

Maximising the *co* in academic coursework and assessment

Margaret Russell



CO CO CO The Consultancy Project

The **Consultancy Project** on our ELC university **Plymouth Business School Module** course **Professional Business Communication** enhances the concept of *co* through collaboration and co-creation between a **business client**, an **academic tutor**, and a cohort of **international business students**.

Business client - University of Plymouth's **Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) team**

EDI requests for the students to research into and explore what 'cultural factors can inhibit international students from engaging in' the following areas:

- Completing the EDI eLearning and student EDI survey
 - **Joining societies or networks**
 - Engaging in lectures
 - **Understanding and completing assessments**
 - Joining school committees or becoming student reps
-
- Areas in blue were chosen by student groups.
 - Student groups would include recommendations in their chosen project area to address the business client's (EDI) requests.



Intercultural 'differences' suggested by EDI client for students to explore cultural 'barriers' in their research

Visible (race, ethnicity, clothes etc) and non-visible (traditions, experiences, beliefs, religion)

Individualist (individual rights & concerns, independence, personal identity) **vs. Collectivist** (unity, selflessness, altruism) Cultures

'Differences' in culture may lead to **miscommunication or misunderstanding** between staff and students in teaching and learning situations

To what extent are we all just individuals

Can labels inhibit choices and beings

Language – native may be different, English may be second language, different phrases.

Communication styles – formal/informal, how to address people (first name, family name, Mr/Mrs, Mam etc.), emotion, eye contact.

Learning styles or ways of working – independent, group work, lots of support vs. very little.

Should belonging be focus rather than differences

What really is 'belonging'

Body language – shaking hands, hugging, personal space, bowing, hand gestures.

Understand how your own **views, assumptions and beliefs are shaped by your culture and experiences.**

Attitudes to time (some cultures value punctuality and others are more flexible towards time; some cultures are future-oriented and others are past-oriented).

(Merabet,2024)

Consultancy Project process - scaffolded

Collaborative group **data collection** (secondary data; primary data – questionnaires to students, and interviewing EDI team)



Group **academic poster** – preparation for business report and presentation



Individual **business report**



Group **presentation** to EDI client of project's findings and recommendations.
Opportunity for EDI to ask questions and initiate a collaboration



Example project:
Joining societies and networks

Methodology

Primary Data Collection

Quantitative Data: A questionnaire was administered to 50 *students* at the University of Plymouth. The questionnaire consisted of closed-ended questions and Likert scale questions designed to quantify the impact of a hindrance (Taherdoost, 2020).

Qualitative Data: Three university EDI department members were interviewed in depth. The interviews aimed to gain insight into existing initiatives to support international students and identify gaps in current EDI practice.

1. Are you an international student or a home student?

A. International student B. Home student

2. Have you joined any clubs?

A. Yes B. No

3. If you joined a society, what factors do you think motivated you to join?

A. Interests B. Social needs C. Career development D. Language

E. Other_____

4. If you did not join a society, what was the main reason?

A. Lack of interest B. Concerns about language barriers

C. Concerns about cultural differences

D. Uncertainty about social unknowns E. Other_____

5. Compared with domestic students, what do you think is the biggest cultural difference that international students face in participating in societies and networks?

A. Different communication styles (e.g., euphemism or directness)

B. Etiquette and customs

C. Internet and social media usage habits

D. Social and religious customs

E. Greater emphasis on individual achievement

F. Greater emphasis on collective interest

6. How often do intercultural misunderstandings occur within clubs or networks you've participated in?

A. Very frequently, it's a significant problem.

B. Sometimes, but it's manageable.

C. Rarely, we generally understand each other well.

D. Never, I haven't experienced any misunderstandings.

Joining societies and networks - Results

3. If you joined a society, what factors do you think motivated you to join?
 A. Interests B. Social needs C. Career development D. Language E. Other_____

Personal interests	21
Social interaction needs	10
Career development opportunities	5
Language practice	7
Other	7

4. If you did not join a society, what was the main reason?
 A. Lack of interest B. Concerns about language barriers
 C. Concerns about cultural differences
 D. Uncertainty about social unknowns E. Other_____

Lack of interest	18
Concerns about language barriers	16
Concerns about cultural differences	8
Uncertainty about social unknowns	2
Other	6

5. Compared with domestic students, what do you think is the biggest cultural difference that international students face in participating in societies and networks?
 A. Different communication styles (e.g., euphemism or directness)
 B. Etiquette and customs
 C. Internet and social media usage habits
 D. Social and religious customs
 E. Greater emphasis on individual achievement
 F. Greater emphasis on collective interest

Different communication styles	12
Etiquette and customs	17
Internet and social media usage habits	8
Social and religious customs	8
Greater emphasis on individual achievement	2
Greater emphasis on collective interests	3

6. How often do intercultural misunderstandings occur within clubs or networks you've participated in?
 A. Very frequently, it's a significant problem.
 B. Sometimes, but it's manageable.
 C. Rarely, we generally understand each other well.
 D. Never, I haven't experienced any misunderstandings.

Very frequently	6
Sometimes	28
Rarely	12
Never	4

- **Lack of interest 18%** is the main factor for not joining, but also **language barriers 16%**.
- **33% etiquette and customs** biggest barriers, but also **different communication styles**.
- **More than 80% of students believe that intercultural misunderstandings still exist** in participating in clubs and networks



UoP INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITH JOINING SOCIETIES OR NETWORKS

Shuwen/10923026 Michael/10889605

Introduction

Universities are committed to equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI). This is to promote the inclusion of difference (Wolbring & Lillywhite, 2021). The module Consultancy Project works with the business client in EDI at the University of Plymouth. The project investigated international students' engagement in societies and networks. EDI expresses opposition to all forms of discrimination, although the practice of EDI can still present difficulties and challenges (Tavares, 2024).

Aims

- To investigate student engagement with joining societies or networks, and understand the challenges faced by international students.
- To recommend some practical methods to improve students engagement with joining societies and networks.

Rationale

To understand why students might more, or less, be engaged with joining societies and networks.

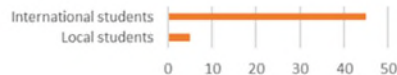
Methodology

- The primary data was collected from a questionnaire with 50 international students at the University of Plymouth and an interview with a senior EDI administrator.
- Secondary data was researched on EDI, Intercultural understanding and international students in uk university.

Questions

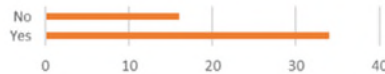
1. Are you an international student or home student?

A. International student B. Home student



2. Have you joined any clubs?

A. Yes B. No



3. If you joined a society, what factors do you think motivated you to join?

A. Interests B. Social needs C. Career development D. Language E. Other_____



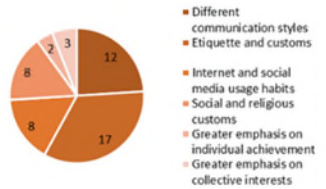
4. If you did not join a society, what was the main reason?

A. Lack of interest B. Concerns about language barriers C. Concerns about cultural differences D. Uncertainty about social unknowns E. Other_____



5. Compared with domestic students, what do you think is the biggest cultural difference that international students face in participating in societies and networks?

A. Different communication styles (e.g., euphemism or directness) B. Etiquette and customs C. Internet and social media usage habits D. Social and religious customs E. Greater emphasis on individual achievement F. Greater emphasis on collective interest



6. How often do intercultural misunderstandings occur within clubs or networks you've participated in?

A. Very frequently, it's a significant problem. B. Sometimes, but it's manageable. C. Rarely, we generally understand each other well. D. Never, I haven't experienced any misunderstandings.



Results and discussion

The responses from international students show that cultural and language barriers are significant obstacles to participating in clubs and networks. About 33% of international students do not join clubs or societies; of these, 36% do not participate due to language barriers, and 18% due to cultural differences. These barriers are notably absent among local students. Additionally, 22% of international students struggle with communication styles and 33% with local etiquette and customs, highlighting a disconnect between their expectations and the prevailing norms.

At the same time, discussions with EDI supported the idea that cultural and language barriers are significant barriers to participation in clubs and networks. For this reason EDI has set up a suggestion box and related lectures to help international students integrate.

Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that although international students actively try to participate in student clubs and networks, there are several barriers that hinder their full participation. These barriers include language proficiency, cultural misunderstandings, and unfamiliarity with local customs. In order to increase participation, EDI departments must implement targeted support mechanisms such as one-on-one language assistance at language cafés, soliciting international students by email or physical flyers and inclusive event planning such as icebreaker parties. Helping international students develop the concept of EDI ensures that they have a fulfilling and inclusive educational experience.

References

Tavares, V., 2024. Feeling excluded: International students experience equity, diversity and inclusion. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 28(8), pp.1551-1568.
 Wolbring, G. and Lillywhite, A., 2021. Equity/equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in universities: the case of disabled people. *Societies*, 11(2), p.49.

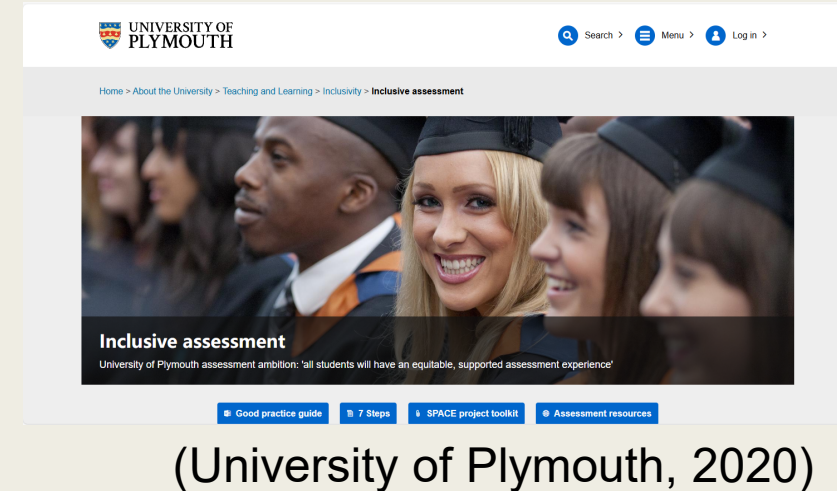
Example student slide: Understanding and completing assessments Secondary Research

In order to provide our EDI client with more accurate and reliable information, secondary data research was conducted to compare to our primary findings.

- Searched university EDI related websites,
- Relevant literature was found in Google Scholar search engine

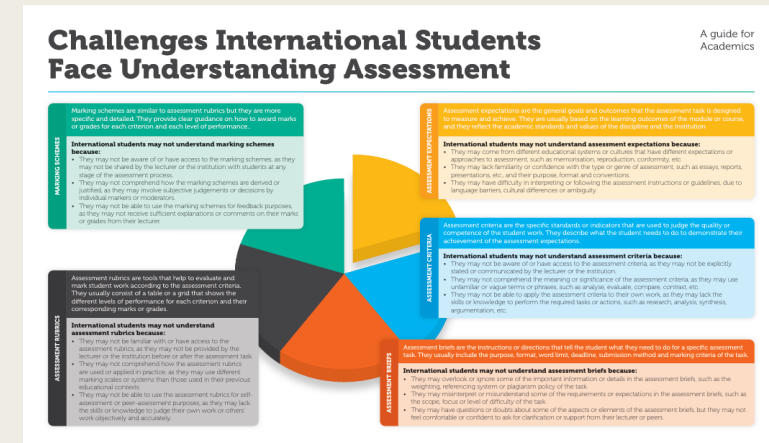
Differences in culture may lead to miscommunication or misunderstanding between staff and students in teaching and learning situations (Velliaris and Pierce, 2017)

Learning styles in Asian countries are more collectivist, while European countries like the UK are more individualistic (Evans, 2006)



The screenshot shows the University of Plymouth website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the university logo, search, menu, and login options. Below the navigation bar, there is a header with the text 'Home > About the University > Teaching and Learning > Inclusivity > Inclusive assessment'. The main content area features a large image of students in graduation gowns and caps. Below the image, the text reads 'Inclusive assessment' and 'University of Plymouth assessment ambition: 'all students will have an equitable, supported assessment experience''. At the bottom of the page, there are several blue buttons: 'Good practice guide', '7 Steps', 'SPACE project toolkit', and 'Assessment resources'.

(University of Plymouth, 2020)



The infographic is titled 'Challenges International Students Face Understanding Assessment' and is subtitled 'A guide for Academics'. It features a central circular diagram with five segments, each representing a challenge. The challenges are: 1. **MARKING SCHEMES**: International students may not understand marking schemes because they may not be aware of or have access to the marking schemes, they may not understand how the marking schemes are devised or used, and they may not be able to use the marking schemes for feedback purposes. 2. **ASSESSMENT EXPECTATIONS**: Assessment expectations are the general goals and outcomes that the assessment task is designed to measure and achieve. They are usually based on the learning outcomes of the module or course, and they reflect the assessment objectives and values of the programme and the institution. 3. **ASSESSMENT CRITERIA**: Assessment criteria are the specific standards or indicators that are used to judge the quality or competence of the student work. They describe what the student needs to do to demonstrate their achievement of the assessment objectives. 4. **ASSESSMENT BRIEFS**: Assessment briefs are the instructions or descriptions that tell the student what they need to do for a specific assessment task. They usually include the purpose, format, word limit, deadline, submission method and marking criteria of the task. 5. **ASSESSMENT RUBRICS**: Assessment rubrics are tools that help to evaluate and mark student work according to the assessment criteria. They usually consist of a table or a grid that shows the different levels of performance for each criterion and their corresponding marks or grades.

(King's College London, 2023)

Questionnaire for: **Understanding and Completing assessments**

1. Do you find the academic language used in assessment instructions easy to understand?

(Always 10%, Usually 30%, Sometimes 36%, Rarely 17%, Never 7%)

2. How often do you seek clarification on assessment requirements?

(Always, Often 30%, Sometimes 24%, Rarely, Never)

3. How would you describe your preferred learning style for assessment

(Independent 24%, Group-based 50%, Both equally)

4. Describe any specific challenges you face in understanding or completing assessments due to cultural differences.

- Language 10%
- UK Academic Culture 10%
- Overload of information 10%
- Too little information 10%
- No or little check of understanding 17%
- Not enough individual support 10%
- Time 27%
- Other:

5. What changes do you think could help make the assessment process more inclusive and supportive?

(Open question) More feedback 27%; cultural training 20%; clarification opportunities 17%

Example poster: Understanding assessments

Introduction

Students from diverse backgrounds can face distinct challenges when engaging with various aspects of university life (Popov *et al.*, 2012), particularly in understanding and completing assessments. These challenges often stem from cultural differences, communication barriers, and varying expectations regarding educational practices (Rendon, 1994).

This poster highlights the cultural barriers to student engagement, focusing on both international and home students, and proposes evidence-based recommendations to foster an inclusive academic environment where all students can thrive.

Methodology

Primary Research: Formal interview with Senior Administrator-EDI support of Plymouth University; A questionnaire to collect data on the experiences of international and domestic students in university assessment.

Secondary Research: A review of existing literature on intercultural communication, learning styles, and inclusive pedagogical practices provide a theoretical framework for understanding barriers and inform the design of effective interventions.

Results

Approximately 40% of participants reported that they "sometimes" understand the academic language in assessments, while 20% usually understand, and 20% rarely do. Additionally, 35% of students often seek clarification, and 30% seek it sometimes, highlighting the need for clearer instructions. Regarding learning styles, 50% prefer group-based learning, while 25% prefer independent learning. The most common challenges were language barriers (30%) and adapting to UK academic culture (20%). Key suggestions for improvement included simplifying language (25% of responses) and providing more feedback (20%), indicating a need for accessible communication and continuous support.

1. Do you find the academic language used in assessment instructions easy to understand? (Always, Usually, Sometimes, Rarely, Never)

Ease of Understanding Academic Language in Assessment Instructions



2. How often do you seek clarification on assessment requirements? (Always, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never)

How Often Students Seek Clarification on Assessment Requirements



3. How would you describe your preferred learning style for assessment? (Independent, Group-based, Both equally)

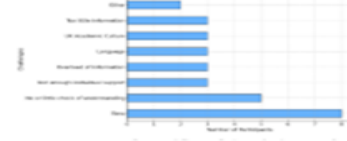
Preferred Learning Style Among Participants



4. Describe any specific challenges you face in understanding or completing assessments due to cultural differences.

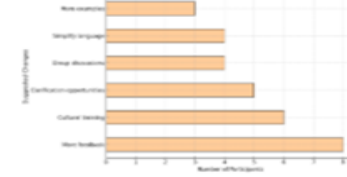
- Language
- UK Academic Culture
- Overload of information
- Too little information
- No or little check of understanding
- Not enough individual support
- Time
- Other:

Challenges Faced by Students in Understanding or Completing Assessments



5. What changes do you think could help make the assessment process more inclusive and supportive? (Open question)

Suggested Changes for Improving Assessment Process



Discussion and Analysis

The data shows that 40% of students struggle with academic language, and 35% often seek clarification, indicating a need for clearer assessment instructions. Half of the participants prefer group-based learning, suggesting that collaborative approaches could enhance engagement. Key challenges include language barriers (30%) and adapting to UK academic culture (20%). Simplifying language and providing more feedback were the most common suggestions for improvement. Addressing these issues by simplifying communication, enhancing group-based activities, and offering continuous feedback can help improve student engagement and understanding of assessments.

Recommendation & Conclusion

To improve student engagement, it is essential to address cultural barriers in assessments. Help students understand British academic culture by providing courses and providing language support for specific terms. Educators are also trained in cultural sensitivity to create inclusive assessments that take into account diverse backgrounds. Inclusive assessments benefit not only international students but also enhance the learning experience for everyone, fostering a sense of belonging and equity across the student body.

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Student Recommendations for **Joining societies and networks**

Issue	Solution/Recommendation
<p>Language</p> <p><i>International students can experience serious language barriers and difficulties and anxieties in cultural integration</i></p> <p>(Risager, 2020; Lorenzetti et al., 2023; Leersnyder et al., 2022; Rienties et al., 2012; Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer, 2019)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Promote language workshops and events ie on university screens (students don't read emails :-), and hold these in easily accessible rooms/places - Improve ease of use/accessibility of websites for joining societies and networks (overload of info/fees complicated/UK social media different)
<p>Culture</p> <p><i>Social and club activities often reflect nuances of the local culture that may be unfamiliar to international students</i></p> <p>(Stein and de Andreotti, 2016; Trujillo, 2021; Scott, 2015; Tavares, 2021; Akter and Shah, 2024)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 'Suggestion boxes' for improvement ideas at society events - Joining events with a home/current UoP student buddy ie from Hello project for support - Encourage international students to lead clubs/societies and related online resources based on their interests - Promote participation using feedback from international students <p>SU can provide assistance in joining societies</p>



Student Recommendations for Understanding and completing assessments

Issue	Solution/Recommendation
<p>Time management is an additional 'obstacle' for international students (Jackson, 2017)</p>	<p>Reduce number of assessments from 3 to 2 (Sem 1 is only 11 weeks). Early familiarisation with teaching and assessment methods</p>
<p>Language a significant 'barrier' for international students (Mei, 2017; Popov et al, 2012; Arkoudis and Tran, 2010)</p>	<p>Cooperate/co-creation of accessibility of assessment briefs (students and lecturers) ie: glossaries for terms, and ELC workshops on HOW to understand and <i>develop</i> assessment skills</p>
<p>Fact-checking of assessment info Students hesitant to seek clarification</p>	<p>Inclusion of this in teaching schedule, ie 'hidden/ + anonymous' chat box/online platform for questions during lectures, and egs of completed assessments to clarify expectations</p>
<p>Group-based assignments</p>	<p>Shared/collaborative-learning in research to reduce cultural isolation, but...individual assignments</p>
<p>Feedback</p>	<p>Improve quality of feedback/feedforwards – feedback styles. Formative assessments – independent learning. Tutorials for drafts</p>
<p>Cultural training Cultural differences play crucial role in students' engagement and performance (Prodanova and Kocarev, 2024; Gay, 2018; Velliaris and Pierce, 2017)</p>	<p>Cultural sensitivity training for staff/communication workshops ie: student inhibitions re asking questions/interrupting, critical thinking skills, lecturers can adapt use of language to aid understanding</p>



Slide from student presentation: Recommendations

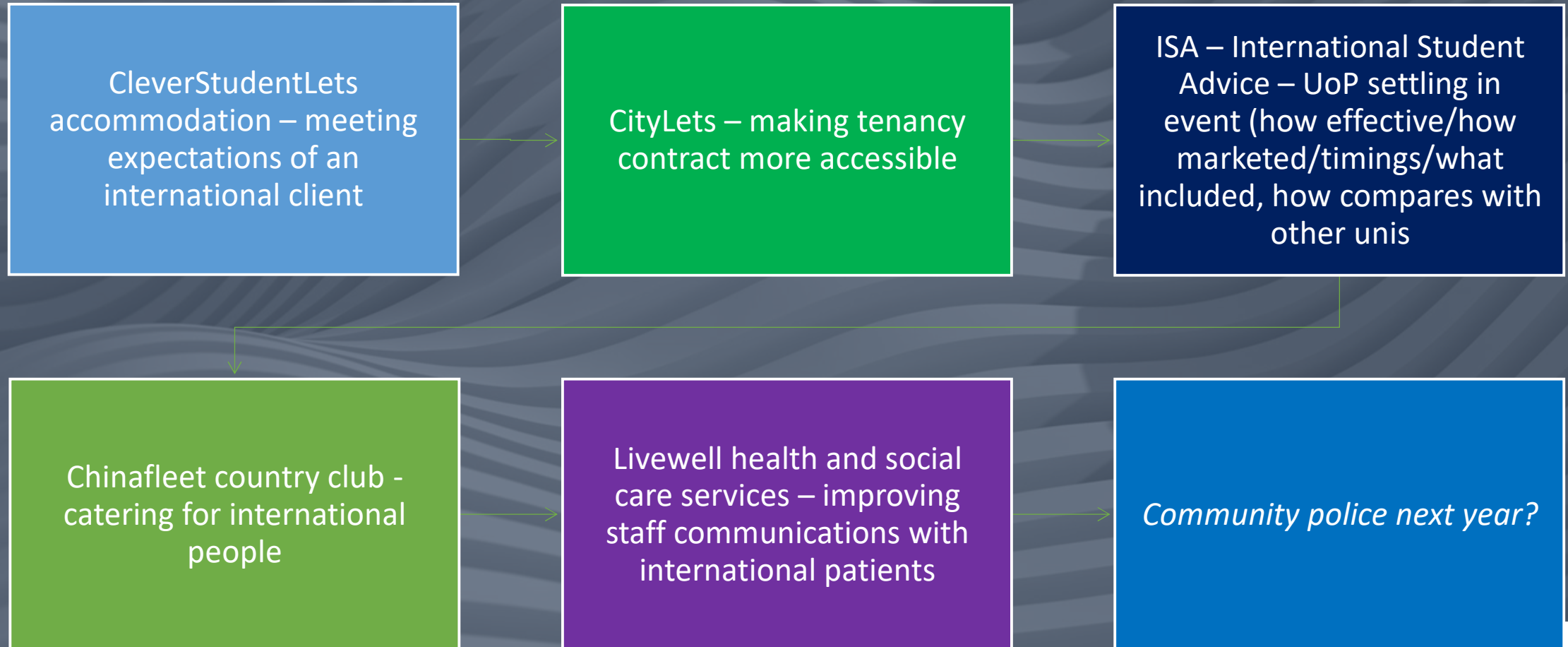
- Current students participate in the **formulating of assessment requirements** for the freshman of next year.

Current students participate in the development of the next student assessment requirements to ensure that the requirements developed are better understood from the perspective of the students



(Jacobson, 2021)

Previous Consultancy Project clients:



Course input –
 Consultancy Project
 process was created
 with course input on
 various aspects and
 theories of
 cooperative cultural
 communication

NB. Critical Reflection essay on
 Project was 3rd and final
 assessment

25/9/24	Induction	Module DLE, aims, SOW, Consultancy Project brief + marking criteria
2/10/24	Weds	Personal presentations, EDI presentation, Intercultural awareness activity
4/10/24	Fri	Intercultural differences discussion, Project focus areas, Questionnaire ppt, Poster ppt, Academic skills
9/10/24	Weds	Referencing activity, Reporting verbs, summarising, and paraphrasing. Culture, and Communication ppts
11/10/24	Fri	Tutorials – questions/aire and research so far
16/10/24	Weds	Reports ppt. Jigsaw reading of a report. Sections of a report. Communication skills self-audit. Check posters and questions
18/10/24	Fri	Actual SOW so far. Critical Reflection brief + marking criteria. Primary data from formal EDI interview. List of secondary data sources. Check posters and questions.
23/10/24	Weds	Discussion section definition + jigsaw reading + language use. Final draft posters
25/10/24	Fri	Presentation guidelines/language. Posters in class presentation. Mid Semester feedback
30/10/24	Weds	Tutorials report
1/11/24	Fri	Tutorials report
7 November	Thurs	READING WEEK Report deadline
13/11/2024 7	Weds	Giving presentations input/fbk
15/11/2024	Fri	Tutorials presentations. Communicating in groups
20/11/2024 8	Weds	Presenting group/teamwork theories. Skills in future employability ppt
22/11/2024	Fri	Consultancy Project presentations
27/11/2024 9	Weds	Writing a Reflection
29/11/2024	Fri	Emotional intelligence/empathy + case studies ppts
4/12/2024 10	Weds	Case studies presentations + effective communication framework
6/12/2024	Fri	Case study roleplays + effective communication framework. Draft reflections
11/12/2024 11	Weds	Tutorials reflections. Feedback form
13/12/2024	Fri	Tutorials Reflections
19 December	Thurs	Critical reflection essay deadline



Impact

Using an action-oriented approach, the students were active co-creators of knowledge critically developing ideas and solving problems and this tended to fuel the students' engagement, sense of ownership and real achievement (Piccardo and North, 2019; Matthews, 2016; Bovill, 2020).

There were diverse opportunities for students to develop real-life academic and professional skills, particularly in global communication and awareness of EDI.

Through collaboration and a supportive network, original academic work was produced with useful recommendations for the EDI client to improve cultural understanding not only within the university community, but also the wider community (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).



Student feedback

- As I look back on this EDI project, I realise that the experience has sharpened my research and analytical skills, and has brought to my attention many details such as language skills that I would not have noticed. Most importantly, the insights gained from exploring cultural perceptions have given me a deeper understanding of the complexities involved in effectively implementing these EDI policies. I have realised the need to integrate EDI policies within organisations and these insights will benefit me in my future career, particularly in roles that require the development of equality policies and the creation of inclusive working environments
- In researching barriers to international student participation in societies and networks at the UoP, I recognized that EDI is not only a theoretical concept, but also an area that needs to be explored and improved in practice, so it is important to analyze the barriers in depth and provide targeted and practical advice
- The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Consultancy Project offers a valuable opportunity to examine cross-cultural obstacles in academic assessment while developing professional and collaborative abilities.
- This project has improved my English communication skills, both written and oral
- Gaining insight into the requirements of my client has enabled me to gain a deeper comprehension of the principles underlying EDI and to appreciate its capacity to effect transformative change in academic and professional contexts.
- This project has shown that, I found that there is a lack of awareness of EDI on the university campus, particularly among international students
- Finally, I really realised that the university's EDI department helps to create an equal learning environment for all students.



EDI client feedback



The findings from these projects are valuable in helping us understand how intercultural differences may create barriers to international students engaging with academic assessments and student societies. The project recommendations offer practical suggestions as to how we can address these barriers so that we can better support students from all cultures.



External Examiner Comments on ELC316 module

I cannot stress enough how fantastic, innovative, and engaging your Consultancy Project assessment is. Not only is it in line with current UoP and national EDI agenda, but also equips students with valuable and current skills and knowledge that go beyond EAP. I am unsure whether you have been sharing this assessment practice more widely within UoP and/or EAP communities, but if you have not, I strongly recommend you consider doing it.



Conclusion

The collaborative practices used on the ELC316 Consultancy Project module align with social constructivist theories, where learning occurs through social interaction and the sharing of diverse perspectives (Wenger-Traynor and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

The learning process on the Consultancy project can be deemed innovative and meaningful with its focus on students **doing** the real-life co-creation of the academic work.

Similar projects can help to cultivate global citizens by enhancing and personalising the transformative potential of the student experience.



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Thank you 😊

Any questions?



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