

The ‘beyond the classroom’ practices and self-formation of students on postgraduate programmes with a majority from one country: an exploration of the links between the conceptual framework and methodology.

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Abstract

Much research and policy discusses international students or particular nationality students as homogeneous in terms of their identities and needs. Yet, it is important to transcend the nationality or fee status labels to explore students’ multifaceted identities. This paper concerns a work-in-progress study with students on postgraduate programmes with the majority of students from one country. The aims are: 1) to explore how postgraduate students’ out-of-class experiences contribute to their UK experience, identities and ‘self-formation’ (Marginson, 2024); 2) to challenge prevailing stereotypes about international / particular nationality students; 3) to produce findings with the potential to facilitate the ‘self-formation’ process. This paper focuses on the links between the conceptual framework (recognition of students’ heterogeneous identities and agency with a focus on ‘self-formation’) and the study design. The aim is to reflect on whether the chosen methodology enables participants to share these moments of ‘self-formation’ and captures their evolving identities.

Full paper

Much research, policy and public discourse discusses international students or students of a particular nationality as homogeneous in terms of their identities, needs and experiences (Jones, 2017; Lomer, 2018; Marginson, 2012). In the UK, it is a common phenomenon to have postgraduate programmes mostly consisting of ‘international’ students and, in some cases, to have large cohorts from one country. These situations are sometimes referred to as ‘enrolment intensity’ (Jones, 2017); a term reserved for international cohorts rather than home students since the diversity of the ‘home’ cohort is already acknowledged. The phenomenon of a course having the majority of students from a ‘single-sending’ country is little discussed; perhaps because it raises uncomfortable issues for universities promising both a UK and global experience. Aligning with the idea that identity should not be ‘essentialised’ and that individual experiences are complex and ‘socially-situated’ (McArthur, 2020), it is important to go beyond the labels of nationality or fee status to explore the many facets of any student’s identity. Therefore, there is a clear case for ‘intersectionality’ to be considered in relation to all students (Lomer & Mittelmeier, 2020).

Further, while much of the literature focuses on issues of integration and adjustment to the host country's culture and education system, often placing such students in a 'deficit' position (Jones, 2017; Killick, 2017; Marginson, 2014;), it is possible to take a more positive view and focus on how students actively create their UK experience and form their identities. Marginson (2014, 2024) develops the concept of 'self-formation', drawing on Archer's (1995) concept of 'reflexive agency', whereby self-formation encompasses autonomy, reflexive agency, will to learn, immersion in disciplinary knowledge and most recently, the 'relational experiences of students beyond the classroom' (Marginson, 2024, p. 750). The last aspect is a key focus of our study, outlined below, albeit in the context of programmes with majority single-country cohorts. Relatively little is known about how such students relate to each other, to students from 'minority' countries or how they actively shape their own identities and UK experiences including how they engage with different communities.

This paper is based on a work-in-progress study we are conducting with students on postgraduate programmes in the School of Education. The aims are: 1) to explore how postgraduate students' out-of-class experiences contribute to their 'UK' / 'global' experience, identities and self-formation 2) to challenge prevailing stereotypes about international / particular nationality students 3) to produce resources from the project with the potential to facilitate the process of 'self-formation'. The study design involves a qualitative approach based around interviews with any students on such programmes (including the majority-nationality / other students) at two points during the year. The interviews are based around a portfolio of images curated by the participants from their own / stock photos which reflect experiences, people and spaces that have been important to them during the year. This aspect of the study design affords the participants some agency in the generation of the data (Mittelmeier, Lomer & Unkule (Eds.), 2024). We have completed the first round of interviews and have some preliminary themes emerging from the data.

The focus of this paper, however, is to consider the links between the conceptual framework (recognition of heterogeneous / multi-faceted identities and students' agency with a focus on the notion of 'self-formation') and the study design. The aim is to reflect on the extent to which the chosen methodology enables participants to share these moments of 'self-formation' and whether it captures their evolving attitudes and identities. Preliminary findings will be shared to support this reflection on the pros and cons of the methodology in relation to the aims and conceptual framework; including how the study design might generate findings which enable universities, and staff within them, to facilitate such self-formation.

In terms of the conference theme of resistance, we, and we believe our students too, would like to resist the negative stereotypes that are often assigned to international / particular country students. While not ignoring some of the less positive experiences during their year in the UK or the uncomfortable ethical issues that surround such courses, by focusing on their individual identities, agency and self-formation, it is possible to focus on a more positive, dynamic and agentic view of their experiences which could benefit all students, those who work in universities and people in the surrounding communities.

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