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Navigating learning and teaching in expanding culturally diverse higher education settings

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ABSTRACT

Developing a deeper understanding of factors that influence learning and teaching in widening culturally diverse learning environments is necessary in proactively planning supports and pedagogical approaches that encourage integration, intercultural understanding and respect for cultural difference. This qualitative descriptive study reports on the experiences and perceptions of teaching faculty and students (domestic and international) of learning and teaching in postgraduate culturally diverse environments. Three themes were generated from the data: *'early apprehension'*, *'cautious engagement'* and *'shared acceptance'*, highlighting the multifaceted responses to cultural diversity in the learning environment. These findings illuminate how learning and teaching in widening culturally diverse education settings require careful, sensitive and proactive planning and supports. The individuality of learning experiences, self-preservation of identities, narrow perceptions of cultural difference and unconscious 'othering', influenced learning behaviours, integration and cohesive learning. The findings also highlight the necessity of adopting culturally responsive pedagogies.

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Introduction

Internationalising education is a key priority for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the globe as a means of preparing graduates to live and work in a globally connected world. Internationalising higher education is widely reported as a mechanism for enhancing the international and intercultural dimensions of education, thus enriching the overall student learning experience (Buckner & Stein, 2020; Byrne, Brugh, & McGarvey, 2019). Despite these known benefits, expanding international student recruitment strategies and increasing incoming student mobility, often dominate internationalisation agendas (Robson & Wihlborg, 2019). Consequently, educators are challenged with balancing the business model that prioritises growing international student numbers, with providing quality learning experiences for all students in culturally diverse environments (Miller, Cunningham, & Lehmann, 2021). Like other countries, Irish HEIs have witnessed a rapid growth in international student enrolments

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(Byrne et al., 2019; Clarke, Hui Yang, & Harmon, 2018), highlighting an unprecedented transformation to the cultural diversity of the student population. Although there is growing evidence within the international literature highlighting the complexities of supporting quality student learning in culturally diverse classrooms, there is a dearth of Irish specific evidence within this area. ‘Super diversity’ (Vertovec, 2007) and ‘commonplace diversity’ (Wessendorf, 2013) are terms used in wider societal discourse elucidating the broadening of population diversity and can help us understand the widening cultural diversity in higher education. Cultural and linguistic diversity (CALD) is a term commonly used in the literature to describe the diversity of different cultures and language groups represented in the population (Department of Health and Human Services, US Office of Minority Health, 2014). For the purposes of this paper, cultural diversity is a term used to describe the range of diversity among the student population, in terms of cultural and linguistic backgrounds and culturally informed learning behaviours.

Andrade (2020), highlight the importance of preparing graduates with the capacity to work in culturally diverse environments and calls for the development of initiatives supporting intercultural learning. Intercultural learning is a dynamic process that supports the development of knowledge, skills and capabilities for engagement in intercultural interactions (Haas, 2019). It provides opportunities for intercultural interaction in the safety of the classroom learning environment, where students learn to understand and appreciate cultural similarities, whilst respecting cultural difference. It requires educators who are confident and skilled in examining cultural factors that influence learning behaviours and fostering respectful cross-cultural discussions (Day & Beard, 2019; Malau-Aduli, Ross, & Adu, 2019). However, O’ Brien, O’ Donnell, Murphy, O’ Brien, & Markey, (2021) report on the complexities in planning strategies to enable intercultural learning in the classroom. Intercultural learning does not occur spontaneously and requires commitment and courage in maximising learning opportunities that support the development of cultural awareness and respect for cultural difference. However, there is a need to further understand the intricacies of supporting intercultural learning and the factors that influence quality learning for all students, in widening culturally diverse postgraduate nursing programmes.

The expanding cultural diversity of the student population enriches the learning environment and provides a fertile space for intercultural dialogue and intercultural learning (Kaihlanen, Hietapakka, & Heponiemi, 2019; Markey, Efua Sackey, & Oppong-Gyan, 2020). However, it requires educators who are committed to fostering culturally responsive pedagogy, as a means of supporting meaningful and quality learning for all students. Culturally responsive pedagogy is an education approach that adopts a learner-centred philosophy, which respects the cultural background and nurtures the intellectual, social, emotional and political developments, of the learner (Ladson-Billings, 2014). It fosters approaches that support both the well-being and success of students, through three core tenets: academic achievement, cultural competence, and socio-political consciousness. Culturally responsive pedagogy adopts the viewpoint that culture influences learning behaviour (Hudiburg, Mascher, Sagehorn, & Stidham, 2015), emphasising the importance of identifying cultural identities and planning responses to the varying cultural factors that influence learning. This requires cultivating respect for cultural identities and educational backgrounds within the learning environment. However, the intricacies with applying

culturally responsive pedagogy is not without its challenges and requires strategic planning and supports at both an institutional and classroom level (Malau-Aduli et al., 2019). Exploring the experiences and perspectives of both students and educators of learning and teaching in a wide range of culturally diverse education contexts can provide guidance and direction regarding the structures and supports needed. In particular, the importance of reviewing educational pedagogies, educational needs and supports for students from diverse backgrounds, requires a critical review (Whalley, France, Park, Mauchline, & Welsh, 2021).

Although good practice recommendations regarding the adoption of culturally responsive pedagogies are widely reported within the international literature, there is a need to further understand the enablers and barriers for their adoption in different education settings, situations and contexts. For example, the literature highlights the importance of cultivating a safe sharing space where students feel comfortable to express themselves (Chen, Jensen, Chung, & Measom, 2020; Day & Beard, 2019), and developing connections within the learning environment, both among students and between students and educators (Gillespie, Pritchard, Bankston, Bruno, & Glazer, 2017; Jeffreys, 2014). Critically reviewing teaching practices (Awang-Hashim, Kaur, & Valdez, 2019) and reducing language bias within the learning environment (Sommer, Beitzel, Osuri, & Rosfeld, 2019), are frequently reported key recommendations. However, understanding factors that enable and hinder the practicalities of adopting these approaches in different cultural contexts and learning environments, requires further consideration. For example, collectively exploring the experiences and perspectives of both students (international and domestic) and educators in an Irish context, where expanding cultural diversity of the student population in postgraduate nursing programmes is a relatively new phenomenon. It is anticipated that the findings of this study will inform additional developments and structures needed to support the application and sustainability of culturally responsive pedagogies.

Acknowledging the benefits of internationalisation, a postgraduate nursing programme specifically targeting international registered nurses, was developed in one region of Ireland. International students registering on this programme engage with modules that are co-scheduled with other postgraduate nursing programmes (domestic students). Consequently, there was a notable increase in the widening cultural diversity of the student population within these co-scheduled modules and anecdotal evidence suggested that there were difficulties with navigating learning and teaching in this new culturally diverse environment. As this was a new development in postgraduate nurse education in this HEI, it was considered important to comprehensively explore experiences of learning and teaching in culturally diverse learning environments, with the aim of informing ways to incorporate culturally responsive pedagogies in daily practice. The following question guided this research study: ‘What are the experiences and perspectives of students (domestic and international) and teaching faculty of learning and teaching in culturally diverse postgraduate nursing programmes, in one region of Ireland?’

Methodology

Design

This study incorporated a qualitative descriptive design informed by Sandelowski (2010). Qualitative descriptive designs are frequently used when exploring experiences,

providing a detailed description that contributes to an understanding of a phenomenon under investigation (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020). The aim of this research was to describe the experiences and perceptions of teaching and learning within a widening culturally diverse higher education learning environment.

Sample

Student participants were drawn from two academic programmes MSc Nursing (specialist) and MSc Nursing Studies. The MSc Nursing (specialist) programmes are open to registered nurses working in Ireland for a number of years. Domestic students is the term used to indicate students registered on specialist programmes, who are Irish citizens or Irish permanent residents. The term international students refers throughout to students of the MSc Nursing Studies programme, which was specifically designed to meet the requirements of international students. All international student participants were registered nurses in their country of origin, prior to registering on the MSc Nursing Studies programme and required student visas to study on this programme. Six modules across these programmes are shared core co-scheduled modules, an approach that is resource effective and increases opportunities for intercultural learning. Faculty teaching on core co-scheduled modules were also invited to participate in this study.

Ethical approval from the University research and ethics committee (EHSREC 2013–11-17) was initially granted and extended. Participants were informed about the study and the voluntary nature of participation before they agreed to take part, with particular emphasis on freedom to withdraw from the study at any time. Informed consent was obtained and participants were free to ask questions. A total of twenty-five postgraduate students (domestic students $n = 14$ and international students $n = 11$) and teaching faculty ($n = 12$) participated. Although the MSc Nursing studies programme is open to all international students meeting the entry requirements, the majority of students accessing this programme are non-EU international students who hail predominantly from Asia.

Data collection no sources for data collection

Data collection took place towards the end of the second semester of the programme. One to one semi-structured interviews facilitated data collection, as they afforded the opportunity to explore sensitive issues, which might have been uncomfortable for some people in a group setting. Researchers (who had no teaching or assessing role with either student cohort) conducted the interviews. This approach aimed to reinforce the voluntary nature of participation, which emphasised student choice whether to participate or not and would have no impact on grading of course work.

Every effort was made to remain open in establishing rapport with participants throughout the interview process. In particular, measures to create an atmosphere of trust was a priority to ensure participants felt comfortable in sharing their experiences, thoughts and feelings. Data collection continued until data saturation was reached. Interviews were guided by an interview schedule (Table 1) and lasted between 30 and 75 minutes. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, with permission from participants.

Table 1. Interview guide.

Student Interview Guide	Teaching faculty interview guide
• Tell me about your experiences of learning in culturally diverse classrooms. • Tell me what it was like for you to learn with students from a cultural background different to yours. • Can you tell me about the benefits and can you talk about any challenges you experienced of learning in a culturally diverse classroom. • What enabled and hindered your learning within culturally diverse classrooms? • What can we do to enhance your experience? • Is there anything else that you would like to share?	• Tell me about your experiences of teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. • Tell me what it was like for you as an educator in teaching and facilitating learning when there is widening cultural diversity among the student population. • Can you tell me about the benefits and can you talk about any challenges you experienced of teaching in a culturally diverse classroom. • What enabled and hindered your teaching abilities and meeting the needs of a widening culturally diverse student population? • What can we do to enhance the learning or teaching experience? • Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Data analysis

The data analysis process was thematic analysis, which was guided by the research question, searching for patterns across the data set (Lester, Cho, & Lochmille, 2020). The thematic analysis framework is based on the writings of Braun and Clarke (2021), in promoting a sequential approach to data analysis as a method for organising, describing, and reporting themes. Data were thematically analysed through an iterative process by three of the researchers (BO'B, MMG, and JMcC). The process of how this process used in generating themes is outlined below (Table 2).

The importance of researchers immersing themselves in the data and demonstrating a methodical approach to the analysis was critical (Doyle, McCabe, Keogh, Brady, & McCann, 2020). The process of generating and agreeing codes ensuring a 'data-near' approach to analysis was critical (Sandelowski, 2010). This was informed by semantic (explicit) and latent (implicit) meaning of data, during coding processes and theme development (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Reflexivity was central to all aspects of data analysis. Individually and collectively the data analysis team (BO'B, MMG, and JMcC) engaged in a process of remaining open to the data and being mindful not to reach early conclusions about themes (Finlay, 1998). Through a tripartite discussion and reflexivity, the themes were reviewed, critically discussed and consensus reached as to the final themes.

Table 3 outlines how themes were generated.

Trustworthiness and rigour of this study was ensured by using Guba and Lincoln's (1989) framework of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is ensured by avoiding a conflict of interest by making sure the researchers collecting the data were not involved in teaching or assessing students (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). Secondly, the use of extensive participant quotations enables readers to judge the adequacy of the data (Tuohy & Cooney, 2019). Transferability is facilitated through the inclusion of demographic profile which enables readers to assess the applicability of the findings to other settings (Tuohy, Fahy, & Murphy, 2021). Dependability is illustrated by the description of the data collection process and also by the clear audit trail of the data analysis as outlined using Braun & Clarke's thematic analysis framework. Confirmability

Table 2. Phases of thematic analysis.

No.	Phase	Process
1	Becoming familiar with data	● Prepared, organised and transcribed the audio interviews data verbatim ● Each member of the analysis team listened to the audio recordings and read the transcripts ● Checked and confirmed accuracy of transcripts ● Familiarisation with the data ● Made notes and noted first impressions of the data.
2	Initial codes generated	● Each analysis team member independently sifted and worked through each transcript identifying similar words and phrases. ● Explored commonalities and differences ● Separately organised data ● Commenced initial coding transcripts independently for relevancy to the research question ● Researchers (BO'B, MMG, and JMcC) compared codes, discussed and modified ● Agreement and final consensus on codes
3	Searching for themes	● Initially BO'B, MMG, and JMcC of the analysis team provisionally grouped codes. ● Individually identified significance of generated codes ● Identified patterns, and began coming up with themes ● Examined and regrouped codes together into a theme.
4	Initial themes reviewed	● Provisionally grouped codes. ● Themes were reviewed against the transcripts ● Collectively modified and developed initial themes ● Critical discussion of themes (BO'B, MMG, and JMcC)
5	Naming and defining themes	● Refinement and refocussing of the themes in relation to research aim and question ● Related themes to each other ● Consensus of final overarching themes and their meaning representing the data
6	Writing the report	● Report written with themes illustrated in addressing the research aim and research question ● Presented finding in report with relevant participant quotations

of themes is demonstrated through the initial independent analysis by each of the researchers followed by in-depth tripartite discussion and agreement of analysis. Relevant quotes are used to illustrate the meaning of the themes that are representative across the data set. Domestic students are designated [DS], international students [IS] and teaching faculty [TF], according to interview number.

Findings

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

Early apprehension

Early apprehension describes the initial anxieties of learning and teaching within a culturally diverse learning environment, from the perspectives of both students and teaching faculty. Navigating different learning methods, teaching styles, ways of communicating and group dynamics, was challenging. All of the domestic and international student participants (n = 25) consistently described struggles in adjusting to new learning and teaching approaches and transitioning to a higher academic level of study. The following student quotes are typical perspectives evident across all student interviews.

Table 3. Coding to themes.

Example of Codes	Grouping of Codes	Early/Initial Themes	Themes
Anxieties, learning styles, ways of communication, culturally diverse learning environment, navigating learning methods and teaching styles, differing group dynamics, higher academic level of study, differing expectations, uncertainties, needing to adapt styles, being accepted, integration, feeling frustrated, differing communication styles, differing perception of learning behaviours, learning expectations	Anxiety, Frustration, Uncertainties, Learning styles, Behaviours, Group dynamics, Higher academic level,	Nervousness, Learning styles and expectations	Early apprehension
Different professional backgrounds, previous education, academic abilities, creating inclusive learning, negotiating learning and teaching approaches, being careful, preconceived stereotypes, differing ideologies, perceptions of cultural difference, expectations of intercultural engagement, valuing intercultural learning, wanting to succeed, wanting to work together, managing differing expectations, changing demands	Different professional and educational backgrounds, Valuing intercultural learning and engagement, Wanting to succeed,	Awareness of differing backgrounds and abilities Differing expectations	Cautious engagement
Appreciation of others, respect, appreciation for cultural diversity, academic writing, barriers lessened, student familiarity, developing confidence, balancing, sharing views, understanding cultural difference, connecting, comfort zone, getting to know one another,, stimulation, new ways of learning and teaching, 'in it' together	Appreciation of culture diversity, Sharing views, Getting to know one another, Connecting,	Appreciation of culture diversity, Respecting others view, Reducing barriers,	Shared acceptance

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 is difficult (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 (DS6).

In particular, searching for and using evidence-based literature was a consistent challenge described by international student participants. All international student participants (n = 11) found it stressful in moving from relying on prescribed textbooks as a primary source of knowledge towards becoming more autonomous in accessing broader sources of evidence to inform their learning.

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

Ten of the twelve teaching faculty described their apprehensions and at times, frustrations while adapting teaching pedagogies in meeting diverse student needs, whilst striving to ensure equity and inclusivity for all learners.

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 (TF10).

Twenty of twenty five student participants acknowledged the importance of integration and interacting with all students in fostering learning and intercultural understanding.

However, all of the international students ($n = 11$) particularly reported on their lack of confidence in initiating cross-cultural engagement, within the classroom.

I felt that if I don't mix with them [Domestic 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 the descriptions throughout the interviews, with all three strands of participants. New learning environments compounded by communication challenges influenced classroom interaction and engagement. All domestic ($n = 14$) and international student participants ($n = 11$) recognised the value of communication, while describing various language and cultural challenges in learning and working together during group work activities. Although attempts to overcome these challenges were evident in some of the student interviews ($n = 10$), it remained a significant challenge for integration and engagement in the learning environment. The following are exemplars of issues consistently raised across all student interviews ($n = 25$).

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 (DS5).

Linguistic challenges contributed to apprehension around group dynamics. However, this alone does not go far enough in explaining why there was a general hesitancy to integrate and engage in cross-cultural learning environments. Nine out of fourteen domestic students and eight out of eleven international students spoke about what could be described as superior and inferior ideologies of culturally informed learning behaviours and academic abilities, leading to tensions which had an impact on opportunities for intercultural learning. The following student interview extracts illustrate the key perceptions about learning behaviours and abilities consistently described among the majority of domestic ($n = 9$) and international ($n = 8$) student participants.

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 (DS8).

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).

All teaching faculty ($n = 12$) were aware of the importance of reflecting on and adapting teaching practices, in meeting individual and collective needs of students in culturally diverse classrooms. However, meeting the diverse learning needs of students, whilst ensuring programme expectations were met was challenging. The following participant quotation captures the difficulties consistently experienced by all teaching faculty

participants (n = 12), in responding to learning needs for all students. However, the actions of ‘changing words on power point slides’ raises questions about the interpretation of one of the twelve teaching faculty participants, about being responsive to the needs of all students in culturally diverse classrooms.

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 (TF6).

Culture played a significant role in influencing learning behaviours and learning expectations. Previous education experiences, including taking a passive role in learning, lead to several students focusing on note taking rather than engaging in discussions. Five of the fourteen domestic students and nine of the eleven international students described the challenges in adjusting to the interactive and student centred learning environment, whereby students lead their own learning guided by teaching faculty. One student aptly described.

... 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).

Nine of the twelve teaching faculty participants also raised concerns regarding leading modules with a new cohort of students in a widening culturally diverse environment. They described difficulties in responding to differing expectations and responsibilities that widening culturally diverse learning environments bring, while meeting learning outcomes and maintaining intercultural inclusive environments. The following is a typical perspective frequently described by nine of the teaching faculty participants.

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 (TF8).

Nine of the twelve teaching faculty participants acknowledged the transitioning challenges for all students. They acknowledged the need to support students in adapting to their new learning environment and noted the importance of responding to the needs of students in maximising learning opportunities. Reflexivity was described by four out of the twelve teaching faculty participants as an approach that encouraged them to ‘stop and think’ about their teaching practices and the quality of the learning experience.

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 (TF1).

Cautious engagement

This theme describes the perceptions and experiences of participants, as they negotiated their learning and teaching in the culturally diverse learning environment. Having preconceived stereotypes informed perceptions of cultural difference, which affected intercultural integration, learning and inclusiveness. There was numerous examples across all student interviews (n = 25) that highlighted how focusing on differences of; professional backgrounds, previous education and clinical experiences and academic ability, impacted on the abilities of students to form connections and relationships.

Their clinical experiences [International students] were quite limited, when we talked to them [international students] and most of us, unlike them are quite experienced nurses and this is difficult and impacts our learning (DS12).

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 [domestic students] students were enjoying the class, were better able for the pace than us and were able to get a better understanding. I was still afraid, shy and lost ... they [domestic students] seemed more able than us. (IS8).

The majority of teaching faculty (n = 10) described an awareness of the importance of creating an inclusive and supportive learning environment and formal and informal approaches of doing so were described by many (n = 6). The following is one such example.

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 there perspectives was coming from and indeed their fears about success in the assignment (TF9)

However, student descriptions of their perceptions of cultural difference and experiences of intercultural engagement identified areas for further improvement. All domestic students (n = 14) and all international student participants (n = 11), consistently conveyed the importance of learning together and valuing intercultural learning opportunities. However, achieving success on the programme and doing well in assessments, took priority over cross-cultural engagement and intercultural learning, for the majority of domestic (n = 8) and all of the international (n = 11) student participants. A significant comment by one of the eleven international students below, illustrates a commonly shared perspective about the importance of 'succeeding'

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 that supported me that I could succeed and do well. That was my main goal (IS6).

Learning about other cultures was perceived as interesting by ten out of the fourteen domestic students and eight out of the eleven international students. However, many of the domestic (n = 6) and international (n = 8) students acknowledged that intercultural

learning often occurred by chance and was not formally incorporated into learning outcomes or 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 (DS9).

Numerous examples of self-preservation of personal, professional and academic identities were described. Ten out of fourteen domestic students and eight out of eleven international students noted the differing demands and expectations of group working within the culturally diverse classroom. They appreciated the value of learning together but were particularly concerned about gaining good grades. Although such self-preservation behaviour can occur in any learning environment, it was particularly applicable for these students learning in culturally diverse environments, as illuminated by the following student interview extracts from both groups.

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).

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 (DS2).

Shared acceptance

Shared acceptance describes a gradual appreciation of and respect for cultural difference within the culturally diverse learning environment. Over time, academic writing, language, and communication barriers were lessened as students began to demonstrate greater knowledge and understanding of the programme material. Respect was noted by all domestic ($n = 14$), and international ($n = 11$) students and all faculty ($n = 12$), as being an important part of learning in the culturally diverse classroom, where sharing of views seems to contribute to greater understanding and learning. One domestic student suggests.

Respect is fundamental 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 (DS7).

The following example illustrates the possibilities when supporting the dynamics in promoting intercultural engagement and inclusiveness. However, valuing cultural diversity and inclusiveness takes time and commitment, as acknowledged by ten out of the twenty five student participants.

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).

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 in finding an optimal level of engagement in fostering learning while recognising the diversity of learning needs throughout the programme. Across the data all domestic ($n = 14$) and international ($n = 11$) student participants showed an understanding of these processes over time.

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 (DS12).

As the domestic and international students became more familiar with each other, group interaction increased. However, getting to know one another and developing the confidence to engage took time, as described by five of the domestic and eight of the international student participants.

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 (DS4).

It took a long time for me to speak in class with all the Irish students as I had doubts about my understanding (IS1).

All teaching faculty participants ($n = 12$) described the complexities associated with balancing the speed and clarity in managing teaching content, while at the same time stimulating challenging conversations and intercultural learning and at postgraduate level. The programme was delivered through a blend of face to face and on line learning platforms. This created further difficulties for intercultural engagement, integration and inclusiveness as described by nine faculty and is exemplified by one in the following.

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 (TF11).

Similar challenges were described by all international students ($n = 11$) as captured by one student.

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 stressful (IS11.)

Discussion

This study illustrates the multifaceted perspectives and experiences of learning and teaching in postgraduate nursing programmes within an unprecedented and rapid expansion of cultural diversity, among the student population. It draws attention to the intricacies of negotiating learning and teaching within a culturally diverse environment,

highlighting the importance of proactively planning supports and structures for widening cultural diversity in higher education. These findings confirm the importance of nurturing integration, respect for cultural difference and inclusivity in culturally diverse higher education institutions (Malau-Aduli et al., 2019; Markey, O'Brien, Kouta, Okantey, & O'Donnell, 2021). Students and teaching faculty described a process of moving from early apprehension and cautious engagement, to shared acceptance. However, the shared acceptance happened more towards the end of the programme of study, re-iterating the importance of preparation, commitment and supports for embedding and weaving integration and intercultural learning across all learning opportunities. Although all students successfully completed their programmes of study and graduated, the findings of this study reiterate 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. However, these findings must be considered within the context of exploring perspectives of learning and teaching in HEIs, where there are rapid growths of international students and an unprecedented expansion of the cultural diversity of the student population (Byrne et al., 2019; Clarke et al., 2018)

Supporting transitioning to culturally diverse learning environments

Students described the complexities associated with transitioning to study at a higher academic level and adjusting to new pedagogical approaches, echoing findings reported elsewhere (Mittelmeier, Rientiesb, Rogatenc, Guntere, & Raghuramd, 2019; Yang, Lee, & Chen, 2019). However, the intricacies in navigating cultural differences in learning behaviours and learning expectations in culturally diverse environments exacerbated transitioning challenges. Both teaching faculty and students described their apprehensions about learning, teaching and intercultural integration, in a widening culturally diverse education setting. These findings highlight the importance of supporting both teaching faculty and students in understanding and respecting cultural factors that influence learning behaviours and intercultural integration. Strategic and sensitive planning of structures, training and educational approaches that acknowledge, respect and respond to cultural diversity is paramount (Sommers & Bonnel, 2020). Providing opportunities to examine ways of nurturing intercultural integration, inclusiveness and the student-educator roles, within the culturally diverse environment is also required (Awang-Hashim et al., 2019; Markey et al., 2021). Transitioning challenges were further complicated when using blended learning approaches, where half of the scheduled taught sessions were delivered remotely through online learning platforms. The challenges with maintaining a meaningful intercultural learning atmosphere online is highlighted, echoing views of others (Mittelmeier et al., 2019; O' Brien, O' Donnell, Murphy, O' Brien & Markey, 2021). In an era of changing landscapes in higher education, remote learning and online interaction is going to become a more common phenomenon. Acknowledging the added challenges to supporting integration and inclusiveness in an online forum requires consideration. The need for time, space and facilitation, to grow

relationships and foster integration in every mode of delivery, should not be underestimated.

Nurturing intercultural integration, understanding and engagement

Cautious engagement describes the impact of unaddressed implicit biases among the student community, which negatively influenced intercultural engagement, group working dynamics and integration. Implicit biases are described as stereotypes and pre-conceptions about people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds that occur outside of our conscious awareness (Chin, Quinn, Dhaliwal, & Lovison, 2020). Focussing on differences in cultures, learning behaviours, academic ability and prior educational experiences, created dilemmas, fears and sometimes conflicts. Drawing on the conceptualisation of 'othering' that is described in the broader literature (Udah & Singh, 2019), helps us understand the negative impact of overstating cultural differences. Various examples of unconscious 'othering' was evident in the data, where students described a 'them' and 'us' way of thinking, which either directly or indirectly resulted in exclusionary behaviours. Marcelin, Siraj, Victor, Kotadia, and Maldonado (2019) highlight the importance of recognising and mitigating implicit biases as a means of creating an inclusive learning environment. Although participants grew to respect cultural difference, apprehension and hesitancy remained in integrating and caution was evident when engaging within the culturally diverse learning environment. There were limited opportunities to challenge this way of thinking, which ultimately created tensions with group working and intercultural integration. These findings highlight the importance of seeing cultural diversity as an agent for inclusivity, but also highlights the urgent need to review how cultural difference is conceptualised as a means of reducing uncertainties, misunderstandings and tensions. Reviewing narrow conceptualisations of cultural difference is paramount in developing mutual understanding and learning to respect cultural difference (Kaihlanen et al., 2019).

Although students valued opportunities to learn about different cultures and international dimensions of healthcare within the culturally diverse environment, intercultural learning quite often was an incidental occurrence. These findings highlight the importance of ensuring intercultural learning outcomes are explicit and more visible in programme and module learning outcomes. Focusing on programme success and achieving high grades took precedence over the intercultural learning journey. Despite the growing emphasis on the importance of effective intercultural learning for intercultural competence development (O' Brien et al., 2021), maximising intercultural learning opportunities was not a requirement for success on the students programme of study. Teaching faculty need to appreciate the value of widening cultural diversity in the learning environment as a means of nurturing intercultural dialogue and understanding. Cachia, Lynam, and Stock (2018) highlight the importance of reviewing the meaning of academic success for students and call for a more comprehensive understanding of success that captures the need for knowledge development and employability skills, in a globally connected world. However, educators play a critical role in fostering the importance of valuing cultural diversity and maximising intercultural learning opportunities as a means of preparing graduates to work in an interconnected globalised world. Students consistently acknowledged the importance of protecting their personal,

professional and academic identities. Some international students viewed diversity of learning behaviours and methods, differing experiences in clinical practice and previous educational experiences, as potential obstacles to achieving high grades. These findings confirm the importance of ‘humanising the learning environment’ as asserted by others (Devis-Rozental & Farquharson, 2020). Although not unique to culturally diverse learning environments, the subtle nuances of notions of superiority and inferiority, self-preservation and exclusionary behaviours, as a means of protecting identities, is an area that requires attention. Occasionally, these ideologies may have helped self-rationalise the segregation and intercultural disengagement approaches adopted, as students tended to interact and integrate more with students of similar cultural backgrounds.

Teaching faculty have a critical role to play in supporting integration, inclusiveness and comfort in engaging cross-culturally, incorporating culturally responsive pedagogies. Learning to value other cultures and identities, as a means of encouraging and promoting engagement and connectedness in the culturally diverse environment is paramount.

The importance of culturally responsive pedagogies

Although participants gradually developed shared acceptance and understanding of cultural difference, this took time. Developing respect for cultural difference was critical for developing shared acceptance, but quite often this did not occur until the completion of the programme. Providing opportunities for culturally diverse students to become comfortable and confident when engaging in intercultural learning activities was critical. Developing connections not just between students, but also between students and educators is also recommended (Gillespie et al., 2017; Jeffreys, 2014). The findings of this study echo these sentiments, but remind us of the fundamental role educators have in this process. In particular, the importance of adopting culturally responsive pedagogies as a means of nurturing intercultural integration and inclusiveness, is critical. Culturally responsive pedagogy uses cultural awareness and knowledge in learning and teaching approaches in exploring differing globalised perspectives (Day & Beard, 2019). This necessitates an understanding of inclusive teaching approaches and the development of cultural mediation skills in managing intercultural relationships (Murray & McConachy, 2018). Although several teaching faculty articulated their desire to adapt their learning philosophies and teaching practices within this new culturally diverse environment, the experiences articulated by students identified further opportunities for negotiating diversity of learning needs and integration. Teaching faculty, while articulating their awareness of the importance of facilitating culturally responsive teaching, their actions did not always align with the philosophies underpinning culturally responsive pedagogy. The narrow interpretation of culturally responsive pedagogy described, may be associated with the lack of preparation received for rapidly evolving cultural diverse learning environments. Chen et al. (2020) report that teaching faculty feel ill prepared to facilitate cross-cultural learning in the nursing classroom. In an era of expanding international education initiatives, the importance of preparing and supporting educators in developing culturally responsive teaching and culturally sensitive classroom management strategies is vital.

Strengths and limitations

A strength of this study is the adoption of a qualitative descriptive design to gain insights into the intricacies of learning and teaching in widening culturally diverse learning environments, integrating data from teaching faculty, domestic and international students. Qualitative descriptive research design endeavors to explore and gain insights and understanding of new and novel experiences (Busetto et al., 2020). In seeking to understand teaching and learning within a rapidly expanding culturally diverse learning environment, small qualitative studies may address challenges in building a body of evidence. Such findings may impact on the future of culturally diverse learning environments. A further strength of this study is the commitment of the researchers to maintaining rigor through transcript verification with participants, remaining close to participants' rich descriptions. This approach is in keeping with the understanding of transferability and credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985).

This study is limited by participation of students and teaching faculty in one HEI in Ireland and during one academic year intake, 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. Therefore, the findings of this study are only generalizable to third level institutions commencing international student education (Polit & Beck, 2021). A further limitation is the small sample size and incorporating perspectives of international students that predominantly hailed from Asia, which is based on that academic year intake. The study findings are based on participants self-reported perspectives of their experiences. There is an assumption that participants reported true accounts of their participation in a culturally diverse learning environment.

Conclusions

This study highlights the essential role HEIs and educators have in ensuring learning opportunities are equitable and builds capacity to see differing perspectives, oneself and others in more inclusive ways. HEIs 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. Educators play a critical role in supporting students' integration and intercultural learning and adopting culturally responsive pedagogies in daily practice is paramount. The need to respond carefully and sensitively to diverse learning styles in scaffolding learning, whilst acknowledging individual strengths and limitations of culturally diverse students and responding to learning needs informed by culture, is essential. Students also need to appreciate the value of understanding self and others in more inclusive ways.

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Ethics approval and consent to participate

Ethical approval from the University of Limerick's research and ethics committee (EHSREC 2013-11-17) was granted.

Data availability statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article. Full transcripts of data are not publicly available as full transcripts contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants. Supporting data are available on request from the corresponding author, [KM].

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