

Cultivating Talent, Fostering Belonging: A New Paradigm for Intercultural Education Research

Berrin Yanikkaya, PhD
Professor of Communication Studies

Abstract

In the post-pandemic era, higher education institutions are engaged in a renewed global effort to attract and cultivate international talent. While student mobility numbers are surging, our institutional frameworks for supporting these scholars often lag behind, remaining focused on administrative processes rather than the complex, human-centric work of fostering genuine belonging. This keynote argues that the persistent challenges faced by international students—so well-documented in our literature—reveal a critical disconnect between our research and our practice. Simply welcoming talent is not enough; we must be architects of their integration.

While decades of valuable research have diligently documented the 'what' of student challenges, the persistent gap lies in the 'why'. To bridge this explanatory gap, this address proposes a new paradigm for intercultural education research—one that begins the moment a student accepts their offer of admission. The innovation of this methodological blueprint is a virtual, pre-arrival research phase, where students become part of the "research-first" approach before they even leave home. This initial digital engagement gathers crucial baseline data on their expectations, anxieties, and existing social capital, providing a powerful "before" snapshot. This baseline then becomes the foundation for a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design post-arrival. Large-scale quantitative analysis first identifies what predicts successful integration, followed by targeted qualitative inquiry—through ethnography and narrative interviews—to explain why these patterns emerge, revealing how intersecting identities of gender, discipline, and cultural background truly shape a scholar's journey.

Ultimately, this keynote is a call for our field to move beyond describing challenges and toward explaining them with longitudinal, sociological depth. By engaging students from the very beginning of their journey, we can finally close the gap between our findings and our actions. This new paradigm allows us to build evidence-based, human-centric practices that truly foster belonging, transforming the entire international student experience from pre-departure anxiety to post-graduation success.