

For *Transitions: Journal of Transient Migration* Volume 4 Number 2, 2020

Introducing the CI model for intercultural contact

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Abstract

International education has become as a dynamic export sector and key source of income for education providers in New Zealand. Its development in the last twenty years has been characterised by steady growth of student numbers, and yet the economic good news has been tempered by a growing awareness of the acculturative stress and anxiety international students experience. This concern is exacerbated by news stories that depict international students as a disadvantaged group, and the profound impact of COVID-19 has highlighted international students' vulnerability to a global pandemic. In light of these complex challenges, there is a strengthening case for focused work on theory-to-practice models that support international student acculturation in educational contexts. This article introduces the *CI model for intercultural contact* as a framework that supports education providers' engagement with international students. It draws on indigenous perspectives embedded in New Zealand's bicultural heritage and presents three key concepts underpinned by research findings and practitioner experience: Cross-disciplinary Inquiry, Comprehensible Input and Collaborative Intervention.

Keywords

Acculturation
Indigenous perspective
International education
Intercultural exchange
International students
Tailored practice
Theory-to-practice model

Introduction

International education is a booming export industry in New Zealand. In 2018 the sector was reportedly worth \$5.1 billion and supported 49,631 jobs (Education NZ 2018). Its economic success, however, is accompanied by a growing number of studies that indicate international students experience a unique set of acculturation stressors and health-related issues such as anxiety and depression (Gan and Forbes-Mewett 2018: 229; Forbes-Mewett and Sawyer 2016: 667; Mesidor and Sly 2016: 269; Chen et al. 2015; Li and Samson 2015). News media also routinely publish stories that indicate international students are either disadvantaged or vulnerable to exploitation (Pullar-Strecker 2019; TVNZ 2019; Foon, 2020). In 2020, the impacts of COVID-19 have included emotional and financial stress and raised questions about the sector's preparedness to respond proactively to student welfare concerns. Following the closing of New Zealand's border, some university leaders and commentators pressed for it to be re-opened to international students for economic reasons (Campbell, 2020; Edmonds, 2020). This was met with a firm response from the New Zealand International Students' Association (NZISA), who objected to the strong focus on revenue streams while ignoring the financial impacts on students in the

country (NZISA, 2020). A hardship fund was soon established to support international students (Education New Zealand, 2020), but the news reports that focused on lost industry revenue had left students feeling unsupported.

International education is set apart as one of New Zealand's lead export industries by what it does not possess: an underpinning academic discipline, clear professional pathways or sector-specific qualifications. There have been moves to address this with the Ministry of Education setting a mid-term goal to develop international education as an academic discipline in its International Education Strategy (IES) 2018-2030 (Education New Zealand 2019: 21). ISANA NZ, the national peak body for international education practitioners, is also working with education providers to develop sector-specific courses guided by this goal and the IES's broader commitment to student experience, sustainability and global citizenship.

The Education Pastoral Care of International Students Code of Practice (New Zealand Qualifications Authority 2020) presently sets minimum standards for education providers enrolling international students. This offers students important protections and is often pointed to as evidence of the sector's provision of support and care. Minimum standards, however, are not a guarantor of effective support and a code-compliance regime may arguably reduce incentives to invest in innovative, research-led practice.

The aim of this article is to provide a brief outline of the CI model for intercultural contact (see Appendix 1) which has been designed to provide a theory-to-practice framework for practitioners and educators working with international students. By incorporating tikanga Māori principles the model also points to the value of indigenous perspectives in international education.

The CI model for intercultural contact

In 2018 ISANA NZ gathered feedback and evaluations from eighteen professional development workshops around New Zealand and results showed strong practitioner demand for frameworks of practice tailored to international education contexts. This provided stimulus for the development of the CI model.

One of the features of the model is the use of key Māori concepts to inform practice. There are few examples of host institutions in English-speaking study destinations appropriating insights from the larger society's engagement with indigenous communities. If indigenous perspectives are not sought, there may be an inclination for assimilationist attitudes to shape international student policy and strategy (Liyanage & Gurney 2017: 211).

The CI model presents three interdependent concepts: *Cross-disciplinary Inquiry*, *Comprehensible Input* and *Collaborative Intervention*. Imbedded in these concepts are three domains that highlight risks for education providers enrolling international students and tailored strategies for addressing these risks. The model follows a problem-based learning approach (Clouston and Whitcombe 2005: 266) and reflects the author's 25 years' experience teaching international students, 15 years' experience working one-to-one with at-risk students, participation in Australia-New Zealand ISANA networks and the findings of desktop research.

CI 1: Cross-disciplinary Inquiry

Cross-disciplinary Inquiry emphasises the need to recognise and explore the multi-faceted nature of intercultural exchange in educational contexts. Tailored, evidence-based practice in international education is informed by a cross-disciplinary view.

(i) *Culture-specific knowledge*

Culture-specific knowledge offers education providers and students a window to one another's core concepts, etiquette and communication practices (Cultural Atlas 2019). It relates to cultural identity and in New Zealand's case the partnership principle embedded in the Treaty of Waitangi (McHugh 1991: 4). Culture-specific knowledge highlights differing cultural values such as the differences between large-power-distance societies and small-power-distance societies (Hofstede and Hofstede 2005: 43). It also emphasises the need to examine the dynamics of the acculturation experience (Demes and Geeraert 2015; Ward 2001: 416). Cultural psychologist John Berry (2011: 14), for instance, shows that new settlers/sojourners who are able to 'doubly engage' by retaining their heritage culture while participating in the larger society are more likely to integrate.

(ii) *Religious literacy*

Religious studies is a discipline that has much to offer international education. The world's inhabitants are predominantly religious (Pew Research Centre 2102), religious *illiteracy* in secular societies is steadily increasing (Prothero 2007; Economic and Social Research Council 2017) and new educational projects are highlighting the importance of religious literacy to intercultural learning (Harvard Divinity School 2020). If host institutions ignore religious literacy, there is a risk that many international students will feel alienated. In the New Zealand context, religious literacy affirms the spirituality inherent in tikanga Māori. Penetito (2009: 20) is wary of the secularising influence of colonisers: "To the indigenous mind, the absence of the human spirit, the mauri and wairua, makes no sense ... The Enlightenment ideals imported from Britain engulfed the people native to this land". Familiarity with the key tenets of world religions and attention to religious literacy not only enables staff to understand religious students' core values, but also allows them to critically appraise their own worldviews that influence their outlook and perceptions of students.

(iii) *Interlanguage awareness*

Interlanguage awareness draws on applied linguistics to identify and address the target language limitations many international students encounter. The lack of target language proficiency is emerging as a key acculturative stressor for student sojourners (Bradley 2018; Mesidor and Sly 2016: 267; Skyrme and McGee 2016; Ramia et al. 2013:10). If texts, lessons and lectures are pitched predominantly at native speakers, international students with entry-level language proficiency and smaller vocabulary sizes are significantly disadvantaged. Familiarity with principles such as text coverage, which refers to the percentage of running words in a text that a (second language) reader understands (Nation 2006: 61) and a knowledge of linguistic tools such as online vocabulary profilers (Compleat Lexical Tutor 2020) helps frontline practitioners tailor texts for non-native speakers. Interlanguage awareness encourages 'insider empathy' for second language

learners and promotes strategies which set measurable language use goals and a systematic critique of linguistic practice (Ministry of Education 2013).

CI 2: Comprehensible Input

Comprehensible input represents tailored text and speech that is demonstrably communicated. The term is borrowed from Stephen Krashen's classic comprehensible input thesis (' $i+1$ ') in second language acquisition theory (Ellis 1985: 157), and for the purpose of the model simply refers to language use and content that is accessible to learners.

(i) *Tailored messaging*

Tailored messaging focuses on the efficacy of communication exchange in intercultural contexts. This principle affirms Ausubel's dictum: "The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach ... accordingly" (Barker and Bunting cited in Fraser and Hill 2016: 38). In the case of international education, the task of learner-centred communication is made more complex with linguistic and cultural differences to negotiate, particularly with time constraints placed on orientation programmes and course schedules. Assessment of cultural backgrounds and prior learning, the disciplined use of high-frequency vocabulary and an evolving programme/curricula responsive to learner characteristics and feedback (Ryan 2005: 92) provides platforms for tailored messaging.

(ii) *Interactive learning*

Interactive learning highlights the value of dialogic approaches to information delivery. Focused, well managed classroom discussions generate student interest (Sutherland 2006) and interactive tasks reflect the *ako* principle in Māori education which emphasises the reciprocal nature of learning (Ministry of Education 2011). A commitment to the use of pair work and group work encourages international students to share their own funds of knowledge and gives them time to digest and 'hook into' the new learning environment (Ryan and Hellmundt 2005: 14). An interactive learning strategy mitigates any programme impulse to resort to information dumps, hastily delivered talks or uninterrupted flows of unidirectional speech.

(iii) *Rehearsal and retrieval*

Rehearsal and retrieval identifies the need for spaced, multi-varied modes of communication to strengthen and reinforce student uptake of key information. Experienced educators are cognisant of the checking/feedback/reinforcement principles in learning, particularly for transitioning international students. So, providing them with opportunities to retrieve and process new information through repetition, modelling, spacing, loop-back inputs and multi-media strengthens their capacity to recall key academic and student welfare content (Coxhead 2004: 2; Ryan 2005: 96; Barker et al. 2018).

CI 3: Collaborative Intervention

Collaborative intervention emphasises the utility of collaboration and cooperation between education providers, international student and domestic student communities. Fruitful intercultural relations and international student integration depends on shared interests and incentives.

(i) *Host outreach*

Host outreach reflects the prominent Māori proverb *He aha te mea nui o te ao. He tāngata, he tāngata, he tangata: What is the most important thing in the world? It is people, it is people, it is people* (Tipene-Matua et al. 2012). This is embodied in the Māori powhiri, which is the cultural practice of tangata whenua welcoming manuhiri (visitors) onto the marae and finishes with the two groups becoming one: a generous expression of *manaakitanga* (hospitality). Indigenous hospitality offers a community-centred ethos that encourages newly arrived guests to participate and engage. It also counter-balances export education's revenue-raising drivers (Education NZ 2018; Universities Australia 2018). Without hospitality and outreach there is a greater likelihood of a cultural mismatch with services-in-waiting failing to engage service-shy students, who may feel their options for academic and pastoral support are narrowed to peer brokering (Ling and Tran 2015: 52).

(ii) *Adjustment scaffolding*

Adjustment scaffolding highlights the importance of identifying key drivers and shared motivators to facilitate intercultural exchange. One trend among international students is the limited social integration and engagement with local communities (Hendrickson 2018: 1; Kukatlapallia 2016; Ramia et al. 2013:10; Ward 2001: 425). An example of a scaffolding approach is the use of tailored incentives for students from cultures where strong academic success is highly valued and volunteering is not common practice. Community leadership awards that are added to student academic transcripts are likely to appeal to their study aspirations. Limited work and career opportunities for international students have emerged as a 'negative driver' for export education in New Zealand (Education New Zealand 2018: 18) and so adjustment scaffolding that encourages students' community engagement and enhances their employability appeals to the key drivers of both student and education provider alike.

(iii) *Intergroup mediation*

Intergroup mediation recognises the key role of culture brokers. International students who intuitively integrate and doubly engage (Berry 2011: 14) shape as potential bridge-builders between the education provider and their fellow international students. The *tuakana-teina* model in Māori educational practice (Te Kete Ipurangi, n.d.) offers an indigenous model for training these students to mentor new students. More broadly, a strategy to promote intergroup mediation can offer opportunities for both international and domestic students to act as culture brokers, develop their leadership qualities and relay authentic student feedback to student services and course coordinators. Intergroup mediation is also facilitated by frontline staff such as tutors and student advisors who possess qualities to perform an intercultural connector role (Hendrickson 2018: 11).

Discussion

The CI model introduces a theory-to-practice framework for education providers enrolling international students. It reflects a unique bicultural approach that incorporates interdisciplinary findings with principles of tikanga Māori. The model is designed for frontline practitioners such as orientation planners, accommodation coordinators, student advisors, international programme managers, careers advisors, student health professionals, counsellors, teachers, lecturers and tutors. Because the CI model is grounded in practitioner experience and the shared expertise of professional networks, it may also benefit policy makers and researchers interested in the integration of international education theory and practice.

Effectively supporting international student integration and wellbeing is a critical export education issue in New Zealand. The growing awareness of the unique stressors they face and the far-reaching impacts of the COVID-19 have highlighted the need for tailored approaches to support international student adjustment. With the government's strategic emphasis on the student experience and stated goal of developing international education as an academic discipline, it is hoped that the CI model makes a contribution to the critical inquiry and evidence-based practice that is needed to support sector sustainability.

International students represent a taonga (treasure) for New Zealand schools and tertiary institutions. The CI model offers a springboard for intercultural exchange that enriches all students' formation as global citizens.

Acknowledgments

The CI model is informed by tikanga Māori, and so I wish to thank Dr Craig Rofe, Victoria University of Wellington Te Kura Māori School of Education, for generously sharing his expertise in mātauranga Māori. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for the critique and constructive feedback they provided. I am also indebted to the many ISANA NZ members and workshop participants who shared their working knowledge and grassroots insights which provided inspiration for the model.

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