

Serial number 0186
Title International branch campus students' perceptions of their experience and employability
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Student choice of higher education (HE) is connected to student experience, i.e. their pre-university expectations of it. IBC students chose to study at an IBC because it facilitated their belief that desirable possible selves could be developed. Given how the choice is intertwined with their post-enrolment student experience, this paper is concerned with how IBC students perceived their experiences at university in relation to their future employability. The research context is two UK parent universities with two IBCs and one IBC respectively.

Universities, driven by global competition, marketisation and a consumerist orientation towards students, set a high premium on offering a quality student experience and achieving student satisfaction. However, the consumer metaphor does not lead to better consumer protection or accurate information about service quality to inform student decision-making (Maringe, 2011). In most countries there are quality assurance measures in place to safeguard students. Nevertheless, students' perspectives should be considered to ensure long-term sustainability of IBCs (Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2010).

There is little consensus on what student experience means. Research is often undertaken to report student experience, but there is little attempt to define the term apart from a general agreement that it is more than teaching and learning. The literature on student experience is wide-ranging but this paper focusses on student experience in the TNHE context only.

Despite IBCs' growth, there has been little research on IBC student experience, other than the student feedback evaluations undertaken by institutions (Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2012b). Among those who have examined TNHE student experience, their focus has been on student needs, expectations and satisfaction involving quality and teaching and learning issues (Ahmad, 2015; Mok & Xu, 2008; Chapman & Pyvis, 2006; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2012b; Miliszewska & Sztendur, 2010; Wilkins et al., 2012a; Wilkins & Balakrishnan, 2013), cultivation of social capital (Waters & Leung, 2012), and the spread of cultural imperialism (Djerasimovic, 2014). Apart from Djerasimovic (2014), the literature surveyed is primarily empirical. Studies which focussed on IBCs are Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2012a; 2013) and Wilkins et al. (2012a) who studied student satisfaction in IBCs in the UAE, and Ahmad (2015) did the same in Malaysia. The others were concerned with the broader TNHE.

This paper's reference to student experience involves a wide range but does not focus on student satisfaction or service quality. It encompasses an individual student's life experience during university covering academic and non-academic activities within or without the IBC and the parent university.

Investigating student satisfaction or service quality aligns with the metaphor of student as customer/consumer. This research does not label students as such although it assumes that in most cases, students and parents do look for value for their money. This research posits that they also search for options which match their ways of being and aspirations of 'becoming' within the means of affordability and their freedom to pursue these options. Therefore, the research contributes by

examining more holistically, rather than a consumerist focus, the student perceptions of their experiences while studying at an IBC and its parent university.

Critical realism is the lens through which a combined framework of economic theories of human capital, screening/signalling and identity is used to explain the interview data. This study examines IBC students' perceptions of their experiences and employability taking into account structure and agency. It also draws on Holmes' (2001) concept of employability and Wenger's communities of practice (1998).

Participants identified experiences which impacted their employability development and related how they (indirectly) impacted their employability and based on these, they shared their anticipated employability outcomes in the labour market or postgraduate study.

In examining the university phase, both mainland Chinese and Malaysian participants regarded it as a period where they were accumulating evidence to present themselves as having a potential to perform and be a member of a community of practice they would like to join (e.g., an accounting firm, a prestigious university in the USA). Indicators of knowledge and skills were academic achievement, intercultural experience and practical work-related experience gained through student activities on campus or internship off-campus. These together with social capital and character development (self-developed personality) represented their graduate identity. There was a broad agreement among participants that university provides opportunities for them to develop, but it was largely their responsibility to make an effort to step out of their comfort zone.

In the next stage of job recruitment/postgraduate study application, they sought to present themselves in a way which 'fit' with the employer/university. Ultimately, participants had a 'constellation of concerns' which were being shaped along their life trajectory by structural properties they encountered and their own agential powers.

Overall, participants had setbacks and disappointments as a result of choosing an IBC particularly when their experiences there and the parent university did not match their expectations. Nevertheless, they made their way through the IBC and the parent university by making the best out of their teaching and learning opportunities, the intercultural experiences, extra-curricular activities and internship or part-time employment opportunities.

Existing student experience research is mostly preoccupied with investigating student satisfaction and service quality. Students are assumed to be rational consumers motivated by value for their money. Such assumptions are unhelpful to explain what motivate these under-represented IBC students. Moreover, such customer-orientated studies focus on student experience relating to university facilities, curricula, etc. which are restricted to aspects within the university and usually measurable quantitatively. However, 'student experience' which is linked to employability seems wider than these aspects, suggesting that there is another dimension including aspects which might not be quantitatively measurable/discoverable. The implication for practice, thus, is to look into how this might be captured for individual institutions.

Most of the TNHE literature focussed on processes rather than outcomes. It is an under-researched field particularly with respect to undertaking qualitative studies on outcomes such as students' experiences and employability. Therefore, it would be useful to have more outcome based research on IBC students.

(988 words excluding references)

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