

# TEACHING TOPICS

# TEACHING MULTICULTURAL STUDENT GROUPS

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## INTRODUCTION

*At the UT, an increasing number of programmes are being taught in English and are therefore open to international students. Lecturers are not only faced with having to teach in English, but also have to teach in a multicultural student group setting. This requires some specific skills and knowledge.*

*If you have always taught in your own language, you will have to spend additional time on preparing yourself for teaching in English. You may have to translate teaching materials and will have to prepare your lectures in English using the English jargon of your discipline.*

*Moreover, when international students enter your classroom, you are suddenly faced with an international environment. This is different from a domestic classroom because of the variety in the students' backgrounds. Existing methods of teaching might not work for students with a different cultural background, and you must be aware of such issues and be prepared to adapt.*

*It is also important to think about how to integrate the domestic and the international students to better benefit from having such a variety of students. It's a rich learning environment for both you and the students.*

*For this Teaching Topic, three experienced lecturers were interviewed about their teaching practice in relation to multicultural student groups. The interviews were video-recorded and can be watched in full by visiting the links above the references. Summaries of these interviews are presented below.*

*We hope these interviews offer you inspiration and directions to help you further develop in this area.*

## 'KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE'



**DR. IRIS VAN DUREN**  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR  
AT THE FACULTY OF  
GEO-INFORMATION  
SCIENCE AND EARTH  
OBSERVATION (ITC)

Iris van Duren has worked in the Faculty of ITC in the Department of Natural Resources for 18 years and is an assistant professor. The main part of her work is focused on teaching and developing the educational programmes. In addition, she has research tasks and assists in projects. Moreover, she teaches students from very diverse cultural backgrounds. She started her teaching career at ITC and for her it is a given fact that she has students of so many nationalities in her classes. She tries to take advantage of this and bring this diversity into play.

When she started teaching 18 years ago, she was thrown in the deep end and had to learn what works best by trial and error. However, for a few years now she has been involved in a workshop called Education at ITC, which is

given at ITC during the introduction period. In the workshop, the different educational backgrounds of the students are discussed. Students are brought together in groups with mixed nationalities to informally discuss their educational experiences with each other. As one of the people running this workshop, it is amazing to see how varied it can be.

The most important thing about teaching multicultural student groups is to 'know your audience'. Find out about the students' different educational backgrounds in the countries they come from. At the same time, don't forget that even students with one nationality will not all be the same; some will be more open-minded, others might be more shy and others more confident. Non-verbal communication

AT THE BACK OF THIS TEACHING TOPIC YOU WILL FIND THE URL'S TO WATCH THE INTERVIEWS.

is just as important as what you teach your students. If you notice that something is going on, that a student is having problems, just ask the student.

Iris suggests that we should not always expect that students feel they can ask a question. This is not 'done' in all countries, because it is considered a sign that the teacher has not explained the subject very well. She helps these students by explaining how we work and why it is important. She tries to make the students feel comfortable and confident by giving them compliments, but also by giving feedback on what does not go so well.

It might be difficult to stimulate interaction in class. To ensure students are more active, she moves around the class a lot and asks students questions. Sometimes Iris uses quiz questions in her lectures. She discusses a couple of concepts and then puts a question on the screen. This is one way to activate the students. She might also ask students to come forward and address the class, creating a bit more movement, and not only having them seated, which is a very static situation.

A third point is that students differ in their levels of English proficiency. She actively monitors whether the students' English is sufficient and lets them know

if this is not the case. Basically, it is their responsibility, and the UT has plenty of opportunities for remedial education. As a lecturer, Iris also stimulates English proficiency development by giving everyone the opportunity to say something in class once in a while. She also encourages students to mingle with people of other nationalities and to use English in class and when communicating with their fellow students.

For good group work, it is necessary that students feel confident with one another, that they divide up the tasks and discuss how they will fulfil them. You have to ensure that all students are aware of what the process entails and that they feel responsible to make it work as a group. If she sees something going wrong in the group, she discusses it with the student or group. However, she always tries to avoid naming and shaming individuals. Students do things for a reason, and you should not make them feel foolish.

The preparation of students for assessment is also important. If they know what is expected of them, they can better fulfil the task. Clear information on when an assignment or task must be finished and how to submit it are important. Clear instructions on the importance of an assignment, including why it should be done are also a must. If you

give students a task, they should know why it has to be done.

Finally, it is necessary to inform students about the University's understanding of fraud and plagiarism. Information on this is given in the curriculum and supported by the library and software. Iris gives students writing assignments and always checks when students who are not so fluent in English in class produce very good written English. She might do this by searching for something similar on the internet. Students are permitted to make this mistake once or twice and are given feedback about the inappropriate nature of their behaviour. If they continue to use other work in this manner, you can be confident it is plagiarism. Fraud and plagiarism often arise due to the poor English skills of the students. However, there are also cultural differences involved. ●

IF YOU GIVE STUDENTS  
A TASK  
THEY SHOULD KNOW  
*Why* THEY NEED  
TO DO IT



A foreign teacher  
BRINGS HIS OWN VARIETY  
AND TEACHING METHODS

## 'DON'T BECOME DUTCH'

**DR. JAMES SEDDON**  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT THE FACULTY  
OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY (TNW)



James Seddon is from Manchester in the UK, and he has been a lecturer in the Netherlands for more than nine years. He teaches Physics and Advanced Technology in the Faculty of Applied Sciences, in both the Bachelor's and the Master's programmes.

Usually, James is the only person with a different cultural background in his classroom, since most of the time he only has Dutch students. Occasionally, there are also a few German students. However, in the Advanced Technology programme, 10 percent of the students have an international background and come from all over the world. When he started lecturing at the UT, James had some of the worst student ratings, but he has changed and adapted since then and in 2016/2017 he won the Teacher of the Year Award in Advanced Technology.

The greatest difficulty that James encountered was the difference between his own British cultural background and the Dutch culture itself. When looking at the Hofstede dimensions of culture, the British take more risks than the Dutch and there is a lot more government regulation of education in the Netherlands.

For example, spontaneous or spot testing is not allowed in the Netherlands. He still uses spot testing, but students don't get a grade for the test. Instead, for a bit of fun in the classroom, he awards a small prize (something that reflects the Dutch environment, so always something orange, in the past mandarins, carrots, etc.). So, there is no direct link to their grade but it is fun and different. He also learns the names of his students, which is not what most Dutch lecturers do. This also allows him to take a more personal approach, asking a specific student to answer a question. But taking the Dutch students' aversion to risk into account, he also gives them a get out: they can always nominate someone else.

Another difference concerns the degree of masculinity in the two cultures: Dutch people in general are less competitive and more nurturing than people in the UK. James is very aware that he has to step back a bit in his desire to challenge students and also in his praise when they perform well. Such a competitive approach is less common here. As he cares about what students think and he wants feedback and to improve his

teaching, he decided to adjust his teaching methods in his classes with Dutch students by getting them to teach each other. In these classes, James sits with the other students and only intervenes if those doing the teaching make mistakes. In one of his courses, students even create their own exams. In relation to some of the learning objectives, students are free to choose how they want to prove they have mastered them in an oral exam over half an hour.

James has also spent a lot of time on expectations management, especially with international students; for example, informing them about what kind of support they can expect or what they can expect from his teaching, and in relation to the issues of fraud and plagiarism. He has also talked to students about the kind of support they need, in one case offering his own lecture notes as a study resource to reassure a student. While the examples he uses when he is teaching are the same whether he has only Dutch students or a more international group of students, he does use new examples every year.

Unfortunately, James has had to deal with plagiarism in a Bachelor's thesis. His experience is that the Dutch tend to plagiarize more than the British. The penalty in the Netherlands is not as harsh as in the UK. He also had a Chinese student who submitted a two-page literature review that had been copied literally from an article James had written himself. He sat down with the student and talked about why it was wrong in the first place and discussed what is expected.

Because James is from Manchester, he has a northern English accent and experiences language difficulties as a result. When he is teaching he becomes

increasingly enthusiastic, speaking faster and faster, with his accent becoming more pronounced. He also found he was explaining things using vocabulary students were not used to. That's another reason why he came up with the idea of the students teaching each other. He also does this in another way: by getting the students to explain to each other, in their own words, but in English, what they have just learned.

Most of the time, Dutch students speak English very well, but sometimes during group work James notices that the English of certain students is not so good. These students tend to hold back more, but this does not generally lead to any

major problems. In addition, the students choose their own groups and this creates peer pressure, which means they don't want to let their friends down. James has not encountered group work problems due to different cultural backgrounds.

The most important tip James has for international lecturers who are about to teach a mostly Dutch group of students is 'Don't become a Dutch teacher'. The students' learning environment is most enriched by variety. Teachers from other countries bring their own styles and teaching methods, so don't lose that difference and try out different things. Don't just do the same as everyone else. ●

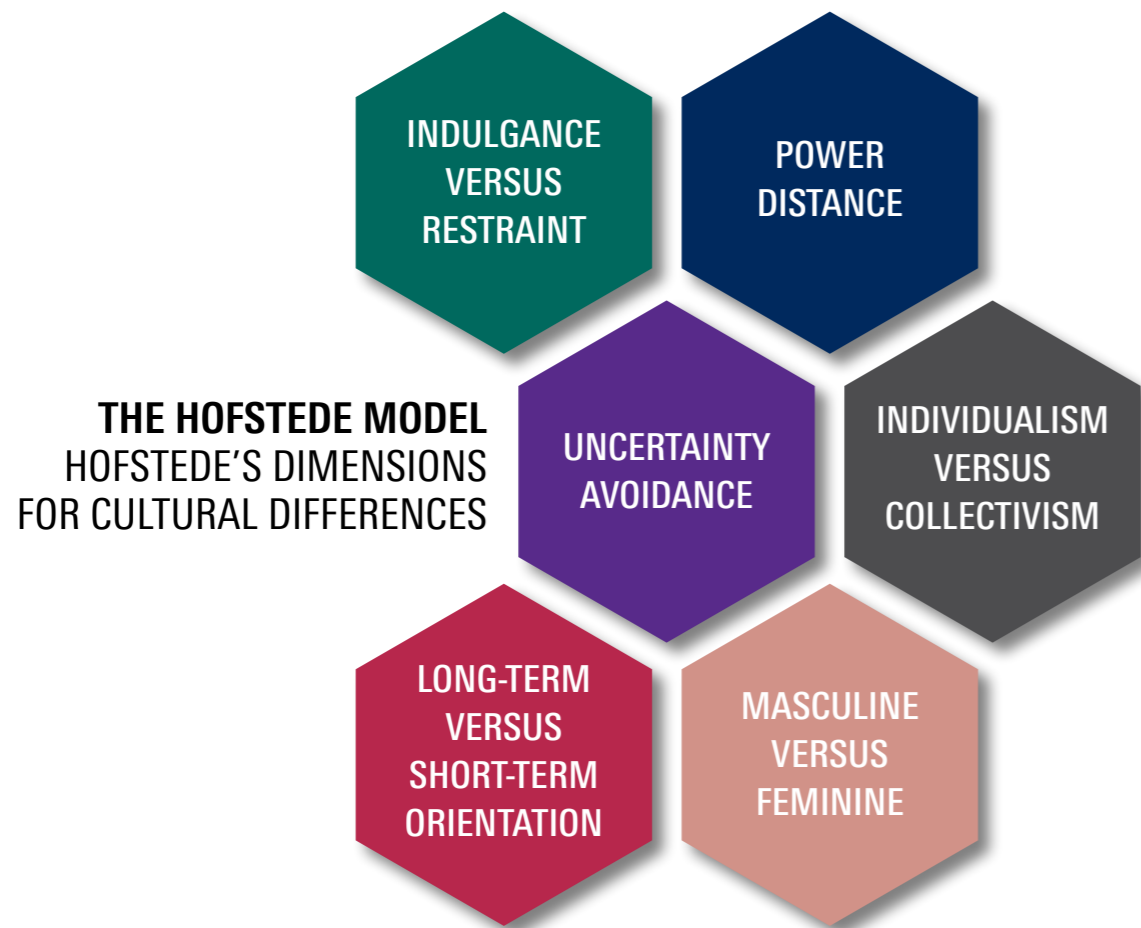


Figure 1. Hofstede's dimensions for cultural differences. More information on this model can be found at: [www.geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/](http://www.geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/)

## 'BE SENSITIVE'



**DR. MATTHIAS DE VISSER**  
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AT  
THE FACULTY OF BEHAVIOURAL,  
MANAGEMENT AND SOCIAL  
SCIENCES (BMS)

Matthias de Visser is a lecturer in International Business Administration (IBA) and in Business Administration programmes and coordinator of the first-year IBA module called TOP: Technology, Organizations, People. He teaches students from all around the world, whether Dutch, German, Asian or American students, so it is a very international setting. He has been teaching to international students for quite some years now.

Matthias does not consciously teach international students in a different way, but it is very important to be sensitive to people having different cultural backgrounds. You must always be sensitive to individual differences when you are teaching, so it is the same in this kind of setting. Matthias has encountered many situations where he had the feeling that the issue might be related to cultural backgrounds.

To begin with, the TOP module is very much focused on the students, it is student-centred teaching. Students from certain backgrounds are not necessarily very attuned to that

way of teaching. While not wanting to stereotype, some Asian students have difficulty when they feel their teacher is being a little bit ambiguous. Matthias deals with this by explaining to these students that our teaching method is very much about having discussions, that you can have your own opinion, that your opinion is respected, and that we invite all students to actively participate in the discussions and to share their individual opinions. Sometimes this is difficult for them because they have been taught to feel ashamed if they have to ask a question. Creating a good atmosphere is very important in this respect. When a student asks a question, even if it appears to be going in a weird direction, it is important to show you appreciate the question. It is also very important to make sure that learning occurs in smaller settings where students feel more comfortable participating in discussions; for example, having discussions in smaller groups before participating in a plenary discussion.

In the TOP module, there are many German students, as in many edu-

educational programmes at the University. Many German students are very ambitious, and they are focused on high grades. They will usually ask lecturers exactly what they need to do to get a very high grade. You might show them all the criteria and give feedback on their work. Dutch students are more informal, while German students are used to more traditional kinds of education and tend not to approach lecturers. They also tend to act very formally, while Dutch students can be more spontaneous. Another related difference is that German students want clear guidelines about the structure of the programme. They challenge lecturers about the lecture timetable and find it important that we communicate clearly about any changes in the schedule. They have high demands in relation to the organization of the courses.

The first module is the one where students have to learn how to learn, while in the modules that follow, students face fewer barriers. For example, you sometimes see students with language issues, especially Asian students, typing the text of their textbook into Google Translate so they can read it in their own language. However, the more we move on in the programme, the less challenging it becomes, as it will be easier for them to communicate in English

and to write in English. You can provide additional support to these students during breaks in tutorials or during lectures, focusing on determining whether it is the content they don't understand or whether it's a language issue.

In the first year of IBA, the groups are deliberately composed of a mix of all the nationalities to make students ultimately more comfortable with differences by learning how to deal with them positively. For example, some students are very focused on deadlines and are long-term oriented. Some students are more relaxed, more flexible. When conflicts occur, Matthias asks the students to discuss the issue within the group and analyse the problems using Hofstede's dimensions of culture. Are the problems related to cultural differences or it is a clash of personalities? If they determine that the issue is culturally related, students must address the question of what they can do in the face of such cultural differences. Awareness and empathy already have an effect, and trying to understand each other, understand each other's perspectives. The teacher's role in this is to be supportive, but the students have to do the work themselves.

Another thing Matthias does in class is look at the content of his courses. He

uses international business models to analyse how organizations operate globally. During discussions, he tries to link the content to the experiences of the students themselves, by asking them where they are from and then what experiences or opinions they might have. Sometimes it is interesting to talk about what their parents do, what kinds of jobs they have and in what kind of organizations, as well as what kinds of frustrations they face and whether they have any success stories.

In the TOP module, the lecturers use a combination of multiple-choice tests and written assignments. Because it is a first-year module, students in general do not know what to expect in the assessment, so Matthias always gives them some examples. This allows potential problems to be signalled. For example, Matthias once had a Greek student who had never done a multiple-choice test. He explained the types of questions students can expect, strategies to deal with the questions, but also theoretical issues such as the possibility that all of the correct answers are 'alternative a'.

The TOP module has a component that deals particularly with fraud and plagiarism. Students learn how to quote and reference information and knowledge from studies that they read. Matthias has

never experienced students who cheated or plagiarized because of different cultural ideas about what constitutes fraud or plagiarism.

Matthias has learned that he should be careful in making quick judgements. Once, at the start of a lecture, some students were sitting in the front row but were lying with their heads on their desks as if they were asleep. He was annoyed and wondered what was going on. One of their peers explained in all seriousness that they were sleeping because it was a daily habit, and they needed to do this to restore some kind of natural balance. The point is that once you understand certain behaviour is based in habits which are unfamiliar to you, it is possible to be a bit more relaxed when something strange occurs. Another thing he learned is that with people from certain backgrounds it is harder to read their body language. They seem angry when they are not, or they might appear uninterested when they are in fact interested. You deal with that by trial and error, and by being a little more flexible about your own norms and values. He advises that you make sure you connect with students and that you can engage in a dialogue with students from any background. Make their different backgrounds an explicit topic and make sure that students interconnect by creating opportunities to bring them together. ●



# LIST OF TIPS FOR TEACHING MULTICULTURAL STUDENT GROUPS:

1

BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN NORMS AND VALUES AND BE OPEN TO OTHER CULTURES.

2

GET TO KNOW YOUR STUDENTS: LEARN THEIR NAMES, ABOUT THEIR BACKGROUND; BE AWARE OF NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOUR FOR SIGNS OF PROBLEMS.

3

TAKE TIME TO TALK TO YOUR STUDENTS. MAKE SURE THEY FEEL YOUR DOOR IS OPEN FOR THEM.

4

MAKE SURE ALL STUDENTS FEEL SAFE AND SECURE; DO NOT BLAME AND SHAME IN PUBLIC AND BE SENSITIVE TO DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS.

5

EXPLAIN CLEARLY WHY AND HOW THINGS HAVE TO BE DONE. MANAGE EXPECTATIONS.

6

MAKE SURE THAT ALL STUDENTS ARE ACTIVE IN CLASS AND CONTRIBUTE ONCE IN A WHILE.

7

ENCOURAGE THE STUDENTS TO GET TO KNOW EACH OTHER BY CREATING MIXED LEARNING GROUPS AND MAKE SURE THEY HAVE A DISCUSSION ABOUT DIFFERENT CULTURAL BACKGROUNDS. DON'T ASSUME THAT WORKING TOGETHER AUTOMATICALLY MEANS THEY WILL TALK OR LEARN ABOUT THE ISSUE OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCE.

8

ALLOW THEM THE OPPORTUNITY TO MAKE MISTAKES WITHOUT DIRECT PUNISHMENT.

## THE INTERNATIONALISATION EXPERT TEAM

This might all sound quite complicated if you have never taught in an international setting. Or perhaps you have some experience, but want to develop further. The CELT expert team on internationalisation is here to help you either way. The expert team consists of Chantal Scholten and Marie-José Verkroost.

We have developed a workshop on teaching in the international classroom in which you can discuss the challenges in greater depth and in relation to your own educational practice. We teach this workshop with a lecturer from the Faculty of ITC who has experience with teaching in the international classroom.

If you do not have the time or do not wish to participate in the workshop, we have also developed a toolbox on internationalisation, which contains a large number of resources that you might find useful.

And if you would like some personal advice on internationalisation issues, you are also welcome to contact the expert team directly.

Internationalisation at the UT is a reality that you will soon confront or have already confronted in your classroom. If you want to be well prepared, we invite you to take advantage of the support we offer.



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### WORKSHOP

'How to teach in an international classroom'

[www.utwente.nl/en/ctd/staff/teaching/  
teach-international-classroom/#information](http://www.utwente.nl/en/ctd/staff/teaching/teach-international-classroom/#information)



### TOOLBOX

'Internationalisation'

[www.utwente.nl/en/ces/celt/toolboxes/  
internationalisation-celt/#the-challenge](http://www.utwente.nl/en/ces/celt/toolboxes/internationalisation-celt/#the-challenge)

## HERE YOU CAN WATCH THE INTERVIEW RECORDINGS:



**Iris van Duren**

[player.vimeo.com/video/238764624](https://player.vimeo.com/video/238764624)



**James Seddon**

[player.vimeo.com/video/242027882](https://player.vimeo.com/video/242027882)



**Matthias de Visser**

[player.vimeo.com/video/246438211](https://player.vimeo.com/video/246438211)

## REFERENCES

Carroll, J., & Ryan, J. (2005). *Teaching international students : improving learning for all*. Routledge. Retrieved from <https://www.routledge.com/Teaching-International-Students-Improving-Learning-for-All/Carroll-Ryan/p/book/9780415350662>

Deardorff, D. K. & Arasaratnam-Smith, L. (2017). *Intercultural Competence in Higher Education*. Routledge. Retrieved from <https://www.routledge.com/Intercultural-Competence-in-Higher-Education-International-Approaches/Deardorff-Arasaratnam-Smith/p/book/9781138693852>

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## COLOPHON

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