Experiences of international students in UK Higher Education: possibilities and limits of interculturality

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Project Background

• 2 year, mixed methods research: 2 surveys and 11 case studies
• 4 UK universities – 2 ‘old’ and 2 ‘new’
• International undergraduate students (Year 1-2)
• ESRC-funded
At Home (e.g. parents, family relationships, etc.)

At University (e.g. lecturers’ support, ways of teaching, learning resources etc.)

Student Life (e.g. friendship patterns, accommodation finance, etc.)

In Yourself (e.g. positive attitude to life; internal states etc.)
Context: Internationalisation

Rapid internationalisation of higher education in the 1990s:

• ‘symbolic’ internationalisation (revenue): institutions of higher education become ‘active players in the global marketplace’ (de Wit, 2002: 227) (Turner and Robson, 2008)

• ‘transformative’ internationalisation (knowledge sharing and co-operation): ‘integrating an international/intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the academic institution’ (Knight, 1999: 16) (Turner and Robson, 2008)
Context: Literature

• A study abroad experience is:

  a significant transitional event that brings with it a considerable amount of accompanying stress, involving both confrontation and adaptation to unfamiliar physical and psychological experiences and changes

  (Cushner and Karim, 2004: 292)

• Study abroad as transitional event – intercultural attitude and skills development, identity shifts, stresses and rewards

• Literature gaps: methodology, focus, essentialist assumptions
Contact theory
(Allport 1954)

• Conditions for successful intergroup contact for development of mutual understanding:

1. Equality
2. Common goals
3. Intergroup co-operation
4. Authority support
Contact?

- Diverse student population
- Multicultural society

BUT

- Would like more interaction with host culture
- Increasing tendency to socialise with students from home culture
- Internet facilitates selective segregation
Nature of Contact: Diversity

• Multicultural society/university versus monocultural backgrounds

“The UK was a tolerant society”: over 60% reported agreement, with more than one in ten indicating strong agreement

‘I would honestly say that that has probably been the best thing about living in England: having that experience of many cultures and not just English culture’

(Tristan from Trinidad)
Equality?

Problems:
• Cost of living
• Language ability
• Teaching and learning norms

Initial inferiority complexes – but growth in confidence
"Powerless"

Back home I had a career and a future. I was in control of my own life, but I’ve lost track of that now. Because I had authority [as a hotel manager]. Here I’m virtually powerless. … Sometimes I miss “home”. Sometimes I miss my parents. Sometimes I miss my mum. Sometimes I just miss being a manager in the hotel. I miss my workplace.

(Doris, Cameroon)
Boring social life/lack of a sense of belonging

I was just wondering why I didn’t feel lonely at all when I first came here – because I didn’t know what was going to happen. So every day was a new day.

But this time I came back [after Easter break] I know what is going to happen to me. I know I’m going to have a presentation and lots of study … and every day is normal. To be honest I don’t like my personal life here. I enjoy my study life but my personal life is kind of boring. … Everyone [friends in England] has got their [own] stuff to do. …

I just felt that I didn’t belong here. It’s not my place. I’m the guest and the guest is always less powerful; and also they are the host or something like that.
Common goals?

- Assessment and competition
- Priorities – academic and social
YOUTH Culture

• ‘Social obligation’
• Challenges to social adaptation:

I haven’t been going out to many of the social activities and they like going out clubbing and things like that. So they would be talking about what they had done the night before and I would not really understand. That’s another way that you feel outside of the group. (Rina, Malaysia)
Intergroup co-operation?

- Mixed experiences of group work and other co-operative learning strategies
- ‘Learning shock’ in relation to class discussions
- Challenges of working with hosts students
Friendship Patterns

• Initial survey: easy to mix with international students from **home countries** (64%) and **other countries** (67%)

• Having made friends from home country: three months or less (50%) vs. over a year (33%).

• Role of cultural roots:
  – shared understanding
  – social and emotional resources

  ‘…when we come, we are basically alone, and being in a group, it just like helped us from not wanting to go back’. (Sophie, Mauritius)

  ‘…there is the language so you can find the way to say something without offending. Because we have a shared language we can be more diplomatic.’ (Guzel)
Identity Change (1)

• Maturity and interculturality

‘I’ve got two sets of values: one is for here and one is for China. … think they are just natural. … I’m a grown-up here. When I went back to China, I just went back to being the same – who I was – before I came here.’

(Jiayi, China)
Identity Change (2)

• “A locus of self”

It’s [studying in England] **opened up my thinking processes** as well. When you are born and brought up in a restrictive environment, everything is family and you only have a very limited view on things. But when you go to another country and study and you meet people from other countries, then it opens up your perspective and you realise that everything in the world is not the same.

**You are so torn between being yourself and what they want you to do** – what others want you to do…

(Raveena, India)
Authority support?

Patchy….

• Some positive experiences: induction/welcome weeks, mentor systems, language and study skills sessions, supportive individual tutors and students

• Some negative: not all tutors understanding or supportive
Interculturality: possibilities and limits

‘I’ll always be changed by what I experienced here, and by other cultures I saw here.’

(Nadia, Slovakian student)

But what will the nature of these changes be?
And how can universities facilitate the kind of contact that will ensure the changes reflect positive intercultural, academic and