**Theme: Communication across cultures within higher education.**

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September 2017.

**Cross-cultural feelings and expressions of gratitude within higher education.**

Gratitude is acknowledged as an important part of relational exchange, in essence the emotional core of reciprocity (Dewani and Sinha 2012). Al-Khawaldeh (2014) found that expressions of gratitude play a role in establishing and sustaining relationships. This paper argues that in adopting a relational approach to higher education, gratitude assumes a role worthy of exploration. The study examines feelings and expressions of gratitude within higher education. It seeks to identify emerging themes amongst students and academics which contribute to our understanding of cross-cultural communication.

A small number of studies examining gratitude and cross-cultural communication within the context of education are recorded within scholarship and include: Pishghadam and Zarei’s (2012) examination of speech acts of gratitude amongst Persian and Chinese learners and English native speakers; and Farnia and Sattar (2015) study of Iranian and Malaysian students’ expressions of gratitude. Morgan et al. (2014) suggest that gratitude has a common core which resonates across cultures, but ‘socially constructed elements’ which are specific to cultures. Al-Khawaldeh (2014) suggests that cultural variations in expressions of gratitude can be explained by the sensitive interplay between social and contextual variables. Naito and Washizu’s (2015) review of the literature identifies the cultural differences in conceptions of gratitude and the influence of cultural values on expressions of gratitude as areas worthy of future study. Extant studies have tended to focus on verbal expressions of gratitude and highlight the importance of building awareness of understanding speech acts cross culturally (e.g. Farnia and Sattar 2015).

This exploratory study used in-depth interviews to examine the experiences of undergraduate and postgraduate students studying within a faculty of a UK university. In addition the voices of academics and alumni were sought. The sample comprised participants from the UK, Italy, Bulgaria, Finland, Germany, Turkey and Hong Kong. Whilst student participants were largely European, academics, in the main from the UK, wer able to commented on their experiences of working with students from across the globe including South Asia, SE Asia, Far East, Africa, North and South America. Nevertheless at the outset it is acknowledged that this exploratory study was limited in the breadth of non-UK participants. However it seeks to present interim findings which can inform a broader future study which systematically draws participants from a range of cultures.

The study found that student participants experienced feelings of gratitude and indeed saw these feelings of gratitude as positive aspects of their student experience. Academics in contrast, were more varied in their perceptions of feelings of gratitude and whether feelings of gratitude were experienced or indeed were relevant within higher education. Culture appeared to have little role in distinguishing students’ or academics’ perceptions of the presence and role of feelings of gratitude within higher education. However it should be noted that student participants were recruited as a response to programme leaders’ requests to be involved in the research. Thus these students were undoubtedly engaged within the learning experience and should not be seen as representative of the entire student population even within the faculty of study.

Expressions of gratitude appeared to be more variably experienced by culture. Indeed this reflects the findings of studies examining cross-cultural expressions of gratitude (Farnia and Sattar 2015; Pishghadam and Zarei 2012).

Whilst academics highlight differences in the manner in which they perceive overseas and UK students’ expressions of gratitude, this distinction seems less evident within the conversations with student participants. Academics reported few expressions of gratitude from UK students whether that be cards, gifts or indeed face- to-face verbal expressions of gratitude. However, academics spoke about routine presentation of gifts from overseas students which some academics found void of emotional expression. Indeed these gifts generated neutral or even negative emotional responses. In contrast one alumni spoke about the difficulties he perceived Asians had in expressing gratitude.

Students from all countries, appeared to be consistently concerned about how to demonstrate the feelings of gratitude which they experienced, into expressions of gratitude. Several respondents, particularly those in their earlier years of study, felt uncertain about how they might express gratitude to academics. Face-to-face expressions of gratitude felt ‘weird’, and students spoke about piggy-backing routine email communication with expressions of thanks. The student union scheme ‘You’re Brilliant’ was enthusiastically used by one overseas student, who talked about wanting to express gratitude but being unsure about how to do so in an appropriate manner. The scheme facilitated her expressions of gratitude in a way with which she felt comfortable.

Therefore the interim findings of this small-scale study seem to speak to a more consistent pattern between cultural groupings of students than previous literature suggests. This is probably linked to the limited diversity within the student sample.

Consistency was evident in both students’ feelings of gratitude within HE and in concerns about how best to express gratitude in an appropriate manner.

The study highlights the apparent mis-match between students’ reports of feelings and expressions of gratitude. Arguably the comparatively fewer expressions of gratitude under-plays the current and potential role of gratitude within HE. Formal schemes which facilitate students of all cultures to express their gratitude towards academics appear to have value amongst students and are worthy of exploration in higher education.

**References.**

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