

234 “‘It’s not easy’”: Amplifying voices of ‘Global South’ international students in the UK

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Research Domains

Student Access and Experience (SAE)

Abstract

The dominant discourse of international students characterised homogeneously as socially, culturally and economically advantaged is increasingly contested as international student mobility (ISM) flows are changing. However, empirical analyses of the experiences of international students from diverse backgrounds remain limited. This paper seeks to offer a contribution to this lacuna through a consideration of the structural inequalities in higher education experienced by Global South international students in the UK. Twelve semi-structured interviews were undertaken with international students from the Global South using a narrative inquiry approach. The thematic analysis drew upon ‘intersectional consciousness’ and identified gender, economic precarity and familial commitments as shaping participants’ experiences of studying. In highlighting the heterogeneity of international students’ lived experiences, it is recommended that their voices are utilised in the university sector to develop more supportive policies regarding equality, diversity and inclusion.

Full paper

Context:

The literature on international student mobility (ISM) has tended to focus on this group of learners as privileged, transnational elites who are able to ‘convert different capitals across borders for the ultimate purpose of maintaining and maximizing social advantages’ (Yang, 2018: 698). However, internationally mobile students are a heterogeneous group, and their experiences are multidimensional and highly stratified (Glass et al., 2022; Mittelmeier et al., 2022; Ploner, 2017; Schartner & Shields, 2023). A growing number of students from a wider range of geographical areas and socio-economic backgrounds are seeking international student mobility (Deuchar, 2022), for example the estimated upturn of outwardly mobile students from sub-Saharan Africa is projected to double by 2050 (Kigotho, 2023). Therefore, this paper seeks to critically interrogate and deconstruct the notion ‘international student experience’.

Global South international students are likely to be impacted by pre-existing inequalities – with hidden costs and risks to student mobility with the potential for social and economic inequalities being reproduced rather than challenged (Malet Calvo et al., 2022: 384). The term ‘Global South’ emphasises geopolitical relations of power and ‘references an entire history of colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standards, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained’ (Dados & Connell, 2012: 12-13). Countries within Latin America, Asia, Africa and Oceania are typically defined as part of the ‘Global South’. One impact of pre-existing inequalities for Global South students may be their dependence upon precarious paid employment whilst studying (Malet Calvo et al., 2022). Arguably, Global South international students may encounter particular challenges as part of ISM due to the status of their country of origin and they may need specific types of support during their period of study abroad (Malet Calvo et al., 2022: 383). There are likely to be economic and emotional challenges experienced which have to be balanced against individualised success stories of social mobility.

Main research question:

How do gender and socioeconomic background affect the identities, experiences of university life and understandings of mobility of international students from the ‘Global South’ studying at UK universities?

Research Design:

Narrative inquiry was adopted as the methodological approach in this study. As Clandinin & Connelly (2004:19) contend 'stories are powerful, we all tell stories in our everyday life'. The semi-structured interviews with the twelve international students lasted approximately 50 minutes with the length of interviews lasting between 30 minutes to one hour and 30 minutes. The intersectional thematic analysis acknowledges that stories are shaped by the social, economic and historical context that we are situated in. The thematic analysis of the interview transcripts drew upon the concept of 'intersectional consciousness' which highlights participants' understandings of the advantages and challenges related to how their multifaceted intersecting identities influence their educational experiences (Nair & Vollhardt, 2020; Curtin et al., 2015).

Ethics:

The study was approved by the Ethics Committee at the institution at which the researchers both worked. The ethical guidelines of both the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2018) and the British Association for Applied Linguistics (BAAL, 2021) were also drawn upon. The study is mindful of confidentiality and anonymity and consequently pseudonyms are used for the names of participants and the names of higher education institutions.

Findings and discussion:

Similarly to Pásztor (2015: 833) our findings query if universities have entered a new era of 'widening participation' or if HEIs continue to act as 'transmitters of privilege'. The study findings revealed that our Global South participants' lived experiences did not 'fit' with the dominant narrative of 'privilege' typically attributed to international students. Furthermore, 'privilege' was understood comparatively with their lifestyles in their country of origin. Paid employment was needed to manage living costs and/or tuition fees in the UK and to send remittances. Scholarship funding from countries of origin was not generally sufficient for covering the cost of living in the UK. Both men and women students engaged in transnational caregiving providing both emotional and financial assistance. The challenges encountered by Global South international students meant that competing demands were managed alongside studying, highlighting that there are gaps in our understanding related to programme outcomes for students from the least developed countries (Campbell & Neff, 2020). This paper amplifies and pluralizes the voices of international students from the 'Global South', with the intention of providing 'narrative story data' for universities wishing to improve their support services in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion.

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