

The role of inclusive and diverse culture(s) in teaching and learning

How can we be inclusive of diverse cultural perspectives in international Higher Education? Exploring *interculturality*

Frank Fitzpatrick

Abstract

As the flow of international students to UK Higher Education continues to grow and becomes ever more diverse, Higher Education institutions and Business Schools seek to engage more with students' cultural differences and prior educational experiences in order to create an inclusive and level playing field for academic achievement. For this to happen, institutions and their employees require a greater understanding of the challenges that international students face, both as academic learners and as sojourners in an often substantially different cultural context. On the one hand, this involves an appreciation of what is entailed in the process of cross-cultural adjustment and what kind of practical support can be provided for students engaged in exploring and thriving in a new way of life that may be different to their own. Likewise, greater awareness of the impact of culturally inflected knowledge assumed by learning outcomes from a particular approach to academic study, together with the need to build *interculturality* in order to enhance interaction amongst students when carrying out unfamiliar academic tasks, without necessarily assuming a corrective or remedial stance when dealing with alternative prior learning experiences and approaches, is of paramount importance in order to ensure an equitable treatment of different perspectives. The article concludes that institutions have a duty of care to provide support for sociocultural and institutional adjustment, rather than simply imposing standards of compliance and enacting culturally inflected models of knowledge, if a level playing field is to be the intended and desired outcome of internationalised programmes. Furthermore, recognition

and appreciation of different perspectives on the learning process can feed back into both pedagogical and administrative practice to the benefit of educational policy and strategy, including staff development and growth. Fostering *interculturality* can enrich the perspective of both the learner and the provider of instruction and governance, as well as delivering an inspiring educational experience that facilitates intercultural development for all students and practitioners.

Introduction

The flow of international students to UK Higher Education continues to grow and becomes ever more diverse as more non-EU students are admitted for university study (HESA, 2022), which highlights the need for Higher Education institutions and Business Schools to consider the challenges of a greater diversity of students from a wider range of cultural differences and prior educational experiences in order to create an inclusive and level playing field for academic achievement (de Witt, 2002; Universities UK, 2021). In order to facilitate this, institutions and their employees require a better understanding of the specific obstacles that international students face in order to adjust to both a new academic context and a new way of life in often unfamiliar cultural surroundings and there is evidence that this tends to lag behind expectations (Dervin, 2016). A better understanding involves an appreciation of what is entailed in the process of cross-cultural adjustment and what kind of practical support can be provided for students engaged in exploring and thriving in a new way of life that may be different to their own. Likewise, better awareness of how to build interculturality and level out the playing field when it comes to ways of learning and approaching academic tasks that may be new and challenging for some is of paramount importance. This article explores how Higher Education institutions can help to build a more welcoming and inclusive environment and experience for a growing and increasingly diverse body of international students and enable them to succeed and excel on a level that would demonstrate genuine equity in academic opportunity and achievement.

The challenges facing international students

Relocating for work or study brings a number of well-documented challenges (Ward et al, 2001; Fabricius et al 2015). On the one hand, individuals need to navigate lifestyle changes that come with a new and unfamiliar environment on a range of different levels in their quest to set up a new life in their new location. This involves learning about how everyday life is organised and the way it functions, as well as learning to interpret potentially new patterns of behaviour and verbal and non-verbal communication while navigating unfamiliar contextual dynamics, including the norms and values of a new setting (Cushner and Karim, 2004). On the other hand, in the case of international students, while cultural adjustment is seen as important for academic success (Nasir, 2012), their experience of education may differ considerably from their home environment in how they are expected to engage in learning and assessment, whether at an institutional level or through pedagogical practice (Li and Campbell, 2006). While this is an experience that all students have to confront to some extent, whether home or international students, in that they relocate and abandon their own direct familiar social and support networks, the challenge in this may be considered greater for students from a diverse linguistic background and cultural context.

Culture Shock and Cross-cultural Adjustment

The oft quoted model of phased *culture shock* (Oberg 1960), which sees cross-cultural adjustment as a uniform process regardless of context or individual experience, is now largely seen as inadequate to explain the challenges of relocation (Fitzpatrick, 2017) and a more tailored description of the challenges and stresses of adjustment and convergence have been outlined by more personalised coping and growth models (Kim, 2001; Ward et al, 2001; Landis et al, 2004). In these, ‘culture shock’ is seen as a process of ‘adjustment’ in which a distinction between *sociocultural* aspects of adjustment, or learning how to live, behave and communicate in a new cultural context, and *psychological* aspects of adjustment, or coping with life changes and the stress of uncertainty and unfamiliarity, is made. To

this must be added the challenges relating to weakening *social capital*, and the need to rebuild this, as sojourners move away from familiar and supportive families, communities and personal and professional and friendship networks set in predictable surroundings (Fitzpatrick, 2016). Such models are indeed more complex and embracing and avoid relegating the personal and difficult challenges of coping with change, or ‘acculturative stress’ (Berry, 2006), to uniform stages experienced by all in the same way as *culture shock*, although it is also important to be aware of the positive aspects of starting a new life at university or in a new location, which universities can exploit and build upon to enhance the student experience (Sercombe and Young, 2015; Furnham, 2004).

Educational adjustment

Similarly, a horizon of potential adjustment challenges, or ‘learning shock’ (Gu and Maley, 2008), can be identified in an unfamiliar learning context. As well as language difficulties and intercultural communication barriers, other challenges identified, range from unfamiliar patterns of classroom interactions, lack of knowledge of academic norms and conventions, and inadequate learning support (Li and Campbell, 2006). The practice of working collaboratively and producing work collectively in groups, for example, or re-wording a published text and presenting it in one’s own words, or being asked to think critically and challenge purportedly established academic wisdom, or speak out in front of peers and even challenge or contradict the instructor can create stress and consternation for those not familiar with such techniques or approaches, while confusion about the status and nature of the *independent learner* can have implications for continuance, progression and student experience (McKendry and Boyd, 2012). In this vein, we must be aware of the how culturally inflected knowledge and pedagogical practice is constructed in different contexts and how this can influence all our modes of perception, expression, learning and communication. In this sense, what can be identified as the ‘*Enlightenment-driven disposition*’ embodied within ‘Western’ education (Wisker and Robinson, 2014) normalises an objective, neutral, rational and critical approach towards established knowledge

constructs, while, in other contexts, the construction and expression of knowledge may not be open to question or, by questioning it, it may be seen to challenge tradition and fundamental social cohesion. Consequently, the very notion of independence may, in itself, be a troublesome challenge for students from societies where individuals are expected to be *interdependent* rather *independent*, framed by tight cultural and community networks that may de-emphasise self-promotion or ‘individualism’ and focus much more on social cohesion and harmony rather than competitiveness (Triandis, 1995). Contexts that are more *culturally tight*, for example, may create authority structures that are more restrictive for individuals, where deviance or originality are more inhibited than ‘looser’ contexts (Gelfland, 2018). Some educational practices in Higher Education, then, may be second nature to some students and not others, and a lack of awareness of alternative perspectives amongst educators can lead to culturally inflected aspects going unrecognised (Wisker and Robinson, 2014). This may result in a tendency to unconsciously commend a certain form of academic engagement that is familiar to us and deride a lack of engagement as failure and in need of ‘remedial attention’ (Wisker and Robinson, 2014: 191) resulting in a far from level playing field.

Understanding cultural context

While such variant notions as *cultural tightness* (Gelfland, 2018), *Individualism-Collectivism* (Hofstede, 2001) or *interdependence* (Triandis, 1995), for example, have become popular clichés within Cross-Cultural Management literature and claim to be able to identify set behavioural characteristics across entire populations that can be comfortably categorised and classified within a frame of distinctive *national cultures*, such an approach to cultural diversity has been consistently challenged as essentialist and over-simplistic (Soderberg 1999; McSweeney 2002; Signorini et al, 2009). Furthermore, it is important to contemplate the range of experiences and expectations that students may bring to the educational arena from their own cultural perspective or *cultural context*. Context is not seen, in this sense, as a static notion, but as a dynamic behavioural domain to be

navigated and influenced by individuals within it through interaction and social construction (Duranti and Goodwin, 1992). Consequently, context is not just a physical space, but also a social and behavioural construct governed by sociocultural conventions and influenced by extra-situational and historical factors. For this reason, Day (2008) contends that what is contextually relevant for people in a particular situation is to be found in the knowledge and orientations of social relationships and their membership of different groups, rather than in the material context itself. A distinction is made, then, between the *proximate context* (see Figure 1), or what is encountered within the *sociocultural* and material space by those unfamiliar with it, and the *distal context*, or what individuals bring to the context in terms of their interpretation of it framed within their cultural perspectives, prior experiences and material resources (Day, 2008). Day (2008) also identifies a *meso* level of context of interaction, at an organisational or institutional level, which, within the university context, can be seen to relate to the Higher Education sector, together with its values, methods, conventions, regulations and such and how these are framed within a particular university institution and enacted through the relationships that develop within the praxis of an individual's educational experience.

This, then, creates a dialectic on two levels. First, between the *proximal* factors at the sociocultural level of context, related to features and the dynamics of everyday life within a particular location, which influences *sociocultural adjustment* (Ward et al, 2001), and the *distal* elements, related to individual perspectives, identities, resources and expectations drawn upon in the navigation of a new way of life by students on a psychological level. Second, at the 'meso' domain of context, what can be described as 'pedagogical power relations' (Grant, 2010: 93) are seen to unfold. This relates to how students interact with the institutional and behavioural framework of university life and hierarchy in order to navigate their particular educational experience, which influences their coping levels and their *psychological adjustment* (Ward et al, 2001). Important here are the various social positionings of key academic and administrative gatekeepers that subtly pass judgment on student performance and

participation and their sometimes intangible assumptions of conventions and standards of knowledge and behaviour that ‘ghost’ or stand behind the participants in interaction and which can distort the power balance between students and university authorities (Grant, 2010).

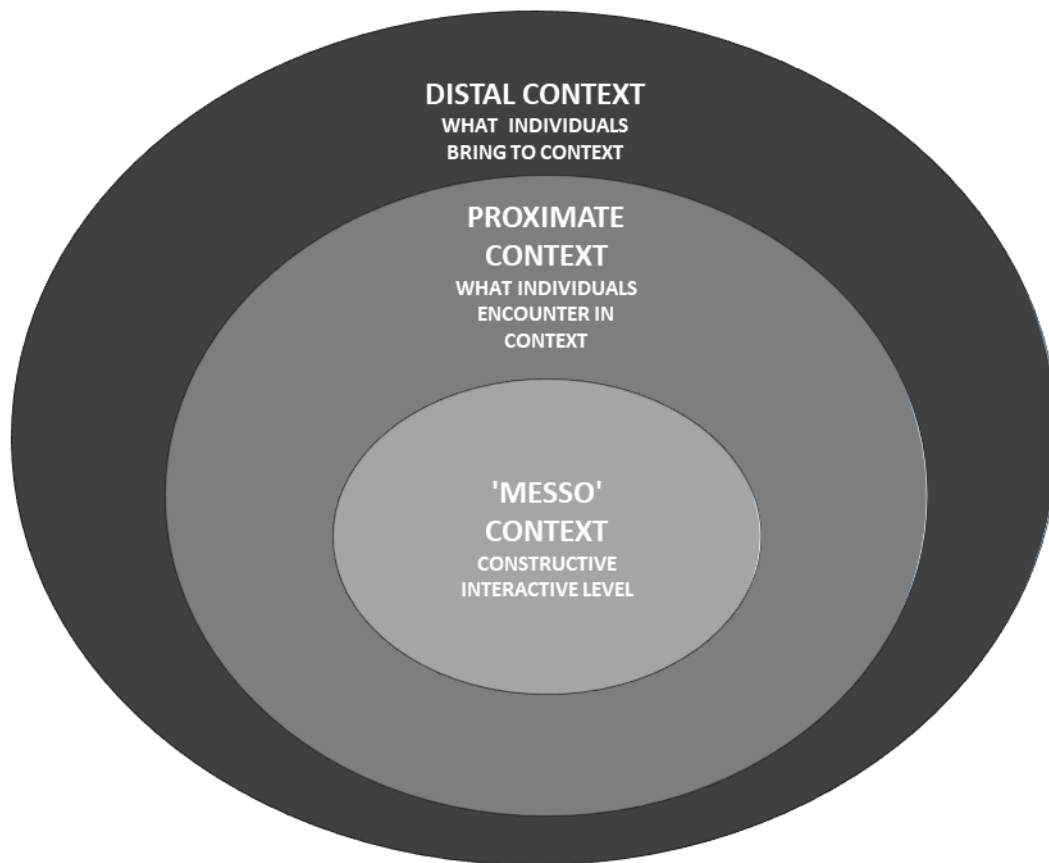


Figure 1: Representation of Day’s (2008) ‘Messo’ context (author)

What universities can do to help students adjust

Universities can facilitate the cross-cultural adjustment of students, both within the university context and the wider sociocultural context, in a number of ways. Settling into a new life can involve a number of practical and time-consuming challenges even at a basic or routine level, such as setting up home, learning how everyday life functions and becoming familiar with surroundings and daily routines (Hechanova et al, 2003), but it can also heighten emotional distress and involve a degree of difficulty in forming relationships and networks that can help adjustment. In this sense, the notion of *social*

support, or the availability of “helping relationships” and targeted support mechanisms (Kraimer et al, 2001), have been identified as a way of alleviating such elements as loneliness, stress and depression, which can have a positive impact on both the psychological and sociocultural level (Ong and Ward, 2005). Ong and Ward (2005) identify four functions served by social support:

1. **Emotional support** (displaying understanding, concern, sympathy and caring for others facing challenging circumstances)
2. **Social companionship** (the feeling of social belonging with others across a range of daily activities)
3. **Tangible assistance** (concrete help in terms of material resources, essential services or financial facilitation)
4. **Informational support** (provision of a wide range of information, views and products and services related to becoming familiar with daily life)

Interestingly, the authors conclude that, despite the importance of emotional support at a time of change, it is practical support, together with local social networks, which are the most important for psychological well-being, noting that individuals often use their own strategies to create a sense of mastery over their environment and seek support and information from others in order to reduce uncertainty. Building on this, Hechanova et al (2003) sees the provision of institutional support as critical in order to facilitate adjustment, and many universities provide assistance with such key elements as finding accommodation, providing information and bulletins on public services, hosting social events and clubs and, increasingly, wellbeing support and financial flexibility (Baik et al, 2019).

How universities can help build awareness and tolerance of different cultural perspectives and behaviours

A certain amount of awareness raising and training relating to the issues involved in cross-cultural adjustment amongst staff working at an institutional level has been identified as critical to responding

to growing diversity in student populations as universities become more globalised (Leavitt et al, 2017). This is seen as critical not only for students to develop intercultural competence skills in order to facilitate their adaptation to new and diverse environments, but also on a policy and institutional level to facilitate a broader capacity for cultural sensitivity and acceptance (Dervin and Layne, 2013). An example of this is the use and application of the Bennett *Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS)* (Landis et al, 2004) in the university environment (Fitzpatrick 2022: 154-156), which models the journey from *ethnocentrism* (cultural superiority) to *ethnorelativism* (cultural pluralism) in order to develop awareness of and sensitivity to different worldviews held by cultural groups other than one's own. Likewise, Arasaratnam-Smith and Deardorff (2022) demonstrate the value of exploring individual student narratives related to navigating cultural differences, of self-reflection and of building relationships through intercultural competence in order to engage with issues associated with identity negotiation, stereotyping, cultural difference, and communities of support. Such an approach focuses on developing appropriate *Attitudes* (including respect, openness, curiosity, discovery and tolerance for ambiguity), *Knowledge* (including cultural self-awareness, culture specific knowledge, socio-linguistic awareness and a perspective on global issues and trends) and *Skills* (including listening, observing and viewing the world from different perspectives) in order to promote effective and appropriate behaviour and communication in intercultural encounters (Deardorff, 2009). Such work can lead to important insights for educationalists and administrators, who may see their own version of pedagogical and managerial practice as the indisputable and self-evident paradigm of the ideal learning experience and accountability, and can challenge them to accept alternative experiences of learning and social interaction derived from a quite distinct set of cultural assumptions. What might be regarded as conventional wisdom and superior pedagogical methodology by those empowered to induct students into the framework and ethos of genres of knowledge and comportment within one context may be viewed as particularly challenging and uncomfortable from a different point of view or for those with diverse learning experiences and constructs of knowledge (Grant, 2010).

Building interculturality in academic spaces

The notion of *culture* used here is a now well-established, non-essentialist, postmodern concept relating to dynamic, fluid and universal intercultural processes through which identity evolves as trajectory of experience (Holliday, 2011; Zhu Hua, 2016; Fitzpatrick, 2022), rather than one of a static, bounded and deterministic modernist notion of identity relating to fixed national culture (Hofstede, 2001). *Cultural background* as a way of life and contextual construct is not denied as being influential on sojourners and international students, in that they are educated in different languages and hold beliefs, values and views that have been shaped by their upbringing and material experiences and sociocultural filters, but the notion of agency allows individuals to evolve in their cultural perspective and identity as a result of their experiences and social encounters beyond the dynamics of early socialisation, always, however, within the material possibilities available to them. Figure 2 shows such a range of influences based on a social constructionist model of culture and cultural identity (Berger and Luckman, 1967; Tajfel, 1982; Benwell and Stokoe, 2006), set within a framework of material conditions (Martin and Nakayama, 2009) which constrain our possibilities and *personal cultural trajectory* (Holliday, 2011). The process of identity construction is framed by the *cultural resources* at our disposal through the process of *enculturation* in the early stages of our social existence, which influence our understanding of and perspective on our social world, through to a range of *sites of identity construction* (Benwell and Stokoe, 2006) through *socialisation* in which we construct our *social identity* interactively, influenced by many *sociocultural filters* that frame and influence our emerging place in society, while we develop our own *individual cultural identity* through our various personal experiences, encounters, networks and interests (Fitzpatrick, 2020). *Personal identity*, however, continues to evolve and hybridise and the experience of being in a new cultural context can enrichen this process and trajectory of change substantially.

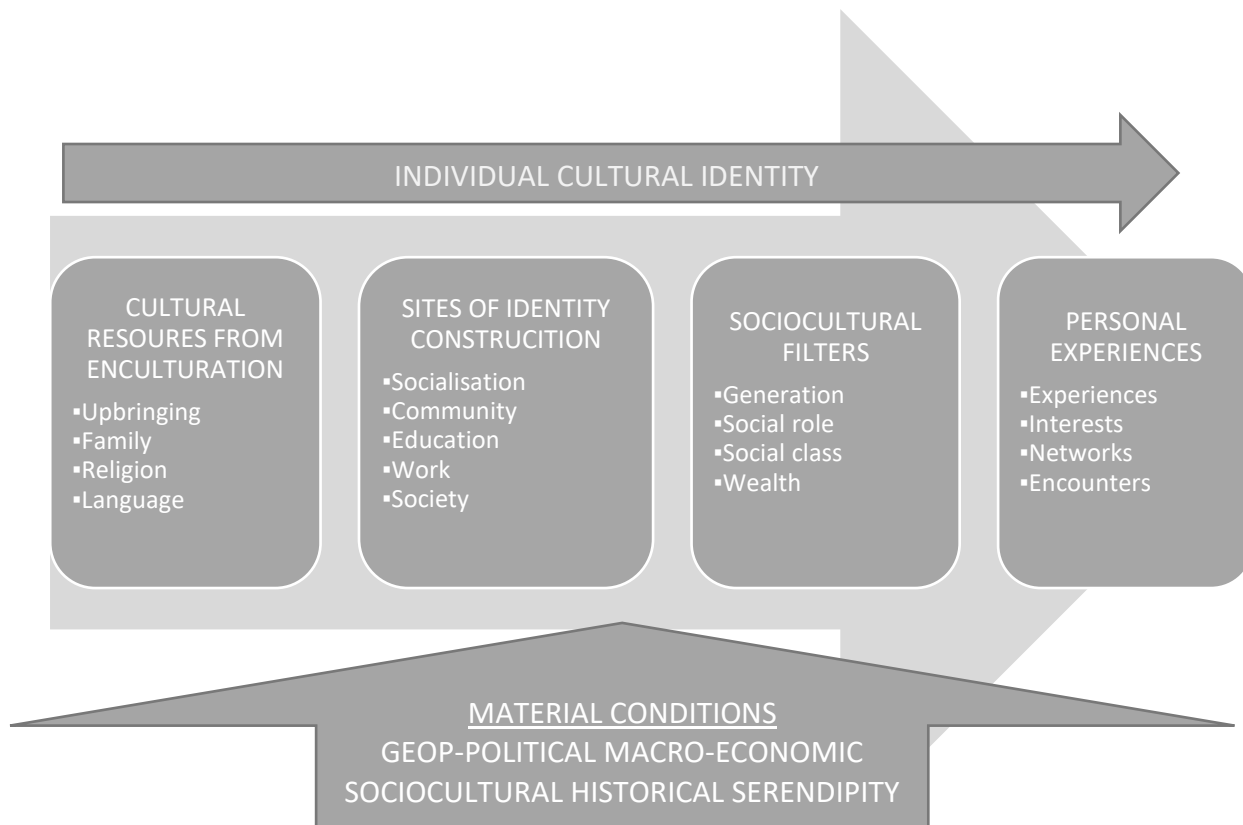


Figure 2: Development of individual cultural identity (author)

In this sense, it is important to recognise that the international student, as with all social actors, is much more than their nationality and that it is worth avoiding national or cultural stereotyping that may lead us to place them in the role of the exotic ‘other’ (*otherisation*) and interpret behaviour as being determined by where they come from (Gu and Maley, 2009). If we focus on students as individuals with diverse abilities, aspirations, expectations, motivations, perspectives and such, that emanate from their own personal trajectory in life, we focus much less on the individual as a product of their environment and more as an agent of their own identity construction through engagement with their social and material environment. The only proviso here, however, is that, as we have seen with reference to Day (2008), it is of value to recognise the challenges of the particular experience of international students, who are confronting the dual-pronged process of adjusting to both a new *cultural* environment, or way of life, (*proximate context*) and a new *learning* environment and all the challenges that the *messo context* of a UK Higher Education institution invokes for all involved.

The notion of *interculturality*, then, challenges the largely commonly held assumption that culture resides in a particular location or geography, such as a nation state, which produces predictable interactive outcomes across a given population and considers how individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds interact in a given *context*. It is, thus, derived from the concept of *interstitial* spaces or *third space* (Bhabha, 2004), which can accommodate *cultural hybridity* or the creation of new sociocultural groupings that generate their own particular norms, conventions and relational interactions amongst individuals from different cultural backgrounds. In this sense, it is the shared experiences of studying and working together that can create a shared sense of identity amongst people as a unique and distinct group. This involves building new perspectives, rather than losing existing ones, and indicates how sustained contact with others from diverse cultural backgrounds can help individuals to generate unique outlooks and shared perspectives both within collaborative groups or teams and by developing their own individual cultural trajectory.

In order to facilitate *interculturality*, it is important to ensure that students from different backgrounds have the opportunity to intermingle and participate in sociocultural interaction with each other and with others beyond their immediate in group. Quite apart from the sociocultural and psychological benefits of building social cohesion amongst students, as well as a sense of belonging and acceptance of diversity, from an educational point of view, there is some evidence that encouraging collaborative learning can enhance academic attainment and that equality of contribution can also help develop of intercultural competence (de Hei et al, 2020).

One way of initiating and structuring this is through *cultural mapping*, which includes activities that explore the nature of cultural identity and the influences upon us in our upbringing and our own personal experiences (Fitzpatrick 2020:83-85). For example, by conducting a simple mapping activity

in which the tutor asks students to individually map out the various influences on their cultural identity (based on Figure 2 above), and then involves them in explaining, comparing, discussing and reflecting on them in small groups, can help them work through issues of identity and adjustment with peers and classmates and give them a platform to share their background and develop an intercultural perspective and a sense of being comfortable with diversity. Such an activity, which can be an introductory icebreaker at any level, can build confidence and pride in students' cultural origins and can also feed into other collaborative group work and discussions in which students then develop their own unique set of relationships and outcomes as discrete *intercultural* groups. Furthermore, out of the ensuing discussion, it is important to bring out universal features and perspectives in order to focus on 'omnicultural' similarities (Moghaddam, 2012), rather than solely on differences (Nolan et al, 2022). This can include such elements as the commonalities in the way humans live together in groups and societies through social organisation and governance, or the structure of belief and value systems across different cultural contexts, in order to avoid exoticisation and tokenism relating to superficial features of cultural expression, such as dress, rituals, festivals and so on (Fitzpatrick 2020: 262). All in all, by bringing forth notions and discussions of identity and diversity within induction sessions, modules and courses, *interculturality* can be developed as a positive force that enriches the international learning experience and academic attainment more equitably.

Conclusion

Overall, then, by exploring interculturality and cultural diversity in the Higher Education experience, it is possible to build awareness of and sensitivity to the challenges of studying in an unfamiliar sociocultural and educational environment that is the fate of international students, without necessarily assuming a corrective or remedial stance when dealing with alternative prior learning experiences and approaches. Institutions have a duty of care to provide support for sociocultural and institutional adjustment, rather than simply impose standards of compliance and culturally inflected models of

knowledge, if a level playing field is to be the intended and desired outcome of internationalised programmes. Quite apart from this, recognition and appreciation of different perspectives on the learning process can feed back into both pedagogical and administrative practice to the benefit of educational policy and strategy, including staff development and growth. Fostering *interculturality* can enrich the perspective of both the learner and the provider of instruction and governance, as well as delivering an inspiring educational experience that facilitates intercultural development.

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