Cultural distance, mindfulness and passive xenophobia: Using *Integrated Threat Theory* to explore home higher education students' perspectives on 'internationalisation at home'

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Abstract : *This paper addresses the question of interaction between home and international students using qualitative data from 100 home students at two 'teaching intensive' universities in the southwest of England. Stephan & Stephan's (2000) Integrated Threat Theory is used to analyse the data, finding evidence for all four types of threat that they predict when outgroups interact. It is found that home students perceive threats to their academic success and group identity from the presence of international students on the campus and in the classroom. These are linked to anxieties around 'mindful' forms of interaction and a taboo around the discussion of difference, leading to a 'passive xenophobia' for the majority. The paper concludes that Integrated Threat Theory is a useful tool in critiquing the 'internationalisation at home' agenda, making suggestions for policies and practices which may alleviate perceived threats, thereby improving the quality and outcomes of intercultural interaction.*

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1. The internationalisation agenda

Across the world, the higher education environment is changing rapidly in response to both growing international competition and an increasingly global graduate employment market. There is current interest in education's social and ethical role in mediating global processes and in developing a concept of citizenship. It is in this context that the 'internationalisation' movement has arisen and matured (Knight & De Wit, 1995; Knight, 2004; Universities UK, 2005; Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007; Caruana & Spurling, 2007; Jones & Brown, 2007). Most universities in the UK are now in the process of developing and implementing strategies to respond to this agenda (Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007). These strategies tend to have a number of components, including increasing or diversifying the intake of international students, promoting the uptake of study/work abroad programmes, undertaking formal and informal curriculum development and making university campuses more inclusive, serving an increasingly diverse student and staff body.

Traditionally, there has been an emphasis on encouraging 'home' students (i.e. those studying at university in their country of origin, juxtaposed with 'international' students who attend university in another country) to study or work abroad as part of their course. However, these have always served a minority of students and are declining in popularity in the UK (Osborn, 2006; Birtwistle, 2007). More recently, the concept of of 'internationalisation at home' has arisen (Crowther *et al*, 2000; Wächter, 2003; Teekens, 2006; Teekens, 2007a). This aims to provide home students with a portfolio of globally-relevant skills and knowledge without them leaving their home country. . Some of the common components of 'internationalisation at home' in terms of the student experience include :

- Using the presence of international students to seed intercultural learning, by providing alternative perspectives and illustrative examples from other countries and cultures;
- Developing intercultural communication skills through specific teaching techniques and general exposure to international students;

- Enhancing the curriculum with modules and programmes which have an overt international or global theme;

- Paying attention to the internal dynamics of the 'international classroom' and the diversity of learners it contains;

- Using information technology to transcend national boundaries and the constraints of distance on educational opportunities;

- Fostering a sense of global citizenship, agency and responsibility among students and staff.

However, recent reports from the UK (HE Academy, 2006; Fielden, 2007) have raised questions about the reality of 'internationalisation at home' on the ground. They have noted that while the aims remain strong and positive, there are significant hurdles to be overcome before the predicted benefits are realised.

2. An illusion of internationalisation?

This paper will focus on two specific components of the 'internationalisation at home' agenda which appear to offer particular challenges to achieving the objectives desired by policy-makers.

- **A. Integration of international students**

   It has been clear from evaluations dating back many years (see Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001 for an overview) that the majority of students studying overseas find the experience largely positive. However, a significant proportion struggle to socialise into the host culture, in particular finding it difficult to make friendships with home students and within the wider community. UNITE's (2006) *International Student Experience Report*, found that only 58% of UK students had international friends. Middlehurst & Woodfield (2007) report that international students desire more intercultural experiences but are often dissatisfied, reporting in particular a lack of social integration with home students. They often report

remaining in friendship groups with co-nationals or forming groups with other international students (UKCOSA, 2004).

The studies discussed above suggest that this is a comfortable position for some. Their learning about British culture is from an external perspective, living alongside, yet apart from, the home student population. However, others report intense culture shock, homesickness, a lack of progress with spoken English, alienation and general dissatisfaction as a result (e.g. see press reports from Lipsett, 2007; Asthana, 2007; Hodges, 2007). At the individual level, they return to their home country having not enjoyed the social and educational benefits which they had anticipated. At the market level, poor experiences potentially undermine the reputation of the host country as a study destination as word-of-mouth filters through professional, friendship and family networks. Ward, Bochner & Furnham (2001) and Ward *et al* (2005) also draw a correlation between better integration into the host culture with overall levels of academic satisfaction and general wellbeing.

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In order for UK students to develop the skill-set that is considered necessary for interaction across cultures (Stier, 2003; Deardorff, 2006; Stone, 2006) and which are increasingly valued by employers (Leggott & Stapleford, 2007; Fielden, 2007), it is essential that they have the opportunity to build positive relationships with people from other cultures. It is this exposure which provides the necessary learning experiences. However, it has long been understood by social psychologists that mere contact is insufficient to build mutually-rewarding relationships between groups from different cultures. The *contact hypothesis* (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2000; Dovidio, Gaertner & Kawakami, 2003) predicts the need for (a) equal status; (b) a culture of egalitarianism; (c) shared goals promoting interdependence; and (d) opportunities for positive intergroup interaction and friendship. Whilst the first two factors can arguably be assumed in contemporary UK higher education, strong questions exist over the presence of the latter two.

Shared goals are most likely to be found within the classroom setting, although student societies and community volunteering may also offer opportunities for home and international students to share 'workspaces' with co-operative aims (UKCISA, 2008). However, a growing number of authors (e.g. De Vita, 2005; Cathcart, Dixon-Dawson & Hall, 2006; Ippolito, 2007; Kelly, 2008; Peacock & Harrison, forthcoming) report that opportunities to promote collaborative groupwork with mixed student groups are often missed. Without active classroom management which recognises and respects the international dimension, mono-cultural groups tend to predominate by default (Hills & Thom, 2005). Even within an 'international classroom', there may be little scope for intercultural interaction and where it does occur, it can be problematic or require careful management (Leask, 2007).

Outside the classroom environment, opportunities for inter-group interaction are also limited. Peacock & Harrison (in press) report that interaction between home and international students is relatively rare and often strained. Language barriers, fear of causing offence and a lack of shared cultural reference points cause anxiety, while social interaction patterns exacerbate the situation (Harrison & Peacock, 2008). These phenomena are far from unique to the UK. Ward *et al's* (2005) large-scale study found a similar situation in New Zealand, supported more recently by Li & Campbell (2008) and correlating with work in Australia (Volet & Ang, 1998; Wright & Lander, 2003; Summers & Volet, 2008) and the United States (Spencer-Rodgers, 2001; Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern, 2002; Halualani *et al*, 2004; Halualani, 2008).

Successful 'internationalisation at home' is partly predicated on the interaction between home and international students on university campuses, with students contributing mutually to each other's learning and skills development. However, it would appear that simple proximity is not generally sufficient to seed this interaction. Recent research from the range of countries discussed above suggests that there is little spontaneous mixing between the two communities where this is not actively managed – and such active management is rare. Indeed, one of the architects of the

concept of 'internationalisation at home' posits that *"one of the most difficult challenges in internationalisation is the social interaction and dialogue between students among themselves (domestic students with international students on campus)"*, concluding that *"in spite of many efforts on campus, by staff and students it remains very difficult to bring international and home students together"* (Teekens, 2007b, p. 9).

3. Intergroup interactions

Drawing on *social identity theory* (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), Brewer (2000) asserts that the process of separation into ingroups and outgroups is a natural part of human experience. It reduces complexity by allowing assumptions to be made about interactions with other ingroup members, who can be trusted to behave in certain ways and to hold shared values. Conversely, outgroup members are seen as unpredictable and motivated by different drives which may be at odds with their own. Humans will naturally stress and over-estimate both similarities <u>within</u> the ingroup and differences <u>between</u> the ingroup and outgroups, thereby subconsciously reinforcing preferences for the ingroup; this is sometimes termed *'mindless ingroup favouritism'* (Brewer, 2003). This ingroup bias can be broken down to some extent when the outgroup is in co-operation, rather than competition (e.g. Wolsko *et al*, 2003; Riketta & Sacremento, 2008) or where individuals are interacting rather than groups (e.g. Petersen, Dietz & Frey, 2004).

An useful concept in understanding ingroup bias is that of 'cultural distance'. In this paper, we use the term 'culture' to mean the collection of socially-learned rules, norms, values and shared meanings that influence individuals' behaviour within a population. While postmodernist writers (e.g. ???) argue that culture is an artificial and outdated concept, others continue to present strong evidence from a broadly materialist perspective for identifiable and meaningful between-group differences (e.g. Harris, 1999; Hofstede, 2001; Gannon, 2004). This is not to argue that all members of a particular culture conform inevitably to a set of attitudes or actions, fixed in time and context, nor that individuals are not agents in their culture, which *"can be seen as the creative product of individuals whose thoughts and behavior [sic] are in constant flux"* (Harris, 1999, p. 55).

Rather, it is to suggest that wider society exerts a degree of influence on the how the individual views the world and their place in it.

This standpoint is commonly used within the field of social psychology to investigate how members of different groups interact in a work context; the parallels with students in an internationalised university are readily apparent. A number of writers (e.g. Hall & Hall, 1990; Triandis, 1995; Gudykunst & Kim, 1997; Hofstede, 2001; Gannon, 2004) have attempted to identify and define dimensions on which cultures vary. It is then hypothesised that intercultural relations will be simpler and more rewarding the 'closer' the two groups are and more fraught with misunderstanding, culture shock and anxiety the greater the 'distance' (Stephan & Stephan, 1996; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001). A consensus on the dimensions of culture has, as yet, proved elusive, but may comprise aspects such as the strength of social hierarchies, the role of family, relative gender dominance, attitudes to politeness/face, attitudes to uncertainty and time, the fixedness of rules and levels of ethnocentrism.

One particular dimension of relevance to this study is that of the contrast between what might be broadly described as collectivist and individualist cultures. Seen by many commentators (e.g. Smith & Ball, 1993; Triandis, 1995; Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001; Schimmack, Oishi & Diener, 2005) as a vital component in understanding intercultural relations, cultures which generally stress interdependence, context, long-term group bonding, shared over individual goals and rigid hierarchies contrast strongly with those which stress individual agency, personal success and social mobility. The UK is generally considered to be near the individualist end of the spectrum (Hofstede, 2001; Allik & Realo, 2004; refs?) and so culturally distant from strongly collectivist cultures like those found in many parts of Asia and Africa. As such, home students in the UK might be expected to experience less easy relations with international students from collectivist cultures and lower levels with those from more familiar individualist-leaning cultures in Europe and North America.

Any essentialist approach to culture is open to challenge, not least as widespread migration and multiculturalism make the analysis of national cultural identity increasingly problematic (Couldry, 2000). However, as we shall see, the participants in the study reported in this paper articulated perceived differences between themselves and their international peers which relate to various dimensions of cultural distance, including around what might broadly be described as collectivist cultures.

4. Research questions

The research reported in this paper was primarily undertaken by two individuals, both UK nationals. One is a university practitioner/manager with substantial experience in supporting international students, contributing to internationalisation strategies and developing initiatives to integrate international students into the wider university community. The other is a researcher with a background in examining the undergraduate student experience using mixed qualitative and quantitative methods, having previously worked in developing international support strategies and teaching on modules with a high proportion of international students. Two international members of staff contributed in an advisory capacity in order to provide a different perspective on the research process and data collected.

Having had front-line experience of observing interactions between home and international students, both in the classroom and in social settings, the authors were keenly aware of the tensions which exist and which can serve to undermine the ambitious aims of the 'internationalisation at home' agenda.

As we have seen, there is a substantial literature about the views of international students about their experiences. However, there is relatively little information available from the perspective of home students, especially from the UK. Through the evolution of 'internationalisation at home',

they have become largely unwitting (and potentially unwilling) participants in a process of intercultural exchange, yet their voice is not yet strongly heard.

The overall aim of this study was thus to redress this balance to some extent, using an exploratory approach to build descriptive accounts from a cross-section of home students. It was intended that these would scope the main emerging themes in an area which has received little attention to date. The authors understand that students' lives are constantly in flux and that their views around this subject are contingent and flexible, based on the accumulation of new experiences. It is also understood that home students are not an homogenous group, with a wide-range of cultural and ethnic identities; this point is returned to in the discussion of limitations below. The study was not, therefore, intended to map deterministic patterns of belief or behaviour, but to explore the range of experiences undergone by home students and the meanings they attached to them.

The primary research questions that were posed were:

1. *How do home students view and interpret their interactions with international students and are there identifiable differences between different sub-groups within the home student population?*

2. *What themes emerge from home students' narratives about the social and academic encounters they have had with international students and/or the perceived barriers to such encounters?*

3. *To what extent are home students willing and informed participants in the 'internationalisation at home' agenda and do they share its values and assumptions?*

A secondary question addressed by this paper was whether it is possible to contextualise the findings within an established theoretical framework from the field of group relations.

5. Methodology

Research was undertaken two mid-ranked teaching-focused universities in the southwest of England. One of the two universities has a strong ethnic mix, whereas the other is less diverse. Both cater for a range of academic abilities. The research subjects were UK nationals who were full-time undergraduate students in their second or third year of study; it is recognised that the experience of postgraduate students may differ significantly (Neame, Odedra & Lloyd-Jones, 2007) or in more subtle ways (Trahar, 2007).

A mixed method approach was chosen to offer a contrast between the accounts generated by students in group and one-to-one environments. It was felt that focus groups would enable the researchers to examine the shared dialogues within groups of home students, with group members confirming, reinforcing or challenging views expressed by individuals. However, there were concerns (addressed in the discussion of limitations below) about the likelihood of self-censorship in the focus groups. One-to-one interviews were therefore used to probe students' individual experiences, and affective reactions to them, in a more confidential environment and in more specific detail. Mirrored methodology and data collection tools were used between the two universities:

A. **Focus groups.** 60 students attended one of eight semi-structured focus groups, each lasting around one hour. Students were drawn from 'business studies' and 'creative arts' courses on the basis that these were offered in both universities and had contrasting proportions of international students – very high (around 30%) in the former and relatively low (around 10%) in the latter. Two focus groups were held per subject area per university, each facilitated by one of the authors using the same set of prompting questions. The focus groups aimed to gather information across the range of social and academic interactions between themselves and their international peers, and, in particular, their conceptualisation of international students and what they perceived to be the main challenges and barriers to greater intercultural interaction.

B. Semi-structured interviews. 40 students attended a semi-structured one-to-one interview with one of the authors or a research associate lasting around one hour. These comprised 20 students from each university drawn exclusively from 'business studies' courses where proportions of international students were relatively high. These interviews focused specifically on groupwork experiences (e.g. how groups were formed and their experiences of working with students from other nations) and socialising outside of the classroom.

The participants self-selected in response to e-mails sent to all UK nationals in the target cohort and were given a token payment for their involvement. To minimise bias, the invitations did not state the purpose of the research beyond that it was concerned with aspects of 'the student experience'. The participants were therefore a self-selecting convenience sample of the wider cohort. A small subset of the focus group participants did previously know each other and had some shared experiences. The make-up of the participant group broadly echoed the home student populations from which they were drawn (e.g. by sex, age and ethnicity) , although insufficient demographic information was collected to test this empirically.

The data were subjected to a thematic analysis. Initially, each author independently identified emergent themes from the focus group and interview transcripts from their own university. These were then compared, discussed and refined, leading to a further phase of analysis based on agreed themes. A final phase of analysis saw each author analyse the other university's transcripts to ensure reliability, as far as possible. The findings reported in this paper therefore relate to these agreed themes; there were no readily identifiable differences between the data from the two universities.

6. Summary of findings

It was clear from the comments of home students that they and international students mostly inhabited semi-distinct social spaces within the university environment. Social encounters with international students were generally coincidental and unplanned. Home students reported mainly spending time within tight peer groups which rarely included international students. Where international students were members, their status as 'other' was downplayed by descriptions such as *"one of us"* or *"just the same"* (Halualani, 2008). Those students who were more readily accepted into social groups were reported to be generally of European or Anglophone origin.

Popular culture was crucial for the interviewees in defining their own identity in relation to the wider student body. Friendships and ingroups were built on a shared knowledge and appreciation of music, film, websites, television programmes and comedy; nearly exclusively of British, American or Australian origin. This heavy reliance on a highly-defined portfolio of cultural artefacts made it very hard for students to participate in friendship groups where they lacked knowledge of the key components of the specific sub-culture and its associated meta-language, which took the form of quotations, idioms, catchphrases, definitional slang and detailed back histories. The ability of international students to access UK student friendship groups may therefore be correlated with their own exposure to Anglophone popular culture. Interestingly, sport did appear to offer a more inclusive social space for some students.

Most marked were the distinctions in the nocturnal social spaces, with alcohol playing a greater or lesser role in most instances. It was widely believed by participants that the student drinking culture was inherently excluding as other nationalities would not consume the same quantities of alcohol and would not wish to participate in social activities which were predicated on drunkenness. Amongst some home students, there was a fear that the presence of international students would see them being 'judged' for their poor behaviour. Furthermore, home students' night-time socialising was reported to rely particularly heavily on popular culture references, while reinforcing existing friendship groups through the accumulation of anecdotes from social encounters. These combined to exacerbate the exclusion of international students.

A small subset of the participants did themselves look down on the prevailing student drinking culture and, as a result, felt embarrassment which they reported acted as a barrier to involving international students in their more restrained social events. For the majority, however, as international students did not participate in alcohol-based social spaces, they appeared to be outside established friendship groups and therefore not then invited to non-alcohol events. The exception to this was where home and international students had shared pre-allocated accommodation, after which more inclusive friendship groups tended to persist.

The one situation where home and international students were in a position to spend significant time in contact was within the classroom setting. The amount and nature of this time varied between disciplines. Within business studies, it tended to be in the context of shared spaces (e.g. lectures and seminars), with significant amounts of groupwork in the form of projects or presentations. In the creative arts, contact was more irregular and incidental, partly as the proportion of international students was lower and partly due to the essentially individualistic nature of the subject area.

Despite the frequency and intensity of *notional* contact with international students, home students in business studies generally reported that *actual* contact was low. They felt that international students tended to sit together in groups which they found excluding; they were especially resentful where students talked to each other in languages other than English. Allocations into workgroups were generally led by the students themselves, which meant that these were usually mono-cultural, with home students retaining their own friendship groups while international students grouped together, often in their own ethno-national groups. On the occasions when multicultural groups had arisen, the home students often found these problematic in terms of the academic approach of the international students and the nature of their contributions. Home students identified differences in the pedagogic norms of international students. For example, they were censured for their lack of active participation in class, their unwillingness to use critical techniques, their lax attitude to timekeeping and punctuality, inability to understand instructions, occasional poor behaviour (e.g. noisiness), over-diligence or boastfulness.

The situation in creative arts was somewhat different. There were few formal opportunities to interact with international students and the nature of the workspaces (e.g. the design workshop) was not conducive to casual contact. However, home students reported instances where they had sought out international students as they had useful perspectives, knowledge or skill-sets derived from their cultural background.

7. *Integrated threat theory*

Integrated threat theory (Stephan & Stephan, 2000) is derived from the field of social psychology and proposes an integrated framework for analysing difficult intergroup relations, drawing on practical examples of tensions between two groups who come into regular contact. In particular, it has been used to analyse a range of intergroup situations where an incoming minority is interacting with an established majority group, including immigrants in the United States (Stephan, Ybarra & Bachman, 1999), refugees in Australia (Schweitzer *et al*, 2005) and Muslims in the Netherlands (Gonzalez *et al*, in press). Spencer-Rodgers & McGovern (2002) used the framework to investigate relations between home and international students in the US, finding it a useful tool in understanding threat, anxiety and the use of stereotypes.

Integrated threat theory asserts that there are four major components of the threat felt by one group in respect of another :

a) 'Realistic threats' are those which endanger the material safety and well-being of the group and might include fear of harm or a decline in quality of life.
b) 'Symbolic threats' are those which are perceived as threaten the group's culture or place in the wider society, particularly by challenging or undermining accepted norms.
c) 'Intergroup anxiety' occurs when two groups come into contact and relates to fears over the ability to communicate positively and effectively.

d) 'Negative stereotyping' are those ingrained attitudes and responses to members of another group which mediate contact, set expectations and which can hamper the process of individuation.

Riek, Mania & Gaertner's (2006) meta-analysis tends to support the overall validity of *integrated threat theory*. They postulate minor amendments to the theory, with 'group esteem' threat replacing negative stereotypes and intergroup anxiety; the latter is seen as a mediator between the other threats and more general behaviours and attitudes. However, these amendments have not yet been tested empirically. Cottrell & Neuberg (2005) suggest that *integrated threat theory* underplays the highly individualised emotional responses to stimuli such as threat, although they concede that it provides a useful higher-level framework for categorisation. Nevertheless, it has come under no serious criticism since being developed ten years ago and the authors thus felt confidence in tentatively employing it in this study.

Integrated threat theory also proposes that there may be factors which predicate and influence these four main threats (e.g. a history of intergroup conflict). Of particular relevance to this study are (a) the amount and quality of the home students' previous contact with international students and other representatives of different cultures, (b) the 'cultural distance' between the home students and their international peers, and (c) the extent to which the home students have strong identification with their ingroup (i.e. ethnocentrism).

8. Applying *integrated threat theory*

The following section will discuss each of the components in turn to demonstrate how the emerging themes in this study relate to the four components of *integrated threat theory.* Table 1 provides an overview of these relationships for the major themes relating to threat developed from the focus groups and interviews.

Table 1 : Emerging themes by type of threat

Threat	Emerging themes
Realistic threats	• Unsatisfactory peer learning experiences • Fear about lower groupwork marks
Symbolic threats	• Concerns about 'swamping' by unfamiliar others • Breaches of shared behavioural norms • Role of alcohol and prevailing student drinking culture
Intergroup anxiety	• Absence of shared cultural reference points • Language barriers and need for 'mindful' communication • Fear of causing offence • Fear of inadvertent racism and related peer disapproval
Negative stereotyping	• Lack of differentiation between individuals • Special position of 'Chinese' students • Work-orientation and language skills

It is important to note at this point that not all of the emerging themes related to a sense of threat about encounters with international students. Some were actively positive (e.g. cultural enhancement of the university community), but these were considerably less common and are beyond the scope of this paper.

A. Realistic threats

Realistic threats are most usually felt where there is competition for finite resources; a zero-sum game. While this is not generally the case in the example of university students, there is a degree of interdependence between home and international students in regards to their academic success. In some circumstances, this appears to operate as proxy for competition, with a significant proportion of home students reporting being fearful that their learning or marks would be compromised by the actions of their international peers.

Firstly, some reported that they were required to learn partly through peer presentations, where individual students or groups would lead on a particular topic. They reported incidents where they felt that they had not adequately learned the subject matter due to the quality of the presentation given by international students, particularly in terms of the spoken English and depth of content matter. For example,

> *"[In this module] we are sort of reliant on people to give a presentation. And there is one group, I mean they try really hard and they are all Chinese and it did get… it was very hard to actually understand what they were getting at and to actually understand what they were trying to teach."* [focus group]

The second, and more concerning, situation was where students were undertaking groupwork exercises where they would be collectively marked (e.g. preparing a joint report). They described how they had misgivings about being in a group with international students as they felt that would not be able to contribute at an appropriate level and that the group's marks would suffer as a result. In one particular instance, two students described how, due to his written English abilities, they colluded to falsify a European student's work to ensure that it reached an appropriate standard :

> *"Student 1 : This is gonna make us sound really bad. Sven was in our group and I wrote his section for him because … we were like, 'this doesn't make sense, this doesn't fit in with the rest of the report' and I dictated it.*
> *Student 2 : I ended up writing it, I think.*
> *Student 1 : It was like, so bad, but we were getting really stressed… But we spoke about it without him and said, 'we're not letting Sven write this', 'cos…*
> *Student 2 : Well, no, 'cos he couldn't, because it was our marks."* [focus group]

In another example, the home student felt that the international students in their group simply did not understand the nature of the exercise nor what was expected of a groupwork exercise :

> *"Me and my friend were doing all the work […] They just went off and did their own thing. They didn't take anything in from what the lectures and tutorials were teaching us […] Only a few days before the actual hand-in date, we split into two groups. It was partly because if you do stay in the same group and they've done no work, you are committing an assessment offence to submit it as their work as well."* [interview]

De Vita (2002) concluded that multi-cultural groupwork does not negatively affect home students' marks. However, this hypothesis remains an important part of the home student perceptions of, and anxiety about, the 'international classroom'. It is often related specifically to the standard of English language that their international peers possess :

> *"[This international student] has got one of the poorest levels of English and obviously work gets marked on what they've done as a group and [my friend] doesn't think that its fair. She says he is trying his best, but it's not to their sort of standard."* [interview]

Trahar (2007) notes that *"language skills and intellectual ability are often conflated in people's minds"* (p. 17), such that there is an assumption that students with poorer English will form a threat to the academic health of the 'international classroom', especially in the context of groupwork (Le Roux, 2001). This form of threat was not identified among creative arts students, where groupwork was much less common and where English language capability was less salient.

B. Symbolic threats

As the majority culture, the home students interviewed for this study had a strong sense of international students as 'other'; an outgroup, or, more specifically, a series of overlapping

outgroups based on factors such as nationality, language proficiency, work orientation and so forth. They were familiar and comfortable with the label of 'international student' and gave consistent definitions as to what this meant, based around studying overseas for a finite period of time and paying higher tuition fees than UK students[1]. The expression of this 'otherness' differed to some extent between the subject area from which the student was drawn. In the creative arts, international students were seen as something of a curiosity and cultural resource which could be drawn upon, whereas in business studies, where the proportion of international students was significantly higher, the assessment was less positive.

Drawing on experience from New Zealand, Ward *et al* (2005) assert that where international student numbers reach a critical mass of around 15% of the total population, perception among domestic students tends to turn from positive to negative, leading to a degree of anxiety and irritation in classrooms with a large proportion of international students. This study found some support for that position :

> *"[My friend] used to get irritated with all the international students, but I think it was 'cos she was sort of surrounded by them a lot of the time […] I'm not always working with them so I don't see it as too much of an issue She's sort of surrounded by them because there happen to be a lot of them on her course and I think that frustrated her a bit."* [interview]

At times the language used by home students in this study was somewhat redolent of the less-pleasant rhetoric sometimes employed in relation to immigration; there are *"rather a lot of them"*, they *"always stick together"* and their behaviour is *"excluding"*. There are two possible components to this reaction from home students. The first is that it is known that minority outgroups tend to tighten (Brewer, 2003), pulling together in the face of prejudice or exclusion from the majority. This is particularly likely with international students who are away from their home country and are likely to be experiencing a degree of culture shock (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001), often while struggling with a second language. The second component is the unfamiliarity of collectivist

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[1] Few students were aware of the distinctions in tuition fee regimes between European and other international students.

cultures to the majority of UK students who have raised in an individualistic setting. This appears to form a strong symbolic threat to the home students, seeing the incomers as holding values which are different to their own and to which they have not previously been exposed, heightened further by the highly ethnocentric nature of UK culture (Hooghe *et al*, 2006). We will return to this theme when considering negative stereotyping below.

Home students also identified specific behaviours (e.g. around timekeeping) exhibited by international students which were felt to be breaches of British societal norms and which marked these students out from the rest :

> *"We had a Chinese lad in our group and he was the last person to speak and before he started we were 4 minutes under time and by the time we'd finished we were 4 or 5 minutes over and none of us really wanted to say 'stop', but the teacher finally said 'wrap it up' and he still nearly kept going, purely because he didn't really understand… when she said she wanted a 20 minute presentation it was a 20 minute presentation."* [focus group]

Whereas ingroups are tolerant towards their members when norms are transgressed, negative judgement about outgroups is generally more severe, simultaneously strengthening the ingroup/outgroup divide. Ingroups also readily identify small and uncontroversial differences to reinforce group distinctions. In this study, clothing was frequently mentioned as something which set international students apart.

As we have seen, home and international students generally moved in very different social circles, at least partly due to contrasting attitudes towards – and use – of alcohol. By some home students whose use of alcohol was relatively high, the rejection of what was perceived to be prevailing student drinking culture could arguably also be seen as a symbolic threat :

> *"[International students] have to make the choice at the end of the day. They have to accept that they are coming over here, it's a different [drinking] culture and if they don't like*

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it, they're going to have to accept it or they are going to be isolated… The culture's not going to change to suit them." [focus group]

C. Intergroup anxiety

Brewer (2003) asserts that *"because we are less familiar with outgroup persons, imagining or being with them is likely to trigger anxious thoughts"* (p.72), such that *"the mere appearance of an outgroup member may arouse negative affect that may influence subsequent perceptions without the individual being consciously aware of the affect itself"* (p.74). Stephan *et al* (2005) found that the thought of interacting with international students could arouse anxiety among home students, especially if they had been primed with negative stereotypes, while Fritz, Chin & DeMarinis (2008) found that international students reported greater anxiety about intercultural interactions where the cultural distance was greatest.

Consistent with this, the participants in this study demonstrated significant anxiety about interacting with the outgroups presented by international students. Interactions were not generally straightforward. They required significant effort and home students often found these encounters to be *"exhausting"*, both in academic and social situations where the other person's English language ability was limited :

> *"Obviously you can communicate in other ways and stuff, but sometimes […] meaning and terms are sometimes quite different and so when you are doing a project with that person it's not straightforward."* [interview]

In order to avoid misunderstanding and incomplete or embarrassing conversations, it was necessary to listen carefully, use simple linguistic forms, avoid UK-specific idioms and check shared understanding (Smith & Bond, 1993; Graddol, 2005). More generally, cross-cultural communication between students can be challenging due to differences in conversational forms

and conventions (House, 2003), such that some degree of misunderstanding becomes inevitable. Home students reported this caused them significant anxiety, especially in social situations which were more reliant on humour and popular cultural references :

"If you get on really well with other people that aren't [international], it's much easier, especially if you're tired and you're working hard – you don't want to have to spend a whole evening trying really hard to get on with people you don't really get on with." [focus group]

Another focus group participant summed up the prevailing view succinctly, if tautologically – *"it's so much easier to go with what's easy.*"

Peacock & Harrison(in press) have linked the intergroup anxiety felt by home students to the concept of 'mindfulness' (Langer, 1989; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000), in contrast to the easy and comfortable 'mindlessness' of everyday communication with ingroup members. Mindful interactions require the individual to be keenly aware of a range of information coming from their conversational partner, as well as considering the impact of their own words and actions. Possible misunderstandings need to be anticipated and managed, while novel information needs to be contextualised and tested against stereotypes and previous concepts (Burgoon, Berger & Waldron, 2000). Mindful interlocutors are constantly finding new ways of communicating effectively while learning about each other's experience and perspectives (Thomas, 2006). However, they are also having to expend significant cognitive resources in maintaining mindfulness, as well as bearing the anxiety which is associated with it. This tends to be higher for the dominant group (in this case, home students) as minority groups are more used to communicating across culture (Hyers & Swim, 1998). This need for mindfulness was not unique to interactions with students with less strong English language skills. One focus group participant noted of a group of American students, *"We may speak the same language, but we don't understand them!"*

Another specific component of the observed intergroup anxiety was a keen fear of causing offence (Plant & Devine, 1998; Le Roux, 2001; Hyde & Ruth, 2002; Avery & Steingard, 2007). The home

students were highly aware of 'political correctness' as a concept and of the moral sanctions imposed upon those that acted incorrectly. Most also showed a strong awareness of national, racial or cultural difference and specifically around causing offence through ill-considered words or actions. Given the overwhelming range of nationalities and cultures represented in UK universities, it is unsurprising that some described finding this fear as *"paralysing"*. They feared making a cultural *faux pas*, but even more feared being branded as *"stupid"* or *"racist"* by their British peers.

There was evidence of 'response amplification' or 'ambivalence amplification' (Stephan & Stephan, 1996; Brewer, 2003), especially within the more social setting of the focus groups. This manifested itself in a tendency to describe the 'other' presented by international students in excessively positive tones. International students were described variously as *"really, really clever"* or *"really, really hard working"*, apparently in attempts to establish an egalitarian position. However, as noted above, there were also harsh reflections on outgroup members who were seen as behaving poorly.

D. Negative stereotypes

Fiske & Neuberg (1990) define a 'continuum model' of social cognition, ranging from crude characterisations to full individuation. Where people who are considered to matter little to the individual are concerned, stereotypes and broad categories prevail. In contrast, where regular and meaningful contact is crucial, more information and detail is collated and processed. The home students interviewed in this study tended to engage with their international peers towards the former end of the continuum. Many were keen to impress that they treated all people as individuals and were proud of knowing something about international students with whom they had only limited dealings (e.g. their name or their country of origin). They sought to suppress what were seen as unhelpful or prejudiced stereotypes (Bodenhausen & Macrae, 1996), although not all stereotypes are necessarily negative in intercultural encounters between student groups (Bond, 1986). However, it was notable that this drive for individuation held much more strongly for

students from Europe, Anglophone countries and South America. Their personal knowledge of Africa and Asia in particular was sketchy and they tended to categorise large geographical or cultural areas, and the people coming from them, together.

The main focus of negative stereotyping was in regard to 'Chinese' students[2]. It was rare that individuals' names were known and they were generally referred to in collective terms; e.g. *"we have a group of Chinese students in our class".* The students did not individuate easily and often relied on stereotypes to do with work-orientation (which was felt to be extreme), English language skills (seen as poor) or collectivist culture (described as excluding, unfriendly and alien). This fits more broadly into the Western stereotype of 'the inscrutable oriental' (Said, 1978; Smith & Bond, 1993).

A more general extension to this negative stereotype was that international students were seen to 'flock together', remaining in national groups and using their native language. One participant summed this up :

> *"I find always that I can't approach them and I find that a bit… not intimidating, but I wouldn't ever approach a big group. It's just because it's a bit daunting and it's probably, for them, 'cos they feel safer and it's their own language and they're probably more comfortable."* [focus group]

Niles (1995) has noted that international students tend to have higher academic motivation than home students; this is perhaps due to cultural differences, the tuition fees they are paying or that international students are a rarefied sample of their nationality, having already been motivated to study abroad. Niles (1995) and Watson *et al* (in press) have noted that different cultures have approaches to learning and teamwork. This was reflected to some extent in this study in two mutually contradictory negative stereotypes relating to work-orientation. International students

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[2] It became apparent that the label of 'Chinese' was, in many cases, being employed in interviews and focus groups to refer to all students from East and South East Asia, including Japan, Malaysia and Vietnam, as well as China itself.

were, by some home students, seen as being excessively keen about their education. They were those who sat at the front at lectures, did not socialise and who spent extra time with teaching staff. The diametrically opposite stereotype was of international students whose attendance in classes was very poor or who did not seem to want to put in the required effort :

> *"The fifth group was just like put together by people who didn't turn up and like they just sort of happened to be international students, so they all work together but we never see them really because they don't turn up anyway."* [focus group]

In both instances, these stereotypes were seen as being unattractive to home students and part of their construction of international students as 'other'.

In many ways, it is only natural that home students should use stereotypes to intellectually manage the sheer complexity of the cultural milieu that the internationalised university places them in. Similar situations elsewhere are relatively rare, with members of the majority culture being exposed to a wide range of minority cultures in close proximity, although this is increasingly the experience of those living in large British cities. Participants were concerned that they didn't have the specific non-stereotypical cultural knowledge to enable them engage without embarrassment or the fear of causing offence :

> *"There's this Nigerian guy and [my friend is] scared 'coz she's worried she's going to say the wrong thing … and that worry has stopped her from talking to him, just because she's afraid she's gonna say something wrong."* [focus group]

In addition, Brewer (2003) suggests that anxiety restricts cognitive space and increases reliance on stereotyping. We have seen that concerns about academic results, a degree of cultural dissonance, nervousness about personal interactions and communication and fear of peer censure can all generate significant anxiety for home students. These pressures are likely to heighten the

creation and use of negative stereotypes or, at least, broad categorisations and characterisations (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990).

9. Discussion

Among the students interviewed for this study, no views were encountered that were openly hostile to the presence of international students on university campuses, nor open prejudice about the individuals or the cultures from which they were drawn. However, there was an appreciable degree of threat and anxiety about sharing academic and social spaces, and what this meant on a day-to-day basis.

Integrated threat theory has provided a useful framework for categorising the types of threat felt by participants in this study, in terms that are becoming familiar within the field of group relations. It is not intended to suggest that <u>all</u> threats were felt by <u>all</u> participants, nor does it describe their relative strengths. Nevertheless, there is evidence of threats of all four types predicted by the theory and found in other studies of similar types of intercultural interaction. These were mentioned with a degree of consistency between the two universities and the two modes of data collection. *Integrated threat theory* has typically been used previously in the context of quantitative studies that do attempt to measure the strength of the threats and of the factors that predicate them. Now that its relevance to the arena of 'internationalisation at home' has been tentatively demonstrated, this type of approach would be a natural progression for future research.

The authors are conscious of, perhaps inevitably, having focused on the more negative themes which emerged from the collected data. The aim of the study was to address the two issues (integration and intercultural development) which pose a challenge for internationalisation. We have seen that both of these objectives are challenged by the threats felt by many home students. However, this response was by no means universal. A minority of students were clearly more comfortable with intercultural encounters. These tended to be older students, those on creative

arts courses and those with cross-cutting identities (Gaertner, Dovidio & Bachman, 1996; Ward, 2006) which meant that they had some degree of shared experience with their international peers – e.g. being from a British minority ethnic community or having a parent of another nationality. Those who talked about living in multicultural areas, travelling widely or living abroad also appeared more comfortable and described less threat. The authors term this minority culture *'informed cosmopolitanism'*; members spontaneously identified the gains from intercultural interaction which the 'internationalisation at home' agenda would predict.

In contrast, the majority culture of *'passive xenophobia'* was typified by a reluctance to interact voluntarily with international students at anything beyond the most surface level. At its most extreme, there were some students who were worried about their academic marks and described active avoidance within the classroom setting. More usually it was a case of according international students the status of an 'invisible other' with whom they shared physical spaces, but rarely social or educational ones. There were fears about embarrassment and the threat of those with different values. Encounters which did occur tended to be trivial, incidental and not connected to a wider agenda of intercultural capability (Halualani, 2008).

Thomas (2006) draws a specific link between 'mindfulness' as discussed above and the development of 'cultural intelligence'. He sees mindfulness as a learning state through which, with the reflective application of knowledge and appropriate behaviours, individuals can become more able to communicate effectively across culture. He posits that the lowest level of intercultural competence is typified by people who deny the existence of cultural difference and who therefore fail to exhibit mindfulness. Following the principle that the least skilled are those least able to assess their inability (e.g. Kruger & Dunning, 1999), these individuals mistaken believe that they have transcended cultural difference. This was a position suggested frequently by participants in this study and others involving UK undergraduates (e.g. Pritchard & Skinner, 2002).

For the participants, international students did not collectively comprise a single homogenous outgroup, but rather a series of inter-related outgroups with semi-distinct characteristics. Those

that were culturally 'close' (e.g. those from Western Europe) were more likely to be individuated, especially by those who had previous experience with those cultures. At the other extreme, those who were in multiple outgroups (e.g. those from South East Asia with poor English language ability, a strong work ethic and who spoke their own language in public) were seen as very culturally distant and were subject to the most negative stereotypes and characterisations. Fiske (2000) asserts that, *"if two people from mutual outgroups co-operate … they will heed, interpret, and appreciate each other's individual characteristics. They might not like each other, but at least their impression of the other will be based more of individual than on group characteristics"* (p. 127). However, this co-operation was generally lacking based on the interviews and focus groups in this study.

A number of authors (e.g. Pritchard & Skinner, 2002; Aberson & Haag, 2007; Summers & Volet, 2008) have noted that increased intercultural contact can actually increase anxiety and/or decrease confidence in the short-term while new understanding and identities are constructed, especially where mindfulness (Shelton, 2003) or group salience (Islam & Hewstone, 1993) are stimulated. However, Levin, Van Laar & Sidanius (2003) found that long-term friendships between students of different ethnic groups reduced both ingroup bias and intergroup anxiety. New information tends to challenge prevailing stereotypes and potentially creates new cross-cutting identities based on shared interests. A small proportion (less than 20%) of the home students in this study did report having friends within the international student body. These tended to be based around areas of mutual interest (especially sport) or through sharing accommodation. Van Laar *et al* (2005) report that multicultural student housing plays a strong role in reducing prejudice and perceived threats.

To provide a cautionary coda, Brewer (2003) reminds us that *"although intergroup friendships may be important, highly personalised relationships do not always reduce prejudice toward the outgroup as a whole"* (p. 100), while Halualani (2008) notes that the 'differentness' of friends from other cultures was ignored by the students in her study.

10. Limitations

The authors wish to acknowledge a number of methodological limitations within the study. The first is that the sample was drawn from two similar universities in the same region of the United Kingdom. However, the findings triangulate well with similar work in the UK and other countries (e.g. Volet & Ang, 1998; Spencer-Rodgers, 2001; Halualani *et al*, 2004; Ward *et al*, 2005; Summers & Volet; 2008), suggesting a good degree of validity. Secondly, it is increasingly clear that the distinction between home and international students is an artificial one and that neither population is homogenous. Around a quarter of the participants in this study had backgrounds which made them different from the majority of home students; some had dual nationality, were from a minority ethnic community or were refugees. There is similar diversity within international student populations. In one sense, this complexity is a limitation of this study, but in another, the findings reported here relate also to wider issues of diversity and intercultural interaction. Finally, other studies have questioned the authenticity of the student response when asked about issues around cultural, national or racial difference. Hyde & Ruth (2002) concluded that students had some tendency to self-censor controversial views, but that their main blockage was in regard to being viewed as stupid or ill-informed by their peers, especially on issues of race and gender (Plant & Devine, 1998; Le Roux, 2001; Avery & Steingard, 2007). The authors noted a similar effect, which, as predicted, appeared to have been more of an issue in the focus groups than in the interviews in this study.

11. Concluding remarks

To conclude, we return to the two problems identified at the start of this paper – the integration of international students and the intercultural development of home students. In order to make progress on either of these issues, there is a clear need for the informed involvement of the home students. The authors argue that *integrated threat theory* provides a useful framework for

understanding the 'passive xenophobia' which the majority of home students display towards their international peers, contrary to the wishes of educators (De Vita, 2005; De Vita, 2007; Leask, 2007) and policy-makers (Crowther *et al*, 2000; Middlehurst & Woodfield, 2007).

This study found little evidence of practice which would meet the requirements of the *contact hypothesis* for positive group relations. There were few opportunities for spontaneous intergroup interaction because the home students largely chose to absent themselves. The interdependent tasks which might be provided primarily through classroom groupwork exercises were also largely lacking, while the opportunities to actively manage the 'international classroom' (Otten, 2003; Leask, 2007; Peacock & Harrison, forthcoming) were not being taken. As such, the limited educational encounters which did occur were often troublesome and unrewarding.

As a result, there were few chances for international and home students to mix and interact in constructive ways which would promote integration for the former and skills development for the latter. Reviewing the literature on internationalisation, De Vita (2007) finds that *"the rhetoric of education internationalisation hides the fact that intercultural interaction, in and outside the classroom, is not happening naturally"* (p. 165). Drawing on US experience, Haines (2007) finds that diversity of population does not mean diversity of interaction.

These findings present a challenge to the long-term sustainability of the internationalisation of higher education in the UK and other nations. The integration of international students is an issue which dates back many decades and across many countries (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001), but it is brought more sharply into focus by the new global context and increased competition. The concept of 'internationalisation at home' is partially founded on a belief that shared spaces can lead to improved intercultural skills and understanding. However, this study suggests that more work is needed to provide a managed context in which intercultural encounters are positive, meaningful and non-threatening. At present, it would appear that home students are not being engaged with and that this is a clear challenge to 'internationalisation at home'. This study found little evidence that home students spontaneously shared the values enshrined in

'internationalisation at home', nor that these had been effectively articulated to the students. There was thus a gap between the laudable intention and the reality on the ground.

Policies and practices need to be developed which reduce the anxiety felt by home students and which provide positive learning experiences. There needs to be an appreciation that multicultural groupwork is pseudo-competitive for home students, insofar as that they feel their outcomes are linked to those of international students. This must alter the way in which these groups are formed and how they are guided and supported by academic staff. All workgroups need time and cognitive space to form and negotiate individual roles (e.g. Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977), but the process can only be complicated by an added cultural dimension (Kelly, 2008). It is unlikely that short-term, unguided multicultural groups will provide much learning potential and may even raise anxiety and a sense of threat.

More widely, if home students are to develop their intercultural capabilities, opportunities need to be found for them to develop mindfulness and to challenge the taboos which surround the discussion of difference. Intercultural experiences need to be contextualised, with group identities being made salient, if transferable skills are to be developed (Dovidio, Gaertner & Kawakami, 2003). There needs to be scope for long-term friendships to develop outside of the classroom in order to solidify learning about culture and to reduce anxieties; policies around housing in particular need to be reconsidered in this light. Finally, further research is needed into the mechanisms by which home students' attitudes are constructed and developed as this would appear to be a completely unresearched area at present.

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