

Defining Deficit: A Four-Lens Framework for Practice, Power, and Pedagogy

Dr. Sumeya Loonat

Senior International Student Lecturer, De Montfort University, United Kingdom

Wendy Ramku

Research Assistant, De Montfort University, United Kingdom

Abstract

Internationalisation in higher education continues to be shaped by tensions between institutional rhetoric of inclusion and the structural realities of practice. International students are frequently positioned through deficit narratives, constructed as lacking language proficiency, critical thinking, or familiarity with academic conventions, while the institutional conditions that produce these perceptions remain underexamined. In response, this paper introduces and evaluates a conceptual framework designed to support more ethical and expansive approaches to international student pedagogy. Developed through a cross-institutional project spanning four UK universities, the framework is grounded in participatory workshop data with academic and professional services staff. It proposes four interconnected lenses, positioning, epistemology, reflexivity, and structure, as tools for interrogating how international students are understood, taught, and supported. The paper evaluates the application of these lenses through workshop activities, including mapping exercises, collaborative discussions, and co-creation tasks. Findings indicate that the lenses enable staff to reframe deficit assumptions, surface previously unrecognised structural barriers, and develop more relational and inclusive pedagogic approaches. Ultimately, this paper argues that while the lenses offer a practical and transferable framework for staff development, their impact depends on institutional commitment to addressing the structural conditions they expose. As such, the framework serves both as a diagnostic tool and a call for systemic change in how internationalisation is enacted in higher education.