



Intercultural relationship development and higher education internationalisation: a qualitative investigation based on a three-stage ecological and person-in-context conceptual framework

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Abstract

This qualitative study scrutinised the experiences of intercultural relationship development between international and domestic students at two Japanese private universities, which have contrastive degrees of commitment to internationalisation in regard to stated vision, curriculum, international student enrolment and languages of instruction. Kudo et al.'s (*Higher Education*, 77(3), 473–489, 2019) three-stage ecological and person-in-context conceptual framework was adopted to gain insight into the roles of institutional internationalisation and personal agency in intercultural relationship development. A thematic analysis of interview data from 32 students (14 domestics, 18 internationals) revealed that institutional internationalisation may play a relatively small role in promoting intercultural relationship development compared to students' agency. A detailed examination of the associations between three forms of agency (i.e. situated, cosmopolitan and creative) and three relational stages (i.e. interactivity, reciprocity and unity) led to the identification of cosmopolitan agency as a meaningful hallmark of intercultural relationship development. These findings call for future research aimed at identifying the environmental and individual conditions that are most conducive to the cultivation of cosmopolitan agency in both international and domestic students.

Keywords Internationalisation · Intercultural interaction · Intercultural relationship development · Agency · Cosmopolitan · Ecological framework

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Introduction

With the exponential increase in global student mobility and growing importance placed on educating globally minded future leaders, the proponents of higher education internationalisation emphasise the need to equip *all* students with intercultural competence, global citizenship and cosmopolitanism (Richardson 2016). Intercultural interactions between international and domestic students are considered an essential ingredient in the cultivation of these attributes (Leask 2015). Yet, despite the considerable allocation of institutional resources (fiscal and human), educationally orientated programmes and extra-curricular activities to engender these attributes and increase meaningful interactions between international and domestic students, there is limited evidence of this occurring (cf. Zou and Yu 2019). It is widely recognised that the mere presence of students with diverse cultural backgrounds in the same institution is insufficient to harness the rich potential of student diversity as an educational resource (Marginson and Sawir 2011).

Against this backdrop, this paper addresses three limitations in previous research on intercultural student relationship. These limitations are commonly found in the studies conducted in Anglophone countries as well as in other educational contexts, such as Japan where the present study was conducted. First, most studies display a narrow focus on limited interactions or interactional difficulties (McKenzie and Baldassar 2017; God and Zhang 2019) and neglect the manner in which deep, long-lasting intercultural relationships (e.g. friendship) emerge and develop. Second, despite a decades-long claim that higher-education institutions have a responsibility to strategically design environments that improve students' engagement in intercultural interactions (Volet and Ang 1998), there is still limited research examining the impact of institutional internationalisation as a means to promote intercultural relationship development. Third, although recent studies have highlighted the role of students' agency in international transitions (Jindal-Snape and Rienties 2016; Marginson 2014) and intercultural interactions/relationships (Bennett et al. 2013; Colvin and Volet 2014), the forms and levels of agency conducive to intercultural relationship development have received limited empirical attention.

This paper addresses these limitations by unravelling the respective influences of institutional internationalisation and students' agency in the development of intercultural relationships. Two Japanese private universities with contrastive degrees of internationalisation in terms of overall strategy, support services and resources, educational goals and foci, formal and informal curricula and teaching and learning arrangements, as defined by Knight (2004) and Leask (2015), were purposefully selected as the research site for this study. Importantly, Kudo et al.'s (2019) three-stage ecological and person-in-context conceptual framework was adopted to examine international and domestic students' accounts of intercultural relationship development at the two institutions. Directions for future research on the internationalisation of higher education emerge from the empirical findings.

Conceptual grounding and research questions

Kudo et al. (2019) constructed a three-stage ecological and person-in-context conceptual framework of intercultural relationship development by focusing on the dynamic interactions between multi-layered environments (situations, curricular or policies related to intercultural interactions) and individual 'effectivities' (a term coined by Snow (1994) to refer to attributes,

dispositions, abilities, and personal resources). Specifically, the framework postulates the fluid nature of environmental affordances and individual agency which are seen to co-contribute to the development of meaningful intercultural relationships between international and domestic students (see Fig. 1). Affordances, according to Gibson (1979), refer to perceived or actual opportunities for action that exist in a given environment. Agency, as the human will and capacity to change ones’ life course, explains students’ motives and abilities around intercultural relationship development (Bennett et al. 2013). These are taken together in Kudo et al.’s framework, through the main proposal that ‘the development of intercultural relationships occurs at the dynamic experiential interface between environmental affordances and students’ agency, both of which evolve along three stages of relationships’ (p. 481). The assumptions underpinning each of these stages are described below and illustrated in Fig. 1.

- The first interactivity stage, characterised predominately by functional interactions, emerges from the interactions between affordances in proximity created in institutional settings and situated agency (i.e. seeking interactions in the institutional proximity).
- The second reciprocity stage involving instrumental and growingly personal interactions appears at the interface between affordances in interpersonal proximity and students’ cosmopolitan agency (i.e. seeking interactions that render openness, respect, reflexivity and inclusiveness beyond (perceived) cultural and personal difference).
- The third unity stage is dominated by interactions with a personal focus that are enabled by students’ creative agency (i.e. transcending institutional affordances or constraints to create individualized proximity).

In what follows, the merits of using Kudo et al.’s (2019) framework to examine the roles of institutional internationalisation and students’ agency in intercultural relationship development, and two research questions that emerge from them, are presented.

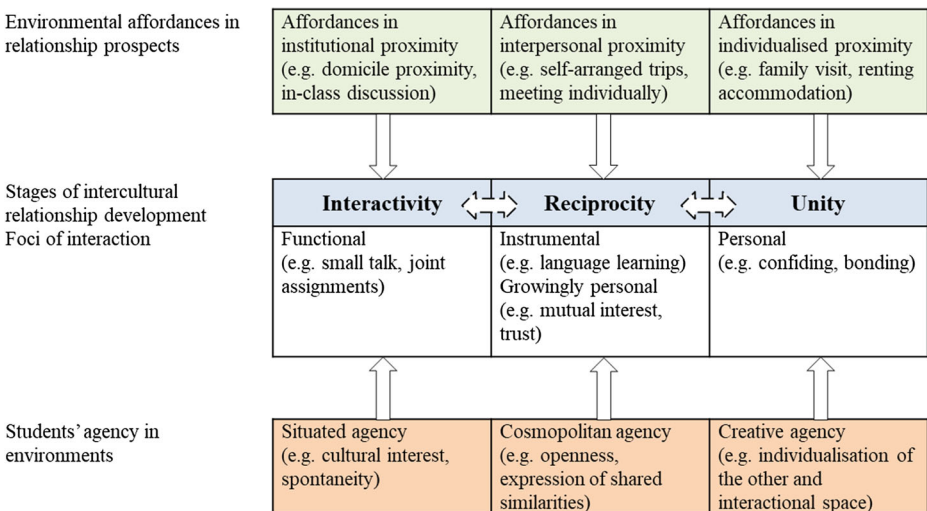


Fig. 1 Kudo et al.’s (2019) three-stage ecological and person-in-context conceptual framework of intercultural relationship development

Roles of institutional internationalisation in intercultural relationship development

A number of scholars (e.g. Leask 2015; Spencer-Oatey and Dauber 2019) have suggested that rigorous and strategic internationalisation of the institution is fundamental to facilitating students' academic/social integration and engagement in intercultural interactions and learning. Most empirical studies, however, have exhibited only a marginal focus on institution-wide internationalisation, although some have reported the positive impacts of intervention activities in specific institutional settings such as the classroom (Arkoudis et al. 2013) and buddy projects (Gareis et al. 2018). Consequently, little is known about the extent to and the manner in which different degrees of institutional internationalisation can afford or constrain intercultural relationship development. The lack of comparative research on the place of institutional internationalisation at more than one institution in the same national context has hampered concrete understandings of this vexed issue.

In this regard, Kudo et al.'s (2019) conceptualisation of environmental affordances is useful, as the breakdown of affordances in institutional, interpersonal and individualised proximity suggests a distinction between institutionally engineered and self-initiated activities, with an assumption that self-initiated activities are predominant in later stages of intercultural relationship development. This distinction helps identify two contrasting roles of internationalisation in intercultural relationship development. On one hand, the degree of institutional commitment to internationalisation can be reflected in the number of activities engineered by university specifically for the purpose of promoting intercultural interactions (hereafter, university-engineered activities). Thus, institutions with a wider range of engineered, formal and informal curriculum environments are likely to offer a greater number of activities for students to interact interculturally in institutional proximity than institutions without such environments. On the other hand, the degree of institutional internationalisation may not be associated with the number of interactional activities initiated by students (hereafter, student-initiated activities), as they occur in interpersonal and/or individualised proximity (See Fig. 1).

Therefore, our first research question was aimed to compare the extent to which two universities with contrastive degrees of commitment to internationalisation afford different kinds of university-engineered and student-initiated activities ('environmental affordances in relationships prospects' component of Kudo et al.'s (2019) framework) conducive to intercultural relationship development (middle part of the framework).

RQ1. What university-engineered and student-initiated activities do students report engaging in, as facilitating their development of intercultural relationships? To what extent does students' engagement in such activities vary across universities that differ in the degree of internationalisation?

Roles of individual agency in intercultural relationship development

Many studies on intercultural relationships in institutional settings have focused on students' dispositions and behaviours, such as country of origin, personality, communicative competence, language proficiency and self-disclosure (Gareis 2017). Agency is one of the constructs that recent studies have associated with the outcomes of positive intercultural interactions such as personal growth and intercultural transformation (e.g. Tran and Vu 2017; Colvin and Volet 2014). Yet, only a few studies have explored different forms of agency or examined the manner in which students' agency contributes to intercultural relationship development (cf. Bennett et al. 2013).

Kudo et al.'s (2019) framework provides a useful basis to address these issues, as it conceptualises three forms of agency (situated, cosmopolitan and creative), and their association with three relational stages (interactivity, reciprocity and unity) (see Fig. 1). This postulated association, however, has yet to be established through solid empirical investigation. Additionally, little is known about the manner in which different levels of situated, cosmopolitan, and creative agency are associated with the emergence of these stages. Considering some studies on intercultural interactions and relationships have emphasised the importance of reciprocal learning and understanding (e.g. Tran and Pham 2016; Ujitani and Volet 2008), intercultural relationship development may require both international and domestic students to actively seek and initiate interactions with each other. Conversely, the absence of agency in both parties can be detrimental to this development. Yet, it may also be that the presence of proactive agency in at least one relational partner is enough for the relationship to begin and thrive. Thus, examining empirically not only the forms, but also the levels of agency that correspond to each of the three stages of intercultural relationships is important.

Our second research question, therefore, was intended to examine empirically the extent to and the manner in which different forms *and* levels of students' agency ('students' agency in environments' component of Kudo et al.'s (2019) framework) contribute to intercultural relationship development (middle part of the framework).

RQ2. What is the relationship between displayed forms and levels of agency and stage of intercultural relationship development, and can any significant patterns be identified?

The extent to which the displayed forms and levels of agency and stage of intercultural relationship development is different between students at universities with contrastive degrees of commitment to internationalisation will also be briefly examined.

Method

This research is grounded in a combination of constructionist and phenomenological approaches in qualitative inquiry. Constructionism asserts that, 'things are defined interpersonally and intersubjectively by people interacting in a network of relationships' (Patton 2015, p. 121). Similarly, phenomenology focuses on, 'exploring how human beings make sense of experience and transform experience into consciousness, both individually and as a shared meaning' (Patton 2015, p. 115). Taking these methodological assumptions together, this research is a construction of the authors' interpretation of realities on intercultural relationship development that were defined by students in research settings.

Research sites

Two Japanese private universities—one (Bamboo University) with stronger commitment to internationalisation than the other (Pine University)—were purposefully chosen to enable comparison of the roles that institutional internationalisation may play in intercultural relationship development. Of note is that unlike Pine which had no external fund for internationalisation, Bamboo had received competitive funding from the Japanese government to internationalise the student experience (worth approximately US\$2 million annually over 10 years). Accordingly, it was evident that the two universities exhibited contrastive degrees of internationalisation in terms of stated vision (publicised versus non-existent), curriculum (comprehensive versus partial), international student enrolment (nearly 50 versus 2% of the

student population) and languages of instruction (English–Japanese bilingual versus predominantly Japanese).

Participants

The first author used a combination of intensity and snowballing sampling methods (Patton 2015) to recruit participants. Thirty-four undergraduate students expressed their willingness to share their experiences of intercultural relationship development that had begun on campus. Two students were excluded because their intercultural relationships were initiated and developed entirely off campus, leaving 32 participants (14 domestic and 18 international students; 19 females and 13 males) from the two Japanese universities (see Table 1). Their majors were in the humanities and social sciences (e.g. linguistics, literature, media, international relations, tourism, business, economics). The domestic participants were predominantly native Japanese, born and raised in Japan, but included three ethnic minority or biethnic students reflecting the increasing ethnic diversity in contemporary Japan. Additionally, it was found that all domestic participants had visited a foreign country, and nine of them (64.2%) had lived abroad for over 3 months. The international participants consisted of six students from China, three from South Korea and one from Singapore, Vietnam, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Lithuania, Germany, Australia, UK and USA. Their period of residence in Japan ranged from 2 to 64 months ($M = 33.38$, $SD = 16.88$).

Data collection

Data consisted of the 32 participants' responses in (1) preliminary questionnaires eliciting demographic information (e.g. gender, country of origin, major) and (2) semi-structured individual interviews conducted by the first author in informal settings. The interviews were conducted in participants' language of their choice, typically in Japanese for Japanese participants and English or Japanese for international participants. This was important to enable participants to express their opinions and feelings freely in the language that they felt most comfortable with. In the 50–90-min-long conversational style interviews, participants were asked to describe their expectations and actual experiences of intercultural relationship development, with a focus on concrete contexts, activities and behaviours that led to this development. When necessary, follow-up questions were generated spontaneously. This flexibility made it possible to address the target issues in greater depth. All participants provided written consent for their questionnaire and interview responses to be used for research purposes.

Data analysis

The thematic qualitative analysis (Ayres 2008) of the 32 interviews, grounded in constructionist and phenomenological methodology (Patton 2015) and Kudo et al.'s (2019) conceptual

Table 1 Participants

	Bamboo University	Pine University	Total
Domestic	7 (4)	7 (5)	14 (9)
International	10 (6)	8 (4)	18 (10)
Total	17 (10)	15 (9)	32 (19)

Numbers of females are in parentheses

framework, was carried out, using NVivo 11. The analysis employed a combination of deductive and inductive reasoning, which involved continuous development and modification of codes representing the interviewees' experiences of intercultural relationship development. Thematic coding was the primary data reduction strategy to seek patterns in the empirical data (Ayres 2008). The aim was to capture the dynamic and multidimensional nature of intercultural student relationships that emerged in the context of contrasting degrees of institutional internationalisation.

To enable rigorous analysis, the three key concepts, namely interactional activities (or environments), agency and relational stage, were operationalized in a systematic way. As regards the interactional activities, separate lists of concrete university-engineered and student-initiated activities were created and constantly added to and modified during the analysis until all the interview data were coded. In total, 16 distinct interactional activities—seven university-engineered (e.g. culturally mixed dormitory, buddy systems) and nine student-initiated (e.g. open institutional space, personal networks)—were identified.

The operationalisation of agency and relational stage led to the development of a coding scheme, inspired by Colvin and Volet's (2014) study of six dimensions of positive intercultural interactions. Ordinal values were assigned to the levels of situated, cosmopolitan and creative agencies, with 3 being proactive (i.e. initiated the interaction), 2 being active (i.e. did not initiate but sought the interaction), 1 being reactive (i.e. followed the initiative by other persons) and 0 being none (i.e. the interaction was imposed). Similarly, relational stages were displayed numerically, with 3 being unity, 2 being reciprocity and 1 being interactivity. Since many participants reported multiple interactions with multiple intercultural partners, only the display of the highest level of the three forms of agency and the highest stage of relationship was coded. Table 2 provides the description and examples of situated agency, cosmopolitan agency, creative agency at each level, and the three relational stages.

The first author, fluent in both English and Japanese, (Coder 1) piloted the coding scheme by coding eight interview transcripts, four in English and four in Japanese (25% of all data). The same eight transcripts were coded in turn by two independent coders, both highly experienced in qualitative data analysis. Coder 2, a native speaker of English, coded the four English transcripts and Coder 3, a native Japanese speaker, coded the four Japanese transcripts. Perfect inter-coding agreement of 87.5% was achieved (with agreement rate across the three forms of agency and relational stage, ranging from 62.5 to 100%) for the eight interviews. All disagreements were resolved through discussion between the coders. Subsequently, Coder 1 coded all remaining interview data in the original languages, and the validity and reliability of the coding process were double-checked by the second and third authors. Only the Japanese transcripts selected to report the research findings were translated into English by the first author.

The two research questions were addressed by identifying significant patterns in (1) the interactional activities conducive to intercultural relationship development that were assumed to be associated with the degree of institutional commitment to internationalisation and (2) the associations between the highest displayed levels of the three forms of agency and the highest achieved relational stage.

Findings

Role of institutional internationalisation in intercultural relationship development

The first research question was concerned with the extent to, and the manner in, which institutional internationalisation prompted interactional activities that were conducive to

Table 2 Coding scheme for intercultural relationship development

Forms of agency and relational stage	Level and value	Description	Example
Situational agency	Proactive	3 Initiated the interaction in institutional environments	'I really wanted to join <i>shogi</i> (Japanese chess) club. So I emailed them. There was no reply for three weeks. Then, I just went to the room. ... then they taught me how to play <i>shogi</i> '.
	Active	2 Did not initiate but sought the interaction in institutional environments	'I chose to attend one of the parties organized by International Office. I got to know him there'.
	Reactive	1 Did not seek the interaction but followed willingly an initiative started by other person(s) in institutional environments	'How I met him was he sort of spontaneously, while I was at the cafeteria with my friend. ... He just came up to us and said "hey, are you exchange students?" Then we got to talk with him'.
	None	0 Interaction was imposed on the student. None of the above three levels of agency was evident.	'Teacher arranges us sometimes in groups and we discuss the question or something. We all discuss in English and some Japanese guy is there'.
Cosmopolitan agency	Proactive	3 Initiated to develop a relationship with explicit openness to and interest in cultural and/or personal backgrounds	'I have a qualification for teaching Japanese ... and I offered to tutor an international student in Japanese. ... When I have some questions about English, I can easily ask her in return'.
	Active	2 Did not initiate but sought to develop a relationship with explicit openness to and interest in cultural and/or personal backgrounds	'We have a similar interest in movies as well. He has an appreciation of Japanese culture. So we both went to see Japanese movies. ... He is quite broad-minded'.
	Reactive	1 Did not seek to develop a relationship but followed willingly an initiative started by other person(s), or found common ground, on the basis of explicit openness to and interest in cultural and/or personal backgrounds	'I think we started to get really close when she needed help installing her internet in her room. So, I went to help her and I actually saw that she had the Bible. I was like, "Oh! Are you Christian?" and she was like, "Yeah!" ... we got really close from that time maybe'.
	None	0 No evidence of developing a relationship with explicit openness to and interest in cultural and/or personal backgrounds	
Creative agency	Proactive	3 Initiated to create the individualised space and/or style of interactions	'I invite them to my house and we make dumpling or something like that'.
	Active	2 Did not initiate but sought to create the individualised space and/or style of interactions	'... every time we register for courses, we talk to each other to take the same classes together, so we can meet every day'.
	Reactive	1 Followed willingly an initiative started by other person(s) to create	'We talked together [in class] and there was like, "Oh, I am going to Osaka". ... She just said, "Oh, I am

Table 2 (continued)

Forms of agency and relational stage	Level and value	Description	Example
		the individualised space and/or style of interactions	from Osaka. Come and stay at my house” ... I just decided to go with her’.
	None	0 No evidence of creating the individualised space and/or style of interactions	
Relational stage	Unity	3 Experienced voluntary and individualised interactions with a personal focus and with the hope of the relationship being everlasting	‘We help each other a lot. I do not think we will graduate and we will quit the relationship. I will try to keep it’.
	Reciprocity	2 Experienced largely voluntary interactions with instrumental and growingly personal foci	‘I would often make corrections in their Japanese essays, and they would make corrections of my English essays in return. ... I became closer to international students by meeting them individually’.
	Interactivity	1 Experienced voluntary or involuntary interactions with a functional focus	‘In the [foreign] language class ... we stay close to each other and we have questions, we just ask, and we just talk randomly’.

intercultural relationship development. To address this question, the analysis of participants’ accounts focused on (1) the identification of concrete activities that they engaged in, which were either engineered by the university or initiated by students, and (2) the extent to which participants’ reports of university-engineered and student-initiated activities differed at two universities with contrasting degrees of internationalisation. Table 3 shows the breakdown of types of activities reported by participants from the two universities.

Engagement in university-engineered and student-initiated interactional activities or environments

As shown in the right-hand side column of Table 3 (Total), participants reported more than twice as many student-initiated activities ($n = 143$, $M = 4.46$) than university-engineered activities ($n = 69$, $M = 2.15$). The five most frequently mentioned student-initiated activities were private party ($n = 24$), open institutional space ($n = 21$), student clubs/organisations ($n = 18$), personal networks ($n = 18$) and class activities ($n = 18$). The high frequency of private parties is noteworthy, because it indicates that 24/32 respondents (75%) reported having created and/or utilised a non-institutional environment for intercultural relationship development.

In addition, only three out of all 16 interactional activities reported by participants related to the taught formal curriculum: two of the seven university-engineered activities (culturally mixed group work, class activities other than group work) and one of the nine student-initiated activities (informal group work related to classroom activities). These are in italics in Table 3. The other reported activities relate either to the informal curriculum (e.g. culturally mixed dormitory) or to non-curriculum/personal environments (e.g. open institutional space). These

Table 3 Interactional activities (or environments) that students engage in at two universities

	Pine (<i>n</i> = 15)	Bamboo (<i>n</i> = 17)	Total (<i>N</i> = 32)
University-engineered			
Culturally mixed dormitory	NA	16	16
Events (1-day)	12	3	15
Events (longer than 1-day)	NA	12	12
<i>Culturally mixed group work</i>	NA	10	10
Buddy systems	5	3	8
<i>Class activities other than group work</i>	NA	5	5
International lounge	2	NA	2
Subtotal	19	50	69
Mean per student (SD)	1.26 (0.85)	2.94 (1.05)	2.15 (1.27)
Student-initiated			
Private party, outing, dining-out	13	11	24
Open institutional space (e.g. cafeteria)	14	7	21
<i>Informal group work related to classroom activities</i>	8	10	18
Student clubs, organizations	10	8	18
Personal networks (e.g. intro through friends)	12	6	18
Online/virtual platforms	10	6	16
Living space other than culturally mixed dormitory	6	2	8
Introduction to family members	0	4	4
Others (e.g. part-time job, travel)	8	8	16
Subtotal	81	62	143
Mean per student (SD)	5.40 (1.40)	3.64 (1.41)	4.46 (1.65)
Total	100	112	212
Mean per student (SD)	6.66 (1.77)	6.58 (1.68)	6.62 (1.72)

NA means interactional opportunities were not available in that institution while '0' means interactional opportunities might be available, but students did not seize or create those opportunities. Activities related to the formally taught curriculum are in italics

findings suggest that overall, the 32 participants in this study exercised agency to develop intercultural relationships mostly through self-initiated, informal activities.

Cross-institutional comparison of engaging in interactional activities

Comparing participants' accounts of engaging in university-engineered and student-initiated activities for intercultural relationship development across two universities unearthed two contrastive findings. First, Bamboo, the more internationalised university, offered students a wider range of environments for intercultural relational development than Pine, the less internationalised university. The upper part of Table 3 shows that the average number of university-engineered activities reported by Bamboo participants ($M = 2.94$) was more than twice as that by Pine participants ($M = 1.26$). Importantly, 16/17 Bamboo participants (94%) reported culturally mixed dormitory as related to their intercultural relationship development. Continuous events and culturally mixed group work were also salient at Bamboo University. Such steady and solid engineered environments that would allow prolonged engagement in intercultural interactions were hardly present in Pine University, in which students had to interact interculturally in sporadic and temporal environments (e.g. 1-day events) or unstructured environments (e.g. international lounge).

Second, participants at Pine, the less internationalised university, outnumbered their counterparts at Bamboo, the more internationalised university, in terms of the number of student-initiated activities that were reported. The lower part of Table 3 shows that on average, Pine

participants ($M = 5.40$) reported more student-initiated activities than Bamboo participants ($M = 3.64$). This difference may mean that students at the less internationalised university exercised greater degrees of personal agency than students at the more internationalised university. The higher frequency of student-led interactional activities in open institutional space, personal networks and living space, reported by Pine participants in comparison to their Bamboo counterparts (93% vs 41%, 80% vs 35% and 40% vs 11%, respectively), appears to support the idea of the compensatory nature of agency.

In sum, the findings related to RQ1 indicate that greater institutional engagement in internationalisation induced intercultural interactions through a range of university-engineered activities. However, in light of the greater number of student-initiated than university-engineered activities reported in both institutions, and especially the largest number in the less internationalised university, we tentatively conclude that it is ultimately students' agency that determines the development and quality of intercultural relationships. The role of students' agency as an enabler of intercultural relationship development is examined in the next section.

Role of students' agency in intercultural relationship development

The second research question explored: (1) the manner in which Kudo et al.'s (2019) three forms of agency (situated, cosmopolitan and creative agencies) and three stages of intercultural relationship development (interactivity, reciprocity and unity) are related to each other and (2) whether this association is present consistently across universities with contrasting degrees of internationalisation commitment. The systematic coding of participants' accounts made it possible to establish the extent to which the relationship between displayed forms of agency and achieved stage of intercultural relationship was consistent with the assumptions underpinning Kudo et al.'s conceptual framework.

Displayed engagement in three forms of agency

The analysis of participants' accounts provided evidence of varying levels of engagement in the three forms of agency. Fig. 2 shows the breakdown by displayed level of engagement (proactive, active, reactive, none) for each form of agency (situated, cosmopolitan, creative).

As the pie chart on the left-hand side of the figure shows, most participants (30/32, 94%) reported high levels of situated agency, specifically, 22/32 (69%) proactive and 8/32 (25%) active levels. This finding is consistent with Kudo et al.'s (2019) assumption. However, the patterns of findings regarding cosmopolitan and creative agency were not consistent with Kudo et al.'s framework. As can be seen by comparing the findings of the other two pie charts, only 17/32 participants (53%) reported a proactive ($n = 6$, 19%) or active ($n = 11$, 34%) level of engagement in cosmopolitan agency, while 27/32 participants (85%) displayed a proactive ($n = 14$, 44%) or active ($n = 13$, 41%) level engagement of creative agency. This is inconsistent with Kudo et al.'s assumption that creative agency represents the ultimate, thus presumably less often displayed form of agency, leading to unity as the highest, thus less often achieved stage of intercultural relationship development. This pattern of findings was reinforced further by the absence of any display of cosmopolitan agency in eight participants (25%) and of creative agency in only two participants (6%). The evidence of greater difficulty in exercising cosmopolitan agency than creative agency suggests that the form of agency that leads to the highest stage of intercultural relationship development may be cosmopolitan rather than creative.

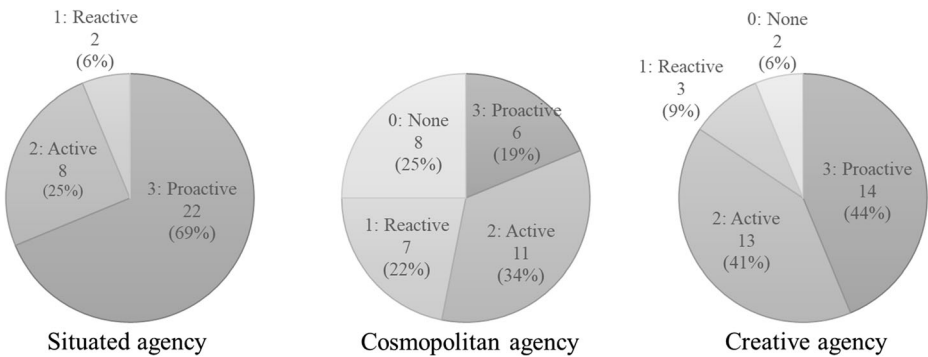


Fig. 2 Displayed engagement in three forms of agency

Achieved stage of intercultural relationship

Since participants recruited for the present study were exclusively students with positive experiences of intercultural interactions and relationship development, the majority (21/32, 65%) were identified as having achieved unity, the highest stage of intercultural relationship development. Six participants (19%) were found to have achieved only the second, reciprocity stage and five (16%) the first, interactivity stage.

Association between displayed forms of agency and achieved stage of intercultural relationships

Table 4 presents each of the 32 participants' displayed forms of agency (first three columns) and their achieved stage of intercultural relationship (fourth column). The data is organised in descending order of achieved stage of intercultural relationship (based on Kudo et al.'s (2019) theoretical assumptions), and within each stage in descending order of level of cosmopolitan agency (based on the empirical findings related to agency described above). All names mentioned in this article are pseudonyms.

Looking at the patterns of data at the individual level, a number of observations can be made. First, the link between displayed forms of agency and the first interactivity stage is supported by data from five participants (numbered 28 to 32 in Table 4). These participants exhibited varying levels of situated agency (reactive to proactive), but except for one student (Hitomi), their cosmopolitan and creative agencies were either at reactive level or non-existent. These students' minimalist engagement in cosmopolitan and creative agency is consistent with the finding that they were the only participants who did not move beyond the first interactivity stage in their intercultural relationships.

Second, participants' displays of cosmopolitan and creative agencies, revealed inconsistency with the assumption underlying Kudo et al.'s (2019) framework, that cosmopolitan agency is essential for reciprocity to develop. Specifically, six participants (numbered 22 to 27 in Table 4) whose intercultural relationships did not go beyond the second reciprocity stage hardly showed any cosmopolitan agency, but nevertheless displayed active or proactive levels of creative agency. This suggests that a reciprocal stage of intercultural relationships could be

Table 4 Displayed engagement in three forms of agency in relation to achieved stage of intercultural relationship

Name (institution, status)	Students' agency			Relationships
	Situated 3: proactive 2: active 1: reactive 0: none	Cosmopolitan 3: proactive 2: active 1: reactive 0: none	Creative 3: proactive 2: active 1: reactive 0: none	Relational stage 3: unity 2: reciprocity 1: interactivity
<i>Purposeful cosmopolitans</i>				
1. Yuko (P-DS)	3	3	3	3
2. Takeshi (P-DS)	3	3	3	3
3. Koji (B-DS)	3	3	3	3
4. Jun (B-DS)	2	3	2	3
5. Yusaku (B-DS)	2	3	2	3
6. Jihoon (P-IS)	3	3	3	3
<i>Amicable cosmopolitans</i>				
7. Michael (P-IS)	3	2	3	3
8. Guang (B-IS)	3	2	3	3
9. Ayako (B-DS)	3	2	2	3
10. Yurie (B-DS)	3	2	2	3
11. Duong (B-IS)	3	2	2	3
12. Ranil (B-IS)	3	2	2	3
13. Tomoko (P-DS)	2	2	2	3
14. Fung (P-IS)	2	2	2	3
15. Seoyoon (B-IS)	2	2	1	3
16. Yuta (P-DS)	2	2	2	3
17. Mary (B-IS)	3	2	3	3
<i>Selective cosmopolitans</i>				
18. Rou (P-IS)	3	1	3	3
19. Minji (B-IS)	3	1	2	3
20. Xiaoli (B-IS)	3	1	3	3
21. Nari (B-DS)	3	1	3	3
<i>Façade cosmopolitans</i>				
22. Chung (P-IS)	2	1	3	2
23. Marina (P-DS)	3	1	3	2
24. Cheng (P-IS)	3	0	3	2
25. Emily (P-IS)	3	0	3	2
26. Ayumi (B-DS)	3	0	2	2
27. Lina (B-IS)	3	0	2	2
<i>Would-be cosmopolitans</i>				
28. Umida (B-IS)	1	1	1	1
29. Hitomi (P-DS)	3	0	2	1
30. David (B-IS)	1	0	1	1
31. Hikari (P-DS)	3	0	0	1
32. Hannah (P-IS)	2	0	0	1

The 32 students were numbered serially after the five distinct groups of the participants were conceptualised. P Pine, B Bamboo, DS domestic student, IS international student.

reached if students engage, at least actively, in creative agency and without any evidence of cosmopolitan agency.

Third, in regard to the achievement of the third, unity stage, the data supports the criticality of engaging in cosmopolitan agency rather than creative agency. Importantly, participants' displayed level of engagement in cosmopolitan agency (0–3) stood out as strongly related to their achieved stage of intercultural relationships (1–3). As the dark shading of the right-hand side column of Table 4 illustrates, 21 participants demonstrated the stage of unity, and 17 of them (81%) exhibited active or proactive levels of engagement

in cosmopolitan agency. This contrasts with the findings that only two of the six participants who were at the stage of reciprocity displayed some engagement in cosmopolitan agency and both at reactive level. Furthermore, only one of the five students who only reached the first stage of interactivity displayed some cosmopolitan agency and also only at reactive level.

Scrutinising further the nature of cosmopolitan agency

In light of the criticality of cosmopolitan agency in the empirical findings, the nature of cosmopolitan agency was further examined. Five distinct, coherent groups of participants were identified, mainly based on their level of engagement in cosmopolitan agency but complemented by their display of engagement in other forms of agency towards their achieved stage of intercultural relationship development. These groups are intended to provide nuanced, meaningful insight into the co-contributing roles of cosmopolitan, situated and creative agencies to intercultural relationship development. The five groups were conceptualised through intensive discussions among the research team and were labelled *purposeful*, *amicable*, *selective*, *façade* and *would-be cosmopolitans* (see Table 4). The common features of students in each group are illustrated by quotes from the interviews.

Purposeful cosmopolitans Six participants (numbered 1 to 6 in Table 4) formed the most enthusiastic group about intercultural relationships, with a common characteristic that their proactive cosmopolitan agency, along with proactive or active engagement in situated and creative agencies, led to the highest unity stage of intercultural relationships. They found perceived utility in intercultural interactions (Dunne 2013) and attempted to fulfil their concrete interests in cultures, languages, world affairs, and international business by purposefully engaging in intercultural relationships based on, or regardless of, assumed cultural differences. The following extracts exemplify this:

I have a qualification for teaching Japanese ... and I offered to tutor an international student in Japanese. ... When I have some questions about English, I can easily ask her in return. (Takeshi).

I have spoken to anyone who studies marketing, regardless of his/her country of origin (Jihoon).

Amicable cosmopolitans Eleven students (numbered 7 to 17) were identified as having achieved the unity stage, but the display of their cosmopolitan agency did not go beyond the active level. Nevertheless, cosmopolitan agency was exercised strongly enough to develop common ground at a deep personal level. For example, Michael reported:

We are both very curious about the world. ... we do not want to just look at things on the surface, but we have a curious mind for different things.

Importantly, ten out of the 11 respondents (except Seoyoon) showed either a proactive or active level of situated and creative agencies. They sought to create interpersonal proximity with their relational partner(s) on and off campus while showing general openness to and curiosity in cultural differences. Ranil commented, for example:

I wanted to try out a Japanese-style bath in the dormitory, and then going to the bath (with Japanese students) was a good experience. Bonding and friendships were taken into another level. Then, going to the thermal bath off campus became the weekly routine, and ... the friends became good friends and they become best friends.

Unlike *purposeful cosmopolitans*, this group of participants tended to believe that deep and sustained intercultural relationships ‘naturally developed’ (Yuta) rather than developed as a result of conscious efforts and initiatives. Intercultural interactions were perceived to be largely organic and non-purposeful yet were built on trust, along with the awareness of common interest and mindset.

Selective cosmopolitans Four participants (numbered 18 to 21) displayed the unity stage of intercultural relationships, but they showed cosmopolitan agency only reactively with a few individuals whom they considered internationally open-minded. Rou referred to expression of cultural interest that singled out her close Japanese friend from other ‘average’ domestic students:

She probably had a Chinese boyfriend. ... she wanted to know more about China and Chinese ways of thinking. ... she also experienced study abroad in Canada.

Similarly, Nari’s friendship with an international student was built on common interest in international travel, as well as ‘similar laid-back personality’.

He and I are very close. He says he will welcome me in Indonesia, and I’m making plans to visit his house.

While these participants exercised a proactive or active level of situated and creative agencies, displays of their cosmopolitan agency were minimal and open to a limited number of selected partners who were perceived to possess an international mindset or similar personal attributes.

Façade cosmopolitans Six participants (numbered 22 to 27) displayed reactive or no level of cosmopolitan agency, but with their proactive or active engagement in situated and creative agencies, they established reciprocal intercultural relationships. Just like *purposeful cosmopolitans*, this group of students made constant efforts to build the relationships through both university-engineered and student-initiated activities, as Ayumi illustrated:

I really wanted to become friends with my roommate at dormitory. We chatted together in our room, helped each other’s homework, went out privately, and cooked meals together. ... I tried out things which I would normally do with my Japanese friend, while not considering her as an international student.

While a low level of engagement in cosmopolitan agency was sufficient for *selective cosmopolitans* to solidify intercultural bond with international-minded partners, this was not the case for *façade cosmopolitans* who felt a lack of deep emotional connection with a strong personal focus as exemplified by Cheng:

There is a little distance between him and me. He does not show me what he really thinks.

Would-be cosmopolitans Five participants (numbered 28 to 32) showed situated agency at a proactive through reactive level. They expressed general interest in intercultural interactions, but a lack of cosmopolitan agency, as well as a limited exhibition of creative agency, confined

their intercultural relationships to the first interactivity stage. Interestingly, three participants displayed creative agency at an active or reactive level, by which they enjoyed companionship in their private time. Hitomi mentioned:

Most often, I find international students and eat lunch together at cafeteria. I sometimes go out for dinner together and go to the city to play together.

For this group, it appeared as if the lack of cosmopolitan agency hampered the establishment of interpersonal connections beyond cultural and personal differences. This was reflected in David's observation that 'there's still always a boundary'. Such emotional distance was also expressed by Hikari, who interacted with international students proactively in multiple university-engineered activities (e.g. organising cultural events, supporting international students' daily life as a buddy) but did not appear to have engaged in student-initiated activities. She said, 'at this stage I don't think I will meet them in private'.

Consistent presence of the five groups of cosmopolitans across two institutions

In view of the five identified groups of participants that indicated the intricate association between three forms of agency and three stages of intercultural relationships, we further examined whether this association was present consistently across two universities with contrasting degrees of internationalisation. Institutional identifications located next to each of the participants' name in the left column of Table 4 indicate that in each group of cosmopolitans, there were participants (at least one) from both universities. This provided empirical support for the relevance of the agency–relationship association, across universities with different degrees of internationalisation—notwithstanding that in the present study, the highest stage of relationship development was associated with cosmopolitan agency, rather than creative agency as postulated by Kudo et al. (2019).

To reiterate, our investigation of RQ2 supported the importance of situated agency for the establishment of the interactivity stage, but highlights the role of cosmopolitan agency as more crucial in the development of higher relational stages than creative agency. This finding questions Kudo et al.'s (2019) proposal that creative agency is the key to the consolidation of intercultural relationships. In addition, the identification of five kinds of cosmopolitans across different institutions suggests the criticality of cosmopolitan agency in intercultural relationship development beyond differences in institutional commitment to internationalisation.

Discussion and conclusion

Significance of the findings

The explicit focus on the roles of institutional internationalisation and students' agency in intercultural relationship development highlighted issues that are novel to higher-education studies. Our findings related to RQ1 suggest that institutional internationalisation plays a relatively small role in promoting intercultural relationship development, compared to students' agency. Regardless of the degree of institutional commitment to internationalisation, student-initiated activities were found to be more conducive to intercultural relationship

development than university-engineered activities. In addition, both student-initiated and university-engineered activities appeared to take place predominantly in informal curriculum (e.g. student clubs) or non-curriculum environments (e.g. private party) rather than in formal curriculum environments (e.g. group work). This suggests that meaningful intercultural interactions with the prospect of relationship development tend to occur in environments that are created and owned by students. This insight resonates with other studies that have stressed the importance of student-led, out-of-class activities for students to exercise agency as global citizens (Boni and Calabuig 2017) and to engage in transformative learning (Nada et al. 2018). It also challenges the literature that emphasised the importance of facilitating intercultural interactions through teaching and learning activities (Arkoudis et al. 2013).

Nevertheless, institutional commitment to internationalisation appeared to induce students' engagement in engineered activities. In the present study, students at the more internationalised university reported participating in a significantly larger number of university-engineered activities than students at the less internationalised university. That an overwhelming majority of the students at the more internationalised university (16/17, 94%) indicated the relevance of culturally mixed dormitories to promote intercultural relationship development is intriguing, because those dormitories appeared to enable their residents to engage in intercultural interactions through a number of engineered activities such as cultural events and outings. This suggests that under carefully constructed policies and interventions, students may be able to exercise, and even cultivate, their agency to initiate and nurture intercultural relationships. Interestingly, though, students at the less internationalised university reported more student-initiated activities than students at the more internationalised university. This implies that students could make up for the shortage of engineered environments by mobilising their agency to develop intercultural relationships (Yu and Moskal 2019). It may be, though, that in the context of minimum institutional commitment to internationalisation, only students who are already equipped with proactive or active levels of agency would be able to form and sustain intercultural relationships.

The importance of agency was supported by our findings related to RQ2, which suggest associations between forms of agency and relational stages and stress the criticality of cosmopolitan agency for intercultural relationship development. Consistent with Kudo et al.'s (2019) framework, our data supported the link between situated agency and the first interactivity stage. The achievement of the second reciprocity stage, however, was found to be associated with creative rather than cosmopolitan agency, while the emergence of the third unity stage was more closely related to cosmopolitan rather than creative agency. Notably, these forms of agency, in combination with the relational stages, emerged consistently within Pine and Bamboo universities. In light of these findings, it might be possible to reconceptualise cosmopolitan agency as the form of agency associated with the highest stage of unity and creative agency as linked to the stage of reciprocity.

Our conceptualisation of five distinct types of cosmopolitans provided a more nuanced insight into cosmopolitan agency as a meaningful hallmark of intercultural relationship development. *Would-be and façade cosmopolitans* reveal that intercultural relationships can be more than functional and thus reciprocal, if students are committed to creating their interpersonal space with potential relational partners. In turn, *purposeful, amicable and selective cosmopolitans* indicate that the deepest level of intercultural relationships can be achieved if at least one of the interactional partners enacts cosmopolitan agency at some level. This is an encouraging finding for institutions, especially those with limited resources for the development of structured activities for internationalisation, because the success of

institutional intervention may not lie in the provision of an extensive range of engineered interactional environments but ultimately in the provision of carefully designed environments aimed at nurturing students' cosmopolitan agency.

Directions for future research

As with all studies, this research has limitations, mostly deriving from methodological shortcomings. It relied on self-report data derived from one-off round of interviews with a small number of students who successfully developed intercultural relationships in limited national and institutional environments at a particular time. The generalisability of the findings to different student groups (e.g. domestic and international, undergraduate and postgraduate) and institutional, national and chronological contexts is therefore limited. Multiple methods, including observational data, would be valuable to gain further insights into the respective influences of institutional internationalisation and students' agency in intercultural relationship development. The inclusion of data from students who encountered difficulties in intercultural relationship development will enhance our understanding of the issues addressed here. Interactional activities or environments that constrain the prospects of intercultural relationship development, and the roles of students' agency in overcoming these obstacles, may also be worth exploring. Longitudinal studies will be essential to explore the dynamic and developmental nature of intercultural relationships, especially at turning or transitional points of the relational stages.

A critical task for future research will be to identify the environmental and individual conditions most conducive to the development of cosmopolitan agency. Although associations between forms of agency and relational stage have been identified, we lack concrete evidence of the specific university-engineered and student-initiated activities most likely to promote and cultivate cosmopolitan agency. Individual factors that may influence the degree of enactment of cosmopolitan agency, such as language proficiency and past international experience, will need to be examined explicitly with large student samples across various institutional and national contexts. Intervention research examining the impact of pedagogical and recreational activities on the development of cosmopolitan agency in students will also be warranted. A clearer understanding of these issues, we hope, will help promote meaningful intercultural interactions and learning in higher education institutions.

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