Conceptual framework

Towards an ethical and expansive model of international student pedagogy

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Lead institution

DE MONTFORT UNIVERSITY LEICESTER

Partner institutions

MANCHESTER 1824 The University of Manchester

Manchester Metropolitan University

UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

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The structural condition: how deficit narratives are produced

International students arriving at UK universities do not arrive into a neutral space. They arrive into a context shaped by at least three intersecting forces that this project takes seriously as the starting conditions of any pedagogic encounter.

The institutional framing

Across all four workshop sites, participants named without prompting the way institutions frame international students as financial assets rather than pedagogic partners. The term 'cash cows' was used directly and repeatedly by staff who found the framing both accurate and deeply uncomfortable. This matters because the financial logic of recruitment shapes: the conditions in which students arrive, the speed at which they are expected to integrate, the support made available to them, and the way their presence is communicated to academic staff. An institution that recruits students as a financial strategy and then tasks individual educators with the consequences of that strategy is producing a structural injustice, not a pedagogic problem.

The hostile external environment

International students do not only navigate institutional conditions. They arrive into a country whose political and media climate has become actively hostile to their presence. Visa restrictions, net migration targets that include international students, and sustained press coverage framing international students as a burden on domestic students or a threat to migration figures (Mittelmeier 2024). All of this shapes the experience of students before they reach the classroom. Several workshop participants noted the financial precarity that accompanies this climate: students overworking to cover fees and living costs, too frightened to disclose this to staff for fear of jeopardising their visa status, and navigating what Wolverhampton participants described as risks of modern slavery and exploitative employment. These are not peripheral concerns. They are the conditions in which students are expected to think critically, participate actively, and produce assessed work.

The deficit narrative

From these structural conditions emerges a persistent narrative that positions international students as lacking: lacking language proficiency, lacking critical thinking skills, lacking familiarity with UK academic conventions (Lomer and Mittelmeier 2021). Participants at every workshop site identified this framing in the institutional language around international students, in the training materials they had encountered where these existed, and, with considerable honesty, in their own assumptions. The deficit narrative is not simply an attitude or behavioural problem. It is a structural product. When institutions recruit students as financial assets, when the political climate frames students as a problem, and when staff receive no dedicated support for working with diverse international cohorts, the deficit narrative fills the gap.

> "Cash cows are a common term to describe international students, but no action is being taken to challenge this. The university is docile." workshop participant, University of Manchester

The reframe: who has the deficit?

The most important shift this framework asks of us is a question, not an answer. When workshop participants were asked how international students are positioned in their classrooms, a recurring counter-narrative emerged: the deficit may not lie with the student. It may lie with the staff member who lacks understanding of the student's educational history. It may lie with the institution that provides no or minimal dedicated professional development. It may lie with a curriculum that treats eurocentric academic conventions as universal. It may lie with an assessment framework that was never designed with diverse/ minoritised learners in mind.

This reframe does not dissolve the real challenges that international students face. Students do navigate genuine transitions: linguistic, academic, cultural, and social, but the question of who names these transitions as deficits, and in whose interest that naming operates, is a political as much as a pedagogic question.

One participant at the University of Manchester articulated the shift with particular clarity:

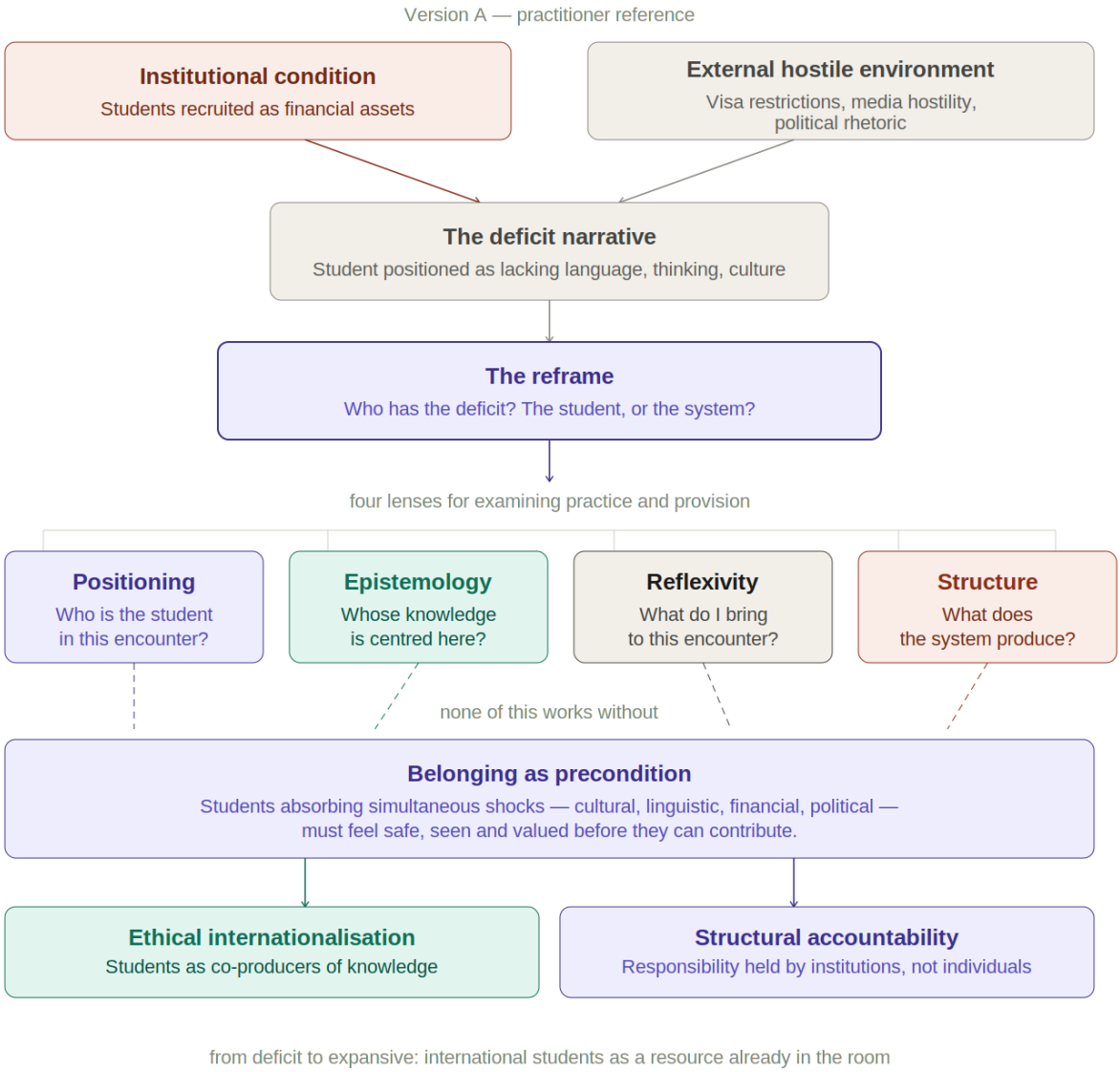
> "I went from a deficit mindset to an expansive mindset. Ask students what they already know. Find gaps, commonalities, and even learn something new from them. International students are a treasure that's already in the room with you." workshop participant, University of Manchester

This shift, from deficit to expansive, is the orienting commitment of the framework. It does not require abandoning rigour or pretending that all students arrive with identical preparation. It requires asking a more honest question: whose standards are we applying, and why?

One dimension of this reframe deserves particular attention in the classroom. We frequently read a quiet student, or a student whose written English does not conform to academic conventions, as someone who cannot think critically. But what we are often actually doing is measuring thinking through a particular linguistic and cultural lens, one shaped by Eurocentric academic traditions, and finding it absent when it arrives in a different form. This matters for every pedagogic decision: how we interpret seminar silence, how we respond to written work, whose contributions we follow up and whose we let pass. The association between fluency in dominant academic English and intellectual capacity is not a neutral standard. Scholars who study language and power call this a raciolinguistic ideology, a set of assumptions about whose language counts as evidence of intelligence, and it systematically disadvantages students whose thinking operates through different linguistic traditions (Ramjattan 2024; Loonat 2025). Naming it is the first step to examining it in our own practice.

The framework is presented in two forms. Figure 1 offers a quick reference overview of the key concepts and their relationships, designed to be used alongside staff development sessions or returned to during teaching. Figure 2 presents the same framework in fuller conceptual form, grounded explicitly in the workshop data and the voices of participants across all four institutions. Both are intended to be used together.

Figure 1: Conceptual framework, practitioner reference



Belonging as precondition

A consistent thread across all four workshops was the relationship between belonging and learning. Each institution contributed distinct evidence of what happens when belonging is absent, and what becomes possible when it is genuinely cultivated.

At the University of Wolverhampton, participants used zine-making and collage activities to map the shocks that international students absorb before their first seminar: navigating unfamiliar transport systems, adjusting to regional accents and dialects, managing finances, experiencing loneliness, missing home, finding food, and learning to read an entirely new physical and social landscape. One participant described the experience through a collage image of hands holding a flower: international students are placing their growth in our hands. The Wolverhampton workshop also surfaced the acute material stakes involved: students working excessive hours to cover fees and living costs, too frightened to disclose this to staff, navigating what participants described as risks of exploitative employment. These are not peripheral concerns. They are the conditions in which students are expected to belong.

At De Montfort University, the workshop generated a strong sense of what becomes possible when belonging is actively cultivated from the start. Participants recognised that international students bring new worldviews into the classroom and can identify with concepts and contexts that enrich learning for the whole cohort. There was also honest awareness of the conditions that can work against this. Students arrive in week one already navigating jobs, visas, unfamiliar systems, and cultural adjustment, and are expected to form relationships, engage critically, and prepare for assessment simultaneously. Participants were clear that week one is the most important moment for academic staff to develop what one participant called a cultural consciousness, an active curiosity about who their students are, rather than an assumption that students should simply adapt to existing norms. The observation that was returned to repeatedly was this: if they do not feel safe, they cannot be critical.

At the University of Manchester, participants identified isolation as one of the most persistent features of the international student experience. Home students and international students do not tend to interact, meaning that deficit assumptions go unchallenged and genuine community rarely forms. Staff noted that international

students are frequently surrounded by others from the same national background and have no experience of integration into something new. This is not because they are unwilling, but because the structures that would support integration are absent. The Manchester workshop also raised the mental health implications of this isolation explicitly, with community building named as fundamental to student wellbeing. Dr Sylvie Lomer, as the workshop facilitator at Manchester, reflecting on the session, noted something that extends the belonging argument beyond students alone: that academics who concentrate on internationalisation and inclusive pedagogies often end up feeling isolated in their daily work. She left the workshop deeply encouraged, but also concerned about how to sustain the enthusiasm that such events generate once the grind of daily work is re-established. This observation matters because it points to a structural condition that this framework takes seriously: belonging is not only a student experience. Staff who care about this work also need institutional conditions in which that commitment is recognised, supported, and sustained.

At Manchester Metropolitan University, participants reflected on how programme design in the contemporary university creates conditions that undermine belonging structurally. Class sizes too large for individual recognition, staff too stretched to address specific needs, and students clumped together under the category of international without regard for the diversity within that grouping. These are institutional choices, not natural conditions. One participant became aware through the positionality mapping exercise of her own situational advantages: proximity to family, familiarity with bureaucratic systems, a support network close at hand. She reflected on the gap between her own experience of arrival and what she was asking of her students.

The implication across all four sites is significant: students absorbing simultaneous shocks, cultural, linguistic, financial and political, must feel **safe, seen and valued** before they can contribute. This is not a soft concern supplementary to the real business of teaching. It is a precondition for the kind of critical engagement, collaborative participation, and co-creative practice that this framework advocates for. Belonging in this framework means something specific. It does not mean that students feel comfortable or are welcomed with a warm induction event. It means that students are recognised as individuals with histories, knowledge, and perspectives of value, not as a homogeneous category defined by fee status or visa type.

This has implications for timing. Belonging cannot be treated as something that develops over an academic term. It must be actively cultivated from the moment of arrival, and arguably from the moment of recruitment. An institution that communicates warmth and partnership in its marketing and then delivers a deficit-framed induction has already begun to undermine belonging before teaching starts.

> "Hands holding a flower: international students are placing their growth in our hands." workshop participant, University of Wolverhampton, collage activity
>
> "If they don't feel safe, they can't be critical." workshop participant, De Montfort University
>
> "Community building is fundamental to prevent mental health issues and isolation." workshop participant, University of Manchester
>
> "International students don't have safety nets to retake a year." workshop participant, University of Wolverhampton

Four lenses for examining practice and provision

Once belonging is established as the enabling condition, this framework offers four interconnected lenses for examining both institutional provision and individual practice. These lenses emerged from what participants across all four institutions consistently raised when asked how international students are positioned, whose knowledge is centred, what educators bring to the encounter, and what the institutional system produces. They are grounded in practice, not sequential steps, and each shapes how the others operate. **They underpin the Deficit Narrative Audit Tool that accompanies this framework**.

> Lens 1 **Positioning**
>
> How is the international student constructed in this encounter? As a contributor to knowledge and culture, or as the bearer of deficits that must be fixed? Positioning operates in language, in assessment design, in curriculum content, in how feedback is given, and in the assumptions that shape each pedagogic decision. Workshop participants

consistently noted the tendency to homogenise international students as a category, speaking of them as having shared needs, shared limitations, and shared characteristics when in fact the diversity within the group is at least as significant as the diversity between international and home students.

Lens 2 **Epistemology**

Whose knowledge is centred in the curriculum, the classroom, and the institution? Eurocentric academic conventions such as essay writing, seminar participation, oral argumentation, and a particular style of critical reasoning are frequently treated as universal standards that students must attain. Yet these conventions reflect particular traditions of knowledge production. They are not neutral. A curriculum that draws exclusively from Global North scholarship, that treats Western epistemological frameworks as the baseline for all intellectual work, and that pathologises students whose thinking operates through different traditions is not simply failing to be inclusive. It is making a political choice about whose knowledge counts.

Lens 3 **Reflexivity**

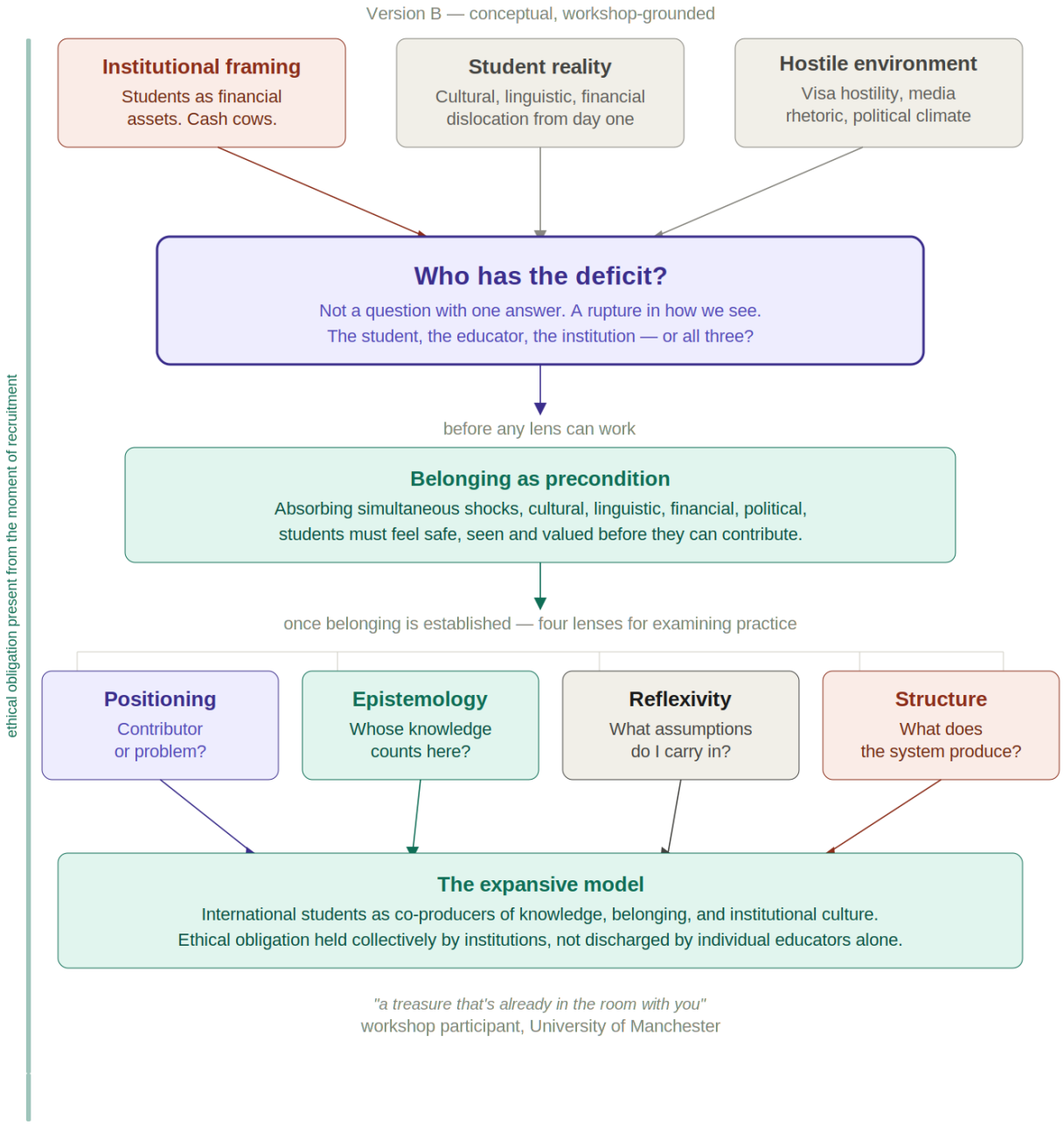
What does the educator bring to the encounter? Positionality mapping exercises used across all four workshops invited staff to examine their own educational backgrounds, linguistic identities, and the privileges they hold as educators in a UK higher education context. This was consistently the most generative and the most uncomfortable part of the workshops. One site noted that positionality discussions can generate hostility among colleagues, a finding that speaks to how much is at stake when we ask educators to examine the assumptions that underpin their practice. Reflexivity in this framework is not about guilt or self-criticism. It is about the honest awareness that makes change possible.

Lens 4 **Structure**

What does the system produce? Individual pedagogic goodwill cannot compensate for structural conditions that make inclusive practice impossible. Workload pressures, block teaching constraints, large class sizes, late arrivals due to visa restrictions, the absence of dedicated professional development, and the financial logic of mass international recruitment all shape what is possible in any given classroom. Workshop participants at every site expressed genuine commitment to supporting international students and genuine frustration at the structural constraints that limited their ability to do so. This lens asks institutions to take responsibility for the conditions they create, rather than leaving individual educators to carry that responsibility through personal effort alone.

These four lenses form the analytical basis of the Deficit Narrative Audit Tool, a companion instrument developed as part of this project. The audit tool enables staff and staff development practitioners to apply the lenses systematically to existing training resources and to their own practice.

Figure 2: Conceptual framework, workshop-grounded



"a treasure that's already in the room with you"
workshop participant, University of Manchester

Ethical internationalisation: obligation, not aspiration

The ethical argument of this framework begins with a disconnect that was named at every workshop site: between the lived realities of international students and staff navigating internationalisation in the classroom, and the claims that institutions make about how well they support international students. That gap is not simply a matter of resources or implementation. It represents an ethical deficit that this framework asks institutions to take seriously.

When an institution recruits a student from overseas, taking significant fees, issuing a place that shapes that student's future and making promises about the education and experience they will receive, it incurs an obligation that goes well beyond logistics. That obligation is not met by an induction week, an international office, or a voluntary English language class offered on the assumption that language deficit is the primary challenge students face. These gestures, however well-intentioned, can inadvertently communicate that the institution has done its part and the rest is up to the student. What is required instead is sustained, resourced, and institutionally embedded commitment to the conditions in which international students can genuinely thrive: academically, socially, and personally.

This project argues that ethical internationalisation has three defining features. First, it is relational rather than transactional: it positions students as partners and co-producers rather than consumers of a service. Second, it is structural rather than individual: it locates responsibility at the institutional level rather than delegating it to individual educators through personal commitment alone. Third, it is critical rather than celebratory: it does not treat diversity as an enrichment opportunity while ignoring the structural inequalities that produce and constrain that diversity.

> "When is support pre-emptively offered, or is it always a last resort?" workshop participant, De Montfort University

Principles for practice

The following principles distil the framework into actionable commitments. They are intended as a shared language for staff development, curriculum review, and institutional policy, applicable across all four partner institutions and beyond.

01 Recognise before you teach

Before any pedagogic encounter, recognise who is in the room. Recognise them as individuals with histories, knowledge, and perspectives, not as a category defined by fee status or visa type. Belonging begins with recognition.

02 Locate the deficit honestly

When a student appears to struggle, ask where the deficit actually lies. In the student? In the curriculum? In the assessment design? In the support available? In the assumptions the educator brings? Honest diagnosis is the precondition for honest intervention.

03 Centre the voices of international students

Co-creation is not a methodology. It is an ethical commitment to working with students rather than on their behalf. Decisions about curriculum, pedagogy, and support should be informed by the actual experiences of the students they are intended to serve. What opportunities do international students have to share their stories?

04 Act where you can, and name what constrains you

Inclusive practice requires both individual commitment and institutional change. When workload, class sizes, or institutional policy make it harder to support international students well, name this as a structural issue rather than a personal failing and continue to act within whatever space you have. Educators who care about this work are not absolved of responsibility by structural constraints, but they are also not responsible for carrying institutional obligations through personal commitment alone.

05 Hold the ethical obligation from the moment of recruitment

The duty of care towards international students does not begin at induction. It begins when recruitment promises are made. Institutions that recruit internationally carry an ethical obligation to resource the conditions in which students can genuinely thrive and succeed.

06 Move from deficit to expansive

The goal is not to fix international students. It is to expand the pedagogic imagination of institutions and educators. See what international students bring rather than what they lack, and to build the structures that allow those contributions to be recognised and valued.

References

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A list of further resources is provided on the project page as a companion document to this framework.