

The Impact of Intercultural Experience: A Survey of Undergraduates at the University of Warwick

Stuart Reid
Centre for Applied Linguistics
University of Warwick

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1. Introduction

This paper has its origins in a large-scale project funded in 2009 and 2010 by the Higher Education Council for England (www.hefce.ac.uk). 'The Graduate Pledge' project was a collaboration between the University of Warwick and King's College, University of London, to research new ways of developing student capabilities in research-led universities (www.kingswarwick.org). Within this overall research programme, the Centre for Applied Linguistics (CAL) was funded to carry out work on developing the "globally-oriented curriculum". The Centre's project was entitled '*Using an intercultural competency framework to develop students' ability to work and communicate across cultures*' and consisted, firstly, in researching how intercultural competencies could contribute to the internationalisation strategies of research-led universities and, secondly, in identifying actual opportunities to make that contribution at the University of Warwick (www.warwick.ac.uk/cal).

Some aspects of the work were carried out in collaboration with other research strands within 'The Graduate Pledge' project. In particular, the Warwick team running the Community Engagement strand organised a student consultation exercise to which a number of the other strands contributed (1). A questionnaire was designed to gather information across the range of topics covered by the project as a whole. There were 14 main questions in total including those collecting background information about the students who responded to the survey (year of study, degree subject, status). The questionnaires were administered by paid student interviewers at three university Careers Fair events. A copy of the full questionnaire is available in Appendix 1.

Background data on the student sample are provided here in section 3 below, with the main questionnaire data presented in section 4. The results analysed here relate only to the responses to the six questions (8, 8a, 9, 9a, 10 and 10a) which requested information about student experience of intercultural interaction. The aim of this paper is to use the data generated by those questions to describe the reported experience of undergraduate students in terms of their intercultural interaction, ranging from structured schemes such as the Erasmus programme through to informal social interaction on campus. It is hoped that this evidence will provide a better understanding of the scale and scope of intercultural interaction and will also offer insight into students' perceptions of the value of such interaction for their own intercultural competence.

2. Research context

This paper is intended to be a contribution to the wider discussion of internationalisation in the Higher Education sector and, in particular, of the intercultural experience of students at UK HE institutions. The data here are limited, and specific to the University of Warwick, but might provide useful points of comparison for others researching in this field and for those responsible for reviewing or managing internationalisation in their own institution. This section briefly locates the research within this wider debate but it is beyond the scope of the present paper to provide a comprehensive literature survey (2).

The large-scale expansion of international education in the past three decades has prompted a considerable body of research on aspects of the student experience. Some studies have focused on the experience of international students attending institutions in unfamiliar cultures, with a particular interest in their ability to integrate into the host culture. A number of these studies (Quintrell and Westwood 1994; Abe et al. 1998; Volet and Ang 1998; Daniels et al. 1998) consist of experiments in intercultural integration: incoming international students are paired with established 'host' students or allocated to culturally-diverse study groups in an attempt to monitor their social integration, personal

satisfaction or academic performance. In general, the findings of such studies have tended to be very positive, reporting higher degrees of satisfaction and integration for those students in the experimental arrangements, compared to those coming to terms with a new culture independently(though academic performance seems unaffected). Another line of enquiry has consisted of monitoring the experience of students participating in study abroad or overseas exchange schemes (Martin 1987; Rohrich and Martin 1991; Laubscher 1994; King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003; Van Hoof and Verbeeten 2005;) These studies have looked at different aspects of the ‘sojourn’ experience and, again, have tended to report positive levels of satisfaction and perceived gains in intercultural competence. Most of these studies rely on self-reported measures but Frisch (1990), in a study of student nurses on a study-abroad programme, used an objective measure of cognition to assess the potential influence of international experience on students’ personal development. As with much of the research in this field, Frisch’s work showed the study-abroad students performing better than their counterparts who had not had this intercultural exposure.

The data in the current study is not exclusively concerned with incoming or outgoing students but presents a ‘snapshot’ of Warwick undergraduates in terms of their levels of intercultural experience and the reported impact of that experience. In terms of the substantial existing literature, this small-scale study highlights the level of intercultural exposure available to the contemporary UK HE student and echoes other, more developed, research in identifying high levels of positive student reaction to that exposure.

3. Profile of interview sample

A total of 220 students agreed to be interviewed for the survey. The data in this section provide a basic profile of those respondents by year of study, main degree subject and home or overseas status.

3.1 Year of study

Of the 220 respondents, 32 (15%) were Year 1; 75 (34%) Year 2; 62 (28%) Year 3, and 49 (22%) Year 4. There was one Year 5 student and one first year MA student (1%).

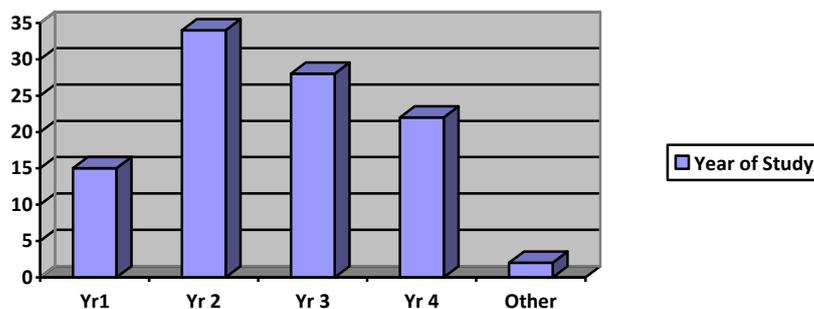


Figure 1: Respondents by year of study

3.2 Degree subject

Respondents were distributed across a wide range of degree subjects, though with a preponderance of students in Maths, Engineering and Law. A summary table is given below (see Appendix 2 for the full table by individual degree subject):

Table 1: Student respondents by main degree subject area

MAIN DEGREE SUBJECT AREA	No.	%
Engineering (all variants, single and joint honours)	59	26.8%
Law (all variants, single and joint honours)	45	20.4%
Maths (all variants, single and joint honours)	25	11.3%
Humanities: History, Philosophy, Classics, Psychology, History of Art (single honours and all combinations)	21	9.5%
Economics, Politics, International Studies (single honours and all combinations)	18	8.2%
Languages (French, Italian, German including joint honours + English/Creative Writing, Translation)	18	8.1%
Physics (single honours)	12	5.4%
Chemistry (all variants, single and joint honours)	10	4.5%
Management & Business (single honours and all combinations)	8	3.6%
Computer Science	4	1.8%
Total Sample	220	100%

3.3 Student status

Of the 220 respondents, 40 (18.2%) were registered as overseas students. This is very closely in line with the University's most recent figures for the undergraduate population as a whole, which suggests that 17% of undergraduates are registered as overseas students.

4. Data relating to intercultural experience

There were three questions specifically relating to intercultural experience, each with a supplementary question asking the respondent to assess the impact of that experience on their own intercultural competence. The aim was to produce questions that would be easy to administer and simple for the respondent to understand, with as little ambiguity as possible. The information produced in responses needed to be easy to allocate into fixed response categories. This approach was adopted given the need to administer the questionnaire using student interviewers and with volunteer respondents contacted during attendance at a Careers Fair. Using these methods limits the complexity of the data obtained but is effective in producing simple aggregate data as a 'snapshot' of student experience.

4.1 Questions 8 and 8a)

The first of these questions (Question 8 on the survey) asked about international experience during the student's period of study.

"During your time at Warwick have you taken part in any of the following activities?"

The Erasmus programme

Other student exchange or overseas study programme

Study abroad as part of your degree curriculum

*Volunteer work outside the UK
None of these*

45 (20.5%) of the respondents had participated in one of these, with the vast majority (n=175) not having taken part in any of the activities. One third of this 45 had done more than one activity, so that there were actually 61 positive responses, with a number of students having done both overseas study and international volunteer work. The actual numbers of responses* are as below:

Table 2: Number of students participating in work, study or volunteer abroad activities

The Erasmus Programme	21
Other student exchange or overseas study programme	8
Study abroad as part of your degree curriculum	8
Volunteer work outside the UK	24
None of these	175

(* 61 positive responses from 45 students)

Of the 45 responding positively to this question, most, as one would expect, were 3rd or 4th year students (n=27), though a substantial minority (n=14) were 2nd years. In terms of degree subjects, these respondents were fairly well distributed across the range of subjects among the total population of respondents. Not surprisingly, languages students were over-represented, with 12 of the 45 taking a language-based single or joint degree. Thirteen of the 45 were registered Overseas students, 6 of whom were on the Erasmus programme.

In terms of the impact of the experience, Question 8 a) asked
“Would you say that this experience improved your ability to work with people from other cultures?”

Responses were as follows:

To a great extent	32
To some extent	10
Not at all	2

The response to the experience was overwhelmingly positive, with the two ‘Not at all’ responses being one Engineering student on Erasmus and a Physics student on an unspecified study-abroad scheme. There was one missing value in the data.

4.2 Questions 9 and 9a)

The next question was a little broader, asking students whether they had participated in social events with an intercultural element:

“Have you taken part in any internationally-focused social events (e.g. One World Week)?”

Responses to this were as follows:

Yes – as an event organiser	27
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Yes – as an event participant	68
No	125

As with Question 8, a small number of students gave positive responses to both of the first two categories: 86 students (39.0%) responded positively, accounting for a total of 95 positive responses.

Comparing positive answers to Question 8 and to Question 9 revealed that those who had done study abroad or international volunteering were not necessarily also those who organised or participated in international social events: students in the former category represented about 20% of our total survey group and the same students represented just over 18% of those involved in international social events. So, they are not over-represented and there is evidence of a much wider body of students participating in international events socially.

In terms of the impact of the experience, Question 9 a) again asked
“Would you say that this experience improved your ability to work with people from other cultures?”

Responses were somewhat less positive than those to Q. 8 a), though that might be expected given that social participation could be relatively superficial compared to the experience of studying or volunteering abroad. The actual responses* were as follows:

To a great extent	20 (23.2%)
To some extent	38 (44.2%)
Not at all	23 (26.7%)

*(Does not equal 100% due to 5 missing values on original survey data)

The University has committed resources to supporting the international ethos of its campus and the responses to these questions seem to suggest that those resources have generated positive outcomes: over a third of all students have organised or participated in explicitly intercultural activities and, of these, almost two-thirds feel it has improved their ability to work with people from other cultures.

4.3 Questions 10 and 10a)

The final question on intercultural experience was broader still, asking the students to describe their level of regular intercultural contact in both study and social situations. Question 10 on the survey asked:

“Do you have contact with students from other cultures on a regular basis (i.e. more than once a week)? “

Not surprisingly, the vast majority of respondents had had some regular contact of this kind, predominantly through their study activity. Where respondents said ‘yes’ to both categories, the answer was categorised in the first (‘degree work’) category. The actual responses were:

Yes – as part of my normal degree work	139 (63.2%)
Yes – on a social basis	71 (32.2%)
No – not at all	10 (4.6%)

Again, the impression of Warwick as an international campus with a high intensity of intercultural interaction is confirmed by these figures. Perhaps even more persuasive were the responses to the supplementary question in this area. Question 10 a) asked:

“Would you say that this experience has improved your ability to work with people from other cultures?”

The responses* out of the 210 students responding positively, were as follows:

To a great extent	92 (43.8%)
To some extent	83 (47.1%)
Not at all	18 (8.6%)

*(Does not equal 100% due to 1 missing value on original survey data)

In other words, of the 210 students saying that they had at least weekly contact with students from a different culture, less than ten per cent thought that this contact had no impact on their ability to work with people from other cultures. This compares well with the impact of more structured international experience and with participation in intercultural events, suggesting that even routine contact across cultures offers a positive experience for undergraduates in building their perceived competence.

5. Concluding comments

There are, necessarily, important limitations to this study. Firstly, the sample was a relatively small one, compared to the size of the total undergraduate student body (220 students from an undergraduate population of over 9,000). Secondly, the sample was drawn from events (Careers Fairs) where particular students might have been over-represented. Thirdly, the sample was self-selecting as it relied on students volunteering to answer the interviewers' questions. Finally, the survey could only test respondents' own perceptions of their "ability to work across cultures" and could not make any objective assessment of the students' actual competencies. Nevertheless, the sample is large enough to contain a good range of students in terms of year, degree subject, experience and status (home or overseas) and provides data of value in reviewing some general aspects of Warwick students' intercultural experience.

The University of Warwick presents itself as an international institution. On its website the campus is described as "a lively, cosmopolitan place" with "a great sense of community.... home to students and staff from over 120 different countries and from all backgrounds" (3). The responses to this survey appear to confirm that image of an international campus with significant numbers of students participating in intercultural activities, from study abroad schemes to campus social events. A fifth of respondents had participated in study, work or volunteering abroad; twice that proportion had participated in intercultural events on campus. Moreover, the substantial proportion of international students on campus (around 17% of the undergraduate population and 39% of postgraduates) meant that almost all students had regular work or social contact with peers from another culture.

Crucially, the students in this survey consistently valued their intercultural experience as having enhanced their own ability to work with people from other cultures. Indeed, perhaps the most interesting finding from these responses is the perceived impact of even routine intercultural contact:

over 90% of those having regular study or social contact with students from other cultures believed it had - at least to some extent - enhanced their intercultural competence.

These data may provide encouragement for the objectives of building intercultural competence through providing more – and better-supported - opportunities for undergraduates to experience communication across cultural boundaries. The positive feedback from those who have undertaken planned intercultural activities both echoes other, more extensive, studies and supports the University's commitment to the value of building an international ethos with opportunities for immersion in other cultures.

NOTES

- (1) The student survey was organised and managed by Fiona Kent in the University of Warwick Student Careers and Skills Centre. Colleagues from four of the research strands contributed questions relevant to their respective projects and the final interview schedule was compiled by the author of this paper.
- (2) The Centre for Applied Linguistics paper 'Internationalisation in the UK HE Sector' (available at www.globalpeople.org) provides a summary of the internationalisation literature and references to the more detailed reviews such as Caruana, V. and Spurling, C (2007) *The Internationalisation of UK Higher Education: a review of selected material* York: Higher Education Academy. (<http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/international>)
- (3) <http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/about/campus/> accessed 12 May 2010

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Appendix 1: Survey Questionnaire Schedule

KING'S-WARWICK PROJECT: "The Graduate Pledge"

STUDENT SURVEY

We're conducting a survey of undergraduate students as part of a national research project which has been set up to improve both the experience of students and their employability. The questions cover aspects of your main degree course but also of any additional, voluntary activities you've undertaken. There are only about a dozen questions and the interview should take no more than 5 minutes.

First of all, a few questions about your actual area of study.

1. Are you doing a single or joint honours degree?

Single

Joint

2. In which subject(s)?

3. Which year are you currently in? 1 2 3 4
(circle as appropriate)

4. Are you registered as a UK home student or as an overseas student?

Home

Overseas

5. Do you have a clear sense of what your chosen undergraduate discipline(s) is all about?
(If they are unsure, use prompt question: For example, how aware are you of the kinds of knowledges and skills that are specific to your discipline?)

.....
.....
.....

6. Has your degree enabled you to gain insight into other disciplines and disciplinary perspectives?

Yes, definitely

Unsure

No, not at all

If YES, ask 6 a) Did you find this of value to you?

Yes, definitely

Unsure

10

No, not at all

If NO or UNSURE, ask 6 b) Would you have liked to have the chance to study some topics outside of your subject?

Yes

No

7. Do you think that knowledge of other disciplines would enhance your career prospects?

Yes, definitely

Unsure

No, not at all

8. During your time at Warwick have you taken part in any of the following activities?

(Tick as appropriate)

- The Erasmus programme
- Other student exchange or overseas study programme
- Study abroad as part of your degree curriculum
- Volunteer work outside the UK
- None of these

IF NONE OF THESE, move on to Question 9.

IF ANY OF THESE, ask 8 a) Would you say that this experience improved your ability to work with people from other cultures?

To a great extent

To some extent

Not at all

9. Have you taken part in any internationally-focused social events (e.g. One World Week)?

Yes – as an event organiser

Yes – as an event participant

No

IF NO, move on to Question 10.

IF YES TO EITHER, ask 9 a) Would you say that this experience improved your ability to work with people from other cultures?

To a great extent

To some extent

Not at all

10. Do you have contact with students from other cultures on a regular basis (i.e. more than once a week)?

Yes – as part of my normal degree work

Yes – on a social basis

No – not at all

IF NONE OF THESE, move on to Question 11

IF YES TO EITHER OR BOTH, ask 10 a) Would you say that this experience has improved your ability to work with people from other cultures?

To a great extent

To some extent

Not at all

11. Apart from the activities already mentioned, have you taken part in other extra-curricular activities such as voluntary work, community projects or URSS?

Yes

No

If NO, go to Question 12.

If YES, please ask them to specify the activities and ask follow-up Question 11 a)

Activities mentioned:

.....

11 a) What would you say you have gained from the experience?

.....

.....

.....

12. Why do you think students get involved in extra-curricular activities like these?

.....

.....
.....

13. Why do you think some students choose not to get involved?

.....
.....
.....

14. How would you describe how you spend the majority of your leisure time at Warwick?

.....
.....
.....

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR TAKING THE TIME TO PARTICIPATE.
YOUR INPUT WILL CONTRIBUTE TO A MAJOR REVIEW OF THE STUDENT
EXPERIENCE IN UNIVERSITIES**

Appendix 2: Students responding to survey by main degree subject

Mechanical Engineering	9
Civil Engineering	15
Electronic Engineering	1
Maths & Physics	6
Economics	6
Engineering	25
Engineering & Business	1
Maths	17
Computer science	4
French	4
French & German	1
German & Business	1
Chemistry	7
Accounting & Finance	1
Chemical Biology	1
German & International Relations	1
Comparative American Studies	1
Maths & Economics	2
Management	4
Physics	12
Mechanical Manufacturing	1
MORSE	3
Law	35
Business Admin. & Law	1
European Law	1
History	6
History & Politics	1
Classics	3

English & Creative Writing	1
English & Italian	1
Italian & Classics	1
History & Sociology	1
Law & Business	3
Psychology	2
Law & Sociology	5
Italian & International Studies	1
Politics	4
Politics, Philosophy & Economics	1
Politics & International Studies	1
International Business	3
Philosophy & Psychology	1
Italian	2
Sociology	3
Economics, Politics & International Studies	3
English Literature	2
English & French	1
Philosophy	4
Philosophy & Classics	1
Auto Engineering	1
Systems Engineering	1
Systems Eng & Management	1
Electrical Engineering	1
Biomedical Chemistry	2
History of Art	1
Translating & Interpreting	1
Translation Studies (MA)	1