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RECEIVED 21 October 2025
ACCEPTED 03 November 2025
PUBLISHED 18 November 2025

CITATION
Zabrodskaja A and Wang J (2025) Editorial:
Intercultural communication and international
students. *Front. Commun.* 10:1729136.
doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2025.1729136

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Editorial: Intercultural communication and international students

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KEYWORDS

intercultural communication, international students, transnational education, intercultural competence, globalization, cultural adaptation, higher education internationalization, digital interculturality

Editorial on the Research Topic

Intercultural communication and international students

1 Introduction

As internationalization becomes a central goal in higher education, the intricate relationship between intercultural communication and the international student experience warrants close examination. For many international students, studying abroad is more than an academic pursuit; it is a transformative opportunity to engage with new linguistic and cultural environments and to develop intercultural communication competence (Deardorff, 2006; Mittelmeier et al., 2023).

Traditionally, *international students* are defined as those pursuing part or all of their education in a country other than their own. This Research Topic adopts a broader perspective that also includes students engaged in transnational education (TNE), who earn degrees from foreign institutions while remaining in their home countries or relocating to a third country (Knight, 2016). This expanded understanding reflects the growing diversity of international learning pathways and the increasingly fluid boundaries between studying abroad and studying across borders.

2 Global context: mobility and transnational education

The global number of international students in tertiary education has risen sharply, from around 2 million in 2000 to 6.9 million in 2023 (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2025). In parallel, transnational education has expanded significantly, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. TNE includes diverse models such as dual and joint degrees, international branch campuses, and other collaborative arrangements that allow students to earn foreign qualifications without relocating (Schueller et al., 2024).

In addition to its cultural and social importance, international and transnational education have become major economic drivers. In the United Kingdom alone, total revenue from education-related exports and TNE activity reached £32.3 billion in 2022, up from £29.5 billion in 2021 (Department for Education, 2025). This steady growth

underscores the strategic value of international education as both an economic sector and a catalyst for global engagement.

While this overall growth reflects increasing global interconnectedness, participation remains uneven across regions. Students from Asia, especially China, India, and South Korea, continue to represent the largest share of outbound mobility, whereas students from low-income countries in Africa and Latin America face persistent barriers to participation. These disparities highlight structural inequalities shaped by economic capacity, visa regimes, and institutional partnerships. Addressing them requires a more equitable model of internationalization that promotes inclusivity alongside global competitiveness.

The rise of TNE can also be interpreted through theories of transnationalism and globalization, which emphasize fluid identities and the emergence of hybrid spaces where local and global cultures intersect (Appadurai, 1996; Giddens, 1990; Vertovec, 2009). Within these frameworks, international and TNE students are not merely educational migrants but active participants in constructing transnational academic and cultural networks. This perspective deepens understanding of how mobility, technology, and policy shape hybrid identities, communication practices, and evolving notions of belonging in global higher education.

3 Theoretical foundations of intercultural communication

Research on international students spans communication, education, psychology, and linguistics. Within this multidisciplinary field, intercultural communication examines how people from different cultural backgrounds interact, interpret meaning, and negotiate understanding. The intersection between intercultural communication and the international student experience has therefore become a rich and timely area of inquiry.

Studies have explored students' perceptions of intercultural encounters, the challenges they face, and factors such as intercultural competence, intergroup anxiety, cultural sensitivity, attitudes, stereotypes, empathy, and motivation to engage in intercultural dialogue (e.g., Leask, 2009; Müller et al., 2020). Foundational theories include Gudykunst's (2004) Anxiety/Uncertainty Management Theory, Deardorff's (2006) Process Model of Intercultural Competence, and Spitzberg and Cupach's (1984) model of Interpersonal Communication Competence, all of which view competence as dynamic and context-dependent. Macro-level frameworks such as Hofstede's (1980) Cultural Dimensions and the GLOBE study (House et al., 2004) explain how cultural values shape communicative behavior.

In recent years, scholars have questioned the universality of these models and called for more context-sensitive and decolonial approaches. Critical intercultural communication theories highlight the power asymmetries embedded in global education and advocate for recognition of epistemic diversity. Incorporating postcolonial, feminist, and intersectional perspectives has enriched the field and enabled a more inclusive understanding of international and transnational education.

4 Research gaps and future directions

Despite the growing attention to international education, research on intercultural communication has not kept pace with the rapid expansion of student mobility. Significant gaps remain, including the limited representation of TNE students and the continued predominance of institutional and academic staff perspectives over students' lived experiences. As Mittelmeier et al. (2023) emphasize, research with international students requires critical, context-sensitive methodologies that recognize students as co-constructors of knowledge rather than subjects of inquiry. Although academic advising plays a crucial role in student success, many advisers lack intercultural training to support diverse learners effectively. Real-world interactions within academic and social contexts also remain underexplored.

Future studies should adopt interdisciplinary and innovative methodologies. Qualitative approaches such as narrative inquiry, digital ethnography, and participatory action research can reveal lived experiences in greater depth, while mixed-methods designs that integrate psychological, communicative, and sociocultural dimensions can yield richer insights. Centering student voices is essential to move beyond deficit-oriented perspectives and toward more empowering, experience-based understandings of global education.

Theoretical perspectives on adaptation, such as Berry's (1997) model of acculturation and Kim's (2001) Integrative Theory of Cross-Cultural Adaptation, offer valuable insights into how international students adjust to new environments. These frameworks highlight the relationship between communication competence, identity negotiation, and sociocultural adaptation, demonstrating the transformative potential of intercultural experiences in shaping both personal and academic development.

5 Digital interculturality and online learning environments

The digitalization of higher education, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has reshaped intercultural communication. Research on digital interculturality (Dervin and Liddicoat, 2013; Thorne, 2016) suggests that online platforms create both new opportunities and new challenges for developing intercultural competence. In virtual classrooms, communicative cues and power dynamics differ from in-person settings, requiring revised theoretical frameworks to understand intercultural engagement in hybrid and online contexts.

The growing use of artificial intelligence and language technologies adds another dimension. Automated translation tools, AI tutoring systems, and adaptive learning platforms can enhance access but may also reproduce cultural biases embedded in their design. Understanding how technology mediates perception, participation, and interaction is therefore an emerging frontier in digital intercultural communication.

6 Contributions in this Research Topic

This Research Topic brings together studies that explore underexamined intersections of intercultural communication and international education. Collectively, the papers address themes such as language and communication, intercultural competence, interaction, international student experience, TNE, and higher education internationalization.

The contributions offer wide-ranging insights. Wang examines recurrent intercultural challenges in transnational higher education using data from students, parents, staff, institutional leaders, and regulators. From this evidence, the study develops the Triple A framework of Agility, Adaptability, and Alignment, offering a clear lens for understanding how TNE partnerships can navigate cultural complexity and build sustainable collaboration.

Munk et al. analyze classroom “error culture,” showing that supportive responses to mistakes foster engagement across cultures. Vu et al. explore how international professional development transforms Vietnamese teachers’ identities. Hofhuis et al. find that social networking sites facilitate adaptation but that strong home-culture ties online can impede wellbeing. Nadeem and Zabrodska propose a comprehensive model of intercultural communication that captures adaptability among international students.

Other studies extend theoretical boundaries. Peng and Dervin introduce the concept of inter-ideologicality to explore ideological tensions in online intercultural learning. Yin et al. and Shen and Luo examine how teacher behavior, resilience, and institutional factors influence sociocultural adaptability in post-pandemic contexts. Haikuo advances cultural intelligence theory by identifying mediating pathways between multicultural literacy and intercultural competence. Zhang et al. highlight the importance of peer and teacher relationships for psychological wellbeing, mediated by belonging. Yang and Gao demonstrate that resilience bridges identity and successful adjustment, while Wang et al. analyze institutional communication during COVID-19 to uncover culturally embedded values of independence and interdependence.

Further studies address adaptation, health, and motivation. Li and Zhang propose a cultural regulatory fit model linking motivational alignment with wellbeing. Li, Quan et al. examine how social media communication shapes institutional image and enrollment intentions. Kim and Kim connect intercultural sensitivity, uncertainty tolerance, and conflict management. Atiku and Adofo explore international students’ healthcare access in Hungary, aligning their findings with Sustainable Development Goal 3 (SDG3). Amlashi and Forstmeier analyze how acculturative stress, emotion regulation, and coping strategies shape resilience. Additional contributions include Wei’s exploration of sociocultural adaptation among Chinese students in the United States; Li, Wang et al.’s (Hongwei) hybrid risk assessment model identifying key adaptation factors; Wu et al.’s framework connecting life satisfaction and acculturation; Malakouti et al.’s application of *Self-Determination Theory* (SDT) to crisis volunteering; Le and Jin’s analysis of trust, discrimination, and reacculturation among returnees; Xu and Shapii’s extension of SDT to intercultural communicative competence; and Lap et al.’s investigation of academic resilience among Vietnamese students.

Together, these 24 studies advance understanding of intercultural communication and adaptation in an era of global mobility. They demonstrate how international and transnational education transform learning, identity, and belonging while offering practical insights for improving institutional practices and student support.

7 Practical and pedagogical implications

Beyond theoretical advances, these studies offer practical and pedagogical implications. Intercultural communication training should be embedded in curricula and staff development, making intercultural competence a core learning outcome across disciplines. Initiatives such as dialogue workshops, mentoring schemes, and reflective learning tasks can cultivate empathy, adaptability, and mutual understanding. Teacher education programs can also integrate intercultural awareness and communicative sensitivity to prepare instructors for culturally diverse classrooms.

8 Policy and institutional perspectives

The findings highlight the importance of institutional frameworks that support students’ academic and psychosocial adaptation. Culturally responsive pedagogy, inclusive assessment, and effective advising can strengthen engagement and belonging. Universities should align policy, pedagogy, and support systems to promote intercultural engagement. Digital learning platforms can facilitate collaboration across borders, while counseling and health services should incorporate intercultural competence into professional standards.

At the policy level, internationalization must move beyond recruitment toward transformation. Global engagement should not only attract international students but also reshape institutional cultures to value dialogue, diversity, and reciprocity. Embedding intercultural communication principles into governance, leadership development, and quality assurance can help create resilient and culturally fluent educational ecosystems.

9 Toward global citizenship

Intercultural competence lies at the heart of global citizenship. In an age of geopolitical tension and social fragmentation, universities play a crucial role in nurturing empathy, ethical awareness, and reflexivity. Education that fosters intercultural understanding prepares graduates to become responsible global citizens capable of bridging divides and contributing to more peaceful and just societies.

10 Future directions

Future scholarship should integrate psychological, sociological, and critical approaches to better capture the complexity of

intercultural encounters. Emerging concepts such as intercultural empathy (Arasaratnam-Smith, 2017), intersectionality, and critical interculturality (Dervin, 2020) offer promising pathways for exploring how structural inequalities and identity negotiations shape intercultural learning in higher education.

11 Conclusion

Ultimately, advancing knowledge in this field is fundamental to shaping the future of global education. As institutions welcome increasingly diverse cohorts, creating environments that foster cultural exchange, empathy, and mutual understanding will be central to their success. By addressing the intercultural communication challenges and opportunities faced by both international and transnational students, we can move toward more inclusive, transformative, and future-ready educational systems. Cultivating a culturally fluent global academic community is not only desirable but essential for the world we share.

Author contributions

AZ: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JW: Writing – review & editing, Conceptualization, Visualization.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the authors whose work on intercultural communication, international students, and transnational education has significantly shaped the development of this Research Topic. Their research has been instrumental in framing the critical discussions on the international student experience, intercultural competence, and the evolving role

of transnational education. We are also deeply appreciative of the reviewers for their insightful and constructive feedback, which has greatly enriched the quality and depth of this publication. Their thoughtful suggestions have been especially valuable in refining our examination of intercultural communication and international students, as well as in exploring the evolving dynamics of transnational education in the post-pandemic era.

Conflict of interest

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