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NOT THE ONLY ONE

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My contribution is in the form of a letter written by an international support staff member to a student in a different university, where both are from a foreign background and have had to adapt to life in a less than racially diverse environment. It narrates the sharing of experience by the writer who is the only non-white person in her workplace, who empathizes with the student's own experience of settling in and feeling foreign. The intention is to show that it is possible to be resilient and open to experiences despite being the 'only one' in the group. It also includes a discussion around identities and cross-cultural communication.

Letter to an International Student

Dear Connie,

I hope this letter finds you well. It was lovely to meet you at the Christmas fair and chat about our experiences of coming to the UK. Although I'm a professional support staff member who is working at a different uni, and you're a student who is relatively new in the UK, we still have a lot in common: being in the UK higher education community while being far away from the environment and culture that each of us grew up in. I remember you mentioned 'feeling foreign' either in the classroom or when you are out and about, and this makes you feel self-conscious.

Nevertheless, it must have been a happy and exciting moment when you received that letter from the university and found out that you had been accepted for the course. Having been an international student myself at a university here (many years ago), I can understand what you have been going through. You are very brave to venture out on your own, to live independently, and you have chosen to live with housemates who come from the UK and other countries, instead of staying with the same group of students from your own country, who already understand your culture and speak your language. Being outside of your own group presents both opportunities and challenges. I'm sure there are lots of cultural exchanges for you to share with others and learn from others, including understanding the different day-to-day practices which people normally take for granted—because they assume that what's normal for them would also be normal for everyone else.

I'm glad to hear you've been enjoying all the new things to see and do, and places to eat and visit in the UK. Talking about visiting, thank you for inviting me over to Carlisle. I would love to see Carlisle Castle. Are you still working part time at the Castle gift shop? Apart from the necessary income, I think it's wonderful that you get to experience a little more of the everyday setting and environment by working here, seeing the world from two sides: as an international student, and also as an employee working in a foreign

country. As we've discussed, there are certainly differences in the work culture. Apart from that, interacting with colleagues in a language which isn't your native tongue can also be challenging, as you tend to think in your own language and then translate it in your head before you can express it.

You mentioned that it doesn't feel very 'international' at your university, and it's not as you had imagined before coming to the UK. I think I know what you mean. Working in higher education administration, it sometimes doesn't feel that international to me either. I have wonderful colleagues, but still most of the time I find myself to be the only person in the room who isn't British and isn't white, and so I can feel like the 'odd one out' too.

You mentioned feeling a little intimidated by being the only non-native-English-speaking person among your classmates, and you're finding it strange that nobody seems to be curious or concerned that you're the only one who looks and sounds different. But I could probably understand that from their end too. Here in the UK, it could be considered unnecessary or rude to point out differences and ask people lots of questions when you first meet them. Or maybe the other students in your class are shy themselves and don't wish to offend you in any way. Their thinking might be, "it's better to keep yourself to yourself," and there is a saying in the North that, "when in doubt say nowt"—which means it's better to say nothing than to cause offence.

Apart from that, the other students may not necessarily see you as 'different' as you actually feel. Of course, they might refer to you as someone who is 'not from here,' and you're maybe their 'foreign' friend rather than just their friend. But, you see, it's okay to be the only person in the room who looks and sounds different. Remain the warm, friendly person that you are, who is here to make friends and learn new things. The point I am trying to make is that whatever insecurities you might feel at the moment just because you seem to be 'the only minority' to step into a room, or café, or restaurant—remain open to your experience, and smile... It takes time to get used to things, so keep going. You have successfully made it this far, arriving in the UK and pursuing a postgraduate degree, leaving your family and closest friends, moving out of your comfort zone to new experiences—studying in Europe! Now that you are here, take it all in your stride: the people, the culture, the climate, the different ways of doing things here than back home where you're from. This is all part of the 'studying' experience.

It occurs to me that the more I travel, my viewpoint changes from seeing my world at home as 'the real world' to a view that 'we all come from different little foreign villages'—even if those foreign villages are actually big cities or modern nations. It doesn't necessarily follow that knowledge and understanding of different cultures and ethnicities is more sophisticated in the first world than in the developing world. We develop our understandings through our personal experiences and education. And if you're able to travel beyond your country of origin on that journey, those understandings become all the richer and more rewarding. I say this not to make light of that 'foreign feeling' and being the 'odd one out' that you have described. Pave the way for the possibility to learn from each experience. Be the learner *and* the educator, as we are not

just about where we are from, but, more importantly, where we are heading—the type of person we want to be and the community or world we would like to see for the future.

Since we last met, Newcastle is still very grey and misty. Picking up work again after the festive break has been a challenge to say the least. I have lived in the North East for the past 18 years, and you would think I would have gotten used to the winters by now. But winter still gets to me. I don't really mind the cold, as I can pile on my jacket, hat, scarf, and gloves. It's more the darkness that gets to me. It's dark when I start work, and dark when I leave work. The funny thing is, what I'm experiencing here is also what most of my local friends from here feel about winter too. They don't like the cold and dark evenings either! Having said that, the cold and dark evenings certainly won't last forever. Spring is on its way, bringing with it brighter and warmer days.

I would be delighted to hear more of your stories and adventures, so keep me posted. Please take good care of your health and wellbeing and know when to take a break. All the best, until the next time.

Yours sincerely,

M