

Teaching Comparative and International Education in the UK: a national survey of undergraduate programmes

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1. Introduction

This BAICE-funded study reports on the status of comparative and international education (CIE) in undergraduate programmes in the UK based on analysis of curriculum documents and interviews with teachers on CIE units. While there have been numerous efforts to map CIE research over the years (Davidson et al., 2020; Pizmony-Levy, 2021), the nature of CIE teaching has received considerably less attention. To our knowledge this is the first systematic effort to map CIE teaching in UK universities since the 1990s (Schweisfurth 1999).

The overarching question guiding this study is the nature of CIE as taught at undergraduate level in the UK, as well as the value and the challenges of such courses from the perspectives of teachers. We explore these issues through the analysis of curriculum documents and interviews with teachers. Evidence for this study was collected as follows. In September 2020 we issued a call via the BAICE mailing list, social media and professional networks for UK-based colleagues to share the handbooks for undergraduate courses which address comparative education, international education and/or globalisation. Materials for 40 units (Appendix 1) were received from colleagues at 24 institutions (9 pre-1992, 15 post-1992). Following this, in Spring 2021 interviews were conducted with seven teachers of CIE (4 pre-1992, 3 post-1992).

In this report we share findings on the geographical and thematic coverage of CIE at undergraduate level, and teachers' perspectives on the purposes as well as the challenges of teaching these courses. We hope that findings from this study can inform future teaching, curriculum development and debate in this area.

2. Geographical and thematic coverage of CIE at undergraduate level

In this section we report the nature of CIE as taught at undergraduate level in the UK, exploring patterns in substantive themes and geographical coverage.

Geographical coverage

Ten of the 40 handbooks (25%) made no explicit reference to geographical areas covered in the unit. Some of these units are intentionally broad, seeking to appeal to anyone with an interest in education outside the UK, for example:

“This module is for those students interested in exploring the influence of globalisation on educational provision. It may be of particular interest to those who would like to work abroad or in an international context” (*2nd year unit, post-1992 HEI*).

In other cases, a focus on particular contexts was suggested by reference to the Education for All initiative or the Global Monitoring Report, signifying a concern for education in the Global South.

By tallying explicit references to countries, regions and continents within the unit handbooks, a picture emerges of the relative attention received by different parts of the world in CIE undergraduate units (Table 2.1). As this table shows, education in Europe receives greatest attention, featuring in 29 out of 40 handbooks (72.5%); Asia and Pacific is the second most prominent geographical region, referenced in 19 out of 40 handbooks (47.5%).

Table 2.1 Curriculum coverage by geographical region

Region	Tally (out of 40)
Europe	29
Asia & Pacific	19
Africa	15
North America	12
Latin America	9
Middle East	3

Breaking down geographical coverage by country offers a more fine-grained picture of curriculum attention across CIE units (Table 2.2). It should be noted that since we only counted explicit references to countries by name, these figures are likely to underestimate coverage of the UK and USA (which often pass unmarked).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the UK is the most commonly-referenced country, appearing in 17 of the 40 (42.5%) unit handbooks. There is a clear orientation toward European countries, and an emphasis on countries with a high PISA performance, such as Finland which appears in 5 (12.5%) of the units. Some of the most populous countries are not necessarily well-represented: for example, Brazil, with the sixth largest country population in the world, appeared in only one reading list. Latin America is poorly-represented overall, with only Chile appearing in more than one unit (in both cases as an example of neoliberal education reform). Other omissions are apparent: almost no attention is paid to the ex-Soviet contexts of Eastern Europe or Central Asia, and while one coursebook referenced Russia, there were no clearly marked examples of literature on Russia recorded in the reading lists. The Asia Pacific region was represented only by its larger countries, with no reference to smaller island states. Given the high enrolment of students from China at UK universities, it is also notable that only 5 units (12.5%) included explicit reference to China.

Table 2.2 Curriculum coverage by country

Country	Tally (out of 40)	Region
UK	17	Europe
Germany	8	Europe
India	6	Asia & Pacific
Australia	5	Asia & Pacific
China	5	Asia & Pacific
USA	5	North America
Finland	5	Europe
Japan	4	Asia & Pacific
Rwanda	3	Africa
Canada	3	North America
Sweden	3	Europe
Denmark	3	Europe
Hong Kong	3	Asia & Pacific
South Africa	2	Africa
Cameroon	2	Africa
Ethiopia	2	Africa

Chile	2	Latin America
Norway	2	Europe
Portugal	2	Europe
Ireland	2	Europe
Israel	2	Middle East
Palestine	2	Middle East
Turkey	2	Middle East
South Korea	2	Asia & Pacific
Sierra Leone	1	Africa
Sudan	1	Africa
Tanzania	1	Africa
Botswana	1	Africa
Mozambique	1	Africa
Ghana	1	Africa
Uganda	1	Africa
Zimbabwe	1	Africa
Quebec	1	North America
Brazil	1	Latin America
El Salvador	1	Latin America
Honduras	1	Latin America
Mexico	1	Latin America
Nicaragua	1	Latin America
Belgium	1	Europe
Catalonia	1	Europe
Greece	1	Europe
Netherlands	1	Europe
Northern Ireland	1	Europe
Poland	1	Europe
Romania	1	Europe
Spain	1	Europe
Jordan	1	Middle East
United Arab Emirates	1	Middle East
Bangladesh	1	Asia & Pacific
Indonesia	1	Asia & Pacific
Malaysia	1	Asia & Pacific
Pakistan	1	Asia & Pacific
Singapore	1	Asia & Pacific

Thematic coverage

Each unit handbook was assigned up to 20 keywords from a controlled vocabulary set of 86 terms which we developed inductively through the process of coding the first 10 handbooks. The vocabulary set was negotiated and agreed within the team, and a sample of catalogue entries were cross-checked by two team members. This process allowed us to identify patterns in the thematic coverage of CIE at undergraduate level. Excluding geographical markers, Table 2.3 lists the most common themes across the unit handbooks.

Table 2.3 Top 10 thematic areas in CIE units

Keyword	Explanation	Tally (out of 40)
globalisation	Refers to globalising trends, including increased contact between nations, shifts in international mobility, the emergence of the global marketplace, etc. E.g. "In an ever increasingly competitive world market, governments are paying more attention to international comparisons as they seek to find more effective educational policies to enhance their provision." (1 st year unit, post-1992 HEI)	28
cross-national comparison	Refers to comparisons of national education systems or approaches, or CIE as a field. For example, this lecture: "Comparative approaches and workshop" (3 rd year unit, pre-1992 HEI) or the learning outcome for this unit: "Be conversant with a range of frameworks and methods that can be used to make comparisons in education." (2 nd year unit, pre-1992 HEI) Nb. Reference to international large-scale assessments (e.g. PISA, TIMSS) are coded separately.	25
policy transfer	Includes specific reference to education policies being transferred, borrowed, or imposed. E.g. Description for lecture: "Models of comparison and thematic approaches: The concept of policy borrowing. Exploring other countries using basic models of comparison and examples." (3 rd year unit, post-1992 HEI)	20
gender	Includes specific references to gender or issues of girls/women's or boys/men's education with gender clearly highlighted. Does not include references to LGBTQI+ identities (which did not appear in the dataset). E.g. "In particular, the module gives critical attention to the key geo-political themes of global educational provision, gender, the quality of the type of education provided as well as the actual impact of education on countries, particularly developing ones." (3 rd year unit, post-1992 HEI)	14
inequalities	Refers to inequalities in general, with more specific forms of inequality, such as poverty, social class, gender, rurality, indignity, and migration, coded separately. For example, this title for a lecture: "Inequality in education." (3 rd year unit, post-1992 HEI)	14
SDGs	Specific references to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs); the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All were coded separately. For example, indicative content for this unit: "[Students] will investigate major developments in the field such as the drive for increasing rights for people with disabilities, Education for All, inclusive education and the place of SEND in the current Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's)." (2 nd year unit, post-1992 HEI)	14
children/youth	General references to children, their lives and development, but does not include more specific topics related to children, including children's rights, child labour, or child soldiers, which have their own codes. E.g. Unit learning outcome: "Be familiar with empirical research related to the roles and relationships in family and its connection with children's learning and development, for example concerning parenting, fathering and sibling relationships." (1 st year unit, pre-1992 HEI)	12

development	Refers to development as a field and sector, including international development. For example, this lecture title: “Explanations for Development and Underdevelopment” (3 rd year unit, post-1992 HEI).	12
culture	General references to culture, e.g. this lecture description: “Comparing schools, teachers & teacher education – culturally situated concepts.” (3 rd year unit, pre-1992 HEI)	11
Education for All	Includes specific reference to the Education for All; the MDGs, SDGs, and other international policies, agreements, or programmes were coded separately. E.g. this listed module content: “Critically appraising a range of Global Education Policies, e.g. MDGs, SDGs, Education for All and Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs).” (3 rd year unit, post-1992 HEI)	10
race	General references to race, with more specific references, such as critical race theory, coded separately. For example, “The unit will encourage participants to develop a sociological understanding of class, gender and race inequalities in education and explore their intersecting effects.” (3 rd year unit, pre-1992 HEI)	10
postcolonial / decolonial perspectives	Includes reference to postcolonial or decolonial themes, using those specific terms. For example, this lecture title: “The view from sub-Saharan Africa: decolonising the mind.” (2 nd year unit, pre-1992 HEI).	10

Towards the top of the list are terms which mark out CIE as a field – a concern for cross-national comparisons, in globalised and globalising contexts. Also high up, though somewhat less prevalent, is explicit discussion of “policy transfer”, which featured in half the unit handbooks. Global education policy statements (SDGs, Education for All) which are likely to indicate a consideration of education in the Global South are also common points of reference in these units. Another notable point is the emphasis given to postcolonial and decolonial perspectives, which featured in 25% of unit handbooks.

A more detailed picture of thematic coverage is provided in Table 2.4, which shows all keywords which featured in 5 or more handbooks.

Table 2.4 Prevalence of thematic areas across CIE units

Keyword	Tally (out of 40)	Keyword	Tally (out of 40)
globalisation	28	pedagogy	7
cross-national comparison	25	league tables	7
policy transfer	20	Special Educational Needs and Disability	7
gender	14	UNESCO	7
inequalities	14	human rights	6
SDGs	14	MDGs	6
children/youth	12	neoliberalism	6
development	12	teachers	6
culture	11	alternative education	5
Education for All	10	capability theory	5
race	10	children's rights	5
postcolonial / decolonial perspectives	10	conflict	5
Inclusion	9	international large-scale assessments	5
poverty	9	internationalisation	5

OECD	8	social change	5
social justice	8	sustainable education	5
INGOs/IGOs	7		

3. Teachers' perspectives on CIE at undergraduate level

To gain a richer understanding on the nature of CIE at undergraduate level, we conducted semi-structured interviews with seven academic teachers of CIE courses from six universities in the UK (three pre-1992, three post-92). The intention was to capture teachers' perspectives on the nature, aims, priorities and challenges of teaching CIE at undergraduate level. The interviews, which took place in the spring of 2021, were recorded and transcribed for the purposes of analysis. Analysis was based on a process of inductive category building. Participants were given assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, and reminded of the voluntary nature of their participation, as well as their right to withdraw at any point.

Purposes and priorities

Participants were asked to discuss their views on the purposes of and priorities for CIE within undergraduate education, and their responses revealed a number of widely shared ideas that are often reflected in the literature. Two themes which dominated conversations were CIE as a means of promoting *critical thinking* and as a form of *intercultural education*.

The aim to develop students' critical thinking was raised frequently in these discussions. All interviewees talked about the importance of provoking students to reflect critically on their own experiences and being confronted with different ideas on education. They expressed the view that this would help decentre student thinking by troubling in-grained assumptions and providing students with tools to build a critical awareness, as evidenced by the following comments:

"I think that one of the purposes is to de-centre them a little bit, and make them think about their own experiences in the light of educational practice more widely."

"...using comparative lenses as a way of building critical awareness..."

One respondent related this aim to Sadler's ideas on how CIE can help us "to understand our own society better by problematizing the taken for granted". Another referred to the value of CIE in helping students to deal more critically with educational comparisons in the media, for example:

"I think it's very important to teach students to be able to critically deal with evidence and assess certain claims that they come up against in the media."

A second but allied purpose of CIE was said as "a kind of inter-cultural training". This notion of developing "multi-cultural awareness" and "global literacy – moving beyond our own immediate environment" was frequently referred to as a means of helping students explore and deal with notions of otherness and difference, as well as to recognise commonalities. One pre-92 participant felt that CIE could support students in this aim by "moving away from the West as a benchmark of comparison," echoing the idea of decentring students mentioned above. This idea of considering educational issues elsewhere as a means of stimulating student's critical re-evaluation of their own and others' experiences was stressed on several occasions; the same interviewee felt this was particularly important in the context of his pre-92 HEI, where many students could be confronted with facing and problematizing their own socio-economic privilege via CIE.

A number of other purposes were mentioned that might be categorised as centred on students' broader educational development. For some, this was a question of CIE acting as a preparatory form of "social science training" that could support student thinking and learning on their courses of study. Such thinking was also reflected in one participant's view that CIE, with its focus on research studies and methods, benefitted students as preparation for their undergraduate research projects which take place in their final year. For others, a particular aspiration for CIE was that it would be part of "a mission to educate about the rest of the world". Several respondents, particularly among the post-92 sector, expressed the view that many undergraduates lacked knowledge and understanding of international issues in education, and hoped that their CIE units would contribute to "filling some of these gaps", as they saw it, by "expanding horizons of knowledge" and developing "insights in and understandings of how we grapple with education across the world". This idea of "filling gaps" was seen as particularly important in the post-Brexit climate where it was felt that CIE should aim to disrupt insular thinking by promoting "global mindedness", reinforcing once again the inter-cultural angle discussed above.

While for some this mission brought with it "a focus on the big ideas in education", others revealed that their aspirations from CIE had more specific inflections. Some participants discussed aims that focused strongly on desires to develop students' awareness of colonial histories and legacies of empire by getting students to engage with scholarship from the Global South and notions of curriculum decolonisation. For others, enabling students to appreciate the centrality of politics and ideology in shaping educational systems was a particular goal. One participant mentioned how this aim in a sense went beyond developing understanding by being linked to a transformative goal of "making students political agents of change" as a result of their newly acquired understandings:

"...trying to shape the world and empowering students to kind of go, 'Well actually, the world is a big place and this country over there, well they do things really differently. Why can't we do that as well? How can I make a difference in order to make this country more like that country?'"

A more instrumental view was expressed by two participants who discussed the value of CIE in terms of supporting the aspirations of their institutions to prepare students for international employment and overseas career opportunities.

Challenges of teaching CIE at undergraduate level

Participants were asked to share their views on the challenges they identified in teaching CIE at undergraduate level. Again, a number of common themes emerged across the interviews. For the purposes of discussion, these can be classified into three broad categories that will be explored below – *student-related issues*, *staff-related issues* and *institutional constraints*.

Student-related challenges

With regard to student-related issues, many respondents from both sectors mentioned student prior knowledge as a common teaching challenge. It was recognised that many undergraduates would inevitably lack the disciplinary foundations that postgraduate students generally come equipped with, and that this often presented difficulties. Several interviewees explained that this lack of student knowledge could make CIE units appear rather abstract and beyond their lived experiences:

"UK students are the majority. We found that they didn't have much knowledge of colonial histories."

“For some people in the group you're talking about things that may be beyond their experience.”

“Some of them, they had absolutely, not even an understanding that the United Kingdom is made up of several nations, and I wanted to cry.”

While it was acknowledged that many students would overcome this challenge, our participants also recognised that many students were uncomfortable with the degree of unfamiliarity involved. Interviewees from the post-1992 universities in particular commented on a perceived narrowness of student horizons and political interests. This was related to less experience of travel (perhaps reflective of socio-demographic factors more characteristic of student intakes in widening participation institutions) and more insular mind-sets; as mentioned earlier, one participant expressed concern that the situation may become compounded further by Brexit.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the perceived narrowness of interests and deficit in knowledge resulted in widely observed motivational issues. One post-92 interviewee expressed the view that student motivation and interest in CIE had noticeably declined in recent years. His explanation drew again on the widening participation context – the university increasingly attracted local students who prioritised regional aspirations and interests; CIE’s focus on issues well beyond the local was perceived to present fundamental questions of relevance and importance for many students, and as such, an important disjuncture between subject focus and student orientation was noted:

“One of the big issues for me was the issue of student interest, particularly at a university that recruits local students with local interests, local connections, local horizons, and then suddenly asking them to think further afield, further away. Not for all students, but for some students that raised constant questions of relevance and purpose, because for them: ‘why do I want to know about this when I want to work in the Midlands?’”

Though concerns about motivation were also noted by some pre-92 participants, one interviewee noted a rather different attitudinal challenge – a “Little Englander” sense of cultural superiority among some students from more privileged backgrounds which sometimes resulted in a lack of interest in module content. Intriguingly, such attitudes were not exclusively restricted to UK students; one participant from a pre-92 HEI recruiting large numbers of privileged students from China noted the same disinclination:

“I think [there are] different nationalisms that kind of focus on ‘us as special’ and ‘there's not much to learn from others’, and kind of coming from a position of superiority in either the English or the Chinese variants of it.”

Staff-related issues

One implication for staff arising from the above was thus the challenge of adapting teaching to overcome the issues described. Participants repeatedly referred to attempts to make content relatable to students by bringing in newspaper articles and booking IT suites so that students could be guided in making connections and developing their knowledge of overseas contexts. The need to ignite and maintain interest was repeatedly acknowledged by the interviewees, as was the requirement for careful presentation and management of sensitive and complex issues relating to colonial histories, for example:

“We had to pay very careful attention then to presenting those histories and positioning the literature and the ideas that we were introducing. With reference to the context of colonisation in particular.”

Some participants mentioned that the diverse national composition of some teaching groups could also help to enrich and enhance the student learning experience, though managing their diverse competences was sometimes noted as an challenge in itself.

The content base of CIE units was not just an issue for students, however. All respondents noted that the wide-ranging knowledge required in teaching CIE, both in terms of the issues covered and the wide diversity of geographic settings, presented a key challenge for staff. Participants discussed the difficulty of developing and maintaining expertise across a wide range of topics and contexts in constantly changing landscapes:

“One of the first barriers was how little I knew about [laughs] scholarship from the Global South.”

“I think the challenges as a teacher is one’s own, my own, depth of knowledge of a particular context, and I was actually just reflecting on this the other day with a colleague. We can’t know every country’s history and context, so I find that – I mean it’s a challenge but it’s also a good one, that I end up having to kind of read and refresh my own understandings of even quite basics to be honest.”

This was associated with the ongoing challenge of remaining up-to-date through reading and scholarship. It was felt that becoming inexpert was a constant danger which ran the risk of staff simplifying issues and misrepresenting nuances – something particularly problematic in relation to CIE “where the CIE mantra is ‘context matters’”. Several staff admitted that for this reason, the choice of content for their modules was largely influenced by what they did know – their own research interests and expertise:

“I draw on examples from my own experience a lot, because I think you tend to understand a place more deeply if you’ve personally researched it or lived there.”

“If you’re going to be doing stuff on, let’s say Sweden or Cuba as I’ve mentioned, you’ll need to know something about the language, you’ll need to have had contacts there. You can’t just kind of walk into a classroom and start teaching on Cuba, you need to know some kind of background on it.”

One interviewee recognised that this made his teaching more Eurocentric in coverage, but felt that his ability “to pepper the teaching with examples of first-hand experiences and insights” was key in combatting motivational issues and engendering greater student enthusiasm.

The “expertise challenge” was sometimes met by recruiting staff with regional specialisms (e.g. sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America), but in most cases the onus remained with department staff to maintain and extend their own knowledge bases. This challenge was exacerbated at times by the availability of resources – for example, in some cases, access to the most recent educational scholarship in South America requires fluency in Spanish, thus presenting barriers for many staff and students.

Institutional constraints

Institutional support for CIE was noted as an additional issue. Where this was less strong, it was recognised that resourcing specialist staff and access to course materials would be more of a challenge:

“There’s probably a kind of institutional challenge in some places, which I’ve seen, where everyone – there is a bit of a discourse around that ‘everybody’s international these days, so why do we need specifically to teach international education, because all education is international?’”

“...I guess [there needs to be] recognition of the time and expertise and like the kind of resourcing around teaching comparative education that’s needed, that needs to be acknowledged and perhaps recognised more by universities”

A further institutional issue related to course structure. One participant expressed the view that a CIE unit that ran the length of the academic year would allow students more time to develop understanding and interest, and that this potential could be more limited in semester-based structures.

Summary of interview findings

A number of tentative conclusions can be distilled from the interviews:

- A broad consensus emerged on the purposes of CIE at undergraduate level, with respect to its ability to support critical thinking by disrupting existing assumptions; its potential to promote multi-cultural awareness and global-mindedness; and its contribution to enhancing students’ overall educational development.
- The interviews revealed three broad (and widely shared) areas of challenge in relation to teaching CIE. These included student-related issues (prior knowledge and experience; student motivation and cultural superiority complexes; and the resulting need to adapt teaching to respond to these challenges); staff-related issues (avoiding the risk of becoming inexperienced by developing and maintaining knowledge in a rapidly changing and ever-expanding field of scholarship); and ensuring institutional support for CIE with its need for specialist resourcing in terms of both staffing and course materials.
- Broad differences in approaches to CIE content were noted between pre- and post-92 universities; post-92 institutions offered wide-ranging courses which drew mainly – and perhaps somewhat superficially – on comparative perspectives on educational issues in Europe and around the globe; pre-92 interviewees tended to focus on education in the Global South and engage with issues of curriculum decolonisation.
- Interviewees’ views varied on the extent to which CIE is genuinely embedded in undergraduate education.

4. Conclusion

This report has outlined findings on the nature of CIE on undergraduate programmes in the UK based on the analysis of curriculum documents and interviews with teachers on CIE units. The study reveals patterns in the geographical and thematic coverage of these courses, and teachers’ perspectives on the value, as well as the challenges, of teaching CIE at undergraduate level.

We hope these findings will inform ongoing debates and decision-making about CIE teaching in UK universities. To support these efforts we recommend the establishment of shared spaces such as SIGs and other fora within relevant learned societies that can support the collective (re-)consideration of the practicalities and demands of teaching, and strengthening CIE at undergraduate level. Further research on students' perspectives on CIE would be welcome, as well as a similar review of CIE teaching at postgraduate level.

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Appendix – Details of curricula documents included in the study

40 unit handbooks were collected 17 from pre-1992 and 23 from post-1992 institutions. The names of units and institutions have been withheld to preserve anonymity.

Type of document	Description	#
Reading lists	Contains only the list of readings; may or may not be arranged by a weekly schedule.	4
Short module guide	1-2 pages and includes most or all of the following: brief module description, LOs, short list of key readings.	10, 2 did not include RL
Mid-length module guide	3-6 pages, including most or all of the following: brief module description, LOs, weekly schedule overview, short list of key readings. May include institutional language (attendance policy, etc.)	11, 3 did not include RL
Detailed module guide	7+ pages, including extensive detail with most or all of the following: brief module description, LOs, weekly detailed schedule overview with weekly summary and weekly readings, comprehensive list of all readings. May also include institutional language (attendance policy, etc.)	14, 1 did not include RL