

Negotiating interculturality in internationalising higher education: a multi-voiced exploration

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Abstract

In this article, we examined an oft-observed ‘interaction problem’ in the internationalising classroom by adding some reflections on universities’ internationalisation-interculturality praxis. Drawing on existing research and examples, we scrutinised the ‘path’ (multicultural interaction) and the ‘goal’ (intercultural learning) entailed in the ‘problem’ through the theoretical lenses of dialogicality, space and boundary. Our exploration suggests that the ‘interaction problem’ was possibly rooted more in the educators’ discursive construction than in students’ motivation. Meanwhile, the students’ experiences showed that they may indeed have engaged with organic processes of intercultural learning through multicultural interaction, but the knowledge they consciously took away may have remained confined to essentialist understandings. For intercultural learning to be transformative, we suggest that it is crucial for educators to recognise themselves as intercultural actors (rather than experts) and reflexively engage with situated knowledge about interculturality emerging from local practices.

Keywords: group work; interaction; interculturality; intercultural learning; internationalisation

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Introduction

In universities’ internationalisation efforts, an intercultural element has existed for some time (Robson & Wihlborg, 2019). In the domain of practice, academic courses developed for enhancing students’ intercultural skills have been on the increase (Collins, 2018; Zotzman, 2011). In recent years, there has been some detailed

critical work regarding the ‘intercultural’ concept (e.g., Dervin et al., 2020; Ferri, 2018; Holmes et al., 2022; López-Rocha, 2021; R’boul, 2022). However, the term ‘interculturality’ (used hereafter as its noun form) has still been employed by many as a hollow buzzword for its instrumental value (e.g., Bassani & Buchem, 2019; Collins, 2018; De Hei et al., 2020; Liang & Schartner, 2022). Studies have shown that across the universities interculturality can be approached in multiple, even conflicting, ways (Collins, 2018; Trede et al., 2013). In this article, we have aimed to add some reflections on the internationalisation-interculturality intersection through examining an ‘interaction problem’ often observed in internationalising higher education.

Internationalisation used to operate on a wishful thinking that students would naturally become more intercultural through exposure to different cultures, a correlation now considered by many as untenable (e.g., Buckner & Stein, 2020; Jones, 2017, 2022; Klein & Wikan, 2019; Leask & Carroll, 2011). One critique has been that students are often observed to form cultural cliques, refrain from mixing or interacting with cultural Others, and thus miss the intercultural learning opportunities (Mendoza et al., 2022; Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017). This concern, which we have broadly referred to as an ‘interaction problem’, shifts educators’ attention from cultural diversity in the physical learning environment to the intermingling in activity (Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Mendoza et al., 2022).

In this article, we scrutinised the ‘interaction problem’ from two perspectives: the ‘path’ and the ‘goal’. The ‘path’ referred to multicultural interaction. We adopted the *multicultural* term to foreground the culturally and/or ethnically diverse backgrounds (De Castro et al., 2019; Zimmermann et al., 2021) associated with the students who are interacting. In comparison, we examined the ‘goal’ through the lens of intercultural learning. We chose the *intercultural* term to emphasise any culturally relevant learning (e.g., change in cultural awareness, attitude or understanding) that happened with students’ mutual exchange of ideas through their interaction (Borghetti & Qin, 2022; Shadiev & Sintawati, 2020).

To aid our exploration, we drew on interviews we conducted with university managers, lecturers, and students, within which the ‘interaction problem’ recurred across many participants’ accounts and showed interesting nuances in their perspectives. Therefore, we engaged with the relevant data to explore the ‘interaction problem’ in the educational sphere.

Specifically, we explored the ‘problem’ from two broad angles in relation to participants’ structural positions in the educational system. First, engaging with relevant literature (supported by interview excerpts from our educator participants),

we focussed on *educators* and examined how multicultural interaction has often been discussed/practised as a ‘path’ to intercultural learning. We also reviewed some typical perspectives held on intercultural learning as the ‘goal’ and discussed potential challenges therein. Our second angle focused on *students*, where we considered how students’ lived experiences of multicultural interaction can be related to intercultural learning. We did this by foregrounding a few examples from our student participants’ narratives on multicultural group work and interpreting the learning possibly occurring there.

We adopted this two-tier (i.e., educators and students) structure to potentially open a point of entry into the complex terrain of intercultural learning in the internationalising classroom. It has not been our aim to draw conclusive claims about the two groups’ voices ‘existing out there’. We have recognised multivocality as intrinsic to qualitative inquiry, manifest both *across* and *within* groups, individuals, and our researcher (re-)engagement with participants’ utterances in the (re-)construction of meaning (Aveling et al., 2015; Roulston, 2001). Therefore, we see our exploration as merely one moment in an open-ended attempt to generate questions for further debate. In this attempt, we have tried to give voice to the variety we heard where possible, a process within which our researcher voices are ‘indelibly inscribed’ (Roulston, 2001, p. 281).

Our researcher voices were influenced by critical theories on interculturality. Particularly, we adopted a Bakhtinian (1990) lens of *dialogicality* to explore the meanings of intercultural learning, to which we also added insights from theories on the learning *space* (Kostogriz, 2006) and *boundary* (Lotman, 1990). This exploration led us to speculate that in the internationalisation discourse, the intercultural affordances derived from multicultural interaction may be more romanticised than reasoned, and the oft-observed ‘interaction problem’ may be rooted more in educators’ discursive construction than in students’ motivation. The students’ experiences suggested that multicultural interaction may indeed induce an organic engagement with interculturality vis-à-vis relational dynamics. However, such engagement did not automatically surface in the students’ intercultural learning, while the intercultural knowledge the students consciously took away may have remained confined to givens (e.g., solidified portrayals of culture, Self and Other) and thus fallen short of the transformative aims intended in the internationalisation agenda. In the conclusion, we have provided some thoughts on what these might mean for educators negotiating alternative approaches to interculturality in their internationalisation praxis.

Setting the context

The data for discussion in this article were extracted from a study we carried out. The study was conducted in a post-1992 UK university where ‘UK’, ‘EU’, and ‘overseas’ students constituted roughly 50%, 15%, and 35% of the entire student population. The university strategy identified interculturality as a key aspect of promoting internationalisation of student experience and curriculum.

In that study, we recruited ten participants (including staff members and students) engaging at different levels of the university’s internationalisation project, such as policymaking, international student recruitment, teaching, and learning.

Table 1. Background information of participants

No.	Participants (Pseudonyms adopted)	Professional/Study background
1	Simon	University manager in internationalization
2	Craig	University manager in international student recruitment
3	Maria	University manager in student wellbeing and development
4	Jane	University manager in overseas exchange programmes
5	David	Lecturer in Modern languages
6	Claudia	Lecturer in Accounting
7	Rebecca	Lecturer in Marketing
8	Julian	Master’s student from Germany, studying International Business Management, with rich personal and professional experience in international contexts
9	Chris	Masters student from the UK, studying Marketing, with no study abroad experience at the time of interview
10	Liang	Masters student from China, studying Business Management, studying abroad for the first time at the time of interview.

We then interviewed each participant (at an average length of 30 minutes for each interview) (see Appendix 1 for the interview questions). More precisely, we asked the university managers to interpret the intended meaning of interculturality in the university’s policy document. We invited lecturers to describe their perceptions of interculturality and pedagogical considerations. With the university managers and lecturers, we thus adopted semi-structured interview questions (Evans & Lewis, 2018) explicitly targeting the idea of interculturality. As for the students, we mainly used a narrative interviewing strategy (Butler-Kisber, 2018) to elicit reflections on their lived experiences of interculturality, particularly with respect to multicultural group work they had completed.

For the purposes of this article, we mainly focussed on interview segments most relevant to multicultural interaction and intercultural learning. In selecting and interpreting these segments, we followed a conventional thematic approach combined with a discourse analytic element (Fairclough, 2013), targeting at units of meaning pertaining to *interaction*, *culture*, *difference*, and *learning* through both *what* was said and *how* things were said.

Problematising the ‘path’: multicultural interaction

To begin with, we have presented the ‘interaction problem’ in Simon’s words, who was then commenting on his frustrations when implementing intercultural initiatives:

One frustration is that international students stick together, and UK students stick together and the interactions between them is very small. They don’t mix as much as we would like them to. So, the challenge for us is to break that. Therefore, the students actually embrace their interaction, as a part of that is preparing them in terms of cultural awareness, getting them to be interested in that and getting them to want to learn from it.

We found that in educators’ discussion of the ‘problem’, the term interaction was usually used in two senses in relation to interculturality, either a conducive condition or an integral component. The first sense, sometimes linked to Allport’s contact hypothesis (Killick, 2015; Reid & Garson, 2017), posited that meaningful interaction—if facilitated by equal status, intergroup cooperation, common goals, and support from social and institutional authorities—provides a conducive condition for enhancing interculturality (e.g., reduced prejudice and increased tolerance between groups). The second sense implied a stronger claim, treating interaction as an integral component of interculturality, hence a ‘goal’ in itself. Below we have detailed both uses and have discussed the potential challenges which they present.

Interaction as a condition for enhancing interculturality

In the internationalisation discourse, multicultural interaction has been linked with a variety of inter-group activities between students. For instance, it has referred to surface exchange of cultural difference and social communicative activity, such as opportunities to experience other cultures and develop cross-cultural friendship

with cultural Others (Marginson & Sawir, 2011; Reid & Garson, 2017)). Sometimes, 'interaction' has referred to activities and processes involving deeper cognitive, behavioural, and affective engagement, such as purposeful participation in collaborative learning activities and socio-cultural integration between learners (Leask, 2010; Turner, 2009). We reasonably expected all these types of interaction to yield positive outcomes of some kind, such as improved academic and social satisfaction, sociocultural adjustment, and stress management (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). However, how they specifically contribute to intercultural learning has lacked robust reasoning (often accompanied by vague uses of the intercultural concept itself). Let us take collaborative learning activities as an example. Students have often been encouraged through self-selection or arranged through teacher allocation to form multicultural work groups. Our participant—Craig—was clearly a proponent:

No more than 50% of any tutorial can be any one nationality. There has got to be a mixing and if that mixing has to be forced to start with, then so be it. By making the groups more international, you are therefore driving interculturalism within every classroom.

Arguably, multicultural interaction arranged as such may increase students' amount of communication and cooperation around common tasks. However, research evidence has rendered fragile its imagined benefits for intercultural engagement. For example, Turner (2009, p. 252) discussed how her multicultural group work intervention 'failed to enable students to overcome their attitudinal or interactive difficulties', while students 'unhappily coexisted in groups but did not fully inhabit them'. Others have also noted that learning activities conducted in internationalised classrooms did not necessarily enhance students' intercultural competence (Holmes et al., 2016; Pitts & Brooks, 2017). Some have cautioned that such activities may even end with cultural segregation and reinforced stereotypes (Trede et al., 2013; Woods et al., 2011), anxieties around mindful interaction and passive xenophobia (Harrison & Peacock, 2010), and withdrawal from multicultural interaction in the future (Spencer-Oatey & Dauber, 2017).

The challenging evidence cited above warn us that multicultural interaction (especially in the form of arranged classroom activity) is unlikely to be a sufficient condition for intercultural learning and is possible to induce experiences apparently running counter to the 'goal' of the latter.

Interaction as a component of interculturality

Studies of students' multicultural interaction have traditionally followed a diagnostic and comparative paradigm, where the reasons and source of solutions for 'poor interaction' were sought from cultural differences. An example is Chinese students' 'cultural preference' for 'reticence' in the classroom, contrasted with Western values that have encouraged verbal interaction (Sang & Hiver, 2021). This cross-cultural paradigm has been critiqued for running the risk of promoting Othering and inequality, as cultural difference has often been constructed between dominant and minority groups via a 'norm-deficit' vocabulary (Marginson & Sawir, 2011).

When the key concerns at stake involved fluency in the host institution's working language and knowledge of local educational practices, many international students fell into the category of minority groups. Institutional mechanisms established within this paradigm for supporting inclusivity have usually laid an emphasis on 'normalising' these students, who were considered 'different'—in terms of 'deficient'—from the rest of the student community.

More recent work on internationalisation has tended to mitigate this ideological bias. The causes of the 'interaction problem' were sought from all concerned, with the focus shifted from cultural identity to individual attitude and motivation. For example, international students were sometimes observed to place the priority on cultural-emotional connectedness by seeking company from co-nationals, which created major stumbling blocks in the formation of culturally mixed groups (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 12). Some studies found that, at the other end, domestic/local students may not have considered it worth their time to get to know cultural Others due to demands from various commitments in life (Leask & Carroll, 2011), or were 'unwilling to move away from their home territory—whose status was privileged across the programme curriculum' (Turner, 2009, p. 252). Some considered local students as "lacking the motivation to interact" because they 'have not placed themselves in settings in which cross-cultural learning has become essential to them' (Marginson & Sawir, 2011, p. 181).

While there may be some truth in students' hesitation in multicultural interaction, what is at issue here is that their hesitation was often blamed as an impediment to intercultural learning. Alongside the ethically problematic Othering approach to assimilating international students, an alternative 'deficit' discourse has seemed to come into play. Students observed to refrain from multicultural interaction (for reasons variously associated with culturally shaped orientation, personality, practical constraint, or emotional need etc.) tended to be diagnosed as

‘problematic’. If not ‘fixed’, this ‘deficit’ was perceived to ‘fail’ students on their progression towards interculturality.

Viewed in this light, multicultural interaction has become an end in itself, sometimes explicitly discussed as an expected outcome of internationalisation (Arkoudis et al., 2013; Reid & Garson, 2017) and measured through stakeholders’ (e.g., students’) satisfaction on it (Borghetti & Zanoni, 2019). In this manner, multicultural interaction began to constitute (at least in part) the substance of interculturality. By subjecting students’ experiences to a ‘deficit’ diagnosis and containing their views within a satisfaction-dissatisfaction continuum, this interaction rhetoric tended to subordinate students’ voices to a master narrative of inclusivity and a univocal ‘truth’ on (the path towards) interculturality. Such one-sidedness was commented upon by our participants Rebecca and Claudia when they spoke of inclusivity:

The student has to want to be included and not every student wants to be included. You want every student to feel that we are inclusive, but we can’t force it on people. It’s got to be something that people choose. (Rebecca)

They [Chinese students] feel so isolated and quiet, and uninvolved. But actually, maybe they are fine with that, and it’s us that have the problem because they are not behaving in the way that we are used to. (Claudia)

As such, the interaction rhetoric evokes what O’Regan and MacDonald (2007) have referred to as ‘aporias of intercultural praxis’: when pursuing an intercultural ideal through stipulating the path(s) towards it (e.g., desirable forms of multicultural interaction), have educators been promoting a version of interculturality premised on closure rather than openness? What would be the implications if we learn *from*, rather than *about*, the ‘interaction problem’? What if we, for example, try to understand our students not as ‘patients’ awaiting a motivation diagnosis but as social actors (Page & Chahboun, 2019) showing us how they, with means and resources available to them, variously ‘act[ed] on that [universal] impulse’ to ‘withdraw from risk-ridden complexity into the shelter of uniformity’ (Bauman, 2000, pp. 179–180)? In a later section, we return to student voicing and illustrate it through a few examples from our student participants’ accounts.

Problematizing the ‘goal’: intercultural learning

The educator participants in our study concurred that an international experience was important and useful for intercultural learning, albeit with some variation in their interpretations of the latter. Some focused on cognitive aspects and others emphasised holistic personal transformation. For example, Jane talked about active learning about a different culture by being integrated within it and therefore really beginning to understand its nuances. Craig spoke of maturity and greater [personal] development resulting from experiences beyond one's comfort zone. Simon emphasised the transformational goal of higher education, being to change the way people think, the way they behave [and] change their lives. These comments convey their shared belief that difference has generative potential and, through creating a space of difference, internationalisation would help bring out that potential. However, the links between difference and intercultural learning warrant some scrutiny, as 'responses to difference can acquire multiple forms' (Kostogriz, 2006, p. 185). Philosophies germane to interculturality (c.f. Bhaktin, 1990; Lotman, 1990) have also reminded us that while the boundary induced by Self-Other difference can enable constructive change, the process is likely to be cyclical rather than linear.

Intercultural learning at an Us-Other boundary

An Us-Other boundary was easily seen in our educator participants' comments on 'difference', for example (our symbols about different markers of 'inclusion'—to be explained shortly):

... making sure that we are taking advantage of what **our*** international students bring to **us** in terms of **them** internationalising the experience of **our*** domestic students. (Simon)

... looking at integrating **our*** international students more with **our*** local students because I'm aware that there is still a disconnect. (Jane)

... our intercultural dimension comes in, in that **we** are acknowledging **other** cultures, we are recognising **other** cultures and we are welcoming **them** within the wider university community. (Craig)

From a semiotic perspective, Lotman (1990) postulated that the boundary between the internal space of our own meaning system and the external space of their system is a human cultural universal, adding that 'how this binary division is interpreted

depends on the typology of the culture' (p. 131). In the internationalisation literature, a common interpretation of this binary division has been to place it between home students and international students (reflected in our excerpts above) (e.g., Alsaifi & Shin, 2019; Arthur, 2017; Ma et al., 2020). Critical interculturalists have warned about the problems emanating from such an interpretation (e.g., Jones, 2022; Patel, 2017; Ploner, 2018). For example, the international concept, when overly emphasised, has diverted people's attention from complexities occurring within and beyond national borders (Holliday, 1999, 2010, 2018; Halualani, 2019). The Us-Other division has also worked to promote power imbalance in identity politics and legitimate practices of Othering, which are relatable to thorny issues of inter-group discrimination and exclusion (Kostogriz, 2006; Marginson & Sawir, 2011).

Kostogriz (2006) associated such a position on the Us-Other boundary with 'conservative forces', attached to the notion of 'place' as 'an a priori of human existence' (cf. Casey, 1997). 'Place' has emphasised identity construction through a sense of stability and 'feeling-at-home' and has sought to keep the Us-Other boundary clear. Thus 'conservative forces' have privileged the transmission of canonical knowledge over situated knowing, for it advocates 'an all-encompassing cultural identity of a nation [...] that fills the void of power with the aim to differentiate, control, marginalise, and normalise the cultural Other' (Kostogriz, 2006, pp. 179–180). From Lotman's (1990) semiotic perspective, this transmission of 'canonical knowledge' has precluded potential cultural change, for new meaning is only born of boundaries which see dynamic activity between forces seeking semiotic authority and contesting forces from the periphery. When semiotic spaces seek greater structural control, they are on the way to lose their 'reserve of indeterminacy', thus becoming 'inflexible and incapable of further development' (p. 134).

Therefore, when intercultural learning was expected, discussed, and analysed at a conservative Us-Other boundary constructed *a priori*, there was a likelihood that students' learning process/es was 'plagued' by the 'cultural deficits' of those positioned on the periphery and compelled to adapt (e.g., international guests) and the lack of motivation of home students privileged as the host. Cultural exercises undertaken at this boundary may have (re)produced static intercultural knowledge that was unilateral in kind, potentially serving an assimilating agenda and running the risk of promoting prejudice.

It is noteworthy, though, that our excerpts above did not show a solid Us-Other boundary. Alongside a distinct line drawn between 'us' and 'them' in some

places (the italicised words), there was a latent attempt elsewhere to attenuate the strangeness of the Other, reflected in the discursive inclusion (the underlined words) of both ‘them’ and ‘us’ into a somewhat expanded identity of ‘us’ (the words with asterisks). This may indicate these participants’ subtle awareness that a conservative conception of difference anchored to ‘place’ is no longer suited for the university’s evolving identity in the globalising arena.

Intercultural learning at a globalist boundary

The second perspective we examined surrounded the notion of cultural diversity and borrowed Marginson and Sawir’s (2011) terminology to call it a globalist perspective. This perspective has maintained the concept of *a priori* boundaries, but in more multiplied than binary forms. It has weakened the hierarchical relationship between hosts and guests and represented all students equally as carriers of cultural resources. Often, the globalist perspective has set as its aim the promotion of social harmony and peace through an ideal of transcending—in the sense of overcoming—cultural boundaries by reconciling potential conflicts resulting from difference (Lundgren et al., 2019). It has thus celebrated certain beneficial dispositions, attributes, and skills, such as culture-specific knowledge, self-awareness, tolerance, and empathy. These have usually been discussed as constituents of intercultural competence, commonly known as ‘the ability to effectively and appropriately interact in an intercultural situation of context’ (Perry & Southwell, 2011, p. 453). Intercultural competence (and its pedagogy) has become an established line of educational research (e.g., Byram, 1997; Deardorff, 2006). It has also entered universities’ strategic discourses and everyday practices. In our case, the term intercultural competence was made explicit in the university’s internationalisation strategy. Our participants also referred to components of intercultural competence. For example, Maria talked about understanding and respect regarding how various cultures both grow together. David planned to introduce cross-cultural knowledge in the classroom, considering it a stimulator for the students’ curiosity [which] is a good thing for the learning process.

However, research on students’ intercultural competence development has increasingly reported frustration from both educators and students, while ‘success’ stories were argued to have an aspirational character and lack thorough qualitative demonstration (Dervin, 2016; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018). Moreover, the celebration of diversity has evoked critiques from poststructuralist sceptics. As famously commented by the postcolonial cultural critic Homi Bhabha (1994, p. 37), ‘cultural diversity is created through a liberal notion of multiculturalism, which assigns

culture with primordial unity or fixity’ and represents cultures as equally valid sources, rather than power-laden production, of meaning. Critical interculturalists have built on this lens of analysis to interrogate the essentialist, de-politicised orientation with the globalist perspective, which places discrete cultures and personal intercultural competence at the centre and represents intercultural experiences as neutral cultural exchange (e.g., Guilherme, 2002; Halualani, 2019; Holliday, 2020; Mallman et al., 2021; Moon, 2013).

Pointed questions and comments have been made, such as ‘how to tolerate others’ intolerance, let alone accept and respect it’ (James, 2005, p. 318), ‘what if the “other” fails to find interesting the idea of their empathetic understanding of the powerful’ (Jones, 1999, p. 299), and ‘intercultural dialogue rarely occurs among people with equal access to power’ (Gorski, 2008, p. 523). Thus, despite its admirable goals, the globalist perspective has arguably masked important issues concerning social actors’ agency, relational aspects of communication, contextual contingencies, and power asymmetries (Gorski, 2008; Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; Marginson & Sawir, 2011).

Classroom activities unfolding at a globalist boundary have likely generated essentialist understandings of diverse cultures and encouraged the cultivation of intercultural competence transcending specific cultural values. As discussed above, these types of intercultural knowledge may not have been adequate for students to deal with the complexity of social realities, or simply difficult to attain. Some commentators have gone further to criticise the globalist perspective for its compliance and complicity with neo-liberal interests through promoting the façade of reconciled cultural differences and thereby helping sustain the status quo of social hegemony and marginalisation (Gorski, 2008; Kostogriz, 2006). These concerns have led to proposals of a more radical shift of intercultural education away from the cultural Other and towards systems of power and control, on the grounds that ‘culture and identity differences may affect personal interactions, but more importantly, they affect one’s access to power’ (Gorski, 2008, p. 522).

We agree with the critiques of decontextualised approaches to intercultural learning. However, we caution that educators should not sideline the constructive role that Otherness plays. From a dialogical perspective (cf. Bakhtin, 1990), Otherness is ubiquitous in any human relations. Intercultural learning—if conceived as a transformative process—entails the expansion of an individual’s horizon through acting on Otherness towards the destructing and re-authoring of Self. The expansion relies on the individual’s capacity to engage with the excess of seeing and knowing only possessed by the Other (and inaccessible to Self) through

its vantage point *outside* Self (Bakhtin, 1990, p. 23). This capacity is more likely to be acquired through educated efforts than simply being innate (Kostogriz, 2006).

We thus echo critical interculturalists' recommendation of a paradigm shift for intercultural learning from the *cultural* to the *relational* (Dervin, 2016; Hoskins & Sallah, 2011; Marginson & Sawir, 2011). We particularly emphasise a direction that *both* attends to systemic influences on communicative dynamics (necessarily involving consideration of e.g., inter-national, inter-ethnic, and inter-religious matters) *and* is oriented towards the generative potential of Self-Other dialogue in individually operated communication.

Students' experiences of interculturality: some examples

In this section, we have explored how the complexities associated with the 'interaction problem' may be embodied in students' lived experiences of interculturality. We have done this through an analysis of three episodes extracted (see Appendix 2) from our student participants' narratives of multicultural group work, which we considered particularly illustrative of moments where Self meets an Other. We interpreted the intercultural learning taking place there. Specifically, we explored the boundaries at which intercultural learning occurred, the forms it took, and the relational dynamics that may have shaped the learning processes.

Self-Other boundaries: A priori and a posteriori

All the three episodes (see Appendix 2) involved some kind of tension, which surfaced the potential boundaries where the students constructed the Self-Other dyad. Their representations of Self and Other were evidently interspersed with broad identity markers, including international students, Western, and specific nationalities. However, the ways they used these identity markers did not seem to manifest a straightforward host-guest (i.e., home-international) or globalist boundary (i.e., cultural diversity) as previously discussed.

If defined by passport identity, Liang's group (with members from China, Sudan, Germany, and Russia) could be considered fully international. Arguably, Liang constructed a boundary approximating one between host and guest despite the absence of home students, by drawing on communication styles in group discussion (e.g., those demonstrating Western assertiveness) and English proficiency (the language of instruction in the host institution). This boundary helped him understand the secondary guest status he perceived of himself vis-à-vis

an imagined superior Other, whom he referred to as ‘domestic’ or ‘Western’, even though the actual cultural Others in his group were neither ‘domestic’ nor indisputably ‘Western’. The boundary was conveyed in how Liang employed the international student marker (and the collective ‘we’) not to indicate the group members’ shared geopolitical identity, but to rationalise his own limited competence, lack of ‘right’ to show negative emotions, and exclusion from group leadership. It is worth noting that this host-guest boundary was once cracked open—though not substantially re-defined—by new evidence, when Liang noted with surprise how a Western Other (from Germany) could behave just like himself by remaining quiet in group discussions.

For Chris and Julian, the Self-Other boundary seemed more between individuals than national cultural identities. Julian talked about group members’ different backgrounds and levels of efforts, considering these not really an intercultural question. Likewise, Chris did not wish to extend his problem with a Chinese student to any generalisation, commenting that ‘it’s nothing to do with culture’. These remarks were brief though, possibly functioning as disclaimers to avoid accusation of racism (cf. political correctness). Nevertheless, what we find significant here is that both Chris and Julian emphasised boundaries emerging *a posteriori* vis-à-vis the materiality of the Other they encountered, which contrasted with the previously-discussed *a priori* host-guest (home-international) and globalist boundaries circulated in the educational sphere.

Then, what kind of intercultural learning took place at these boundaries?

Intercultural learning: An emerging picture of closure and openness

A skim over the surface of the episodes (see Appendix 2) reveals some learning points revolving around cross-cultural differences and the very activity of multicultural interaction. For example, Chris noted links between “Germans” and a “hard-working” attitude. Liang learnt about “Westerners”’ intellectual “independence” and “assertiveness” in group discussion. On multicultural interaction, they learnt that ‘when it’s culturally diverse, it might provide some additional hindrances’ (Julian), ‘if I do group work again, I will choose to work with Chinese students’ (Liang). These learning points seem resonant with an essentialist mode of knowing and also connect with the ‘interaction problem’, in that the students showed more reservation than enthusiasm on multicultural interaction.

To delve further into the level of intercultural learning as personal transformation, we have applied a brief Bakhtinian analysis. The aforementioned

learning points can be seen as indicative of these participants' (heightened) self-awareness through discovery of their preferred approaches to Otherness (in multicultural group work). Under ideal conditions, Julian would have helped the Other to 'integrate'; Liang and Chris would have avoided Otherness by seeking national cultural homogeneity or like-minded collaborators. These preferences were brought to light to these students with the help of the Other, who they met as a 'mirror' (of their Self), i.e., individuals 'under-performing' according to 'expected standards', communicating 'inappropriately' in group work, or 'failing to be hard-working'. The meanings of 'expected standards', 'appropriate group communication styles', and 'hard-working attributes' seemed self-originated and were drawn upon unquestioningly. Also, there was little query about why they selected these categories from the outset for framing the Other. Here, the Other was perceived not with a unique value, but as an object of rational contemplation for Self to express its pre-set identity (Bakhtin, 1990). In Bakhtinian terms, such Self-Other interaction was *monologic*, whereby the Self remained enclosed and little transformation of its consciousness occurred. In this sense, we may tentatively say that the learning points were *not* significantly intercultural.

However, we highlight a narrative thread we consider akin to intercultural learning as dialogical transformation. When Chris narrated the problem with a Chinese group member, his reflections showed a tendency towards tentative rather than finalised interpretation (e.g., 'I don't know whether she just hadn't done any work for it or that she was actually telling the truth'; 'I don't know whether it was just that one Chinese girl [...] I've only actually worked with one Asian girl before, so I don't know'). Especially, his reflection on the Other's' problematic behaviour (i.e., 'inadequate contribution') demonstrated an opening up to alternative interpretations and an attempt of self-questioning (e.g., due to the group work schedule, 'we probably didn't give her enough time to really get to grips with it'). This was accompanied by a retrospective willingness to modify Self (e.g., 'we should have delegated the work a bit better'), a renewal of meaning that would potentially shape future actions towards better interaction with cultural Others.

The factors influencing these students' individualised engagement with Otherness would have been a topic of much value and merit further exploration, although we could not go into detail within the scope of this article. We suspect there to be a complex whole at play, encompassing (but not limited to) socio-cultural traditions, personal life trajectories, previous group work experiences, contextual particularities, and our researchers' role in the creation of the experiences we have interpreted here (Dervin, 2016; Holliday, 2018). The variation

we noted in the students' meaning-makings may also be seen as pointing to different stages in their intercultural learning, captured in the specific moments of our interviews and contextualised by their group projects undertaken over varying timeframes (from 1 to 6 weeks).

Relational dynamics in intercultural learning

The students all demonstrated multicultural interaction by negotiating ways with cultural Others to progress their collaboration especially in tense situations. Julian took charge of the project progress and put pressure on a group member. Liang mediated between group members holding conflicting opinions and persuaded the group towards a compromise. Chris helped his group ensure the quality of their work by making extra efforts to proofread the report and re-work parts delegated to another member. From the participants' accounts, we did not see any judgmental comments on cultural Others. Nor did we find overt signs of distancing stances, prejudice, or exclusion. While it was tempting to congratulate such multicultural interaction from the perspective of intercultural respect and tolerance (cf. transcendental intercultural competence), we noted how the students negotiated their interactions with pragmatic considerations and at uneven tables.

All these students mentioned assessment and time pressures. Julian was especially explicit about his pragmatic responses to an academic system hinged upon grades, money, and service. This pragmatism, evidently linked to a market-centred and neo-liberalised educational system (Zotzman, 2011), provided a context for the students' choices of 'pushy' (e.g., Julian) or 'submissive' (e.g., Liang) strategies when they interacted with the Other. When they negotiated roles of privilege and subordination with their group members, the pre-existing asymmetries in the wider educational environment (e.g., expectation of English proficiency and Eurocentric academic standards) naturally emerged to them as convenient frames of reference.

Additionally, Julian spoke of *mutuality* as a necessary condition for intercultural learning (e.g., 'It's a real advantage to work with people from different backgrounds but only if [...] they want to mingle with you. Otherwise, it might be rather damaging.'). When this condition was felt absent and task completion took priority, his intent to learn with the Other gave way—somewhat apologetically—to a perceived necessity to turn the interaction unidirectional by assuming power (e.g., 'I had quite some time just to ... hassle her wouldn't be the right wording, but ... put some pressure just to be sure the work is done').

Chris was the only home student in his group. Rather than entitling himself to the powerful side, this privileged identity generated for him a bigger share of workload. In some cases, he accepted the uneven work distribution as a fair strategy to compensate group members' unequal access to the linguistic and information resources required for their work. However, there was a twist in his reflection on the Chinese member, who apologised for her "incompetence" to do the task and relied on him to re-write her part. Chris wondered if 'she just hadn't done any work for it or that she was actually telling the truth' on the grounds that this member 'has been at this university for four year'.

We would not know which interpretation is closer to truth, but this narrative thread triggered our thoughts on a possible dynamism between the privileged (a mutually agreed host) and the marginalised (a self-described incompetent guest) (cf. Lotman, 1990), where the latter withdrew from group contribution and potentially performed her marginalised identity as a way of *resisting* the unevenly distributed resources on wider scales. Nevertheless, our data did not evidence any new meaning born of this dynamic moment. The narrative thread began with Chris' suspicion that the marginalised may be 'taking advantage of' the privileged and ended with the compromise made by the privileged based more on pragmatic demands than understanding.

Our analysis of these students' power negotiation potentially illustrates that in the internationalising classroom, students did not simply situate themselves in an objective place characterised by 'a state of stasis within communal boundaries' attached to the host society (Kostogriz, 2006, p. 180). Nor did they seem to find themselves in a globalised place hospitably granting equal recognition to diverse cultural practices. Instead, the students portrayed to us an intercultural space that, as Kostogriz (2006, p. 177) suggested, was situated in dynamic negotiation of social relations and participation in 'distinct cultural-semiotic activities anchored to, and mediated by, particular material objects and textual representations of one's situationality'. In line with this view, we argue that this reconfiguration on the spatiality of learning environments is key to understanding intercultural learning as a relational process, which may involve moments of inertia (complicated by neoliberal pressures) where participants stop searching new meaning and engage with the Self-Other boundary as a barrier rather than threshold towards transformation (cf. Lotman, 1990).

Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we examined some complex aspects of the ‘interaction problem’ in internationalising higher education. We discussed some typical themes surrounding multicultural interaction (as a ‘path’) and intercultural learning (as a ‘goal’) and explored how these themes might play out in students’ lived experiences of interculturality in the classroom. This exploration showed that the imagined links between multicultural interaction and intercultural learning are theoretically and empirically fragile. It further led us to speculate that when educators observe students’ hesitation in multicultural interaction and worry about the intercultural learning outcome, a possible root of this ‘problem’ is its own discursive construction.

Often, interaction has been used as a lens to diagnose students’ readiness for (even success of) intercultural learning, lending itself to a deficit discourse. This discourse runs the risk of disregarding alternative paths to intercultural learning and thus promoting a singular, closed ‘truth’ on interculturality. Concomitantly, the interaction diagnosis has often been uncritically premised on modes of learning conceived to occur in places demarcated by *a priori* Self-Other boundary (e.g., between ‘Us’ and ‘Other’ or ‘diverse cultures’). The intercultural knowledge produced at such boundaries may take different forms, associated with various ideological challenges and falling short of transformative effect. A close analysis of our student participants’ lived experiences of interculturality revealed complex interplays between *a priori* and *a posteriori* boundary, between transcendental ‘intercultural competence’ and pragmatism, between open-ended dialogue (i.e., seeking alternatives) and closure (i.e., reinforcing fixity about Self and Other), and between careful detachment from (overt) prejudice and conscious deployment of power hierarchy. These interplays illuminate a multifaceted landscape where, we would argue, the participants indeed engaged with an organic process of intercultural learning *through* multicultural interaction.

Therefore, we suggest that educators problematising students’ multicultural interaction should exercise a critical reflexivity by shifting some attention from the symptoms of the ‘problem’ to its existential status. The reasons for the ‘problem’ may lie in the very creation of it: who imagined the ‘problem’ with what epistemological bias. Its ‘solutions’ may as well arise from that.

We nonetheless do not see the promise as residing in a simplistic ‘fix’ around the interaction discourse, e.g., to modify the terminology by hailing ‘diverse’ and ‘intercultural’ as more appropriate or useful than ‘our’, ‘other’, and

‘international’. We discussed how Us-Other boundaries can be rooted in a conservative identification with place, which may simultaneously serve as a natural condition for Self to meet the Other and pose the ethical problem of Othering the Other. We considered how a nationality-oriented vocabulary may trigger acts prone to cultural essentialism and yet remain important for understanding the wider structural realities shaping students’ communication. We also examined the apolitical orientation with a globalist approach to cultural diversity and intercultural competence, which despite its admirable goals caused concerns of effectual compliance with neo-liberal interests.

Therefore, rather than a terminology ‘fix’, we propose a more holistic review of universities’ positioning of themselves in their internationalisation-interculturality praxis. We suggest that universities conceive their own identities as intercultural *actors* rather than *experts*. This means to see their knowledge of interculturality as being ever incomplete and not any superior to the knowledge held by other social actors, e.g., students (Page & Chahboun, 2019). It entails a responsibility to fully recognise the changing spatiality of the internationalising classroom and engage relationally with students as an informative Other (rather than Othering them with a ‘deficit’ model).

This does not mean to simply treat what students say as knowledge. Students’ feedback on intercultural learning may be reduced to set answers derived one-sidedly from dominant discourses (e.g., their satisfaction on multicultural interaction) or reflect no more than known traditions/practices (e.g., essentialised cultural differences, neo-liberal pragmatism, and political correctness). Instead, we argue that for intercultural learning to be transformative, it is crucial to surface the multifaceted interculturality students are actually grappling with and, departing from this, engage students in a conscious dialogical process of renewing existing knowledge about Self and Other.

This has various implications for universities’ intercultural policies, learning objectives, and pedagogical practices. For example, policy makers could consider framing interculturality as both a multifaceted process integral to individuals’ everyday practice (*contra* a theoretically hollow buzzword) and a contested intellectual concept (*contra* givens from specific epistemological positions). The curriculum could be designed so that students are sensitised to the processual dynamics of interculturality and the dialectic between structural shapers and interpersonal dialogue. This may be achieved through guided reflections on multicultural interaction as a form of experiential learning (Pitts & Brooks, 2017; Zhou & Pilcher, 2018), which may draw on, but not be limited by, known

traditions/practices (e.g., essentialised cultural differences, intercultural competence attributes).

To enable an adequate intellectual space for conducting such experiential learning, particularly for guiding students through possible stages of dialogical inertia towards threshold experiences of the Self-Other boundary, multicultural interaction at least needs to be arranged with measured assessment pressures and suitable lengths of time. These considerations are relevant both to one-off classroom activities (e.g., multicultural group work) and broader aspects of curriculum design (e.g., a coherent intercultural thread structured into the entire programme) (cf. Leask & Carroll, 2011; Turner, 2009).

These suggestions are, of course, rather general and idealistic, while realities are constrained by many factors. As Kostogriz (2006, p. 179) commented, the ‘cumbersome institutional structure’, ‘centralised hierarchies’, and pressures from neo-liberal governments have rendered educational systems ‘slow and ineffective in their response to the speed of socioeconomic and cultural changes’ despite their well-intentioned educational policies. Nevertheless, we urge that being responsive to the changing global landscape should always remain high on universities’ internationalisation agenda, for failing it will potentially encourage modes of intercultural learning that reproduce, rather than challenge, unequal power relations and resource distribution external to students’ learning spaces. An important part of this responsiveness is to recognise and critically use situated knowledge about interculturality from practices emerging locally, as these are ‘more agile forms of social organization and semiotic representation that are able to respond rapidly to changes’ (Kostogriz, 2006, p. 179).

To conclude, we suggest that students’ ‘interaction problem’ provides a stimulus for educators to penetrate the surface of multicultural learning activities towards more reflexive exploration of intercultural learning. This reflexivity may not provide immediate answers on methods for nurturing interculturality. However, it will better prepare educators for delicately balancing the complex facets of interculturality, thus resetting the starting point of intervention towards practices that are more effective, vis-à-vis the transformative goals of higher education, and more ethical, in the sense of promoting social equality through conscious monitoring of ‘act[s] of [intellectual] irresponsibility’ (O’Regan & MacDonald, 2007, p. 275).

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Appendix 1. Interview Questions/Prompts for the Participants

These interview questions/prompts were originally designed for a study (explained in Section Two). For the purposes of this article, we extracted all the relevant data from the interview outcomes (i.e., participants' answers). Thus, not all the given answers were analysed or interpreted while we were writing this article.

In addition, the specific names (e.g., participant, institution) have been replaced by general terms (e.g., the University) in this appendix to maintain the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants and their corresponding institution.

Part One: Interview Questions for the University Managers

1. Can you summarise your main remit at the University that shows how the intercultural aspect of student experience is relevant to you?
2. What are the main sources that have shaped the university's current internationalisation strategy, especially the part on student experience?
3. To what extent has the internationalisation of the student experience come to the fore in the present strategy? Why?
4. The internationalisation strategy has clearly specified an intercultural element when setting out the objectives for an internationalised student experience. For example, to "ensure every student can access intercultural competencies", "engaged in language and/or intercultural study" and to "promote intercultural awareness for all staff". Since both terms are used, how would you define "intercultural" in relation to "international"?
5. What is meant by "intercultural study" and "intercultural competencies" in the context of the internationalisation strategy?
6. In the current strategy, we noticed several other concepts that *we* think can be related to the intercultural aspect of student experience. The internationalised student experience and curriculum section says that [show the quotation to the participant, with key concepts highlighted] (see below the indented text). We are particularly interested to explore the terms "transformational", "equitable", "global learning experience", "inclusive" and "diverse needs of our students". Could you explain what each of them means?

"Our approach will be *transformational* and will promote a high quality, *equitable, global learning experience* for all our students

irrespective of their geographical location or background, an *inclusive* curriculum design and a culture in which all staff support their international agenda”

“To deliver curriculum which responds to *diverse needs of our students*, including on/off campus and online, and promotes active engagement with a global, interconnected society” (Extracts from the Internationalisation Strategy of the University).

7. How is the university making its internationalisation strategy widely available to everyone concerned?
8. In general or specific terms, how does the university expect the teaching staff to incorporate the part of the strategy you just discussed into their day-to-day teaching practices?
9. What resources are available within the university which can help the teaching staff to offer an intercultural dimension to their teaching?
10. How do you think the teaching staff and the university will know whether students are actually having the kind of internationalised experience as expected? What are the formal or informal indicators?

Part Two: Interview Questions for the Lecturers

1. Can you summarise your main remit at the University especially in terms of the student experience you are trying to offer (e.g., What subject do you teach? What kind of students do you teach?)
2. Were you aware that for the last five years, the university has had a strategic goal which reads “integrating an international and intercultural dimension into our mission”?

If yes – i) What do you think is meant from the university’s strategic point of view

ii) What do you think this means in your area of teaching?

If not – How do you think the university could have made this strategic goal more noticeable to the teaching staff?

3. The university is currently devising its strategy for the next six years and the strategy team has worked out a draft document for this strategy. In this document, we noticed three terms that we think can be related to the

intercultural aspect of student experience, which are “international outlook”, “diversity” and “inclusivity” [show the bullet points to the participant] (see below the indented text).

- “We will be recognised as a University which is professional, ambitious, innovative and **inclusive** ...”
 - “We will create an environment in which **everyone involved with the university** feels proud, confident, challenged and supported ...”
 - “We will be **international in our outlook**”
 - “We will promote **diversity and an environment free from discrimination.**” (Extracts from the STRATEGY of the University)
- i) In more specific terms, what do you think the university is aiming to achieve through these goals especially considering student experience?
 - ii) What do you think these might mean in your area of teaching?
4. Have you incorporated an element into your teaching that might enhance your students’ experience in relation to your understandings of the university’s strategic goals you just discussed?
 5. If yes – Can you think of one particular module or context and describe what you have done?
 6. If not – Go to question 5.
 7. Do you intend to (continue to) incorporate an element into your teaching in the future that might enhance your students’ experience in relation to your perceptions of the university’s strategic goals you just discussed? If yes, can you detail how you plan to do it? If not, why?
 8. Have you used or are aware of any resources within the university which can help to offer an intercultural dimension to your teaching (e.g. the LTA resource bank, help from the International office and different training courses on offer)?
 9. Thinking in terms of your local teaching context (or, if not applicable, in terms of the broader picture of the educational context the university is offering to the students), how do you think you (or teaching staff in general) will know whether students are having an experience as expected by the university in terms of the strategic goals you just discussed? For example, what formal or informal criteria or methods will you expect to be used to give you an indication that this kind of student experience is happening?

10. Do you have any further comments about, or suggestions for, the university's aim for internationalisation in terms of student experience?

Part Three: Interview Questions for the Students

1. Can you tell us where you are from and what you are studying at the University.
2. During your studies at the University so far, have you often encountered students on your course that you consider to be culturally different from yourself? Can you give some examples?
3. Have you had the experience of doing group work with other students on any of the modules you are studying?
4. If yes, can you think of one particular module and describe your group work experiences? For example:
 - i) Who were the students you worked with? What are their cultural backgrounds?
 - ii) What kind of project did you work on?
 - iii) In your opinion, how did the group work go?
 - iv) Did you come across any issues? If so, how did you deal with them? If not, what do you think made the group work go smoothly?
5. What did you realise or learn through this group work experience in terms of working with others?
6. After doing the group work, did you develop any particular preferences as to what kind of people you most enjoy working with and what kind of people you would avoid for group work? Why?
7. Do you feel that in general, studying at the University is an intercultural experience? Why (not)?
8. Do you feel that having an intercultural or non-intercultural mix of students during your studies at the University is an advantage or a disadvantage? Why (not)?
9. Do you have any further comments about, or suggestions for, the university's aim for internationalisation?

Appendix 2. Three Episodes concerning Students' Experiences of Interculturality

Episode I

Julian (from Germany) worked with 3 students (from Finland, Poland and China) over 6 weeks on a presentation for an Intercultural Communication module.

We had different levels of effort in this. Some people more, some people less, which is not really an intercultural question, I think. But, especially when it's culturally diverse, it might provide some additional hindrances.

A group member [from Poland] hasn't a lot of time or anything. She said I was organising the direction [and] assign her work for when she was going to do it. She wasn't really doing it to the level that I expected even though she said she would do everything she is told. It was difficult because I had quite some time just to [...] hassle her wouldn't be the right wording, but, you know, put some pressure just to be sure the work is done.

Usually there are two options and I think with those options I learned to develop myself. First option of course is, especially with a narrow timeframe, to just pull them with you, more or less doing their work, which is the not preferred option. The option I prefer more is just really to spend more time to figure out how to integrate them more into the project.

It's a real advantage to work with people from different backgrounds but only if they want to work with you, I mean, if they want to mingle with you. Otherwise it might be rather damaging to the academic environment or culture.

In the end it's about grades, about what we achieved. Also, because the pressure is we are paying quite an amount of money. It's a service but we have to put effort to receive the right amount of outcome of the service.

Episode II

Liang (from China) worked with 4 students (from Sudan, Germany, and Russia) over 1 week on a presentation for a Human Resource Management module.

Western people are perhaps too independent. They want the group to follow their own ways. Chinese students are different when they discuss things. If one person's ideas are really good, then people will take this person's ideas. [...] Normally I would follow one leader in the group. If someone asserts his own opinion and someone else does the same, then they would argue on and on, waste people's time, and lead to no fruitful outcome.

What surprised me most [in this group work] was the German student. Normally, German students are very good at English, so he should have become our group leader. But this German student behaved just like me. He was quiet. Finally, it was the Sudanese student [to lead our group]. The Sudanese student wanted us to follow his ideas of doing the report. But the two Russian students argued with him because they had different opinions. [...] Actually, it doesn't matter to me because I can see the point from both sides. [...] In the end, the Sudanese student wasn't happy with the result of our discussion and said 'if you guys insist on your opinion, then I'll have to withdraw from this'.

I hoped that we could finish this work as soon as possible, because I had to work on another urgent report. So I persuaded the others to take his suggestion [...] just to follow what he said [...] then the final result turned out okay.

When it was close to our presentation, the Sudanese student said he still hadn't finished his part. I couldn't understand why, but after all, I'm an international student. I'm not qualified to show anger to others. After all, we are international students, not domestic students. With limited competence, I don't think we are qualified to lead the groups. We can at best play a supporting role. To be a group leader requires high levels of English. At least I don't think I'm qualified for that yet.

The main lesson I learnt is that if I do group work again, I will choose to work with Chinese students. In that case, there is a greater chance to get a better mark, although this sounds ironical. I think that was my first and

probably also my last experience of collaborating with people from other nationalities.

Episode III

Chris (from the UK) worked with 3 students (from China, Germany and Belgium) over 6 weeks on a written report for a Marketing module.

At the beginning they decided that we'd all write it, we'd all contribute, and at the end I'd go through all the grammar, so it felt like I had to do a bit more work than everyone else, which is fair enough because I'm British.

We had a bit of a problem with the Chinese girl. She didn't contribute as much as she should have [...] I had to rewrite her part for her. She said she didn't understand the language that was used and didn't understand the context of the question and she's not really good at writing essays, but she's been at this university for four years. So, I don't know whether she just hadn't done any work for it or that she was actually telling the truth.

[Looking back on this experience ...] We should have delegated the work a bit better because how it worked was the person doing the second part couldn't do the second part unless the person had done the first part. So she was [doing] the last part. She was waiting all this time until all the parts were done, until she could write her part. So, in fairness we probably didn't give her enough time to really get to grips with it because she only had a week.

I think [in the future] one culture I'd definitely work with is Germans because they worked really hard. I don't know whether it was just that one Chinese girl who was struggling with it or [...] I've only actually worked with one Asian girl before, so I don't know. It's nothing to do with culture, if they work hard, I'm happy to work with anyone really.