Navigating Cultural Difference: Nigerian Students' Perceptions of Intercultural Competence Among UK HE Instructors

Abstract

We examine how UK higher education institutions (HEIs) manage and assess their instructors' intercultural (in)competences relevant to international students from Nigeria. Managing (inter)cultural competences is significant for instructors in HEIs as they interact with international students who bring cultural diversity and differences to the classroom, library, and other areas of the institution. We conducted semi-structured qualitative interviews with international postgraduate students from Nigeria in the UK. To develop a balanced view, we intend to collect data from educators, including lecturers/tutors, support and services staff who engage with these students on campus, and the university's development staff.

The interviews with the students have revealed that some instructors lack awareness and knowledge of international students' cultural differences, have little intercultural sensitivity regarding the language used in the classroom, and have a different construct of empathy compared to the students' home countries. These findings are significant because they contribute to the literature and debate on intercultural competencies, focusing on how students must transition and be integrated into the local HE culture and education system.

Keywords: intercultural competencies, intercultural sensitivity, international students, cultural differences, higher education institutions

Introduction

This research was exploratory and part of a bigger project on analysing international postgraduate (PG) students from Nigeria studying in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). A substantial body of research has been undertaken to explore the experiences of international students at both the undergraduate (UG) and PG levels. Some studies problematise

the students' individual and university experiences (Walker, 1997). Hence, for students to have a positive experience, the instructors need to understand the intercultural differences these students bring into the classroom. Additionally, we acknowledge that for instructors to develop the necessary knowledge, skills, and attitudes supporting IC/IS, they need to undergo development that addresses students' cultural differences and diversity (Deardorff, 2009).

Given the high representation of globally diverse students, Deardorff and Arasaratnam-Smith (2017) recognised the need to understand intercultural competencies (IC). For this to happen, Arasaratnam-Smith (2017) provides two components that are prevalent in the literature, including aspects of "effectiveness (ability to achieve one's goal in a particular exchange) and appropriateness (ability to show mannerisms that are acceptable to the other person) (p.9). As such, Johnson et al. (2006) define IC as "an individual's effectiveness in drawing upon a set of knowledge, skills, and personal attributes *to* work successfully with people from different national cultural backgrounds at home or abroad" (p.530). Linked to this is Hammer et al.'s (2003) definition of IC, which suggests it as "the ability to think and act in interculturally appropriate ways" (p.422).

Such varied analyses of IC have led researchers to develop and use diverse labels, including intercultural sensitivity (IS), cultural acculturation, adaptation, intercultural communication, and multiculturalism (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017). Building on this, IC has paid increased attention to the internationalisation of higher education (HE), which is distinguished into "internationalisation abroad" and "internationalisation at home" (Knight 2008, p. 22). This study is concerned with the latter, as it examines the educational environment within UK HEI because internationalisation is at home and resides centrally within academics. Therefore, this research aims to investigate students' perspectives in Nigeria within UK HEIs on how they perceive

their instructors' cultural awareness and competencies. This will interest students, educators, leaders, and readers, as it focuses on Nigerian PG students who may be involved in enhancing culturally responsive policies and practices (Jabbar & Hardaker, 2013).

While studies have been conducted on international students, some prior studies have focused on students from China (Wang, 2018; Zhu & O'Sullivan, 2022) and India (Gordon, 2020). Hence, studying PG students from Nigeria is necessary because, historically, the UK has been a popular destination for this group, and they represent the UK's third-largest international student body (Abijade & Hayes, 2022).

Another reason to pay attention to Nigerian students is the need to understand their cultural worldview regarding "position" and "ability" in developing successful relationships with their instructors. When dealing with African students, it is necessary to understand how they conceptualise IC/IS, their thought processes, and behaviours, as these are derived from "enduring systems of values, beliefs, and cultural themes that shape" them (Nwosu, 2009: p. 119). The UK HEIs are external to this environment and its cultural rules that set expectations and predict ICs/IS, communication practices, and acts. Hence, this paper also responds to the call for further research examining academic institutions' attitudes towards IC/IS and how Nigerian students communicate (Nwosu). Therefore, the appropriateness of language instructors' classroom language when communicating with international students from Nigeria facilitates learning experiences (Holubnycha et al., 2021).

This paper will begin by analysing the literature on the context of UK HE from an international student perspective, intercultural competences and sensitivity, and the Development Models for Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) theoretical framework. It will then explore the research design, analyse the findings, and develop a discussion and conclusions.

Literature Review

Higher education in context

UK higher education has seen an increase in students from diverse international contexts, with the largest numbers from China, India, and Nigeria (Jabbar et al., 2020). This means that the HE is represented by many international students, especially those pursuing PG studies (Ajibade & Hayes, 2022). These students bring different cultures, backgrounds, and educational systems that may influence how they interact, engage, and learn within the UK HEIs (Jabbar et al., 2020). Hence, the premise of such differences has increased the complexity of learning and the classroom, suggesting that UK HEIs have failed to provide international students with a positive experience (Turner, 2006). Further, some commentators have alluded that the failure to create positive experiences is due to a largely Eurocentric curriculum (Winter et al., 2022). Besides, Jabbar et al. argue that these students are expected to learn and understand the local educational system and culture independently. Hence, this approach harms international students' experience and development (McDonald, 2014).

Besides enriching complex cultures and fostering diversity, international students have also contributed economically to UK HEIs. Hassan et al. (2019) found that in 2017/18, international students contributed circa £25.8 billion to the UK economy's gross output. In agreement, Kelly & McNicoll (2017) argue that international students contribute financially to the universities and local communities where they study, e.g., by paying rent in private accommodation and purchasing groceries, thereby generating additional demand for consumer-related industries. This was supported through the City Deals initiative, created by the UK coalition government, which promotes local economic growth by developing partnerships between central and local government as they work with major stakeholders (McCann et al., 2023). The same study found that the economic contribution through the City Deals approach was evidenced through fees paid by internationally taught PG students. Hence, the

UKCISA (2023) showed that non-EU international PG students accounted for 59%, of which around 60,000 are coming from Nigeria. Such a prominent figure shows that international PG students and their dependents from Nigeria contributed an estimated 1.9 billion pounds to the UK economy in 2021/2022 alone (Deji-Folutile, 2023).

Intercultural competence and sensitivity and developing relationships.

Deardorff (2006) defines intercultural competence as "behaving and communicating effectively and appropriately in intercultural situations based on one's intercultural knowledge, skills and attitudes" (p.254). This is linked to the appropriateness and effectiveness of intercultural communication (Holmes and O'Neill, 2012). Hence, for someone to be competent in intercultural communication, Hunter et al. (2006) reported that educators, among other professionals, need to be competent in cross-cultural awareness and interaction and to develop familiarity with a new environment. The same study references Curran (2003), who argues that IC/IS is a continuous process characterised by tolerance of ambiguity, patience, and acceptance of the challenges and complexities of the new culture without comparing them to one's beliefs.

This way, Nwosu (2009) suggests that rather than relying on perceptual knowledge when interacting with African students, educators will benefit from understanding and developing their cultural dialogue and intelligence about (i) community rather than individualism, (ii) friendship, not temporary affair, (iii) ability to have patience and tolerance, and (iv) display sympathy and acceptance. These characteristics help us understand how these individuals' thought processes and behaviours are derived from and shape them (Nwosu, 2009). Indeed, these characteristics are essential for HEIs as they rethink the development of instructors' IC and their sensitivity or communication skills.

Intercultural dialogue in the HE context

To build an inclusive climate, as argued by Nwosu (2009), relationships are created through an inclusive environment for intercultural dialogue

(ID) (Broome et al., 2019). IC and ID use cultural differences to develop intercultural knowledge competences within HEIs to manage diversity and diverse multiethnic student groups (Marta-Christina et al., 2010).

Theoretical Framework

This study applies Bennett's (1993) DMIS framework to investigate instructors' understanding and progress in IC/IS. The framework is particularly useful in studying the effectiveness of intercultural training programs and the impact and dynamics within multicultural teams. DMIS offers a valuable lens through which the experiences of international students and the development of teachers' cultural competence can be understood and enhanced. The framework further proposes a continuum of IS ranging from ethnocentrism, in which one's culture is central, to ethnorelativism, in which cultural differences are understood and appreciated. The progression through the stages (denial, defence, minimisation, acceptance, adaptation, and integration) reflects increasing cultural understanding and competence sophistication.

We have minimal understanding/knowledge about how HEIs are getting their instructors to stay on the "top" of students who superficially look the same visually, but/yet have cultural differences due to different cultural backgrounds and traditions. Looking across the body of literature on IC/IS, we find gaps that current research can help fill. Therefore, we address the following research questions: *(i) How do international students perceive the IC of their instructors? (ii) How can HEIs promote and assess IC among instructors? (iii) How effective are the existing practices of IC development in HE for the instructors?*

Research Methods

To gain insights on understanding "how HEIs support instructors manage and assess intercultural (in)competences relevant to the international students from Nigeria", we conducted qualitative research. Specifically, this study used semi-structured interviews, which allow a focus while

enabling the investigators to explore relevant ideas that may emerge during the interview (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This further enhanced the understanding of instructors' and students' views on IC/IS.

Research setting

We focused on Nigerian postgraduate students.

Data Collection

First, semi-structured interviews were held with international students. This was to understand how they perceive the instructors' knowledge and understanding of intercultural competences.

Second, personnel from the staff's development department will be interviewed to react to the student's viewpoint.

Findings

We investigated how HEIs support instructors in managing and assessing intercultural (in)competences relevant to international students from Nigeria. To understand why HEIs need to support and assess instructors' ICs, we start by analysing how students construct and develop their perspectives.

Understanding cultural differences

Instructors' understanding/knowledge of cultural differences is central to issues related to intercultural competencies, sensitivities, and skills. The evidence shows that cultural differences were most evident in the classroom, particularly with white lecturers. Some staff behaviours and attitudes in class were considered the key issue concerning the students. For instance, some behaviours and attitudes are perceived as demeaning, leading students to feel humiliated or less respected. Such attitudes resulted in some students not seeking support when they are struggling with assessments; "Some of the behaviours and attitudes has great impact on my learning". The main thread throughout explaining the behaviours and attitudes includes (i) lecturers' lack of experience and the

process of being "other". This was clearly explained by a respondent who said, "I don't think they will because it is said in Nigeria, 'who wears the shoes, knows where it hurts'. I think most of them might not know the challenges or understand what it means". This view of "otherness" seems to be based on having experience of being a student of African/Nigerian background, who has endured difficult experiences to get where they are. This notion of 'othering' creates/constructs the 'them' and 'us' hierarchy. In this case, the hierarchy emphasises a self-awareness that may have been shaped by historical constructions that devalued the group. (ii) misunderstanding of the students' strengths and weaknesses. In this case, the evidence shows how their culture or background has developed their resilience in a different learning environment. This echoes Nwosu's (2009) suggestion that there is a need learn about the African background and values.

Intercultural sensitivity

Concerning intercultural sensitivity, the evidence shows that the cultural background of the instructor/s had effects on their level of sensitivity:

> "I think it also depends on this instructor's cultural background as well. For those who are not from our part of the world and are local here, don't have cultural competencies or sensitivity. They are not sensitive to international students. Probably because they don't have the cultural intelligence of that continent".

The cultural backgrounds mentioned by various participants during the interviews highlighted the importance of intercultural communication and cultural intelligence. Intercultural intelligence would demonstrate instructors' cultural ethnorelativism (Bennett, 2004). For instance, some participants stated that, "In fact, he spoke as if he wanted to know us". The experience of difference in this case shows some level of acceptance from Bennett's developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS).

Additionally, the evidence seems to show that the lecturers/instructors' intercultural sensitivity is influenced by their age and maturity:

> "I think because he's an elderly person, he could relate to us. He was really willing to help, and that really helped. And every time that you meet him and even after class, we would rally around him, and he would still explain what we needed to know."

Intercultural communication from instructors is reflected in the words and language they use in class. Evidence shows some worrying language experienced by students from some lecturers:

> "Many of us were not able to scan our registers sitting in our seats, so we went to the front to scan from the computer. This is when this white lecturer said something like, 'Oh, where are these aliens coming from…' I don't know why she quickly entrusted herself to say such a thing".

Plan for developing the paper:

Complete data collection and transcription

Clearly develop the literature review/theoretical framework

Data analysis

Write up.

Contribution from the paper: Intend to contribute to the literature by:

(i)   addressing the Nigerian students' perspectives on intercultural competences in the higher education (HE) context;

(ii)   the debate on intercultural competence, i.e., intercultural sensitivity and communication of academics; and

(iii)   develop a theoretical model that can be used to assess intercultural competence among HE instructors.

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