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One size fits *none* in international higher education: A UK-based case study on how to foster inclusive participation and active engagement in the classroom

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Abstract

This study analyses the challenges surrounding the promotion of inclusive participation and active engagement within Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in an international context such as that of UK Universities. Starting from an analysis of the current UK Higher Education (HE) scenario (Organization of Economic and Cultural Development, 2019; Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2020), and giving an overview of the meaning of participation and engagement therein (Gibbs, 2014; Kubota, 2001; Ryan & Louie, 2007), this paper outlines the issues that may arise in HEIs. In line with research on participation and engagement in non-UK-based, albeit also international, institutions in Australia (Marlina, 2009), this paper presents evidence from student interviews on the same issues within the UK HE context during the COVID-19 pandemic (i.e., June 2021). Similarly to the students in Marlina's (2009) study, five undergraduate and

postgraduate students from different fields at the University of Edinburgh report a preference to participate in classes where instructors create a welcoming and safe environment. Importantly, a 'language barrier' (Lomer, 2017) is attested even among students fluent in English, therefore showing that a high level of proficiency in a second language does not guarantee inclusion when participating and engaging in university settings. Consequently, this highlights the centrality of the 'small culture' (Holliday, 1999) co-created by teachers and learners in the classroom - that is, a safe space for students of all cultural, linguistic and socio-economic backgrounds, which facilitates comfortable participation and engagement within HE settings. Ultimately, this study offers some pedagogical reflections and recommendations on how to foster inclusive participation and active engagement for all HE instructors, and particularly for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) given the specific teaching settings in which they operate and their unique role within HE.

Introduction: International contexts and challenges in UK HEIs

In the 21st century, the movement of goods, services, capital as well as people, driven by globalisation, also includes an increase of international students in Higher Education (HE) (Organization of Economic and Cultural Development, 2019). In this context, the UK plays a pivotal role as an established destination for international students. It is the second global destination, with over 300,000 students from outside the European Union (i.e., non-EU students) in 2017/2018 and with 14% of the total HE student population constituted by international students (Higher Education Statistics Authority, 2020). When examining more closely institutions such as the University of Edinburgh, including EU students, the proportion is even more significant – non-UK students make up over 44% of the student population, coming from 180 nations, including more than 4,800 students from the EU (University of Edinburgh, 2021). In this international, thus multicultural, *milieu*, it is crucial for UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to provide an internationalised curriculum, whereby focus is placed on the needs of international students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Bennell & Pearce, 2003). Despite this evident need, the rather limited research on international pedagogies within HE highlights that both international students and staff report experiencing concrete challenges often attributed to a 'language barrier' and the lack of academic skills which British academic life requires (Lomer, 2017).

Moreover, it is important to point out that the use of the term 'international' embeds within itself a myriad of realities, which can be extremely different given their cultural specificity. While it is true that international students as a group are similar in terms of their not being 'national', the use of the term 'international' comes with the potential of obscuring the crucially important differences which exist among this very same group of students. If our ultimate aim, as HE practitioners, is to promote *inclusive* participation and active engagement, we must not forget that our inclusivity needs to be tailored to the diverse students' needs that international, as well as home, students may have. This paper thus delves into the challenges of inclusivity in international HEIs by providing an overview of participation and engagement in multicultural HE, along with key research findings from the Australian HE context where the 'small culture' (Holliday, 1999; Marlina, 2009) co-created by students and instructors in the classroom ensures a successful teaching and learning experience. We further discuss evidence from current international students enrolled in undergraduate (UG) and postgraduate (PG) degrees at the University of Edinburgh, which confirms the importance of a safe environment to facilitate participation and engagement of all students within HE, also in the UK. Finally, we provide some pedagogical reflections and recommendations on how to foster inclusive participation and active engagement for all HE instructors, and particularly for graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) given the specific teaching settings in which

they operate and their unique role within HE, as we will argue in our discussion.

An overview of participation and engagement in multicultural contexts

To understand the issues of participation and engagement within international and multicultural contexts, one must reflect on what participating and engaging in HE entails to begin with. What educators strive to stimulate in the classroom is *active* engagement with the materials presented to students, although much of what students learn tends to be forgotten as a result of the learning approach they use (Gibbs, 2014). *Deep* learning is the kind of approach HE teachers want their students to adopt; this is when students actively engage with materials in a personal way (i.e., by expressing one's own opinion on a topic, relating it to one's own experiences), which tends to leave a deeper mark in their memory as opposed to merely regurgitating knowledge, usually the result of *surface* learning (Marton & Säljö, 1976a; 1976b).

What is interesting to the present discussion is that active participation, the 'ideal' classroom behaviour (Kubota, 2001, cited in Kettle, 2005; Ryan & Louie, 2007), is oftentimes equalled to the outward manifestation of one's thoughts and feelings – in other words, talking (DeVita, 2005; Jones, 1999; McLean & Ransom, 2005). Dialogic exchanges between people are at the core of participation and interaction, as

means through which the transformation of individual and collective knowledge occurs (Vygotsky, 1978). The crucial point is that although non-EU and East Asian students are essential economic contributors to the UK HE context depicted at the beginning of the present paper, they are also reported to be 'educational drains in the classroom' (Lomer, 2017). Asian students, particularly those from China, are often framed as 'passive' (Karram, 2013), 'unparticipative' (Straker, 2016), and 'uncritical' (Song, 2016). Frequently, they are stereotyped as 'rote learners' (thus adopting the surface learning approach discussed above), unable and/or unwilling to learn from collaborative or creative pedagogies (Turner, 2013). This uncooperative and uninterested form of behaviour is often attributed to the students' culture. The evidence we review in the next paragraphs points, instead, towards a rather different direction, and is used, along with evidence from the interviews with UG and PG students carried out at the University of Edinburgh, to ultimately suggest a shift in pedagogical approaches in multicultural settings.

Evidence from Australian HE: The importance of classroom 'small culture'

Within the Australian HE context, Marlina (2009) carries out an investigation to analyse the underlying reasons why Asian students, specifically from East and South-East Asia, seem to be disengaged from classroom participation, often interacting less or preferring to listen, thus being categorised

as 'passive' or even 'negative' (MacKinnon & Manathunga, 2003). What Marlina (2009) argues, following interviews with four arts and humanities UG students from Korea, Japan, Brunei and China, is that seeing culture as the main explanation of students' reluctance to speak equals only a partial understanding of the issue. Whilst, on the one hand, culture may play a partial role in explaining anyone's behaviour, it would also imply a 'monolithic nature' of culture (Holliday, 1999) which, in this context, does not reflect contemporary Asian societies and classrooms. Indeed, the widespread idea that Asian students may not be speaking their minds as they regard teachers as absolute authorities, as a result of Confucianism, is refuted by evidence gathered by Cheng (2002) and Shi (2006). In fact, they find that contemporary Asian students do not accept teachers' ideas without challenging them – they are, on the other hand, extremely critical of content, materials and learning environments (Cheng, 2002; Shi, 2006). A further point to consider, which relates to the aforementioned issues with the use of terms such as 'international', is that seeing culture as the main factor affecting a particular population's behaviour equates to overlooking diversity within a country and/or individual differences such as religion, class, gender, and socioeconomic background (Shi, 2006). This would result in, to put it in Kumaravadivelu's (2003: 714) words, "nothing more than a one-dimensional caricature of the learners".

Central concepts in Marlina's (2009) findings are the alternative 'contextual approach' (Biggs, 1999) and the

concept of 'small culture' (Holliday, 1999). In short, understanding Asian students' learning approaches in the classroom cannot prescind from looking at the context wherein it happens – i.e., the classroom itself – and, specifically, the 'small culture' which is co-created by teachers and learners. Students' reluctance to participate may be triggered by a lack of support, warmth, mutual respect, acceptance and responsibility on behalf of the instructors (Campbell & Li, 2008; Clark & Gieve, 2006). Indeed, Marlina's participants report a strong preference towards participating in tutorials wherein tutors create a comfortable and safe learning atmosphere, where teachers convey their enthusiasm for the subject and show acceptance of students' opinions through positive reinforcement and/or their body language.

The other interesting, and often overlooked, point emerging from Marlina's interviews is that talking is only *one* way through which students can participate in HE. In fact, some of the interviewees believe that there is only so much talking one can do, and that responding quickly is not always the best way of engaging in the classroom as the risk of making mistakes under time pressure, without thinking deeply enough about a topic, could be high (Marlina, 2009). On the other hand, participants report other ways of engaging with materials including but not limited to: listening to lecturers' and other students' thoughts and ideas, reading, researching, and lastly thinking.

Ultimately, the evidence outlined in Marlina's (2009) case study seems to refute the common-view idea of Asian students not valuing participation. Rather, when keeping quiet, students are consciously deciding not to engage, as they are either actively processing ideas before seeking an opportunity to voice them or withdrawing from participation due to a factor related to classroom 'small culture', e.g., teachers' impatient or non-verbal behaviour, possibly interpreted as condescending or disrespectful. Given the findings in the Australian HE context, we wished to explore whether similar issues and views regarding participation and engagement were present within the UK HE context. In the next section, we thus present evidence gathered from interviews with UG and PG international students at the University of Edinburgh.

Methodology

In order to gauge the experiences of international students with engagement and participation in the UK HE context, we carried out short, structured interviews with five students at the University of Edinburgh. At the time of the interview, three of the students were enrolled on UG degrees and two of them were studying for degrees at PG level. Their degrees spanned a wide variety of fields (e.g., arts, humanities, social sciences, science and engineering) and their cultural backgrounds were extremely varied, representing the following five countries: China, India, Ireland, Lebanon and Norway. The students, who were all enrolled on one of our

courses[1] in 2020-2021, were invited to take part in the interviews shortly after the end of their course in June 2021. Participation was voluntary and non-retributed.

Given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, the structured interview took place online. The students were emailed the following questions and were asked to submit their answers as one-minute audio recordings:

Q1. Which issues, if any, have you experienced as an international student when participating and engaging in the classroom (e.g., in tutorial activities, lecture participation etc.)?

Q2. Is there anything that lecturers and/or classmates could do to make you feel more at ease when participating and engaging in classroom activities?

Participant data have been pseudonymised and full recordings have been made publicly available on the Open Science Framework (OSF) website, where they can be retrieved on the authors' profiles.

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[1] Students were enrolled either on a language course (Foundation Italian 1 or Italian 1) in the Department of European Languages and Cultures or an interdisciplinary course (Currents: Understanding and Addressing Global Challenges) at the Edinburgh Futures Institute.

Results

Issues when participating and engaging in the classroom

When discussing the issues experienced during participation and engagement in the classroom (Q1), two students highlight the existence of a language barrier which goes beyond one's proficiency in the second language (L2). Thus, a high level of L2 proficiency (i.e., when speaking, listening, writing and reading), usually certified by language tests required to enrol in a degree, does not guarantee inclusion when participating and engaging in the classroom. Specifically, the communicative skills required to participate and engage at university go beyond the mere grammatical rules learnt to pass a language examination. This is attested even in highly proficient L2 speakers, such as in the case of Stud1, who despite being very fluent in English at the time of the interview, admitted not feeling very comfortable when expressing themselves when they began University:

"I think I struggled the most when I first began University. That was mainly because I wasn't as confident in my English skills, so I didn't necessarily feel like I could express my opinion or my arguments effectively…" (Stud1)

Similar struggles are expressed by other interviewees, such as Stud2, who reported the lack of courage to formulate personal opinions in debates when asked to participate in tutorial discussions. Not only is language one of the barriers

perceived by the students, but also cultural differences prove to be detrimental to active participation - even in students who speak English as their first language (L1), such as in the case of Stud3. Indeed, much of the material used in university classes, at least in arts and humanities courses, is highly localised (i.e., including references to Scottish and/or UK linguistic/cultural/historical events), which may make it difficult for international students to properly understand a specific topic and possibly contribute to a discussion. Other interviewees, such as Stud4, go as far as to say that "*the most difficult part … is to figure out which way to participate or engage in the class*". Indeed, international students often come from educational and cultural settings where expectations on participation and engagement may be different from the ones in the UK. In fact, as noted by Stud4, no pre-course training is provided in this specific respect for PG courses in the social sciences. Consequently, some students feel lost when they may be keen to participate, but do not know how participation works in this new environment – when there are also cross-cultural differences in turn taking, as outlined by Stivers et al. (2009). Ultimately, interviewees such as Stud5, point out that international students must undergo a major process of adjustment to a different education system, which takes time. This is even harder for PG students, who usually only have one year to complete their degrees. In the next section, we present students' opinions on how this process of adjustment may be sped up by HE instructors, to ultimately facilitate the

inclusion of international students when required to participate in the classroom.

Ways to facilitate inclusion and enhance participation

When asked what HE instructors could do to make students feel more at ease when participating and engaging in classroom activities (Q2), all interviewees unanimously reported the need for instructors to create a safe and respectful environment, wherein the process of adjusting to a new HE system is sped up for international students, and all students feel comfortable interacting with one another. For instance, Stud1 suggested that instructors "*set the tone*" of the class so that students are mindful of everyone's pace as, in their experience, students tend to take over the discussion and it may take longer for an international student to find the right word to express a concept.

Furthermore, a balanced integration among students of different backgrounds may "*spark new ideas or start new discussions*" (Stud3). Said integration can be achieved in different ways: firstly, through group work (Stud3) in which students' points of views may differ - thus bringing new perspectives and enriching discussions. Secondly, although it is often the case that students are seen as the ones having to adjust, our interviewees point out that instructors should also understand who their students are, where they come from, and what specific challenges they may be facing (Stud4). In this light, taking the time to know one's students

and adapt to them as instructors *as well as* giving students the time to know each other before class (e.g., through an ice-breaker activity; Stud2 and Stud5) represent two sides of the same coin for a successful learning and teaching experience. Lastly, the variety of students' needs, given the issues they may face not only in HE but also as migrants in their day-to-day life, makes it necessary to adopt a multifaceted approach to teaching – or, as Stud5 says,

"*It is important to understand that the process of adjusting and moving to a country is a very huge step that an international student takes, which is why tutorials should be tailored around the needs of the students, as there is no one-size-fits-all approach to delivering quality education* [emphasis added]*."* (Stud5)

In light of the evidence gathered from both the Australian and the UK HE contexts, in the next section we put forward some concrete pedagogical suggestions to foster participation in intercultural HE settings for HE instructors.

Discussion and suggestions to foster participation and engagement in HE

Given the evidence Marlina (2009) gathered from four international UG students within the Australian HE context, and our interviews with five international UG and PG

students within the UK HE context, the importance of the classroom culture co-created by instructors and students should not be overlooked. Indeed, international students, despite the umbrella term used to describe them, constitute a very *heterogeneous* group of learners, whose engagement within HE may be influenced by their cultural and educational background (Trout, 2018), but also, and most importantly, by the classroom environment in which said engagement is to take place. HE instructors thus play an enormous role in the creation of a comfortable and safe environment, as also highlighted by the interviewees' comments, which nurtures students' identity formation through dialogic exchanges and a sense of community.

Among HE instructors, it is important to point out that GTAs play a unique role in implementing the 'small culture' (cf. Section 3) that allows students' identity formation, given the specific teaching settings in which GTAs operate. There is usually a smaller number of students attending GTAs' classes, as opposed to larger numbers of students attending lectures, which creates favourable conditions for students to safely and comfortably engage in the classroom. GTAs have plenty of opportunities to establish a real connection with their students, for instance by investing time during their very first classes to get to know their students, their backgrounds, and their past experiences both within and outside academia, as appropriate. This way, GTAs could build on students' experiences and personal stories, possibly referring to these when going over class materials, ultimately leaving students

feeling remembered and valued as 'somebody' (Kettle, 2005). In particular, international GTAs may be more aware of the potential difficulties of studying abroad, having experienced these themselves. By sharing their own experiences and personal stories with their students, international GTAs can thus empathise with international students, which helps speed up the creation of a classroom 'small culture'.

Moreover, as participation is both 'personal and social' since it involves a person physically, cognitively, and socioemotionally (Wenger, 1998), when students contribute they portray something of themselves to the whole group, unfolding cues about their being, values, and thoughts. In this light, as some of our students at the University of Edinburgh suggest, students should be given the appropriate time to socialise and get to know each other too, before engaging with subject materials and sharing their thoughts, in order to allow them to open up in a familiar and safe environment. Another way to ensure that students feel safe in the classroom could be for instructors to share relevant information about themselves, for instance, by sharing the pronouns by which they would rather be addressed. This could be a way to make students feel more at ease and build trust between instructors and learners.

In the context of international students who do not speak English as an L1, language competence may cause anxiety in discussions (Straker, 2016). It is also important to remember that although admission to university usually requires a

certified level of English, holding a language qualification of even high proficiency does not guarantee that one will be able to understand everything said or referred to. These language barriers especially exist when it comes to technicisms, colloquialisms, jokes and/or irony. As outlined by some of our interviewees, the barrier may also be cultural, when much of the material used in HE is highly localised. Due to this, HE instructors should aim to be as explicit as possible, both when giving instructions and feedback, in order for these to be as accessible as possible to everyone in the classroom.

Lastly, it must be highlighted that talking is not the only mode of active engagement. Given that some students value listening, reflecting and evaluating above speaking (Tatar, 2005). Awareness should be raised among HE practitioners around the fact that listening, thinking, reading, researching, and writing are also valid forms of *active* engagement. While gauging the participation levels of those who keep quiet may be difficult, stimulating participation through group work for instance could be a way to engage shy students more inclusively, both with the subject and with each other, providing the co-creation of an intercultural safe space outlined herein. In the promotion of inclusive and accessible participation in international HEIs, instructors should recognise that not everyone will be an extroverted contributor. Moreover, even though similar challenges may be faced by many international students, such as the aforementioned linguistic and cultural challenges, co-creating

a space wherein *all* students feel safe to participate and interact, and learn from one another, should be the main aim of HE instructors.

Limitations and future research directions

The findings in this study come with some limitations that should be addressed. Firstly, the one-minute restrictions in our structured interviews, imposed due to the nature of our data collection procedure (i.e., online submissions after careful reflection), could be lifted in a semi-structured interview to allow more time to think, process, reflect and expand on answers. Moreover, while our study only asked two questions, future research could employ multiple questions to probe deeper into the distinct roles of GTAs, lecturers and classmates in student participation and engagement. Furthermore, although our interviews took place in 2021, while teaching was restricted to the online environment given the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, our research did not explicitly address the implications of online and hybrid teaching settings on participation and engagement. Thus, future research could explore how inclusion and participation may change with blended hybrid learning and the increasing use of digital technologies, as well as how to achieve and sustain inclusion and participation in different teaching contexts. Lastly, given the limited sample size of the present study, future research could employ a larger and more diverse group of students, representative of the wider HE student population (e.g.,

students from different countries, degrees, and/or at different stages of their degree).

Conclusions

To conclude, this paper has highlighted some of the issues faced in the promotion of inclusive participation and active engagement within the context of international HEIs. The evidence gathered at the University of Edinburgh suggests that the body of students within UK HE is increasingly *diverse*. To avoid a dichotomy between home and international students - both of whom can still be rather diverse groups within themselves - HE instructors should focus on creating a safe space for *all* students to feel comfortable engaging in. They should pay particular attention to the specific needs of individual students, whilst at the same time moving away from preconceived notions of monolithic cultures one may otherwise fall into. Ultimately, the 'small culture' co-created in the classroom by teachers and learners seems to be the key success in HE teaching and learning. To help students overcome some of the challenges faced when participating and engaging in the classroom, some of the suggestions put forward for all HE practitioners include: setting expectations and giving instructions clearly and explicitly, taking time to know one's students whilst also giving them time to get to know each other, and ultimately keeping in mind that not all students are the same or will choose to engage similarly in the classroom. Importantly, GTAs are particularly well suited to implement these

suggestions successfully, given the unique make-up of their classrooms, and international GTAs can even more promptly create a safe and welcoming environment, due to their greater awareness of international students' needs. Future research in UK HE could employ a more comprehensive methodology, with a larger and diverse sample size, and further investigate the challenges faced by students within different teaching and learning environments.

Acknowledgements

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