

CROSS-CULTURAL DESIGN PRACTICE AT THE GLASGOW SCHOOL OF ART: THE LOCAL COMMUNITY AS A CULTURAL MEDIATOR FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how the local community close to The Glasgow School of Art functions as a cultural mediator in the design education of international students. The research adopts a reflective practice approach, drawing on workshops and informal interviews with students and the Garnethill Multicultural Centre. The findings show that the community provides contextualized cultural insights, opportunities for building trust, and feedback mechanisms, which reshape students' design decisions and foster cultural adaptation and the development of social sensitivity. From both student and community perspectives, the role of the cultural mediator is twofold: the community not only enhances cross-cultural understanding and design relevance, but also exposes tensions between academic design skills, community expectations, time resources, and sustainability. The paper argues for repositioning the community as a cultural mediator rather than a passive participant in design education; this shift can cultivate a more sustainable educational ecosystem for international students in a cross-cultural context.

Keywords: Cross-cultural, Design Education, Community Participation

1 INTRODUCTION

With the advancement of globalisation and the strong performance of the United Kingdom's art and design education in the QS rankings, the proportion of international students in this field has continued to rise. According to the UK Higher Education Statistics Agency [1], in the 2023/24 academic year, there were 22,225 students enrolled in taught master's programs in design, creative, and performing arts. The proportion of international students is particularly significant in disciplines such as fashion design, interaction design, and fine art. This trend reflects the ongoing globalisation of education and contributes to greater cultural diversity and creativity within UK art and design education. However, it also presents challenges for the education system, particularly in relation to international students' cultural adaptation and intercultural communication.

At the Glasgow School of Art (GSA), the proportion of international students has steadily increased over the past decade. In the 2023/24 academic year, there were 180 students from the United Kingdom and 615 students from outside the UK enrolled in taught master's programs, including 405 from non-EU countries [1]. This growth has not only enriched the cultural environment of the institution but has also positioned cross-cultural design education as a key direction in curriculum development. However, the rise in cultural diversity has introduced new challenges for students, particularly in understanding and responding to local cultural needs and engaging in cross-cultural collaboration within the design process. These challenges are most evident in how students align their design concepts with the expectations of local communities and how they interpret and participate in design practices situated in diverse cultural contexts [2].

The core aim of design education is to foster creativity and social responsibility, yet this becomes particularly challenging in multicultural contexts [3]. The difficulties stem not only from linguistic and cultural differences but also from divergent approaches to design thinking and practice. Cultural differences can create communication barriers and misunderstandings, as international students often struggle to fully grasp local social needs and cultural norms due to differing educational systems, backgrounds, and value orientations. This limited understanding may lead to biases in design processes and weaken cultural sensitivity. Designers therefore need a deeper engagement with local culture beyond

superficial imitation. Another challenge lies in aligning design concepts with the actual needs of local communities, especially in fields such as social innovation and service design, where outcomes must address specific local issues. Yet adaptability is often restricted by cultural differences and limited local experience. Therefore, design education must account for users' cultural contexts to ensure that products and services are both relevant and appropriate [4] [5].

To address these challenges, the role of cultural mediators has become particularly significant in cross-cultural design education. A cultural mediator is defined as “a professional who facilitates communication (including interpretation) between people speaking different languages and with different cultural backgrounds” [6]. Beyond serving as a bridge for cultural transmission and adaptation, cultural mediators also play a vital role in enhancing design quality and fostering intercultural collaboration [7]. This study investigates how local communities act as cultural mediators in the design education of international students.

2 APPROACH

This research draws upon Donald Schön's [8], concept of reflective practice to construct its approach. Rather than analysing a workshop explicitly designed to explore the notion of the community as a cultural mediator, the research engages in reflection-on-action, the reflective interpretation of previous workshop experiences between international students and local community members in Glasgow.

Through engaging with thirteen international students from the GSA and revisiting documentation, design research notes, and informal post-event conversations, the study reinterprets how these interactions implicitly embodied forms of cultural mediation. In this approach, the researcher constructs new understanding from past experiences, recognising that professional knowledge emerges through reflection upon practice rather than the application of predetermined theories.

3 DESIGN WITH THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

3.1 International students and community

The School of Innovation and Technology at GSA, located in the Haldane Building, offers taught master's programs in service design, transformational design, and citizenship and international management. These programs emphasize direct engagement with real users and the exploration of their needs, focusing on social realities, multicultural perspectives, and the potential of community involvement [9]. Consequently, many students proactively establish connections with local communities during semester projects or their final research to deepen their studies.

However, for most one-year master's students, gaining an in-depth understanding of Glasgow's cultural and social dynamics within such a short period presents a significant challenge. The Garnethill Multicultural Centre (GMC) therefore serves as the first point of contact with the local community. Situated less than 100 meters from the Haldane Building, the two locations are spatially neighbors (Figure 1). This proximity lowers the barriers for student engagement and makes GMC an ideal starting point for exploring community-based design and local culture.

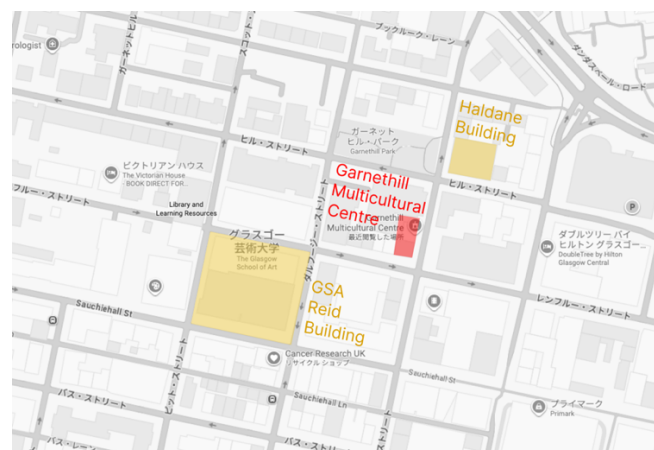


Figure 1: Distance between GMC and GSA on the map

GMC plays a crucial role in facilitating cultural adaptation and cross-cultural design practice for GSA students. Located in central Glasgow, the centre has long promoted social inclusion and intercultural exchange through a variety of regular activities, including fitness classes, handicrafts, gardening, walking groups, dance, and social gatherings. It also provides low-cost or free meals for the elderly, asylum seekers, and refugees, establishing itself as an important platform of social support. Moreover, the centre’s community food program offers affordable groceries, including halal and culturally diverse options, addressing the varied needs of the local population. Through these initiatives, GMC creates a welcoming and inclusive social space for people of all backgrounds. And Its unique social functions and cultural inclusivity thus potentially contribute to international students’ participation in Glasgow culture.

3.2 Design aligns with the culture

In the service design course, international student Tison focused on enhancing the user experience and engagement of a charity shop. Although he conducted multiple interviews with donors and shop staff during the research phase, cultural differences and language barriers led to some uncertainty in his design decisions. Notably, Tison was not new to Glasgow’s multicultural community; he had been actively participating in community activities in his daily life. This sustained engagement provided a crucial foundation of cultural understanding for his subsequent design adjustments.

During a community activity, Tison, acting as a designer, collaborated with community members to explore ways to improve charity services. In this process, he proposed using a mobile application to establish a positive feedback mechanism for donations, believing it could enhance efficiency and drawing on examples of successful charity donation apps in the market. However, community members doubt this approach, noting that such a dedicated app would likely see low usage in daily life, whereas traditional mailboxes remain a more common and reliable means of communication. Regarding post-donation incentives, residents showed a preference for tangible forms of recognition, citing the example of Oxfam in Edinburgh, which increased donor engagement through *charity postcards*.

These feedbacks prompted Tison to reconsider his design decisions, recognizing that while an app-based solution would be highly feasible in the Asian context, where digital practices are deeply embedded, he had overlooked the local emphasis on embodied experiences. Research indicates that people in the UK generally prefer face-to-face interactions and tangible forms of engagement, particularly in scenarios involving emotion and feedback [10]. Following his supervisor’s guidance, Tison adjusted the service touchpoints, shifting from digital to offline interactions. For example, the annual charity report, initially planned for email delivery, was sent as a physical letter to donors’ mailboxes, and the points-based reward system was replaced with “thank-you” postcards, strengthening the emotional connection between donors and the charity (Figure 2).

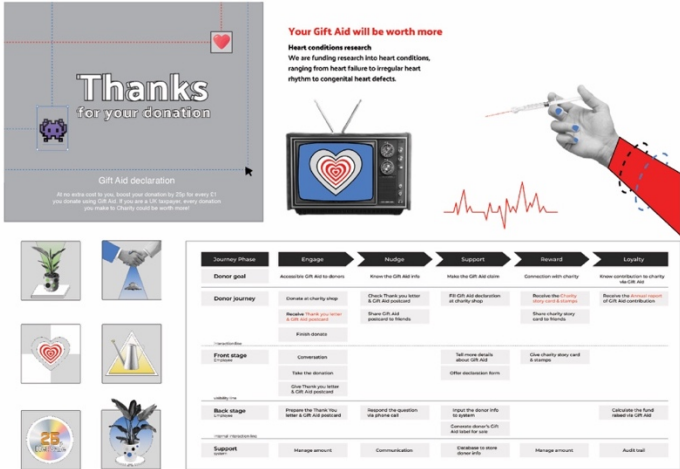


Figure 2: Charity donating service based on physical touchpoints

This design adjustment not only better matched local residents' habits but also highlighted the importance of adapting design decisions in cross-cultural contexts. Tison's experience illustrates the role of the community as a cultural mediator, helping international students understand and respond to local cultural needs.

4 ROLE OF CULTURAL MEDIATOR

In cross-cultural design education of GSA international students, the GMC community plays a key role as a cultural mediator, supporting international students' cultural adaptation and deepening design practice through feedback. First, the community helps students overcome cultural barriers; through interaction with local residents, students gain deeper insights into the local culture, reducing misunderstandings or biases and ensuring that designs meet real needs. Second, cultural mediators facilitate sustainable cross-cultural collaboration by fostering stable relationships and providing a platform for ongoing cultural exchange, promoting continuous cooperation across cultures. The following sections further detail from both student and community perspectives, how the community's role as a cultural mediator manifests and influences cross-cultural design education.

4.1 Students' view

Most international students conduct their design practice within the local context of Glasgow, cultural conflicts often emerge as a primary challenge, especially in projects emphasizing responses to real local needs. Recruiting research participants is also a common difficulty. Many students attempt to gather data through street interviews, but this method is often inefficient, making it difficult to accurately reach target users. Language and cultural differences can further lead to miscommunication or misrecording of critical information, potentially resulting in misunderstandings that affect the design outcomes.

A core underlying factor is the lack of trust. Strangers on the street are unlikely to readily place their trust in unknown researchers, even if they are students. The presence of GMC effectively addresses this challenge. With its open and inclusive multicultural environment, as well as ongoing social and cultural activities, the community creates conditions for establishing trust. Acting as a cultural mediator, the community not only provides international students with a stable platform for interaction enabling them to gradually understand the local social, cultural, political, and economic context through everyday activities, but also helps students develop a cross-cultural cognitive framework during the early stages of their research.

In specific design decisions, community members demonstrated active engagement and made critical contributions. International students regarded the community's cultural inclusivity, diverse resident backgrounds, and friendly social atmosphere as reliable sources of information and advice. Notably, almost all students mentioned that while the community is knowledgeable in interpreting local culture, the insights provided are often broad and difficult to translate into concrete design opportunities. Additionally, some suggestions were considered impractical by design students. For example, proposals aiming to address personal needs, integrating individualised support for people who have seasonal affective disorder with the healthcare system; students viewed this as overly idealistic given the constraints of limited medical resources and service coverage.

Students thought that although some suggestions from community members lacked professional design suggestions, they undeniably contributed to diversifying the design proposals from a critical cultural perspective. In other words, whether or not these ideas fully aligned with design logic, they introduced culturally diverse ways of thinking into the projects. Thus, GMC's role as a cultural mediator holds a dual significance to international students. On one hand, it provides students with a channel to understand and integrate into local society through everyday interactions. On the other hand, it effectively mediates the tension between cultural understanding and design practice within the projects.

For international students, this mediation acts like a telescope, while it may not offer direct theoretical or professional guidance for design proposals, it provides forward-looking support that helps ensure the projects remain aligned with local realities, thereby enhancing the relevance and practical value of cross-cultural design education.

4.2 Community's view

From the community's perspective, international students bring youthful energy and multicultural vitality, aligning with GMC's core values. As most members are middle-aged or older and activities are usually casual social gatherings, students' participation enhances community vibrancy and stimulates exploratory cross-cultural dialogues. Each student can introduce new influences, such as traditional cultural activities, Kung Fu or tea experiences, or craft workshops. These interactions reinforce community cohesion while expanding residents' cultural horizons, highlighting GMC's role as a cultural mediator in cross-cultural education.

Design workshops led by international students also received positive responses from the community, particularly when addressing topics closely related to local realities. For example, Yee, an international student in GSA's design innovation program, initially focused on "safety" due to feelings of insecurity around the community. However, through in-depth dialogue with residents, she realised that these concerns largely stemmed from cultural misunderstandings. Through the co-creation process, Yee gradually understood that community members were more concerned with cohesion and vibrancy (Figure 3), which contrasts with the strong emphasis on safety, privacy, and minimal interaction typical in Asian residential-commercial neighborhoods.



Figure 3. Yee was interacting with GMC members through engagement tools

The community's role as a cultural mediator goes beyond providing cultural input. In co-creation activities, residents actively voice their needs and propose ideas, ensuring their concerns are included. International students contribute professional design methods and systematic planning. Through this mediation, students' expertise and residents' local knowledge are balanced, fostering collaboration between local culture and design practice.

However, community members retain certain reservations about this collaborative relationship. Each year, different teams of international students use GMC as a research site, exploring topics such as food systems, neighborhood relations, and the circular economy. Although the community actively participates in the design process, the final proposals often remain at the conceptual stage, lacking conditions for practical implementation. This reality can inevitably lead to disappointment, as successful project implementation typically requires resources, policies, funding, and long-term validation, these factors beyond the scope of short-term academic projects. For international students, the immediate

utility of design outcomes is primarily in fulfilling academic requirements rather than addressing the community's structural challenges.

Nevertheless, GMC members continue to encourage international students to engage in their daily lives, emphasizing that these connections should extend beyond academic projects and develop into sustainable, long-term relationships. Even when design proposals do not achieve immediate implementation, the interactions and collaboration themselves create new spaces for community dialogue. This ongoing cultural negotiation not only reinforces the community's role as a cultural mediator, but also reflects their motivation to foster a more inclusive and diverse community.

Therefore, from the community's perspective and their social position, they aim to establish the equitable, long-term partnerships with international students rather than being treated merely as resource providers or tools for design experiments.

5 NEW ECOSYSTEM IN CORSS-CULTURAL DESIGN EDUCATION

5.1 Sustainable education ecosystem

In cross-cultural design education, the community's role as a cultural mediator extends beyond providing background information to international students; it involves cultivating a sustainable cultural ecosystem (Figure 4) through reciprocal interactions between students and community members. From the students' perspective, the community offers trust, experiential knowledge, and local practices, lowering the barriers to engaging with an unfamiliar social and cultural context and grounding design work in contextually relevant and culturally sensitive ways [11]. From the community's perspective, student participation injects youthful energy and multicultural perspectives into daily activities, while co-creation workshops and participatory projects generate new opportunities for dialogue, recognition, and innovation in Glasgow.

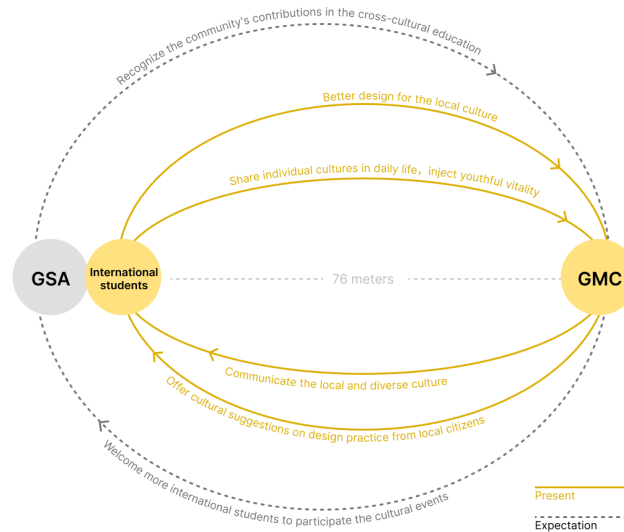


Figure 4. The sustainable education ecosystem between international students and GMC

This mutual exchange gradually shifts knowledge production from a unidirectional model, where students simply learn from the community to a multidirectional, and potentially decentralised collaborative system. Community members contribute contextualized experience and cultural insights, while students provide design expertise and methodological frameworks. Through repeated co-creation, these contributions converge into a dynamically adaptive knowledge network. Notably, this process not only addresses the cultural adaptation challenges faced by international students but also strengthens the community's collective capacity and cohesion through active participation in co-creation.

Thus, the community's role as a cultural mediator actively reshapes the ecosystem of design education. It transforms the traditional institution-centered paradigm into a more distributed, interconnected, and sustainable model of learning and practice, linking cross-cultural education with socially grounded innovation. In this sense, the community no longer functions as a passive resource provider, but emerges as an active co-creator of meaning and practice.

5.2 Potential challenges

Positioning the community as a cultural mediator in cross-cultural design education also raises critical questions regarding recognition and sustainability. On one hand, community members contribute extensive cultural knowledge, lived experience, and time, yet often receive little institutional recognition or tangible reward. Without resources such as funding, formal partnerships, or academic credit, these relationships rely heavily on the goodwill and enthusiasm of individual community members, making long-term sustainability difficult. On the other hand, international students frequently propose imaginative and idealised solutions, but the time constraints of academic projects often lack the structural resources, policies, and mechanisms for sustained implementation. This creates an inevitable tension between the community's engagement and the limited capacity of student projects to generate lasting impact, potentially affecting the sustainability of future collaborations with international students.

Notably, the gap between ideal design scenarios and practical feasibility can frustrate the community and undermine trust. To make cultural mediation sustainable, GSA's educational structures need to recognise and support community contributions while reframing students' community projects as exploratory prototypes or tools for dialogue rather than final solutions, which means avoiding drawing beautiful blueprints that risk exhausting the community's trust. Otherwise, the community may increasingly perceive itself as a living laboratory being instrumentalised rather than as an equal partner in co-creation. Addressing these structural imbalances is therefore crucial to ensuring that cultural mediation contributes to the establishment of a long-term, equitable model of cross-cultural design education for international students.

6 SIGNIFICANCE AND LIMITATIONS

This paper contributes to the study of design education towards a cross-cultural context in three ways. First, it highlights the role of local communities as cultural mediators, moving beyond the traditional framing of community members as mere research participants or end users and offering a novel perspective. Second, it provides empirical evidence of how community involvement reshapes international students' design processes. The GSA case demonstrates that feedback from non-design professionals can challenge cultural assumptions, inspire diverse design pathways. Third, the study advocates for a pedagogical shift from institution-centered education to a distributed, collaborative ecosystem, contributing to educational practice. This reconceptualization aligns with the broader agenda of sustainability in design education, indicating that integrating cultural mediators can strengthen long-term connections between academia and society.

Although this study provides valuable insights, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the empirical material is limited to a single institution (GSA) and one community partner (GMC). While this focus enhances contextual depth, it restricts the generalizability of the findings to other cultural or institutional settings. Second, the sustainable education ecosystem map is a theoretical proposition based on the GSA case, which still needs to be validated for wider application. Finally, although the study highlights the empowering role of cultural mediators, it does not fully examine issues such as power asymmetries and resource allocation within the community–student–institution relationship. Future research addressing these dynamic interactions will be crucial for developing a more equitable and sustainable model of cross-cultural design education.

CONCLUSION

This study emphasizes the importance of positioning local communities as cultural mediators in cross-cultural design education. Drawing on the collaboration between international students from The Glasgow School of Art and the Garnethill Multicultural Centre, the research demonstrates that community involvement not only enriches students' cultural learning but also contributes to the co-creation of contextually relevant and socially grounded design knowledge. Meanwhile, the study

uncovers key tensions: communities can provide broad cultural perspectives but often lack professional design expertise, while students benefit from contextual insights yet are constrained by short project durations and limited feasibility for implementation. These tensions highlight the need to reconceptualize design education as a dynamic ecosystem in which responsibility and recognition are shared among communities, students, and institutions.

To achieve meaningful progress, design education should try establish mechanisms that recognize and sustain community contributions, positioning students' community projects as dialogic prototypes that foster long-term collaboration rather than isolated design outputs. In this way, the role of cultural mediators can evolve from temporary facilitators to indispensable components of a sustainable and equitable cross-cultural design ecosystem.

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