

'Enhancing the value placed on diversity: from the international classroom to the global workplace'

LITE Report 2022-24, Dr M Hussain

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Introduction and background

The university and the world are changing, students and graduates need to be well-equipped to study, work and manage diversity to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and diverse workplace. It is therefore crucial that we enable all students to realise the value of diversity and intercultural understanding to be effective leaders and global citizens of the future. However, recent studies (Rose-Redwood and Rose-Redwood, 2018; Harrison and Peacock, 2010; Leask, 2009) have shown that there are underlying barriers to engagement between different student groups, which may inhibit 'diverse ways of working and thinking' and thus negatively impact equitable student experience, outcomes, and thus graduate employability (Advance HE, 2020; AGCAS et al., 2022). Data reported in recent studies (Ely and Thomas, 2020) on the impact of 'diversity' in organisations indicates that having diverse perspectives at all levels of an organisation is pivotal to effective decision-making in the workplace, particularly within senior leadership. As Covid-19 has evidenced, a one-size fits all approach is ineffective. Harnessing the power and creativity that cultural diversity or 'diversity -of- thought' can foster is also crucial for a more equitable society. It is thus vital that the value of diversity is really foregrounded during the student lifecycle to not only enhance the learning experience but to nurture more inclusive, equitable global leaders of the future.

Objectives

- i)) Explore learner attitudes towards cultural 'diversity' and the perceived value

- ii) Explore employer-related views on key graduate attributes and skills demanded of the global workplace

- iii) Investigate key enablers for greater student-community cohesion that may facilitate more engaging learning experience(s) for all

- iv) Explore key enablers to enhance student employability related readiness for the global workplace.

The principal project outcomes are outlined below:

- Deliver cutting-edge research on student-centred, interdisciplinary, employability and interculturally enabled learning through delivery of two pilot interventions.
- Engage with students and external partners and graduate recruiters to better understand attitudes and the value of 'diversity' in relation to global graduate employability readiness.
- Develop evidence-based guidelines to inform curriculum development and enhancement in support of the University's strategy.

This project explores learner and employer attitudes towards 'cultural diversity' to better understand how the perceived value of diversity can be enhanced and harnessed within the student lifecycle to nurture greater student-community cohesion leading to more engaging

learning experience for all; to progress important work on closing equity-related gaps through establishing an evidence-baseline. The second related principal objective is to enhance student employability related readiness for the global workplace through important data triangulation and mapping of graduate employer insights of future workplace 2.0 graduate skills (WEF, 2023a) and competencies demands. The final objective draws upon the evidence-baseline to develop research-led guidelines to inform curriculum development and enhancement in support of the University’s strategy. In this way the project also supports global citizenship through foregrounding the value and necessity of ‘diversity-of-thought’, through recognition of the value diverse cultural perspectives can offer which are essential in solving global challenges.

Methods

This project explores attitudes towards ‘cultural diversity’ through a range of methods with learners and large graduate employers.

Phase one: institutional student attitudinal survey: an institutional student attitudinal survey targeted at UG student was conducted in 2022 with a breakdown of participants as follows:

Overall student survey participants: **103**; undergraduate, UG (**87**) and postgraduate, PG (**16**). The a split between UK (**68**) and International (**35**) which is broadly proportionate.

Figure 1: Breakdown of student survey participants across faculties

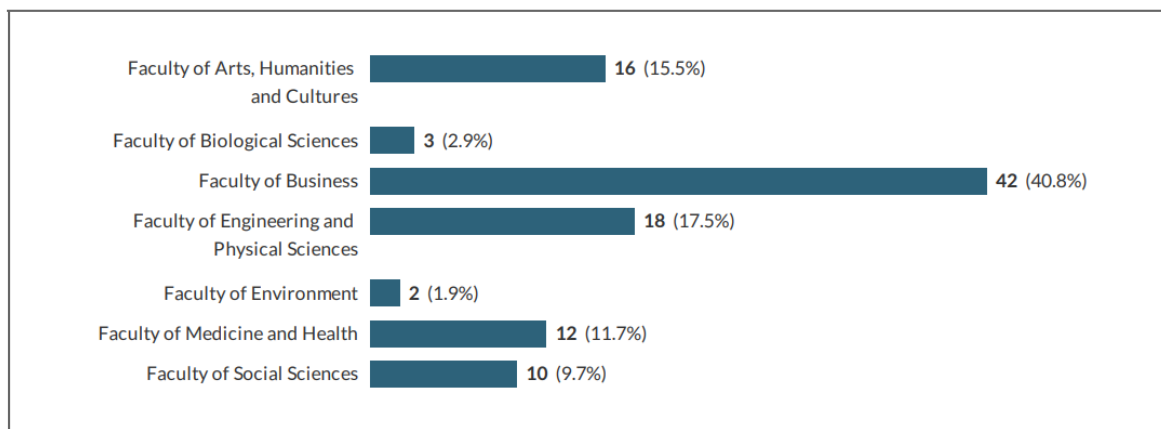


Figure 2: Breakdown of student survey participants across level of study

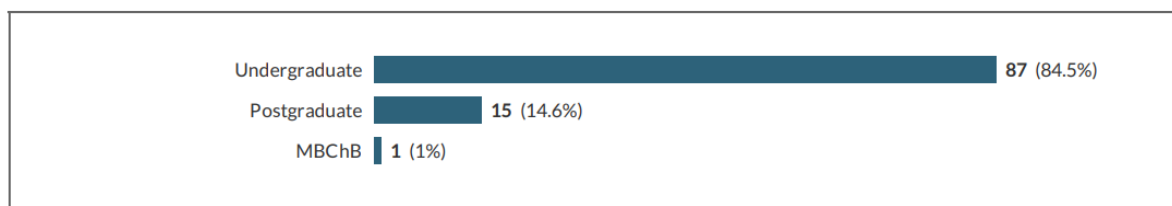


Figure 3: Breakdown of student survey participants across year of study

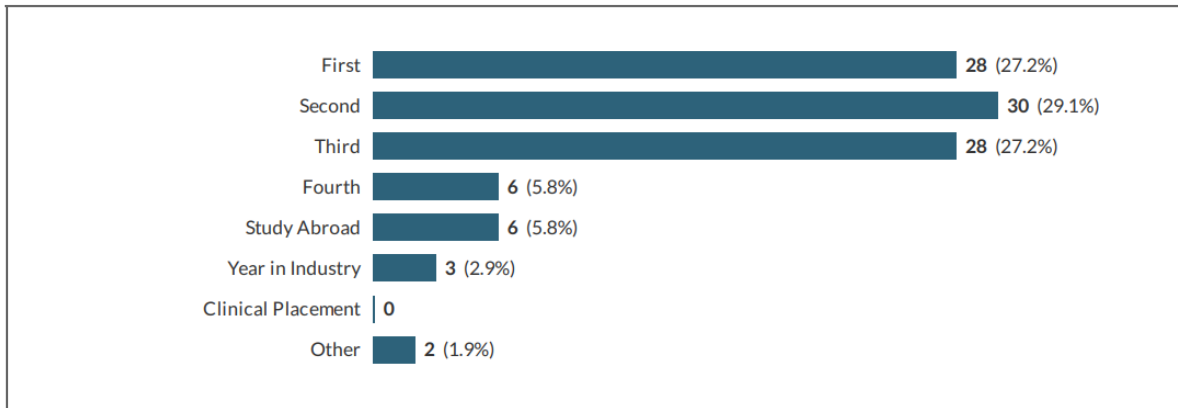
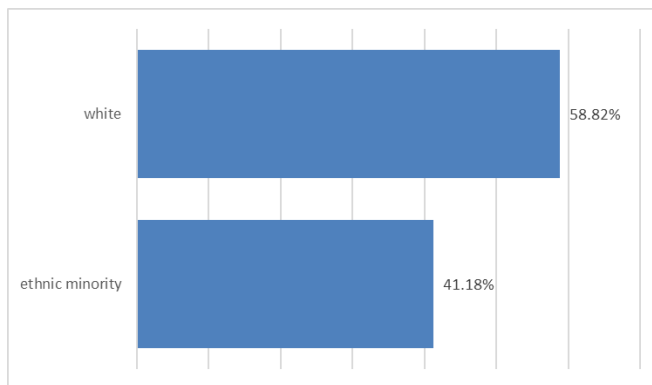
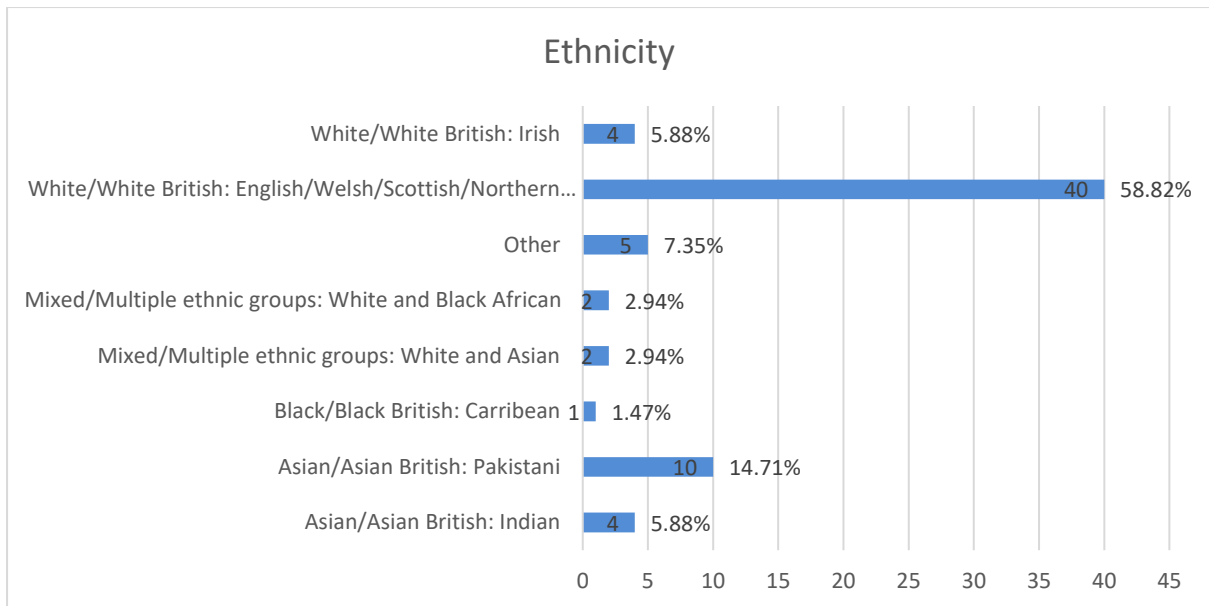


Figure 4: Overall breakdown of UK student survey participants in relation to ethnicity



UK students (**68**) breakdown in relation to ethnicity

Figure 5: Detailed breakdown of UK student survey participants in relation to ethnicity



Phase two: focus groups: 2 focus groups (n=9) were conducted to generate deeper data insights informed by the student attitudinal survey. The focus groups consisted of both UK and international students, both UG and PG from a broad range of disciplines.

Student Interviews: 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted with students who are engaging in Study Abroad (SA) (n=1) and Year in Industry Placement (n=6) and clinical placements (n=1) across three schools. Both the interview and focus groups provided important insights into better understanding how the learning setting (Trolan and Parker 2022) may affect and mediate positive or negative attitudes and behaviours towards 'diversity'.

Interviews with large graduate employers: 6 semi-structured interviews were conducted with large graduate employers (1,000 plus employees) across three broad sectors including healthcare (clinical/non-clinical), 'Big 4' consultancy firms and the automotive industry.

Overall 120 students took part in the study and 6 professional participants. A total of 126 participants were included in this study.

Data analysis

Data from the attitudinal survey was analysed in relation to the main research objectives and the literature review. Student focus group data and interview data was thematically analysed in line with the emergent themes from the literature review and baseline data from the student attitudinal survey.

Furthermore, triangulation (Creswell, 2007; Saldaña, 2009) of student participatory data was facilitated through interview data collected from external stakeholders at large graduate employers such as a large Health Service and consultancy companies in situating and substantiating employer-related views on key graduate attributes and skills demanded of the global workplace. This also informed principles on how to make cultural diversity more visible and valuable across the institution.

Key findings

This section outlines the key findings from the study in enhancing the perceived value of cultural diversity from the campus to the graduate workplace.

Clear case for *in situ* student cross-cultural skills development

One of the principal findings of this study evidences that there is a growing need for students and graduates to be able to work and lead cross-culturally as workforce diversity is set to increase (WEF, 2023) due to significant changes to the makeup of the working population and also increasingly diverse markets (WEF, 2023). The majority of student participants in the survey (93%) across UG/PG (no major differences across the disciplines) felt that 'the ability to work across cultures was important for studying and working the 21st century' which was also supported by both student focus group data and industry insights.

'Understanding our increasingly diverse client-base is essential to our growth as a large employer- we need to evolve as a global organisation and recruit people that understand our clients- and that look like them- it's good business sense.' (HR Director at a large automotive company)

However, there were marked differences in how cross-cultural experiences, with peers or colleagues from different cultures were experienced and in related perceived value. For example, student participants in the attitudinal survey whom only spoke English (monolingual) felt that working with peers that were culturally diverse was more beneficial compared to their multilingual counterparts, perhaps reflecting student perception of the valuable opportunity this presents in developing key communication skills. In contrast, the attitudinal data showed that international students experience of diverse team working was more challenging and perceived to be less beneficial. This theme was also explored further within the focus groups. The triangulated findings suggest that international groups were more likely to fear being misunderstood and not always interpret often 'hidden' group dynamics and power differentials due to being socialised in to differing culturally-situated communication and behaviour patterns. This challenge was also compounded by students often operating in a second or additional language; thus increasing their cognitive challenge. Furthermore, focus group data also suggests that UK ethnically-minoritised students may be more prone to self-censor during cross-cultural team work or peer-peer exchanges due to previous experiences of entrenched deficit-modelling, being 'othered' or negative stereotyping.

'...I think that there are many positives to working in groups, but when you are just put into a group and everyone else know each other, they have similar hobbies, life experiences like they've been to the same private school, it makes me feel like I don't really belong and that my life is so different, they probably won't get where I'm coming from or my ideas...so I just stay quiet, rather than sounding stupid or something.' (Second Year Food Science Ethnically Minoritised UK Student).

Intercultural competence and cross-cultural communication as essential graduate skills

Furthermore, interviews with industry leaders confirm that communication skills remain essential to succeeding and thriving in the graduate workplace regardless of sector or position.

'...I soon learnt that a 'tea break' had little do with *tea*, it's more about taking time out to engage with your team, building important connections that are essential to being able to do your job at the hospital.' (International clinician in training, large healthcare provider).

With workforce diversity set to increase over the coming years, this finding clearly showcases the increasing importance of cross-cultural communication. This was also exemplified in effective inclusive behaviours leaders within large graduate organisations are required to implement, such as being aware of their own positionality and the ability to effectively interpret different communications styles and behaviours in order to lead diverse teams/organisations.

This clearly evidences the need for intercultural competence to be addressed consistently and sustainably within the student lifecycle to better prepare students for the increasingly diverse workplace and for wider society. Deardorff, (2006) defines intercultural competence across three dimensions:



Figure 6. Definition of intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006)

Intercultural competence (ICC) development is a proactive process that positions all cultures, culturally-situated styles of communication and behaviours on par with one another as equal in status thus challenging often deficit modelling of less dominant cultures. ICC foregrounds the importance of cultural exchange through awareness raising of one’s own positionality and acknowledgement of unconscious biases and through respecting different world-views through an open-minded approach. Furthermore, it foregrounds mindful inclusive behaviours of different culturally-situated communication styles and awareness of how they may be interpreted by others.

Relating to the initial finding that makes the case for intercultural competence to be tangibly addressed within the curriculum, despite 93% of student survey respondents feeling that ‘the ability to work across cultures was important for studying and working the 21st century’ only 42% felt that this ‘ability’ would tangibly increase their graduate employability. Subsequently, there is some joining-up and surfacing of skills that is required for students to be able to recognise and articulate their intercultural competence which will be discussed in the implications and recommendations respective sections.

Secondly, the study surfaces the real value in facilitated opportunities through summatively assessed group work or prolonged experiential learning, such as Study Abroad, Year in Industry in facilitating important exposure to diverse studying and working required to develop intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006). However, the findings suggest that there is inequitable access to such opportunities across the curriculum which is a key implication of this study to level-up access to this essential employability competence that will also be unpacked in the recommendations section. This is reflected in student focus group discussions, as evidenced below, on their experience of engaging with culturally diverse peers in a teamwork project.:

...’I am glad I can make mistakes now when doing group work and learn from them, rather than at work when it will cost me a promotion.’ (2nd year, International UG Business student)

Workplace 2.0: The case of inclusive leadership behaviours

Lastly, a dominant theme around 'inclusive leadership behaviours', emerged from interviews with industry leaders. Inclusive leadership is defined by Randel, et al. (2018:192) 'explicitly revolves around leader behaviours that respond to group member needs for belongingness and uniqueness within a work group', drawing on Brewer's 'Optimal Distinctiveness Theory' (1991). The data suggests that future leaders' ability to manage tensions between 'diversity' and 'inclusion' will be increasingly important with greater diversification of workforce set to continue (Hussain, in press).

We can learn so much from our clinicians from the global south who have a lot of experience of working in contexts with modest resources- they have important experience that can help us be more efficient as an organisation, but unfortunately this is often overlooked and goes unrecognised due to our entrenched ways of doing things...' (Senior Consultant, at a large healthcare provider)

Furthermore, a related overarching macro theme also emerged from the three datasets pertained to effective 'conflict management' within teams or as a leader. Conflict management is also at the heart of inclusive leadership (Randel, et al., 2018).

...'I had a complaint brought against me by a white colleague who felt that I had been aggressive towards her when I was trying to resource a big project- I was under pressure from my superiors and the colleague was 'on the bench' (unassigned to a project) so it was a no-brainer to assign her, although she didn't really like the project she needed to be resourced to one. In hindsight I think my 'Indian approach', which was quite direct is where I went wrong, she didn't respond well to the way I instructed her- I think she was expecting more back- and-forth, but this is not seen as an efficient way of managing in India.' (An Indian Resourcing Manager at a Big4 Consultancy firm in London)

Similar to the employer insights, interviews with two Year in Industry students from different programmes of study (engineering and management) had struggled initially to transition into a culturally diverse international team, citing that they felt very 'under-prepared' to cope with senior members of staff whom had a rather different communication style to what they had been exposed to in the UK, as their colleagues were from different countries and thus cultural background. Furthermore, one of the student who was carrying out a placement at a very prestigious automotive company was in contact with suppliers across the globe on a daily basis. He cited that he was only able to understand how to adjust his own communication style to manage conflict more tangibly when suppliers were not meeting expectations solely because he had regular access to a 'buddy' and 'mentor' whom were on-hand to provide tacit guidance and mentoring on a regular basis. However, the majority of students that were either at an alternative learning context (Study Abroad, Year in Industry or Clinical Placement) felt underprepared entering the graduate workplace and also under-supported in understanding work place power dynamics in cross-cultural teams.

Furthermore, focus group student participants who had experienced either formative or summative diverse groupwork assessments felt that they did not feel that they had sufficient support or guidance to be able to effectively resolve conflict or tensions effectively to maximise the learning opportunity the group work provided.

In summary, overarching interconnected theme around 'effective conflict management' and 'graduate preparedness' further evidenced the role that the co/curriculum should play in more effectively and tangibly preparing students for the increasingly complex and diverse graduate workplace 2.0.

The following section will outline a number of positive pilot interventions the project's evidence-baseline has informed so far.

Pilot interventions

The evidence-baseline, informed by both student and industry participatory data has supported the design and delivery of two pilot interventions.:

'Getting Ready for the Diverse Workplace'- LUBS student pilot (2022)

In December 2022, drawing on the preliminary findings, I ran an initial pilot intervention on workplace readiness foregrounding the importance of intercultural competence development in relation to the diverse graduate workplace. Initial feedback from students has been very positive:

'I really enjoyed our vibrant open and honest conversations today. The session was very interactive and I learned a lot about my own biases.'

Management Student

The faculty is exploring how this can be developed and embedded across the LUBS curriculum initially at UG.

Designed and delivered [YCEDE](#) Advocacy Training to advocates and PhD supervisors (March, June 2023)

The Yorkshire Consortium for Equity in Doctoral Education (YCEDE) is a collaboration between five universities in Yorkshire, 12 UKRI funded Doctoral Training partnerships and Centres for Doctoral Training plus a number of external partners dedicated to equity at doctoral level. Central to YCEDE is the question of access to doctoral study for UK-based graduates from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic backgrounds.

Drawing on the findings of my LITE Fellowship I designed and delivered [YCEDE advocacy training](#) to 40 academics across 5 Yorkshire universities on the value of building a diversity in research and understanding the specific needs of diverse learners. As part of this, underrepresented students and colleagues were given the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise as well accessing a Community of Practice, which has led to a number of students now being enrolled onto a PhD programme, who would not have previously done so. Feedback on each iteration has been very positive with an invitation from YCEDE to train the forthcoming 24-25 cohort which I have accepted.

Implications

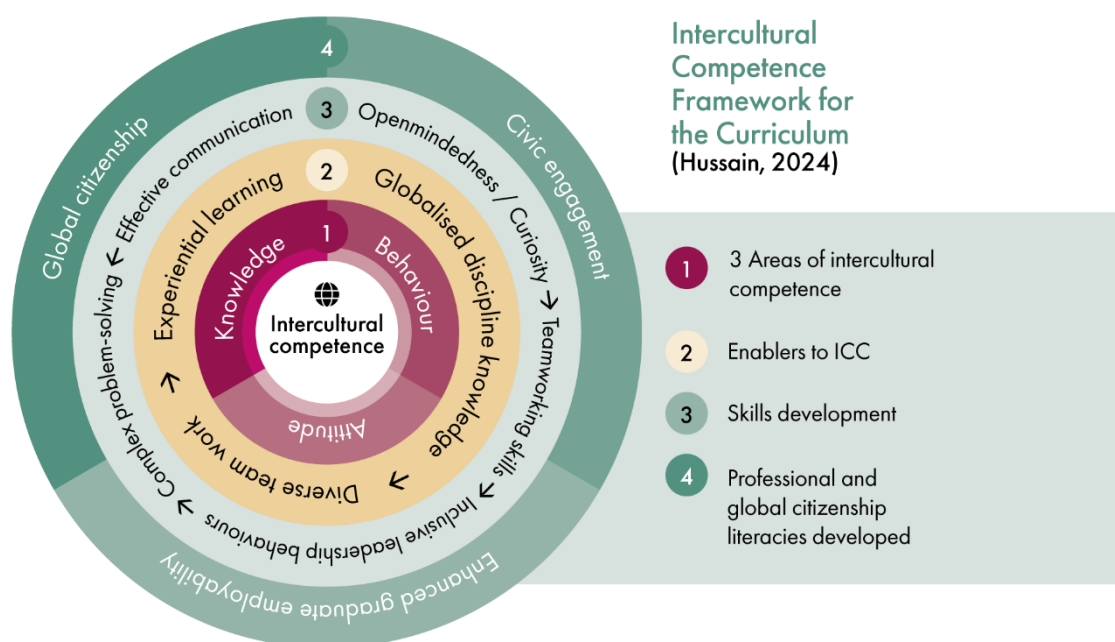
As discussed in the findings section, the project evidences many implications for facilitating more equitable experiences and outcomes for all students across the student lifecycle that will also impact on student progression and graduate outcomes. The findings also provide data-driven evidence-based insights into particular student group(s) experiences, attitudes and behaviours towards cultural diversity which is useful in nurturing more an inclusive co/curriculum.

Implications of the study suggest that a vehicle to facilitate greater diversity-of thought, intercultural working and communication is required. Intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006) provides a cross-cutting mechanism through which the value of cultural diversity can be articulated and developed within the student community in relation to enhancing graduate professional

employability and workplace expectations, as well as addressing broader civic societal needs for 21st century.

This research project has provided important empirical evidence which has enabled theorisation towards a conceptualised ‘Intercultural framework for the curriculum’ (Hussain, 2024) (see figure 1 below) which recognizes and surfaces key enablers for ICC development across the co/curricular space(s) and optimal contexts for it to be embedded and developed across the student lifecycle with impacts stretching well beyond the campus. Furthermore, the proposed framework also surfaces the potential for catalysing positive wider longer-term changes to societal behaviours, through ICC being foregrounded embedded within higher education programmes, such as positive impacts towards greater ‘global citizenship’ and ‘civic engagement’.

Figure 7: Intercultural Competence Framework for the Curriculum (Hussain, 2024)



Recommendations

This study makes a number of evidence-based recommendations:

Surfacing Skills agenda- ICC should be surfaced and recognised within ‘Leeds Skills Matrix’ and ‘Leeds Capabilities Framework’ across the curriculum

It is vital that intercultural competence (ICC) is surfaced and foregrounded institutionally within the ‘Leeds Skills Matrix’ and within the ‘Leeds Capabilities Framework’ to both recognise and make visible the value of cultural diversity. In this way, will also be able to communicate this message more tangibly to students and external stakeholders that institutionally we are proactively addressing the complex needs of our students in relation to graduate readiness and preparedness for the workplace 2.0.

Programme-level learning objectives- embedded across UoL consistently to ensure development of intercultural competence is foregrounded consistently and sustainably.

Through programme-level inclusion of ICC through clearly articulated learning outcomes all students regardless of discipline, programme or personal background will have an opportunity to develop this important graduate competence during the student lifecycle in a consistent and sustainable manner. This will also enable students to tangibly articulate and communicate this sought after competence in relation to their chosen profession on graduation and beyond.

Enablers- summatively assessed diverse team work opportunities; experiential learning opportunities such as, Collaborative Online Integrated Learning (COIL)

This study also evidences a number of 'enablers' to proactively developing and encouraging engagement with a range of opportunities to facilitate and nurture ICC. A key ingredient, in line with the literature in recognising the value of ICC is to reward students, similar to how other desirable graduate competencies, often through summative assessment (credit). It is important to provide curricular summative assessment opportunities which enable students to develop and evidence their ICC- facilitated diverse group work is a good example of how this may be facilitated.

'A visual 3-step guide to embedding ICC across the curriculum' (Hussain, 2024) (see Figure 8) is presented on the following page to enable the recommendations from this report to be taken forward and implemented into the curriculum.



UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

The university and the world are changing. Students and graduates need to be well-equipped to study, work and manage diversity to thrive in an increasingly interconnected and diverse workplace.

FROM CAMPUS TO THE GLOBAL WORKPLACE ENHANCING THE PERCEIVED VALUE OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY... **in 3 STEPS**

Dr Maria Hussain, LITE research recommendations, 2024

1. Defining intercultural competence or ICC (adapted from Deardorff, 2006)

The what?



Knowledge: awareness of own positionality and worldview.



Behaviour: ability to interpret and respond to different styles of communication effectively.



Attitude: openness to different ways of 'thinking and doing'.

2. Communicating its importance—joining things up!

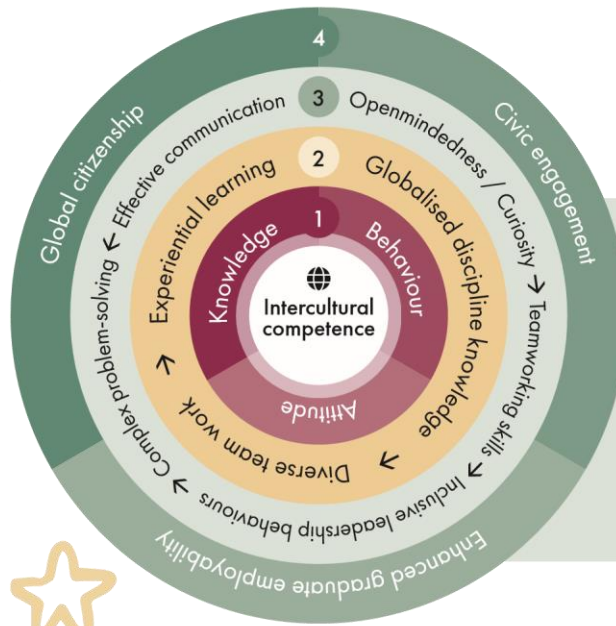
The why?



Complex global challenges require diverse perspectives.



It's an essential graduate 'skill' (WEF, 2023).



Intercultural Competence Framework for the Curriculum (Hussain, 2024)

- 1 3 Areas of intercultural competence
- 2 Enablers to ICC
- 3 Skills development
- 4 Professional and global citizenship literacies developed

3. Enable and embed it!

- ★ Making it visible → clear programme-level learning objective(s)
- ★ Making it count → summative assessment which includes ICC
- ★ Making it happen (sustainably) →
 - ◇ Global perspectives within discipline curriculum
 - ◇ Diverse team working opportunity on programme (actual or simulated) with guidance and support
 - ◇ Menu of peer-peer engaged activities with critical reflection

The how?



Research-led recommendations based Maria's LITE Project.

Scan to read the full report

[Impact so far](#)

Student Education

Designed and delivered [YCEDE](#) Advocacy Training to advocates and PhD supervisors (March, June 2023)

Drawing on the findings of my LITE Fellowship I have designed and delivered [YCEDE advocacy training](#) to 40 academics across 5 Yorkshire universities on the value of building a diversity in research and understanding the specific needs of diverse learners. The initial training was provided in March and later iterated for the second round in June. I received excellent feedback on both the research-led approach to the advocacy training and the relevance of foregrounding intercultural competence within the advocates training for adequately addressing the support needs of diverse potential doctoral students. As part of this, underrepresented students and colleagues were given the opportunity to share their experiences and expertise as well accessing a Community of Practice, which has led to a number of students now being enrolled onto a PhD programme, who would not have previously done so. Feedback on each iteration has been very positive with an invitation from YCEDE to train the forthcoming 24-25 cohort, which I have accepted.

Developed a conceptual model: ‘Intercultural Competence Framework for the Curriculum framework’ (Hussain, 2024) – see figure 7.

Developed a 3-step visual guide to embedded intercultural competence across the curriculum- see figure 8. Both the ICC conceptual framework and the 3-step guide to embedding ICC into the curriculum will be presented at the Student Education Conference, 2025.

Research Output

Hussain, M. 2025. Inclusive Leadership. In: Everett, S.& Hill. ed(s). *Diversity, Equity and Inclusion for Business & Management*. London: Sage, in-press.

Developed a conceptual model: ‘Intercultural Competence Framework for the Curriculum framework’ (Hussain, 2024) – see figure 7. This will be written into paper.

Dissemination activity

- Invited presentation University Utrecht Pedagogical Leaders:
- Commissioned CPD Advance HE- Anti-racism Leadership workshop
- Invited Panelist Chartered ABS Annual Learning, Teaching Student Education (LTSE) Conference

Public engagement and dissemination

- ‘Muslims in the North’ exhibition in collaboration with Leeds City Museum, funded by Leeds Cultural Institute (launch event funded by LUBS), over **130, 000** people have visited LCM between March 2024-October, 2024 (statistics provided my LCM Manager, October, 2024)

- Museums Association (MA) invited Case Study for 'Essentials' Course' - published online to MA members in September, 2024

Conference papers presented nationally/internationally

- European Association for International Education (**EAIE**)
- International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (**ISSOTL**)
- Chartered Association of Business Schools Learning Teaching and Student Experience Conference (**CABS**)
- Advance Higher Education Annual Student Education Conference (**Advance HE**)
- National Education Opportunities Network Annual Summit (**NEON**)
- University of Leeds Student Education Conference (**SEC**)

Other dissemination activity

- Invited presentation University Utrecht Pedagogical Leaders, 2024
- Commissioned CPD Advance HE- Anti-racism Leadership workshop, 2024
- Invited Panelist Chartered ABS Annual Learning, Teaching Student Education (LTSE) Conference, 2023

Awards:

Research Culture Awards – Runner-up in '[Diverse Research Activity](#)' category (£1,000 prize for further RC activity)

Shortlisted for Museums Association '[Radical Change Maker Award](#)', results November 2024.

Successful follow-on funding so far

Cultural Institute Funding and collaborative agreement with Leeds City Museum to curate a research dissemination visual dissemination exhibition.

Horizon Institute & Bradford City of Culture 2025 pump-prime funding: 'Muslims in the North'; a soundscape of trailblazing stories untold'

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