A guide to working together across cultures for international students
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As an international student at the University of Birmingham, you may be based on our Birmingham campus, or on one of our campuses abroad. Wherever you are, you will meet people from different cultures during your studies. This guide will help you work more effectively with others.
A guide to working together across cultures for international students

WHAT IS CULTURE?

A few questions to ask yourself before you read on:

- How would you define ‘culture’?
- Are you able to describe your national culture?
- How have the cultures you feel you belong to changed over time?
- What do you talk about when you say, ‘in my culture, we…’?
  - Is it values or habits? Is it about group behaviour or norms?
  - Does this relate to upbringing, religion or ethnicity?

‘Systems of knowledge used by relatively large groups of people.’
Gudykunst and Kim (2003, p.17)

‘A pattern of shared basic assumptions… considered valid… taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel.’
Schein (2010, p.12)

‘The collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one group or category of people from another.’
Hofstede (2007, p.16)

‘A more or less consistent pattern of thought and action “related to a society’s intellect and emotions.”’
Benedict (1934, p.46)

‘That complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, arts, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired… as a member of society.’
Tylor (1871, p.1)

‘Communication.’
Hall (1959, p.97)

From these definitions, we can understand that culture is about what people think, say, do and create, that it is not always visible and that it is shared and learned in groups. As it is about society and people, culture is not static; it changes over time.

**Language point**

Culture can relate to different areas of human experience. Below you will find examples of common language combinations with the word ‘culture’, grouped in different categories:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Geography and ethnicity</td>
<td>National culture, Traditional culture, African culture, Western culture, Black culture, Urban culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Dominant culture, Mainstream culture, Underground culture, Street culture, Working-class culture, Youth culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interests</td>
<td>Football culture, Academic culture, Company culture, Political culture, Literary culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ideology</td>
<td>Capitalist culture, Consumer culture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Culture is about belonging to a group and it feels comforting to belong. Being part of a group also means that there is an ‘other’: people who do not belong to the same group and are therefore perceived as different.

Generalisations about groups of people and information about their cultures can sometimes be helpful because it can help you understand them better. They can be used as a starting point to think about how they may do things differently and this can promote tolerance of this difference. However, stereotyping can be unfair because it is often superficial, not based on fact and sometimes hurtful. It is important to know that behaviour can be influenced by culture but that it is not uniform.

This is for a number of reasons:
- Culture can and does change
- Culture is complex
- People are complex
- People from different generations may have different views and approaches
- Culture does not stop or start at a national border
- People from different parts of a country may have different views and approaches
- People can make individual choices

Ultimately, we can also choose to focus on the many similarities there are between people and societies, and on the characteristics that make us all human.

Think of someone you know from another culture who is very different to you with regard to certain characteristics eg, how loud, relaxed, spiritual, direct, reserved, creative, confrontational, tolerant, sociable or punctual they are.

- How much of this is because of their cultural background and how much of it is just because of who they are as an individual? How do you know that?
- Think about your own characteristics. Were you born with these or did they get shaped by your culture? How do you know?
- Do we have to follow the written and unwritten rules of our culture?
WHAT STRATEGIES CAN I USE IN INTERCULTURAL SITUATIONS?

People follow different conventions. Greetings may be exchanged to everyone we meet or just to people we know; these greetings may be just an acknowledgement (eg, eye contact or a nod of the head), language (from a quick ‘good morning’ to a chat), involve physical contact (eg, a handshake) and be different between men and women.

Personal space is another area where norms differ. In some cultures, there needs to be a lot of space between people and certainly no contact; in others standing close is seen as friendly and polite.

Table manners can be very different too. In some cultures, you are expected to leave some food on your plate to show that you were given plenty of food; in other’s it is polite to finish your food.

To really understand what someone means or what their intentions are, don’t just listen to what they say, but find clues in their body language or in the context. For example, if you are leaving and somebody says ‘we must do this again soon’, this may be just a way to say a friendly goodbye, not an invitation to write a date in your diary.
Imagine the following scenario. You are invited to a new friend’s house for a drink and are having a lovely time, chatting for hours to them and their family. You have had some hot drinks but have not been offered anything to eat. It is getting late, nobody is talking about dinner and you are hungry.

What is the ‘culture bump’ here? How do you feel about this situation? What are the emotional and rational responses you are likely to have?

What would you do in this situation?

When would it be appropriate to discuss the culture bump, immediately or later?

Who would it be appropriate to discuss the culture bump with e.g. your friend, other people from that culture, people from your own culture?

Can you understand why your friend might not be offering food?

What would you do the next time you are invited for drinks by them?

It can be useful think about a cultural difference as a ‘culture bump’, which occurs when an individual has expectations of a particular behaviour within a particular situation and encounters a different behaviour when interacting with an individual from another culture.


According to Archer and Nickson (2012), in a situation where a culture bump occurs, something happens that is different from what you have learnt to see as normal in your culture, and you will react with your heart and your head:

- You will have an emotional response, which can be positive (if you like what happens), negative (if you don’t like it), or not very strong
- You will have a rational response: a sense of disconnection and of not knowing, and you will wonder why the situation happened.

If you are aware of possible differences, even if you don’t know yet what they could be, then you will become a better observer of what is acceptable around you. It will make you think about what is expected of you and you will be able to ask questions about what is appropriate behaviour.

Although you are allowed to be yourself, you can still be considerate to others, so it is worth thinking about adjusting to situations whenever possible so that you give a positive impression.
HOW CAN NATIONAL CULTURES BE DESCRIBED?

It is a common and long-held belief that there are national characteristics, although there is disagreement on the extent to which these are due to genetics or to upbringing.

Based on large-scale research, Hofstede (Hofstede and McCrae, 2004; Hofstede 2011) has identified six aspects, known as ‘dimensions of culture’, which can be used to describe what groups of people tend to be like, and to compare cultures as well as organisations. The dimensions can be explained as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Customs, ideas, beliefs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Power distance** | Related to the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality | **High**: families expect their children to do what they are told  
**Low**: children are allowed to make their own decisions; people question authority¹ |
| **Uncertainty avoidance** | Related to the level of stress in a society in the face of an unknown future | **High**: they are uncomfortable when a situation is unknown  
**Low**: people feel comfortable in unstructured situations eg, new, unexpected or unusual circumstances |
| **Individualism** | Related to the integration of individuals into groups | **High**: people are expected to look after themselves  
**Low**: [=collectivism] people are part of extended families, who protect them and whom they are loyal² to |
| **Masculinity** | Related to the division of emotional roles between women and men | **High**: a preference for eg, achievement, heroism, assertiveness and material rewards; work is valued over home life  
**Low**: [=femininity] preferring co-operation, modesty, caring; a balance between family and work |
| **Long-term orientation** | Related to the choice of focus for people’s efforts | **High**: the focus is on the future; perseverance and saving resources are valued, traditions are adjusted based on circumstances  
**Low**: [short-term orientation] the past is important, traditions are kept and honoured |
| **Indulgence³** | Related to the value of enjoying life versus control of basic human desires | **High**: people say they are happy, they enjoy fun, order is not very important to them  
**Low**: [restraint] the fulfilment of needs is controlled (with social norms⁴), leisure is not very important |

¹ A person or organisation that has power  
² Giving or showing firm and constant support  
³ Being generous to oneself  
⁴ A required standard

Notice that these dimensions are not about individual people but about groups.

Look at the six dimensions again. For each of them decide if your culture would score high, low, or in the middle for each of them.

Try to answer the following questions before checking the answers underneath (upside down):

- Which of these two do you think has a higher power distance: Japan or the UK?
- Which do you think has higher rates for individualism: Western countries or Eastern countries?
- Which do you think has higher masculinity scores: Italy or Sweden?
- Which do you think are more long-term oriented: East Asian countries or the USA?
- Which do you think score higher for indulgence: South American countries or the Muslim World?

According to Hofstede’s research, the first option in the question was always highest.
The University is an organisation and as such it has an organisational culture: there is a history, and there are shared values, expectations, written and unwritten rules.

The University has ways of operating and you will be expected to work in the same types of ways. The academic expectations around attendance, work and assessment will be made clear to you.

However, at other times you will find out what is expected by observing what others do. Like everyone else, you will learn the unwritten rules, but you may get it wrong occasionally. This will not last long: be patient with yourself and observe what others do.

### Group Work

You will of course have worked with others before, but you may not be used to working with people from a variety of cultures. Higher education is becoming increasingly internationalised and multiculturality is likely to be the case.

Group work is a common way of working and you may therefore work in a group with people from different parts of the world. You may be assessed on your group work, and if there is one mark for the whole group then it is really important that everyone works well together.

**TIP**

Don’t be afraid to ask questions. Staff members understand that you will not know everything. Don’t assume your question is stupid and don’t wait too long to ask.

**TIP**

Spend some time together before starting to work. Time you spend getting to know each other and understanding each other’s strengths and weaknesses, and simply enjoying each other’s company, can help you work better together later.
Think about the following scenario. Imagine that you are paired up to work together with a British person on a project. You will have to write research questions together, interview people and record them, and write a report about what people said.

You will then have to do a presentation together. The project will be assessed and will count toward the final mark on the course. Read the statements on the right. Indicate whether these would apply to you.

### Potential problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>True or false?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I worry that one of us will dominate the pair work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry that we will both be quiet</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry that there will be language or communication problems</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think I will rely on the other person to do more of the work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think assessed pair or group work is always unfair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I worry that there will be too many differences between us</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conflict will be inevitable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think the other person will be reserved, indirect and/or punctual</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Potential problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Likely or unlikely?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I will try to contact the other person beforehand to introduce myself</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will try to contact the person beforehand to discuss roles and responsibilities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will think about the fact that the other person might be worried about how I will approach the work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will discuss any worries I have about the future group work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will be honest about my feelings when there are problems during the group work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I will have a positive attitude towards the group work, even if I have some worries</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**LANGUAGE POINT**

When working with others, you will want to come across as polite and co-operative. One way of doing this is thinking about your language and making sure it is non-confrontational. Rather than tell people that you think what they are doing or thinking is wrong, you can use “I” language to express how you feel about that. This will make them feel less attacked and more co-operative.

Here are some examples:
- **You are** wrong about that equation
- **Don’t you** talk to me like that
- **You should** put both our names on that second report too

- I **don’t think** that equation is right
- Please **don’t** talk to me like that
- I **would be much happier if** you put both our names on that second report too

□ Were any of your worries based on cultural stereotypes about British people?
□ Were your worries based on your own personality and/or abilities?
□ Do you think that anticipating possible conflict is helpful?
□ How important is communicating openly in situations like these?
Seminars are classes in which a topic is discussed by a lecturer and a small group of students.

Seminars are often used alongside lectures, so that attention can be given to individual students and the lecturer can ensure that the topic has been understood.

Seminars can be run in different ways but often the students are asked to read a text before coming to the seminar and then discussing it there. Sometimes the students are in charge of running the seminar.

Many academic skills are being exercised in seminars: the ability to read, to question, to argue, and to develop the argument through debate.

Think about the following scenario.
Imagine that you are in a seminar with a multicultural group. You observe the following two types of behaviour:

1. Some people are not contributing.
   - You think the reason could be one (or more) of these:
     - Gender roles
     - They are waiting patiently for others to finish speaking
     - They have not done the reading beforehand
     - They have nothing to say
     - They are being respectful to other (eg, older) people and are letting them speak first
     - They are waiting to be invited to speak
     - They need time to formulate what they want to say in English
     - They don’t think it is important to speak in a seminar
     - They enjoy listening to what others have to say

2. Some people seem to enjoy the discussion, but they talk loudly, speak over others, interrupt others before they have finished speaking, talk for a really long time before coming to the point or changing the subject completely.
   - You think the reason could be one (or more) of these:
     - Gender roles
     - They are enjoying the debate
     - They know that everyone has been invited to speak and can join in at any time
     - They are not thinking about others and their needs at this moment
     - They are rude people
     - They want to show off their knowledge of the text, or in general
     - They want to hide the fact that they don’t know what is in the text
     - They are fluent in English
     - They think it is important to contribute to a seminar
     - They enjoy talking

Think about:
1. What do you really think the main reasons are for both sets of behaviour?
2. Are these types of behaviour acceptable?
3. Are these types of behaviour to be expected in multicultural settings?
4. Which type of behaviour do you tend to have? Should you contribute more or less to group discussions?
5. Is it the lecturer’s role to guide the discussions?
6. What can you, as a participant, do to make sure that the discussion goes as smoothly as possible?
7. How can the group bring some more equality in the discussion? What could be done (a) before, (b) during and (c) after the seminar discussion?
The following language is useful in seminars. Notice that it is quite informal and that you can also communicate effectively through body language (eg, nodding to agree, seeking eye contact and smiling to invite others to speak).

**INVITING OTHERS TO SPEAK**
- Would anyone else like to say something about that?
- What do you think about x?
- Anyway, that’s just my opinion…?

**STATING AN OPINION**
- In my view, x is right.
- From what I have read, there is no need for x
- Surely, x would be a good idea

**AGREEING WITH OTHERS**
- Yes, I thought so too, especially in section 4
- I also thought the author was quite negative about x
- I like what you said about their use of x

**DISAGREING WITH OTHERS**
- That’s not quite how I saw it.
- I think that’s true to an extent but we also need to think about x.
- I did not think that was the case. Where did you find that in the text?

**ASKING FOR CLARIFICATION**
- So, are you saying that x…?
- Do you mean that you only partially agree with x?
- Can you give an example of that?

**MOVING THE CONVERSATION ON**
- I think we will have to agree to disagree
- I think that answers that question then
- Shall we have a look at the next question?

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**TIP**
The following will be helpful when you work with people from different cultures:
- Reflect on what shaped you as an individual with the values and beliefs you have.
- Think about the attitudes and unwritten rules in your own culture.
- Try to notice what effect your behaviour has on others. How does your tone of voice, volume, speed of speech, pauses, interruptions, silence come across? And is what you say appropriate, eg, expressing opinions, asking direct questions, making jokes?
- Try to notice how your body language comes across, eg, distance between you and others, eye contact, posture.
- Avoid judging people based on stereotypes about their culture – stereotypes are only useful to help you compare and if you use them to understand others.
- Be prepared to find differences (and many similarities) in people.
- Be prepared to be tolerant of difference: what is good in one society may not be so in another.
- If you see behaviour you do not like, try not to judge, but to find out more.
- Treat people like individuals and try to understand why they do and say what they do.
- In discussions, check that you have understood (eg, by asking clarification) and speak in a way that is easy to understand (eg, at a reasonably slow speed).
- Communicate with others about your feelings using ‘I’ language.
- If possible, set ground rules for behaviour when working in groups.
Culture changes over time. When working with people from other cultures, it is worth using the tips and other advice in this guide. Act like someone who is ready to discover other cultures, to analyse them, to learn from them and to adapt if that is helpful. So, get ready to explore…

Enjoy being a cultural detective!
REFERENCES


All dictionary definitions taken from https://en.oxforddictionaries.com