

CROSS-CULTURAL ENGAGEMENT WITH STUDENTS FROM THE SUBCONTINENT:

CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES



AUTHORS

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DISCLAIMER

1. There could be subtle cultural variances between the countries of the subcontinent as they are a mix of diverse cultures, languages and religions. We have made generalisations in treating all subcontinent countries collectively. Hence, information contained in this document should be treated accordingly. And remember, cultural traits can change over time as students adapt themselves to a new cultural environment in Australia. Ultimately, all interactions with students should transcend across cultures.

2. Whilst we may have referred to academic and professional staff collectively in this document, it was apparent their views were similar. Pedagogy aside, the learnings and strategies are equally applicable to professional staff too.

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Anthony Weber was for over 20 years an Intensive Care and Flight Paramedic and then changed career paths to a second successful career in paramedic education, where he developed the acclaimed Bachelor of Paramedic Science and had since taken up positions as Deputy Dean (Learning and Teaching) within the school and now expanded to the School of Business and Law. Anthony has been awarded a number of citations for his teaching. This year he was awarded the Vice Chancellors Tier 2 award for Outstanding Contributions to Learning and Teaching. Anthony has a number of publications and book chapters and has presented at numerous conferences and symposiums. Anthony's PhD is focussed on developing a paramedic signature pedagogy.

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Mahsood Shah is the Professor and inaugural Dean of Swinburne University of Technology, Sydney Campus. In this new role, he provides overall leadership and management of the campus. Mahsood is responsible for the growth of the campus, management of campus facilities and resources, staffing, monitoring quality and standard, improving quality of student experience and other academic outcome measures. Prior to joining Swinburne University of Technology, Mahsood led learning and teaching at faculty level at a number of Australian universities. Mahsood is an active researcher. His areas of research include quality in higher education, measurement and enhancement of student experience, student retention and attrition, student engagement in quality assurance, international higher education, widening participation and private higher education.



ROBERT GROSE

Robert Grose is a Lecturer in Accounting at CQUniversity's School of Business and Law. Robert is an experienced teacher who has taught in a variety of educational settings across multiple campuses and to large numbers of international and domestic students both in Australia and at overseas universities. Prior to joining CQUniversity, Robert acted as Program Manager in RMIT's Bachelor of Business Studies Program run out of Malaysia and Singapore. Robert is an active researcher whose research interests lie in the areas of accounting education, the use of technology in accounting education, financial accounting and auditing. In addition to publishing in a number of academic journals and several academic conference papers, Robert has also authored several accounting, auditing and accounting software textbooks published through Pearson Australia.

The overarching aim of the study is to improve the cross-cultural awareness of academic and professional staff in relation to subcontinent students. The key research questions driving the project are:

- 1. What are the challenges faced by academic staff in teaching and supporting students from subcontinent?**
- 2. What are the challenges faced by professional staff in supporting the subcontinent students?**
- 3. What are the strategies that universities can execute to train academic and professional staff to support international students in addressing their cross-cultural issues?**

Australian universities have seen a rapid growth of international students. From 2017 to 2018, there was an 11% increase in international student numbers and of these, 45.5% were enrolled in higher education institutions. Student numbers from the subcontinent have grown significantly, for example, students from India have increased by 32% whereas students from Nepal have the highest increase at 51% from 2017 to 2018.¹

As a result of this increase in numbers of international students, higher education institutions need to offer a rich learning and cultural environment, while also providing engaging interactions between international and domestic students, as well as between students and staff (both teaching and professional staff). A diverse student population, predominantly on metropolitan campuses, but with an increased focus on attracting international students to regional university campuses, **creates an environment that can potentially improve collaborative learning coupled with cultural interactions.**²

Unfortunately, evidence suggests that interactions between domestic and international students is lacking. Academics and professional staff are integral to improving collaboration between all students, not only on campus and in classroom environments, but also off-campus environment. Active teaching approaches by academics towards

students from a range of cultures provides students from all backgrounds with a diverse perspective that is supported in the peer-to-peer environment so that students are exposed to different world views on specific topics. It is important for academics to facilitate this diverse knowledge sharing through an inclusive and open approach to learning and teaching. The overall university experience is just as important as the learning journey.

Professional staff need to be aware of the importance of cross-culturalism in the Australian Higher Education system. Such an awareness will facilitate a student's transition into an Australian university way of life with different learning modalities through flexible formal and informal approaches to their studies. A collaborative approach between academic and professional staff facilitates this smooth transition.³

¹ Australian Government. International Student Survey. In: Training DoEa, editor. 2019
² Arkoudis SB, C. Crossing the interaction divide between international and domestic students in higher education. HERDSA Review of Higher Education. 2014. 1:1147-62.
³ Leask BC, J. Learning and Teaching Across Cultures. Melbourne: International Education Association of Australia (IEAA); 2013. p. 76.

There are many layers to the cross-cultural challenges involved in teaching and/or supporting subcontinent students:

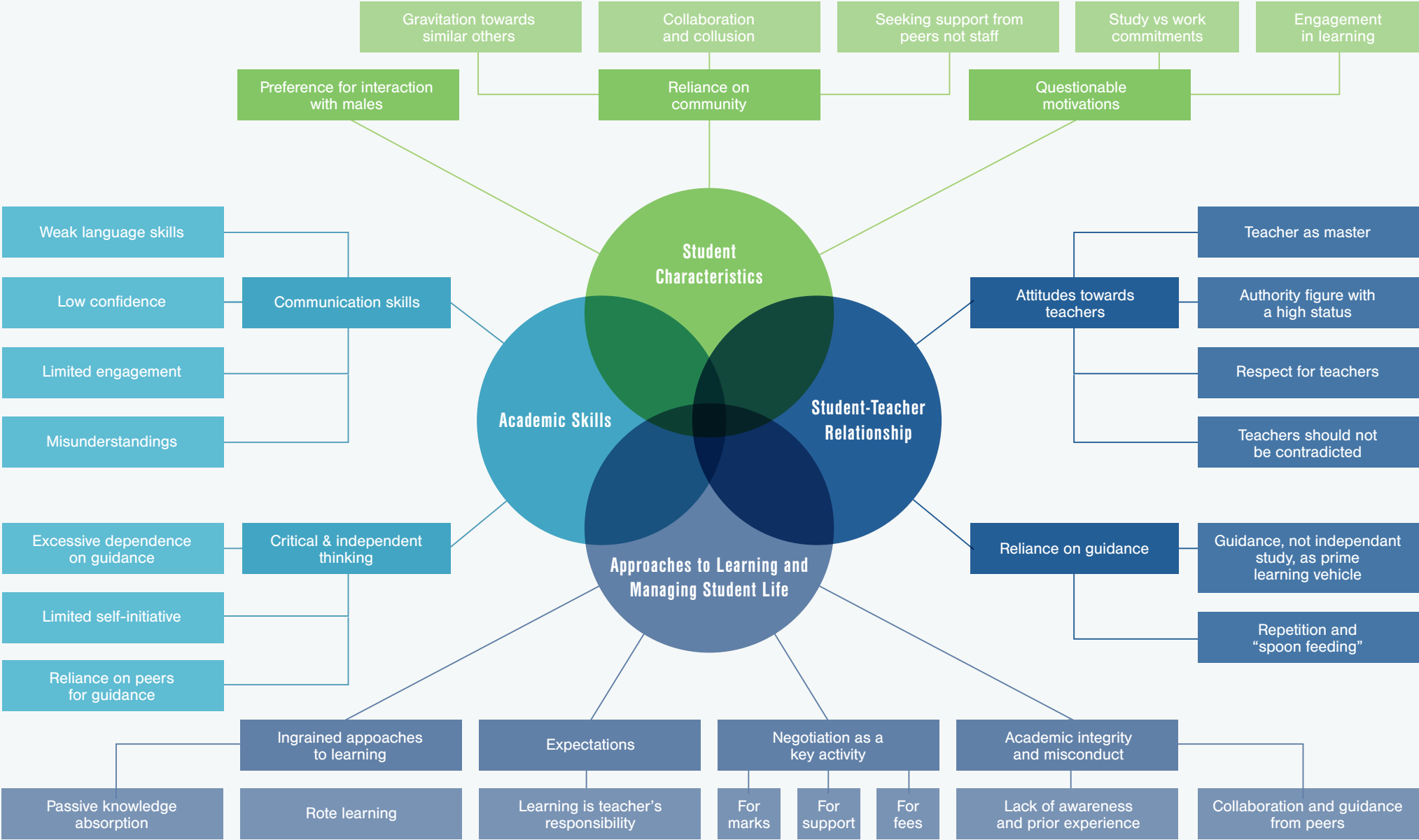
- **Students** themselves face a diverse set of challenges, some of which are common amongst international students, while others are more unique to the specific subcontinent cohort.
- **Professional and academic staff** face challenges when dealing directly with subcontinent students and actions to alleviate such challenges are challenging.
- The **university structure and systems**, within which staff and students must operate, may cause or aggravate some of the challenges for both parties. Thus, institutional responses and actions are required if these challenges are to be addressed.

Cross-cultural challenges do not exist in isolation – they mutually affect and influence each other and thus complicate attempts to alleviate them. Several interconnected cross-cultural challenges, which affect staff and students alike, were identified in this project. Each of these groups are influenced by the institutional context, are nuanced, and thus affect the challenges of students, professional staff and teaching faculty. As *Figure 1* illustrates, these challenges roughly correspond to:

- A.** The students' characteristics
- B.** Their approaches to learning and managing student life
- C.** Their academic skills
- D.** Their attitudes towards the student-teacher relationship



FIGURE 1: UNIVERSITY STAFF PERCEPTIONS ON CROSS-CULTURAL ISSUES OF STUDENTS FROM SUBCONTINENT



TRAITS OF STUDENTS FROM THE SUB-CONTINENT

It is important to understand the cultural traits and pedagogical behaviours of students from the subcontinent so staff can better mould interactions. The interactions with both academic and professional staff in our study showed that subcontinent students:

- Show a lot of respect for people in authority and are usually obedient
- Are reluctant to ask for help or information
- Do not usually speak out for fear of damaging their relationship with staff
- Rely on teachers for obtaining information, who they also often see as paternalistic figures
- Form groups within their own cultural cohorts, with little effort to mingle outside their cultural cohorts
- Focus on rote learning
- Demonstrate a lack of critical analysis skills
- Value masculinity over femininity

LESSONS FROM THE FRONT LINES

Crucial lessons for staff came to the forefront in this study. The important lessons were:

- Question your own assumptions and biases about student behaviours
- Establish and communicate clear expectations from the start
- Respect diversity and cultural differences
- Avoid stereotyping
- Help students adapt to new learning styles through a gradual shift
- Encourage students to ask questions
- Motivate students to take self-initiative
- Ensure/encourage multicultural student groups
- Encourage all genders to participate in in-class discussions
- Use examples from diverse cultural perspectives, relating to students' backgrounds
- Establish peer-to-peer mentor groups among the student cohort
- Shuffle classroom seating to be more collaborative
- Discuss extensively about academic integrity concepts
- Shift student motivation from short term goals, such as permanent residency to long-term goals, such as career advancement
- Consider student wellbeing and refer to counselling services if required

“IT IS NOT THE STRONGEST OF THE SPECIES THAT SURVIVE, NOT THE MOST INTELLIGENT, BUT THE ONE MOST RESPONSIVE TO CHANGE.”

– CHARLES DARWIN

Some direct excerpts from the interviews with staff are shown here.

SIGNIFICANT RESPECT FOR TEACHERS

We have differences which are culturally situated around things like our distance and respect for elders, and education traditions as well, and I think generally Asian traditions are generally that you learn from the master. You learn from a sage. And you're the student, you're at a much lower level, whereas perhaps the Anglo-American tradition is more a questioning, challenging and critical thinking tradition. (FG1_AS_P2)

EXPECTATION OF A SPOON-FEEDING LEARNING APPROACH

Students come with the culture of being spoon fed. They want everything laid out to them on a plate and they don't want to work towards it. They want everything done for them. (FG6_PS_P5)

But they do expect a lot of directions in many cases. They don't understand the independent study units especially. Because they don't think that they have to actually read all the instructions and come up with their own process of learning. (FG1_AS_P1)

LANGUAGE AND ACCENT ISSUES

Additionally, there's the issue of accents. And this goes both ways—some of the lecturers might have accents which the students have trouble understanding, and the students might also have accents which limits the lecturer's ability to understand. That's the first issue—language. (FG1_AS_P8)

NEGOTIATIONS AND ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Negotiation. Negotiation is a thing that, let's say, 70% of those

students that I see in regards with fees, "Can we negotiate payment deadline?" (FG6_PS_P2)

So, from my experience, this cohort is more prone to cheating or exploring options of cheating. I'll mention contract cheating because that's something that's the flavor of the month, recently.

(FG8_PS_P2)

WHY THEY ARE HERE: RESIDENCY OR STUDY?

You're on student visa. You're not on a tourist visa or a working visa. You have to study five days a week! Even if it is seven days, you have to attend. They [students] have to be full-time enrolled. (FG6_PS_P2)

We need to overcome the visa mentality, which I know a lot of our students have, they're here seeking a visa, and that's really a lot, a proportion of the students. We need to improve our recruitment techniques, because

moving away from the selling of a visa, which is unfortunately, a lot of our agent network. That's what they do. (FG3_AS_P2)

The trend has been that there's an increasing number of students who are not as genuine I feel... So that means their priorities are not study related and [are] more visa or a permanent visa [related].

(PG8_PS_P2)

Majority of the subcontinent students that I teach at [name of the university] do not have financial support, as such devote their time and attention at their casual jobs. I feel, that is the main hindrance in their learning. Can we solve this one? (FG4_AS_P2)

ENGAGEMENT VIA ORIENTATION, VIDEOS AND CUSTOMISED EXAMPLES

Probably, more engagement. Orientation structure needs to change. You know, that's the first day a student comes to university.

What are our expectations, and how are we meeting their expectations? (FG6_PS_P5)

We want to put on webinars, so we can actually engage with students before they arrive, to help them sort out things like accommodation, help clarify expectations, and things like that.

(FG5_PS_P1)

A strategy that I've adopted and find [that it] works very well with students from the subcontinent when teaching marketing is using examples relevant to the country they come from. (FG1_AS_P7)

I've got all of the videos of the slides with me narrating them. They've been captioned now for hearing. Look at the slides with the captions, because they think, "well, I'm not quite understanding him, but I've got captions down there." (FG2_AS_P1)

Additionally, there's the issue of accents. And this goes both

ways—some of the lecturers might have accents which the students have trouble understanding, and the students might also have accents which limits the lecturer's ability to understand. That's the first issue—language. (FG1_AS_P8)

BRIDGING COURSES COULD HELP

Some kind of bridging courses. And our domestic students have access to [the pathway] so that's a preparation course that's completely free, again, those guys that come out of [the pathway] and enter one of our courses, are so well prepared, so much better set up to succeed.

(FG8_PS_P1)

A second idea would be providing a program that's like a peer-to-peer mentoring. Because as I mentioned earlier, the international students rely a lot on their friends, on their mates for information, for guidance, it might

be useful to have senior students paired up with a junior student to provide him guidance and help. This is what I could think of.

(FG1_AS_P8)

UNIVERSITIES NEED TO TRAIN STAFF 'TO BETTER SPEAK THEIR LANGUAGE'

I think the answer would be, of course, it can enhance the student experience. The more training, I guess, cross-cultural training than we're given. (FG5_PS_P3)

Cross-cultural workshops in understanding the student culture and expectation of students from the subcontinent to 'better speak their language' when it comes to academic expectations and study styles. (FG3_AS_P1)



ADDRESSING AND ALLEVIATING THE ABOVE-MENTIONED COMPLEX AND INTERCONNECTED CHALLENGES REQUIRES ACTION FROM ACADEMIC AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF, AS WELL FROM HIGHER LEVELS WITHIN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS. IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT MANY OF THESE ACTIONS ARE IMPORTANT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN GENERAL, NOT JUST STUDENTS FROM THE SUBCONTINENT.

WHAT CAN ACADEMICS AND PROFESSIONAL STAFF DO?

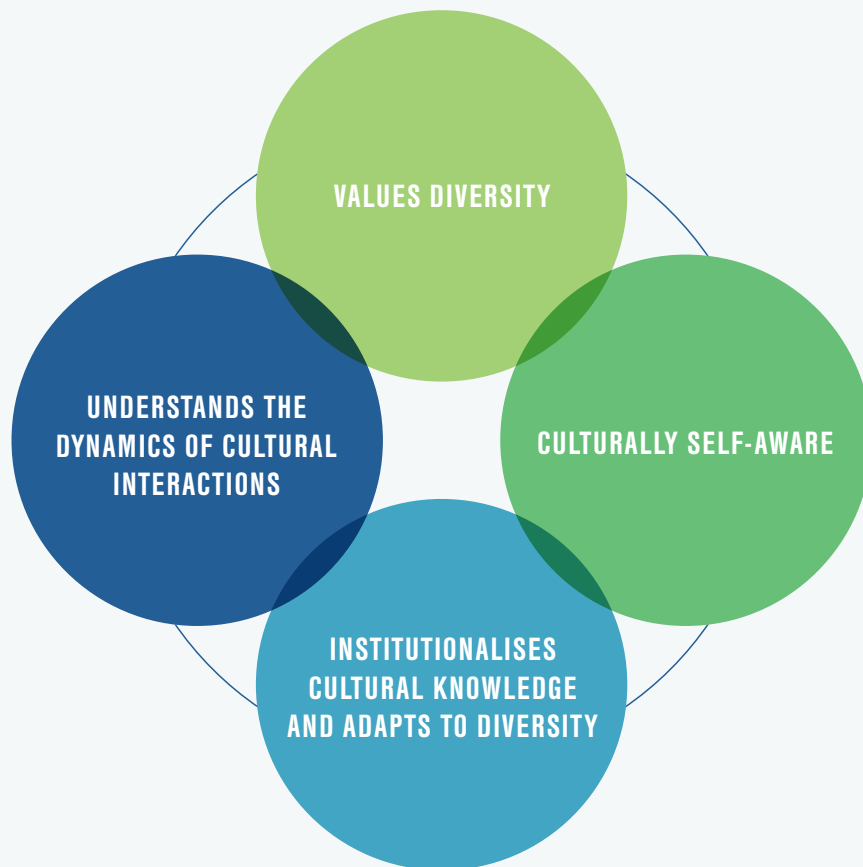
- **Better expectation management and communication of these expectations:**
 - Before and during orientation
 - Explicitly in the first week(s) of term
 - Regular repetition throughout the term
 - Practical demonstrations (e.g. of paraphrasing)
 - Ideally this happens through real-time one-on-one engagement before and after students have arrived
- **Contextualising and customising the course contents:**
 - Explicit reference to (occasional) examples from students' own background, but also
 - Emphasis on the Australian context (after all, this is where they chose to study)
- **Assessment design:**
 - Reduce contract cheating opportunities
 - Increase support for students so they do not want to cheat
- **Complementary videos to support study materials:**
 - Subtitles are useful for international students
- **Physical teaching spaces:**
 - Flexible teaching spaces for collaborative learning
 - Availability of social spaces for students and staff to mingle

WHAT CAN INSTITUTIONS DO?

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- Improve language skills by offering additional bridging and language courses
- Formalise peer guidance by implementing peer-to-peer mentoring and students as teaching assistants
- Provide additional resources for academic skills development (e.g. an Academic Learning Centre)
- Offer added financial support for international students to reduce their need for excessive part-time work
- Expand counselling resources
- Provide cross-cultural training for staff
- Improve academic integrity training for students
- Review student recruitment practices and assure that recruiters provide accurate information

FIGURE 2: SKILL AREAS OF CULTURALLY COMPETENT TEACHERS



**FIGURE 3:
EQUIP YOURSELF!**

We also formulated the EQUIP acronym below to outline simple strategies to enhance cross-cultural understanding and more importantly support staff in adapting their interactions with students from diverse cultural backgrounds. This acronym is non-restrictive, i.e. It can be used to inform interactions with all students regardless of their cultural background.



CHALLENGING ASSESSMENTS AND SUPPORT VIDEOS



Dr. Monika Kansal

Senior Lecturer, Accounting, School of Business and Law

I follow two primary strategies to support international students in an accounting unit in MPA program. First, I design challenging assessments to develop their communication, research and practical workplace skills. Every term, I create a support video (8-10 minutes) for each assessment, demonstrating step by step instructions for submission of assessment and use of turnitin software. This also elucidates the assessment question, process of literature review, assessment rubrics and requirements. Students' extensive use of these videos evidence their relevance. Secondly, given that many international students lack exposure to Australian work culture, I invite professional accounting bodies and industry experts to interact in an informal classroom environment. These interactions serve to bridge cultural gaps between international students and Australian professionals thus making them feel comfortable in their new environment. Overall, this two-pronged strategy enhances their learning experience by first ensuring completion of assessment tasks and second acquainting them with the Australian culture.

OVERCOMING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES TO IMPROVE PEDAGOGY



Dr. Ritesh Chugh

Discipline Lead (Information Systems and Analysis),
School of Engineering and Technology

Teaching subcontinent students poses its own set of challenges. It is not only important to cultivate cross-cultural awareness in students but also how I understand their cultural differences and overcome them. I have coined and practice the 5Rs of teaching international students, which particularly apply to face-to-face teaching.

- **The 5Rs are:**
 - **Recognise** differences
 - **Reduce** jargon
 - **Recap** periodically
 - **Relate** examples to students' experiences and prior knowledge
 - **Reward** intrinsically

This allows certain elements of my teaching to become culturally responsive and an enriching experience for students.

ENGAGING STUDENTS THROUGH NEUROSCIENCE OF LEARNING

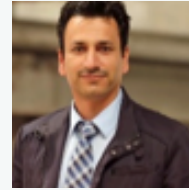


Dr. Chandana Watagodakumbura

Sessional Academic, School of Engineering and Technology

I have observed that many students come with pre-meditated, unsubstantiated views such as learning a unit ends with the semester and what matters is the final pass mark. To highlight the notion of lifelong learning, I spent 10-15 minutes in the first class of the newly starting students talking about what learning is in a broader sense. I give facts from the neuroscience of learning, using contents from my publications. When one pays attention to learning contents, it makes physical changes in his/her brain, creating new neural connections. If one copies contents from somewhere else, he/she is not able to make positive physical brain changes. Many students come with less confidence and motivation when in the process of shifting to a new discipline of studies. I introduce the notion of “growth mindset” by showing them the Ted talk on the topic from Professor Carol Dweck to motivate them with facts.

REDESIGNING COURSE CONTENT AND DELIVERY



Dr. Omar Aziz

Sessional Lecturer Finance, School of Business and Law

In the MBA course, I teach managerial finance, with a majority of international students from subcontinent who do not have a background in finance but demonstrate efficient maths skills. Thus, I redesigned the teaching material to utilise their maths skills to learn finance. I generated a specific routine which cycles through the delivery of a small lecture about the sub-topic, followed by a practical example, and then a hands-on workshop requiring students to work in groups. All sub-topics of the day are covered in the same manner. This approach has produced a deeper understanding amongst international students as compared to the traditional lecture-tutorial format, as it encourages the students to engage more with the content and form better links between each sub-topic.



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