

Differing Perspectives of Learning and Teaching in Culturally Diverse Postgraduate Classrooms: A Qualitative Descriptive Study.

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Research article

Keywords: Intercultural learning, Intercultural classroom, Inclusivity, Culturally responsive teaching, Postgraduate learning, Nursing

Posted Date: August 3rd, 2020

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-47394/v1>

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Abstract

Background:

Higher Education Institutes are experiencing a widening cultural diversity of student populations and campus communities. With expanding globalisation, growing international education initiatives and increasing incoming international postgraduate student numbers, the cultural diversity of the classroom will continue to magnify. The expanding diversity of the student population provides a fertile environment for intercultural learning and can support the development of intercultural competence if structured and facilitated appropriately. However, meeting the individual and collective needs of postgraduate students in a widening culturally diverse learning environment is not without its challenges. A greater understanding of factors that enhance and constrain quality and inclusive learning in culturally diverse classrooms is required as a means of identifying structures, supports and educational approaches needed. The purpose of this study is to describe the perceptions and experiences of students (home and international students) and faculty of learning within a culturally diverse postgraduate programme, delivered through blended learning approaches.

Methods:

This qualitative descriptive study explored and triangulated data from three data sets. This approach guided the exploration of experiences of faculty and students (both home and international students) in capturing detailed descriptions of perspectives and experiences of learning in culturally diverse environments.

Results:

Three themes were generated from the data, namely representing students (both home and international students) and faculty participants' perspectives of learning in culturally diverse environments: early apprehension, cautious engagement and shared acceptance.

Conclusions:

This study highlights the multifaceted responses of teaching faculty and students to cultural diversity in the learning environment, adding new dimensions to the existing discourse on intercultural learning and development. It illuminates the individuality of participants' learning experiences and draws attention to the complexities associated with meeting individual and collective learning needs of postgraduate students who come from diverse cultural, linguistic, educational and clinical experience backgrounds. However, this study illuminates how perceptions of cultural difference can also impact on learning behaviours and cohesive learning. Creating positive intercultural inclusiveness, culturally responsive teaching and nurturing capacity to see differing perspectives, oneself and others in more inclusive ways is essential in supporting quality postgraduate student learning.

Background

Within the context of increased globalisation, the long term benefits of international education are recognised by policy makers, resulting in calls for expanding initiatives and growing international student numbers [1, 2]. As in other countries, Irish Higher Education Institutes (HEI's) have witnessed a rapid growth in the enrolment of international students. There was a 45% increase in international student enrolments globally between 2013 and 2017 and the most popular courses were health related [3]. Ireland has also experienced an unprecedented inward migration trajectory over the last 15 years, highlighting levels of complexity around socio-cultural population diversification, exceeding any previous trends [4]. Consequently, there is a broadening cultural diversity of the student population that HEI's need to embrace. 'Super diversity' [5] and 'commonplace diversity' [6], are terms used in wider society discourse to describe the diversification of cultural diversity of populations and can help conceptualise the widening cultural diversity in higher education. Cultural diversity in this context refers to the individual and collective student needs with varied learning behaviours, coming from different cultural, ethnic, linguistic and educational backgrounds.

Higher education institutes are challenged with balancing the business model of growing international student numbers, while providing quality learning experiences for all students [7]. Facilitating quality learning in culturally diverse environments is complex and the importance of planning institutional support and preparation for expanding cultural diversity of the student population cannot be underestimated [8,9]. Nonetheless, the expanding cultural diversity of the student population provides a fertile environment for intercultural learning. Intercultural learning is a dynamic process of developing knowledge, skills and capabilities to effectively engage in intercultural interactions and can help develop an understanding of one's own and other cultures [10]. The value of engaging with intercultural learning opportunities in the classroom are well recognised [11,12]. However, much of the existing evidence on intercultural learning is on undergraduate professional programmes [13, 14]. Although this body of evidence clearly highlights the benefits of intercultural learning, there is a need for further research from a postgraduate perspective. Furthermore, much of the existing research on intercultural learning, reports through the lens of either home students, international students or faculty teaching in intercultural classrooms. There is a need to explore these views collectively in a single study, so that the different views can be captured together and resulting insights can be made explicit.

Intercultural learning can support the development of intercultural competence, signalling the significance of identification and assessment of intercultural competence as a student outcome of internationalisation of higher education [15]. Despite the increased emphasis on developing intercultural competence in professional education over the last decade, healthcare professionals across the globe continue to experience challenges during cross cultural encounters [16, 17, 18]. This illuminates the complexities with developing intercultural caring relationships and highlights the urgent need to critically examine ways of developing a competent workforce that can respond appropriately in culturally diverse contexts. Although the importance of in-house intercultural competence training initiatives in clinical practice are acknowledged, it is not usually mandatory and is poorly attended [19]. Availing of postgraduate nurse education is growing in popularity and the uptake of registrations on postgraduate nurse programmes is increasing [20, 21]. Ensuring opportunities for the development of intercultural competence within these postgraduate programmes is a growing necessity.

The culturally diverse postgraduate nursing classroom is a microcosm of the health care setting and it can support the development of intercultural competence if structured and facilitated appropriately. It provides opportunities for intercultural interaction in a safe environment, where students learn to understand and appreciate cultural similarities, whilst respecting differences. However, for effective and meaningful intercultural learning to occur, nurse educators need to examine ways of nurturing intercultural inclusive learning environments [22, 9]. Intercultural inclusiveness creates an environment of fair, equitable and meaningful learning opportunities for all students [23]. However, the challenges in achieving intercultural inclusiveness in increasingly culturally diverse classrooms is acknowledged [24] and there is limited guidance on how this can be achieved at both institutional and classroom level. There is a need for a greater understanding of the complexities of learning and facilitating learning in culturally diverse classroom as a means of overcoming some of these challenges. Hearing the experiences of students and faculty of learning and teaching in culturally diverse classrooms will help inform ways of nurturing intercultural inclusiveness.

This background formed the impetus for this research project. Acknowledging the benefits of internationalisation, a postgraduate nursing programme (MSc Nursing Studies) specifically aimed at targeting international registered nurses was developed in a HEI, in one region of Ireland. Students registering on this programme come from diverse cultural, linguistic, ethnic and educational backgrounds and are required to engage with modules that are co-scheduled with other postgraduate nursing programmes, which are open to applicants who are working as registered nurses in Ireland for at least one year. Consequently, the postgraduate nursing classroom has witnessed unprecedented changes to the cultural diversity of the student population. This paper reports on a study that explored the perceptions and experiences of students (home and international students) and faculty of learning within a culturally diverse postgraduate programme, delivered through blended learning approaches.

Previous papers reporting on two aspects of the same study, broadly report on the experiences of intercultural learning only, from the individual lens of international students [25] and home students [26]. This paper focuses on more in-depth analysis of data from home and international students and faculty of learning in culturally diverse postgraduate learning environments. It takes a broader lens in integrating multiple experiences of learning or facilitating learning in culturally diverse classrooms from the perspectives of all students and faculty. Triangulating data from various sources, such as diverse student experiences and faculty helps gain a deeper understanding of opinions, perspectives and experiences of learning in culturally diverse classrooms [27].

Methods

Design

The aim of this study was to explore the perspectives and experiences of students and faculty, of learning and facilitating learning in culturally diverse environments on blended learning postgraduate nursing programmes, in one region of Ireland. A

qualitative descriptive design informed by Sandelowski [28] was adopted. Qualitative descriptive designs are frequently used when seeking rich data exploring differing perspectives towards achieving understanding of a phenomenon [29]. Increasingly, such qualitative descriptive approaches to research have been employed in capturing detailed descriptions of participants' perspectives and experiences [26].

Sample and setting

Students are drawn from two academic programmes MSc Nursing (specialist) and MSc Nursing studies. Both programmes serve to attract different student profiles and share some modules. Faculty teaching on these common co-scheduled modules were also invited to participate. All students registered on Year 2 of the MSc Nursing programmes (specialist) were invited to participate. These specialist nursing programmes are open to students who are working as registered nurses in Ireland. Students within this cohort come from Ireland and diverse ethnic origins who have been living and working as registered nurses in Ireland for a number of years (Table 1). For the purposes of this study and for ease of distinguishing this cohort of students, they will be referred to as home students.

All students from the first cohort of the MSc Nursing Studies programme were also invited to participate. This academic programme delivered over one full calendar year was developed specifically to target international students requiring student visas who are not eligible to apply for other MSc nursing programmes. Students within this cohort come from diverse ethnic origins and cultural and linguistic backgrounds (Table 1). For the purposes of this study and for ease of distinguishing this cohort of students, they will be referred to as international students. Six modules across these programmes are common modules where students on both programmes share co-scheduled modules, further increasing the cultural diversity of the learning environment. At the time of data collection students would have completed two academic semesters where they shared a total of six modules.

A purposeful sampling technique was incorporated to obtain variations in ethnic origin, country of education for primary degree, age, gender and work experience of participants. A total of twenty-five postgraduate students (home students n=14; international students n=11) and faculty (n=12) participated.

Please insert table 1 here

Data Collection

A letter inviting participants to volunteer was sent to each prospective student and faculty member via email, along with the consent form and participant information sheet. Those interested in participating were encouraged to reply via email or phone. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to commencing data collection. One to one semi structured interviews facilitated data collection, as they afforded the opportunity to explore sensitive issues, which might have been uncomfortable or embarrassing for some people in a group setting. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim with permission from the participants. Participant names were not used during the audio digital recordings. While data collection with most participants was through face-to-face interviews (by researchers 1, 3, 4, 6, 6, 8), telephone interviews were conducted with four home students, in responding to requests.

Researchers had no supervisory relationship to the students and they were assured that their responses would not affect their progression on their programmes in any way. All interviews were guided by the use of open and follow up questions. As findings from the student interviews emerged, this guided the development of an interview schedule with faculty. The face-to-face interviews were held in a neutral venue at a time and day chosen by the participants. Interviews lasted between 30 and 75minutes.

Every effort was made to remain open and establish a rapport with participants throughout the interview process. In particular measures to establish an atmosphere of trust was a priority, to ensure participants felt comfortable to share their experiences, thoughts and feelings. Remaining sensitive to participant gestures and facial expressions throughout the interviews was also important. Participants were asked to verify the accuracy of the information discussed during the interview before the end of the interview. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached.

Data Analysis

Data were thematically analysed through an iterative process using Braun and Clark's framework [30] (Table 2), by three of the researchers (2, 4, 8). Each read and familiarised themselves with the original transcripts. Independently, each researcher identified initial codes and then initial themes. A cyclical immersion process of listening to the audiotapes and thoughtful repeatedly reading of the transcripts guided data analysis. Transcripts were then read using line-by-line analysis to identify codes that summarised participants' descriptions of their perceptions and experiences. Codes were then compared based on differences and similarities and grouped into clusters that formed themes. As data and codes emerged, comparisons were made to determine if similarities or differences in perceptions and experiences or if variations occurred in different contexts. Through a tripartite discussion, the themes were reviewed, critically discussed and consensus reached as to the final themes. Relevant quotes were used to illustrate the meaning of the themes. Home students are designated [HS] international students [IS] and Faculty [F] according to interview number.

Please insert table 2 here

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval from the University's research and ethics committee (EHSREC 2013-11-17) was granted. Participants were fully informed about the study and the voluntary nature of participation before they agreed to take part, with particular emphasis placed on the fact that they could withdraw from the study at any time with no consequences. Informed consent was obtained and participants were free to ask any questions. A 'cooling off' period was facilitated in so far as there was time between recruitment, consent and interview [25]. Researchers (who had no teaching or assessing role with either student cohort) conducted the interviews and this reinforced the voluntary nature of participation. This was important in demonstrating to participants that there was no link between student course work, marking or grading with their decision to volunteer or not. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed. No identifying names were used. Electronic data were stored using a password-protected file, which was encrypted.

Findings

The themes of early apprehension, cautious engagement and shared acceptance describe the perspectives and experiences of postgraduate nursing students (home and international students) and faculty, of learning or facilitating learning in culturally diverse learning environments.

Early apprehension

This theme describes student and faculty apprehensions about differing learning behaviours, teaching styles, communication challenges and group dynamics in approaches to learning, within a culturally diverse learning environment. Home and international students described early apprehensions in joining a culturally diverse classroom. These fears and apprehensions impact on both groups of students' abilities to study at postgraduate level. All student groups spoke about their struggles with transitioning to a higher academic level of study and adjusting to diverse education pedagogies and student expectations. All students identified concerns about engaging with different teaching methods and learning styles and assessment approaches, as exemplified by the following student quotes.

I had doubts about doing my course as I was in a different country. Things are very different in Ireland and getting used to different teaching methods so I have many doubts (IS4)

I was worried about studying at Masters Level as I had not studied in a very long time and was fearful about doing it (HS6).

In particular searching for and using evidence-based literature was a consistent challenge. Some international students found it stressful in moving from using and relying on a prescribed textbook as a source of knowledge for studying, to accessing data base materials and broader sources to inform their learning.

At home we depend on one book....data base searching was unfamiliar to me and here at the University we were expected to seek information ourselves (IS4).

Faculty also described their apprehensions and at times frustrations with trying to adapt their teaching pedagogies in meeting diverse student learning needs, whilst striving to ensure intercultural inclusivity.

Gradually my self-awareness helped me to overcome frustration with a somewhat passive learning whereby students sat, listened and nodded. This took a lot of time, energy and commitment in adapting strategies to be inclusive while accepting cultural differences in learning styles (F10).

There was an acknowledgement and appreciation of the importance of interacting with all students in fostering learning. Students appreciated the value of having opportunities to learn about different cultures.

I felt that if I don't mix with them [Home students]... I'll be alone in the classroom. They will not talk to me unless I talk to them. If I mix with them, I will get to know their culture and learn (IS3).

Communication and in particular language challenges were central to descriptions throughout the interviews with all participants. Both home and international students recognised the value of communication, while recognising language and cultural challenges in learning and working together during group work activities. New learning environments compounded by communication challenges influenced classroom interaction and engagement. Although attempts were made to overcome these challenges, it remained a significant challenge for integration and engagement in the learning environment.

It can be hard for some of us, particularly when English is not our first language. We think in our own language and then need to translate it to English. This takes a lot more time and some people don't understand that issue. We sometimes get misunderstood and sometimes translating isn't easy and things get lost in translation. Listening and understanding different accents and the speed at talking is ... difficult. (IS11)

The language barrier was a bit of a challenge at first. Some had excellent English others hadn't ...so we tried to translate together with the hand and faces and everything....we managed to get through (HS5)

The linguistic challenges contributed to apprehensions around group dynamics. However, this alone does not go far enough in explaining why there was a general failure to integrate, which clearly impacted on the effectiveness of learning. Students, spoke about what could be described as superior and inferior ideologies, leading to tensions impacting on opportunities for student integration and inclusivity.

It was hard to work with them [International students] in-group settings. There was only a basic level of communication and understanding of learning expectations, it was difficult. It was nearly like the classroom splitting in two (HS8).

At the start we couldn't concentrate in the class,... so frightened and with so many different dialects present., we saw all the Irish students in the beginning..... never dared to sit with them not to mind talking and learning with them (IS7)

Faculty were aware of the importance of reflecting on and adapting their teaching practices in meeting the individual and collective needs of students in culturally diverse classrooms. However, meeting students diverse learning needs whilst ensuring programme expectations were met, was challenging, as the following example illustrates:

I have worked hard to review my style of teaching and change words on power point to bring clarity to the key message for greater understanding for all students while at the same time creating opportunities for critical thinking as expected for masters level study (F6).

Culture is seen as playing a significant role in influencing learning behaviours and perceptions of learning expectations. Previous education experiences and student familiarity with taking a passive role in learning, resulted in classroom time spent in note taking. Some students described the challenges with adjusting to the interactive and student centred learning environment, whereby students lead their own learning guided by faculty.

...a new experience, we are from a culture where the teacher used to teach us and we used to take down the notes, we used to write exams and just pass them that is the kind of learning that we had experienced before... but what we had here it was totally different than what we expected (IS2).

Faculty also raised concerns regarding leading modules with a new student group coming from diverse backgrounds and different learning styles. Faculty were aware of the need to balance teaching centred and student centred approaches to learning, while meeting learning outcomes and maintaining intercultural inclusive environments. However, the differing expectations, demands and responsibilities that widening culturally diverse learning environments brings can be daunting for faculty.

When a semester begins with a new module and a new group there is always a degree of apprehension... as I begin engaging with students and trying to work through the struggle of information sharing and student learning in this new culturally diverse environment... to be welcoming and inclusive of all it's a hard task and all different learning styles. It's a big responsibility for us and perhaps underestimated (F8).

Faculty acknowledged the transitioning challenges for all students and were conscious of the need to support students in adapting to their new learning environment. Nevertheless, constant awareness of the importance of responding to students needs in maximising learning opportunities in a widening culturally diverse classroom was identified. Although, such reflexivity encouraged faculty to 'stop and think', sometimes not going far enough to impact on effective intercultural student engagement and learning, as exemplified by the following faculty interview extract.

You always have to support all students in adjusting to new academic expectations and teaching modes. I found myself having to stop, pause, and check in on myself and students more now, to ensure that learning was happening in an intercultural setting. I found it challenging having students who were quiet and passive. At first they seemed to understand what was going on however when I tried to interact with them they were lost (F1).

Cautious engagement

This theme describes participants' perceptions as they begin to negotiate their learning in the culturally diverse learning environment and how they develop an appreciation of the value of other students' contribution. Perceived differences in academic ability and professional experiences contributed to group interaction and learning. Having preconceived ideas, stereotypes and ethnocentric ideologies informed perceptions of cultural difference which impacted on intercultural inclusivity and integration, as exemplified by the following where notions of what could be defined as somewhat superiority, were described.

Their clinical experiences [International students] were quite limited, when we talked to them and most of us are quite experienced nurses and this is difficult and impacts our learning (HS12).

Some students were cautious about engaging in classroom discussions and activities for fear of how they would be judged by their peers and faculty. Lack of understanding of adult learning contributed to students' apprehensions and fears. Comparing and focusing on differences of professional backgrounds, previous education experiences and academic ability, left some students feeling inferior, which impacted on learning experiences and dynamics within the groups.

I wasn't prepared for the differences in ways of learning and how to deal with that in such a mixed group. I felt the other {home students} students were enjoying the class, were better able for the pace and were getting an understanding. I was still afraid, shy and lost...they seemed more able. It was only after a long time that we learnt from their questions and now I ask questions but it took a while (IS8).

However, such ideas around superiority and feelings of inferiority were subtle. Although the importance of supporting students in settling in was acknowledged by faculty, understanding the complexities associated with perceptions of cultural difference and its impact on intercultural inclusiveness and integration took time.

I noticed the students gradually settling into the group dynamics regardless of culture, gender or ethnic origin (F2).

All students understood the importance of working together and valued intercultural learning opportunities. However, the importance of succeeding on their programme of study and doing well in their assessments took priority over intercultural engagement

and development.

I improved my writing, learning and technical skills, and now working in my current job the knowledge from the academic course and communication helped me. It was a pleasurable experience for me to explore the university as meeting lots of students from various cultures. I haven't been to any other country before. But here... learning about different cultures, facing students from different countries, was very interesting and helpful. However, there was a lot of sacrifices, I needed to show everybody at home that supported me that I could succeed and do well. That was my main goal (IS6).

Learning about other cultures was interesting but sometimes happened accidentally or coincidentally. Understanding the complexities of cultural diversity and intercultural learning, sensitivity or integration was not seen to be important as it was not evident in learning outcomes and therefore not part of modular assessments.

I wanted to work together, but I took the lead for group work but knew I was wrong taking the lead. But you are doing your Masters and you have to think of what you need to achieve and do well, we need to do well and this is our primary focus, so there was a lot of extra work involved just to make sure we were on the right track, with limited time for extra stuff such as cultural learning as that's interesting but not part of our assessments (HS9).

Numerous examples of self-preservation of personal, professional and academic identities were described. Some students recognised the differing demands and expectations of group work and were more focused on their own academic achievement in furthering career development. Although such self-preservation behaviour is not uncommon in any learning environment, it was particularly poignant for students learning in culturally diverse environments.

The Irish students, were very friendly and understood from our faces when we were in trouble. We eventually had a good relationship with them, but I was always on guard and needed to stay true to myself. It was fine but my goal at all costs was to do well on the programme, nothing else matters (IS5).

Although students did not want to be seen to be insensitive or inappropriate, protecting their identities and succeeding on their programme of study was more important than intercultural integration and inclusiveness.

I don't want to be insensitive or political incorrect but I want to do well in my course so I have to think about myself and my career and how I use my time constructively to be successful. It's not that I don't want to mix but I need to protect myself, my credibility and grades (HS2).

Faculty identified the importance and awareness of creating an inclusive and supporting environment and several formal and informal supportive approaches were described. However, students' descriptions of perceptions of cultural difference and experiences of intercultural engagement identified areas for further improvement.

I find having lecture notes, guided reading on our online learning platform helpful and I also started being available for 30minutes before the lecture (chat time) in helping to clarify any student queries rather than simply replying to an email. In fact, this was a great way for students to get to know one another and for me to get back to basics and appreciate where their perspectives were coming from and indeed their fears about success in the assignment (F9).

Shared acceptance

Shared acceptance describes a gradual appreciation of and respect of cultural diversity within the intercultural learning environment. Over time language, academic writing and communication barriers were lessened and students began to demonstrate greater knowledge and understanding of the programme material. Respect was noted as being a very important part of learning in the intercultural classroom, where sharing of views seems to contribute to greater understanding and learning. The following examples illustrate the possibilities that may occur when taking time to support the dynamics with intercultural engagement.

Respect is fundament when working in groups even when people get frustrated and annoyed. Cultural differences need to be discussed so understanding and learning can occur for all (HS7).

I love to observe the growing depth of understanding with students near the end of the semester (F5).

When I look back it took me a very long time to be all right within this strange ways of learning together with people from other cultures (IS7).

Gradually, through creating and facilitating a learning environment, students began to see each other as individuals and came to respect the individuality and diversity across the group. This is a slow process that winds its way across all interactions and modules throughout the academic year and contributes to a greater awareness of responsibilities for understanding individual learning behaviours and creating intercultural inclusive learning environments.

Students are the same but they are all different. I have learnt to be aware of my role of understanding where I create learning spaces for student learning that are inclusive of multi-cultural, and multinational dimensions which is ongoing (F7).

Large intercultural classrooms with students from differing backgrounds, languages, dialects and interests, can present challenges with an inherent possibility of conflict. It is a delicate balancing act to find an optimal level of engagement in fostering learning while at the same time recognising the diversity experienced throughout the programme.

I am thankful for the way we learned here and all the supports, helped us work out how to learn (IS10).

I liked being with students from all backgrounds, it's good to have a mix (HS12).

As students became more familiar with each other, group interaction increased as noted by students and faculty. However, getting to know one another and developing the confidence to engage took time.

I did group work with the international students in both semesters where we were all mixed and it took a while for the diverse group to interact together (HS4).

Balancing the speed and clarity in getting content covered while at the same time stimulating challenging conversations at postgraduate level was found to be a constant pressure. However, the blended learning delivery of programmes whereby half the programme was delivered remotely through technology created further complexities for intercultural engagement, integration and inclusiveness.

We try to make it creative, interactive and a stimulated learning environment and wonder how to tread lightly where words that are familiar to us maybe new and confusing for newly arrived student. Time is limited particularly when the programme is a blended learning programme and I wonder about the comprehension and understanding for all with this type of delivery. I like working with groups where I give time and opportunities for students to grow and work together in an organic way and this is difficult in a blended learning environment (F11).

Similar challenges were also reported by students.

Getting used to new ways of learning in a different country on your own is hard but worth it. Meeting all types of students' helped but getting my head around the technology side of things was very hard. Trying to figure out Moodle {online learning platform} was really stressful (IS11)

Discussion

Our study explored the perceptions and experiences of students and faculty of learning and facilitating learning, in culturally diverse postgraduate nursing learning environments. It highlights the value of engaging in opportunities to learn about other cultures and differing perspectives of healthcare practice, concurring with other studies [11, 14,12,9]. However, this study also draws attention to the complexities associated with meeting individual and collective learning needs of postgraduate students who come from diverse cultural, linguistic, educational and clinical experience backgrounds. It reiterates the importance of understanding how culture plays a large role in influencing learning behaviours, engagement and interaction. Nevertheless, this study illuminates how perceptions of cultural difference can also have an impact on learning behaviours and cohesive learning. It draws attention to the multifaceted responses of teaching faculty and students to cultural diversity in the learning environment, adding new dimensions to the existing discourse on intercultural learning and development. The intercultural developmental journey participants on this study experienced ranged from, early apprehension and cautious engagement with cultural difference, to achieving respectful shared acceptance. The process described mirrors the first four stages of Bennett's six stage developmental model of intercultural sensitivity (DMIS) [31]; denial, defence, minimisation and acceptance of cultural difference (table 3). However, examples of adaption, (DMIS stage five) and integration (DMIS stage six) of cultural difference were minimal within the data, raising questions about the effectiveness of the learning environment in changing mutual attitudes and behaviours to cultural difference. In this context, this study confirms the complexity of learning and teaching in culturally diverse postgraduate learning environments and reminds us of the importance of fostering intercultural inclusiveness both at institutional and classroom level.

Please insert table 3 here

Early apprehensions associated with learning in culturally diverse classrooms were described, highlighting the impact on intercultural engagement and integration. Nonetheless, these findings need to be considered in the context of the unprecedented expansion of cultural diversity in the postgraduate classroom, as a result of new initiatives to develop nursing programmes for international students in meeting Universities' targets for internationalisation. Students enrolled for their individual programmes and although valued opportunities to learn about different cultures and international dimensions of healthcare, intercultural learning and intercultural sensitivity quite often occurred coincidentally and were not seen as central to succeeding on the programme of study. In an era of growing reports of culturally insensitive care in healthcare settings [16,18], the importance of intercultural awareness and sensitivity needs to become a more visible responsibility for all and should be explicit in all healthcare professional programme learning outcomes and learning activities. Although the benefits of intercultural learning opportunities afforded in a widening culturally diverse classroom were acknowledged by participants, the lack of preparation for intercultural integration and intercultural learning received, contributed to the fears and anxieties described. The value of having adequate preparation, planning and intercultural training for internationalisation of nursing curricula and widening cultural diversity of the student population

is often underestimated and not seen as important [32]. HEI's need to ensure institutional supports are in place to support quality learning and teaching in expanding culturally diverse learning environments. This requires planning structures, supports and educational approaches that provide positive academic growth for all students [24]. Students and faculty need guidance and support in; understanding cultural factors that influence learning behaviours, acknowledgement of own culture and having respect for cultural difference.

This study draws attention to the added intricacies associated with meeting the individual and collective educational needs of all students within a culturally diverse postgraduate blended learning environment. Calls for intercultural inclusiveness in an era of expanding cultural diversity of the student population, is growing in popularity [9, 33, 24]. Intercultural inclusiveness creates an environment of fair and equitable learning opportunities, that meets needs of all students from diverse backgrounds [23]. However, there is limited guidance as to how this can be achieved in postgraduate nursing programmes. This study helps to fill this gap as it highlights the importance of fostering respect for diversity in cultural norms, learning behaviours and clinical practice experiences, in providing equitable and meaningful learning opportunities that meets the needs of all students. It reminds us of the importance for both students and educators in recognising, appreciating and capitalising on cultural diversity as a means of enriching the overall learning experience, intercultural dialogue, integration and inclusiveness. However, this can be further complicated through the use of blended learning approaches, where half of the scheduled taught sessions are delivered remotely through technology. Many students struggled with using unfamiliar technology, were fearful of engaging online and had limited prior exposure to online platforms. The challenge with maintaining a learning atmosphere online is acknowledged [34], which brings another dimension to intercultural inclusiveness which must be considered. In an era of changing landscapes in Higher Education, remote learning and online interaction is going to become a more common phenomenon. Although, the benefits of intercultural learning through the use of technology are acknowledged [12], they also warn of the difficulties of facilitating meaningful intercultural learning in such non-traditional learning environments. The challenges with forming cross-cultural relationships in the culturally diverse classroom is recognised [35], this study highlights the extent of these complexities when blended learning approaches are incorporated. The need for time, space and facilitation to grow relationships should not be underestimated.

Cautious engagement describes participants' perceptions to cultural difference in the postgraduate learning environment and the impact of such views on intercultural engagement, group working dynamics and integration. Unaddressed pre-conceived stereotypes and unconscious biases that can manifest in different ways influenced perceptions of cultural difference. Focusing on differences in cultures, learning behaviours, academic ability, prior educational and nursing experiences, as opposed to exploring similarities created tensions with group working and intercultural integration. This is similar to the conceptualisation of 'othering' in the broader literature [36], where the focus is on overstating cultural differences as opposed to exploring similarities. Although participants grew to respect cultural difference, at times they remained apprehensive and hesitant to integrate and were cautious when engaging within the intercultural learning environment. Other studies have reported on the challenges with achieving collective learning needs in culturally diverse learning environments [37,12, 9], however, the impact of perceptions of cultural differences within the learning environment has received limited attention. This study adds new insights into this discourse, as it highlights how perceptions of cultural difference and differences in learning behaviours create dilemmas, fears and sometimes conflicts. These findings highlight the importance of reviewing how cultural differences are conceptualised in the classroom as a means of reducing misunderstandings, tensions and stereotyping. Addressing stereotypes and biases, developing positive attitudes and behaviours to cultural difference and nurturing supportive cross-cultural engagement is paramount for building the foundations for inclusiveness and intercultural competence development. A view that is echoed by others [37, 16].

The importance of having institutional support for building intercultural inclusive learning environments is acknowledged [9]. However, individual faculty members and students also need to take responsibility for their role in engaging ethically, sensitively and responsibly within a culturally diverse learning environment. Although some faculty took measures to adapt their learning philosophies and teaching practices, the experiences articulated by students identified further opportunities for negotiating diversity of learning needs and integration. While students did not specify faculty deficits, the apprehension and at times frustrations described could have been eased through incorporating more culturally responsive teaching, learning and assessment strategies. Culturally responsive teaching is defined as using cultural awareness and knowledge in learning and teaching approaches that explore differing globalised perspectives and nurtures meaningful intercultural learning encounters [38,33]. This necessitates an understanding of teaching and learning approaches that are inclusive for all students [37]. The findings of this study also suggest the importance of respecting students' cultural identity and educational backgrounds, whilst responding appropriately and sensitively to different learning needs and diverse learning behaviours. Careful facilitation of discussions on similarities of learning needs, whilst respecting differences in linguistics, cultural norms, learning behaviours, and previous educational and clinical experiences is essential. Other studies have also reported on the importance of developing facilitation techniques and pedagogies that encourage intercultural inclusive learning [37, 26]. The findings of this study adds to this body of knowledge, as it highlights the importance of incorporating curricula design, pedagogical philosophies and educational methodologies that values differing perspectives and acknowledges how culture and perceptions of cultural difference influences the way students learn and interact with other students. This takes time and commitment and is an area of practice that requires greater attention and institutional support to make this a reality. Although nurse education literature on culturally responsive teaching is relatively sparse, it is receiving a lot of attention in other disciplines [38, 33, 9].

Students and faculty consistently reported on their desire for students to do well on their programme of study. Although learning about international dimensions of healthcare and sharing intercultural perspectives of nursing was valued by all students, focusing on succeeding on the programme and achieving high grades took precedence over the intercultural learning journey and intercultural competence development. Despite the growing emphasis on the importance of effective intercultural learning for intercultural competence development [13,14,12], maximising intercultural learning opportunities was not seen as a requirement for success on students' programme of study. Addressing the self-preservation of identities, preconceptions and biases and ethnocentric ideologies is paramount. Students consistently reported on the importance of protecting their personal, professional and academic identity and ultimately succeeding on their programme of study. Diversity of learning behaviours, differing experiences in clinical practice and previous educational experiences, were perceived by some students as potential obstacles to successful learning and achieving high grades. Consequently, many students reported on their apprehensions and fears of working with students where there were perceived differences of learning behaviours, academic ability and clinical

competence. Although not unique to culturally diverse learning environments, the subtle nuances of notions of superiority versus inferiority, self-preservation and exclusionary behaviours as a means of protecting identities which draws some parallels with broader definitions of ethnocentricity and xenophobia, requires attention. These ideologies helped self-rationalise the segregation and intercultural disengagement approaches adopted, as students tended to interact and integrate more with students of similar cultural backgrounds, limiting meaningful intercultural learning opportunities. Findings from other studies [39, 40], warn of such subtle exclusionary approaches in culturally diverse classrooms, that are often unintentional but get overlooked in higher education. Students need support in exploring their own ethnocentric and unconscious biases regarding learning behaviours and challenging personal prejudices and assumptions, as a means of remaining open to new learning opportunities and inclusiveness.

Although participants gradually developed shared acceptance and understanding of cultural difference, this took time and did not always result in intercultural inclusiveness and integration. The challenges in fostering cross-cultural relationships in the classroom learning environment where there is a 'melting pot of cultures' is also acknowledged elsewhere [35]. This study highlights the importance of identifying a common ground for students from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds to connect, feel comfortable and confident, to engage in intercultural learning activities and opportunities. Learning to value other cultures and identities as a means of encouraging and promoting engagement and connectedness between culturally diverse students is important. While Gillespie et al. [37] and Sommer et al. [41], re-iterate the importance of addressing unconscious biases as a means of connecting students and encouraging respectful student engagement, this is far from simple. The importance of supporting all students in culturally diverse environments to feel comfortable, connected and a sense of belonging is echoed by others [14, 9]. However, the significance of developing a 'common ground' and connections not just between students, but also between students and faculty in culturally diverse classrooms is also acknowledged [22, 37]. The findings of this study echo these sentiments, but reminds us of the fundamental role educators have in this process. The need to develop cultural mediation skills in managing intercultural relationships in the classroom is core to nurturing respectful and culturally sensitive engagement, intercultural inclusiveness and integration. However, this requires an understanding of other cultural factors that may affect students level of intercultural engagement and integration, such as learning behaviours and previous educational and clinical experiences.

This study illuminates the diversity of learning styles and behaviours that need to be considered in nurturing intercultural inclusiveness. All students reported on being anxious about postgraduate level study, concurring with other studies that describe the learning transitioning challenges with studying at higher academic levels [42, 20]. Adjusting to new pedagogical approaches was challenging for all students, but international students appeared particularly anxious about new modes of teaching, learning and assessment, echoing findings reported elsewhere [25, 35, 43]. Educators have critical roles in designing inclusive curricula, facilitating educational experiences and teaching pedagogies that support different learning styles. Furthermore, exploring different perspectives in how students conceptualise cultural differences and integrate learning, is crucial. Faculty while aware of the importance of facilitating culturally sensitive teaching, sometimes feel ill prepared to do so [44, 45]. In an era of expanding internationalisation activities and widening cultural diversity of HEI communities, the importance of supporting educators in developing culturally responsive classroom management strategies and cultural sensitivity in approaches to teaching and learning, is crucial [35]. This paper adds to the body of knowledge globally on learning and teaching in culturally diverse classrooms from a postgraduate perspective.

Strengths and limitations

This study provides a wide-ranging understanding of the perceptions and experiences of faculty and students (home and international students) of learning and facilitating learning in culturally diverse postgraduate nursing learning environments. A key strength of this study is the contribution it makes to providing a deeper understanding of the complexities of learning and the facilitation of learning in culturally diverse environments, extending the limited evidence on intercultural learning on postgraduate blended learning nursing programmes. Integrating data from faculty, home and international students in one single paper extends other studies and provides credibility of the research, contributing a greater understanding into the complexities of learning in culturally diverse environments.

There are limitations to this study that also need be acknowledged. This study is limited by the participation of students and faculty in one HEI, where international education initiatives have only recently been introduced as a means of increasing international student recruitment. Perceptions and experiences may be different in other contexts, where engagement with international education initiatives have been ongoing. This study took a retrospective view of participants' accounts and relied on a recollection of actual views and experiences, therefore participants may have been influenced by recall bias. Furthermore, the findings reported are based on participants' self-reported perspectives and opinions, and are based on an assumption that participants report their true thoughts, experiences and behaviours. The data was collected at one point of time, and intercultural competence is a continuous process and new developments may have already occurred and attitudes and perceptions could have changed.

Conclusions

This study highlights the essential role HEI's and educators have in building intercultural inclusiveness, ensuring learning opportunities are equitable and builds capacity to see differing perspectives, oneself and others in more inclusive ways. HEI's need to embrace, but also plan appropriately for rapid growths in the cultural diversity of its student population and ensure integration of cultural diversity in educational systems and curriculum design. Faculty play a critical role in supporting students' intercultural sensitivity development, inclusiveness and integration, but students also need to appreciate the value of understanding self and others in more inclusive ways. The need to respond sensitively to diverse learning styles in scaffolding learning, whilst acknowledging individual strengths and weaknesses of diverse students is paramount. Providing opportunities for students to explore conceptualisations of cultural difference, unaddressed stereotypes, biases and individual identities and how they have been shaped is a necessity, as a means of encouraging meaningful intercultural engagement, learning and integration.

Abbreviations

DMIS - Developmental model of intercultural sensitivity

F - Faculty

HEI - Higher Education Institute

HS - Home students

IS - International students

MSc – Masters of Science

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval from the University of Limerick's research and ethics committee (EHSREC 2013-11-17) was granted. A letter inviting participants to volunteer was sent to each prospective student and faculty member via email, along with the consent form and participant information sheet. Those interested in participating were encouraged to reply via email or phone. Written consent was obtained from all participants prior to commencing data collection.

Consent for publication

Not applicable

Availability of data and materials

The datasets used and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests

Funding

Not applicable

Authors' contributions

All authors meet the criteria for authorship as outlined below. All entitled to authorship are listed as authors. No other authors were involved with this paper.

1. All authors have made substantial contributions to conception, design and ethical approval application or acquisition of literature, or analysis and interpretation of literature (KM; BOB; COD; MG; DT; AF; JM; TH);
2. All authors have been involved in drafting the manuscript or revising it critically for important intellectual content (KM; BOB; COD; MG; DT; AF; JM; TH);
3. Data collection was carried out by (KM; AF; BOB; JM; TH)
4. Data analysis and interpretation was carried out by (BOB; MG; JM)
5. All authors have given final approval of the version to be published (KM; BOB; COD; MG; DT; AF; JM; TH);
6. All authors have participated sufficiently in the work to take public responsibility for appropriate portions of the content (KM; BOB; COD; MG; DT; AF; JM; TH);

Acknowledgements

Not applicable

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Tables

Table 1: Demographic profile of participants

Characteristics	Home students (n=14)	International Students (n=11)	Faculty (n=12)
Gender:			
Male	1	5	1
Female	13	6	11
Age group (years):			
≤ 25	6	4	
≥ 25	8	7	12
Ethnic origin:			
Asia	2	10	
Saudi Arabia	1	1	
Europe			
Ireland	11		12
Years of working experience as a registered nurse:			
≤ 5			
≥ 5	2	4	
	12	7	12
First language			
English	11		12
Other language	3	11	
Time lived in Ireland			
Up to 1 year		11	
1-3 years	1		
3 – 5 years	2		
Longer than 5 years	11		12

Table 2: Phases of analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) Framework

No.	Phase	Description
1	Becoming familiar with data	Reading and rereading the transcribed data
2	Initial codes generated	Identifying areas of interest and relevance through coding
3	Searching for themes	Initial themes generated from codes independently by each researcher
4	Initial themes reviewed	Collective review and critical discussion of themes by researchers
5	Naming and defining themes	Consensus of final themes and their meaning
6	Writing the report	Report written with themes illustrated by relevant participant quotations

Table 3. Bennett's (1986) Six stage developmental model of intercultural sensitivity.

Stage 1	Denial of cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture is experienced as the only real one. Other cultures are avoided by maintaining psychological and/or physical isolation from differences. People at Denial generally are disinterested in cultural difference, although they may act aggressively to eliminate a difference if it impinges on them.
Stage 2	Defence against cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture (or an adopted culture) is experienced as the only good one. The world is organized into "us and them," where "we" are superior and "they" are inferior. People are threatened by cultural difference, so they tend to be highly critical of other cultures, regardless of whether the others are their hosts, their guests, or cultural newcomers to their society.
Stage 3	Minimization of cultural difference is the state in which elements of one's own cultural world view are experienced as universal. Because these absolutes obscure deep cultural differences, other cultures may be trivialized or romanticized. People at Minimization expect similarities, and they may become insistent about correcting others' behaviour to match their expectation.
Stage 4	Acceptance of cultural difference is the state in which one's own culture is experienced as just one of a number of equally complex worldviews. Acceptance does not mean agreement—cultural difference may be judged negatively—but the judgment is not ethnocentric. People at Acceptance are curious about and respectful toward cultural difference.
Stage 5	Adaptation to cultural difference is the state in which the experience of another culture yields perception and behaviour appropriate to that culture. One's worldview is expanded to include constructs from other worldviews. People at Adaptation are able to look at the world "through different eyes" and may intentionally change their behaviour to communicate more effectively in another culture.
Stage 6	Integration of cultural difference is the state in which one's experience of self is expanded to include the movement in and out of different cultural worldviews. People at Integration often are dealing with issues related to their own "cultural marginality." This stage is not necessarily better than Adaptation in most situations demanding intercultural competence, but it is common among non-dominant minority groups, long-term expatriates, and "global nomads".

Supplementary Files

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