

“No more snapshots?”: Using longitudinal studies to explore postgraduate international students’ multifaceted experiences

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The burgeoning internationalisation of Higher Education (HE) and growth in international student mobility have become visible components and characteristics in the UK. Yet, little attention has been given to empowering international students, i.e., lacking insights into their nuanced experiences and developmental trajectory over time. Against this backdrop, our paper aims to bring different research together highlighting students’ voices to provide a more holistic overview of the study experiences of Chinese international students who pursue PGT programmes in the UK. We highlight the value of conducting studies over time with international students in order to not only access the rich and detailed accounts of their stories and experiences, but also to bridge the empirical gap of understanding not only the ‘what’, but more importantly the ‘how’ of their complex and diverse experiences.

Full paper

Background

As international student mobility has continuously expanded over the last half century (OECD, 2021), international students’

experiences have drawn the attention of policymakers, universities, researchers and other stakeholders. However, much of the literature on international students begins from a position of deficit, highlighting gaps of knowledge, skills and language competence (Heng, 2018). Currently, there is limited research giving voices to international students in a longitudinal fashion, for example, seeking insight into their nuanced experiences and developmental trajectory over time. In the UK, postgraduate taught (PGT) programmes are highly attractive to international students, particularly, Chinese international students (HESA, 2021). However, this cohort has been largely described in 'snapshots' that focus on part of their experiences instead of a whole story (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2021).

Methodology

The longitudinal-style projects in this paper all incorporated the use of in-depth interviews and other qualitative data collection methods, e.g., diaries, photo-elicitation and observations. Conducted over an extended period of time, longitudinal research enables researchers to explore and analyse social phenomena in-depth, inter alia, those ongoing developments or changes (Mills et al., 2012). At the same time, longitudinal research helps researchers to seek explanations or illuminations by identifying similarities and patterns emerging over time, either within a single case or across cases (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In this sense, longitudinal studies with international students can effectively capture the nuances and changes over the course of their whole study experience, pre, during and post-departure.

Our paper aims to bring different research together, highlighting students' voices to provide a more holistic overview of the study experiences of Chinese international students who pursue PGT programmes in the UK. Three studies, each with a longitudinal design, focus on the distinct stages of Chinese international students' experiences; application experiences in the pre-arrival stage, learning experiences during study in the UK, as well as career development and aspirations of their post-study achievements. Across these three empirical studies, we highlight the value of conducting longitudinal-style studies with international students in

order to not only access the rich and detailed accounts of their stories and experiences, but also to bridge the empirical gap of understanding not only the 'what', but more importantly the 'how' of their complex and diverse experiences (Neale, 2020).

Findings

Some of the key findings of our paper highlight the changes that happen over time such as: prior to studying abroad, Chinese international students' decision-making process becomes more dynamic, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Students went over more rounds of the choice process in terms of selecting courses and universities, while at the same time, their perceptions of the functioning of education agents ongoingly changed throughout different stages of the application process.

Students' learning journeys in the UK can be understood in more depth, for example, students begin with little understanding of the UK learning environment and requirements for studying on a PGT programme in the UK, but throughout the course of their studies (and the research) the students' transitions into this new environment are recorded to reveal the process of unlearning specific practices from their previous educational experiences to build on that knowledge and relearn new ways of academic competence which allowed them to not only be successful students in China, but also to thrive in their new environment (the UK). The longitudinal nature of these project designs also enabled the illumination of changes among students to show an improved understanding of themselves and their learning over a certain period, e.g., how Chinese cultural characteristics can impact their learning in a positive way, and their evolving sense of belonging.

This design style also allowed for the exploration of students' reflections back on their study in the UK once they had returned home. At the beginning of their journey in the UK, students were convinced that studying abroad was something they really must do. When reflecting back on their study abroad experiences, they realised that they could have had equally valuable experiences if they had remained in China.

Summary

We argue that using a longitudinal-style approach to research with international students allowed us to gain a more holistic understanding of the students' mobility experiences and provided nuanced insights into the phenomenon being researched (Watts et al., 2019). The authors suggest this research approach with international students enables the illumination of changes and provides improved understanding over time. At the same time, we discuss the practical recommendations for conducting longitudinal studies with international students for researchers and key stakeholders, such as the value, success and tips in terms of 'hearing' students' voices.

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