# 315 Promoting students' interest through culturally sensitive curricula in higher education

Kathleen M Quinlan[1], Dave S.P. Thomas[2], Annette Hayton[3,4], Jo Astley[5], Leda Blackwood[4], Fatmata Daramy[6], Morag Duffin[7], Muhammad Arslan Haider[1], Deborah Husbands[8], Richard Joiner[4], Helen Kay[9], Mary Mosoeunyane[10], Ian J Turner[5], Claire Walsh[9], Dan West[5]

[1]University of Kent, Canterbury, United Kingdom. [2]Solent University, Southampton, United Kingdom. [3]NERUPI, Bath, United Kingdom. [4]University of Bath, Bath, United Kingdom. [5]University of Derby, Derby, United Kingdom. [6]University of Leicester, Leicester, United Kingdom. [7]University of Law, London, United Kingdom. [8]University of Westminster, London, United Kingdom. [9]Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, United Kingdom. [10]Buckinghamshire New University, Wycombe, United Kingdom

## Research Domains

Learning, teaching and assessment (LTA)

## Abstract

We examined the relationship between higher education students' perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of their curriculum and their interest in their programme of study. 286 (228 F) students rated the cultural sensitivity of the curriculum using a revised version of the Culturally Sensitive Curricula Scales (CSCS-R) that contained six scales. They also rated their interest in their program and the perceived quality of their relationships with teachers. Racially minoritized students (n=99) perceived their curriculum as less culturally sensitive than White students (n=182). There were no significant differences between minoritized students and White students on interest or the perceived quality of relationships with teachers. Five dimensions of cultural sensitivity (Diversity Represented, Positive Depictions, Challenge Power, Inclusive Classroom Interactions, Culturally Sensitive Assessments) predicted interest. Ensuring curricula and assessments represent diversity positively and challenge power may support students' interest while accurately reflecting an increasingly diverse society.

## Full paper

Higher education (HE) students are preparing for professional roles in which they will serve diverse clientele and operate within or attempt to re-dress pervasive inequalities (United Nations, 2015). Around the world, there is a move toward making curricula more culturally sensitive, diversified, or decolonized (Peters, 2018; Shahjahan et al., 2022). The impact of such curricula on students is not yet well understood.

In this study, we revised a ground-breaking measure of culturally sensitive curricula (CSCS-R) (Thomas & Quinlan, 2022) and used it to determine whether HE students perceive their curricula as culturally sensitive and the impact of cultural sensitivity on their interest in their program.

Conceptual Framework

We situate our study in interest theory (Renninger & Hidi, 2016; Renninger & Hidi, 2022). Interest refers to a psychological state of individuals during engagement with some object (e.g. an academic subject) and the predisposition to re-engage particular content meaningfully over time. Interest is inherently rewarding (Gottlieb et al, 2013) and is associated with many positive learning behaviours that lead to higher academic achievement and influence career decision-making and success (Ainley, Hidi, & Berndorff 2002; Jansen, Lüdtke, & Schroeders 2016; Nye et al, 2012; Quinlan & Renninger, 2022; Renninger & Hidi, 2022; Sansone et al., 2019).

Building on previous research that identifies factors that promote students' interest (Quinlan, 2019; Guo & Fryer, 2022), we propose that five of the six dimensions of the CSCS-R will support students' interest, as will students' perceived quality of relationships with teaching staff (QRTS) (Figure 1).

# Figure 1

*Conceptual Framework for this Study*
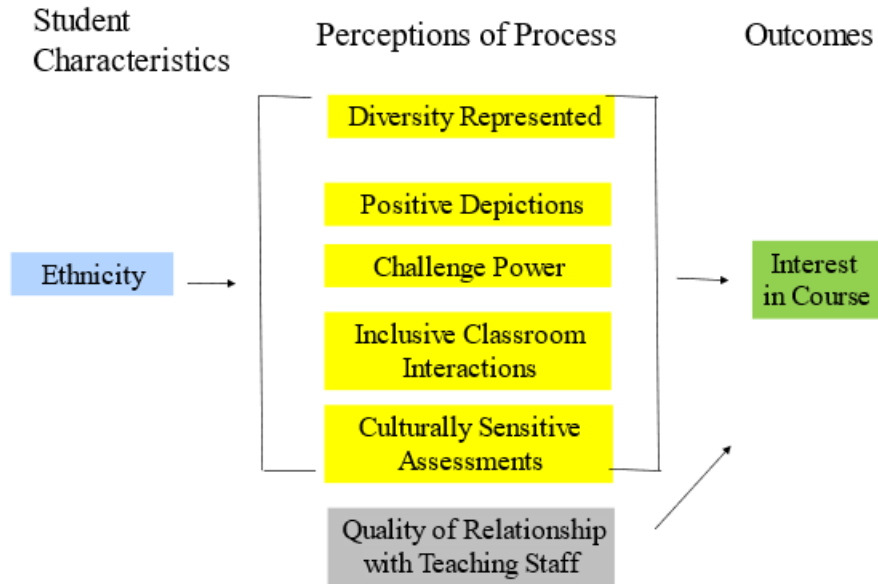


Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1. To what extent did students perceive their curricula as culturally sensitive? We hypothesized that Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students would perceive the curricula as less culturally sensitive than White students (H1).

RQ2. What is the relationship between cultural sensitivity of the curricula and students' interest in their program? We hypothesized that students' perceptions of the cultural sensitivity of the curricula (H2.1) and the perceived quality of relationships with teachers would predict interest (H2.2).

Methods

Following ethics approval, we surveyed second year undergraduate students in seven UK universities (N= 286; 228 F; 46 M; 182 White; 99 BAME). Most (69%) were in professional education program (Table 1).

## Table 1
### Participants by Program

| Program | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Childhood/Early Childhood Studies | 12 | 4% |
| Education | 49 | 17% |
| Law | 42 | 15% |
| Nursing | 72 | 25% |
| Other | 6 | 2% |
| Politics and/or International Relations | 22 | 8% |
| Psychology | 48 | 17% |
| Social Work | 35 | 12.2% |

The survey included the following measures:

Culturally Sensitive Curricula Scales (CSCS-R). We extended Thomas and Quinlan's (2021) CSCS scales. Students rated items on 6 point Likert scales from strongly disagree to strongly agree: Diversity Represented (7 items; α=.92); Negative Portrayals (3 items; α=.92); Positive Depictions (4 items; α=.86); Challenging Power (5 items; α=.90); Inclusive Classroom Interactions (3 items; α=.87); Culturally-engaging Assessments (3 items; α=.89).

Interest. We slightly adapted Quinlan's (2019) 5 point Likert scale for interest (10 items; α=.88).

Quality of Relationships with Teacher Staff (QRTS). We assessed whether students found their teachers approachable, understanding and encouraging (3 items; α=.91). This variable was included as a control variable.

Demographics: Students reported university, program, gender, race, and age.

Results

BAME students rated their curricula as significantly less culturally sensitive on five of the six CSCS scales (Table 2), confirming H1. Only Challenge Power showed no differences.

Table 2

*Descriptive Statistics for the Study Variables*

| Variable | BAME Mean (SD) | White Mean (SD) | Mean Dif | t | Cohen's d |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Diversity Represented | 4.29 (1.13) | 4.70 (1.00) | -.41 | -3.01** | -.39 |
| Negative Portrayals | 3.35 (1.51) | 2.39 (1.41) | .96 | 5.30*** | .67 |
| Positive Depictions | 3.55 (1.15) | 4.17 (1.11) | -.62 | -4.33*** | -.55 |
| Challenge Power | 4.26 (1.30) | 4.55 (1.12) | -.30 | -1.91 | -.25 |
| Inclusive Classroom Interactions | 4.83 (1.26) | 5.29 (.89) | -.46 | -3.20** | -.44 |
| Culturally Sensitive Assessments | 4.11 (1.28) | 4.56 (1.12) | -.45 | -2.91** | -.38 |
| CSCS Overall+ | 4.12 (.81) | 4.63 (.76) | -.51 | 5.20*** | -.65 |
| Course Interest | 3.85 (.56) | 3.91 (.63) | -.06 | -.766 | -.10 |
| Quality of Relationships w/Teaching Staff | 3.26 (.78) | 3.26 (.74) | -.12 | -1.23 | -.16 |

***p<.001 ** p<.01 *p<.05 (two tailed)

+ CSCS Overall reverses Negative Portrayals so that all scales are in the same direction, with higher scores demonstrating higher
Cohen's d<2 small effect size; d=5 medium effect size; d>.8 large effect size

There were significant correlations between ethnicity (BAME or White) and the CSCS scales, though not with interest or relationships with teachers (Table 3). Given the high correlations among the CSCS scales, we also computed CSCS Overall, an average of the six scales after reversing Negative Portrayal.

# Table 3

*Pearson Product-Moment Correlations for the Study Variables*

| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Diversity Represented | — | | | | | |
| 2. Negative Portrayals | -.04 | — | | | | |
| 3. Positive Depictions | .53** | -.12 | — | | | |
| 4. Challenge Power | .58** | .02 | .49** | — | | |
| 5. Inclusive Classroom Interactions | .52** | -.01 | .45** | .62** | — | |
| 6. Culturally Sensitive Assessments | .60** | -.01 | .49** | .64** | .61** | — |
| 7. CSCS Overall | .77** | -.37** | .76** | .77** | .72** | .7 |
| 8. Course Interest | .33** | -.04 | .28** | .34** | .40** | .3 |
| 9. Quality of Relationships w/ T. S. | .29** | -.00 | .14* | .39** | .45** | .3 |
| 10. BAME or White | .23** | -.29** | .29** | .13* | .21** | .1 |
| 11. Gender | -.05 | .01 | -.08 | -.01 | -.09 | -.1 |
| 12. Age | .03 | .09 | -.00 | -.01 | .09 | .0 |

** $p<.01$  * $p<05$  (two tailed)
Listwise deletion N=246

There were no significant differences on CSCS Overall, interest or QRTS by university or by program.

Regression analysis (Table 4) showed that CSCS Overall predicted students' subject interest even when controlling for QRTS, which was also significant, supporting H2.1 and H2.2. When running separate regression analyses for each CSCS subscale, five of the six scales were significant predictors when controlling for QRTS (Table 5). Only Negative Portrayals was not a significant predictor.

Insert Tables 4 and 5

Table 4

*Hierarchical Regression Analyses: Demographic Variables and CSCS Overal*

| Model | Variables | $R^2$ | $F(df1, df2)$ | SE | $\beta$ |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | .01 | 687 (3, 270) | | |
| | Gender | | | .07 | .01 |
| | BAME or White | | | .08 | .05 |
| | Age | | | .00 | .07 |
| 2 | | .16 | 12.79*** (4, 269) | | |
| | Gender | | | .06 | .03 |
| | BAME or White | | | .07 | -.08 |
| | Age | | | .00 | .07 |
| | CSCS Overall | | | .04 | .41*** |
| 3 | | .20 | 13.64*** (5, 268) | | |
| | Gender | | | .06 | .03 |
| | BAME or White | | | .07 | -.06 |
| | Age | | | .00 | .06 |
| | CSCS Overall | | | .05 | .32*** |
| | Quality of Relationships w/T.S. | | | .05 | .23*** |

*** $p<.001$ ** $p<.01$ *$p<05$  (two tailed)

## Table 5

### *Simultaneous Regression for Each of the CSCS Scales as Predictors of Interest*

| Variable | $R^2$ | F (df1, df2) | SE |
|---|---|---|---|
| Diversity Represented | .17 | 11.13*** (5, 267) | .05 |
| Negative Portrayals | .12 | 7.45*** (5, 263) | .02 |
| Positive Depictions | .17 | 10.86*** (5, 258) | .03 |
| Challenge Power | .16 | 10.02*** (5, 263) | .03 |
| Inclusive Classroom Interactions | .19 | 11.96*** (5, 256) | .04 |
| Culturally Sensitive Assessments | .18 | 11.49*** (5, 261) | .03 |

Run as separate equations due to collinearity. Controlling for gender, BAME or White, Age, Qua

## Discussion

Racially minoritised students perceived their curricula as less culturally sensitive than White students, consistent with Thomas and Quinlan (2022). Culturally sensitive curricula predicted students' interest, suggesting that it benefits not only BAME students as previously emphasised (Thomas & Quinlan, 2022), but all students. By controlling for quality of relationships with teaching staff, we also showed that these effects were not due solely to enthusiastic teaching.

The study adds evidence on the effects of culturally sensitive curricula. Theoretically, this study highlights specific features of the curriculum that support students' interest.   Practically, the CSCS items and scales detail how teachers can create curricula that both support students' interest and prepare students for increasingly diverse society.

For Tables, see:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1bRHwyCHGc3w6H-_eLVYTj7tCJziu-xcT/edit?usp=sharing&ouid=109826477435222269791&rtpof=true&sd=true

## References

 Ainley, M., S. Hidi, and D. Berndorff (2002). Interest, learning, and the psychological processes that mediate their relationship. Journal of Educational Psychology 94:546–561.

 Gottlieb, J., Oudeyer, P.-Y., Lopes, M., & Baranes, A. (2013). Information seeking, curiosity, and attention: Computational and neural mechanisms. Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 17(11): 585–593. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2013.09.001

Guo, Z. & Fryer, L. K. (2022, August 27). What really elicits learners' situational interest in learning activities: a scoping review on the six types of situational interest sources identified by empirical studies. Poster presentation at the International Conference on Motivation, Dresden, Germany.

Jansen, M., Lüdtke, O., & Schroeders, U. (2016). Evidence for a positive relation between interest and achievement: Examining between-person and within-person variation in five domains. Contemporary Educational Psychology, 46, 116-127. doi:10.1016/j.cedpsych.2016.05.004

Nye, C. D., Su, R., Rounds, J., & Drasgow, F. (2012). Vocational interests and performance: A quantitative summary of over 60 years of research. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 7, 384–403. doi:10.1177/1745691612449021.

Peters, M.A. (2018). Why is my curriculum white? A brief genealogy of resistance. In J. Arday & H.S. Mirza (Eds), Dismantling Race in Higher Education: Racism, Whiteness and Decolonising the Academy (pp. 253–270). Palgrave Macmillan.

Quinlan, K.M. (2019). What triggers students' interest during higher education lectures? Personal and situational variables associated with situational interest. Studies in Higher Education, 44 (10), 1781-1792. doi:10.1080/03075079.2019.1665325.

Quinlan, K. M. & Renninger, K. A. (2022). Rethinking employability: How students build on interest in a subject to plan a career. Higher Education. Online first. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-021-00804-6

Renninger, K.A. & Hidi, S.E. (2022). Interest: A unique affective and cognitive motivational variable that develops. Advances in Motivation Science, 9, 179-239. https://doi.org/10.1016/bs.adms.2021.12.004

Renninger, K.A. & Hidi, S.E. (2016). The Power of Interest for Motivation and Engagement. Routledge.

Sansone, C., Geering, D.M. Thoman, D.B. & Smith, J.L. (2019). Self-regulation of motivation: A renewable resource for learning. In K.A. Renninger & S. Hidi (Eds), The Cambridge handbook of motivation and learning (pp. 87-110). Cambridge University Press.

Shahjahan, R.A., Estera, A.L., Surla, K. L., Edwards, K.T. (2022). "Decolonizing" Curriculum and Pedagogy: A Comparative Review Across Disciplines and Global Higher Education Contexts, Review of Educational Research, 92(1). http://dx.doi.org/10.3102/00346543211042423

Thomas, D. S. P. & Quinlan, K. M. (2021). Why we need to reimagine the curricula in higher education to make it more culturally sensitive. Widening Participation and Lifelong Learning, 23 (3), 37-47. doi: https://doi.org/10.5456/WPLL.23.3.37

Thomas, D. S. P. & Quinlan, K. M. (2022). Reimagining curricula: Effects of cultural (in)sensitivity of curricula on racially minoritised students' engagement. Studies in Higher Education, 48(2). https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2022.2134332

United Nations (2015). Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. https://sdgs.un.org/2030agenda