

# Unearthing students' self-perspective on their intercultural sensitivity and skills development: enhancing students' holistic experience

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Key area – International contexts and perspectives

## Introduction

The flow of students from one country to another has increased dramatically in the last 10-20 years. Initially, non-native students were in small numbers and were expected to adapt to the dominant teaching paradigm, but with overseas numbers increasingly significantly in more recent years, adjustments to courses and modules – from design, to teaching to assessment – are required and have been investigated globally (Nieto and Booth 2010).

Of those studying overseas, many only study for one year – as a foreign exchange (for example ERASMUS students) or a top-up route (final year or taught masters). Such a one-year scenario is the most challenging for all, particularly in terms of language ability and an ability to develop effective communication skills within a multi-cultural environment quickly.

This paper focuses on a group of multinational students who were studying on a one year programme in the Engineering and Computing Faculty at Coventry University, in particular to explore the role of a one-year study in the UK on the development of students' intercultural abilities and their self-awareness of the same.

## 1. Literature Review

The requirement for “global-ready graduates” or “global citizens” has become a key outcome for universities – this requires intercultural skills and their adoption to be part of the overall student experience (Paige & Goode 2009). Two primary options exist to support multi-cultural experience: 1) to engage with the potential of the multi-cultural nature of your home institution or 2) to study abroad. Within either option, there runs the risk of microcosms of culture sustaining themselves (particularly with high numbers of students from the same culture), which can weaken any intercultural awareness. However, studies have shown that overseas programmes, even short-term term, students learn from their experience – Root and Ngampornchai (2012) showed development of cognitive, affective and behavioural skills, whilst Williams (2005) showed that students with overseas experience exhibit a greater change in intercultural adaptability and sensitivity. Pederson (2010) showed in a small-scale study that facilitated intercultural training improved intercultural effectiveness. The intervention in Pederson's study included guided reflection, which within education reflection is regarded as a useful learning process that can help students express and evaluate their attitudes and feelings, as well as expand their learning cognition and increase the comprehension of their own thinking (Chirema 2007). Yang, Webster and Prosser (2010) show that reflection helped study-abroad students make connections between prior learning, self-development both during their

time abroad and after returning home. However, there are limited studies on how to encourage this awareness and how this awareness manifests itself in students.

## 2. Research Approach

This study adopted a survey-oriented questionnaire, adapted from the Intercultural Sensitivity Scale developed by Chen and Starosta (2000), to investigate the students' intercultural sensitivity, with follow up interviews to provide supplementary insights for the survey findings. In addition, in-class and out-class observation was conducted to collect data on the students' behaviour and interaction within the university. The chosen sample consisted of 20 students, from six different countries. Due to the availability, eleven male and three female students with age between 20-35 years participated in the survey and interview. Of note is that on the course, there are no UK students within the group.

## 3. Key Results

Based on the interviews' data, students are all agreed that this one-year study has positively impact on their development of intercultural competence. An initial challenge for many was the cultural make-up of the class.

“I did not expect that all my classmates are international students. I was hoping more British students will be in the class. However, I really enjoy the interaction with colleagues, from whom I learnt a lot about the international culture”.

At the end of their studies, none of them had given deep thought on the benefits (apart from academic achievement) they had gained through this programme. With the subsequent interview questions, the students have gone through a transformative journey during interview, and have become more aware of the benefits of interacting with several different cultures, rather than just a British culture.

In the first term, there were two structured group activities. Initially one of the authors allocated students for both activities, but after the first group activity a petition was made that the second groups were not working and, subsequently, the students were allowed to form their own groups. Of interest, here was that only one multi-cultural group remained (from 6). After the second group activity, some of the homogeneous cultural groups had come to realise that they had focussed too much on the task and not benefited from the wider experience – this reflection occurred as a result of an informal discussion with the authors. In the second term, another multi-cultural group activity worked more effectively with wider acceptance of each other.

Social activities occurred throughout the year – some organised by staff and others by the students themselves. Interview and observational data suggested that intercultural competence has further opportunities to be developed outside of scheduled class times.

The implications of these results indicate that a holistic and structured approach needs to be taken to provide the opportunity for multi-cultural experiences as well as highlighting the importance of a reflective dialogue. The reflection can be staged – focussing initially on

changes in expectation on arrival and later on moving to how to gain the most from the opportunity offered.

Nowadays, intercultural leaning emphasises a dynamic process toward the communication of meaning rather than the cultural knowledge transfer. This research has highlighted the importance of taking a holistic approach-academic as well as social activity during the students' staying in the host country. Further details will be presented at the conference.

#### 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has shown that a structured reflective process around intercultural sensitivity and skills development is important to unearth in the student their own awareness of their self-development in these areas. Importantly, the scope of these interventions and support needs to include non-academic aspects. The results of this study highlight many options to students and staff alike to enhance the overall experience for students spending a year abroad.

#### 5. Reference

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6. Appendix

The data of intercultural sensitivity

I enjoy interacting with people from different cultures.	4.7
I think people from other cultures are narrow-minded.	2.2
I am pretty sure of myself in interacting with people from different cultures.	4.1
I find it very hard to talk in front of people from different cultures.	2.9
I know what to say when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.5
I can be as sociable as I want to be when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.7
I don't like to be with people from different cultures.	1.3
I respect the values of people from different cultures.	4.4
I get upset easily when interacting with people from different cultures.	2.2
I feel confident when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.4
I tend to wait before forming an impression of culturally-distinct counterparts.	3.9
I often get discouraged when I am with people from different cultures.	1.9
I am open-minded to people from different cultures.	4.1
I am observant when interacting with people from different cultures.	3.4
I often feel useless when interacting with people from different cultures.	1.9
I respect the ways people from different cultures behave.	4.1
I try to obtain as much information as I can when interacting with people from different cultures.	4.3
I would not accept the opinions of people from different cultures.	1.6
I am sensitive to my culturally-distinct counterpart's subtle meanings during our interaction.	3.6
I think my culture is better than other cultures.	2.8
I often give positive responses to my culturally different counterpart during our interaction.	3.6
I avoid those situations where I will have to deal with culturally-distinct persons.	2.1
I often show my culturally-distinct counterpart my understanding through verbal or non-verbal cues.	3.4
I have a feeling of enjoyment towards differences between my culturally-distinct counterpart and me.	4.1