

## **Serving international students beyond teaching them cultural differences?**

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Over the past several decades, especially since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, universities worldwide have expanded their international reach by welcoming inbound international students and sending students abroad. I have been an international student in Swedish and Finnish tertiary institutions over the past decade. In most cases, universities offer orientation programs for international students, especially those who are newcomers, to “help” international students adapt to the “new” learning environment by teaching and informing them of cultural differences. For most of us, this practice seems natural because individual experiences abroad are usually articulated or described as challenging intercultural/international adjustment, and adaptation can be problematic. However, this practice has extended to the point that international students are viewed as culturally deficient in the host environment and are often treated as a homogenous and exotic population. By uncritically creating the domestic-international dichotomy, “cultural difference”, “cultural shock” and “cultural clash” fixate and reduce local Self and foreign Other into an us-them separation (Holliday et al., 2010) instead of seeing both groups of students as strangers (Mendoza et al., 2022) who are equally simple and complex, equally similar and different, experiencing both success and failures during their stay on campus. As a result, such differentialist bias misleads both international and domestic students to an obsession with how they are different from each other, rather than adopting a universal continuum of differences and similarities for a more inclusive praxis (Abdallah-Preteuille, 2006). This bias manifests in many orientation programs and guidelines that teach international students how to behave in the host environment. For example, the orientation program offered for exchange students at my university describes Finnish people and Finnish learning culture (e.g., silent, honest, individualistic, responsible for their own studies), as well as exotic Finnish traditions and customs (e.g., sauna); the student housing company allocates almost all exchange students into three locations that are furnished and provides them with a list of dos and don’ts for international

students, suggesting that cultural differences are problematic and difficult.

In line with Dervin's (2016) idea of *diverse diversities*, we need to acknowledge that every individual is diverse and has multiple identities, no matter whether they are local or international. For example, like the housing company's practices mentioned earlier, listing dos and don'ts not only imposes unitary identity in an either-or manner (i.e., local or international) that separates international students from domestic students, but also compiles simplistic stereotypes instead of encouraging all university members to take risks and explore complex human conditions and diverse interpersonal interactions. In other words, international student programming is often superficial and uncritical and represents an unsustainable way of transmitting knowledge about a new culture without focusing on the inter- (i.e., to go across) of intercultural learning, which empowers reciprocal dialogues, mutual learning, equal treatment, and introspection of self with critical reflexivity rather than acquiring information of otherness and overgeneralizing cultural differences. The transformative nature of international education and intercultural learning is not guaranteed when these programs reinforce a Self-Other distinction because the starting point for self-transformation is subjective but not universally the same among a (national) population group. It is important for international educators to think about how to redesign programming for international students to promote authentic and meaningful intercultural learning.

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