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# Diversity approaches matter in international classrooms: how a multicultural approach buffers against cultural misunderstandings and encourages inclusion and psychological safety

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## ABSTRACT

Students in higher education are increasingly part of international classrooms. While these classrooms have the potential to catalyze learning, they also come with lower senses of inclusion and psychological safety –factors that are crucial for learning. In the current study, we empirically test a contextual model in which these psychological costs are related to the number of cultural misunderstandings which are, in turn, associated with the prevailing diversity approach. Specifically, we surveyed the experiences of 360 university freshman enrolled in either a mononational or an international version of an otherwise identical educational program in the Netherlands, allowing us to investigate the unique effects of studying in an international classroom. Quantitative analyses exposed that students in international (vs. mononational) classrooms indeed experienced heightened levels of cultural misunderstandings that, in turn, were related to lower senses of inclusion and psychological safety. Crucially, this chain of effects differed depending on whether students perceived the diversity approach as more multicultural vs. colorblind. When lecturers were perceived to adopt a multicultural approach (i.e. recognizing and valuing cultural diversity), students experienced less cultural misunderstandings, and, therefore, less negative outcomes associated with studying in international classrooms. However, when lecturers were perceived to communicate a colorblind approach (i.e. overlooking cultural differences), cultural misunderstandings and their concomitant negative effects remained high. Together, these findings postulate a contextual model to understand *why* students' sense of inclusion and psychological safety may be jeopardized in international classrooms and encourage further research on both the mechanisms and potential benefits of a multicultural approach.

## KEYWORDS

International classroom; multiculturalism; colorblindness; diversity; inclusion

The typical mononational university classroom is increasingly turning into an international classroom. According to the latest figures, there are 5.3 million international students engaged in tertiary education programs worldwide – a number that has tripled since 1998 and that tends to increase by 5–6% each year (OECD 2019). Students in international classrooms may benefit from the international environment to improve their out-group attitudes, cross-cultural knowledge, intercultural

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communication skills, and ability to critically reflect on their own (culture's) worldviews and the subjective nature of knowledge (Andrade 2006; Caruana 2014; Héliot, Mittelmeier, and Rienties 2020; McClure 2007; Steir 2003). Yet, many students in international classrooms also experience cultural misunderstandings and other cultural barriers (e.g. de Araujo 2011; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010) that are associated with psychological costs. Specifically, international students tend to report a lower sense of inclusion – i.e. a feeling of belonging and authenticity (e.g. Shore et al. 2011) – than domestic students (e.g. Strayhorn 2012) and international or racial/ethnic diverse (study)groups are, in comparison to more homogenous groups, characterized by lower levels of psychological safety – i.e. a feeling one can perform interpersonally risky behaviors like speaking up, without fearing negative consequences (e.g. Beigpourian, Ohland, and Ferguson 2019; Kahn 1990). Since both factors are crucial for students' academic performance (Rienties et al. 2012; Strayhorn 2012; Van Laar et al. 2010), it is key to reduce international classrooms' psychological costs if we wish students to flourish in them.

The current research aimed to gain insight into some of the potential contextual mechanisms that link student experiences and perceptions in international classrooms to diminished psychological outcomes. Specifically, and empirically testing common assumptions from the literature on international classrooms, we examined whether students enrolled in international (vs. mononational) classrooms report a lower sense of inclusion and psychological safety due to a higher level of cultural misunderstandings. Moreover, we investigated if the perceived classroom approach to diversity can buffer against this chain of effects, hypothesizing that a perceived multicultural approach that values cultural differences mitigates cultural misunderstandings, while a colorblind approach that ignores cultural differences does not. As such, the current research moves beyond dominant approaches in the literature that focus on international *student* characteristics and searches for processes and dynamics that are key to the *context* of international classrooms. The resulting supported model not only documents that cultural misunderstandings are an important mechanism underlying the specific psychological costs associated with international classrooms, but also shows how the prevailing approach to diversity in a given context matters, thereby addressing scholarly calls for examining variables that can inform evidence-based interventions and reform policy in higher education institutions (Smith and Khawaja 2011).

Below, we first review the relevant literature on international classrooms in higher education. Subsequently, we outline our proposed model in which cultural misunderstandings operate as a mechanism that links international classrooms to specific psychological costs, and in which the perceived classroom approach to diversity operates as a 'dial' to increase or decrease these cultural misunderstandings and the concomitant negative chain of effects.

### **International classrooms**

With growing student mobility and surging international student population, the scholarly attention for (the impact of) international classrooms has increased over the past decade. This literature has illuminated factors that predict why students choose to study abroad, as well as what the (long-term) effects of international experiences on students are (Curtis and Ledgerwood 2018; Dwyer and Peters 2004). Perhaps because of the increasing pressure for higher education institutions to not only attract but also to integrate and retain international students (Choudaha 2017), most research has focused on the challenges international students face upon arrival in their host country and/or institution (Smith and Khawaja 2011; Van Mol 2019), ranging from barriers such as limited knowledge of the local language (Wang and Moskal 2019), experiences of prejudice and discrimination (Brown and Jones 2013), and financial hardships (Poyrazli and Grahame 2007), to cultural hinderences such as a lack of knowledge about the educational norms at the new institution (Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto 2005) and differences in educational values (Zhou and Zhang 2014)

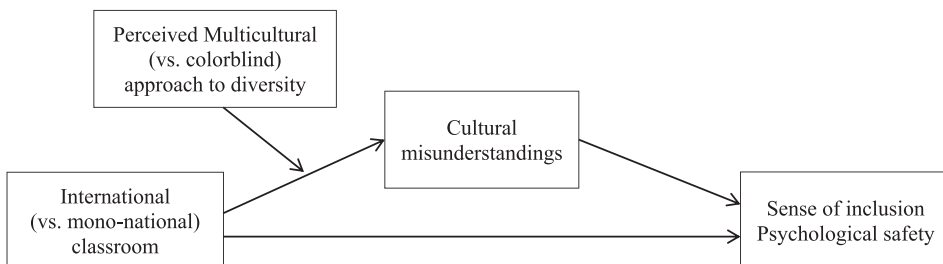
International students' cultural 'misfit' and its negative social and psychological effects are typically studied through a lens of *acculturation stress* – i.e. the (potentially detrimental) stress

individuals can experience as a consequence of cross-cultural encounters (Berry 2005). For example, international students' acculturation stress has been shown to predict reduced well-being (Yan 2020), depression (Hamamura and Laird 2014), and lower academic adjustment (Cura and Işık 2016). Importantly, the potential negative effects of acculturation processes are not limited to the personal experiences of international students themselves; the dynamics of international classrooms may relate to the well-being and study performance of all students engaging in them. Here, we propose – and empirically test – a model that extends the insights from the acculturative stress-perspective to *all* students engaging in international classrooms. Specifically, this contextual model proposes that experiences of cultural misunderstandings are a key mechanism to understand *why* international classrooms may be associated with students' lower sense of inclusion and psychological safety and hypothesizes that *how* classrooms approach diversity may matter such that a perceived colorblind versus multicultural approach can respectively fuel versus alleviate cultural misunderstandings and their associated negative chain of effects (see Figure 1).

### ***Sense of inclusion and psychological safety in international classrooms***

Research has shown that a 'sense of inclusion' is of great importance for college students' academic achievement and well-being (e.g. Yao 2015). Specifically, the two core ingredients of 'inclusion' – a 'sense of belonging' and a 'feeling that one can be one's unique self' (Shore et al. 2011) – can motivate positive behavior (Maslow 1954) and learning (Strayhorn 2012). Applied to the higher education context, students' 'sense of inclusion' not only captures their belongingness as a 'sense of identification and affiliation with the campus community' (Hausmann et al. 2009, 650), but also their authenticity, or how much they can feel comfortable being their unique selves at their institution (e.g. Le et al. 2020). Numerous studies found that these key components of inclusion benefit students. For example, feelings of belonging are positively associated with students' self-reported self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation (e.g. Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen 2007), as well as with their objectively measured academic achievement and persistence (e.g. Hausmann et al. 2009). Further, students' ability to be their authentic self not only boosts their positive affect (Ito and Kodama 2007), but also promotes perceptions of institutional acceptance and reduces backlash that underrepresented identity groups may experience (Turk, Stokowski, and Dittmore 2019).

Another important building block for learning is students' sense of 'psychological safety.' Although mainly featured in organizational psychology as a necessary condition to learn new behaviors and to engage with work roles (Kahn 1990), psychological safety may be just as critical in higher education. In its simplest form, it refers to 'feeling able to show and employ one's self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career' (Kahn 1990, 708). It thus refers to the degree to which people view the environment as 'safe' to perform interpersonally risky behaviors like speaking up or asking for help – i.e. behaviors that are critical to any learning process (Edmondson and Lei 2014).



**Figure 1.** Theoretical model.

However, the literature on international students and the workings of diverse groups point out that both inclusion and psychological safety can be jeopardized in international classrooms that are, by definition, highly heterogeneous (e.g. Inzlicht and Good 2006). Firstly, when comparing either domestic students to international students, or racial/ethnic majority to minority students, the latter groups typically report lower levels of belonging and inclusion at university (Walton and Brady 2017). Indeed, international students are particularly vulnerable to ‘feel isolated, alienated, lonely, or invisible’ (Strayhorn 2012, 10; Sherry, Thomas, and Chui 2010) – feelings that represent non-belonging and exclusion since they reflect failures to either connect with others or to feel ‘at home.’ Secondly, studies comparing different compositions of work or study teams have found that members of racially/ethnically diverse teams experienced lower levels of psychological safety than members of more homogenous teams (Beigpourian, Ohland, and Ferguson 2019; Foldy, Rivard, and Buckley 2009). Likewise, it is well-established that the academic performance of cultural minority and international students is often undermined by experiences of identity and/or stereotype threat (Steele, Spencer, and Aronson 2002; Van Laar et al. 2010) – two processes that reflect the absence of psychological safety (Roberge and van Dick 2010). Thus, although critical for learning, experiences of inclusion and psychological safety may be lower among students in international than in mononational classrooms.

### ***Cultural misunderstandings as contextual mechanism***

The challenges associated with the international classroom are well documented but the mechanisms are less well understood. Here, we propose that the amount of cultural misunderstandings, which may be higher in international than in mononational classrooms is one of the main reasons for these psychological costs. We do so, because international students’ difficulties and feelings of alienation are not only due to the lack of familiar social networks, but also, and perhaps more importantly so, due to the lack of familiar cultural environments (e.g. Zhou et al. 2008). Firstly, international students’ difficulties are exacerbated by unknown societal values, structures, and systems, both within the host country and university (e.g. Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2009), where they may not only face a language barrier, but also different academic expectations and teaching and learning styles (e.g. Crose 2011). In fact, when (international) students’ culturally shaped ideas on learning and education clash with those that are implicit yet omnipresent in their higher education institution, their sense of inclusion may decrease dramatically as they feel ‘out of place’ (Stephens et al. 2012; Walton and Brady 2017). Secondly, international classrooms may be plagued by awkward social interactions that stem from suboptimal (de-)coding of verbal or nonverbal cues (Ting-Toomey, Gu, and Chi 2007) or perceived preconceived cultural traits (Crose 2011). Indeed, and in comparison to culturally homogenous groups, heterogeneous groups generally report lower levels of cohesion (Harrison, Price, and Bell 1998; Terborg, Castore, and DeNinno 1976) and higher levels of conflict and misunderstandings (Jehn, Chadwick, and Thatcher 1997; Pelled, Eisenhardt, and Xin 1999), which may, in turn, reduce individuals’ sense of belonging (Tsui, Egan, and O’Reilly 1992) and psychological safety (Foldy, Rivard, and Buckley 2009; Tsutsui 2009). For all these reasons, it is often assumed, yet seldomly empirically tested, that students attending international (versus mononational) classrooms may encounter more cultural misunderstandings that may, in turn, come with psychological costs.

### ***Potential mitigating effects of perceived multicultural versus colorblind approaches***

In trying to understand the factors that mitigate the negative effects of international classrooms, most research has primarily considered individual differences among international students in factors that are somehow associated with overcoming cultural misunderstandings and hence facilitating social and academic integration. Specifically, studies have documented individual differences in open-mindedness, self-efficacy, cultural empathy (Chennamsetti 2020), help-seeking attitudes

(Clough et al. 2019), cultural intelligence (Presbitero 2016), country of origin, social integration (Rienties et al. 2012) and acculturation attitudes (Shafaei et al. 2016). By its focus, this research line thus suggests that the (main) locus of responsibility, control and potential change should be situated at the level of the individual student.

In the current paper, however, we respond to calls for broadening this scope by *also* studying the role of contextual factors – that is, to document that what happens in the ‘places of interaction matter’ (Van Mol 2019). To date, scholars and universities alike have argued that a ‘welcoming university’ is crucial for the mental health and academic outcomes of international students (Heffernan et al. 2019; Tidwell and Hanassab 2007) and that institutions hold the key to create such synergistic or welcoming environments where there is reciprocity among and openness to different student groups (Ploner 2018; Zhou et al. 2008). According to several qualitative studies, institutions may facilitate the educational and social outcomes of international students by offering social support and adequate campus services such as language or career centers (Arthur 2017; Banjong 2015), encouraging equity (Beykont and Daiute 2002), facilitating inclusive knowledge sharing (Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto 2005), fostering an appreciation of diversity (Wang and Moskal 2019), and embedding effective classroom dynamics in a multicultural environment (Bordia et al. 2019; Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015). Nonetheless, creating such a space, may appear to be difficult because of a prevailing deficit model that assumes that international students should ‘adapt’ or ‘adjust’ into the mainstream ways of the host environment in order to succeed (Ploner 2018).

Building on these perspectives, and preparing to employ a quantitative method to assess some contextual factors that shape students’ outcomes via cultural misunderstandings, we propose that students’ perceptions of the diversity approach in their classroom may be an especially fruitful area to examine. To the extent that the perceived diversity approach is consistent with a synergistic and open environment, it may provide a strong buffer against the potential detriments of studying in international classrooms.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, we argue that students’ perception of an approach that welcomes diversity (a.k.a. multicultural approach, see *infra*) can be related to reduced cultural misunderstandings, and as such, can mitigate the psychological costs associated with international classrooms, whereas the perception of a deficit model that neglects diversity (a.k.a. a colorblind approach) cannot (see [Figure 1](#) for our research model).

To conceptualize how higher education institutions approach ethnocultural diversity we draw on the framework of *diversity approaches* (or diversity ‘models’ or ‘ideologies’) – that are, the institutional beliefs and practices regarding how cultural differences should be dealt with (Gündemir, Martin, and Homan 2019; Rattan and Ambady 2013). Two diversity approaches are prominent in educational settings, workplaces, and other organizations: colorblindness and multiculturalism (Levin et al. 2012; Plaut 2010).<sup>2</sup> The colorblind model puts forward that prejudice and discrimination can be neutralized by *ignoring* group categories and refers to individualism and uniqueness to justify this disregard (Markus, Steele, and Steele 2000). In contrast, the multiculturalist model submits that equality lies in *acknowledging and valuing* ethnocultural differences (Levin et al. 2012; Plaut 2010). It highlights that cultural differences can be an important source of strength for minorities (Wolsko et al. 2000), and argues that minorities can be included if their social identities are recognized and affirmed (Van Laar et al. 2010). Thus, applied to the higher education context, models of diversity refer to the set of beliefs and practices about how ethnocultural diversity – in terms of both race, national origin, religion or language – is approached within college or university classes (Agirdag 2020).

While both the colorblind and multicultural approaches intend to improve intercultural relationships and social cohesion, research in primary and secondary education suggests that culturally diverse environments benefit more from a diversity-aware than a diversity-blind approach (Agirdag 2020; Schachner 2017). For instance, a large-scale longitudinal study in Flemish secondary schools found that whereas colorblindness negatively impacted pupils’ school belonging and grades, multiculturalism had the opposite effect (Celeste et al. 2019). Similarly, a unique study within the higher education context that followed diverse undergraduate study teams over the course of one semester, showed that the diversity approach of the team leader, who was a graduate

student, impacted both the groups' performance and minorities' sense of belonging (Meeussen, Otten, and Phalet 2014). Specifically, whereas leaders' multiculturalism positively predicted minorities' feelings of being accepted in the group, their colorblindness positively predicted minorities' self-distancing from the group and experienced relationship-conflict. Finally, suggesting that multiculturalism may reduce intercultural misunderstandings, a study in Dutch primary schools showed that multiculturalism was related to more positive interethnic attitudes and the establishment of anti-racist norms (Verkuyten and Thijs 2013), and several studies suggested that teachers with a multicultural approach adapted their teaching materials and practices to the diversity in their classroom, thereby solving potential cultural misunderstandings in regard to studying (Aragon, Dovidio, and Graham 2017; Hachfeld et al. 2015). In sum, a multicultural approach has the potential to enhance belonging and achievement in diverse educational settings.

Here we propose that students' perception of a multicultural approach in the classroom may mitigate the psychological costs associated with studying in international (vs. mononational) classrooms. This proposition resonates with the argument that a 'welcoming' environment is associated with positive mental health and academic outcomes of international students (Heffernan et al. 2019; Tidwell and Hanassab 2007). It is also indirectly supported by the above described phenomenological research that suggested that classroom processes that foster an appreciation of diversity and inclusion are crucial determinants of international students' classroom participation (Wang and Moskal 2019; Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto 2005) and that higher education institutions that have an eye for developing global mindsets and the needs of different student groups contribute to fulfillment of their psychological contract with international students (Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015). More direct evidence comes from research suggesting that multiculturalism promotes an open and respectful environment that is vital for cultural fluency, which is necessary for effective intercultural communication and the reduction of cultural misunderstandings (Inoue 2007). Hence, we expect that while a multiculturalist approach may reduce the number of cultural misunderstandings – that may, in turn, may be associated with students' sense of inclusion and psychological safety – a colorblind approach is unlikely to do so.

### **The current study**

The current study tested the above outlined research model on the dynamics of international classrooms in a unique context, namely among first-year students of one of the largest universities in the Netherlands who were enrolled in either a mononational (Dutch-taught) or an international (English-taught) variant of the *exact* same social and behavioral sciences bachelor's program. Concretely, we asked them to reflect back on the same six-month long tutorial course that they had attended in small classgroups and that was thus offered in either English or Dutch but otherwise contained the exact same content. We focused on first-year students since this group goes through a number of transitions at once (e.g. to university, a new cultural context) and student experiences in the first year are important predictors of continuation and completion of higher education (Zhou and Zhang 2014). Further, we deliberately chose the unique setting of our study as it has two main benefits unseen in most other studies. Firstly, it allowed us to compare students in mononational and international classrooms while holding constant the content, structure and even some lecturers in their respective educational programs. Secondly, it allowed to compare the experiences of students in different *types of classrooms* instead of those of domestic and international students, which will likely underestimate rather than overestimate the effects of different diversity approaches as majority members are often less impacted by different diversity policies (e.g. Celeste et al. 2019). As such, the current study design provided a rather stringent test of our hypotheses.

It is noteworthy, however, that the current context of investigation may diverge from the contexts in which international education has been primarily studied before. Specifically, much of the existing research focuses on international education or the experiences of international students in English-speaking countries such as the U.S., U.K. or Australia. Given the long standing international education

tradition in those countries, neither a dominant national group nor actual mononational classrooms may be present in those contexts. Also, since the dominant language in these Anglo-Saxon contexts is also the language of instruction for international students, there is no need for two variants of the exact same study program in different languages. Our target institution here is different. The faculty has only recently transitioned to bilingual education and the government specifies that the default language of instruction (at least for Dutch students) should remain Dutch (Wet op het Hoger Onderwijs en Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek, artikel 7.2; Law on Higher education and Scientific research; article 7.2). As such, the program offers tutorials in Dutch for the mononational variant, and in English for the international variant. Whereas students enrolled in the mononational variant of the program were all Dutch nationals (mainly due to the Dutch language requirements), those enrolled in the international variant were both Dutch and international students.<sup>3</sup> As a consequence, cultural diversity is only (or much more) salient in the international variant. Thus, although quite atypical, the current study context may offer unique insights into the dynamics of international classrooms as compared to those in mononational classrooms.

The current study aimed at understanding the dynamics in the international classroom from students' point of view. In so doing, we also aimed at broadening the focus from the perceptions of international students alone to all students within the international (versus mononational) classroom. That is, perceived classroom dynamics represent an interactive process among multiple actors (i.e. students from different national backgrounds, teachers). While much of the prior work has highlighted international students' perspective, we compared student experiences in these two classroom forms, regardless of individual students' national background. We tested the following predictions:

*Hypothesis 1:* Students in international classrooms encounter more cultural misunderstandings than those in mononational classrooms.

*Hypothesis 2:* The relationship between classroom type (mononational/international) and students' (a) sense of inclusion, and (b) psychological safety is explained (mediated) by cultural misunderstandings.

*Hypothesis 3:* The perceived diversity approach (multiculturalism/colorblindness) differentially shapes (moderates) the positive association between studying in an international classroom and encountering cultural misunderstandings, such that (a) a perceived multicultural approach alleviates the (positive) link between studying in international classrooms and encountering cultural misunderstandings, while (b) a perceived colorblind approach does not alleviate this link.

*Hypothesis 4:* Cultural misunderstandings mediate the interactive effect of the perceived diversity approach and classroom type on students' (a) sense of inclusion, and (b) psychological safety.

The current research advances the field of higher education by outlining and empirically testing a novel contextual model on international classroom dynamics. Specifically, and by focusing on cultural misunderstandings in mono- versus international classrooms, it provides insight into the 'black box' of processes that link international classrooms to psychological costs. Moreover, and by documenting the correlates of perceived diversity approaches, it further integrates insights from social and organizational psychology to test if universities' policies and practices towards diversity can tackle these mechanisms that either undermine or instigate basic conditions for learning –i.e. sense of inclusion and psychological safety– in international classrooms. Hence, the current work paves the way for future studies and novel interventions that may help all students to thrive in international classrooms.

## Method

### *Participants and procedure*

The study was administered as part of a regular course evaluation of tutorials that freshman psychology students at one of the largest universities in the Netherlands had attended twice a week for six months, involving 36 class groups of 7–14 students. All 532 enrolled freshman students of that single



course were invited to complete the evaluation. The participant pool consisted of 164 students who attended the mononational classroom variant of the course offered in Dutch (30.8%) and 368 students who attended the international classroom variant offered in English (69.2%).

The study was completed by 360 students (response rate = 67.7%); 98 attended the mononational (27.2%), and 262 (72.8%) attended the international variant. Both variants have the exact same courses and curriculum; the difference is that the mononational one is only attended by Dutch nationals, while the international variant is attended by both domestic and international students. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Psychology Department's Ethics Review Board. Participation was on a voluntary basis and completely anonymous, which prevented us from obtaining any demographic information about the participants (e.g. gender, nationality).

## Measures

Given time constraints, the measures were shortened versions of existing, validated instruments. For all items, participants indicated their level of agreement on a seven-point Likert scale (1 = completely disagree, 7 = completely agree). Students answered all questions reflecting back on their experiences in the tutorials.

Two items measured *cultural misunderstandings* in the classroom. Building upon research on task and relationship conflict in heterogeneous groups, one item tapped into misunderstandings regarding studying ('I feel like there were misunderstandings in how to study or make an assignment that were due to differences in students' (past) study culture.') while the other tapped into misunderstandings regarding social relationships ('I feel like we had some awkward interactions that were due to intercultural misunderstandings.' based on Jehn 1995;  $r = .61, p < .001$ ).

Two items measured students' *sense of inclusion* at the university, each focusing on one of two key aspects of inclusion: (a) authenticity ('I feel comfortable being myself at university.') and (b) belonging ('I feel like I belong at university.'). based on Chung et al. 2020; Shore et al. 2011;  $r = .63, p < .001$ ).

*Psychological safety* was measured through a single item (i.e. 'I sometimes did not dare to ask for additional explanation.' [reverse coded]; based on Edmondson, Kramer, and Cook 2004). Focusing on a behavior that is central to university freshmen, this item captures the essence of the construct – a sense of being able to perform behaviors that may pose a 'risk' to one's status or identity – because a willingness to ask for additional explanation signals the extent to which these new students show an approach attitude in situations where they run the risk that others may question their competence or belonging.

Finally, the *perceived approach to diversity* in the classroom was measured with single items for *colorblindness* ('Because of neutrality, the teacher of my tutorial paid little attention to ethnic/cultural differences in the classroom.'), and for *multiculturalism* ('I feel like the importance of appreciating differences between students from different ethnic/cultural groups was emphasized.'). based on Agirdag, Merry, and Van Houtte 2016).

## Results

The means, standard deviations and intercorrelations are presented in Table 1. The observed patterns are consistent with the theoretical model. For example, attending the international classroom is associated with experiences of increased cultural misunderstandings, which are negatively associated with a sense of inclusion and psychological safety. It is further noteworthy that the relationship between the two diversity approaches is close to zero.

To test our hypothesized mediation model, we used the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes 2017). The path coefficients reveal that, as expected under Hypothesis 1, students in international classrooms report higher levels of cultural misunderstandings than students in mononational classrooms. Cultural misunderstandings are, in turn, negatively associated with students' sense of inclusion and psychological safety. Indirect effect analyses using 5000 bootstrapped samples and calculating 95%

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations.

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5
1. International classroom <sup>a</sup>	.73	.45					
2. Cultural misunderstandings	2.63	1.59	.13*				
3. Sense of inclusion	5.67	1.17	-.03	-.21***			
4. Psychological safety	5.15	1.82	-.17**	-.45***	.34***		
5. Perceived multiculturalism	4.81	1.61	.15**	.00	.26***	.02	
6. Perceived colorblindness	4.68	1.96	.09	.12*	.11*	-.12*	.02

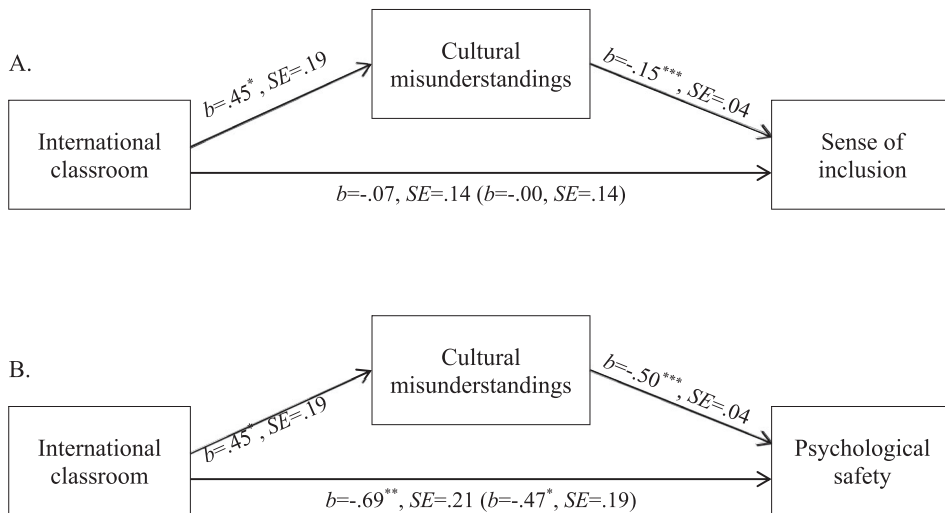
Note: <sup>a</sup>International classroom is dummy coded (1 = international, 0 = mono-national).

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

confidence intervals (CI; Hayes 2017), support our prediction that there is an indirect effect of international classroom on both students' sense of inclusion ( $b_{indirect} = -.07$ ,  $SE = .04$ , 95% $_{CI}$  [-.15, -.01]) and psychological safety ( $b_{indirect} = -.22$ ,  $SE = .10$ , 95% $_{CI}$  [-.41, -.03]), thereby supporting Hypotheses 2a and 2b, respectively. Thus, in contrast with those in mononational classrooms, students in international classrooms experience more cultural misunderstandings, which, in turn, reduce their sense of inclusion and psychological safety (see Figure 2).

In order to gauge the moderating role of a multicultural versus colorblind approach on the above established links, we complemented our mediation model with both moderation and moderated indirect effect analyses. In a first step, we ran a multiple linear regression<sup>4</sup> analysis with international classroom, (mean-centered) perceived multiculturalism and their interaction as predictors and cultural misunderstandings as the outcome. Subsequently, we ran a similar analysis that replaced multiculturalism with colorblindness. Each analysis included the non-focal approach to diversity as a control variable (e.g. colorblindness was the control variable when testing the effects of multiculturalism). Our findings did not change when excluding these control variables, yet including them allows estimating the effect of one diversity approach net of the other's effect. Therefore, we here report the analyses including the control variables.

As predicted, there was a buffering effect of the perceived multicultural approach on the negative impact of being in an international classroom. Specifically, there was an interaction between international (vs. mononational) classroom and multicultural approach on cultural misunderstandings,



**Figure 2.** Path coefficients for the indirect effect from international classroom to (a) Sense of Inclusion and (b) Psychological Safety.

Note: Coefficients are unstandardized. Direct effect of international classroom on the dependent measures after including cultural misunderstandings is in parenthesis. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

$b = -.26$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $p = .033$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.49, -.02]$ . A simple slopes analysis showed that when perceived multiculturalism was lower ( $-1$  SD), students in international classrooms experienced significantly more cultural misunderstandings than students in mononational classrooms,  $b = .84$ ,  $SE = .26$ ,  $p = .002$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [.32, 1.36]$ . But, when perceived multiculturalism was higher ( $+1$  SD), students in the international classrooms reported similar levels of cultural misunderstandings as those in mononational classrooms,  $b = -.18$ ,  $SE = .35$ ,  $p = .606$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.86, .50]$ . The results of the regression testing the effect of colorblindness did not show this buffering. There was no interaction between international (vs. mononational) classroom and colorblindness on cultural misunderstandings,  $b = .09$ ,  $SE = .10$ ,  $p = .384$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.11, .28]$ . A schematic representation of the simple slopes can be found in [Appendix](#). Taken together, the regression analyses supported Hypothesis 3: While multiculturalism weakens the positive association between international classroom and students' perceptions of misunderstandings, colorblindness has no such effect.

As a final step, we performed 'moderated mediations' or 'conditional indirect effect analyses' with the PROCESS macro in SPSS (Hayes 2017) to illuminate whether cultural misunderstandings mediate the interactive effects of the diversity approach and classroom type on students' (a) sense of inclusion and (b) psychological safety. Specifically, we used conditional process analysis to understand if the indirect relationship between classroom type and sense of inclusion and psychological safety through cultural misunderstandings (mediator) differs across the two perceived diversity approaches (moderators). In this analysis the moderator's impact on an indirect relationships is quantified by the so-called 'index of conditional indirect effect' and the inferences are made by assessing whether this value differs from zero (Hayes 2015). When the 95% confidence interval (CI;  $95\%_{CI}$ ) associated with the index includes zero, the null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Hence, a  $95\%_{CI}$  that excludes zero suggests that the indirect effect is indeed moderated. We ran two models testing the potential moderating (expected buffering) effects of multiculturalism on the indirect link between classroom type and (a) inclusion and (b) psychological safety through cultural misunderstandings. Subsequently, we repeated these two analyses now testing the moderating (expected to be non-buffering) effects of colorblindness. For each analysis, we report the index of moderated mediation including its  $95\%_{CI}$ . When the index is significant, we follow by reporting the 'simple indirect effects' (i.e. indirect effects at different levels of the moderator).

Supporting our prediction, perceived multiculturalism moderated the indirect effect of international classrooms on students' sense of inclusion, *index of the conditional indirect effect* = .04,  $SE = .02$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [.00, .10]$ . Concretely, when multiculturalism was lower ( $-1$  SD), students in international classrooms reported more cultural misunderstandings than those in mononational classrooms, which in turn, was associated with a reduced sense of inclusion,  $b_{indirect} = -.14$ ,  $SE = .06$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.26, -.04]$ . This indirect effect was absent when multiculturalism was higher ( $+1$  SD),  $b_{indirect} = .03$ ,  $SE = .07$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.10, .17]$ .

Similarly, perceived multiculturalism moderated the indirect relationship between international classrooms and students' psychological safety, *index of the conditional indirect effect* = .13,  $SE = .06$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [.01, .125]$ . When multiculturalism was lower ( $-1$  SD), students in international classrooms reported more cultural misunderstandings than those in mononational classrooms, which in turn, was associated with a reduced sense of psychological safety,  $b_{indirect} = -.42$ ,  $SE = .12$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.66, -.18]$ . Again, this indirect effect was absent when multiculturalism was higher ( $+1$  SD),  $b_{indirect} = .10$ ,  $SE = .20$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.28, .51]$ .

In contrast, perceived colorblindness did neither moderate the indirect effect of international classrooms on students' sense of inclusion through cultural misunderstanding, *index of the conditional indirect effect* =  $-.01$ ,  $SE = .02$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.04, .02]$  nor did it moderate this indirect effect on students' psychological safety, *index of the conditional indirect effect* =  $-.04$ ,  $SE = .05$ ,  $95\%_{CI} [-.14, .06]$ . Altogether, the analyses supported Hypothesis 4: While multiculturalism buffers the negative indirect effects of international classrooms on students' sense of inclusion (Hypothesis 4a) and psychological safety (Hypothesis 4b) through being associated with less cultural misunderstandings, colorblindness has no such effect.

## Discussion

This research built on the extensive literature showing that international students may face several psychological costs, such as a lower sense of belonging and psychological safety that can undermine their social and academic integration and, therefore, their study-performance (e.g. Rienties et al. 2012; Strayhorn 2012). The findings contribute to a deeper understanding of *why* these costs occur and *how* institutions can mitigate them by going beyond the dominant focus on characteristics of (the acculturation of) international students themselves (e.g. Chennamsetti 2020; Yan 2020) and employing a contextual approach. This work advances the literature in several ways.

Prior research has provided key insights into the role of international students' individual characteristics on their higher education experiences and outcomes (see e.g. Poyrazli and Grahame 2007; Wang and Moskal 2019; Zhou and Zhang 2014). We constructively extend that line of work by employing a contextual approach, focusing on (both domestic and international) students in international *classrooms* and comparing them to students enrolled in mono-national classroom variants of the exact same program. This unique context provided a rare opportunity to compare how students thrive in ethnically diverse versus non-diverse study *contexts*, while keeping the course structure and content equal. By focusing on the international *classroom* instead of international *student* our study aimed to highlight the processes and dynamics in these contexts that may be key for the well-being and success of all students enrolled in them. Our findings highlight the importance of allocating attention and resources to building inclusive international learning *contexts*, in addition to supporting individual international students. As such, our study may support the larger recent movement in higher education studies (e.g. Van Mol 2019) that calls to look beyond 'fixing the student' to also 'fixing the system.'

A theoretical feature of our contextual approach is that we turned to cultural misunderstandings – which are a characteristic of interactions rather than individuals – to gain a better understanding of *why* international classrooms come with psychological costs. Previous qualitative studies had suggested that students in international classrooms may face cultural hinderences and misunderstandings in regard to both general interactions and education itself (e.g. Zhou et al. 2008). In one such study, about 60% of international students surveyed reported 'no' or 'a little' to the question 'Have you felt that people here understand your culture?' The current quantitative study documented that cultural misunderstandings are indeed more prevalent in international than in mononational contexts, but more importantly, showed through mediation analyses that cultural misunderstandings are a key mechanism that can (partially) explain *why* students in international classroom contexts report a lower sense of belonging and psychological safety. As such, the current study puts forward a novel model to understand why these psychological costs occur in international classrooms: When students do not feel understood in social interactions and/or encounter mismatches in expectations about studying, they may more easily feel that they do not belong at university and cannot be themselves, as well as may be much more hesitant to ask questions and perform other behaviors that may pose a 'risk' to their (socio-cultural, ethnic) identity. At the same time, this model may help explain why some individual level factors such as cultural empathy (Chennamsetti 2020), cultural intelligence (Presbitero 2016), and country of origin (Rienties et al. 2014) help students thrive in international classrooms – they all prevent or mitigate cultural misunderstandings.

Another critical theoretical element of our contextual approach is that we turned to students' perceived diversity approach – which is another property of the (perceived) environment – to come to an understanding of *when* cultural misunderstandings are more or less at play in intercultural classrooms. Our analyses showed that when the perceived diversity approach was highly multicultural and thus valued and embraced cultural differences, students in the international and mononational classrooms did not differ in terms of perceived cultural misunderstandings and the negative chain of effects on inclusion and psychological safety was broken. This buffering role did not occur when the perceived diversity approach was colorblind, suggesting that cultural misunderstandings and their

associated psychological costs remained when students had the feeling that cultural differences were ignored or downplayed. This finding reveals that the psychological costs of international classrooms are not a 'natural law' but rather context dependent as cultural misunderstandings can be 'dialed up or down' by the context's approach to cultural difference. In line with the increasing consensus in the social and organizational literatures (e.g. Gündemir, Martin, and Homan 2019) as well as with studies on the lived experience of international students (e.g. Bordia et al. 2019), our study provides quantitative empirical evidence for the benefits of installing a multicultural approach to diversity in order to foster students to thrive in international classrooms.

### ***Implications for higher education policies***

Based on the current findings, we can derive a number of preliminary conclusions and recommendations for higher education staff and policy makers. Specifically, and by showing the buffering role of a (perceived) multicultural approach to diversity against the potential downsides of student experiences and learning in the international classroom, the current study concretizes the calls for installing a 'welcoming climate' in higher education (e.g. Heffernan et al. 2019; Ploner 2018) and outlines the broad strokes of how it should look like: It should value and embrace students' different socio-cultural backgrounds and treat them as resources for learning rather than ignore them. Despite increasing awareness, colorblindness remains a prominent approach in educational contexts (e.g. Bonilla-Silva 2014; Plaut 2010; Posselt 2016). This work suggests that academic institutions could thus become more inclusive learning environments by reassessing their diversity approaches and considering to work towards a multiculturalist framework.

Although we can only speculate about the exact ingredients that make the multicultural approach effective in mitigating the costs associated with studying in international classrooms, our findings on its indirect effects via cultural misunderstandings provide some clues. Specifically, it is likely that a multicultural approach buffers misunderstandings in day-to-day intercultural interactions by encouraging (and perhaps even requiring) students and staff to explicitly acknowledge and talk about differences and commonalities, thereby explicating one's own (socio-cultural) positionality, raising awareness on one's own implicit biases, taking others' perspective, and leaving room to counter(f)act each other's socio-cultural stereotypes (cfr. Morreel et al. 2021). In addition, the multicultural approach may buffer against educational mismatches by not only acknowledging but also valuing differences in (prior) educational trajectories – they are not considered a deficit but an asset for learning.

In implementing a multiculturalist approach, it is important that higher education institutions consider doing so at multiple levels simultaneously to communicate a consistent multicultural message across via different channels (i.e. lecturers, students, official communication, curriculum). Indeed, recent scholarly work suggests that since students are embedded in institutions with multiple layers, an effective alignment of different layers is essential given each layer's unique role and responsibility in creating an enriching educational environment (Bordia et al. 2019). The current study shows that students' perceptions of the prevailing diversity approach in their classroom matters, and we know that tutors importantly shape that perception for individual students. This, along with the exploratory finding that students within classrooms show little consensus about the prevailing diversity climate (see footnote 4), suggests that students' perceptions are rooted in their idiosyncratic relationships with their tutors and that these relationships vary across students. When the relationship with the tutor addresses students' needs, favorable processes and outcomes appear to follow. This suggests that interventions focusing on teaching the tutors to employ a uniform approach towards all students (which would result in more convergent classroom-perceptions) have a good chance of positively impacting processes and outcomes at the group level as well. A good starting point may then be to train tutors in employing and communicating a multicultural approach towards all students. Moreover, since tutors are often perceived as agents acting on behalf of the institution and as the key party in shaping and managing the

'psychological contract' between student and institution (Koskina 2013), higher education institutions can make a true difference by training their tutors and lecturers to embrace and practice a multicultural approach when teaching international classrooms. Yet, to date, many teacher-trainings are (still) dominated by a deficit and/or colorblind perspective either expecting that international students should 'adjust' to the university and/or that equality is created through adopting a 'neutral' stance that caters each unique and individual student. Further, these trainings tend to approach diversity in an essentialist and/or stereotyping manner, which should be avoided (May 2005). Allocating time and resources to train tutors and lecturers in an effective, non-stereotyping multiculturalist approach, may be a first step for higher education institutions aiming to shift toward a more multicultural approach. Yet, to be truly impactful, the multiculturalist diversity approach should be embodied by practices at each level of the higher education institution (see Bordia et al. 2019).

### **Limitations and future research**

The current study has some limitations. Given the data collection setting guaranteed anonymity and was restricted in time, our results may be overly conservative. In fact, while our trimmed measures may not have been able to capture the specific subcomponents of the constructs in the best way, their arguably 'gross' nature may produce findings that represent an underestimation of actual relationships. This may also apply to estimating responses as a function of students' gender or international versus domestic student status given the anonymized setting of data collection (Dreachslin, Hunt, and Sprainer 2000). Further, given the correlational nature of our study, it is imperative that our findings are replicated in (quasi-)experiments to show causality, before they are used for interventions.

Future studies may want to finetune these methodological restraints as well as examine the consequences of the international classroom – and the particular diversity approach within that classroom – for other student outcomes, such as flexibility of thought, effectiveness in group tasks as well as individual student performance outcomes (e.g., grades). Such extension is not only important to objectively test the assumed benefits of the international classroom itself, but also to gauge whether the benefits of a multiculturalist approach extend beyond mitigating negative effects and can also strengthen the positive effects of international classrooms. In addition, future studies should attempt to document the exact ingredients of the multiculturalist approach that account for its benefits in higher education as well as explore other mechanisms, such as experienced discrimination, through which multiculturalism can relate to students' outcomes.

### **Conclusion**

As international classrooms are increasingly becoming the norm, universities are faced with a unique challenge since these types of classrooms can be both a catalyzer and a barrier to optimal learning. In this work, we outlined and empirically tested a theoretical model on the potential detriments of the international make-up of classrooms on students' experiences that focuses on the contextual factors that may account for, and potentially alleviate, such detriments. Supporting this model, we found that attending international classrooms can indeed be costly for students as these classrooms are characterized by more cultural misunderstandings that come with a reduced sense of inclusion and psychological safety. Intriguingly, these downsides of the international classroom were absent when students perceived the diversity approach as multicultural, that is, as recognizing and appreciating cultural diversity. As such, the current study underlines the importance of (tutors' shaping) intercultural understanding in diverse classroom settings as this may have far-reaching effects on students' experiences. In addition to unraveling the relationships of interest from a theoretical point of view, we hope the presented findings and discussion will inspire both academic work and higher education institutions to consider implementing interventions that

target the classroom *context* (in addition to individual international *students'* challenges) in order to become truly inclusive learning environments.

## Notes

1. We focus on the perceived approach in the classroom rather than on the perceived institutional approach. Scholars have recognized that while many universities with long-standing international education traditions have employed a multicultural approach, the challenges around cultural differences still remain. One reason for this may be that the institutional perspectives may be too abstract or distal for individual students. In contrast, because of their psychological proximity, perceptions of approaches that prevail in one's classroom may more strongly determine students' responses. We return to this point in the discussion section, where we emphasize the importance of consistency across multiple institutional tiers or layers (see Bordia, Bordia, and Restubog 2015).
2. The broader literature on diversity models furthermore outlined the assimilationist approach that entails that societal goals of equality and social cohesion can be best obtained when cultural minorities *adopt* the language, customs, and values of the dominant group and leave behind their distinct minority cultures or any markers thereof (Verkuyten 2010). In the current paper, we restrict our further analyses to colorblindness and multiculturalism as these approaches (i) have been most widely studied (Gündemir, Martin, and Homan 2019) and (ii) the assimilationist notion that only international students should 'adjust' without the host university taking any responsibility (Tinto 1993; Yao 2015), is incompatible with the notion of the 'welcoming university'.
3. Of course, one could argue that the mononational variant is not entirely monocultural due to the potential enrollment of students who are Dutch nationals with an ethnic minority background. However the number of students with a migration background is very low at this university (13%) and it is our impression that these students are equally likely to enroll in the mononational and international variants of the program.
4. Although our 360 participants were nested within 36 class groups, we here report single-level analyses of our data. This approach is justified given that (i) the focus of this study is on the individual differences of perceived diversity approaches by students and (ii) no significant variances were found at the class group level for any of the variables we examine. Results of these multi-level 0-models documenting the variances at both the individual and class group level can be obtained from the authors upon request.

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## Geological information

Belgium and the Netherlands

## Data availability statement

All data and syntax can be obtained from the first and second authors upon request.

## Authors' contributions

Conceptualization: [JDL], Methodology: [JDL & SG]; Formal analysis and investigation: [SG & JDL]; Writing – original draft preparation and editing: [JD, SG & OA]; Funding acquisition: [JDL].

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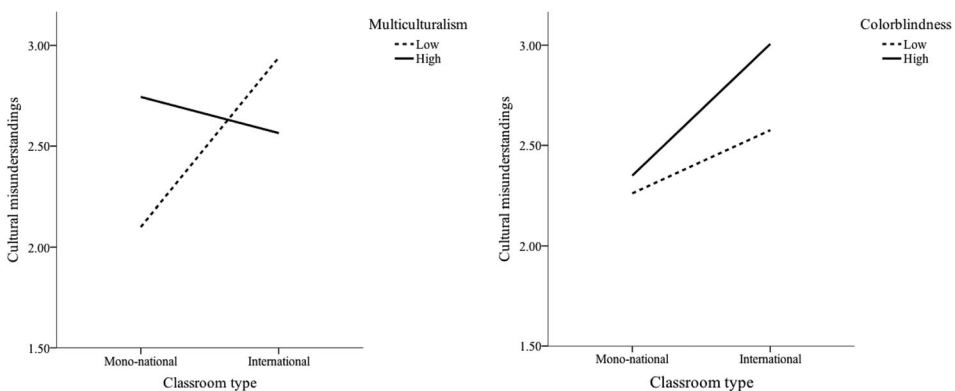


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## Appendix



**Figure A1.** The moderating impact of perceived multiculturalism (left panel) and colorblindness (right panel) on the relationship between classroom type and cultural misunderstandings. Note: The differences within mono- or international classrooms were all non-significant ( $ps \geq .115$ ).