Inclusive Education: Practices and Challenges in a Transnational Educational Context

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Abstract

Transnational education (TNE) has become a major revolution in global higher education, allowing students to access degree programmes from institutions in other countries without physically crossing borders. With the rapid expansion of such opportunities worldwide, Africa has emerged as a significant hub. Between 1998 and 2021, the number of African students enrolled in degree programmes outside their home country increased by approximately 170%, highlighting the continent's growing engagement with TNE. Lancaster University Ghana (LUG) is a prime example of this trend, offering Lancaster University UK degrees within Ghana.

As the only British university campus in West Africa, LUG attracts a diverse student body from across the African continent. This diversity highlights the importance of inclusive education, ensuring that all students—regardless of cultural, linguistic, or educational background—can fully participate and excel. Inclusivity in this context is not only a pedagogical necessity but also a defining feature of successful transnational education, where different traditions of learning and ways of knowing must be respected and integrated.

Drawing on Thomas and May's (2010) four-pronged typology of student diversity, this study explores the teaching practices and challenges encountered by module leaders at LUG. The findings reveal that language barriers and differences in cultural background pose the most significant obstacles to inclusivity. However, module leaders adopt strategies such as encouraging classroom discussions, promoting peer consultations, and organising cultural or country exhibition days, all of which contribute to fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

By foregrounding inclusivity, this study not only reflects the lived realities of teaching in a transnational context but also offers practical insights into how institutions like LUG can strengthen their inclusive practices, setting a model for other TNE providers in Africa and beyond

Introduction

The past few decades have seen a dramatic change in the scope and scale of transnational education (TNE), especially in higher education (Levatino, 2017; Nnazor, 2018; Lai & Jung, 2024). Today, transnational education is becoming a norm where academic programmes and qualifications move across borders. Sometimes referred to as offshore, borderless, or cross-border education (Knight, 2016), Tran et al. (2021) argue that the growing need for global educational mobility, coupled with the huge cut in public funding for many higher educational institutions, has led to the exponential increase in TNE. In Africa, many nations are embracing TNE education (Asare-Yeboa, 2024; Atta, 2024; Harris, 2020), with South Africa being the country with the largest proportion of TNE on the continent (Tran et al., 2021).

Lancaster University Ghana (LUG) is one such TNE institution and being the only British university campus in West Africa, it attracts students from many countries, especially from other African countries. LUG can boast of a diverse student population from nearly seventeen (17) countries. The diverse nature of the student population brings to light the need to enhance an inclusive educational environment that ensures that students, no matter their backgrounds, can have a sense of belonging.

From the authors' experience within this context, it is observed that the richness of student diversity, while valuable, often comes with educational challenges. Students bring with them different cultural orientations, linguistic abilities, and prior academic experiences, which sometimes lead to difficulties in communication, participation, and assessment. For instance, while some students adapt quickly to the British-style teaching and learning approach, others may struggle with independent study skills or the emphasis on critical thinking. These disparities can inadvertently create gaps in learning and limit students' ability to feel fully integrated into the classroom environment. Such experiences have heightened my interest in inclusive education, as I believe that creating equitable learning opportunities and a sense of belonging for all students is essential to the mission of a transnational university like LUG.

This paper therefore focuses on module leaders, as they occupy a pivotal position in shaping the student learning experience. As the primary facilitators of teaching and learning, module leaders not only design and deliver content but also interact most frequently with students. They are directly responsible for classroom practices, assessment strategies, and student engagement, making them well-placed to identify challenges and implement inclusive approaches. Moreover, their role extends beyond content delivery to fostering classroom culture, which means they are crucial actors in ensuring that the diverse student body feels recognised, respected, and supported. For this reason, understanding how module leaders perceive and respond to student diversity provides valuable insights into institutional efforts toward inclusive education.

Diversity and inclusivity in TNE

Some scholars have argued that campuses with diverse student populations serve as fillips to varied and enriched student experiences which augments greater levels of student engagement and participation (Chang et al., 2006; Goethe & Colina, 2018; Qodirova, 2022). Nevertheless, whether diversity will lead to a greater level of student engagement and participation is highly dependent on the institution's perception of diversity (Chun & Evans, 2023). At Lancaster University Ghana (LUG), the student population is diverse in multiple senses. Geographically, students are drawn from more than seventeen countries, spanning West Africa, East Africa, and beyond, which creates a melting pot of cultural identities within the campus community. This means that in a single classroom, one might find students from Ghana, Nigeria, Sierra Leone, The Gambia, Kenya, or even further afield, each bringing their own perspectives, values, and ways of engaging with knowledge. Linguistically, while English is the medium of instruction, students' proficiencies vary depending on whether it is their first, second, or even third language. This often shapes their confidence in oral participation and their ability to express complex ideas in academic writing. Religiously and socially, the population is equally varied, with students coming from different faiths and socio-economic backgrounds.

Inclusion in higher education looks at institutions where students have equal opportunities. Though over the years scholars have studied inclusivity in education from the perspective of minority groups such as disability studies, gender studies and anti-racial studies (DeLuca, 2013; Goehring & Whittington, 2017; Maimon et al., 2023) inclusivity in education generally refers to equal opportunities for students regardless of their background and views (Altes, 2024). For module leaders inclusive education involves creating a learning environment that enables students to thrive, realise their capabilities and make meaningful engagements (Sturm, 2019), despite their diverse cultural, educational and social background and experiences (Thomas, 2013). Inclusion in higher education looks at institutions where students have equal opportunities. Though over the years scholars have studied inclusivity in education from the perspective of minority groups such as disability studies, gender studies, and anti-racial studies (DeLuca, 2013; Goehring & Whittington, 2017; Maimon et al., 2023), inclusivity in education generally refers to equal opportunities for students regardless of their background and views (Altes, 2024). For module leaders, inclusive education involves creating a learning environment that enables students to thrive, realise their capabilities, and make meaningful engagements (Sturm, 2019), despite their diverse cultural, educational, and social background and experiences (Thomas, 2013).

At Lancaster University Ghana (LUG), this idea of inclusive education is particularly important given the highly diverse student body. Students enter with different educational foundations – some from international schools with exposure to Western-style pedagogy, and others from local or regional systems that emphasise memorisation and teacher-centred approaches. Without inclusive practices, such differences could result in some students being disadvantaged in classroom discussions, assessments, or group projects. In addition, the multicultural composition of the student body often brings different communication norms, religious orientations, and socio-economic experiences, which can either enrich or fragment the learning process depending on how they are managed. For module leaders at LUG, inclusivity therefore means ensuring that no student feels sidelined because of their accent, prior learning style, financial background, or worldview. It involves designing assessments that are fair to students with varying levels of linguistic proficiency, encouraging participation in ways that respect cultural differences in communication, and creating a classroom culture where all voices are valued. In this way, inclusivity at LUG is not just about addressing traditional categories of exclusion such as disability or gender, but about navigating and harmonising the broader spectrum of diversity inherent in a transnational education setting.

Thomas and May (2010) outline a four-pronged typology that shows four dimensions of students' diversity in the areas of cultural, educational, dispositional, and circumstantial. These dimensions form the theoretical framework for understanding the concept of inclusivity at LUG from the module leaders' perspective as presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Four-pronged typology from student diversity

Diversity dimensions	Examples
Educational	Level/type of entry qualifications; skills; ability; knowledge; educational experience; life and work experience; learning approaches.
Dispositional	Identity; self-esteem; confidence; motivation; aspirations; expectations; preferences; attitudes; assumptions; beliefs; emotional intelligence; maturity; learning styles perspectives; interests; self-awareness; gender; sexuality.
Circumstantial	Age; disability; paid/voluntary employment; caring responsibilities; geographical location; access to IT and transport services; flexibility; time available; entitlements; financial background and means; marital status.
Cultural	Language; values; cultural capital; religion and belief; country of origin/reside ethnicity/race; social background.

(Source: Thomas and May, 2010)

This typology is important because it provides a holistic way of conceptualising student diversity beyond the more commonly discussed markers such as nationality, ethnicity, or

gender. By drawing attention to cultural, educational, dispositional, and circumstantial dimensions, the framework recognises that inclusivity must account not only for visible differences but also for less obvious factors such as students' prior educational experiences, levels of confidence or motivation, and socio-economic conditions. Such a multi-dimensional lens is particularly useful in a transnational education context like LUG, where students' diversity is complex and layered rather than defined by a single characteristic.

The authors chose this typology to frame the project because it allows for a structured yet flexible approach to understanding inclusivity from the perspective of module leaders. Module leaders at LUG regularly encounter challenges and opportunities that fall across all four dimensions – for example, cultural diversity in classroom interactions, educational diversity in students' preparedness for academic tasks, dispositional diversity in levels of engagement and self-efficacy, and circumstantial diversity in balancing studies with personal or financial responsibilities. The typology therefore serves as a practical tool for analysing how inclusivity can be fostered in a setting where diversity manifests in multiple and intersecting ways. In addition, it aligns well with the aims of this study, which is not merely to document diversity but to explore how module leaders actively respond to it in order to create equitable learning environments

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative methodology using in-depth interviews. The purpose of the interview was to investigate module leaders' challenges they encounter with respect to the varied dimensions of student diversity proposed by Thomas and May (2010) and the teaching practices they adopt to enhance an inclusive environment. In all, six module leaders were interviewed: one (1) each from the Politics and International Relations, Law, and Computer Science departments and three (3) from the Business Studies department because it comprises more than one programme. The results of the interview were analysed with thematic analysis, where themes and categories were gathered to help understand the module leader's challenges and teaching strategies.

The interview questions were directly informed by the four dimensions of Thomas and May's (2010) typology. For example, one question drawing on the educational dimension asked: *"In your experience, how do students' different educational backgrounds (for instance, coming from local versus international schooling systems) affect their participation and performance in your modules, and how do you address these differences in your teaching?"*

To explore the cultural dimension, module leaders were asked: *"Have you observed any cultural differences in the way students engage in class discussions or group work? How do you adapt your teaching to ensure all voices are included?"*

Similarly, the dispositional dimension was addressed through questions such as: *"Some students may appear more confident or motivated than others. How do you encourage participation from students who seem hesitant or less self-assured?"*

Finally, the circumstantial dimension was explored with questions like: *"Students often face external challenges such as financial pressures or family responsibilities. How do you take these factors into account in supporting their academic success?"*

Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, providing enough time for module leaders to reflect on their experiences in depth and to share the strategies they employ in creating inclusive learning environments at Lancaster University Ghana.

Key Findings

Though the findings of the study revealed some minor diversity dimensions in the areas of circumstantial, educational, and dispositional, the major challenge highlighted by the module leaders at LUG related to the cultural dimension. The majority of the respondents indicated that language and cultural values were the most significant challenges they encountered in their teaching environment. These challenges stemmed from two key issues: first, the presence of students from many non-Anglophone countries who have not had English as a second language growing up; and second, the wide variety of cultural and traditional values represented on the African continent (Akinola, 2018). The study findings as elicited from module leaders are presented below:

Cultural Dimensions and their Associated Major Challenges:

- ***Student self-expression***
  Many students from non-Anglophone backgrounds struggled to articulate their thoughts fluently in English, which affected their ability to contribute confidently in classroom discussions. Module leaders noted that this often led to students holding back ideas for fear of being misunderstood or judged by their peers.

- ***Confidence levels***
  Differences in language proficiency and cultural expectations shaped students' confidence in academic settings. Some students felt disadvantaged when compared

to peers from Anglophone or international school systems, leading to uneven levels of participation.

- ***Meanings and interpretations of situations and events***
  Diverse cultural backgrounds influenced how students interpreted classroom activities, case studies, or even feedback from lecturers. What might be seen as constructive criticism in one culture could be perceived as harsh or disrespectful in another.

- ***Group participation***
  Group projects often surfaced cultural tensions, as students brought different attitudes towards collaboration, authority, and conflict resolution. Some students preferred hierarchical arrangements within groups, while others leaned towards egalitarian decision-making. Module leaders emphasised that these differences occasionally led to friction, disengagement, or uneven contributions within teams.

Educational Dimension (Minor Challenge):

- Module leaders observed disparities in students' prior academic preparation. Those from international schools were often more accustomed to independent learning and critical thinking, while students from local systems tended to rely more on rote learning. This mismatch sometimes created uneven classroom dynamics, with some students excelling in analytical tasks while others struggled to adapt.

Dispositional Dimension (Minor Challenge):

- Differences in motivation and self-efficacy were also reported. Some students approached learning with enthusiasm and confidence, while others appeared hesitant, less motivated, or resistant to participation. Module leaders linked this to students' varying levels of exposure to active learning environments and personal attitudes toward education.

Circumstantial Dimension (Minor Challenge):

- External pressures such as financial challenges, family responsibilities, and commuting difficulties occasionally affected students' consistency and concentration in their studies. Module leaders noted that while these issues were less frequently discussed by students, they often manifested in absenteeism, missed deadlines, or disengagement during intensive academic periods.

To address these challenges, module leaders highlighted a range of strategies aimed at fostering inclusivity and supporting students' diverse needs. These included:

- **Incorporating diverse cultural perspectives in discussions**
  Module leaders intentionally drew on examples, case studies, and scenarios from different African and global contexts. This helped students to see their own backgrounds represented in the curriculum and encouraged them to value multiple viewpoints.

- **Using teaching materials that reflect varied cultural perspectives**
  By diversifying reading lists, examples, and classroom resources, module leaders ensured that course content was not overly skewed towards Western experiences. This practice created opportunities for students to connect their own cultural knowledge with the academic material.

- **Promoting multiple ways for students to demonstrate understanding**
  Recognising that students have different learning styles and strengths, lecturers encouraged varied forms of assessment and participation—such as written reflections, oral presentations, and group projects—so that no single format disadvantaged particular groups of students.

- **Encouraging peer consultations and support**
  To help students from non-Anglophone countries overcome language barriers, module leaders promoted peer mentoring and group discussions. This approach not only supported language development but also built confidence, strengthened motivation, and fostered collaboration across cultures.

- **Co-creating classroom rules that encourage respect and inclusion**
  Rather than imposing rules, lecturers involved students in setting shared expectations for behaviour, respect, and participation. This collaborative process gave students ownership of the classroom environment and reinforced values of fairness, inclusivity, and self-efficacy.

- **Providing a safe classroom environment for expression**
  Module leaders worked to cultivate an atmosphere where students felt comfortable sharing ideas without fear of being ridiculed or excluded. This included affirming contributions, moderating discussions carefully, and addressing insensitive behaviour promptly—an especially important practice for students balancing external pressures with their academic journey.

Conclusion

At Lancaster University Ghana (LUG), the diverse composition of the student body highlights the critical importance of fostering an inclusive academic environment. The findings of this study revealed that while diversity manifests across several dimensions, cultural diversity—particularly language barriers and differing cultural values—emerges as the most significant challenge faced by module leaders. These challenges often influence classroom engagement, confidence, interpretation of ideas, and group participation.At the same time, the study demonstrates that module leaders are not passive in the face of these challenges; rather, they are actively adopting innovative and inclusive pedagogical practices that transform potential barriers into opportunities for deeper learning. By integrating diverse cultural perspectives into teaching materials, encouraging peer-to-peer learning, promoting flexible modes of student participation, and creating safe spaces for open expression, educators at LUG illustrate that inclusivity is not merely an aspirational goal but a practical necessity in the daily realities of transnational education.

Looking ahead, these findings provide a valuable starting point for further dialogue within LUG about how inclusivity can be strengthened institutionally. One of the goals of this work is to open up conversations across departments, enabling module leaders to share best practices and collectively reflect on how inclusive pedagogy can be embedded more systematically into teaching and learning. In addition, the insights from this study can inform policy discussions at the university level, particularly around faculty training, curriculum design, and support services for students from non-Anglophone and culturally diverse backgrounds.

Beyond the walls of LUG, this research also offers a model for other transnational education institutions in Africa and further afield, highlighting both the challenges and the strategies that can support inclusivity in cross-border higher education. Over the coming year, the authors plan to build on this work by developing workshops for faculty at LUG that focus on inclusive teaching strategies, while also exploring opportunities to collaborate with other TNE institutions in the region to share lessons and frameworks. It is the hope of the authors that by the time of the next edition of this conference, we will be able to report on how these findings have shaped institutional practices at LUG and contributed to a broader conversation about inclusive education in transnational higher education across Africa. Ultimately, diversity at LUG should not be perceived as an obstacle but as a valuable asset that can enrich teaching and learning when managed intentionally. By embracing inclusivity, module leaders are positioned to cultivate students' critical thinking, intercultural competence, and sense of belonging—qualities that are essential for thriving in an increasingly globalized world.

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