

Article

# Understanding Student Participation in the Internationalised University: Some Issues, Challenges, and Strategies

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**Abstract:** The globalisation of higher education has resulted in an increasingly culturally and linguistically diverse student demographic and, with it, a number of significant challenges as well as frequently cited benefits. This article looks specifically at the issue of student participation, highlighting, in particular, its culturally contexted nature and the need for pre- and in-service teacher training and development programmes that raise teachers' intercultural awareness and furnish them with the skills and strategies needed to manage the effects of diversity on patterns of participation in the classroom. It offers a number of concrete proposals for dealing effectively with participation-related issues in the classroom.

**Keywords:** student participation; student diversity; mixed-culture group work; teacher strategies; intercultural competence

## 1. Introduction

The globalisation of higher education has resulted in university classrooms characterised by unprecedented levels of cultural diversity. The ease and relatively low cost of travel, altered political landscapes, new technologies, and changing social and workplace demands and expectations have impacted students' academic and life opportunities and aspirations, and many see overseas study as a valuable experience and an investment in their future. In 2013, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reported that the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their country of citizenship increased more than threefold, from 1.3 million in 1990 to nearly 4.3 million in 2011, representing an average annual growth rate of almost 6% [1]. More recent OECD statistics reflect a continued growth, with a 50% increase (from 3 to 4.5 million) being reported in the number of students enrolled in a country of which they are not citizens between 2005 and 2012 [2].

For universities, globalisation has been both a cause and a consequence of a shift towards a more neoliberal ideology, as they find themselves having to internationalise and recruit overseas as well as domestic students in order to compete in what has become a global marketplace. It is imperative that they do so, for a failure to respond to this rapidly changing context can result, ultimately, in their diminishment, even demise, not least because they risk losing income generated from high overseas student fees, which is critical to supporting their infrastructure and meeting development plans and other operating costs. Moreover, being an 'internationalised university' is seen as a badge of honour, a mark of being with the times and meeting the current and future needs of students—something universities are quick to highlight in their mission statements [2,3]. Internationalisation of the student body is increasingly seen as presenting opportunities for students and lecturers to broaden their engagement with linguistic and cultural diversity, reduce ethnocentrism, interrogate knowledge from

fresh perspectives, and develop the kinds of intercultural and other competencies that underpin and promote notions of global citizenship and employability [4–6].

The growth in the recruitment of overseas students also comes with other attendant benefits for universities, for example, the dissemination of institutional brand and reputation via alumni who go on to become successful and influential scholars, businesspeople, politicians etc. in their home countries, or indeed elsewhere, and who may be pivotal in setting up industry links as well as research and other collaborations [7,8]. Most crucially perhaps, the extent to which today's universities successfully internationalise has implications for their performance in the kinds of league tables seen as increasingly important—even critical—determiners of their fortunes.

One of the most obvious indicators of universities' attempts to internationalise is the growing trend toward offering a greater number of courses and programmes in the medium of English [9–11]. From the students' perspective, in addition to the benefits outlined above and which accompany increased student diversity, such courses provide an opportunity to develop their English language skills and, with them, the wherewithal to navigate the kinds of multicultural interactions in which we increasingly find ourselves engaged in a world characterised by what Vertovec [12] has described as 'superdiversity'. Perhaps more importantly, by helping develop their English language proficiency, these courses equip students with a key employability skill, one which will often carry with it a premium reflected in enhanced salary packages offered by employers in the students' home countries.

That English language is a key factor in students' decision to study overseas is reflected in the fact that 42% of the 4.3 million students who opted to undertake tertiary study overseas in 2011 chose to do so in English-speaking countries [1]. While it is no doubt the case that, for some of these students, the appeal of overseas study lies in the fact that the majority of the highest-ranked universities globally are located in English-speaking countries and award degrees regarded as particularly prestigious due to their reputations, students enrolling in these institutions would only account for a small proportion of the 42% (approximately 1.9 million) who take the decision to study in English-speaking countries.

## 2. The Challenges of Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Higher Education

The increasingly diverse student demographic that accompanies the so-called 'internationalised university' is widely presented as offering learners, in particular, multiple benefits. These include increased academic and social integration [13], the development of intercultural competence—defined in broad terms by Fantini and Tirmizi [14] (p. 12) as 'a complex of abilities needed to perform *effectively* and *appropriately* when interacting with others who are linguistically and culturally different from oneself'—, and increased proficiency in the language that is the medium of instruction. That language, often English, serves as the lingua franca through which students navigate their studies, negotiating meaning with one another and developing their language proficiency in the process. The English language skills with which they graduate, in combination with an overseas experience and the development of intercultural competence, make students an attractive proposition for would-be employers and help ensure that they benefit maximally from a rich and engaging learning experience. Studies conducted by Gurin between 1985 and 1989 and between 1990 and 1994, in which 12,500 students from 189 institutions were surveyed, indicated that students who had the opportunity to interact with peers from diverse backgrounds, both informally as well as inside the classroom, showed the 'greatest engagement in active thinking, growth in intellectual engagement and motivation, and growth in intellectual and academic skills' [15,16]. Furthermore, data from the National Study of Student Learning in the United States provided evidence that both in-class and out-of-class interactions and involvement with diverse peers fostered critical thinking [17].

Although the vast majority of the literature on the benefits of classroom diversity focuses on those which directly impact students, there is a relative paucity of literature on how diversity enhances the teacher's experience and range of possibilities, and thus how it may, in turn and indirectly, benefit students. In a study of student participation in a highly multicultural UK university, Murray and McConachy [18] do, however, refer to lecturers as cultural mediators and intercultural

communicators, whose self-development is an opportunity to grow their ability to enrich and make more relevant—and thus engaging—course content by, for example, invoking cultural references or case studies from students' own countries, either by drawing on their own knowledge reservoirs as experts in the field or by eliciting information from the students themselves. The fact that a diverse student body can mean greater diversity of experiences and perspectives in the classroom also makes teaching a more stimulating, informative, and educative activity by increasing creativity, innovation, and problem-solving [18,19].

The accrual of these benefits, however, is contingent upon students' willingness to participate both inside and outside the classroom through responding to lecturers' questions and contributing to seminar discussions, group projects, or online forums, for example. Such participation is itself widely recognised as bringing with it distinct benefits. For example, De Vita [20] (pp. 173–174) states that participation:

- encourages students to engage in a valuable cognitive process whereby they crystallize ideas, subject them to scrutiny, and articulate their own thoughts;
- helps to improve students' listening skills;
- helps students to develop higher-order analysis and evaluation skills by creating a space for the exchange and examination of ideas;
- provides an education in cultural diversity and how to turn cultural difference in the classroom into a positive experience for all.

There is a wealth of literature, however, which suggests that getting students to participate can present both the students themselves and their lecturers with real challenges and be a source of considerable anxiety and frustration [20–25]. For a plethora of reasons, and sometimes irrespective of their status as international, domestic, native, or non-native speakers of the language of instruction, students may appear highly reluctant to participate in classroom activities, whether as individuals or as members of teams. These include structural constraints that can make it impractical or intimidating for students [26–28], gender factors, particularly when students originate from cultures where the sexes are traditionally educated separately [28,29], insufficient preparation on the part of the students [30,31], affective factors [29,32], teaching style [33], language competence [34,35], and cultural predispositions around notions of hierarchy (for example, see Murray & McConachy [18]). The same factors will often similarly come into play outside of the classroom context; for example, where students are required to complete a group task, perhaps in preparation for a presentation.

Participation, however, is not advocated by educators merely on the basis that it endows students with important skills that have transferability to contexts outside of higher education, it is also seen as fundamental to the learning process itself. The problem is how one discerns whether engagement—with its assumption of learning—is taking place, for this is subject to cultural variation [36]. In the Western education tradition, participation is constructed as overt communicative behaviour, most obviously what Fassinger [26] describes as 'any comments or questions that students offered or raised in class' and body language which signals engagement'. This construction reflects a culture of learning underpinned by the Socratic Method, a dialectic method through which knowledge and understanding are advanced through a process of critical thinking stimulated by argument and counter-argument, question and answer [37]. To understand participation in these terms and be able and willing to manifest associated behaviours can be seen as demonstrating the acquisition of the kind of cultural capital recognised and valued by the academy as an important indicator of participation and for which a learner will generally earn 'credit' regardless of the extent of any learning that may be taking place as a result. That is, participation in and of itself positions students as 'good' or 'competent' [38], while lack of participation positions them as disinterested or incompetent, irrespective of the fact that non-participation may be a product of cultural predisposition and discomfort with unfamiliar teaching methodologies [39] (pp. 441–442) or weak language skills [40], rather than lack of capability or engagement. Thus, lack of overt participation and the way in which this shapes the classroom dynamic

are frequently and overly simplistically associated with the kinds of teacher-fronted approaches to pedagogy that characterise education systems in Confucian cultures such as China, Japan, and Korea, which have a higher power distance orientation [41] and thus tend to be more hierarchical and deferential (see, for example, [42–45]) (See Simpson [46] for a critique of the Socratic/Confucian dichotomy). These kinds of hierarchical cultures are frequently associated with collectivist cultures and politeness systems where considerations of face—‘the negotiated public image’ [47] (p. 45)—may lead to students feeling reluctant to speak up in front of their peers and be seen to take the initiative, with the result that they are indirect, quiet, or evasive during class discussions or group work [48]. The fact that participation is culturally constructed in this way means that it tends to be seen in monolithic terms by lecturers, with the consequence that other forms of participation (i.e., less overt forms of engagement from the perspective of Western educators) can easily go unrecognised as such [49]. This means that students coming from other, non-Western traditions may be disadvantaged because of the negative perceptions their behaviours induce.

The culturally contexted nature of participation, then, is clearly important for it influences the way in which lecturers evaluate student performance. However, it is also important in that it influences students’ perceptions of their peers’ performance, particularly in mixed-culture group work, and this has implications not just for the students themselves but for their lecturers, who may well end up acting as mediators in student disputes [18]. As Volet and Ang [6], Murray and McConachy [18], and others have discovered, both home students and overseas students can feel frustrated and angry when they are placed in mixed-culture groups. Home students have expectations of participation based on the kinds of overt behaviours described above, and failure to observe those behaviours in their overseas counterparts can lead to resentment, particularly when they end up feeling as though they are having to create task momentum and shoulder the greater proportion of the work. Such feelings are only exacerbated in cases where students do not have the language to participate and are, therefore, forced to depend on their native-speaker groupmates. (In their study, Murray and McConachy [18] found that lecturers frequently were unclear about whether lack of participation was a product of lack of language proficiency or cultural dispositions, or both. One might reasonably suppose that the same is often true of students.) Furthermore, in cases where group tasks are assessed not according to individuals’ performances but collectively, home students often feel that they have no choice but to lead on tasks and to take on the greater bulk of the workload if their grades are not to suffer. On the other hand, overseas students—or, indeed, recent immigrants classified as home students—often feel that their contributions are not recognised or valued, or that they are not given sufficient opportunity to contribute to group tasks [18].

### 3. Implications for Pre- and In-Service Training

Given its significance, it is essential that teachers working within the internationalised higher education context—and indeed all sectors of education where diversity exists—fully appreciate the culturally contexted nature of participation if they are to ensure that students are able to engage in the teaching–learning process in ways that reflect their cultural dispositions and with which they consequently feel comfortable. These need to be recognised and valued as legitimate forms of participation, and seeing them as such need not preclude efforts to encourage all students to engage in other forms of participation to which they may not be naturally disposed but which will increase their behavioural repertoire in the interests of their development as intercultural beings. That is, there is certainly an argument for saying that universities should be seeking to educate *all* students in order that they develop a greater understanding, tolerance and, hopefully, appreciation of difference in the way their peers express themselves and participate according to their respective cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

There are various strategies that can assist lecturers in this undertaking by enhancing their ability to reflect on and articulate the cultural nature of participation and its multifarious manifestations, attune to students’ orientations to participation, and negotiate and mediate more adeptly between

disputes that arise during learning as a result of divergent expectations around participation. These strategies can very usefully be incorporated into pre-service teacher training programmes and the kinds of in-service professional development programmes that are now compulsory for most early-career university academics on probation [50,51] and attendance of which is increasingly encouraged for *all* academics. The remainder of this article looks at some of the strategies that promise to furnish lecturers with these skills, so that they are better placed to manage participation-related issues that can arise in culturally diverse classroom settings.

#### 4. Developing Intercultural Competence

Murray [52] emphasises the need for teacher training and professional development programmes that foster lecturers' intercultural competence and instils in them—and gives them the wherewithal to instil in their students—'the ability to work well across cultures and to manage and accommodate cultural difference and unfamiliarity, intergroup dynamics, and the tensions and conflicts that can accompany this process' [52] (p. 3). If they are to understand student behaviour in the classroom and serve as intercultural mediators, teachers need to demonstrate attributes described by Byram, Nichols, and Stevens [53] (p. 5) as 'curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and beliefs about one's own'. This, they say, means

... a willingness to relativise one's own values, beliefs and behaviours, not to assume that they are the only possible and naturally correct ones, and to be able to see how they might look from the perspective of an outsider who has a different set of values, beliefs and behaviours. This can be called the ability to 'decentre'. [53] (p. 5)

In relation to the focus of this article, students' and lecturers' ability to decentre gives them the facility to reposition themselves and see alternative perspectives by loosening the shackles that constrain them by tying them to existing and limited conceptualisations of participation. If it is to nurture this ability, pre- and in-service training needs to develop in teachers an understanding of the notion of 'culture of learning' [54] and the ability to reflect on one's own assumptions about what constitutes participation, the role of participation as a constituent of teaching and learning, and how individuals' assumptions about participation influence the ways they engage in classroom activities. Such reflective trajectories open up opportunities for gaining insight into the diverse ways that students negotiate their roles in the classroom and demonstrate engagement through various verbal and non-verbal behaviours. Teachers need the reflective and reflexive capacities that enable them to question and analyse their own behaviours and assumptions as well as those of others—in this case their students—and these capacities can be nurtured via the use of tools such as the reading and writing of literacy narratives that open up the possibility of multiple meanings and perspectives by leading one to examine one's own ideologies [55], simulation activities that raise awareness in teachers of their own biases [56], action research [57] that engages teachers in interculturally focused research projects, and community-based learning and field experience in educational institutions where student populations are diverse and teachers have the opportunity to develop and reflect on meaningful relationships with people different from themselves in "carefully placed and carefully supervised" practicums [58,59].

Importantly, lecturers need to be sensitive to other cultural factors that may determine students' levels of participation and which may not necessarily derive from a cultural disposition that discourages the vocalisation of ideas and opinions. For example, turn-taking conventions—the rules that govern when to take up and relinquish one's turn in the course of interactions—have a verbal as well as a non-verbal dimension, for, as Leki [60] (p. 52) notes, 'rules for turn-taking vary among languages. A person speaking English is expected to heed verbal and kinetic cues indicating that the listener is now ready to speak, cues like taking a breath or making a sound toward the end of the speaker's sentence'. Similarly, back-channelling, where a listener indicates to the speaker his/her comprehension and interest through verbal and non-verbal means, can also be culturally

variable. Overseas students can be intimidated by their lack of security in terms of understanding and manifesting these kinds of communicative behaviours and, consequently, may be more inclined to opt out of certain, more overt forms of participation.

Described below are a number of concrete strategies which exemplify the kind of guidance for managing participation-related issues that can be imparted via teacher training and professional development programmes.

*Strategy 1: Explaining and contextualising the issue of participation at the outset*

At the point at which students commence their programmes of study, the issue of participation needs to be discussed with students, without overly intellectualising it and in a manner that is accessible and inclusive, by avoiding terminology, using straightforward language, and invoking scenarios to which they can easily relate. That is, rather than being lectured to and presented with a dictat, students need to be actively involved in a process of unpacking what participation means, its cultural variability and associated diverse behavioural manifestations, and the ways in which the understanding of such variability, along with an empathetic disposition, will govern one's own and others' expectations and reactions, with important implications for effective and harmonious working relations in the classroom. One way to do this is to present and have students reflect on critical incidents, both individually or in groups. Participation thus needs to be presented as an exciting and beneficial exercise in cultural exploration, an appreciation of which will pay dividends during both their studies and post-graduation, in their work and social lives.

*Strategy 2: Negotiating how participation will be understood*

In order to avoid imposing or being seen to impose a particular set of cultural values and expectations around participation in the classroom, teachers should consider negotiating with students and agreeing on a set of behaviours at the outset that will be collectively recognised and valued as forms of participation. This will help instil in students a sense of agency, ownership, and confidence, and naturally provoke the kind of exploratory, reflective process promoted in Strategy 1. Such democratically agreed 'principles of participation' provide a means via which the teacher can objectively resolve disputes concerning participation, should they arise, particularly when complemented by effective mediational skills, the development of which also warrants attention in teacher training programmes. Importantly, this kind of negotiation of expectations is unlikely to be adopted as a norm within any given institution, and students need to be made aware, therefore, of the expectations they are likely to face from teachers and some students on other courses and modules and which will in all probability reflect a more Western conceptualisation of participation.

*Strategy 3: Deciding whether and how the degree of participation will be factored into assessment*

It became evident in Murray and McConachy's [18] study that multicultural group work is a context in which the issue of participation is especially fraught. This was particularly the case when the outputs generated by group work were assessed, for students often felt that responsibility and workload were not equally distributed or undertaken within the group and/or that their grades were being compromised. Such issues had led at least one of their interviewees to take the decision to use group work, with its attendant benefits, but not to grade outputs because of the potential for controversy and the difficulty of measuring participation. While this solution may serve to dowse one of the potential flare points, it leaves others unresolved: it does not, for example, address the underlying issue of apparent lack of participation and its potential to undermine the educative experience. Furthermore, not grading students' work may compromise their level of commitment to the tasks set and therefore also the benefits they derive from them. Teachers need to indicate to students early on whether participation will be assessed, and if it is to be assessed, then the means by which this will happen, drawing on the kind of collective determination of its manifestations discussed above. This will help shape expectations, avoid potential disputes, and thereby contribute to a harmonious learning environment.

#### *Strategy 4: Employing pedagogical strategies that promote participation*

Dealing with the issue of participation requires lecturers to go beyond the kind of macro-level strategies that focus on changing the classroom context and expectations, important though these undoubtedly are; it also requires very practical pedagogical strategies which encourage participation, including more overt expressions of participation that are perceptible to lecturers and thus enable them to more easily measure engagement as opposed to assess it. These may include allowing students individual preparation time for seminars and tasks—possibly as a homework activity—so that they have time to familiarise themselves with the content and language involved; adjusting the composition of groups where cultural profiles have the potential to create gender-based obstacles to participation; selecting materials and designing tasks which reflect and encourage students to draw on their own cultures—with which they are likely to be more familiar—by, for example, invoking particular business organisations, brands, or business-related case studies, in the case of Economics and Management students.

#### *Strategy 5: Periodic reflection and evaluation*

Creating an environment that promotes participation and objectifies it for students through the above strategies could—and perhaps should—lead to the provision by the teacher of opportunities for the students to reflect on their own participation, particularly after their having been involved in a process of exploring it and of negotiating the terms of its inclusion in learning and assessment, as described. That is, reflection could be part of a cyclical process through which students evaluate their own participative behaviour, in terms of their perceptions of their own engagement and development and its effect on those around them, but also the participative behaviour of others and its effect on them and their own behaviours. These reflections and the insights they generate promise to give rise to further adjustments or refinements to the individual's behaviour, which subsequently become the object of further reflection and evaluation, and so on, increasing their intercultural awareness and thus competence in the process.

These kinds of strategies speak to Lee and Herner-Patnode's [61] (p. 222) notion of the culturally aware teacher and its manifestation in 'the critical selection of suitable teaching materials, use of culturally responsive instruction, creation of a culturally sensitive classroom environment, and incorporation of various assessment tools'. Their inclusion in teacher training and development programmes and initiatives can help ensure that, in respect of participation in particular, diversity is not a cause of division and does not compromise students' level of engagement, achievement, and sense of satisfaction and fulfilment.

## **5. Conclusions**

When universities promote their credentials as internationalised institutions, they need to forge a 'statement' that reflects more than their student demographic, brand reach, and ambition in terms of international research and other partnerships and collaborations. Any such statement needs to say something about how it sees its role in helping students integrate into academic life characterised by unprecedented linguistic, cultural, and experiential diversity and in preparing them for life post-graduation, both in work and social contexts. This should not involve providing them with a behavioural blueprint based on a singular cultural perspective but rather with the wherewithal to understand and cope with difference, uncertainty, and ambiguity, and to adjust 'on the fly' to whatever linguistic and cultural permutation a given situation may present. Students' facility to do this needs to be recognised as a constituting part of the process of socialisation into the academic community [62] and the accrual of relevant 'cultural capital' [63,64]. It is incumbent on universities, therefore, to actively develop in students—and help them develop themselves—by both explicit and implicit means, the requisite intercultural skills and not simply locate students in multicultural groups in the hope and expectation that they will develop those skills by osmosis. Furthermore, lecturers need, more than ever, to come equipped with the necessary intercultural awareness, situational management skills, and pedagogical

know-how if they are to ensure that diversity is utilised in the service of maximising educational outcomes and producing global graduates. This puts particular onus on pre- and in-service teacher training and professional development courses—the ‘sites’ where these things can be most systematically developed. The issue of student participation is one that exemplifies, perhaps more than any other, the way in which diversity impacts on the higher education classroom and the need, therefore, to ensure that such courses are designed accordingly. In the case of in-service professional development courses, in particular, there is perhaps an argument for making these compulsory for both early-career as well as more experienced academics. In the case of the former, many will have had some exposure to multiculturalism and developed a degree of intercultural awareness and associated adaptive skills as a consequence, while the latter are arguably likely to have had less experience of diverse communities and harbour more conservative and entrenched attitudes that are less amenable to change.

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