

## **“It’s so much easier to go with what’s easy” : ‘mindfulness’ and the discourse between home and international students in the UK**

*A recent aspect of UK higher education has been the ‘internationalisation’ of university campuses, driven by a rapid increase in student numbers from overseas and growing pressure to prepare all students for global careers. It is often assumed by policy makers that the benefits of an ‘internationalised’ university will include opportunities for enhancing cultural awareness and capability among UK students, with contact with other cultures helping to foster a sense of global citizenship and responsibility.*

*This paper reports initial findings from two English universities which suggests that UK students instinctively take a strategic approach to cross-cultural interaction based on perceptions of cultural proximity and comfort. While UK students do appear to identify some of the gains predicted by policy-makers, these are often low level, incidental and unconnected to wider learning. Furthermore, it is noteworthy that data collection and analysis has been hindered by a strong taboo around discussions of diversity.*

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## **1. CONTEXT**

'Internationalisation' as a term now has common currency within the UK higher education sector. Though institutions have developed their own strategic and operational definitions, there is broad agreement that this is a process that must encompass aspects of the student experience, including both the experience of international students in the UK and a wider internationally-contextualised experience for all students, whether on UK campuses or overseas.

While the promoted benefits of 'internationalisation' are numerous and well-documented (e.g. Higher Education Academy, 2006) there are concerns amongst support professionals and academics about the lack of integration between students groups and a realisation that the mere presence of international students does not constitute an 'international experience'. Da Vita (2005) finds that "the ideal of transforming a culturally diverse student population into a valued resource for activating processes of international connectivity, social cohesion and intercultural learning is still very much that, an ideal" (p. 75).

Whereas international student views have been traditionally sought in attempts to understand this issue (notably UKCOSA, 2004), there is little research into the views and attitudes of UK students. What do our home students feel about the process of internationalising our universities and, in particular, how do they feel about interacting with an increasingly diverse student population?

## **2. DOMESTIC STUDENT ATTITUDES: A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF INTERNATIONAL LITERATURE**

Considering the vital economic importance of the global market in higher education and the growing perception of student as 'consumer', surprisingly little research has been presented into the home student experience of and attitudes towards growing numbers of international students in our institutions.

Volet and Ang (1998) in their study of home and international students in Australia found that social contact between the two groups was rare and that home students demonstrated a low inclination to interact with their international peers. A study conducted in Spain identified similar attitudes on the part of the home students that were generated by differences in culture, worldview and language (Sanchez, 2004). Spencer-Rodgers' (2001) work in the US found that students had a broadly positive attitude to their international peers, though these had a considerable basis in generic stereotypes.

Ward et al's (2005) research in New Zealand found that domestic students' attitudes to, and

perceptions of, international students were moderately positive. However, while there was a willingness to interact and few barriers to interaction were perceived, the amount of contact and intercultural friendships were nevertheless low and the frequency of interaction was rare. The survey found however that a higher proportion of incoming international students was associated with greater perceived barriers, a stronger perception of threat and competition and negative stereotyping. Less than half the respondents identified international students as presenting an opportunity to learn about other cultures and few believed students from different cultures work well together.

In the UK, the International Student Experience Report (UNITE, 2006) found that UK students did not generally perceive international students negatively, but were indifferent to interaction and many did not identify the benefits associated with intercultural contact. Cathcart, Dixon-Dawson and Hall (2005) explored interactions through cross-cultural group work in the classroom, analysing the responses of both UK and international students. Both groups of students expressed frustration in trying to overcome linguistic and cultural barriers.

### **3. METHODOLOGY**

This paper reports the initial findings of a research project spanning two post-1992 universities in the southwest of England. One is large and multi-site, the other smaller and with two campuses. Both offer a mainly vocational provision and have a mix of recruiting and selecting courses.

The primary data source for this paper was a series of eight semi-structured focus groups run across the two institutions. These each comprised 6 to 10 second year UK undergraduates drawn from either 'business studies' or 'creative art and media' courses. These broad subjects areas were selected on the basis that (a) they were shared between the two universities, and (b) they contained contrasting proportions of international students, with business studies at around 30% and creative art and media at around 10%. In reality, the actual courses from which participants were drawn varied, but the authors are confident that there was sufficient similarity for effective comparison.

Each session lasted between forty-five and ninety minutes depending on the availability of the students and the strength of the discussion. The participants were self-selecting 'paid volunteers', insofar as e-mail invitations were sent to all UK students on relevant courses with an offer of payment for participation. The focus groups were flagged as being about 'the student experience' without details of the specific topic to be covered. This approach was used to draw a good cross-section of student views and to avoid a bias towards students with particularly positive or negative views around diversity or multi-culturalism. A total of 60 students were involved. Around one in ten of these were from a black or minority ethnic background and a similar sized and overlapping

group had dual citizenship from another country. A small number of students were mature, ranging in age from mid 20s to 50s.

Three secondary data sources have also been used to provide wider context and to triangulate some of the findings :

1. An evaluation of diversity awareness training sessions held with second and third year Peer Assisted Learning tutors.
2. Questionnaires gathered from several cohorts of students pursuing a module in cross-cultural communication.
3. Discussion at and feedback from academic staff development events on cross-cultural awareness, focusing particularly on classroom practice.

Throughout this paper, the term 'international' is used to mean any student not from the United Kingdom, including from the European Union. The focus group participants were given scope to explore their own definitions, but this one generally prevailed.

#### **4. PATTERNS OF INTERACTION AND THREAT**

The research literature suggests that international students and domestic student populations do not mix easily. On a social level, findings from the UKCOSA Broadening Our Horizons survey of international students in the UK (UKCOSA, 2004), found that most friendships were with co-nationals and a lesser number with other internationals; few reported friendships with UK students, especially those students from East and South East Asia. Most interaction occurred at University on campus and very little during extra-curricular activities. Similarly, Ward et al (2005) found that in New Zealand the amount of contact and number of intercultural friendships is low, as is frequency of interaction. In the academic sphere, De Vita (2002) notes that international students do not spontaneously mix and would rather be involved in monocultural work groups in the classroom.

Students in this study reported varying amounts of social contact with international students. A few students were enthusiasts, but the majority had limited interaction based around classroom situations and occasional social events. Sport was an important forum for some, especially male students. A minority of students professed to having had no contact at all, despite being on a course with a relatively large proportion of international students.

The majority of respondents stated on prompting that they wished for more contact. In some students there appeared to be a real sense of regret in not having more interaction (*"sounds like a*

*good thing to have, to be able to easily socialise with”), others mild regret (“I thought it was a slight drawback to me”) and others passive disinterest (“If I had to... it just doesn’t happen that way at the minute”). Consumer research suggests that international students are keen to make friends with domestic students, and come to the UK with high hopes of making contact with UK citizens and learning about UK culture (UKCOSA, 2004). So what is stopping them?*

#### **4.1 Language and introversion**

From this study, language is inexorably linked to the degree of comfort that the UK student feels in the presence of international students and their desire to interact. International students who are mentioned as having good spoken English are also those most likely to be socialised with and identified as *“just like us”*. They are most likely to be European, of European descent or from Anglophone nations; this distinction is explored in more depth below. In contrast, international students with weaker language skills but who initiate conversations are seen as requiring attention, concentration and empathy to interact with successfully. Nevertheless, strong credit is given for trying, engaging, practicing and persevering.

On the other hand, UK students in this study consistently identified a clear ‘out-group’ within their international peers whose language abilities are poor and who do not seek to initiate interaction with them. They are typified as being distant, unfriendly, quiet, rude or arrogant. Some students express having no desire to interact with these students either socially or in the classroom and a minority even reveal a sense of anger at their self-exclusion and what are perceived to be excluding behaviours.

Students participating in this study often drew a connection between language and the level of an international student’s introversion or extroversion. For example, in identifying distinctions between different types of international students, one UK student identified a group where,

*“...their English is quite good and they are quite confident. And, like, the others – we don’t socialise with them, but that’s because we don’t really know them. They haven’t been as approachable as people who are fluent in English.”*

In contrast, there were examples of international students whose English was good, but who still chose to isolate themselves to a degree :

*“Student 1 : There’s one girl who doesn’t speak very good English – I think she’s German. Again, I don’t know if it’s ‘cos she’s shy...”*

*Student 2 : I thought she didn’t talk because she was shy.*

*Student 3 : Yeah. She is shy, but when she talks, she's good."*

Figure 1 below proposes how this interaction works to construct the UK students' perception of individual international students.

[Figure 1 here]

Students in Quadrant A are seen as being slightly troublesome, in that they demand attention of staff and UK students, but they are nevertheless given respect for their desire to engage socially and academically. Quadrant B students are those which UK students tend to describe as being "*just like us*" and the most comfortable interactions occur here. Disapprobation and irritation are common towards the out-group described by Quadrant C who are perceived to flock together and have no desire to improve their English. Quadrant D students are seen as being bookish and slightly aloof, but they are generally ignored and are not perceived as posing a significant threat to the *status quo*.

It is also a working hypothesis of the research team that 'language' acts as a broad proxy for cultural proximity for the UK student. Most prominently, this appears to be based in shared cultural heritage, especially entertainment and sport. There is an obvious mechanism by which this link is made. With English emerging as a worldwide *lingua franca*, the increasingly ubiquitous American (and to a lesser extent British) cultural exports provide a linkage which transcends national boundaries. A strong grasp of the English language by the other person not only makes one-to-one interaction simpler and more rewarding, but it also furnishes speakers with shared reference points depending on the degree to which Anglophone cultural exports are prevalent in their home countries. Nevertheless, shared language is not necessarily a panacea for cross-cultural communication, as illustrated by one student's comments about a group of American exchange students :

*"their attitudes were a lot different. Although we spoke the same language, it was different."*

Thus, while language was important in framing scope for interaction, students identified deeper cultural dissonances which formed barriers to meaningful discourse.

#### **4.1 Fears of 'swamping'**

There is some evidence from the international research literature to suggest that a critical mass of international students tips the balance of perception and interaction from positive to negative. Ward et al (2005) found that as the number of enrolments increased above a certain critical point,

attitudes became more negative and interactions less frequent, that increasing numbers are associated with a heightened sense of threat and competition. Focus group participants made frequent reference to numbers of international students, particularly where nationalities grouped together and who were variously described as “*cliquey*”, “*intimidating*” and “*annoying*”. These students would fall into Quadrant C in the grid above. One student said,

*“We do have a lot of Chinese students and there is quite a few, isn’t there? There’s loads... they do all seem to group together and I don’t think they integrate quite as well, I mean obviously they’re with people that they are comfortable with, but sometimes it does come across a little bit us-and-them.”*

This can then develop into a sense of exclusion, when, as another student explained,

*“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.”*

One particular facet of this sense of threat through swamping is around competition for resources, which, in this case, relates to access to staff time and attention. One student noted,

*“In my French class, I think there is about 12 of us and 6 or 7 of them are foreign exchange students... they are a lot quicker at picking the language up... It’s almost like, if I ask a question, ‘am I going to look stupid?’ You know, its through no fault of the foreign exchange students... but I just feel it’s the teacher, they should just push them up to the next level, put them in a group that would suit them... and then concentrate on us who are skill lagging, who need to reach that level.”*

#### **4.2 Cultural and academic norms**

UK students reported a number of instances of where international students had challenged prevailing British cultural and academic norms, particularly in the classroom. These related to a range of behaviours including poor timekeeping, boastfulness and arrogance, misuse of virtual learning environments and a lack of respect for staff and other students. One student described a student’s failure to abide by instructions,

*“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."*

The students in this study specifically linked these examples to the international students' outsider status, though they were generally quick to state that these behaviours were not solely attributable to international students.

### **4.3 Group work and academic success**

Leading on from the issues of language and adherence to British academic norms, the participants in this study often expressed concern about situations where they had been placed in a group with one or more international students. It appeared to be common practice, especially among the business studies students and some sub-groups of media students, for group work to be marked collectively. There was, therefore, a perceived threat that an international student could bring the marks of the group down through their lack of language ability, knowledge of the UK or understanding of British pedagogy. In one instance, the group discussed how they had colluded to ensure that an international student's contribution was of 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 and like...*

*Student 2 : Like everybody's section... you took each one to make it all sound like the same.*

*Student 1 : And you were like marked as a whole.*

*Student 2 : Not like what he wrote he got marked for individually.*

*Student 1 : 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.*

*Student 3 : Do you not think that they got away with it – like they got a good mark 'cos you wrote it for them?*

*Student 1 : No, because he was, like, there all the time."*

The group went on to explain that they didn't feel that this was inappropriate as the international student had worked hard and effectively on other aspects of the project. This study supports De Vita's (2002) suggestion that one reason that students often choose to work in monocultural groups on assessed projects may be the students perception that working in a multi-cultural group,



with all its associated complexities and challenges, might compromise their final mark. Another student explained that,

*“Obviously if it was an international student [in their work group], English is not their first language... I would feel a bit stressed out that it wouldn’t... flow as well as like working with four English students? I would just have a bit of anticipation... ‘is the presentation gonna muck up?’”*

Even when outside the group work situation, students could feel academic threat from the role of international students in the classroom. In one instance, a language class was felt to be moving too quickly for the majority due to the presence of native speakers, while on one business studies module, groups of students are used to teach the course material and one student noted,

*“[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.”*

While this section focuses on perceptions of threat, the perceived added value of the international classroom is discussed in Section 7 below.

#### **4.4 Peer disapproval and ‘mindfulness’**

Interestingly, high levels of inter-group anxiety, in particular, fear of causing offence, were witnessed in informal class surveys and debates held with a mix of UK and international students during the pilot phase. UK students were obviously choosing their words with care and several even admitted to be afraid of talking to students from other cultures in case they said the ‘wrong’ thing. Some of this anxiety later manifested itself in the way the focus group participants responded to questioning. This will be discussed in more detail in Section 8 below.

More generally, the focus groups participants described an approach to cross-cultural interaction which required a type of conscious effort and vigilance which the research team came to typify as ‘mindfulness’. The UK students were conscious of a range of barriers to interaction, the most obvious of which was language, which required them to give thought to what they said in advance and to correct errors in understanding retrospectively. They also reported the need to concentrate to understand accents. While none of the groups used the term spontaneously, it was clear to the research team that they were broadly conscious of the concept of ‘Global English’ (Graddol, 2006),

where one aspect of this mindfulness was to avoid complex sentence structures, idioms and ethnocentric cultural references. One student explained their basic approach :

*“Sometimes you just talk, don’t you? And if they don’t understand, you simplify.”*

However, while the participants were generally happy to be mindful of their international peers, there were circumstances where this became strained :

*“So, 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.”*

This led one student to conclude with the quote used in the title of this article in relation to why he chose to spend more time with other UK students than international students; *“it’s so much easier to go with what’s easy.”*

Another component around mindfulness was the conscious desire to avoid stereotyping, either of international students in general or of particular nationalities, whilst being aware that they often unconsciously slipped back into stereotyping when they ceased being mindful.

## **5. PERCEPTIONS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN UK AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

Students in this study expressed a degree of discomfort around acknowledging difference, most notably when talking about groups of students rather than individuals. They equated the recognition and discussion of difference with active discrimination and stereotyping, which they wanted to avoid. One student noted with a degree of regret, *“we spoke about it a lot in terms of us-and-them, like every time its been referred to... its us-and-them.”*

Nevertheless, the focus groups have revealed some consistent identifications of cultural difference between the UK and international student populations. These potential barriers to interaction form the foundation of this section of the paper. A minority of students had found core things in common that went beyond culture, language and ethnicity. These shared cultural artefacts appear to dim concepts of difference, especially for surface interactions. Ward et al (2005) found that not having interests in common was in fact the biggest barrier to interaction, which would corroborate this view.

### **5.1 Age differences**

Alongside some of the more obvious cultural differences, UK students frequently described differences within the international student population around age. Students identified quite correctly that international students tend, on average, to be older than UK students even at undergraduate level. Socially, they were also coming into contact with international postgraduate students.

Three sub-groups of international students were thus identified: (a) those of traditional UK student age, (b) others who were slightly, but noticeably, older, being in their mid to late 20s, (c) 'very mature' students, from a different generation. The latter two groups were associated with increasing maturity and stronger commitment to their studies, generally combined with a disinterest in socialising. One student explained,

*"I think sometimes that is why [international students] are a bit more motivated, because they are older and a bit more mature – a lot of us start university at 18 or 19. I remember last year we had a French guy and he started at 26, so obviously he is a lot more mature and determined; he is just there to work really hard."*

The very act of coming to a different country to study was seen to be associated with being older, more focused and more worldly-wise.

Much of this discourse overlapped with that found in the existing literature (e.g. Brooks, 2005) on how traditionally-aged students view mature students in the round, particularly following similar themes around work-orientation, disapproval, cultural and social dissonance, external interests and excluding behaviours. Once this difference had occurred to the focus groups (and it arose spontaneously in each one), it was returned to repeatedly as a source of barriers to interaction.

The small number of mature participants in the focus groups added a valuable additional perspective. They also felt a dissonance from traditionally-aged UK students and actually sought the company of older international students in some cases :

*"I did hang around solely with mature students when I first came here because I thought there was no way I was going to relate to people that had just left school."*

There is a strong possibility therefore that the age difference between the two populations is confounding a simple understanding of UK student attitudes. While the two populations may only be a few years apart in age, some of the traits identified among international students may actually be observations which relate to older students in general. There is also a strong possibility that mature UK students have a different experience of the internationalised campus than described

elsewhere in this paper. This dimension had not occurred to the research team at the outset and more work is needed to examine this further.

## 5.2 British 'drinking culture'

UK students in all the focus groups identified a clear 'British drinking culture' which they saw as being distinct from that in other cultures, even those which do consume alcohol. They describe an environment which they feel could be alien and intimidating to international students, although several examples of international students taking part, or at least attempting to, were offered.

This drinking culture was viewed in different ways by the students in this study. Some felt a sense of national pride about what they saw as a higher capacity for alcohol consumption or hedonistic socialising among British people compared to other nationalities (*"He might feel that he couldn't keep up with us"* or *"I don't think they drink as much in their country"*). Others were more circumspect (*"Britain is really quite gross now"* or *"a really idiotic thing to do"*) or actively ashamed of the activities of their UK peers, both in relation to binge drinking and associated sexual behaviour.

However, the prevailing view was that the drinking culture was a significant barrier. This operated in a number of ways. Firstly, there was a strong perception that international students themselves felt excluded and less likely to socialise, with one student explaining :

*"International students are aware, like, in England, there is a drinking culture and that's not something they like, so perhaps that's why they are not going out as much."*

Another drew from their recent experience of visiting Germany :

*"I went to Germany a couple of months ago actually and met my cousins and... they got all their friends around and they all drank sort of coffee with biscuits – and I just felt like... 'where's the vodka?'"*

While some European students were more open to the British drinking culture, the UK students generally felt that the barrier was strongest with students from the Far East :

*"All of the Chinese students I know, I can't imagine any of them on a night out sort of getting drunk. That's stupid, but that's like the way most of us meet all our mates... other than through your seminar and through your housemates."*

There was also a fear about actively encouraging international students to socialise. The UK students tended to be anxious about applying pressure on international students to do things which they probably wouldn't be comfortable with and that would require more personal attention if they did attend. This relates back to the concept of 'mindfulness'. Effective communication with international students demands significantly more effort in noisy environments and, in addition, having to explain aspects of humour or UK-specific cultural references can be tiresome. When people are drinking cultural differences also become amplified, as the following quote illustrates :

*"I can imagine like when we're drunk, it's a lot more difficult to understand 'cos that make everything ten times more... like humour and like [banter with] people is suddenly like ten times worse when you're drunk."*

A second component was a fear of being judged by international students on their behaviour or possible cultural misunderstandings :

*"You're not pressuring them into drinking, but if you don't want to drink, it's fine... just don't make us feel bad about it."*

This is triangulated by international students (UKCOSA, 2004), who perceive the British drinking culture as a barrier to integration and something that differentiates them from their UK peers. There is also a religious observance aspect to this issue, although this is far from unique to international students and one group with a Muslim participant explored this. The authors intend to examine this complex issues of the role of the British drinking culture in mediating cross-cultural contact between students in more depth in a subsequent paper.

### **5.3 Work-orientation**

The majority of interaction between UK and international students appears to occur in the academic sphere. It is unsurprising that major constructions of difference occur in relation to their peers attitudes to work, although this is not a simple relationship. Many students described diligence and commitment,

*"You find some international students... really just want to work and they don't socialise that much and they don't really, they knuckle down and that's how they are different in a way, they just don't have as much in common as us."*

As noted above, this was often strongly correlated with the issue of age differences, but also with the tuition fees and other costs which students were paying :

*“Student 1 : Maybe they work harder ... ‘cos it’s harder [for them] to understand.*

*Student 2 : Well, if they’re spending more money to come somewhere then you probably might have more motivation.”*

Students’ reactions to higher levels of work orientation were variable, depending on their own attitudes to the academic pursuit and success. Some were disparaging or intimidated by the higher levels of commitment, while others were more positive :

*“In a hypothetical situation, if I had the choice, I might well consider having an international student because I might feel that they are more motivated... I would definitely choose Elena from Russia – I would definitely want her in my group.”*

For students whose self-image was about having a strong commitment to their academic studies, international students were often seen as being kindred spirits, at least in relation to the classroom; a resource to be drawn upon and a potential source of motivation and development.

At the other end of the scale, a small proportion of international students were identified as having poor attendance and low motivation. For example,

*“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.”*

These students were invariably treated with disdain, even by students whose own work-orientation was low, as they were considered to be wasting their opportunities to study in the UK, as well as deliberately excluding themselves from the classroom community.

#### **5.4 Cultural artefacts**

UK students identified a number of seemingly minor differences in cultural artefacts and references which they felt set themselves aside from international students and, in some instances, created barriers.

Foremost amongst these were humour and comedy. UK students felt that the latter formed a significant part of their social repertoire, but that international students weren’t aware of the relevant personalities or television programmes, although there was some sharing where American programmes had been syndicated into other countries. They also felt that British humour was

generally inaccessible for people from other cultures, based largely as it is on wordplay, irony, sarcasm and surrealism.

Clothing was an important discriminator, especially for female students. International students were seen to either dress more casually or in a more business-like way; there was a sense in which UK students felt that they were more stylishly or attractively dressed. The possession of backpacks (and particularly those of a certain brand, which was mentioned in more than one group) was another marker of difference.

In contrast, sport (and especially football) was seen as a shared artefact which brought all students together, except perhaps those from Asia. This was generally more important for male students.

## **6. PERCEPTION OF DIFFERENCE WITHIN THE INTERNATIONAL STUDENT POPULATION**

Traditionally, international students have been treated as an homogenous group, perhaps deriving from patterns of resource allocation in institutions. In literature emanating from other countries, it may well be a genuine reflection of the homogeneity of this population. The higher education sector in the UK however now accommodates the whole gamut of nationalities and any research not probing this dimension is of limited validity and utility (e.g. see Fallon & Brown, 1999).

In fact, little existing research addresses the issue of diversity *within* the international student population. Ward et al (2005) do not consider the complexities associated with the term 'international student', though they note some differentiation between attitudes to and interactions between groups of international students from different countries. Specifically, students from Europe and North America are perceived significantly more favourably by New Zealanders than those from any other region. Spencer-Rodgers (2001) found that there was remarkable consistency of stereotyping of international students by US host students, despite the heterogeneity of that population. From the data in this study, there is a clear difference in UK students' interactions with European, Anglophone and Latin American countries compared to interactions with students from the rest of the world.

Students in this latter group are categorised crudely by UK students, by geography (e.g. African), by ethnicity (e.g. Chinese<sup>1</sup>) or by religion (e.g. Muslim). Discourse about these students is very general. There is little or no knowledge of which country the student comes from and little personal information. Interaction is described as being problematic and the reported behaviour of the

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<sup>1</sup> On the basis of informal data collection, it is hypothesized that 'Chinese' is most commonly used as an ethnic label used to refer to any student from East and South East Asia, including Malaysia, Japan and Vietnam, as well as China itself.

international students is generally such as to set them apart. For example, one student described how,

*“All the Chinese students just sort of grouped together and went off to another group,”*

while other students had a similar example :

*“Student 1 : There’s a group of African girls...*

*Student 2 : Yeh, girls – very cliquy.*

*Student 1 : And they do all sit together and all through lectures they are giggling constantly... and they do come across very annoying and I think they do wind up, you know, the people in the lectures quite a bit.”*

In contrast, when discussing their peers from Europe, Anglophone countries and Latin America, the UK students are able to provide more detail, to point to individuals with whom they have a strong rapport and with whom they actively socialise. They exhibit a degree of pride in knowing personal details and in knowing the names of people with whom they have only occasional contact. Perhaps most strikingly, they know their specific country of origin in nearly every case.

Aside from language, it may be noted that the focus group participants referred to a limited number of cultural distinctions in their responses, whether from a cognitive perspective (e.g. values, norms), affective perspective (types and levels of emotional expressivity) or from patterns of behaviour (e.g. customs, communication styles). They also examined the construction and deconstruction of stereotypes, for example noting that,

*“When like people talk Arabic and stuff it sounds like shouting and they’re having an argument, but they’re not, so I think sometimes the tone and volume and stuff it may be seen as aggression, but it’s not.”*

However, there was little real understanding of some of the key bases of cultural difference around, for example, understanding of community or family relationships. It is possible that the UK students simply do not know enough about their international peers to be able to identify cultural difference. As we have seen, most of their interaction is surface level (e.g. sport, class socials) or academic (e.g. through group work), so they don’t analyse the complexity of difference as more widely understood.

They are particularly wary of stereotyping and are more likely to attribute behaviours to personality factors that may be considered to transcend culture, for example, introversion or language. Both are ‘safer’ ways of talking about difference. Where criticism or comment on a cultural basis could



run the gauntlet of being perceived to be politically incorrect, language ability is individual and measurable. Interestingly, UK students with a higher exposure to international students or internationalism (e.g. through language classes or global awareness modules) appear significantly more comfortable in constructively discussing difference (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern, 2002).

## **7. POSITIVE BENEFITS OF INTERNATIONAL INTERACTION**

There is some research to suggest that home students may feel curious, interested and inspired by international students (Spencer-Rodgers, 2001; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern, 2002). This is supported by the findings of this study.

UK students identified two main types of benefit from sharing the classroom and the campus with international students. The first related to the direct academic assistance they were able to provide. Examples included language learning, but there was also an appreciation of the value of culturally-different perspectives and information :

*“One of my modules is international business in the emerging markets and ... there are quite a lot of international students there and in tutorials it’s quite helpful because the teacher is aware of that and he gets them to give us information specific to their own countries.”*

As mentioned previously, the perceived diligence and work orientation of international students was also seen as a general academic resource for many UK students.

The second benefit was a more general contribution to cultural interest and awareness. This included a desire to travel, learn new languages and the acquisition of factual information about different countries. One UK student described a class where,

*“One of the girls from Venezuela was talking about fair trade and she had to do a presentation on and she related it a lot to her own country.”*

There was also discourse around the benefits of learning to communicate effectively across culture, particularly in relation to future employment :

*“I think it sort of prepares you for the working world as well, because you are going to come across different people, different cultures - the way they do things when you get into groups in the working world.”*

However, the research team observed that there was something of the magpie about students' perceptions of the benefits of cross-cultural interaction. The examples given tended to be incidental; shiny anecdotes which point to a very surface level of understanding and awareness, rather than being bound into a wider context of cross-cultural communication, appreciation of diversity or global awareness. There was a sense in which many of the students in this study wanted to establish some form of personal credentials around internationalism and exoticism, potentially linked to the burgeoning backpacking culture.

*“after I’ve finished uni I would like to go and see those sort of parts – not do the touristy bits, but find out a bit more about the culture. [International students] just make it a bit more sort of appealing.”*

There was little evidence to suggest that students had benefited from any authentic experiences of cross-cultural interaction, involving the “discovery and transcendence of difference” (De Vita, 2005, p.76) that leads to a growing awareness of ‘self’ in relation to ‘other’, the confidence to challenge ones own values and those of others responsibly and ethically and the ability to communicate successfully across culture. Only a few students referred to the issue of their own and others’ cultural identity and the process of moving through a fascination with difference to a shared point of understanding with a person from another culture. Interestingly discussion held during focus groups challenged some students to review their thoughts and feelings about international students, their own attitudes and behaviours and further resulted in a critique of the questions and methodology.

### **7.1 Whose responsibility?**

A specific discourse around apportioning blame for lack of interaction has been observed in the study. The UK students appeared to want to provide an explanatory framework for why they individually and collectively did not spend more time with international students. This seemed to derive from what they saw as an implied criticism generated by the focus group questions.

Some blamed themselves, for failing to make more of an effort to engage with individual students. Others blamed the international students themselves for excluding behaviours (e.g. not speaking English in public), having poor language skills or for not themselves initiating interaction. However, the most common response was to blame the university and its academic, administrative and support structures.

There was a degree of unanimity about classroom experiences. Lectures and seminars did not provide easy opportunities for interaction and little or none occurred beyond casual social

encounters or one-way exposure through presentations. It was through group and project work that most opportunities arose, although a minority of students reported not being involved in this type of activity. While a few students reported either random allocation into groups or a degree of 'social engineering' by teaching staff to ensure a positive admixture, the most common allocation method in both universities was self-selection. This was seen as a significant impediment to interaction between UK and international students, as the two groups tended to separate out :

*"When you get into groups people just tend to stick to people who they know, like most of the international students will stick together – it's all very segregated."*

Similarly, another student explained,

*"We have to do presentations, but we get to choose our groups for that, so we tend to stick together."*

Students could generally see the value of achieving a better mix within groups, their concerns about academic performance and compliance with British academic norms notwithstanding. They felt that this would offer better opportunities for the benefits outlined above, especially where the curriculum has a particular international perspective; one group of students identified a module which relied heavily on British media references in its teaching, which caused a *de facto* exclusion of international students. However, the findings of this study support those of De Vita (2002), in that cross-cultural workgroups do not generally arise naturally.

The UK students in this study felt that there was more that universities could do to induct international students, especially in terms of opportunities to meet and interact soon after arrival. They pointed to the early formation of enduring friendships and that *"there's nothing to encourage intermingling"* at this stage. This was felt to be a particular issue for exchange students and those joining programmes in the second or third year. However, the participants were nervous about what they saw as very forced 'international' social events; their preference appeared to be for more low key ice-breakers within the classroom setting, potentially linked back into group work situations.

There was a perception in both universities that international students were generally allocated into segregated accommodation and that this was a barrier to interaction.

*"Student 1 : They put all the international students together, don't they?  
Group : Yeah."*

*Student 2 : And [the hall of residence] is just like a no-go area 'cos it's right at the top of halls and you've got no reason to go up there and they're like different... I don't think they should do that."*

## **8. AUTHENTICITY OF THE STUDENT RESPONSE**

One key concern reflected in other research (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern, 2002; Hyde and Ruth, 2002; Ward et al, 2005) is the authenticity of student responses and tendency to self-censor when discussing sensitive topics around race and identity. Ward notes one of the major limitations of their research being distortions due to social desirability influences and that students reported more positive responses to international students in an effort to appear 'politically correct'. Hyde and Ruth's (2002) work in the US concluded that while self-censorship may occur, discomfort also results from a concern with other general factors, including the size of the group, the shyness of participants or existing relationships between participants. In particular, there was concern over being seen as 'stupid' rather than 'racist' or 'sexist'

This was identified by participants in this study, especially in the context of the recent Big Brother controversy<sup>2</sup>. They worked from an assumption that neither they nor the other focus group members held racist views, but there was a strong fear about language and not having the correct vocabulary at their fingertips which was linked back to the concept of 'mindfulness' discussed above :

*"Going back to that racist thing with Jade Goody – now I'm just totally [confused]. When we're talking, even when we're saying 'black person' – I don't know whether you're supposed to say 'black', 'coloured'... I don't know and I am worried everybody else is just thinking..."*

Some behaviour patterns that may be attributable to the impact of political correctness and self-censorship were observed in our focus groups, particularly at the beginning of sessions when students are perhaps keen to establish their identity and relationship with others. There was a strong element of defensive response, as if they perceived a tacit accusation inherent in the questions. For example, the UK students were initially keen to offer emphatic reassurances about the legitimacy of international students, notably through 'response amplification' (Stephan & Stephan, 1996), typified by an overuse of the word 'really'; e.g. *"really hard-working"*, *"really, really good at things"* or *"their English is really good"*. However, as the sessions unfolded, more honest,

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<sup>2</sup> Big Brother is a high-profile UK television game show where the contestants share a house together. It has been dogged throughout 2006 and 2007 by accusations of racism by white contestants towards black and asian contestants; Jade Goody was one of the white contestants who was accused of voicing racist views. The participants in this study were very well aware of this controversy and of using words which were, or could be construed as, racist in nature.

objective and critical comments were made, leading one student to conclude that he'd wanted "to choose [his] words a bit carefully".

UK students appeared not to want to take full responsibility for or to 'own' negative comments. Throughout the focus group sessions there was a tendency to qualify negative comments either by attributing the possibility of the object of observation feeling equally negative about the observer, by ensuring that an observation is shown to be shared by others (so it is not something specifically related to their status as international and therefore could not be associated with discrimination) or by attributing the negative comment to other UK students as well.

As a result of living in a society rife with anxiety around political correctness, it can be hypothesized that many students will have a fear of summary judgement by peers and the subsequent humiliation. This has its roots in the concept that the word 'correctness' implies that there are 'wrong' answers and indeed answers that others might find unpalatable. There is also then a fear of not being liked, of being considered 'bad' or 'unpleasant'. In certain situations (e.g. in mixed nationality groups), there may also be a direct fear of causing offence. This self-censorship will pose a significant challenge to the ongoing research in this study.

## **9. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN STUDENTS IN BUSINESS STUDIES AND CREATIVE ARTS AND MEDIA**

The research team began with a hypothesis that two subject-based factors would impact on the experiences and attitudes of UK students and the pairing to contrasting subjects in two universities enabled these factors to be isolated and examined to some degree :

1. Proportion of international students on course. The two subject areas were selected on the basis that they contained contrasting proportions of international students; in the region of 30% for business studies, but only 10% for creative arts and media. Drawing from Ward et al (2005), it was hypothesised that there was likely to be a greater sense of threat from international students where their ratio against UK students was higher, but that there would be more day-to-day academic interaction.
2. Prevailing ethos, course content and pedagogic approaches. It was hypothesised that, given the current emphasis on global economic, business studies students would have more focus on international and cross-cultural issues and that the pedagogy used would support the investigation of the same. In contrast, it was felt that the more individual nature of the creative arts and media was likely to have a lesser international component.

The data from the study did not wholly support either of these hypotheses, although there were indeed marked differences in response between students from the two subject areas.

The creative art and media students had a noticeably more positive approach to diversity and international culture. They saw it as obvious that they would draw ideas and comparisons from across the world and worked within this global perspective. While there were fewer international students in their classrooms, their knowledge, skills and perspectives were prized and sought out by the UK students :

*"I know there's a girl in the year above us from Japan and who's amazing at doing Flash [computer] animation and stuff and therefore I'm wanting to go in her group."*

In contrast, the business studies students were generally more reluctant to want to work with international students, instead expressing more concern about being brought down in group work exercises and more fears about 'swamping'. Even those pursuing courses with an international or global perspective did not convince the authors that they were doing so due to a particular interest, but more that they felt that this would be a positive for their employability upon graduation.

## **10. CONCLUSIONS**

This paper reports the findings of a relatively small scale study in an area with very limited previous research, either in the UK or internationally. As such, any conclusions should be treated as a work-in-practice and subject to validation and triangulation by future research.

The overarching finding was that the prevailing culture with the UK student body, as represented by the participants in these focus groups, was one of 'passive xenophobia'. Many students initially suggested that they had not previously thought about international students as a separate group, but discussions within the focus groups made clear that they had simply been largely invisible to them previously. Most international students were seen as culturally-distant or self-excluding, with few points of reference on which to base interaction. Because of the need to be 'mindful' in order to ease communication and avoid offence, the UK students tended to shy away from initiating interaction, relying on their international colleagues to do so. Within the classroom setting, the UK students had more active reasons for isolating themselves, expressing fear about how their academic results might be jeopardised by multi-cultural groups. As a result, the interactions between UK students and some sub-groups of international students are limited, problematic or non-existent. The sheer fact of proximity and shared environment does not appear to offer significant gains for the internationalisation agenda.

However, there was also a minority culture of 'informed cosmopolitanism'. These students were positive about the internationalised university and saw a range of possible gains to them, both in terms of their academic endeavours and their general education, personal development or worldview. They tended to have cross-cutting identities themselves, either having mixed parentage or being from a British minority ethnic community. Other students drew from their previous experiences of living abroad or exposure to ethnically-mixed communities in the UK to contextualise their interactions with international students. While they identified the same barriers which the majority group did, they were more pro-active about overcoming them and saw more benefits from doing so.

A number of secondary conclusions can also be drawn from this study, each of which has significant scope for future research :

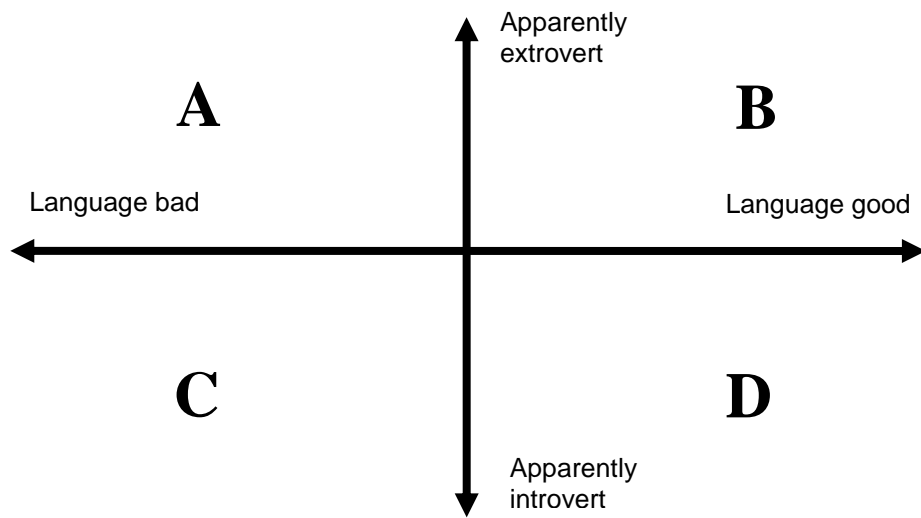
1. That the classroom experience of students is that interaction between UK and international students is not generally actively managed, even within classes which have specific cross-cultural learning outcomes. The result is that work groups tend to crystallise around national and language groupings, with little interaction and some possible antipathy from UK students to international students. This effect seems to be strongest where the proportion of international students is higher.
2. That while some UK students do report benefits of the 'international classroom', these are often of low yield and not contextualised. There is a common inquisitiveness about other cultures, but this does not appear to be tied more widely into learning or skills acquisition. Gains in cross-cultural communication skills are limited to students with a particular enthusiasm; in this study, these were more likely to be found in the creative arts and media subjects.
3. That UK students are not familiar or comfortable with discussions of diversity and difference. However, the reaction of many was that the very act of attending the focus groups had given them a new perspective and that they were looking forward to reflecting on the issues further. Some stated that they would have liked to have had similar discussions earlier in their academic careers.
4. That there are methodological and analytical issues with dealing with qualitative data collected from students due to self-censorship and fear of causing offence. It is hypothesised that this will also act as a block to cross-cultural discussion and learning, as has been observed in social work and teaching training classrooms (e.g. Hyde and Ruth, 2002).

5. That there appears to be a specific issue of interaction between UK students and 'Chinese' students (using the broad definition outlined in footnote 1). Chinese students were seen to be the most culturally-distant, to be the most likely to exhibit self-excluding behaviours, to have the poorest language skills and to share the fewest cultural reference points. Given the importance of Far East recruitment to UK higher education, this requires further understanding as it presents a significant threat to the long-term future of the market.

As a next phase in this work, the research team intends to undertake one-to-one interviews and large-scale surveys to provide additional data and to triangulate the findings reported in this paper. In particular, it is hoped that this will provide an understanding of how students' attitudes are constructed from their own life histories and university experiences.



Figure1 : the interaction between language and extroversion



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