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“Despite the struggles, now I can see...”: Critical incidents during Chinese international student’s learning and development in UK master’s programmes

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The burgeoning internationalisation of HE and growth in student mobility have become visible components and characteristics that are reflected in various platforms. Even considering how the recent global pandemic affected global HE and student mobility, figures show there is still a growing number of international students who choose or plan to study in the UK, considering the high-quality and rewarding experiences and outcomes. Drawing on a longitudinal project that explores international Chinese students’ experiences and development in UK master’s programmes, this paper focuses specifically on how they perceived the impactful learning experiences and outcomes of such an international learning journey. This paper involved a visually guided interview method, i.e., ‘Rivers of Experience’ to identify critical incidents that enhanced international student’s engagement and fostered their development. The analysis focused on aspects of teaching and learning provision and educational outcome in the wider context of the internationalisation of HE.

Full paper

Introduction

Increasing numbers of international students bring distinct cultures and educational backgrounds to HE, and they expect their experiences to be a rewarding journey (Kettle, 2017; Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). Considering the vital role international students play in teaching and learning at HE institutions, their voices need to be heard regarding the personal and professional development they expect to obtain from their great investments of time and resources (Green, 2019). The existing literature still lacks evidence regarding universities' efforts to produce a rich and rewarding learning environment (Kahu & Picton, 2020). It also lacks a detailed understanding of how international students view their experiences and development over time.

Literature Review

An international educational experience is perceived as both exciting and frightening regarding everyday experiences, including many opportunities for the development of skills and knowledge, both academically and professionally (Lee, 2014). The reasons for international students' strong interest in the UK as an educational destination are manifold, e.g., the reputations of its HE institutions and programmes, their worldwide rankings (Lomer, 2018), and the variety of academic, personal, and social benefits that can be gained (Lillyman & Bennett, 2014). Though there is growing attention to the implications of the internationalisation of HE for teaching and for intercultural experiences (Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2018), international students still tend to be viewed as inhabiting a 'grey zone' (Yu & Moskal, 2018, p.655). Their outsider status and the cultural, interactional, and communicative differences and difficulties they face in the countries where they attend university expose them to feeling 'uncertain, vulnerable and de-powered' (Marginson, 2012, p. 498). It would appear that an in-depth understanding of international students' experiences and development is necessary to ensure they are being provided with quality education, and to provide insights into ways of improving the quality and outcome of education (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021).

The study

This paper focuses on the contextual outcomes of international Chinese students learning in TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of

Other Languages) master's programmes. A longitudinal, qualitative phenomenological research design was employed. The innovative visually guided interview, 'River of Experience' (Iantaffi, 2011), was conducted, in which 22 international Chinese students drew their key experiences as bends in their master's learning river. The longitudinal design enabled the obtaining of experience-generated knowledge and contributed to a holistic understanding of students' dynamic engagement and developmental trajectory over time.

Findings

Through the "Rivers of Experience" interviews, four key experiences were identified that are critical and impactful for their development. They are:

- 1) The initial critical experiences, i.e., **adjustment and struggles to complete academic tasks** illustrate their early adjustment phase, and students' motivations and efforts to better engage with the master's input, which played essential roles in their development.
- 2) Another aspect considered influential for their development was their **transformative learning by completing a variety of academic tasks**, even though these experiences often involved struggles. Through various academic tasks in their everyday learning, students were able to learn and think about theories and practices, not only engaged with these activities in multifaceted ways as master's students, but also managed to observe, monitor and reflect on their experiences and add their reflections to their imagined future dimensions, i.e., their 'possible language teacher selves' (Kubanyiova, 2012, pp. 58-59).
- 3) The most impactful moments that triggered change and development were the teaching opportunities provided by the programmes. It was through these **practical experiences that they gained great pedagogical value from the combined teaching opportunities**, which made them think deeply about the relationship between theory and practice, e.g., develop practical skills, gain in-depth knowledge and make a connection with realities.
- 4) '**Apprenticeship of observation**' by **TESOL staff**. Finally, the

findings highlight the significant role TESOL staff played as role models in their developmental paths. Students paid attention not only to the staff's teaching content, but also to their teaching practices (e.g., teaching methodology and interaction with students). This enabled the student to construct their future selves in relation to their identity goals and aspirations and understand their responsibilities regarding their future career.

Discussion

These incidents exemplify the situated processes and outcomes of student engagement during their international master's learning at UK universities with many practical implications, including the effective approaches to achieving the intended learning outcomes. The findings also call for institutions and staff members to pay greater attention to optimising students' learning experiences and enhancing student engagement (Bryson, 2014), e.g., provide greater embedded support in order to enable international students to become successful members of their new academic communities (Choi, 2021).

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