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Title Exploring Graduate Employability through the International Student Lifecycle

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Introduction

International student mobility is the most visible aspect of the internationalisation of higher education in the 21st century (Altbach & Knight, 2007) and research into different aspects of the international student experience are important contributions to the literature. However, currently, research on the international student experience follows three distinct strands of empirical studies at different stages; motivation and decision making (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002); adjustment to academic and societal norms in host environment (Fakunle, Allison & Fordyce, 2016), and outcomes, such graduate employability (Blackmore et al., 2014). In this case, employability is generally regarded as the propensity for graduates to possess skills and competencies adequate to secure graduate-level employment, bearing in mind there are limiting factors such as the availability of jobs and the state of the economy.

While the merit of research into the different aspects of the student experience is not in dispute, there are two issues with this. First, the expected ‘natural progression’ from intentionality to actual experience is not captured and this suggests there is a gap in linking the expectations of prospective international students to their lived experience and the support provided by the host institution. Second, empirical research on employability development opportunities as part of international student experience could provide evidence for anecdotal claims about the benefit of higher education abroad, such as graduate employability. Yet, an extensive trawl of pertinent literature did not reveal any holistic study exploring the international student lifecycle which links all the aforementioned stages.

The graduate employability of international student is important in the current globalised scope of higher education. For instance, earlier theorisation of the individual ‘Push’ for advancement through acquiring valuable skills and knowledge in a ‘global market’ (McMahon, 1992) has been substantiated in many large-scale research suggesting that

employability is one of the key motivations for international student decision to study overseas (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002; Roy, Lu & Loo, 2016). It should be noted that marketing-oriented large-scale studies mostly target international applicants - who may or may not convert to students. There is a lack of insight on how the information from these datasets pertain to the lived experience of actual students to inform or support employability development opportunities.

To understand the development of graduate employability from the perspective of Masters-level international students in the UK, the exploratory qualitative study reported in this paper seeks to understand how employability is embedded in the international student lifecycle.

Research question

The overarching research question in the study was: how does employability feature in the motivation, the decision-making and the experience and the future plans of Masters-level international students?

Methodology

A qualitative methodology allowed an in-depth exploration of the lived experience of a target sample of participants using face-to-face semi-structured interview as the main method. This was supported with document analysis for a contextual understanding of the policy on internationalisation and employability at the institution where the study was conducted.

A target sample of international students from eleven non-EU countries (n=19) interviewed at the end of the first and second semesters were recruited from four programmes in the Schools of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences. Staff participants including four Programme Directors and two Senior Career Advisers were interviewed to gain insight on how employability development opportunities were provided within the scope of institutional practices.

Data collection started in December 2015 and was concluded in October 2016. At the time data saturation was reached as no new themes emerged from the ongoing thematic analysis of the data being collected.

Discussion

Prior work on the student lifecycle (HEFCE, 2001) was useful towards developing a four-stage conceptual international student lifecycle model (Figure 1). Using thematic analysis of the inductive data from the study, findings are presented using the international student lifecycle model.

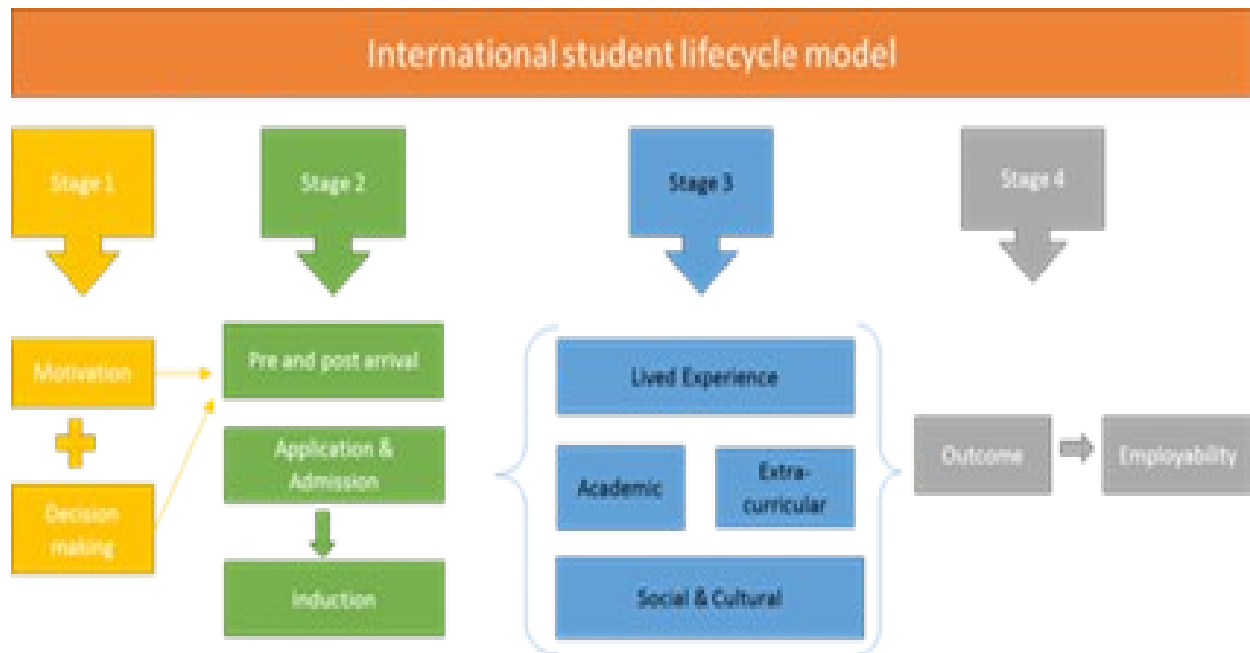


Figure 1. International student lifecycle

In stage one, in agreement with large-scale studies on international student decision making, employability was found to be a key motivator for study abroad. Similar again to such studies, other factors such as the quality of education in host countries was an important factor at the decision-making stage of the international student lifecycle.

The second stage of the international student lifecycle is a transitional stage from applicant to international student status, with access to explore opportunities provided by the host institution. Responses elicited from the study participants provide insight into their perceptions about available opportunities within and outside the campus.

The third stage involves the lived experience of the participants in terms of their academic and extra-curricular activities. The similarities and variations in the experiences of the participants provided rich insight into their experiences. At this stage, the data suggests that to a varying extent (not unrelated to programme of study), the participants were aware of the implicit and explicit employability development opportunities at the institution and beyond.

There were similarities and differences in the students' view when compared with the official employability-related documents and staff viewpoint.

The final stage in the international student lifecycle is the outcome stage which is related to graduate employability. The Masters-level students clearly linked their study abroad to enhancing their employability. Some students linked their success (for example, job offer) to aspects of their study abroad experience while some students have optimistic outlook about the value of their study abroad to enhance their employability. Interestingly, most of the students articulated the intrinsic worth of the study abroad experience for their personal development.

Conclusions

Although with global perspectives and increasing international body of students, still, institutions operate within a nation state. This means that institutions operate within the context of policies and practices towards human capital development contextualised from a national viewpoint. It is therefore unsurprising that graduate employability is the least explored aspect of the international student experience. This omission is not sustainable considering the importance placed on graduate employability as a key motivator for international student decision-making, and with dominant discourses such as economic gains and competitive advantages for knowledge economies as a key targets for host countries.

The study reported in this paper provides a holistic understanding of international student experience and their employability. This has implications for higher education providers and recruiters from a global pool of talent, as this research suggests that employability is important for international students, not only at the decision-making stage as widely reported, but at every stage of the international student lifecycle.

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