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Learning and belonging: Decolonial and Indigenous approaches to gender diversity in higher education

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Abstract

This article examines the role of intercultural education in creating higher education spaces that affirm and recognise the social identities of transgender and gender-diverse individuals, focusing on Global South and Indigenous perspectives. It explores how Western-centric cisnormative frameworks inform institutional policies and pedagogical practices, often marginalising these identities. Moreover, while there has been a growing awareness of transgender issues, this discourse is predominantly shaped by Global North perspectives, which overlook the diverse ways of knowing and experiencing gender. Through a decolonial lens, the paper introduces the Intercultural Triadic Framework, which integrates Indigenous epistemes, gender diversity, and pedagogical transformation to guide more plural approaches to teaching and learning. Drawing on a qualitative case study of an intercultural competence course at King's College London, it demonstrates how theory can move into praxis through reflective activities and collaborative learning. For many transgender and gender-diverse individuals, school can be a site of violence, emphasising the pressing need for institutional change. Education should allow spaces for learning but also for affirming humanity. To this end, it emphasises the importance of engaging activists, students, and educators who identify as transgender or gender-diverse in co-creating intercultural competency. This study contributes to ongoing dialogues about inclusion in higher education by amplifying the perspectives of Indigenous and Global South transgender and gender-diverse individuals. It highlights the importance of intercultural competencies in instilling empathy and understanding within educational spaces. Ultimately, it is about creating opportunities for all individuals to thrive and have a sense of belonging.

Introduction: Reframing intercultural competence through gender diversity

In recent years, intercultural competence has become a central tenet of higher education institutions' commitments to diversity and inclusion. Yet prevailing models of intercultural education remain bound by Eurocentric, cisnormative frameworks. Hence, there is a need to centre non-Western knowledge systems and gender-diverse identities (Jayathunga, 2024; Payne & Smith, 2015; Salas-SantaCruz, 2024).

This paper adopts the term 'intercultural competence' rather than the more general term 'cultural competence.' Whereas cultural competence is often framed as an individual skill for managing difference (Seeleman et al., 2009), intercultural competence emphasises relationality, dialogue, and the co-construction of knowledge (Arasaratnam, 2016). Such a distinction aligns with the paper's decolonial and queer pedagogical approach, which views competence not as technical skill acquisition but as a justice-oriented practice of transforming educational spaces. Building on this foundation, this article examines the role of intercultural education in creating inclusive spaces that not only promote learning but also affirm the humanity and social identities of transgender and gender-diverse individuals. For this reason, this paper highlights the need to reimagine how transgender and gender-diverse identities are understood and engaged within higher education. Hence, the paper advances a redefinition of intercultural competence as a practice grounded in justice, belonging, and the affirmation of gender-diverse identities within higher education.

Despite growing awareness of transgender issues within educational settings, this awareness is often shaped by Global North epistemologies and liberal, rights-based frameworks that centre individual accommodation over structural reform (Martino et al., 2022; Spade, 2007). These frameworks tend to universalise Western understandings of gender while rendering invisible the plural, community-based, and ancestral conceptions of gender that exist in many Indigenous and Global South contexts. Indigenous and Global South identities are compelled to conform not only to binary gender norms but also to Western LGBTQ+ categories, which often fail to capture local epistemologies of gender and sexuality. As a result, institutional policies and pedagogical practices often perpetuate the erasure of diverse gender experiences. In effect, reproducing exclusion even within well-meaning inclusion efforts (Hagen, 2016; Rahman & Jackson, 2010). The invisibilisation of diverse gender systems within intercultural education is not a mere oversight; it is a form of epistemic violence that must be urgently addressed.

Drawing on queer pedagogy (Kumashiro, 2012), critical intercultural education (Gorski, 2009), and decolonial perspectives (Mignolo, 2002; Rivera Cusicanqui, 2010), the paper examines a case study of how non-Western intercultural competencies can be embedded into curricula to centre plural ways of knowing gender. By highlighting both the harms and possibilities of higher education as a cultural site, the paper offers strategies for embedding intercultural competencies rooted in justice and belonging. For many trans and gender-diverse students, the university remains a site of epistemic and institutional violence. Yet education also holds radical potential as a space for resistance and belonging.

This article contributes to the growing body of queer and trans pedagogical scholarship while highlighting the importance of Global South and decolonial perspectives. It points out that inclusion efforts must not merely add trans identities into pre-existing frameworks but fundamentally reconfigure how we conceptualise gender, knowledge, and the purpose of higher education itself. Ultimately, by reclaiming intercultural competencies, the university can become a space where all students, regardless of gender identity, can thrive.

Methodology: Case study context

Empirical insights are drawn from an optional undergraduate course on intercultural competence taught at King's College London. The course lasts on term and is available to any student. As a result, it brings together a diverse student cohort to critically interrogate dominant frameworks of diversity and inclusion, whilst engaging with decolonial, feminist, and queer pedagogical approaches. Designed to encourage reflection on positionality and structural inequities, it provides a grounded context for examining how intercultural education can be reimagined.

The analysis is based on curriculum design, classroom activities, and reflective teaching observations. Accordingly, the paper mobilises the course itself as a pedagogical site of inquiry. The approach is exploratory and interpretive, using the classroom as a space to test how decolonial, feminist, and queer pedagogical approaches can reshape understandings of intercultural competence. By analysing activities such as reflective bias-mapping and the interrogation of gender norms, the article demonstrates how theory can be translated into practice within higher education teaching and learning.

Theoretical frameworks

This study is grounded in decolonial, feminist, and queer theoretical frameworks that contest the dominant epistemologies underpinning intercultural competencies in higher education. By integrating these epistemologies, the paper seeks to critique the presumed universality of Western gender constructs. Instead, it proposes a reorientation grounded in Indigenous knowledge systems, Global South perspectives, and trans and queer pedagogical traditions. To this end, it draws on intercultural competence, queer and trans pedagogy and decolonial perspectives to reconceptualise how gender diversity can be more meaningfully addressed within academic spaces.

Intercultural competence

To begin with, intercultural competence (IC) has become a key concept in educational policy and practice. As such, it is often defined as "one's effective and appropriate engagement with cultural differences" (Arasaratnam, 2016, para. 1). Although this definition ostensibly supports inclusion, scholars have pointed out that much of the IC literature and practice remains depoliticised (Chávez et al., 1998; Hamel et al., 2004; Sleeter, 1996, 1998). Consequently, it focuses on interpersonal relations rather than systemic injustices and "does more to sustain inequities than to demolish them" (Gorski, 2006, p. 164).

Mainstream intercultural education often overlooks the structural roots of exclusion, such as racism, patriarchy, and coloniality, by treating competence as a personal skill. Accordingly, Gorski (2009) warns that when power structures go unchallenged, intercultural education perpetuates inequality despite acknowledging diversity. For this reason, a growing body of literature insists that education must affirm pluralism and explicitly challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of oppression.

This critique is particularly salient in the context of gender diversity. In this context, educational frameworks often neglect to interrogate transphobia, rendering gender-diverse experiences peripheral or invisible. Moreover, when gender is considered, it is typically through the lens of Western binary models (Currier & Migraine-George, 2016; Day, 2020). As such, intercultural competence discourses rarely include trans and non-binary knowledge systems from the Global South and Indigenous people (Bennett et al., 2023). This paper, therefore, builds on critical scholarship to address the erasure of non-Western and Indigenous gender systems.

Queer pedagogy and Trans pedagogy

Queer pedagogy and trans pedagogy seek to centre those who have been historically marginalised in knowledge production (Shlasko, 2005). Accordingly, education is not only about the transmission of knowledge but also about the reproduction of social norms, particularly related to gender and sexuality. Queer pedagogy, therefore, is not merely about adding LGBTQ+ content to the curriculum but about fundamentally questioning what counts as knowledge, how it is legitimised, and whose experiences it validates (Kumashiro, 2012).

Trans pedagogy takes this further by examining how educational institutions perpetuate binary gender systems. Martino et al. (2022) note that many interventions in higher education frame trans-inclusion through the lens of individual accommodations rather than structural change. Although not by design, this sustains trans erasure in higher education by default. To counter this, critical trans pedagogy advocates for unscripting dominant social norms, creating new ways of being, learning, and relating (Keenan, 2017). Rather than trying to fit trans students into existing structures, this approach reimagines those structures altogether. By aligning with queer and trans pedagogies, this paper not only affirms gender diversity but also interrogates the broader systems that uphold exclusionary dynamics.

Decolonising gender and pedagogy

In addition, decolonial critiques will frame the analysis given that colonial histories have shaped both gender norms (Lugones, 2016) and educational institutions (Du Plessis, 2021) in the Global South. Decolonial feminists such as Lugones (2016) introduced the concept of the coloniality of gender to explain how colonialism enforced a hierarchical, binary, and racialised gender system that continues to influence contemporary societies (Lugones, 2016). Under colonial rule, gender and sexual diversity were violently suppressed and replaced with the man/woman binary that aligned with Christian-European heteropatriarchy (Lugones, 2010).

Undoing the coloniality of gender requires dismantling the epistemological foundations of the binary gender system itself. Instead of perpetuating the exclusionary social hierarchies which underpin the university and assuming that Western social identities are universal, decolonial critiques insist on making space for Indigenous and Global South understandings of identity. To this end, the idea of the pluriverse (Grosfoguel, 2011; Mignolo, 2002; Quijano, 2000) supports this gendered critique by promoting an ecology of knowledges that recognises the coexistence of multiple worldviews and ontologies (de Sousa Santos, 2017).

Across the Americas, Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, diverse cultures have long recognised non-binary, fluid, or third-gender roles. These identities are often deeply embedded in spiritual, cosmological, and community traditions. For example, the concept of Two-Spirit in many Native North American cultures (Robinson, 2020), the muxes of Zapotec communities in Mexico (Ramirez & Munar, 2022) and the fa'afafine of Samoa (Kanemasu & Liki, 2021) are culturally embedded, historically rooted expressions of gender that defy binary classifications. Indigenous scholars seek to centre these epistemologies not as archaic curiosities but as living, evolving knowledge systems that continue to inform contemporary Indigenous resistance (Ulturgasheva, 2023).

Universities, however, often treat Indigenous knowledges as supplemental rather than foundational. For example, policies may acknowledge Two-Spirit identities but continue to operate through Eurocentric curricula. This marginalisation perpetuates what Phelan et al. (2025) describe as epistemic violence: the systematic devaluation or erasure of Indigenous worldviews in academia. To counter this, decolonial critiques promote intercultural education that centres on Indigenous gender ontologies as valid and authoritative.

Hence, decolonial, feminist, and queer perspectives form an integrative framework grounding the case study analysis. Intercultural competence provides a foundation for engaging across cultural and epistemic difference; decolonial theory reveals the historical and structural power relations shaping those encounters; and queer and trans pedagogies offer tools to disrupt and reimagine them in educational practice. As indicated in Figure 1, this triadic framework connects Indigenous epistemes, gender diversity, and pedagogical transformation, as interrelated pillars of intercultural learning. Applied to the case study, it establishes a clear relationship between the problem of Eurocentric and cisnormative bias in higher education and the pedagogical strategies that seek to redress it. By situating the classroom as both a site of knowledge production and social change, the framework demonstrates how theory can move into praxis to re-envision intercultural education as an emancipatory process.

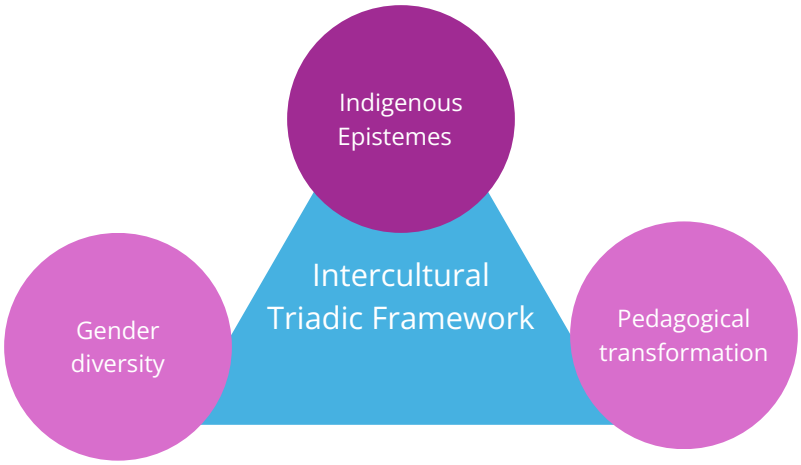

Figure 1. This framework connects Indigenous epistemes, gender diversity, and pedagogical transformation as interrelated pillars of an intercultural competent approach to teaching and learning.

Universities as sites of erasure and possibility

Universities are often idealised as spaces of Socratic questioning, learning and opportunity. Yet for transgender and gender-diverse individuals, particularly those from Indigenous and Global South backgrounds, universities can function as sites of profound erasure and epistemic violence. From administrative structures to classroom practices, academia frequently reproduces the discriminatory dynamics it claims to transcend (Grande, 2004). This section explores how universities simultaneously function as spaces of exclusion and possibility, analysing the institutional, historical, and epistemological dynamics that shape transgender and gender-diverse students' experiences.

To that end, education has historically served as a tool of colonial domination and assimilation, justified under the guise of the civilising mission (Swartz, 2019). Thus, the role of education was to forcibly impose Western gender roles, Christian morality, and binary sexual norms on Indigenous populations (Smithers, 2022). Residential and missionary schools punished expressions of gender nonconformity, often violently (Dempsey, 2021). These histories continue to inform how gender-diverse students experience higher education.

Despite their commitments to diversity and inclusion, many universities remain anchored in the "myth of neutrality", the belief that education is an objective and apolitical process (Agostinone-Wilson, 2005). This myth conceals the deep normative assumptions that underpin educational institutions, including the privileging of white, Eurocentric, cisgender, and heteronormative knowledge (Smith, 2008). The curriculum is rarely neutral; it is shaped by histories of colonialism, patriarchy, and discrimination, often marginalising those whose identities fall outside the dominant social norms. In practice, this is evident in everything from binary gender facilities and enrolment forms to classroom language and curricular content. These micro and macro exclusions perpetuate cisnormativity not only in policy but also in the everyday culture of higher education.

Far from dismantling structural inequities, even well-meaning diversity initiatives can reproduce exclusion by requiring that gender-diverse and Indigenous students assimilate into dominant norms. For example, inclusion is often framed through Western liberal notions of diversity, emphasising tolerance rather than epistemic transformation (Ahmed, 2012; Tuck & Yang, 2021). Research on Indigenous queer and gender-diverse students in Australia reveals that many feel they must conceal parts of themselves to be perceived as professional or credible (Smith, 2008).

Phelan et al. (2025) highlight the emotional and intellectual labour this entails, as students and scholars navigate institutions that celebrate diversity superficially while marginalising non-Western and trans-inclusive epistemologies. Individuals describe being hyper-visible as symbols of inclusion, yet invisible as producers of knowledge. Many encounter resistance to research that centres their communities or adopts non-Western, trans-inclusive methodologies. This contributes to a sense of unbelonging.

This experience of alienation is compounded by what has been termed the hidden curriculum: the unstated norms and values reproduced through everyday practices (Orón Semper & Blasco, 2018). In the case of gender-diverse staff and students, this includes not only explicit discrimination but also the cumulative impact of continuously being unacknowledged or misrepresented (Watson, 2005). Previous research defines higher education settings as "tacitly, and unconsciously, binary" (Mckendry & McKenna, 2020). In addition to being gendered and sexualised, the hidden curriculum is often racialised as well. Consequently, it includes the silencing of Indigenous and non-Western gender narratives, the privileging of Eurocentric theories, and the continued association of intellectual authority with whiteness and cisness.

Universities continue to demand conformity to colonial norms and respectability that marginalise those whose identities fall outside of the white, cisgender, Western mould (Ahmed, 2012; Battiste, 2017). Yet even with these legacies, universities hold the potential for meaningful change. Institutions are not monolithic, and spaces of resistance exist within them. Student-led organising (Mac-lean et al., 2021), Indigenous knowledge collectives (Lin et al., 2021), queer reading groups (Murphy, 2023), and cultural competency training (Kruse et al., 2018) are all examples of how individuals and communities are actively reshaping the university from within. This work, however, must be supported at the institutional level. Without it, such initiatives remain precarious and symbolic.

Disrupting heteronormativity in the classroom involves actively confronting how pedagogy itself perpetuates binary thinking (Mckendry & McKenna, 2020) and exclusionary perspectives (Britzman, 1995). This includes rethinking assessments, classroom dynamics, faculty training, and student support structures. It also demands an institutional commitment to justice. Moreover, it is not an aspirational value but a concrete practice interwoven throughout the curriculum. Reimagining higher education as a space of belonging for transgender and gender-diverse individuals involves more than expanding access; it requires questioning the foundational assumptions of the university. This includes decentering whiteness and Western knowledge, making space for Indigenous epistemologies, and validating gender diversity as a source of knowledge.

Translating dreams into lessons: Embedding gender diversity into intercultural curricula

To transcend Western-centric, cisnormative educational paradigms, universities must centre plural epistemologies. As such, it must build on the concept of pluriversality, the coexistence of multiple ways of knowing and being, as a framework for inclusive pedagogy (Minoia & Castro-Sotomayor, 2024; Nweke, 2019). This section offers practical strategies for translating the critical and decolonial perspectives explored in previous sections into everyday pedagogical practice. Drawing on a case study of an intercultural competency curriculum applied at King's College London focused on gender and sexual diversity in the Global South, it demonstrates how dreams of inclusive education can be realised through reflexive pedagogy and engagement with community knowledge.

The curriculum examined here, from a university module, provides a case study for integrating non-Western perspectives on gender and sexuality into higher education. Framed within the broader aim of developing students' intercultural awareness, the unit situates gender and sexual diversity not as peripheral identity issues but as central to what it means to be culturally competent. By examining Indigenous and Global South perspectives, the curriculum dispels the notions that gender diversity is a modern Western innovation. Instead, it reveals it is a global and historically rooted reality. Importantly, it connects this understanding to developing empathy, instilling critical thinking, and unlearning colonial assumptions. Subsequently, it reframes cultural competency as not merely skill acquisition but a continuous ethical practice.

Pluriversal content as core, not add-on

The notion of the pluriverse, as articulated by a decolonial perspective, challenges the Eurocentric universalism that dominates academic knowledge systems (Arias, 2011; Santos, 2010). Rather than assuming a single trajectory of progress, the pluriverse invites the coexistence of diverse ontologies. In the context of gender, this implies recognising that the binary gender system is not universal but rather a colonial imposition that violently disrupted gender diversity across many cultures (Lugones, 2007). In education, a pluriversal approach demands that Indigenous and non-Western gender systems be integrated not as exotic exceptions or supplementary perspectives but as valid knowledge traditions. Teaching gender diversity through this lens requires decentring Western LGBTQ+ identity frameworks and cultivating critical awareness of how gender is shaped by cosmology, spirituality, language, colonial history, and relationality in different cultural contexts.

Indigenous epistemologies offer expansive understandings of gendered identities. Furthermore, these social identities are often integrated into spiritual and social life with deep cultural meaning. Similarly, in South Asia, gender-diverse identities such as Hijras, Aravanis, and Thirunangai are embedded in long-standing social traditions that resist assimilation into Western binaries of cisgender/transgender (Mahalingam, 2003). Their existence highlights non-Western ontologies of gender that complicate Global North models of trans rights and identity politics, which often prioritise legal recognition and medicalised frameworks over local histories of spirituality, kinship, and community belonging (Dutta & Roy, 2014; Ghosh, 2022).

It is important to note that Indigenous and Global South identities are subjected not only to the enforcement of binary gender norms but also to the imposition of Western LGBTQ+ categorisations of gender and sexuality.

These taxonomies, while politically significant in Global North contexts, often erase or misrepresent local epistemologies of gender diversity. This double bind requires gender-diverse people in the Global South to navigate both colonial binaries and Eurocentric queer frameworks, underscoring the need for decolonial approaches that respect non-Western ontologies of gender. For the purposes of this paper, recognising these dynamics is essential to rethinking intercultural competence. Rather than applying Western categories universally, intercultural competence should be framed as a practice that is attentive to local epistemologies, spiritual traditions, and community forms of belonging.

This epistemic double bind is not merely theoretical. It materialises concretely in institutional and educational exclusions across the Global South. For example, the Hijras are members of long-established gender-diverse communities in South Asia (Mahalingam, 2003). In spite of formal legal recognition in India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh, most Hijras remain systematically excluded from education, highlighting a disconnect between policy and lived reality. For universities seeking to adopt an intercultural pedagogy, it is crucial to engage with these tensions and avoid imposing Western narratives of progress that fail to account for local histories and power dynamics.

These examples highlight the importance of developing pedagogies that are not only inclusive but responsive to local histories of resistance and knowledge production. To this end, the course on intercultural competency emphasises contextualisation. Rather than exporting a universal framework, the curriculum encourages students to examine gender diversity within different communities, asking: What gender identities existed before colonialism? Who are the knowledge keepers? How do legal systems reflect or erase gender diversity? In the curriculum, Muxe, Hijra, Two-Spirit, fa'afafine, and travesti experiences are not treated as supplemental to Western gender paradigms. In fact, they are the starting point. This curricular design models what decolonial education can look like: one in which Global South and Indigenous knowledge systems are not tokenised but placed at the centre of how culture, identity, and competence are understood and taught.

Beyond centring Indigenous knowledges, the course emphasises resistance as a form of pedagogy. Resistance in education is necessary and emancipatory, offering a praxis for scholars to disrupt normative systems of knowledge production (Salas-SantaCruz, 2024). To this end, it aligns with Jotería pedagogy, rooted in queer Latin American communities, which seeks "to open up the possibilities for liberatory consciousness and practices in the study of higher education means to articulate and resist the structures of oppression that are interwoven into the tapestries of the academy" (Duran et al., 2020, p. 82).

As articulated by scholars like Hames-García (2011) and Salas-Santa Cruz (2024), it resists the depoliticised language of diversity in favour of a grounded approach. In effect, it is rooted in cultural resistance, community activism, and the lived realities of queer and trans students of colour. This approach resists both the whitewashing of LGBTQ+ narratives and the erasure of Global South queer knowledge within academia (Hames-García & Martínez, 2011).

In the praxis, this implies that another key innovation of the curriculum is its emphasis on resistance as a form of learning. Rather than presenting gender-diverse communities solely through a lens of victimhood, the unit highlights activism, legal struggles, and community resilience. Key examples include learning about Argentina's Gender Identity Law and Samoan grassroots advocacy networks. This shifts the focus from marginalisation to agency and invites students to see learning as a form of solidarity.

Centring trans-created educational tools

In addition, the module centres on trans-created educational tools. A key resource employed in the curriculum is the Gender Unicorn, a framework developed by transgender youth through Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER). Designed as a playful yet pedagogically robust alternative to more rigid, institutional models, the Gender Unicorn breaks down the core components of identity: gender identity, gender expression, sex assigned at birth, physical attraction, and emotional attraction. Importantly, making it clear these categories exist on a spectrum and have fluid dimensions (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2015). This enables students to move beyond binary thinking and explore gender as a constellation of experiences shaped by social, cultural, and personal factors.

> Trans Student Educational Resources is a youth-led organisation dedicated to transforming the educational environment for trans and gender-nonconforming students through advocacy and empowerment. In addition to our focus on creating a more trans-friendly education system, our mission is to educate the public and teach trans activists how to be effective organisers (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2021b, para. 1).

In centring this tool within the curriculum, the programme models a shift away from institutionalised, top-down approaches to diversity education that often speak about trans people without involving them in knowledge production (Nicolazzo, 2017; Pennell, 2020; Spade, 2015). Critically, it also challenges the assumption that meaningful educational materials must originate within formal institutions. It models a pedagogy of relationality, where trans students are not simply studied or included but recognised as co-creators of knowledge (Hickey & Riddle, 2024). Indeed, it creates a space where everyone is both a learner and a teacher. In this way, the Gender Unicorn is not just a tool to explain gender; it is an act of resistance and reimagination. As part of a broader curriculum committed to intercultural justice, its use reflects a commitment to rethinking who gets to define knowledge, whose experiences are validated in the classroom, and how institutions can move from diversity to liberatory education.

Moreover, integrating this tool into the curriculum is an epistemological choice that affirms trans youth as theorists and educators in their own right. Thus, the curriculum embodies the Freirean vision of education as a process of co-intentional dialogue, where learners and educators engage in mutual meaning-making rather than the passive transmission of information. Freire's critique of the banking model of education, in which students are treated as empty/passive vessels to be filled with knowledge (Freire, 2006), provides a powerful lens through which to interpret the use of community-developed resources like the Gender Unicorn. Traditional diversity education models often replicate the banking model: students are presented with abstract definitions of gender, usually filtered through institutional or medical discourse, and are expected to passively absorb these terms. In contrast, the Gender Unicorn, as indicated by Figure 2, encourages active participation, enabling students to interrogate their understanding of gender:

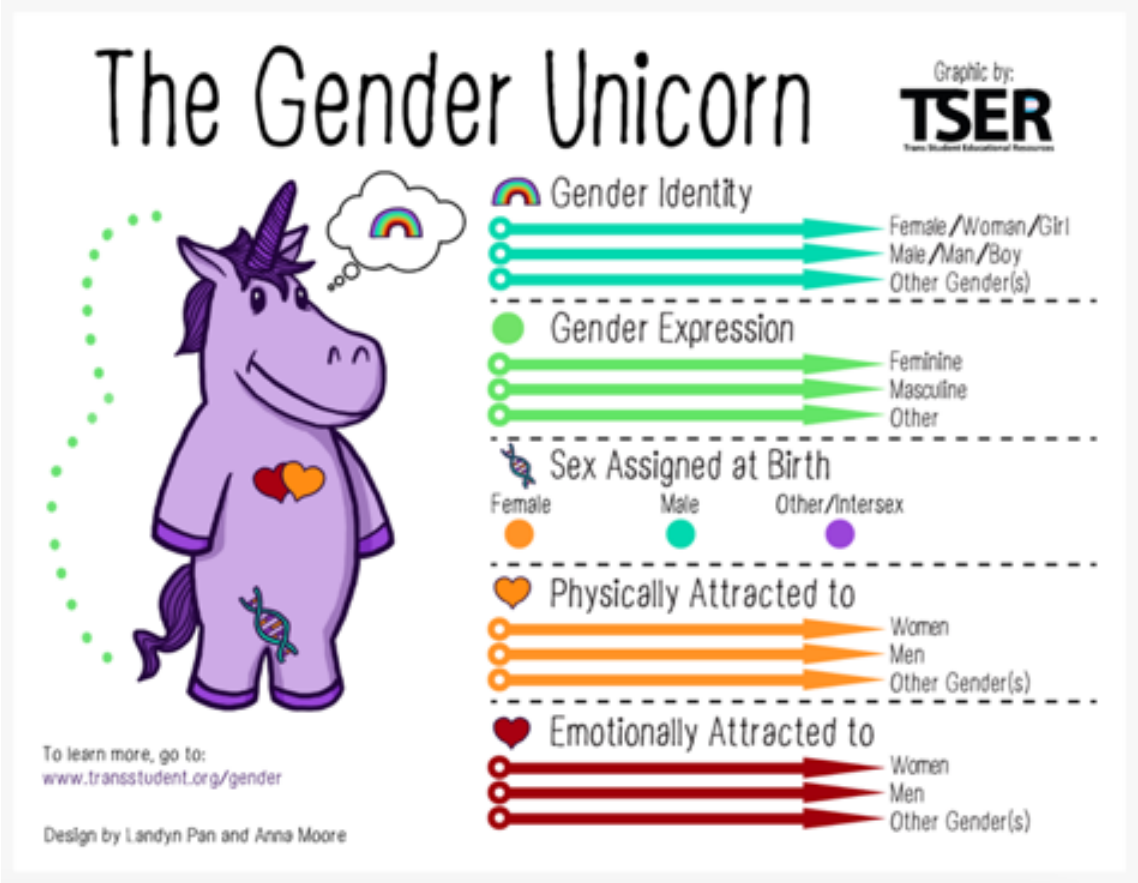

Figure 2. The Gender Unicorn visualises dimensions of gender identity, expression, attraction, and assigned sex at birth (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2015).

Pedagogically, the Gender Unicorn is an entry point for deeper conversations. Students are invited to engage critically with concepts of gender and sexuality. This involves mapping where they locate themselves and reflecting on how they came to understand gender. Hence, it sparks class conversations that connect personal reflection to broader social identities (Trans Student Educational Resources, 2015). Moreover, it allows for discussing power relations, highlighting how colonial legacies, geopolitical forces, and entrenched social hierarchies continue to inform normative constructions of gender and sexuality.

Equally important, because it uses accessible language and imagery, the Gender Unicorn enables students across linguistic, disciplinary, and cultural backgrounds to grasp the key concepts. This accessibility aligns with decolonial education's refusal to privilege academic jargon (Hale, 2009) or gatekeep knowledge over community-based ways of knowing (Dutta et al., 2022; Swartz, 2009). By using trans-created tools such as the Gender Unicorn, the curriculum does not simply "include" trans voices; it recalibrates the terms of engagement. It invites all learners, regardless of gender identity, to recognise trans and non-binary people as educators and theorists. In this way, the Gender Unicorn is more than a visual aid; it becomes an epistemological framing. Subsequently, shifting both what students learn about gender and how that knowledge is produced.

"Unlearning" as an ethical imperative

Perhaps the most critical element of the curriculum is its emphasis on unlearning. Indeed, the focus is on interrogating (and possibly rejecting) deeply embedded gender assumptions. This aligns with critical pedagogy's assertion that education should not be about absorbing facts but as a practice of unsettling, taken-for-granted beliefs (Carlson, 2018). In particular, it asks students to critically reflect on how their understandings of gender have been shaped by colonial, racialised, and cisnormative worldviews. Translating dreams into lessons, then, is not about merely adding inclusive content. It is about dismantling the epistemic frameworks that have erased trans and gender-diverse people from educational spaces. Unlearning becomes an ethical imperative when education is understood not as neutral but as a site for contesting power dynamics and reimagining possibility.

For this reason, the course invites students to explore not only their personal identities but also the structural dynamics that shape societal understandings of gender. It becomes a starting point for discussions on how Western scientific, medical and legal frameworks have marginalised gender-diverse people (Davy et al., 2018), and how trans and non-binary communities have resisted these frameworks through activism and community-driven pedagogy (Friborg, 2023). The curriculum prompts students to critically examine their internalised beliefs and the social norms that have shaped their perspectives.

One of the pedagogical strategies that emerged from this case study is the activity titled "Personal beliefs and assumptions," which encourages students to identify biases they have internalised. Another, "Regulating the spectrum of gender and sexuality", examines how gender norms are upheld through language, policy, and everyday interactions. In this way, the activity expands the scope of intercultural competence by foregrounding how power operates through everyday discourse. These reflective practices help students dismantle the illusion of objectivity and create space for reframing social identities. Crucially, this process also cultivates empathy by encouraging students to understand experiences beyond their positionalities. Empathy, in this context, is not merely an affective response but a deeply political one. It is a stance that values different ways of being and knowing.

Above all, the module does not frame intercultural competency as a box to tick. Instead, it presents it as a dynamic, lifelong commitment to unlearning dominant narratives and learning from different perspectives. The reflective exercises encourage students to examine how their cultural backgrounds shape their understanding of gender and sexuality and how they can continue this process beyond the classroom. In this sense, unlearning is necessary to imagine new ways of being, knowing, and relating.

Conclusion: Toward a pluriversal, gender-just higher education

This article has made the case that cultivating intercultural competencies in higher education must begin with a commitment to epistemic, gendered, and decolonial justice. higher education must begin with a commitment to

epistemic, gendered, and decolonial justice. As institutions continue to internationalise, it becomes increasingly urgent to interrogate the frameworks and assumptions that underpin their diversity strategies. For transgender and gender-diverse individuals, especially those from Indigenous and Global South communities, the university remains a contested space: one that can reproduce systemic violence but also serve as a site of resistance and reimagination.

Through an analysis of queer and trans pedagogies and decolonial perspectives, this paper challenges intercultural competency models that centre on the West. Instead, it has proposed a shift toward educational models that make space for multiple ways of knowing gender rooted in pluriversality. The Intercultural Triadic Framework developed in this paper connects Indigenous epistemes, gender diversity, and pedagogical transformation, revealing how these perspectives can work together to reimagine learning as an emancipatory process. Reframing intercultural competence in this way underscores its potential as a transformative praxis. It contributes to a broader redefinition of education as a practice of world-making in solidarity with those long excluded from academic spaces.

Drawing on a case study of an intercultural competency curriculum that centres on gender and sexual diversity in the Global South, this article shows how decolonial approaches can be translated into concrete pedagogical strategies. It highlighted strategies such as reflective bias-mapping, interrogating gender norms, decentring Western narratives, and integrating trans-created educational tools. Key to this transformation is the recognition that intercultural education is not simply about acquiring knowledge but about engaging in an ongoing dialogue. It requires institutions to co-create knowledge with those at the margins, to rethink who belongs in the university, and to embed empathy alongside intellectual inquiry within the very fabric of educational practice.

To this end, building a gender-just and interculturally competent university means abandoning the illusion of a singular, neutral, or universal standard of education. Instead, it means acknowledging the value of diversity, unlearning gendered assumptions and instilling empathy. Ultimately, translating dreams into lessons means no longer treating trans and gender-diverse identities and Indigenous knowledges as unwelcome guests or token visitors but rather as architects of an educational shared space.

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