

**Title:** Bridging cultures: a programme of academic development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq

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**Bridging cultures: a programme of academic development in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq**

**Authors:**

**Helen Goodall, Herish Khalil, Zina Adil Ismail, Syako Sulaiman Shekho and Kays Sharee Majdi**

**Abstract**

In this paper, collaborative autoethnography is used to explore the authors’ involvement as participants in and facilitator of an academic development programme that took place in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. Recognising the significant differences in cultural origin between the Iraqi participants and its British facilitator, the authors share their reflections on the programme. Consideration is given to the implications of cultural differences in respect of the authors’ expectations and experiences of this educational encounter, with particular emphasis on different approaches to learning and teaching prevailing in collectivist cultures, compared to those that have generally been seen as more individualist. The authors highlight the importance of early relationship-building in cross-cultural educational encounters, emphasising the two-way nature of this particular learning experience, and the subsequent impact on their practice as educators.

**Introduction and background**

In 2012, a new staff development initiative for academics in one of the Kurdistan Region of Iraq’s universities was instigated and eventually took place in four one week blocks over a period of twelve months. It was facilitated by a lecturer from the United Kingdom or what Smith (2014) and others label ‘flying faculty’, and was a modified version of a postgraduate certificate in higher education that was well-established at the facilitator’s own university.

The Kurdish Prime Minster had stated during an interview in 2010 that his government’s goal was ...

to tap the energy, entrepreneurship, creativity and intelligence of our people. We will do this by making sure that future generations will be provided with the best education, (Dr. Barham Salih, reported in The Middle East Magazine, August, 2010, 47).

At that time, the vision of the Ministry for Higher Education and Scientific Research in Kurdistan (MHESR-K) was to establish an integrated education system that adopted best practices from other nations to produce a well-educated and skilful population (Kaghed and Dezaye, 2009). The published ‘Roadmap to Quality’ (MHESR-K, 2011) outlined intentions to improve and reform higher education (HE) and provided a degree of transparency for the associated ministerial decisions, something that had typically been lacking in wider Iraq (Amin and Knoshnaw, 2003). The Roadmap emphasised the economic importance and benefits of education and the development of human capital, just as other policy makers around the globe have done (Gilead, 2009).

Lecturing staff in Kurdish universities were required to participate in continuous professional development (MHESR-K, 2011) and adopt ‘new’ and different approaches to teaching and learning, some of which were made explicit through Ministry directives. The Kurdish university that employed the participants on the programme was growing rapidly in 2012 and there were plans to increase its student numbers still further. The aim of the staff development programme was to provide academics with an opportunity to develop their approaches to learning and teaching in HE by enabling them to acquire greater understanding, flexibility and confidence in their use of different learning and teaching methods. The Ministry’s stated expectation was that academics would ‘put in the time and effort’ (MHESR-K, 2011, 109) necessary for their own development. UK HE was held in high esteem in Kurdistan (Kaghed and Dezaye, 2009,) and it was believed that utilising best practice from the UK would ultimately result in an improved educational experience for students. The proposed programme was identified by senior leaders at the Kurdish university in question as a way of achieving Ministry expectations whilst simultaneously facilitating a better understanding of pedagogic options amongst its academics, thus developing their practice as educators.

Pike and Dowdall (2011) assert that those undertaking international educational assignments should familiarise themselves with the culture of the destination country and anticipate complexity. Similarly, Rabotin (2011) cautions that not understanding the influences of culture gives rise to misunderstandings, misjudgements and cultural bias. The programme facilitator had previously worked in a variety of overseas’ settings and with international learners visiting the UK, and paid particular attention to cultural differences during the planning stages. Learning settings, like other social interactions, are culturally mediated (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005) and a thorough understanding of the potential impact of cultural differences on learning and teaching is required when designing and ‘delivering’ international educational provision (Shulruf et al, 2011; Turniansky et al, 2009; Frankel et al, 2005; Lawrence, 2000). Some of the potential issues and challenges associated with cultural differences that might be encountered in the facilitation of the programme, specifically those associated with the dimension of collectivism-individualism (Hofstede, 1980) were explored in an earlier paper (see X, 2014). It was anticipated that a strengthened understanding of the cultural differences that might exist between the participants on the programme and the facilitator would help her to minimise the impact of any such differences. In addition, ‘one size does not fit all’ and an understanding of both the needs of the learners *and* how they learn is important (Heffernan et al, 2010): this was also explored in X’s 2014 paper. Hofstede’s work on cultural differences (1980, 2002, 2003, 2007a, 2007b) was used as a starting point for her discussion and, whilst acknowledging the criticisms of his initial research (see McSweeney, 2002 and Signorini et al, 2009), she accepted Eldrige and Cranston’s (2009) assertion that, despite its flaws, Hofstede’s model has been helpful in a variety of social studies. In addition, replication research has, to an extent, served to validate his findings.

A number of conclusions were drawn by X (2014) relating to the proposed academic development initiative at the Kurdish university. Firstly, whilst recognising that cultural characteristics should be remembered but not necessarily viewed as deficits (Jones, 2005; Grey, 2002), there are nevertheless some significant differences between the UK and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq in respect of how learning is perceived and approached. However, by opening up a dialogue with the learners at the outset of the programme, a practice that the facilitator would have employed to co-construct the learning environment with any group of students, expectations could be clarified and discussed with a view to negotiating learning relationships. The resulting ‘learning contract’ would encompass both how the facilitator would support the group’s learning and how the group would work together to support each other.

Secondly, X (2014) concluded that regardless of whether educational achievement is viewed within different countries as a collective or individual endeavour, it is both more useful and more fruitful to place emphasis on the similarities rather than the differences between students and facilitators in cross-cultural educational encounters. Furthermore, the potential challenges associated with such encounters extend beyond collectivism and individualism and encompass the other cultural dimensions identified by Hofstede (1980), including uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and power distance. These dimensions are difficult to disentangle (Oysterman, 2006) but flying faculty, and in turn, the students participating in their programmes, will benefit from considering the implications of cultural difference when planning and facilitating international educational encounters.

Seah and Edwards (2006) observe that there is only limited research into international educational encounters or the impact of provision by flying faculty: almost all publications are the anecdotal work of the academics involved and, as such, are likely to be somewhat one dimensional. X’s (2014) paper added to this literature, adopting an approach which, it could be argued, was also analogous of the individualism to be found in the UK. The purpose of this paper, in contrast, is to offer a shared and more collective perspective, post-educational encounter, of the experiences of both the facilitator and a number of the academics that engaged with the programme as learners. Our intention is to offer a balanced, reflective account of our perceptions of this particular cross-cultural encounter, sharing our preconceptions, expectations and experiences with a view to providing some illumination for others that might find themselves in similar situations, as either flying faculty or as students. The passage of time since the programme took place also enables us to discuss the extent of its impact on the participants’ subsequent practice with their students in Kurdistan.

Throughout this paper we continue to write in the first person which is “not without precedence” (Overstreet , 2017, 202) and allows for author identification with the subject matter. Houghton (1998) identifies honesty with writing in the first person and also asserts that it “confers personal and intellectual ownership [on and to the writer]” (ibid, p.6). This paper offers our personal reflections and we wish to own them: we are looking out from the inside rather than looking in from the outside, as is frequently the case with many forms of educational and social research. Writing about our experiences from a more removed position would not engender or indicate our ownership, nor does it feel appropriate, given our autoethnographic methodology. We use both ‘we’ and ‘I’ throughout much of the rest of this paper but indicate individual contributions drawn from our reflective, autoethnographic writing with the use of speech marks.

**Methodology**

This paper is collaboratively written and autoethnographic. It utilises the written perceptions of each of the authors to offer an account of our combined experiences of the educational encounter in Iraqi Kurdistan, and its impact on us and our practice. We have drawn on the work of Chang (2008), Chang, Ngunjiri and Hernandez (2013), Bochner (2012) and others to support our methodological position. Autoethnography may have critics but in recent years its validity has been more accepted for research that adopts a reflective approach, enabling the connection of ‘self with others, self with the social, and self with the context’ (Njunjuri et al. 2010, 3). Through examining and investigating our ‘selves’ and our own lives, a connection with others and with the cultural landscape in which we reside is to be expected (Chang, 2008). Autoethnographic methodologies have ‘tremendous potential for building sociological knowledge’ (Wall, 2016, 7) and also facilitate the ‘collaborative creation of sense-making’ (Ellis and Bochner, 2006, 433). In this work we use a form of autoethnography that is both analytical and evocative, enabling the representation of our combined voices in qualitative research which is intended to be useful. Collaborative autoethnography has enabled us to reflect on and share our experiences with each other. Here, we offer our reflections to others, particularly those who may find themselves participating in similar, cross-cultural educational encounters.

As Chang et al (2013) point out, there are many approaches to collaborative autoethnography. With four of us currently living and working in Iraqi Kurdistan and one of us in the UK, it has not been possible for us to meet in person (or virtually) to write together or to discuss our writing as we would have wished. Instead, we have each written our independent reflections which were brought together by one of us and subsequently circulated in an iterative process. Each contributor has been able to comment on, add to and amend the paper whilst still allowing for the expression of different perspectives, eventually bringing it to its current form. In our writing we focused on a number of themes that were of mutual interest. This produced rich data from which we were able to draw that was already organised under specific headings. Some of these headings are used to structure the rest of this paper and our discussion which focuses on our expectations and experience of the programme, including navigating our cultural differences, and the impact of the programme on our practice as educators.

**The importance of beginnings**

Firstly, we share some of our expectations and our initial experiences of beginning the programme.

“The programme was delivered in four one week blocks. The first week started with the introduction, ‘ground rules’, programme overview and content. The programme leader’s approach was facilitative rather than didactic, and we began by negotiating how we would work together and talking about our expectations.” (Participant 4)

“During the start session we agreed to work together by having a chat to talk about subjects that we do not know well, and exchanged information with each other about our experience as lecturers. Also, we talked about our work and our role in our University. We mentioned in our talk what we enjoyed about lecturing. There was freedom of speaking and expression.” (Participant 3)

“As a participant, my understanding was that the overall aim of the programme was to provide lecturers in higher education with the opportunity to achieve a professional standard, developing our knowledge, understanding and practical skills to enhance the quality of our teaching and lead to reflective practice. My personal aim was to develop my professional understanding around the subject of 'Learning & Teaching in Higher Education' and to gain a greater insight into what I believed was the most significant part that drives the learning wheel, as well as to develop my teaching skills, critical perspectives and analytical self-reflection in order to be able to monitor, enhance and improve my practice.” (Participant 1)

“As a teacher in Iraq, I found that the teacher-centred learning approach had been dominant in the Iraqi education system, including the Kurdistan region, from primary to higher education. Unlike international universities who advocate and implement the student-centred learning pedagogy, universities from Iraqi Kurdistan implement the teacher-centred learning pedagogy. This programme enabled us to experience student-centred learning for ourselves from the beginning and to think about if and how we could apply it with our own students. From what I remember of the contracting session, a great deal of emphasis was given to collaboration, group work, critical thinking and so forth. I believe it was the initial group work when we decided together how to proceed which helped many skills to develop and finally made the process or programme successful.” (Participant 1)

“As programme facilitator, I believed that the ‘contracting’ session was absolutely critical to identify our shared values and learn what we had in common. It offered an opportunity to establish the use of ‘we’ and to clarify our expectations, both in respect of the programme’s content and how we would work together to construct a learning environment in which we could all flourish. Tasked with introducing specific approaches to learning that were likely to be unfamiliar to the participants and unsure of their receptivity to these approaches, I wanted to understand our common ground and focus on our similarities rather than our differences. What values did we share as educators? How did we think the programme might ultimately benefit our respective students? It was clear that our experiences as learners and as educators were both very different and very varied but what we appeared to have in common was a commitment to educational enhancement - doing what we could to develop our approaches to teaching and learning so that, in turn, our students would benefit.” (Facilitator)

Reflecting on our shared experience of the programme, whether as participant or facilitator, we agree that establishing ground rules was extremely helpful, providing an important foundation from which to move forward. This aligns with the importance placed on the requirement to negotiate a group contract, interaction rules or ground rules that is found in relevant literature (Stanley, 2011; Wenger, 1998; Dillenbourg, 1999; Guldberg and Machness, 2009; Fook and Gardner, 2007: Billet, 2011). Our experience also reinforces Armstrong’s (2004) position that reaching agreement on its *ground rules* at the outset is likely to be the most important action to be performed by any new group of learners. We would venture that in this and similar instances where significant differences in perception are encountered, establishing ground rules deserves and requires more than the ‘few moments’ suggested by Stanley (2011, 76). We spent more than an hour agreeing our own ‘rules’ and constructing a group contract and believe that this was time well-spent. It facilitated the “reciprocal understanding ... through the negotiation of meaning [and] mutually shared common knowledge” that Littleton and Hakkinen (1999, 21) advocate. It also provided the foundations of a safe, trusting environment that is essential if participants are expected to admit what they do not know and discuss their concerns, challenges and shortcomings (Van de Wiel et al, 2011). Establishing our ground rules later allowed us to have open conversations so that, as far as possible within the constraints of the programme’s intended learning outcomes, individuals’ needs were also respected and addressed.

**What happened next - navigating the programme from different perspectives**

Once we progressed to the content of the programme, learning and teaching in higher education, we all became very aware of the differences in practice to which we were accustomed. A global literature has developed over the last forty years, seeking to develop a better understanding of teaching in higher education. Typically, this research has centred on approaches to and conceptions of teaching, with the latter influencing the former. Our own experiences, surfaced in our written reflections, align with Barnett and Guzman-Valenzuela’s (2017) assertion that a teacher’s positioning within global and educational structures, alongside the context in which they practice, will determine how they approach their work as an educator.

***The programme participants’ reflections***

“The course itself, when I did come to do it, was not at all what I had expected. I think I had assumed that I would be taught how to teach. Quite how I expected someone to do that I do not know, but I suppose I thought there would be rules and that once I knew these rules I would be able to do it. Instead I got educational theory; learning styles; learning outcomes; aligning assessments and reflective practice. I found it all very difficult at first, but I persevered.” (Participant 1)

“As a participant on the programme, the major difference [that I noticed] between the approach taken by the facilitator and someone within my own culture was the way we were dealt with as learners - a facilitative approach. The completion and mastery of work is in the interests of the learner, so the individual that has a desire to continue in learning will work a lot and hard to achieve his/her goal. On the other hand, the methods or approaches that are followed in our culture are didactic, and the individual is obligated to do the work necessary for passing many examinations.” (Participant 3)

“The facilitator’s approach was very different and difficult but very promising meanwhile, because if offered a ... perspective, which we call a student-centred method of teaching. We were always encouraged to brainstorm, generate new ideas, think laterally, do tasks and work either in pairs or groups. This method for me was very new because we were used to a lecturing style of teaching which never allowed students to have a chance to speak of their minds or have scepticism about materials in academia or in classes. This style of teaching also made the class fun, interesting and brought motivation. I personally never got bored or tired of sessions because I could contribute to providing a healthy learning and teaching environment.” (Participant 2)

“Before attending the programme, I had little knowledge about critical thinking skills, interactive teaching and reflective learning, and I could not critically analyse materials because most of our institutions used to have a traditional method of teaching where students mainly focused on memorisation and lecture-based methods, which made the students often lose interest during the classes. For example, in my undergraduate degree, neither I nor any other student was introduced to teaching which involves interaction, critical thinking or reflective learning.” (Participant 2)

***The facilitator’s reflections***

“Despite being given a clear remit for this programme, I felt nervous about how the participants would respond to its content whilst also mindful of the need to avoid making assumptions about individuals’ starting points. I had been briefed that many of the participants had completed their education within Iraqi Kurdistan but there were others that had returned to the country, having sought refuge overseas during the troubles. In reality, the majority of participants had very similar experiences as learners and educators, regardless of whether they had remained within Iraq or undertaken some of their education in the UK, Australia, Scandinavia or the USA. There was little familiarity with most elements of the content but it became clear during the very early stages of the programme that there was an openness to exploring ideas, concepts and practices that were new to the participants. That is not to say that no one challenged or questioned what we covered but what struck me was the constructive way that this was done; there was no disparagement or scepticism, just a willingness to participate with a view to being able to make informed decisions at a later point regarding if and how people could apply what they were learning to their practice as educators.” (Facilitator)

Early interaction during the programme provided an opportunity to share our educational backgrounds and experiences. Such an exchange can facilitate the discovery of differences in understanding (Arkoudis et al, 2013) and in our case, this focused on the efficacy of different approaches to learning and teaching in higher education. Prosser and Trigwell (1999) categorise these approaches into two types; those that adopt a student-focus and those that are teacher-focused. A student-focused or student-centred approach is far from universally adopted, despite an alignment of it in this paper or elsewhere with UK or western practices. Although we assert that teaching in Iraqi Kurdistan has primarily been teacher-focused, we acknowledge that this approach remains commonly utilised across the globe. Kember (2009) notes the wider challenge for those charged with the improvement of learning and teaching in higher education of convincing academics of the need to shift from a teacher-centred approach to one that is more student-focused. The underlying conceptions of teaching are often used to explain the reluctance of some teaching staff to employ student-centred forms of teaching (Kember, 2009). Educators adopting student-centred methods generally have a more holistic conception of their teaching whilst those employing teacher-centred strategies are likely to conceive of their teaching in a more limited way (Stes and Van Petergem, 2014). Participating in this programme provided an opportunity to examine pre-held conceptions and enabled more informed choices to be made in respect of future teaching practice.

**Mixing it up - learning, teaching and cultural difference**

Some reference has already been made to our cultural positioning as learners and educators, both before and during the programme, based on our nationalities. We referred earlier to Hofstede’s work and although we agree that culture is not just about nationality and there are as many cultures as there are social groups (Signorini et al, 2009), we have confined our own work to national culture, and in particular, to the orthogonal partnership between individualism and collectivism (Oyserman, 2006).

Hofstede (2003) identifies individualism as the tension that exists between satisfying the interests of individuals against those of the group. He associates the high value placed on speaking one’s mind, self-respect and the encouragement of independence of thought and action with those cultures that are particularly individualistic, such as the UK, USA and Australia. In educational contexts, this is manifested by an expectation that students will be treated as individuals, voice their own opinions and challenge the status quo (Hofstede, 1986). Conversely, in a collectivist culture the emphasis is on developing the skills required to become an accepted member of a ‘group’. Harmony is of paramount importance and, in educational settings, students are reluctant to challenge the received wisdom. ‘Personal’ views and opinions are unlikely (or at least, not expressed), “they are determined by the group” (Hofstede, 2003, 59) and students are considered and addressed as members of a group rather than on an individual basis. How then was this relevant to our experiences as participants in and facilitator of this ‘inter-national’ programme?

“In Iraq, our education system is more collectivist than individualistic compared to western education systems and it does not allow individuals to have their own values and speak of their minds. Kurdistan is less collectivist than other parts of Iraq but I can say that we still do not have exposure to self-expression in our education system since collectivism has caused the restriction of creativity and limits confrontation and challenges. Teachers mostly adopt a didactic approach and to a great extent are seen as authority figures, which can be the main reason behind the restriction of self-expression, creativity, and critical thinking amongst students. Similarly, as a teacher, I am obliged to follow certain rules to fulfil the decision of the group (the university) and there is limited autonomy or scope for creativity.” (Participant 2)

“The collective-individual dynamic appeared evident to me in the emphasis placed on academic achievement for the greater good, whether that was the family, the larger community of Iraqi Kurdistan or the country of Iraq as a whole. Not all of those participating were Kurdish and some academics were from other parts of Iraq. Nevertheless, this sense of what might be called duty or deference to the greater good persisted. Interestingly though, the focus was on individual and individualised achievement. Collaborative learning in any sense was unfamiliar to the participants on the programme.” (Facilitator)

The programme introduced a number of concepts and approaches, such as critical thinking and the encouragement of individual self-expression, that appeared to be at odds with Iraqi Kurdistan’s collectivist culture. On the surface, it also seems that there is a contradiction between the values of collectivism and the avoidance of collaborative approaches to learning and teaching. Those of us who were participants in the programme had not previously encountered group-based learning activities as learners or teachers. This contradiction is both challenged and endorsed by our subsequent experiences as educators trying to integrate collaborative group work into our teaching.

“My participation in group work sessions [during the programme] had a great impact on my teaching and academic career as it made me think and practice a different way of doing things, not alone but also with collaborators or other peers. Since then, I have been following this method in my teaching classes, which is very successful and productive. I usually get students to work in groups, analysing the materials in a critical way. This has been very positive and promising since I can see lots of motivation among the students because the lecturing method makes the students bored and even not interested. It can be argued that without interactive teaching style, practical application, critical thinking or suspicion of judgment, students often fail to have a grounded understanding of materials.” (Participant 2)

“Group work is another practice which I planned to apply in all my classes and all stages, since I found it useful to boost the sense of group work and teamwork, but this has not worked in all classes due to the system and the approaches followed in my country.” (Participant 1)

It is perhaps not surprising that there have been mixed responses to interactive and collaborative teaching methods from our Kurdish students. After all, this represents a significant departure from the more didactic approach to which they have been accustomed.

Eldridge and Cranston (2009, 67) question whether national culture really matters in managing what they term ‘transnational education’. However, making use of Hofstede’s cultural model as a framework for their exploratory study, they conclude that cultural differences between providers and learners in higher education do indeed have pedagogical, procedural and social implications. Whilst they caution against assuming that their findings are directly transferable to all transnational education, our own experiences as learners and educators support their findings. We concur with Pike and Dowdall’s (2011) assertion that those undertaking educational assignments in countries where the culture is very different from their own, need to familiarise themselves with the differences and the implications for learning and teaching. This is particularly so when the focus of the educational assignment is similar to that which we discuss here where learners encounter approaches that might be contrary to their own expectations and experience, and are then expected to apply these approaches in their practice with students that are used to learning by rote (Whitney, 2008). Conversely, in a comparison of students from individualist and collective settings, Jones (2005) concludes that critical thinking is not inhibited by cultural background. If properly briefed, learners from collectivist cultures are equally able to undertake critical thinking tasks.

Despite the departure from the didactic teaching that our Kurdish students were used to, we have found many of them both willing and able to rise to the challenge presented by the new approaches to teaching that we have introduced into our practice following our participation in the programme. This, in turn, has impacted on our experience as lecturers.

“I began to enjoy my teaching sessions. It sounds obvious to us now, because over the previous years we have all come to acknowledge the truth of it, but doing something as simple as tailoring examples to a particular group of students just made the time so much more rewarding.”(Participant 1)

Beyond learning and teaching, cultural positioning impacts on wider university life including the relationships between academic colleagues. In her discussion on collectivism, civility and collegiality, Macneil (2016) calls for academics to reflect on what makes academic life rewarding.

“From a wider cultural perspective, I was struck by the strength of the relationships between academic colleagues at the Kurdish university, both inside and outside of work. Sharing and mutual support appeared to be the norm and I was included in this. It extended beyond workplace collegiality to encompass travel and accommodation arrangements and social activities to a far greater degree than anything I have encountered in UK academia. This gave me a lot of food for thought.” (Facilitator)

There is a correlation between highly collectivist cultures and the extent of authentic collegiality between colleagues (Day, 2017). Similarly, in collectivist cultures ‘knowledge sharing is much more common if it is seen to be beneficial to the group’ (Ning et al, 2015, 304) and this strongly resonates with the facilitator’s reflections above. Although Ning at al (2015) are referring to knowledge sharing between teachers in their professional interactions, it is probable that there are also implications for teaching and learning. Explicitly positioning a learning activity, such as making students aware of the benefits to the ‘group’ of knowledge sharing and group work, can provide collectivist contextualisation. At the same time, it is important to be mindful that there may be occasions when a particular learning strategy, approach or activity cannot be easily contextualised or needs to be contextualised for a complex multi-cultural group of learners.

“It is worth mentioning that cultural diversity has an impact on teaching and learning but this does not mean that we as members of different cultures cannot benefit from each others’ methods and means of development. In other words, from my experience of the programme [as a participant] and as a teacher, we can learn, practice and adapt new ideas despite huge differences which might exist between cultures. We cannot just ‘copy and paste’ but we can surely take an idea and adapt it to what works best for our culture, since every culture has its own needs. We have to understand different cultures in order to have successful multinational programmes.” (Participant 2)

Returning to collectivism and individualism, a relevant perspective is that they are ...

inseparable characteristics ... that need to be carefully balanced across educational syllabus. This draws attention of educational planners to create effective balance between individualism and collectivism and revitalize those two dimensions ... if the *Ummah* (Nation)is to regain its intellectual expertise and leadership in the scholarship arena. Individualism and collectivism from Islamic perspective represent intertwined dimensions, which are inseparable. Islam considers these two desires as inborn in humans, which need to be nurtured side by side to develop effective, accountable and innovative personalities. (Mohammed Borhandden Musah / OIDA International Journal of Sustainable Development 02: 08 (2011).)

This view appears to be reflected in the initiatives for reforming higher education outlined in the ‘Roadmap to Quality’ referred to earlier (MHESR-K, 2011). Our combined experiences as participants in and facilitator of the programme at the centre of this paper also suggest that bridging the differences between collectivist and individualist approaches to education is likely to be far more fruitful than adopting an ‘either or’ position.

**Conclusion**

The programme drew to an end in 2013 and since that time the conflict occurring very close to home created all sorts of difficulties and challenges for those of us living in Iraqi Kurdistan. Nevertheless, all of us have had time not only to reflect on what we learnt from our engagement in the programme but to consider how it has influenced and informed our subsequent practice.

In sharing our experiences as participants in and facilitator of a cross-cultural development initiative for lecturers, a number of points emerge that have implications for other such interventions. It is clearly advisable for ‘flying faculty’ to familiarise themselves with the culture of their destination country and to consider the potential implications for learning and teaching. Such implications and the associated complexities are not only likely to be at play during such programmes, but also in the subsequent integration of new approaches in the participants’ future teaching of their own students. Both situations can, to some extent, be planned for.

We agree that sufficient time needs to be allocated at the beginning of such cross-cultural encounters for the learners and facilitator to express their expectations of the programme and each other, and to co-create a working contract or agree ‘ground rules’. This provides an opportunity to surface and address differences and concerns and voice aspirations, whether culturally-rooted or otherwise. It also sends a message that each and every member of a group can make a valuable contribution. We also agree with Moore-Cherry et al (2016) that ‘developing inclusive partnerships in any curricula, particularly in the early stages, could be pivotal in disrupting ‘automatically assumed’ power relations’ (ibid, 101).

Collectivist and individualist cultures have traditionally employed different approaches to teaching. Whilst it should not be assumed that there is a ‘right’ approach that has universal efficacy, we suggest that if lecturers have an increased awareness of the potential of different teaching strategies they are better equipped to discern what is likely to work in their cultural context, with their own students, and in their specific discipline. When introducing practices that are new to students in collectivist cultures, it may be necessary to explain the potential benefits for ‘the group’ in order to engender their enthusiasm.

Although the purpose of the postgraduate programme that is the focus of this paper was to provide opportunities for the development of academic staff in Iraqi Kurdistan, this was not a one-way learning experience. For those of us that were programme participants, it provided us with insights that have since significantly informed our approaches to teaching. For the programme facilitator, her experiences of collectivist collegiality have strengthened her desire to work more collaboratively with colleagues, including adopting more collegial methods of writing which also allow for self-expression, as with this paper. To a greater or lesser extent, our involvement in the programme enabled all of us to recognise the educational strengths and limitations of our own cultures and to learn a huge amount from each other.

The purpose of this paper was to utilise an autoethnographic approach to reflect on and share our experiences of a cross-cultural academic development encounter, and of its subsequent impact on our practice. Whilst we believe that this paper achieves its purpose and contributes to the limited literature in the field, we acknowledge the need for further research to examine the wider impact of the programme on learning and teaching within the participants’ institution in Iraqi Kurdistan.

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