



Keele International Reflections

Developing an online blog on internationalization and
inter-cultural learning

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May 2013

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Abstract

The growing international diversity in UK higher education has the potential to enhance inter-cultural learning but there is very little discussion within Keele University on how we can maximise its benefits. This project aims to develop an online blog to facilitate discussion on how internationalization can foster inter-cultural learning. Students were engaged in its development and pilot evaluation. It is hoped that this project can provide the foundations of an online discussion at Keele University to allow students and staff members to share their experiences and reflections on internationalization and inter-cultural learning.

Background

'Internationalization' has become a buzzword within academic circles with the rising trend of international students in UK HE. A report released by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) showed that a total of 428,225 non-UK students were in UK higher education (HE) in 2010/11, which is a 5.5% increase from the previous academic year.

The concept of internationalization, as Jiang (2008) explains, 'generally concerns the relationships between and amongst nations where respect for sovereignty, national policies and culture are highly accentuated (p.348)'. The internationalization of HE carries political, economic, academic and socio-cultural functions (Knight, 1997; Wit, 2002). The 2005 International Association of Universities (IAU) Survey showed that there is an overall consensus in the international community that the internationalization of teaching and learning brings benefits to HE which include internationally oriented staff and students, improved academic quality, national and international citizenship, revenue generation, and 'brain gain' (Knight, 2007).

Internationalization can also foster an educational climate that can enable students from diverse national and cultural backgrounds to interact and gain international knowledge and competencies simply by being exposed to a more internationalized learning environment. However, very little is known as to how these opportunities can be maximised and what strategies can be developed -- both inside and outside the classroom -- to exploit the fullest potentials of internationalization in promoting inter-cultural learning. This is particularly relevant at Keele since several initiatives that can promote internationalization (e.g. Keele World Festival) are being launched, but there is not enough discussion as to how we can make the most of its benefits in terms of inter-cultural learning.

This project aims to develop an online blog to encourage discussion and reflections on how internationalization can promote inter-cultural learning. There is very little discussion, especially within Keele University as to how we can maximise the benefits of internationalization in terms of inter-cultural learning. Online blogs on internationalization have been used effectively elsewhere (e.g. Leeds Metropolitan University). Developing a similar online resource within Keele could contribute to the wider evidence base for the HEA on internationalization in higher education. Increasing overseas student numbers is a common theme among University, Faculty and School learning and teaching strategies. Developing a reflective online blog on internationalization can help both students and staff to gain a wider perspective on how this could impact upon the teaching and learning environment.

Blog development

Participants

A total of 19 students volunteered to take part in this pilot exercise (7 UK students; 12 international students¹). Posters, emails and Facebook advertising through the International Student Support page were used to recruit participants. Participants were offered a £20 gift voucher for their participation.

Procedure

This project initially engaged students in the process, with the potential to include staff members by the time it is launched. Those who showed interest were invited to a briefing workshop for more information about the project (see information sheet and consent form in Appendix A).

After the briefing meeting, those who agreed to participate were requested to write a 300 word blog on their experiences of internationalization and how it promotes inter-cultural learning. Participants were asked to reflect upon these learning experiences and evaluate whether it worked in terms of promoting inter-cultural learning, and if so, how it worked and how the learning can be maximised.

Word Press

WordPress was selected as the blogging platform for the project because of its popularity as a blogging platform and because it offered the appropriate levels of content controls and anonymity that we required for blog participants. The blogging tools in the KLE could not offer anonymous posting. Similarly, Blogger – another popular blogging tool – is a Google run application and we could not guarantee that participants would not inadvertently associate their Keele account with their posts. WordPress is a free, flexible platform that provided the features we required. Participants were sent an invite to join the blog along with a screencast (short video) showing them how to sign-up and start blogging.

Participants were asked to create a Word Press account to contribute to the *Keele International Reflections* page. Participants were also sent an invitation to join the *Keele International Reflections* page. Once registered and the invitation accepted, participants can then post their blogs at <http://internationalreflections.wordpress.com>.

¹ In this context, international refers to non-UK based students, including those from the EU.

Keele International Reflections

Student reflections on
internationalisation and intercultural
learning



Learning About Charity —

Welcome!

Posted on November 14, 2012 by pionsdale

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this project. We are hoping that you will find this experience a positive one.

We would like you to share with us your experiences of intercultural learning while you are a student at Keele. The growing international diversity in UK higher education has the potential to enhance intercultural learning but there is very little discussion within Keele University on how we can maximise its benefits.

Share with us your experiences of learning something new about a different culture. Whether it is gaining new knowledge or learning new skills (e.g. language, cuisine, arts, etc.), we would like to know how being in a culturally diverse environment can enrich your learning experience at Keele University.

Your experiences can be taken from any context within Keele. It can be within the formal classroom setting; a student union social event; or even just a casual conversation with someone at the bus stop — any occasion where an opportunity to learn about a different culture can form a blog entry.

You are also encouraged to reflect upon these experiences: was it effective in promoting intercultural learning, what made it effective and how intercultural learning can be maximised in the future.

Thank you for your contribution and happy blogging!

Be the first to like this.



About pionsdale

Learning Tech person at Keele Uni in the UK

[View all posts by pionsdale —](#)

Recent Posts

- My experience in Keele!
- 100
- How difficult is for an international / european student to get used to lab/thesis sessions...
- Everything about here
- My experience in Keele

Archives

- April 2012
- March 2012
- February 2012
- January 2012
- December 2011
- November 2011

Categories

- Uncategorised

Meta

- Site Admin
- Logout
- Entries RSS
- Comments RSS
- WordPress.com

Blog entries were initially sent to the administrators' dashboard for approval. These were checked to ensure that entries do not include personal information about the bloggers or other people mentioned in the blog. It was also checked for potentially offensive entries. All entries were approved and posted without any issues.

The participants started blogging in November 2012 and were informed that the pilot exercise will finish by the 30th April 2013. After this date, blogs will be open to the public. Participants were free to remove any of their blogs before it went live. They were also asked to keep posting blog entries if they wished to do so. At the end of the pilot, participants were sent a feedback questionnaire for their comments on the exercise.

The blog entries

There were a total of 19 entries posted in *WordPress* by April 2013. These blogs can be viewed online at <http://internationalreflections.wordpress.com> Summarised below are some of the themes expressed in the students' blogs:

Internationalization promotes inter-cultural learning

Being at Keele provides students with the opportunity to meet and learn from people from around the world. The blogs highlighted how students, whether they are from the UK or not, gained new knowledge about other people's customs and ways of living. Perhaps the most prominent areas of new knowledge revolved around food, religious beliefs and holiday traditions. By being at Keele enables students to form relationships with people from different backgrounds. Thus, rather than simply reading or learning about other people's traditions in books or other forms of media, students are given the opportunity to interact, and often, participate in these activities. Examples of new inter-cultural experiences expressed in the blogs include participating in the Scottish holiday, Burn's night; the Jewish holiday of Shabbat; the Dutch tradition, Sinterklaas; learning about Sikhism and Islam; and Halloween and Christmas traditions in the UK. The blogs also reflected students' openness to try new cuisine and to learn new phrases in other languages to communicate (or perhaps impress) people from different backgrounds.

The international student experience

Majority of the students who took part in this exercise were originally from outside the UK. Entries from these students reflect how much they are learning by being at Keele. The weather, the snow in particular, was often talked about, as well as the friendliness and politeness of British people. Although students also discussed the 'Keele Bubble', the blogs highlight how some international students have made meaningful interactions with people from neighbouring areas such as Stoke and Newcastle. Interestingly, students frequently discussed their interactions with (migrant) taxi drivers and the conversations they had with them. London is also not too far from Keele, and thus, some students have shared their experiences of going to the capital and celebrating the holidays there.

Although the campus is bustling during the weekdays, some international students have commented how quiet it is during weekends and holidays. This could make some international students feel isolated and homesick, especially during the holiday season. However, the International Student Support has done a remarkable job of recognising this. Students have blogged about the events organised by International Student Support over the holiday period to help them feel part of the Keele community, even if they are away from home.

Useful strategies to promote inter-cultural learning

The students also blogged about how inter-cultural learning is promoted at Keele. Within classrooms, international students are given the opportunity to learn about UK standards; while at the same time, home students can learn about standards from other countries through the international students. For example, one blogger commented about her American classmate in her Criminology class who often shared how things were done in the US. Although she did not agree with some of the practices there, having an international perspective enriched the discussions and debates in class.

The Keele World Festival (KWF) was also highlighted in blogs. Students talked about some of the KWF activities including, food tasting, language tasters, dance classes and sports events. Students reflected how KWF has enriched their appreciation for what the university has to offer and the cultural diversity on campus.

The bloggers also expressed that it is a good idea to mix UK and non-UK students in the same halls of residence. The diversity allows students to create friendships with people from overseas which can help to build good international relationships and understanding.

Developing global citizens of the future

Internationalization in higher education allows students to develop competencies to become global citizens of the future. As highlighted in the blogs, diversity helps some students to reflect upon their social position in a global society. Their experiences of interacting with people from different backgrounds, who may hold perspectives that may be different from theirs, could widen their understanding of socio-political issues that they may not have otherwise been aware of. Both home and international students are gaining from their experiences of being in an inter-cultural environment. For some home students, University may be their first exposure to a culturally diverse environment. Being in this environment provides them with opportunities to discuss issues (e.g. racism and other culturally sensitive issues) with people who come from cultural or ethnic backgrounds that are being marginalised.

Feedback

A feedback questionnaire was sent to the volunteers at the end of the pilot exercise. Out of the 19 volunteers, only 7 completed the questionnaire. This is partly due to students leaving for the Easter Break or being too busy with revision for exams and coursework. Due to the low response rate, it is difficult to make definitive conclusions from the pilot exercise. However, responses gathered suggest that there is potential for online blogging to encourage students to reflect about inter-cultural learning and to engage more in inter-cultural activities on campus. There are mixed responses about the experience of blogging itself – some enjoyed it more than others. But for those who enjoy blogging in the first place, having a platform such as this allowed them to express and share with others their experiences and learn about others' experiences as well. Below are tables summarising feedback responses from participants:

ITEM 1: Participating in this project encouraged me to reflect about inter-cultural learning at Keele

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	1	14.3	16.7	16.7
	Agree	3	42.9	50.0	66.7
	Disagree	2	28.6	33.3	100.0
	Total	6	85.7	100.0	
Missing	System	1	14.3		
Total		7	100.0		

ITEM 2: Participating in this project made me more aware of the inter-cultural diversity at Keele

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly agree	2	28.6	28.6	28.6
	Agree	2	28.6	28.6	57.1
	Neither agree nor disagree	1	14.3	14.3	71.4
	Disagree	2	28.6	28.6	100.0
	Total	7	100.0	100.0	

Further comments: In hindsight, I feel that by writing about inter-cultural learning experiences has made me realise just how much there is and it's not until you come to reflect on such experiences that you come to really appreciate them!

ITEM 3: Participating in this project made me more aware of inter-cultural learning opportunities at Keele

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly agree	1	14.3	14.3	14.3
Agree	2	28.6	28.6	42.9
Neither agree nor disagree	3	42.9	42.9	85.7
Strongly disagree	1	14.3	14.3	100.0
Total	7	100.0	100.0	

ITEM 4: Participating encouraged me to engage more in inter-cultural learning activities at Keele

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly agree	1	14.3	14.3	14.3
Agree	4	57.1	57.1	71.4
Disagree	2	28.6	28.6	100.0
Total	7	100.0	100.0	

ITEM 5: Writing blogs was an enjoyable experience

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly agree	1	14.3	14.3	14.3
Agree	3	42.9	42.9	57.1
Neither agree nor disagree	2	28.6	28.6	85.7
Disagree	1	14.3	14.3	100.0
Total	7	100.0	100.0	

Further comments: I've always liked writing, and personal reflections are a good way to keep a commentary on experiences and events you participate in. It's nice to know that these experiences can be shared and read by the public.

ITEM 6: Submitting a blog entry online was easy

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly agree	3	42.9	42.9	42.9
Agree	2	28.6	28.6	71.4
Strongly disagree	2	28.6	28.6	100.0
Total	7	100.0	100.0	

Further comments: Using a platform such as Wordpress is easy as everybody can contribute to it from home or from uni without having to worry.

ITEM 7: I plan to contribute to future blog entries online

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid Strongly agree	1	14.3	14.3	14.3
Agree	4	57.1	57.1	71.4
Neither agree nor disagree	1	14.3	14.3	85.7
Disagree	1	14.3	14.3	100.0
Total	7	100.0	100.0	

Further comments: I hope to contribute more frequently, as a personal reflection on the development of my observations of inter-cultural diversity during the rest of my time at University.

Responses to open-ended questions

<p>What aspects of the project worked well?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chances for students to discuss cultural differences they had come to understand. • Reflecting inter-cultural learning and being able to write a blog on that, whilst I was writing the blogs it made me reflect more on the inter-cultural diversity in Keele. • I really liked being able to do it at my own time. • Having access to other peoples blogs 	<p>What aspects of the project could be improved?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reminders for students to participate in the system • Lack of updates during the project • Maybe more focus on a specific area to write about as writing on inter-cultural learning in Keele is a very broad area. • Overall there doesn't need to be anything improved. But maybe try to advertise it more. • I think it would have been useful to try and encourage more people to contribute to it. For example, rather it being optional, make it open or compulsory to Psychology students to submit at least one blog post. That way you can get more diversity in the types of posts being blogged about.
<p>Do you have any suggestions on how we can improve the online blogs for future use?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send out a reminder email after so long • Register Facebook page and twitter • Maybe by having people to comment on the blogs to gather their views on the topic. • Make it more accessible to everyone 	<p>Do you have any further comments for the project team?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like this idea. I wish I had taken a more active role in it, but it was enjoyable nonetheless • Yes, the project team was very helpful and friendly. • Great job!! So glad that I could be a part of it. • I'd just like to thank-you for the opportunity!

Conclusions and recommendations

The students' blogs highlighted how being in an intercultural environment enables them to create friendships with people from different backgrounds and to learn (and sometimes participate) in their traditional practices. Discussions in classrooms are also enriched through the variety of perspectives coming from students. The blogs also featured the effectiveness of mixing UK and non-UK students in halls of residence and the quality of student support provided at Keele. Being in an internationally diverse environment also enabled both UK and non-UK students to reflect upon critical social issues, such as racism in the UK and poverty in other countries. While the blogs produced from this project provided insightful reflections from students, it is uncertain whether students will continue to post blogs after this exercise since not all students enjoy writing. Thus, alternative platforms are needed to encourage reflection in the future. Below are some recommendations for future work:

- There is a need to widen the reach of this online resource by including reflections from staff also by publicising more widely.

- Not everyone enjoys blogging, and so, this platform may be insufficient in engaging the Keele community in reflecting about internationalisation and inter-cultural learning. Based on previous experience, events such as World Cafes are effective in facilitating communal reflective practice. It may be worth organising such an event in the future (e.g. during the Keele World Festival).
- It may also be worth exploring whether this online resource on blogging about internationalisation and inter-cultural learning could be part of the Keele University Distinctive Curriculum Development Strand to encourage more student participation. Perhaps providing students with more structure and prompts may also encourage them to contribute more.

Appendix A. Information sheet and consent forms

Keele International Reflections: Developing an online blog on internationalization and inter-cultural learning

INFORMATION SHEET

As part of a project led by Dr Emea Vida Estacio, our research team would like to invite you to take part in the development of this online blog on internationalization and inter-cultural learning at Keele. This sheet provides information that can help you to understand why we are doing this and what it would involve. If anything is unclear or if you would like more information, please contact any of the people listed at the back of this sheet. Please take time to read the information carefully before deciding to take part or not.

What is the purpose of the project?

This project aims to develop an online blog to encourage discussion and reflection on internationalization and inter-cultural learning at Keele University. As a pilot exercise, this project will involve a small number of Keele University students in developing and testing this online resource before it is launched to a wider audience.

Why have I been invited?

The growing international diversity in UK higher education has the potential to enhance inter-cultural learning but there is very little discussion within Keele University on how we can maximise its benefits. As a Keele University student, you are invited to take part in this project to gain an understanding of your experiences of internationalization and inter-cultural learning whilst studying here.

Do I have to take part?

You are completely free to decide whether you would like to participate or not. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

What will I have to do if I take part?

You will be invited to attend a briefing workshop so you can ask questions about the project before agreeing to take part. If you agree to take part, you will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm this. After this, you will be requested to write a short blog (approx. 300 words) on your experiences of inter-cultural learning at Keele. For example, you can write about your experiences of learning something new about a different culture, gaining a new skill that is relevant in a global environment, or meeting and learning from someone from a different cultural background.

Your experiences can be taken from any context within Keele. It can be within the formal classroom setting; a student union social event; or even just a casual conversation with someone at the bus stop -- any occasion where an opportunity to learn about a different culture can form a blog entry. You are also encouraged to reflect upon these experiences and to evaluate whether it was effective in promoting inter-cultural learning, what made it effective and how inter-cultural learning can be maximised in the future.

You can submit blog entries at <http://internationalreflections.wordpress.com>

Blogs are moderated before these are posted online to ensure that anonymity and confidentiality are maintained. It is essential that the identity of other people mentioned in your entry remains anonymous. You also have the choice to use a pseudonym in your own blog. The pilot online blog will only be accessible to other participating students and members of the project team.

We are hoping that you will be able to submit a short entry at least once a month. However, you are free to submit a blog entry as often as you wish.

After the four month trial, we will send you an email to invite you to complete a short online questionnaire to provide your feedback about your experiences of participating in this pilot exercise. You will be asked for your comments on how we can improve the online blog before it is launched to a wider audience.

What are the possible advantages of taking part?

Taking part in this project can provide you with the opportunity to reflect upon your experiences of inter-cultural learning whilst studying here at Keele. Contributing to the development of this online blog could also be a useful addition to your CV. You will also be offered a £20 gift voucher for your time and contribution.

What are the possible disadvantages of taking part?

There are no identified disadvantages or risks of taking part in this study.

What will happen to the blog entries at the end of the pilot?

Blog entries will be posted online for public viewing. We will let you know when the blog will be publicly available. You will be allowed to take any of your posts off any time. The processes and outcomes of this pilot exercise will also be shared to colleagues and other interested parties through conferences, seminars and publications. At the end of this pilot, it is expected that contributions to the online blog will be extended to all members of the Keele University community.

Who should I contact for further information or if I have any problems or concerns?

Project leader

Dr Emea Vida Estacio, School of Psychology, Keele University, ST5 5BG

Email e.v.g.estacio@keele.ac.uk

Tel. 01782 733332

If you remain unhappy about the project and/or wish to raise a complaint about any aspect of the way that you have been approached or treated during the course of the study you may contact:

Keele University Research Governance Officer

Nicola Leighton, Research and Enterprise Services, Keele University, ST5 5BG

Email n.leighton@uso.keele.ac.uk

Tel. 01782 733306

This Teaching Innovation Award is funded by Keele University Learning and Professional Development Centre.

Keele International Reflections: Developing an online blog on internationalization and inter-cultural learning

Project leader: Dr Emea Vida Estacio, School of Psychology, Keele University, ST5 5BG
Tel: 017827 33332 Email e.v.g.estacio@keele.ac.uk

Tick as appropriate		
YES	NO	
		I have read the information sheet relating to the above project in which I have been asked to participate and have been given a copy to keep.
		The nature and purposes of the project have been explained to me, and I have had the opportunity to discuss the details and ask questions about this information. I understand what is being proposed and the procedures in which I will be involved.
		I understand that my involvement will remain strictly confidential.
		I understand that I am allowed to use a pseudonym for my blogs.
		I agree for any quotes from my blog entries to be shared in conferences, seminars and publications.
		It has been explained to me what will happen to the blogs once the pilot has been completed.
		I hereby fully and freely consent to participate in the project which has been fully explained to me.
		Having given this consent I understand that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without disadvantage to myself and without being obliged to give any reason.

Participant's name (BLOCK CAPITALS): _____

Participant's signature: _____

Taken by (BLOCK CAPITALS): _____

Signed: _____

Date: _____