

Exploring the factors that impact on younger undergraduates' perspectives on cultural diversity in the globalised university and their ability to navigate intercultural experiences (0195)

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Abstract

Entry into a globalised higher education sector presents novel challenges to (especially younger) students, just at a point where their identities are solidifying. They find themselves in a cultural milieu which may be unfamiliar and which may require the development of new skills and dispositions.

Recent work from a range of countries suggests that many home students derive anxiety from everyday interactions with international students. This can lead to a 'passive xenophobia' of avoidance and perceived threat. However, a smaller group of students describe more positive attitudes to diversity and more constructive intercultural interactions.

This paper will report the findings of a quantitative study involving 755 young undergraduates across three universities which seeks to identify those factors which impact on (a) the attitudes which students have to their peers from other cultures, (b) their intercultural skill set, and (c) the existence of cross-cultural friendship networks.

Paper

In common with many countries, the UK has seen a significant increase in the numbers and proportion of international students at its universities in recent years, being drawn both from Europe and further afield. Whereas the presence of international students was historically limited and largely confined to a subset of courses, they have now become ubiquitous.

This trend has largely been seen as positive for all concerned. The international students themselves tend to report high levels of satisfaction (UNITE, 2006), while the lucrative income from their tuition fees has enabled universities to expand and diversify. It is also frequently conjectured that the presence of international students benefits students studying in their home countries ('home students') too, providing new academic and cultural experiences and encouraging universities to globalise their curricula. This hypothesis, often known as 'internationalisation at home' (Wächter, 2003), has largely gone untested and little supporting evidence from the chalkface has emerged.

In fact, studies from countries including England (Peacock & Harrison, 2009), Australia (Volet & Ang, 1998), the United States (Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002) and New Zealand (Ward *et al*, 2005) suggest that many, or even most, home students have difficulties with living and studying in the vibrant cultural milieu around which contemporary universities are based. Such students report high levels of anxiety about intercultural interaction, both in the academic and social realms. They express fears about making a cultural *faux pas* which could lead to awkwardness or accusations of racism. They are also fearful that the presence of international students can jeopardise their own academic experiences and outcomes by slowing down teaching, monopolising staff time or pulling down groupwork marks.

Whether or not these fears are grounded, they lead to students describing a set of attitudes and behaviours which have been typified as 'passive xenophobia' (Peacock & Harrison, 2009), manifesting itself as an avoidance of intercultural interaction both in the classroom and social spaces. As noted above, this has been observed across a range of countries, suggesting that it is not simply an issue for the UK. However, this is clearly not the experience of all students, with many describing a student experience which embraces and celebrates diversity.

It follows, therefore, that there is some basis of difference between students in terms of their reaction to globalised higher education. For younger students, entry to universities comes at a point when their identities as adults and learners is still in a period of flux and uncertainty, buffeted by a range of influences, including their family background, peer group attitudes, prior experiences and facets of their personality. It is inevitable that these will manifest in a range of reactions to a highly diverse community – possibly the most diverse that they have encountered.

Previous studies in this area have largely been qualitative and descriptive in nature or have focused on the proximal student experiences and their ramifications. They have not primarily sought to understand why different individuals describe different attitudes and behaviours and which factors influence this. However, if there are to be significant strides towards realising the gains predicted by the 'internationalisation at home' agenda, more work needs to be done appreciate the contrasting starting points that students have and how these impact on their receptiveness to intercultural experiences.

This paper will discuss the findings of a recent quantitative study of 755 students drawn from three teaching-intensive English universities. All second year full-time undergraduates from the UK and aged under 21 on entry were contacted by e-mail and invited to complete an online questionnaire. A response rate of 6.2% was achieved after a reminder e-mail; students were also incentivised by being entered into a prize draw. The questionnaire fell into four parts:

- An inventory comprising items relating to childhood cultural experiences (e.g. multiculturalism of school and home area, parents' friendship groups, foreign travel, language learning and interest in the arts).

- The 'Big Five' inventory (John, Donahue & Kentle, 2001) to measure personality types – i.e. extraversion, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness and openness to new experience.
- Revised inventories to measure ethnocentrism (Bizumic *et al*, 2009) and cultural intelligence (Ang *et al*, 2007).
- Demographic information about gender, social class, ethnicity and home address.

At the time of writing, analysis of the data is on-going. Initial analyses suggest that there is a strong relationship between growing up in a multicultural area and both attitudes to cultural diversity (ethnocentrism) and perceived ability to interact successfully across cultures (cultural intelligence). Those students whose childhood was spent routinely interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds were not only more comfortable with their university experiences, but they also felt better equipped to deal with them. Personality also appears to play a significant role, with students scoring higher on the agreeableness scale also having more positive attitudes to diversity and greater cultural intelligence; openness to experience is also a significant predictor for the latter.

Perhaps more controversially, there appears to be a connection between gender and ethnocentrism, with men reporting greater anxiety towards issues of culture and diversity, even once other factors had been controlled for. Surprisingly, a history of foreign travel or living abroad does not appear directly related to either ethnocentrism or cultural intelligence. Conversely, language ability and a knowledge of world affairs appears to impact positively on cultural intelligence, but not on ethnocentrism.

This study was approached from a perspective that the cultural diversity of the globalised university offers exciting opportunities to students and educators if properly researched, theorised and managed. However, it was also approached from the standpoint that this isn't common at present and that simple proximity will not provide the formative experiences that are needed to transform identities and pedagogies.

The findings to date suggest that it is important to understand the heterogeneity of the home student body, appreciating that not all students share the same levels of preparedness for intercultural interactions, nor the personality traits which predispose them to navigating them successfully. This will hopefully act as a spur to other research into how this can be overcome for the benefit of all.

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