
Research article

The internationalisation process: an opportunity for meaningful intercultural interaction or segregation in one UK university?

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Submission date: 28 October 2022; Acceptance date: 14 February 2023; Publication date: 5 April 2023

How to cite

Corazzi, S. (2023) 'The internationalisation process: an opportunity for meaningful intercultural interaction or segregation in one UK university?' *London Review of Education*, 21 (1), 14.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/LRE.21.1.14>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

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Open access

London Review of Education is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

This research was prompted by a perceived lack of meaningful interaction between home and international students in one UK university that has a long history of internationalisation. The study sits within an interpretative paradigm, and it explores the perceptions and experiences of academics and home students. Five focus groups were held with undergraduate home students, and 19 interviews were carried out with academics, 10 interviews with home students and 2 with recent graduates. Home students report feeling that international students have a group identity from which they are excluded. This sense of exclusion and their perceptions of being marginalised in comparison to their international peers appear to lie at the heart of a lack of mixing on campus. These findings imply that academics and institutions can only bring about meaningful intercultural interaction when the different groups of students come to realise that they have shared goals and equal status, with a learning environment that embraces who they are and who they are becoming.

Keywords meaningful intercultural interaction; internationalisation; international student identity; marginalisation

Introduction

The central aim of the 2019 *International Education Strategy: Global potential, global growth* is to increase the financial value of the higher education 'export' and attract 600,000 international students to higher education by 2030 (HM Government, 2019). The strategy describes how 'International students make an invaluable contribution to British society, bringing with them new knowledge, cross-cultural understanding and global friendships, enriching the educational experience of domestic students' (HM Government, 2019: 11). At the same time, it highlights how these international students contribute to the financial sustainability of universities. There is financial planning in this strategy, but no in-depth discussion of how these contributions are brought about, or if this does indeed happen in our universities. Internationalisation strategies are found to be competitive in nature, and internationalisation can be seen 'as a means of leverage in a competitive global society' (Engel and Siczek, 2018: 762). What is valued are the financial benefits of having international students, and the economic benefits of developing students for the knowledge-based economy (Engel and Siczek, 2018). In a marketised system, institutions focus on the development of the 'employable' graduate, with the skills and knowledge for the global marketplace, at the expense of developing students more holistically (Bergan, 2011).

This research arose from listening to my international students over a long period of time describing the lack of interaction between themselves and home students. I wanted to investigate why this was an ongoing issue in a university that has a long history of internationalisation dating back to the 1990s. I decided to examine this from the perspective of the home students and the academics by exploring what was happening in one university. However, this is not just about one institution, as is demonstrated by the need for the recent report for the Office for Students on improving the integration of international students in higher education institutions (Pagliarello et al., 2023). The aim of the research was to explore if the internationalisation process has offered opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction in one UK university.

Literature review

Internationalisation is an ever-evolving field and a complex multidimensional process (Brewer and Leask, 2012). While different institutions may have interpreted internationalisation differently, it could be argued that internationalisation strategies have predominantly focused on increasing the number of international students, the outward mobility of students and staff, and engaging in international research (Knight, 2015).

In the early stages of internationalisation, it was thought that it was sufficient to simply bring international students into universities, for them to internationalise higher education, but then there was a realisation that this was not enough. This led to 'internationalisation at home', which was not only about the international student, but also about the home student and developing their intercultural understanding to make them more competitive in the global marketplace (Haigh, 2014). The literature shows strong support for the need to develop students' intercultural understanding, and this is seen as a key component of the internationalisation process (Deardorff, 2006; Leask and Carroll, 2011; Montgomery, 2010).

Universities often promote opportunities to study or volunteer abroad as one way to develop intercultural understanding (Kirk et al., 2018). However, this link between going international and developing an intercultural understanding is contested. Wachter (2010: 46) maintains that there are those, on one side, who argue that one will naturally lead to the other, and that student mobility and learning languages will 'do the intercultural trick', and there are those, on the other side, who conclude that being international does not mean being intercultural. It is often suggested that meaningful interaction between home and international students is a more effective way to develop individuals' intercultural understanding (Holmes and O'Neill, 2012; Lilley et al., 2015). Through meaningful intercultural interaction and sharing of experiences, the individual can be taken out of their comfort

zone and into a position where they can question their own assumptions and values, becoming more reflexive and developing a perspective which is more inclusive (Mezirow, 1991).

However, there is growing evidence that simply bringing international students into universities does not always lead to the development of intercultural understanding (Leask, 2016). The issue of the lack of interaction between students has been well documented over a long period of time (Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Volet and Ang, 2012). Various reasons are given for this. Some argue that it is the institution's responsibility to provide opportunities for this interaction, and that, with no steer, students will naturally gravitate towards those from similar cultural backgrounds (Bergan, 2011; Urban and Palmer, 2014). It is suggested that international students form groups with those of their own nationality or with other international students and, although they might want to integrate more widely with home students, they become reliant on these networks, and the two groups move further apart (Thom, 2010). The sense of belonging is a stronger pull than the sense of discovering what is new.

Allport (1954) argues that it is only when individuals have shared goals and are of equal status that meaningful interaction can be brought about, which raises the question of what has been valued in the internationalisation process. The *International Education Strategy* (HM Government, 2019: 11), quoted above, explains that international students contribute to 'enriching the educational experience of domestic students'. The strategy could also refer to the reciprocal nature of this relationship. The process has tended to value the 'international' over the 'home', with what Stier (2003: 83) terms the 'lighthouse perspective' of seeing internationalisation as something you do far away through opportunities to volunteer, study or work overseas. These opportunities are valued as developing graduates who have the skills and knowledge for the global marketplace (Becket and Brookes, 2012; Reid and Spencer-Oatey, 2013). Similarly, it is widely acknowledged in the internationalisation literature that international students are valued for the financial rewards that they bring to institutions (Joseph, 2013; Marks et al., 2018), and by academics for their cultural capital, which can be used as a learning resource to develop home students' intercultural understanding (Kirk et al., 2018). In comparison, non-traditional home students (students from under-represented groups) in widening participation institutions are often perceived to be in 'deficit' in terms of their cultural capital, as they have not had the experiences of their international peers (Gayton, 2020).

This research set out to explore if the internationalisation process had offered any opportunities for meaningful intercultural interaction between home and international students in one UK university, using Mezirow's (1991) transformative learning theory as a lens through which to analyse the data. This was not with the aim of looking for examples of transformation, but rather to examine the potential for transformative learning. Mezirow (1991) argues that the socialisation process means that individuals take their world views and beliefs for granted, and that it is only when individuals question their long-held assumptions that their perspective will change and become more inclusive, with meaningful interaction between diverse individuals being key to the process. This suggests that Mezirow's (1991) theory may be an appropriate tool through which to analyse whether the internationalisation process has offered opportunities for intercultural interaction in this university.

Methods

This research was carried out at a large widening participation post-1992 institution with a long history of internationalisation. Widening participation is a key strategy of the Department for the Economy in the UK, which aims to increase the number of students from under-represented groups in higher education (Department for the Economy, 2023). The post-92 institutions are the 'new' universities that gained university status in 1992, having formerly been polytechnics. The research sits within an interpretative paradigm and uses a qualitative case study methodology, which are described as focusing on real-life contexts and following their participants in their natural settings (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2009). It was this focus on context which led me to choose a case study, as I wanted to get a picture of what was happening in this university through listening to academics' and students' experiences (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). I made a decision to collect data from home students as, having heard international students' stories my whole working life, I wanted to explore the issue from their perspective.

I used two qualitative data collection methods: semi-structured interviews and focus groups. I chose to use focus groups in addition to individual interviews because I believed that the group environment would be more comfortable for students who might not feel wholly confident about the

value of their individual contribution, and who might worry about articulating their opinions to an academic. I held 10 interviews with undergraduate home students, 2 with recent graduates who now work for the university, and 19 with academics. I carried out 5 focus groups with 42 undergraduate home students. The participants (academics and students) came from a range of subject areas: business, education, English, events, film and media, history, hospitality, international relations, languages, law, marketing, project management, sport, tourism, and youth and social work.

I recruited my participants in various ways. As an academic working at the institution, I did not have to go through gatekeepers to recruit the academics. For the students, I went through the gatekeepers of course directors who invited me to their lectures, where I asked for participants to take part in my research. The course directors helped me to convene the focus groups, so each focus group consisted of students from the same course and the same year of study. I was clear with all the participants that I was not an outside researcher coming into the university.

I did not use highly structured interviews, as are commonly found in more quantitative market research, but neither did I use unstructured interviews, commonly used to uncover life stories (Silverman, 2020). I chose to use semi-structured interviews for which I had pre-prepared open-ended questions. However, I did not stick rigidly to the questions; if the interviewee deviated from them to discuss something which was relevant to a later question, I went with the interviewee's train of thought. Nevertheless, I did not move fully away from my questions, and I covered most of the same topics with each of my interviewees. There were times when I used extra follow-on questions or probes to gain more insight into my interviewees' ideas (Flick, 2018). I also used focus groups, as I was drawn to the richness that comes from a group discussion as individuals question and reformulate their own opinions and ideas (King et al., 2019), and I thought that this would give the students a supportive environment in which to express their views. These were focus groups rather than group interviews, where my role was as a 'moderator' who 'facilitated' the discussion (Barbour, 2018).

I carried out a thematic analysis of the data from the interviews and focus groups, which involved a process of coding and categorising the data, developing the categories into themes, and interpreting the themes. For the interviews, I analysed them together by looking for themes across the interviews, which I then collated for interpretation (Flick, 2018). I chose to analyse the content – the meaning – rather than to carry out a linguistic analysis of what was said (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). I did the same for the focus groups, as I focused on the content of the discussions, rather than carrying out any type of analysis of the individuals' interactions or group dynamics, or producing a linguistic analysis (King et al., 2019).

The following coding is used for the findings:

- IA = Interview academic
- IS = Interview student
- IG = Interview graduate
- FG = Focus group

Findings and discussion

Home students and their international peers: a dichotomy of marginalisation and privilege

A key finding from the data is that the home students reported feeling marginalised in relation to their international peers. They acknowledge that the university welcomes and supports international students, and that it really values these students:

Here it's all about international students ... I think the city in general is about international and then that is reflected in the university. (IS6)

The home students recognise that international recruitment is high on the institution's agenda, and this seems to leave them feeling that the university does not value them as much as it does international students. They suggest that this agenda does not lead to a more diverse environment on campus, and several of them believe that having international students on campus contributes nothing to their learning experiences:

International students ... We thought that's what the university values dearly but ... we didn't feel the same values being conveyed across to the [home] students. It's the ideology of the university that there'd be all this immersive diversity, but there wasn't as much as what we felt the university would ideally want. Especially personally, not being an international student, I can't relate as much, so in terms of my value compared to the university, it's not going to be the same. (FG2)

The home students feel that the institution prizes international students in financial terms. In a competitive marketplace this is perhaps not surprising, and this has long been recognised in the internationalisation literature (Haigh, 2014; Marks et al., 2018). In their research into internationalisation processes in higher education, Robson et al. (2018: 23) find that internationalisation is seen by stakeholders in one UK university and one Portuguese university as 'an academic asset' and 'a question of survival'. The final report to the Office for Students on international student integration describes international students as 'key assets in our global knowledge economy' (Pagliarello et al., 2023: 36).

While the institution may focus on international students' economic value, the academics value these students' cultural capital as a learning resource. The academics place a high premium on international students having travelled and lived abroad. This intercultural learning is seen as a way for home students to learn from international students, rather than as a mutual learning experience:

You can use that international context ... to broaden other students' way of looking at things. (IA15)

I encourage them [international students] to talk about where they're from and we have a lot of international students so there's a really nice exchange of people talking about where they're from. They can contribute and talk with authority. (IA17)

International students' cultural capital is seen as an educational resource, which can be used to develop home students' intercultural understanding (Kirk et al., 2018). These are students who 'enrich the university experience through their social integration, academic integration, and global diversity' (Pagliarello et al., 2023: 36). This marks a distinction between international students being seen purely as a 'market resource' and as a 'teaching resource' (Spiro, 2014: 70). Spiro (2014) argues that the learning is far from mutual, with the culture of international students being valued, rather than that of home students.

In this widening participation institution, international students are put on a pedestal for their cultural capital and exoticism. This valorisation of the international student is reinforced through a 'deficit' view that academics have of home students' cultural capital and qualities. When the academics discuss their home students through the lens of the 'international', they appear to be marginalised in comparison to their well-travelled international peers: 'It's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that they are all much travelled ... Some of them have had some marvellous experiences but very few' (IA2).

There seems to be little acknowledgement that some of these students in a widening participation institution might have caring responsibilities or could be first generation into university, which is an achievement in itself. These students and their families might not have the financial resources to have travelled extensively. There is a sense that these students are being 'judged' against the gold standard of the 'international', and found to be lacking: 'But I'm conscious that the students that we have sometimes haven't left the regions that they're from ... we do see from some students, that they're happy with their lot' (IA11).

This deficit view is reinforced by the perception that these non-traditional students have no understanding of current affairs, limited aspirations and low self-esteem, and a narrow outlook on life. They are perceived to have no interest in life beyond their local community, and they are described as being insular. These are students who, for financial or family reasons, might need to focus on the day-to-day business of earning money, and on their local communities, rather than on engaging with a 'global world'. Again, the academics are viewing these students through an international lens:

I would expect them to have a sense of current affairs and issues that are happening more broadly, and most of them aren't. They're not aware of them and they're not interested in them. (IA2)

Academics place home students in 'deficit', citing a lack of interest in current affairs or a narrow outlook in terms of travel, in comparison with international students. As Budd (2017) argues, these students are disadvantaged not only at the point of access to higher education, but also while they are at university through their apparent lack of cultural capital (Leese, 2010). There is a contrast with other, more elite institutions where it is often international students who are perceived as being in deficit. It could be argued that an education that embraces notions of transformative learning, developed through meaningful intercultural interaction, is the essential means of challenging the disposition to place home students in deficit. However, while acknowledging that learning may be impeded, and may fail to relate to students' lives, there is little evidence of any attempt to harness the diversity on campus as a learning resource to address the apparent deficit.

Belonging and identity

The home students report there being an 'international student' identity, which they see as a barrier to creating meaningful relationships. The home students report feeling excluded from the groups of international students, and they describe the identity as an 'international student' as creating a strong sense of belonging, which they believe excludes others. There is a sense that the home students want to interact, but that there are no enablers to facilitate such interaction:

You can definitely see it in lectures, because it's one set of people on one side and the other on one side. (FG4)

These perceptions reveal some negative reflections from some of the students towards those that they perceive to be different from themselves:

You see international students pairing off in groups. You might see a group of Chinese students together and it's not integrated, whereas I think it should be. (IS8)

From the home students' perspective, it's almost as difficult to get into contact with international students ... It is hard to interact with those groups because you find that a lot of people of a certain ethnic persuasion ... they generally seem to in lectures sit together ... They all seem to hang around together, so it is a little bit hard to begin those interactions. (IS5)

Seeing these groupings leads to a tendency to negatively homogenise international students, with the home students identifying international students by nationality, rather than as individuals. There is a tendency to describe international students as 'they':

A lot of them tended to stick together. I think they had that cultural thing where they stuck together, and they knew they were going through the same experiences. I wouldn't be able to relate to somebody that was an international student as well as I would a home student. We just have different experiences. (IG1)

Mezirow (1991) argues that our beliefs, attitudes and values are determined in childhood by the personal, social and cultural influences which are part of our background. Our understanding is so ingrained in these backgrounds that we tend to take our perspective for granted. When we experience something new, we view it from the perspective of that which is already known. It is the 'other' who is perceived as being different from the 'norm', as what they say and do does not match our expectations (Mezirow, 1991). It is only when we examine our deeply held beliefs, and view our experiences from a new perspective, that our perspective and world view changes (Mezirow, 1991). The data suggest that there is little opportunity for this type of transformation. The international student community forms a powerful in-group, which seems to exclude home students (Robson et al., 2018; Spiro, 2014; Volet and Ang, 2012). These in-groups do not necessarily lead to hostility to anyone not perceived to be part of the in-group, but rather, those who are not part of the in-group stay away because it is convenient, and they prefer what is known (Allport, 1954). Although no hostility or malice is intended to the out-group, according to Thom (2010), exclusion is the unintended outcome, and all groups move further apart.

Rather than resulting from a reluctance to engage, it is this sense of exclusion that home students have that seems to be at the centre of a perceived lack of mixing on campus. The students argue that

in practice there is no inclusion or diversity, and that having international students on campus does not necessarily lead to meaningful intercultural interaction. The willingness of the home students to mix with international students comes through strongly in the data, as they talk about wanting international students to be integrated, and the value of interacting with those from different backgrounds. As it stands, however, international students are still described as 'they':

We all see things in a similar way, whereas if you have someone of a different culture, they've experienced different things ... We're not just talking to students who have the same background as us or think the same. They have a different outlook. (IS10)

The home students have an awareness of some of the possible issues underlying the lack of interaction, including shyness, cultural barriers and language barriers. They want to be able to mix, but they do not know where to begin. They see it as the university's responsibility to integrate home and international students:

I don't know if enough is done at university to integrate everyone, cos the only situation you have is in lectures and if you're talking to people in lectures, then you're not going to do that, so I think more could be done by the university to integrate everyone. (FG4)

As it stands, both groups of students tend to view each other as the 'other', and not as individuals who can provide mutual learning.

Like the students, the academics value intercultural interaction. They see it as a way for individuals to see beyond differences, to engage with multiple perspectives and to learn to question their own assumptions, as well as a way to help to build social cohesion:

An ability to interact effectively, to empathise with, to engage with and respect difference and to not view others who appear to be different from them or have different views with suspicion, that's going to be critical to them leading fulfilled lives. (IA2)

The academics also recognise the apparent lack of mixing on campus, but rather than thinking that they have a role to play in creating safe spaces for the students, they identify the issue as coming from the students. Like the students, the academics perceive there to be an identity as an 'international student', which excludes others:

We find that in lectures, even with students in the same cohort, that students tend to sit in quite clearly identified groupings, some of which relate to the colour of their skin. (IA2)

Others feel that the responsibility is on the home students to mix:

We have a lot of international students, and the non-international students don't mix, and that's a real issue. They're [the home students] not making the most of those international students. (IA4)

Although the academics recognise the lack of interaction, there is little evidence in the data of them taking ownership. The students claim that there is a lack of opportunity to mix with those of other cultures, and academics describe the issues with intercultural interaction, as they see students dividing into groups. In-groups and out-groups (Allport, 1979) are the norm on campus. There is a sense in the data that nothing changes:

At induction, I make a big play of international students put your hands up and these are the international students, but then we leave them to it ... We leave the process to itself, and I feel a little bit guilty now because I don't think that's good practice ... Half an hour at induction we try and encourage them, and that's it. (IA12)

This lack of meaningful interaction suggests that there is little opportunity to engage with Mezirow's (1991) theory of education. Providing opportunities for students to see their own perspective through the eyes of others, learning to appreciate the perspectives of others, and seeing through different eyes are central to the theory. Mezirow (1991) argues that meaningful interaction gives students the opportunity to critically reflect on their unquestioned assumptions, and to change their perspective and sense of self.

The lack of mixing of home and international students on campus is not a new finding (Robson et al., 2018), but what is noteworthy, particularly when considered alongside the home students' reported marginalisation, is this sense of the home students feeling excluded. The participants in this research express willingness to engage with their international peers, which is also found in the literature (Schartner and Cho, 2017). However, the literature has tended to paint a picture of resistance or indifference from home students to engaging with their international peers, coupled with willingness to engage on the part of international students (Cotton et al., 2013). Home students are often positioned as the out-group (Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Robson et al., 2018). However, in this study, the home students report seeing the bonding of international students through what they identify as a powerful 'international student' identity, which they feel excludes them from the international students' in-group.

This study has shown that the home students reported marginalisation and the privileging of international students for economic benefit and their cultural capital. Allport (1979) argues that to reduce prejudice and challenge stereotypes, individuals with common goals and equal status need to come together in meaningful intercultural interaction. This situation of privileging international students and marginalising home students does not create an environment where diverse students will come together in such meaningful intercultural interaction. These findings suggest that the internationalisation process in higher education is limited, if institutions and academics do not embrace home students' beliefs and attitudes, do not view all participants as having equal status, and do not try to 'foster a sense of belonging' between home and international students (Office for Students, 2023: n.p.).

Conclusion

This research was initially driven by my personal experience of working with international students and, as such, it assumed a perspective whereby international students were eager to interact with home students, but were confronted with barriers that they could not negotiate. This assumption has been ubiquitous in the internationalisation literature, where international students are commonly portrayed as willing cultural mediators faced with an unresponsive audience. This work contributes to this discussion by showing how the teacher–student relationship influences the peer-to-peer relationship. While international students are valued, in comparison, home students are predominantly perceived to be in deficit. The home students, acutely aware of this valuing of international students, perceive a binary divide, where being an international student equates with being privileged (valued), and being a widening participation student represents being marginalised (in deficit), which means that the relationship between the two groups is far from one of equal status.

While this study is context-specific in focusing on one UK higher education institution, there are implications for the wider sector. There is a need for institutions and academics to reconsider how the lack of meaningful intercultural interaction and the issue of in-groups and out-groups can be addressed, and how the 'deficit' perception of home students can be unpicked. Home students in this research enthuse about building relationships with their international peers, but the reality on campus is one of 'voluntary social segregation'. There is a need for academics to open doors for students to new ways of thinking and enquiring, in order to create the curriculum space necessary to enable academics to look around their classrooms and consider the diverse individuals in them. Academics need to create spaces for home students which will provide them with the immersive experience of telling and sharing their personal stories with their international peers, thus creating an environment of shared goals between those of equal status.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The author declares that research ethics approval for this article was provided by the Leeds Beckett University ethics board, and that it conforms to the requirements of the British Educational Research Association.

Consent for publication statement

The author declares that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the author during peer review of this article have been made. The author declares no further conflicts with this article.

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