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Cross-Cultural Challenges Faced by International Students: A Case Study of Indian Postgraduate Students at a London-Based Business School

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ABSTRACT

This case study was undertaken in a London-based business school and explores the cross-cultural challenges faced by students who have relocated from India to the UK for one-year postgraduate (PG) business master's courses. Primary data were collected in two stages: semi-structured interviews, followed by a survey. The paper draws on the literature related to socio-cultural theory. It then reviews the findings of the research as to the cultural challenges the students have faced in the UK, whether in their studies, or their wider social lives. Finally, it integrates these findings into the extant literature and proposes a set of recommendations for consideration by the business school. Some of these may also have relevance for other Higher Education (HE) institutions working with Indian students.

Keywords: Cross-cultural communication, cultural awareness, pedagogy, socio-cultural patterns, teaching methods

This paper defines international students as studying outside their home country, of which there were over five million in 2017 (Neghina, 2017). India currently sends the second largest number of students abroad, after China, but is expected to overtake China by 2025 (Falcone, 2017). The pool of potential students is large and growing. India's urban development is driving the expansion of HE provision for their tertiary learners and fuelling student mobility – "India is home to the world's largest university-age population – estimated to be 129 million" (British Council, 2023). Meanwhile, a recent study placed London as the world's "best city to be a student in 2024", based on factors including quality of life, friendliness, safety, monthly budget, scholarship opportunities, and employment rate (Mastersdegree.net, 2024). Given the likely increase in the numbers of Indian students choosing the UK for study, one area worthy of further investigation is

the socio-cultural contrast between India and the UK, and the implications and challenges this presents to Indian students arriving in the UK, both inside and outside their classrooms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Contrasts between the cultural norms in India and in the UK

Research by Hofstede et al. (2010), Trompenaars & Hampden Turner (1997), Hall (1997) and Triandis (1999; 2006), amongst others, depicts contrasts between socio-cultural patterns of behaviour and norms in the West, compared with Asia. Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 6) define culture as “the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others”. The sources of this programming lie in the social environments where people grow up and collect their life experiences. Hofstede et al. (2010) present six dimensions, which they define as “aspect[s] of a culture that can be measured relative to other cultures”. They label one of these dimensions “Individualism/Collectivism”, which measures people’s orientation towards individualism (the dominant pattern in Western countries including the UK), where “everyone is expected to look after him- or herself and his or her immediate family”, or collectivism (the dominant pattern in Asian countries including India), where “people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 92). Translating this into typical patterns of behaviour in educational settings, Western students expect to be treated as individuals, whereas “[i]n the collectivist classroom the virtues of harmony and maintaining face reign supreme” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 118). Asian students “do not speak up, not even when the teacher puts a question to the class,” because, “for the student who conceives of him- or herself as part of a group, it is illogical to speak up without being sanctioned by the group to do so” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 117).

Another dimension identified by Hofstede et al. (2010) is “Power Distance” (PD), which measures the “extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 61). The UK scores low on this dimension at 35, whilst India scores high with 77, which has important implications for the teacher/student dynamic. In classrooms in India, “there is supposed to be strict order, with the teacher initiating all communication”. The teacher is “a guru, a term derived from the Sanskrit for “weighty” or “honourable”, and in India ... this is, in fact, what a teacher is called” (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 69). In contrast, in low PD countries, such as the UK, “the education process is student-centred, with a premium on student initiative; students are expected to find their own intellectual paths. Students make uninvited interventions in class; they are supposed to ask questions when they do not understand something. They argue with teachers, express disagreement and criticisms in front of the teachers” (Hofstede et al., 2010, pp. 69-70).

Trompenaars & Hampden Turner (1997) present a seven-dimension model to explore cultural differences. One dimension, “Internal/External Orientation”, measures the degree to which members of a social group believe they can personally (i.e. internally) control life’s outcomes or, conversely, that they are controlled by forces beyond them in their external environment. Here again the two countries’ patterns are in stark contrast. People in India believe they are controlled by external forces and consequently prioritise harmony in dealings with others, showing a propensity for “going with the flow”. People in the UK demonstrate a balance between internal and external, preferring “agreement on, and ownership of objectives” and are inclined to “discuss disagreements and conflicts openly” (THT Consulting, 2024).

A third area of contrast between India and the UK emerges from the work of Hall (1997), who distinguishes between cultures using high or low context communication. In countries using high context communication, including India, much is expressed indirectly or is inferred from the context. Countries using low context communication, including the UK, favour direct, sometimes blunt, communication with little room for misinterpretation.

In conclusion, the voluble, outgoing, interactive behaviours typically demonstrated by a Western student and possibly expected by Western teachers contrast with behavioural norms in India. According to Hofstede et al. (2010, p. 384), most foreigners in intercultural encounters experience some culture shock where “in a way, the visitor returns to the mental state of an infant, in which the simplest things must be learnt again. This experience leads to feelings of distress, of helplessness, and of hostility towards the new environment”.

Whilst challenging, foreigners should in time progress past the stage of culture shock into a stage of acculturation, where their self-confidence has increased, and they are to some extent integrated into a new social network. However, the challenge of acculturation is intensified where foreigners need to communicate in a second language. The next section sets out the challenges faced by students firstly in the context of their studies and then in their wider socio-cultural experience.

Academic challenges

Language as an academic challenge

The language barrier is seen as one of the primary hindrances for international students (e.g. Cowley & Hyams-Ssesaki, 2018; Holmes, 2006; Medved et al., 2013; and Bailey, 2010).

Even students with good English may sometimes struggle to grasp what is being said, for example where complex concepts are presented, or where lecturers do not use plain English, or talk too fast or with regional accents. If Indian students miss something the teacher says, they are unlikely to interrupt, or even raise a hand, to ask for clarification. Their high PD culture assumes a formal hierarchy exists in the classroom as elsewhere (Hofstede et al., 2010), so they are more likely to ask for clarification from another student after class.

The language barrier presents Indian students with further challenges when preparing assessments, especially written work, in terms of volume of words required, and finding the range and nuance of vocabulary to present their arguments.

The language barrier also makes it harder for students to distinguish credible from unreliable sources (Lahlahi and Rushton, 2015; Zimerman, 2012; Turnitin, 2022).

Pedagogy as an academic challenge

The UK prides itself on a Socratic tradition of shared dialogue between teachers and students. Socrates' daily occupation is said to have involved "adversarial conversation with anyone willing to argue with him" (Senchuk, 1995, p. 859). Following (perhaps unwittingly) in his footsteps, UK teachers ask students challenging questions to stimulate debate and expect students to respond. This aggressive search for truth has been described by Thayer-Bacon (1993) as the "battlefield mentality". This mentality is common amongst Western students, for whom "confrontations and open discussion of conflicts are often considered salutary" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 118). However, it is alien to Indian students who are used to "the collectivist classroom, where the virtues of harmony and maintaining face reign supreme" and where "[c]onfrontations and conflicts should be avoided or at least formulated so as not to hurt anyone" (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 118).

Whilst teachers in UK HE may therefore think that an argumentative orientation is universally desirable, this is not the case. The pedagogy in Indian classrooms favours consensus and respect, privileging and emphasising the knowledge of the guru. Sarangapani (2020, p. 4) presents the "ideal learner as showing obedience and reverence to the teacher, *teachers* as figures of authority with the right to considerable autonomy, and *learning* as a relatively receptive process involving memorisation, discipline ... and even fear ... are common across traditional systems and they are deeply rooted in culture as cherished ideals".

So Indian students will reject the "battlefield mentality" of Western pedagogy and the "wrestling debate" expected in the Western style of pedagogy (Durkin, 2008). Indeed, in seminar settings, the students' cultural norm is for passive learning and a respect for formality, which deter students from offering up answers or ideas (Medved et al., 2013).

Nor should Western teachers make the ethnocentric assumption that the argumentative pedagogy is superior and that Indian students should be expected to adopt this style wholesale, ditching their cultural norm. Tannen (1998, p. 6) argues that the "argument culture" of Western teachers is "off-balance, with conflict and opposition over-weighted". Indian students may take the same path as the East Asian students in Durkin's (2008) study in an Australian university, who consciously hold back from full engagement in argument, opting for a "middle way" which balances their natural orientation toward conciliatory dialogue with the wrestling debate favoured in UK classrooms.

Socio cultural challenges

This section explores the literature on international students' broader socio-cultural challenges outside the classroom under two headings: attachment and acculturation.

Attachment as a socio-cultural challenge

Individuals can be attached to people or to places (Giuliani, 2003). Smiljanic (2017) finds a correlation between loss of such attachment and increased anxiety or depression. The collectivist bonds with family are relatively strong in India (Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 1997). Banerjee (2008, p. 374) argues that Indian people "search for security and prestige within the confines of the near and dear". In addition to family interdependence (Giuliani, 2003), there is the actual distance from familiar places and cultural artefacts. Branine (2011, p. 478) argues that "symbols and signs, rituals and customs, play a vital role in Indian culture". So, the loss of attachment both to people and places makes Indian students in the UK especially vulnerable to depression.

Acculturation as a socio-cultural challenge

Acculturation is the other side of the coin to attachment (Vingerhoets, 1997). Whilst attachment can be related to homesickness and a separation from the familiar, acculturation relates to the challenges people face when confronting new, unfamiliar environments, where they are often under pressure to conform. Yeh and Inose (2003) find that students from Asia and Central or Latin America experience more acculturation stress than students from Europe. Yeh and Inose (2003) hypothesise that this is because Europeans experience less racism than students from Asia, Africa, or Latin/Central America. In addition, these latter regions are all categorised as collectivist (Hofstede et al., 2010) and communitarian (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997), so there is a socio-cultural component contributing to the stress. In Asian cultures, people tend to conceal stress, even from family. Uba (1994) states that mental health issues are associated with immaturity or weakness. Flakerud (1986) argues that "psychological disturbances in some cultures are generally associated with immoral thoughts", adding that, in Asian cultures, both the individual and the family may deny mental health issues to avoid "losing face".

Plotting a path from ethnocentrism toward cultural awareness

Triandis (2006, p. 22) argues that "an inescapable reality is that all humans are ethnocentric ... that is they strongly feel that what is "normal" in their culture is or should be normal everywhere". To illustrate this, Triandis takes an extreme example, asking: "Why are there cannibals in some cultures? If there is extreme protein deficiency one can understand why this cultural element develops". Triandis argues that when people see a different culture "they are likely to think

of the people who have such norms in the most uncomplimentary ways". He stresses that combatting ethnocentric bias requires training because "in some sense one goes against "human nature"" (2006, p. 22).

Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (1997, p. 196) state that one goal of cross-cultural training must be "to alert people to the fact that they are constantly involved in a process of assigning meaning to the actions and objects they observe. For cross cultural training to be successful, it must not be limited to delivering more or less detailed information about other countries and cultures". Binary approaches to training emphasise the differences between "us and them", amplifying stereotypes and ethnocentrism. Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner say the worst feedback they could receive following a training session is "They are strange beings and you have proved it empirically" (1997, p. 196).

They argue that a positive step in cultural awareness training is when participants move beyond defending their own model of culture and start to identify situations where they might behave the way people do in that other culture. This enables participants to put themselves in the shoes of people who inhabit that other culture. Another positive step is when trainees move beyond simply identifying differences and develop an understanding of the reasons for differences, and a knowledge of their context and history.

METHOD

The first stage of the research involved semi-structured interviews with 7 "experts" (Kvale, 2009). All were from India and studied there as undergraduates. One interviewee (referred to as E1 in the findings section) studied in the UK as a PG before finding work and settling here. The other 6 interviewees (P1-P6) are PG business students who also work as Student Peer Advisors (SPAs) to other newer PG business students. SPAs help peer students resolve a range of challenges inside and outside their studies, some of which are detailed in the findings section. The interviewees were invited to talk about the differences between studying in India and the UK. They were asked about differences in pedagogy and invited to analyse the relationship students had with their teachers in India, compared with in the UK. Prompts included framing the relationship as that of Expert – Learner, Teacher – Pupil, Coach – Coachee or Mentor – Mentee. Interviewees were also asked what they thought distinguished an excellent piece of academic work from a weak one in the UK, compared with India. They were asked what they understood by the phrase critical analysis. They were invited to discuss what could have made their learning/studying experience in the UK better. The interviews then moved on to explore the social context whilst studying in the UK. Interviewees were asked whether they had a "community" in the UK, and if so, what/who did that consist of and what did they do. If not, what did they do outside their studies? They were asked to identify any differences in how they spent their time in the UK, compared with in their home country and what could make their extra-curricular experience in the UK better. The interviews each lasted one hour. The researcher transcribed the data, regularly checking in with participants to verify details.

The researcher adopted the Delphi technique, using insight from the interview stage to determine themes and questions used in the second stage of the research. The themes generated by the research each have separate headings in the findings section. All citations included were shared at draft stage with the appropriate participant for their approval and to verify the correctness of the data.

In this second stage, data were gathered using a survey completed by 215 PG business students. Respondents included students in their first, second or third (and final) term with the school. The total number of students on this programme was 737, so the response rate was 29.1%. There were four questions, starting with where they were living whilst studying in the UK, which factors had influenced their decisions when choosing where to live, with prompts including family, cost, access to the campus and access to interests or activities related to their own culture. They were also invited to propose any other factors that influenced their decision and finally whereabouts they would prefer to live in the UK, if they could choose anywhere. The questions generated both quantitative data (from questions 1 and 2) and qualitative data (from questions 3 and 4).

RESULTS

The following sections present the findings from this research, integrated into the extant literature. The first section addresses the findings about academic-related challenges faced by the Indian students, categorising them into three sub-headings: pedagogy; methods of assessment; and referencing and citation. The second section reviews the findings related to the social challenges the students face, categorising those into two sub-headings: attachment and acculturation.

Findings on academic challenges related to pedagogy

Interview participants were asked to define the relationship between academic staff and students. Prompts included “expert and pupil”; “teacher and learner”; “coach and trainee” and “mentor and mentee”.

All participants perceived the role of the UK academic staff as closer than in India to the role of mentor: “Teachers in India will deliver the classes to you but will not help you outside the class” (P1), whereas UK staff present themselves as “here to help you” (P1). P2 saw the UK academic staff as experts and you need to “grab the knowledge from them” but also as mentors “when I ask questions”. P2 was surprised by the patience of UK academic staff.

Some participants preferred the academic staff/student dynamic they found in the UK to that of India. P4 felt that UK staff were seen as “mentors”, whereas in India “theoretical knowledge is prized”. He liked that, in the UK “we can always ask tutors”. So, whilst initially, he was “very shy”, now he speaks for himself “and for other students”. He also recognises as a “[b]ig thing ... that tutors are happy to repeat” what they have said if a student has missed something.

Other participants mapped out the differences between the cultures, to navigate better between them (Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 1997). P6 might have been reading from Hofstede when she reflected that the lecturer in India was

“much more formalised/hierarchical” but in the UK was “all versions - expert/coach/mentor”. P6 felt that volume of word count was perceived by academic staff in India as a good thing, but “[students in India] don’t read deeply ... [they read] superficially. In the UK good referencing, focus, more depth [is required], critical analysis, elaborate deeply”. In the UK, P5 felt it was “mentor-mentee” with emphasis on “personal reflection, personal insight, critical analysis, what you think about topic in every aspect, then answer what you have got. [These are what] get a good mark in UK. In India, what you have read gets a good mark” (P5). Finally she recognises and uses the “Good support [in the UK] ... [tutor X is] very supportive”.

However, another finding was that the way mentorship worked in practice was not always effective. P3 felt her UK teachers were “mentors” but noted that “you need to email them over here and wait for their open hours [office hours]”. Academic staff did not always sufficiently factor in the newness of a mentor/mentee relationship to Indian students. These students were used to more formalised relationships with teachers, with little interaction outside the classroom. Encounters outside the classroom were not natural for the Indian students, reflecting practice in high PD cultures (Hofstede et al., 2010). The consequent reluctance to proactively email their tutors should not be surprising. “Students are not in the habit of using email. In India, they don’t use emails as students. Instead, they will approach the teacher in the classroom” (P2).

In addition, the interviewees said they were disinclined to email academic staff for appointments, for example to obtain feedback on their work. In the UK, Pokorny and Warren (2016, p. 72) argue that “dialogue and dialogic approaches to teaching that incorporate ongoing formative feedback” are central to learning and teaching strategies. However, for reasons explained in the next section, formative feedback is not a feature of Indian teaching and learning processes. Nor is it “natural” for Indian students to ask for feedback or engage in dialogue because, for them, dialogue with academics is largely confined to the classroom. UK teachers who are not attuned to this socio-cultural contrast may interpret an Indian student’s lack of engagement as laziness, rather than “natural” respectful reticence.

Findings on academic challenges related to methods of assessment

Participants consistently stated that there is a narrower breadth of assessment methods in India than in the UK. In India there is extensive use of exams - “Exams are everything” (P1). Exams are sometimes disparaged in UK HE circles for encouraging “surface learning”. Yet the emphasis on exams reflects the different underlying assumptions (Schein 1985) that underpin educational practice in India. Participants observed that rote learning was common in India - “Rote knowledge is seen as acceptable, however, things are slowly changing, though this might take time” (E1). This orientation reflects the “deeply rooted” cultural traditions of Indian pedagogy, viewing “learning as a relatively receptive process involving memorisation” (Sarangapani, 2020, p. 4).

The role of formative feedback was seen as more prominent in UK pedagogy. P1 noted the richness of feedback provided in the UK, and that, long after completing his previous PG studies in Canada “the professor is still helping [me] and mentoring [me]”. P1 contrasted this with his experience in India, where teachers “will not help you outside the classroom”. His key message for other students coming to the UK from India was for them to recognise that “the university is here to help you ... and the teachers are here for you, so ask for help”. This availability for support, feedback and guidance also underpins three of the five “Activities” expected of the teacher, as set out in the dimensions of the UK Professional Standards Framework (Advance HE, 2023, p. 5).

Participants were also less familiar with critical analysis and argumentation as used in the UK (Durkin, 2008). A wider range of assessment formats in the UK requires Indian students to learn new skills from scratch (e.g. presentations, essays, case study analyses and reports). These new formats show the underlying assumptions (Schein, 1985) underpinning and reinforcing the UK pedagogy and the “wrestling debate” expected in the Western style of pedagogy (Durkin, 2008).

Again, there was evidence in the qualitative interviews that some participants had adopted the UK assessment model enthusiastically, identifying what they perceived as benefits: “India is about memorising. UK is about doing research work. Read each and every thing, understand the question, follow the articles, present it in your way. In India, they should change from rote learning” (P3).

Some participants noted and valued the skills-based components in the UK system, which they found absent in India: “Indian schools require you to complete your notebooks ... they are not at all skills-related ... in India, they just depend on a small piece of paper” (P1).

As with the different pedagogies, some interviewees mapped out differences between assessment models in each culture, to navigate the different systems (Trompenaars & Hampden Turner, 1997) - “Hardback books, pen and paper, examinations, large, almost all of assessments [in India]. New [in UK]? Giving presentations, doing research work, providing references and doing citations!” (P3); “They have more of an emphasis on exams [in India] and less case studies, reports, presentations” (P5).

Findings on academic challenges related to citation and referencing

Another factor in UK HE pedagogy is the importance of citation and referencing as tools for critical analysis, which is central to PG level studies. The phrase “critical evaluation” is one of the five dimensions of core knowledge presented in the Professional Standards Framework as a “basis of effective practice” (Advance HE, 2023, p. 5). This compels us to consider what is meant by “critical” in UK HE in phrases such as critical thinking, critical analysis or critical evaluation. For this study, the researcher sought to situate the word in the cultural context of UK HE. He entered the phrase “critical analysis meaning” into the Google search engine (24/02/24) and noted the first three hits generated from UK HE institutions, which were: “to critically analyse means to make a judgement about the quality of evidence and include when it can and can’t support your

argument” (University of Hertfordshire, 2024); “Being critical in your writing means engaging in academic debates and research happening in your area” (University of Leeds, 2024); “When you think critically, you weigh up all sides of an argument and evaluate its strengths and weaknesses. So, critical thinking entails: actively seeking all sides of an argument, testing the soundness of the claims made, as well as testing the soundness of the evidence used to support the claims” (Open University, 2024). This exercise appears to demonstrate how embedded the argumentative process is in the UK’s definition of good academic work.

The inclination to argue runs counter to the norm of Indian students, whose cultural orientation is towards maintaining harmony and concord (Hofstede et al., 2010; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997). For the same reason, the lack of emphasis on argument in the Indian pedagogy means that citation and referencing are less crucial for students’ success in India and are therefore another competence they may be developing from scratch when they start studying in the UK.

It has also been argued that the lack of familiarity with the concept of critical analysis, combined with the difficulties of analysing material in a foreign language, make it difficult for some Indian students to distinguish between high- and low-quality sources when compiling their evidence (Lahlafi and Rushton, 2015; Zimmerman, 2012; Turnitin, 2022). These gaps, alongside a cultural orientation toward rote learning, may contribute to higher levels of plagiarism found in the work of some international students. One participant said plagiarism was “not on the menu [of academic guidance] - no one cares about it [in India]” and identified “Wikipedia as the “go-to” source” (E1).

Findings on social challenges related to attachment

Trompenaars & Hampden Turner (1997) emphasise the importance of family bonds in India. According to Triandis (1989, p. 75) “the child-parent bond is the strongest human bond in a collectivist culture”, and this was supported by the interviews. Although she lives here with her husband, P6 experienced homesickness and missed her family, in particular, the company of, and cooking with, her mother. Sawir et al. (2007, p. 162) argue that the experience is “more daunting for students who have left the “nest” for the first time” and these authors found that when the international students felt lonely, over half contacted a family member. In one interview for the present study, it was argued that students would generally “be more familiar with what’s going on at home than here [in England]” and would have “family discussions daily” (E1).

There was also evidence in the present study’s data on the importance of attachment to place, largely because of a cultural component. Kent was attractive to P1 because it had the largest Sikh temple in the country, and shops selling Indian food (such as Maggi noodles), spices and vegetables. Another participant mentioned spices in shops in Southall, where P6 found a “whole community ... Nagar kirtan [a religious procession] ... food ... very comfortable ... 60,000 to 70,000 people”. P3 said “Southall is for Indians only!” P4 even referred to some students in Southall “living outside”.

When asked which factors had influenced participants when choosing where to live, the most significant was cost, influencing 25% of them “to a high extent”. 13% said the “availability of/access to interests/activities related to your own culture” influenced them “to a high extent”.

Another question invited students to suggest where (if anywhere) they would prefer to live during the rest of their time in the UK. These were the most popular locations (as a percentage of the total survey number of 215 students):

London (44%)
Birmingham (8%)
Scotland (5%)
Manchester, Coventry and Southampton (each 1.4%)

More specific locations included:

Southall (5%)
Hayes (2%)

When asked why they wanted to live in one of these locations, the following were common themes: Indian culture, Punjabi culture, friends, family and community. Scotland was one exception, being perceived as peaceful/pretty/beautiful, perhaps appealing to the inclination for harmony (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997).

Across the participants, the desire for attachment was not a rejection of UK culture so much as part of a support mechanism, sometimes literally, in the case of the extended family unit, or psychologically in terms of places or other attachments. Participants referred to culturally important places such as Gurudwaras (temples), one explaining there were ten gods in the Sikh religion. Sawir et al. (2007, p. 156) refer to God or religion as “a secure attachment [making people] less lonely and depressed”. Pergament (1990) suggests that God can be viewed as another member of the social network.

As will be noted in the next section, few students will “adopt local values holus-bolus to minimise loneliness. And why should they? It is not a necessary condition for academic performance: it would imply that for every cultural gain, there must be a cultural loss; in some cases, it would be personally destructive” (Sawir et al., 2007, p. 171).

Findings on social challenges related to acculturation

There are pressures to adopt cultural norms of the host country, even when they are abhorrent. P1, a vegetarian Sikh, explained that, whilst studying previously in Canada, he had to change his diet and eat chicken. Several Hindu interviewees observed that, whilst for them cows are sacred, the only place they could find work in London to support their studies was McDonalds.

P1 had also experienced prejudice in both Canada and the UK from people concerned about him being dangerous because he carried a Kirpan. (The Kirpan

resembles a knife and is a symbolic article of faith. Initiated Sikhs are meant to wear one always and their right to do so is protected under UK law.)

DISCUSSION

“We are all creatures of our own culture. The problem is to learn to go beyond our own model, without being afraid that our long-held certainties will collapse” (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 196). The Indian students moving to the UK face considerable pressure to conform and make a cultural leap, whilst also experiencing the loss of attachment to aspects of their own culture. At the same time, “overcoming ethnocentrism requires placing oneself in the shoes of members of the other culture” (Triandis, 2006, p. 22). The Indian students have therefore made the first move away from ethnocentrism by embarking on their journey into a different culture (a phase described by Hofstede et al., 2010, as “curiosity”). The UK teachers may never have explored alternative cultures to their own.

Either way, given the imbalance in power dynamic between teacher and students, host teachers should take the lead in showing curiosity and open-mindedness in developing greater cross-cultural awareness. Trompenaars (2000) states that there are three essential components to building transcultural competence: awareness, respect and reconciling transcultural differences. Evidence in this research shows that some Indian students have developed levels of all three and moved towards polycentrism, a recognition that different kinds of people should be measured by different standards (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 387).

On a similar note, there is an onus on teachers not simply to prescribe what is required of the student but rather to map out a pedagogic “middle way” (Durkin, 2008). The recommendations section identifies some other initiatives that might better equip both students and teachers to build or strengthen transcultural competencies. By clearly mapping out the differences between pedagogic practice in the UK and India, explaining and exploring the socio-cultural norms and differences, and putting themselves in each other’s shoes, both students and teachers will find synergies where “[w]hen two values work with one another they are mutually facilitating and enhancing” (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997, p. 210).

Recommendations

Training for hosts to build cultural awareness

Trompenaars (2000) emphasises that, in developing cultural awareness, both parties must be receptive, embracing each other’s cultures, seeking what Durkin (2008) describes as “an agnostic empathy with alternate views”. Accordingly, UK academics must recognise that UK pedagogy is not universal but a product of the socio-cultural context in which it evolved. The Western emphasis on dialogue, critical analysis and debate is rooted in the philosophical tradition of Socrates’s search for Truth. However, Indian students come from a different philosophical

heritage prioritising Virtue over Truth, and a culture emphasising harmony over confrontation.

Teachers in the UK must also recognise and respect that Indian students come to the classroom with different, equally valid, culturally framed assumptions about how one learns and the typical objectives of learning. Teachers must recognise that the emphasis on formative feedback and self-actualisation stems from a psychological, socio-culturally distinct tradition championing liberal and individualistic ideals. This is alien to students from a collectivist heritage such as India, where the diploma is a “ticket to ride” and where the social acceptance that comes with it is “more important than the individual self-respect that comes with mastering a subject” (Hofstede et al, 2010, p. 119).

Improving awareness and knowledge of how learning “works” in India would enable UK teachers to deploy more suitable tactics in class. For example, a UK teacher trying to initiate dialogue by inviting a response from a class of Indian students is unlikely to succeed. The students conceive themselves as part of a group and would find it “illogical to speak up without being sanctioned by the group to do so” (Hofstede et al, 2010, p. 119). More appropriate would be either to direct the question to a student by name (thus legitimising that student to speak for the group), or to put students into groups and tell them to appoint their own spokesperson.

Extending the academic induction beyond course content to the pedagogy

As part of the induction and repeatedly during the early stages of their studies, students need clear signposting about the more nuanced role that academic staff play in the UK pedagogy. Guidance should be provided on the nature and benefits of teachers who mentor and coach students. It should also be explained that a key objective of this more interactive student/teacher dynamic is encouraging reflection and self-development. Students need to learn how to be reflective and should be provided with tools to help them engage more effectively in self-development activities. Once this learning landscape is mapped out, students will recognise and be more likely to access available support, feedback and formative development opportunities, including *outside* the classroom.

There also needs to be clear mapping of the importance and purpose of debate and critical thinking in the UK pedagogy. Students must understand the importance of presenting arguments, underpinned with robust evidence. Ensuring teachers undergo cross-cultural training will enable them to put themselves in the shoes of international students. The teachers can then help students understand and assimilate essential aspects of the Western debate, whilst perhaps retaining some norms tending towards ambivalence, accommodation and elements of the “synthetic thinking” in India (Hofstede et al. 2010, p. 251).

In addition, where English is not their first language, students will sometimes struggle when seeking to identify which sources are and are not credible (see Lahlafi and Rushton, 2015; Zimmerman, 2012; Turnitin, 2022). Students need clear and comprehensive signposting on the use of core or recommended texts, and how to evaluate the credibility of online sources.

Broadening the scope of induction beyond a purely academic focus

One common recommendation from the participants was to include both academic and non-academic components in student induction. This has been proposed in other research (e.g. Cowley & Hyams-Ssesaki, 2018, p. 123). The objective is to ensure students feel socially “connected”, because those who feel comfortable socially are more likely to complete their studies (Cowley & Hyams-Ssesaki, 2018). This sense of embeddedness has different dimensions: where they live; how they get around; and how safe they feel.

In terms of accommodation, the institution would do well to develop a deeper knowledge of contacts in places such as Southall, helping students relocate somewhere they can retain some sense of attachment.

New students would also benefit during the induction from inclusion of orientation themes. Signposting would include advice on how to open a bank account, and obtain an Oystercard, or other travelcards offering access to student rates. One interviewee said she wanted guidance on “how to travel, challenges of transport, getting the passes (buses and trains), how to get a Student Oyster Card (because on a bus in India ... you just pay the money!)” (P3).

Finally, the induction should include safe-guarding themes, for example highlighting to students the dangers of using informal channels to obtain accommodation or jobs. One interviewee said landlords (with cultural links to Punjab) were exploiting students she knew by, for example, making them clean the shared spaces in the houses where they were renting (P5). Another said that “some students are being exploited (£5 an hour) [so we should] provide them with channels to casual jobs” (P4). One ploy used by unethical employers [originally from Asia but now based in the UK] was to persuade students to take on underpaid work with “the incentive of a job later when he finishes his studies” but P4 does *not* “think that will happen”.

Introduction of one-to-one buddying systems

Data in the findings section demonstrated some of the benefits of buddying where it occurs on an ad hoc basis amongst the students. One participant explained how she “asked student from an earlier term” (someone she had met on a train) “about differences in academic work, university administration, employment, accommodation” (P2). Bartram (2007) advocates formal buddy-systems in his study, where each new student is assigned (“buddied up”) to one from a previous year.

Increasing the range and frequency of events and promoting societies (campus driven)

Total immersion in the UK’s social culture is neither practical nor desirable for many students arriving in the UK. (One observation in the survey was that the much cherished “Great British Pub” has little appeal to those who don’t drink alcohol!)

A more practical strategy would be to encourage and facilitate student involvement in clubs, activities and groups that enable students to build networks inside their own socio-cultural group, as well as bridging across into others (see below and see also Sawir et al., 2007).

One interviewee suggested we “[h]ave a social event every fortnight” and “[i]ntroduce student societies” (E1). An event about which many survey participants enthused was the 2023 Diwali party at the business school, attended by over 300 students. The primary objective was to welcome new students, but an additional (possibly more valuable) benefit was enabling new students to meet and connect with established students. In the absence of a buddying system, this generated valuable connections for new students with others who were more socially “embedded” and “streetwise”.

Contributions

The most significant contribution of this paper is in delineating the differences between pedagogies embedded in HE environments in the UK and India. Recognising and taking account of these differences has implications for practice, improving how UK teachers teach Indian students, and how Indian students may best learn in UK HEs.

The paper contributes fresh empirical evidence from the HE setting. The evidence is consistent with extant, essentialist theories of culture (e.g. Hofstede et al., 2010; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1997; and Triandis, 1989).

This research also confirms findings from other HE settings related to socio-cultural themes of attachment and acculturation. The paper further contributes by developing recommendations to mitigate loss of attachment and help with acculturation. This also can lead to more effective practice in terms of staff training and student induction, experience and well-being.

Limitations

One possible limitation of the case study method lies in its limited generalisability. However, the findings are consistent with extant theories referred to in the literature review section. A further limitation is the relatively small number of interview participants from the case organisation (6), which raises concern of response bias. This was partly mitigated by the subsequent use of a survey (completed by 215 students), the data from which confirmed some of the earlier findings.

Further research

Further studies inside the organisation would be valuable to confirm the findings of this paper and underpin the logic of its recommendations. Further research in other UK Institutions hosting large numbers of Indian students would be valuable in strengthening the generalisability of this paper’s findings and recommendations.

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