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**Using Technology to bridge cultural gaps among
English Speaking International Students in UK Higher
Education**

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Using Technology to bridge cultural gaps among English Speaking International Students in UK Higher Education

Abstract

This empirical paper investigates the cultural challenges faced by English speaking international students studying in the UK, with particular reference to Nigerian students and how technology could possibly aid in bridging the cultural gaps. Data sources includes interviews with Nigerian students studying in the UK. The study found there was a contrast in the teaching methods despite the international students being able to speak and understand the English language. Factors such as the style of teaching, way of life, perception and the curriculum were amongst the cultural challenges they faced. The findings emphasise the need for UK institutions and policy makers to understand and address the challenges faced by international students during their educational journey. Based on the findings it might be useful for institutions to investigate and invest in technologies that can provide centralised information applications and enable peer mentoring in order to facilitate integration. Further work can be conducted to determine other technologies that can be used to further mitigate the cultural gaps.

Keywords: International Students, Study Abroad, Intercultural Communication Competence, Higher Education

Introduction

According to Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), in 2019/20 there were over 530,000 international students studying in the UK, Nigeria being one of the top 10 countries as shown in Figure 1 (Universities UK, 2021). Nigeria has over 500 spoken languages, however English is the official language and is the mode of communication within the educational system. The attraction to study in the UK is very high due to its former status as a British colony and subsequent influence over the educational system. In 2018 alone, the UK economy was boosted by over £28.8 billion from international students through tuition and cost of living, which contributed to over one-third of total income for UK institutions (Says, 2021). These students not only boost the UK economy but provide a diverse classroom by bringing in their own perspective based on their cultural background into class discussions. The increase in international students in the classroom not only promotes tolerance,

understanding and appreciation of other cultures, it also deepens the knowledge of both academics and home students' knowledge of different cultures (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014).

For the purpose of this study, an international student is referred to as a student who is enrolled in a UK university as either an undergraduate or a postgraduate and is resident abroad but chose to study in the UK. International students help the institutions and students develop cultural sensitivity and skills by working with people from different social and cultural backgrounds there by aiding in intercultural communication competence (ICC). ICC is the "knowledge, motivation, and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of a host culture" (Barker 2006, p.15).

Integrating International students within the UK institutions will hopefully aid in the core purpose of Intercultural competence which are empathy, a tolerance for ambiguity, develop behavioural flexibility, communicative awareness, knowledge discovery, respect for others (Perry & Southwell, 2011)

Top 10 non-domestic students in UK higher education for 2019/20

Source: HESA

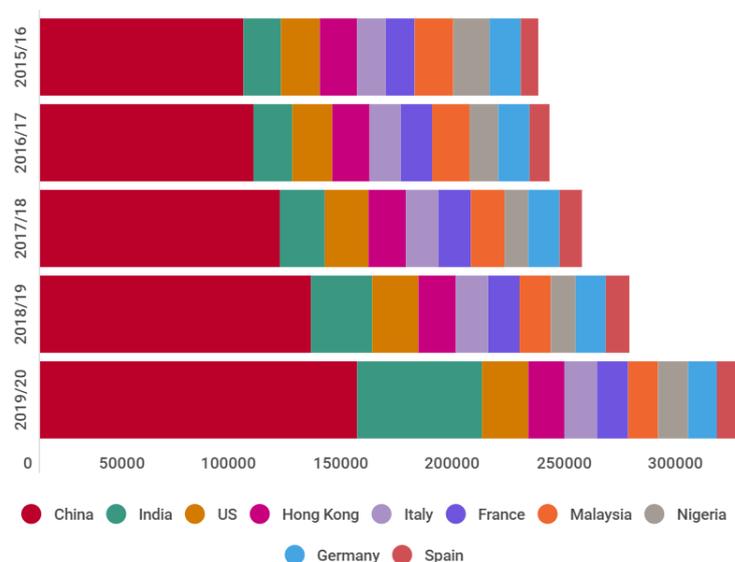


Figure 1. Population of international students studying in the UK

A number of reasons have been cited to explain why students prefer to come to the UK to study; reasons are attributed to push or pull factor. Push factors are things that encourage

the individual to leave home. Maringe & Carter (2007), identified the push factors for a lot of African students coming to study in the UK were economic stagnation, political instability and lack of local capabilities within their country of origin. However, they found that a number of pull factors such as the recognition of UK international degrees in their home country and the prospect of getting a better job (career progression) in their home country was one of the major driving factors for students studying in specific universities in the UK. A lot of students believe that a UK HE qualification is recognised and respected globally, giving them a competitive advantage over their counterparts in their home country. Another factor identified by students, is that the UK application process is quite straight forward compared to other countries (Maringe & Carter, 2007). Furthermore, International students are allowed to work up to 20 hours a week during term-time. This provides a financial relief for international students coming from developing countries such as Nigeria, as financial constraints is one of the challenging factors identified by researchers (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016).

Despite the benefits associated with studying in the UK, research has shown challenges faced by international students such as language barrier, cultural shock, loneliness, financial stress, discrimination, acculturative stress and difficulties with adjustment to the environment of the host country to mention a few (Baklashova & Kazakov, 2016, Smith & Khawaja, 2011, Maringe & Carter, 2007). These potential challenges might impede the associated benefit of studying abroad. A significant amount of this research is focused on international students who speak English as another or second language (ESOL) and the challenges they face in integrating into the UK Higher Educational system. However, there are many international students who speak English but have other cultural barriers that impact the intercultural link with their educational needs. This paper will explore how universities integrate these international students from a student perspective, with the aim of answering the following research questions.

Research questions

- What are the cultural challenges faced by English speaking international students studying in UK?
 - What can be done to mitigate these challenges?
 - How are the universities mitigating these challenges?
 - How are universities providing Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)?
- What technologies are available to mitigate these challenges and bridge these cultural gaps?

In addition, this paper will investigate available technologies that institutions use to allow students to connect and settle easily and discuss any social and cultural issues.

This paper begins with a review of the literature regarding international students experiences of studying abroad, Intercultural Communication Competence and technologies to bridge the cultural gap. It then outlines the research methodology, presentation of findings and discussions followed by conclusion, limitations of the research work and further work.

Literature Review

The literature review explores the experiences of international students studying abroad and the intercultural communication competence associated with their study period. It further explores how technology can be used to bridge the ascertained cultural gap.

Studying abroad and its challenges

Globalisation has seen the distance between countries gradually disappear and a global interconnection between people. More people from different countries are communicating and exchanging ideas in English (Xue & Zuo, 2013). Studying abroad promotes intercultural contacts and builds social networks. Despite the benefits associated with studying abroad, it is not without its challenges for international students. According to Cushner & Karim (2004), adapting to an unfamiliar environment can bring about stress to international students.

Researchers have identified common challenges faced by international students, this includes but not limited to cultural shock, teaching and learning style, communication, acculturation, adjustment and adaptation, prejudice, discrimination, social stressors with much focus on language barriers. According to Smith & Khawaja (2011), language barriers are a major acculturation stressor that international students face.

Schweisfurth & Gu (2009) identified that international students lacked confidence impeding classroom communication and the integration of International students was hindered due to lack of opportunities for meaningful classroom interaction (Freeman & Li, 2019). International students felt that the teaching and learning styles used were incompatible (Bamford, 2008), the negative impact of teaching styles on international students was also noted by Liberman (1994) in a study of Asian students who reported experiencing difficulties adjusting to the interactive teaching style and critical thinking approach used while studying the United States of America.

Intercultural communication competence

Bryam (1997) defined intercultural communication as the communication between people of different cultures, with awareness of the cultural similarities and differences and being able to navigate between these differences, while Intercultural competence implies “particular knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary for a successful exchange with the members of different cultures” (Petrović, 2019, p.122). Dimitrov et al. (2014) explains that intercultural competence within academia includes the ability to present research, facilitate learning across cultures, communicate effectively to a diverse audience and develop working relationships across cultural, social and professional boundaries.

It is believed that studying abroad is a powerful tool for developing intercultural competencies (Cushner & Karim, 2004). Students who spend a significant amount of time studying abroad develop a more positive view of the host culture and exhibit greater intercultural awareness (Pedersen, 2009). The presence of International students creates the potential for universities to facilitate intercultural experience (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009). Furthermore, exposure to different cultures enable intercultural interaction and learning. Establishing a social support network in the new culture eases international students’ intercultural adjustment (Hendrickson et al., 2011). However, Schweisfurth & Gu (2009), found that some international students only socialised and lived with people from their own cultural background due to the discomfort they felt when associating with students from other cultures, hence the creation of an intercultural gap.

Technology Enhanced Learning

Technology has undoubtedly refined the way teaching and learning is conducted by widening accessibility and improving delivery of online content. It addresses equity and access issues for learners (Hollenbeck & Hollenbeck, 2009). It allows users to use resources from anywhere in the world, irrespective of location or time zone. With the advent of the internet, communication has been transformed. A channel for communication with people from other cultures has been created, it has also enabled educators to refine their teaching strategy and reach a wider audience, while trying to provide an all-inclusive learning strategy with culture specific content.

“Information technology makes it possible to address learning preferences through creating learning environments that feature integrated and thematic curriculum, collaborative learning, language acquisition and literacy skills to meet the challenge of cultural and linguistic diversity” (Hollenbeck & Hollenbeck, 2009, p.3). The use of technology can provide learners with opportunities to demonstrate their strengths and gain class status.

The Covid19 pandemic forced many universities to move online to keep students connected. Technology such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, and Google Meet were used to facilitate the process. Despite the location of their international students, the integration of technology was used to reduce the learning barrier, however it was not without issues, such as infrastructural problems (poor connection, cost of data and power supply) that some International students faced in their home countries.

Methodology

The research was conducted using semi-structured interviews as a method of collating data. Interviews were selected to gain insights from international students with direct experiences within the UK educational system. The benefit of direct communication also enabled the gathering of tacit information, which might be missed using other methods. In line with Boyce & Neale (2006), In-depth interviews involves “conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program or situation (p.6).”

Method

A semi-structured interview was used to question participants; this enabled the gathering of more detailed information to answer the research question. Questions were centred around the participants, their settlement experience in the UK, challenges faced, technology used to facilitate the process of settlement, and overall experiences (see Appendix A).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was requested and granted by Lancaster University and all participants received a consent form explaining the purposes and procedures of the study, the interview protocol, and their withdrawal rights. Completed consent forms were obtained from all participants, recorded interviews was stored on a password-protected laptop prior to transcription.

Data collection

Jacob & Furgerson (2015) interview protocol was used and it included reading around the literatures, using standard scripts to aid in reiterating what the study is all about. Participants consent forms were read and signed. Open-ended questions were used with follow-up questions used to explore participants’ responses to ensure their accounts were understood, properly represented and documented.

Three International students from Nigeria studying in the UK were interviewed. Two were postgraduate students and had recently arrived in the UK, while one was an undergraduate student that have been studying in the UK for almost four years. Two face-to-face interviews were conducted and one interview was conducted via zoom. The interviews were recorded with participant consent and lasted between 30 to 45 minutes. Anonymity of the participants was maintained by assigning numbers (P1 to P2: Postgraduates and P3: Undergraduate).

Data analysis

Due to the small data set, Saldana's (2013) manual coding steps were performed using Microsoft Word to organise, evaluate and analyse the textual data. An inductive coding process was used, deriving codes from the data. The interviews were transcribed by reading through line by line, coding in details and extracting relevant information. The codes were categorised and themes generated based on relationship between codes and meaning across codes. The next step of analysis involved reviewing the codes and themes identified in order to answer the research questions.

Finding and Discussion

Based on the analysed data, themes were identified in relation to students experiences as international students, with further details of the technologies that had aided their integration process. The participants were also given the opportunity to provide their points of view or suggestions on the type of technologies they would recommend to facilitate the integration and support the process. The identified themes were educational system, how they perceive us, cultural differences, time management, and language and curriculum.

What are the cultural challenges faced by English speaking international students studying in UK?

The findings showed that there are a number of cultural differences and challenges faced by English speaking international students. The findings were in line with the various research conducted into experiences of international students studying abroad (Smith & Khawaja, 2011, Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009, Schartner, 2006).

Educational System

All participants identified that the educational system was totally different from what they were used to. They identified that the UK educational system is mostly based on self-study unlike their home country where they rely heavily on their teachers. Two of the participants

found this approach very useful as it aided them to think critically and helps them gain knowledge better, however one of the participants found it overwhelming and felt there was no other way than to adapt.

“Educational system is a sharp contrast to what is obtainable here. What I mean by sharp contrast is in terms of pattern of teaching. In Nigeria, you are given everything, the tutor gives you everything but here, it is more of a research-based learning, you just have the basics you build on that yourself. I find it challenging but not too challenging as maturity comes into place.....” – P2

Aubrey (1991) noted that students from countries which focus upon rote learning may find it difficult to adjust to the importance placed on critical thinking in Western universities.

How they perceive us

All participants felt that their lecturers were approachable and supportive. However, one of the participants felt that both the home students and lecturers alike, had a preconceived idea that they were not able students and will not be able to contribute effectively in class discussions.

“I have experienced systematic racism, gestures and comments. I remember when I started the course, I guess because I am African, they automatically assume I don’t know anything. My lecturer will speak to me like I am less able and not smart, including fellow students. I am the only fully black female in my course, they just think she is from a developing country she hasn’t got experience so she probably will not know it.” – P3

Cultural Differences

All participants felt the UK culture is more open, unlike where they are coming from, however, P3 felt that the British want inclusion but she felt that they are not willing to assimilate people’s cultures and beliefs.

“Way of life is totally different in the sense that in the UK, most people are reserved, but in my country, some people are quite candid (direct), without meaning to create offense. You could be walking and someone would approach you and tell you that what you are wearing is inappropriate. Here you do things the way you want to. I find it interesting, it is an entirely different culture.” -P2

“There are differences in cultural beliefs and values. I find UK more open than where I come from. However, they talk about inclusion, but they don’t want to understand other peoples’ beliefs and culture....” – P3

Time management

Understanding the concept of time came as a shock for the newly arrived participants, they found it difficult to comprehend.

“Where I come from, we are not conscious of time, there is something called Nigerian time in quote or African time. Here, I have come to understand what it means to keep to the time, e.g. if the train is supposed to leave by 3:15pm, 3:15pm is not when the train is approaching but when the train is leaving i.e. the doors are shut at 3:15. It is a sharp contrast to what happens in my country” – P2

Language

Language has been identified by many researchers as the main barrier for international students studying abroad. Surprising, this was not the case for participants 2 and 3, however P1 initially felt less confident upon his arrival to the UK.

“It has been quite an experience, initially it was difficult for me to integrate, I felt intimidated, lack of confidence, sort of inferiority complex. I felt the white people were better than me. I was shy and didn’t want to communicate as I didn’t know if others could understand my accent”. - P1.

Self-doubt and loss of self-esteem are typical feelings experienced by International students (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014).

Curriculum

One of the participants felt that the curriculum was too westernised.

“It is very westernized, my course is basically a design course, a lot of us have come here to learn design and go back home to implement. But we are taught, the British way of design without factoring the climate of other countries.....” – P3

“The educational system is very colonized, the curriculum does not take into account the international students. The curriculum is not designed to favor us, it works to train us to be like them and work for them and it leaves a lot of people just hopeless. They need to broaden their view and be more accepting, your way is not always the right way. They need to decolonize the curriculum”. -P3

What can be done to mitigate these cultural challenges and how are universities mitigating these challenges?

Participants felt that having an induction immediately, assigning new arrivals to student ambassadors, having a centralized App where students source information will aid in integrating students faster and mitigate challenges.

Participants mentioned that the induction they had from their institutions helped to an extent but that their universities provided a different view from what they were experiencing. They felt the work life balance is something that the university needs to look into.

“They need to improve the work-life balance, I feel we spend all our time in school and we are so overwhelmed with course work that we barely have time for ourselves” -P1

One of the participants had not had their induction as of the time of the interview, which was about a month into their first semester and felt this was leaving it too late.

“I think the induction should have come earlier, because I had to figure out everything by myself they hard way” Right now, I am saddled with assessments so why should I bring out 3 hours of my time to go and listen to someone talk about something I have already figured out the hard way” – P2

They acknowledged that the live chat provided by the institution’s website was fine as you get an instant response but they did not think it was effective as people will hardly ask for non-academic advice.

“You will hardly put on the live chat how do I prepare for the British weather. There should be an authorized live chat where you can login and the live chat should be session into two areas: academic issues and non-academic issues or extra curriculum issues”-P2

Participants felt university communication was not sufficient and that they should be doing webinars, live seminars on specific subject such as British culture, they believe this will go a long way in integrating International students. In addition, they suggested the use of surveys to ensure that these International students are adapting well.

“The university needs to make sure that their students are being carried along not just based on their assumption of where they are but making sure their students are where they need to be” -P3

One of the participants felt that the mandatory English course for all International students in their course was beneficial as it will aid in their academic writing. While another, felt he only knew about an academic writing course after he had submitted a write up which was not up to standard. He felt the school should have told them about it not letting them figure out things for themselves.

Support from the university

The newly arrived participants felt that their institution was supporting them even though they felt that much more could be done. However, the undergraduate participant felt that the school does not take into account their International students.

“During the Covid 19 the school still kept the same timing, with no concession, despite the time differences affecting International students. No lenience was applied however the work expectations were the same which was unfair. With little support from the tutor we were working blindly only to be informed it was wrong. There are times when I felt overwhelmed and anxious. I called the mental well-being line a couple of times and nobody picked”. -P3

How are universities providing Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)?

From the findings, it did not seem like intercultural competence is taught in institutions, as all participants were not aware of what it meant, even the participant that had spent about four years within the university, this was highlighted by Dimitrov et al., (2014) who stated that intercultural competence is rarely taught and that it is assumed that students will develop it through experience.

What technologies are available to mitigate these challenges and bridge these cultural gap?

The participants identified various technologies that the university tried to use to maintain communication and learning, such as Moodle, Google meet, Zoom, twitter handler and live chats. However, students felt that their own formed WhatsApp group was more effective for posting challenges, navigating the system and eliciting information from International students with similar experiences.

“In order to navigate these challenges, we have a International students WhatsApp forum where we talk about our challenges, share our experiences and resolve issues” -P1

Participants felt that having centralized Apps where new students can have access to varied ranging from academic requests to basic information such as preparing for the UK weather, will facilitate the integration and settlement process within the UK educational system.

Understanding the culture and accepting the difference in one's culture and others will help universities bridge the cultural gaps among their International students. Cultural barriers have a significant impact on how students receive and validate information (Dwyer, n.d)

One of the participants mentioned that pairing new students with existing ones for guidance, will enable integration. This is in line with suggestions made by Hughes and Wisker (1998), that International students paired with peers would aid the students to cope with their new environment.

Research limitation

This empirical study was limited to three participants from the same country hence it does not provide holistic overview of English International students studying abroad. Each participant raised significant points, which have been captured and analysed, however, due to the word limitation, some interesting points were not explored further. There are opportunities for further research into the impact of transport, weather, food, finances and socialising through the use of technology for the integration of International students in the UK's educational system and its impact on aspects of interculturality.

Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to investigate the cultural challenges faced by Nigerian students studying in the UK and how technology could possibly aid in bridging the cultural gaps. This study contributes to the literature around experiences of international students with particular focus on English speaking international students and the need for intercultural competence to be explicitly taught in institutions.

The findings suggest that English speaking international students experience as many challenges as their non-English speaking counterparts despite being able to speak English. The findings indicates that there are differences with the style of teaching, perception of International students and the need to revisit the curriculum. In addition, it found that having a centralised application and peer mentoring will go a long way in integrating and mitigating challenges faced by international students. There is a requirement for UK institutions to adapt, integrate and meet the needs of the vast number of International students who come to study in the UK and that it is essential that monetary value is not put before interculturality, which affects the well-being of students and their integration into the system.

The finding indicated that intercultural competence is not taught in institutions as all participants were not aware of what it meant. The finding also suggests that institutions should explicitly teach intercultural competence as this might aid the integration of international students to ensure that they understand their host culture and are able to prepare to work in a global workforce. Lantz-Deaton (2017) suggests that “university policy and practice may need to be enhanced if the production of graduates with higher levels of intercultural competence is to be realised.

Furthermore, universities should develop a centralised application where students are able to source any information. Based on the findings, institutions might want to develop technologies that will aid peer mentoring where new intakes are paired with students who have already gone through the journey. In addition, training lecturers on classroom pedagogies that accommodate learners from diverse backgrounds, understanding their learners cultural background can help in ensuring that an inclusive learning environment is promoted.

Technology can only bridge cultural gaps if it is used properly. Participants seems to navigate the system better through the use of WhatsApp group. Finally, participants felt the curriculum was too westernised, considering the economic value that these International students contribute to the UK economy, the question that comes to mind is ‘Should UK institutions start looking at making their curriculum more inclusive?’

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Appendices

Appendix A : Core Questions

1. How long have you been studying in the UK?
2. What course are you studying and in which university?
3. What has been your experience of settling and studying in the UK?
4. Did your school organize induction?
5. What cultural differences have you noticed?
6. What cultural challenges have you faced and what do you think the university can do to prepare you for these challenges?
7. How is the school supporting you in settling in?
8. What can you say about the British culture and were there any differences from your home country?
9. Do you think an introductory course on British culture might help?
10. Have you heard of Intercultural Communication Competence (ICC)? If yes then how is your school using ICC?
11. What relevant technologies is the school using to support you and what other technologies do you think university can use?
12. Based on your overall experience are there any areas which you have identified for improvement?