

International students in transition to master's study in the UK (0208)

Walter Catherine ¹, ¹*University of Oxford, Oxford, United Kingdom*

This paper reports on one strand of a project sponsored by the Higher Education Academy National Teaching Fellowship programme to investigate various transitions to master's-level study. The transition focused upon in this part of the project is the one undertaken by international students, here taken to mean those with a first degree awarded outside the UK, whether in Europe or elsewhere. The homogeneity of this group is not unproblematic, as Hyland, Trahar, Anderson and Dickens (2008) have noted: the category comprises students from a range of countries whose educational traditions vary widely on a cline of similarity to that of the UK.

The study draws on a series of semi-structured group and individual interviews, journal entries and email exchanges carried out with sixteen international students from a range of countries, a range of first degree disciplines, a range of social science master's degree programmes, and a range of first-language backgrounds, including native English speaking backgrounds. The data were collected over the course of the students' one-year master's course in a single case study institution. The focus was on students' subjective experiences of their courses and on aspects of their learning trajectories that had an impact their progress towards the goals that they had set for themselves. Interview transcriptions and journal texts were analysed for emerging themes and for critical episodes that illuminated the research questions. Two major issues, those of the shock of arrival and of the pressure to cope with the short timescale of a UK master's degree, will be dealt with in depth, and a range of other issues will be related to these in an attempt to develop ways of understanding these students' experiences.

The initial entry of international students into a foreign educational culture, 'the shock of arrival' (Brown and Holloway, 2008) has been documented elsewhere. These students are moving from an environment where they have typically been high achievers who communicate well and understand the rules of the educational culture to an environment where their knowledge of conventions, written and unwritten, is partial, and where the means of building that knowledge is not always clear. This means that the transition to master's-level study is particularly arduous and can put students' perception of their own 'intelligence, personality, and sense of control in jeopardy' (Pellegrino Aveni, 2005:10). This is a heightened example of the phenomenon that Bourdieu (1991) observed in his seminal study of students from working-class backgrounds acceding to university education in France, with the linguistic and social capital of their home environment (*habitus*) not affording them the means of dealing with the new environment (*field*). This move has also been associated in the literature with a shift in the level of discrepancy between the perceived *real self* and the perceived *ideal self* (Tedeschi, 1990): in the final phase of the first degree, or after a period of professional success in the home country, the discrepancy between perceived

real self and perceived ideal self may be small; in contact with a new environment this discrepancy is suddenly augmented by the perception of lack of expertise and skill. A salient finding of the present study was that this discrepancy was recounted in similar terms and perceived as similarly serious both by native English speakers and by students for whom English was a second language; it was not particular to the second language speakers. Both groups encountered identity misalignments and questions of agency similar to those described by Jackson (2008). This finding suggests links to be made between these experiences and those of students with non-traditional qualifications undertaking master's-level study, as well as with the experiences of students who move from full-time employment (with an established professional identity) to employment plus study at master's level.

While the 'shock of arrival' is an experience shared by international students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, there is an aspect of typical UK master's-level study that is different from that of undergraduate or doctoral students, and this is the comparatively short time the course takes: a typical master's degree in the UK is a one-year course. The Higher Education Academy website on supervising international students (Carroll and Ryan, 2010) advises that

[t]he first 6 months of any international study will be the hardest. Their language, writing and knowledge of the area will develop over time. They will be learning new language and discourses, concepts and methods of analysis and expression.

McClure (2007) likewise cites six months as a feasible acculturation period for postgraduates in Singapore. However, six months into a UK master's course, students will typically have already completed their taught provision and substantial proportion of their assessed work, and will be working on a dissertation. They will have had to develop very quickly the necessary knowledge and skills to survive in the new environment. The importance of this issue emerged clearly from the accounts of several participants in the present study. They recounted instances of timely help from tutors, institutions and classmates, and examples of their own resourcefulness in negotiating and implementing their transitions; and there were also accounts of failures to make speedy accommodations to the system that had later to be repaired, sometimes at serious cost. Here again these students may have had more in common with students with non-traditional qualifications than is often supposed.

The paper will explore the intersection of these two major issues with a series of other issues that emerged from the participants' narratives. I will argue that questions of identity and of social and cultural capital link these students to other students undertaking transitions in this environment, more than they serve to define them as a separate group.

934 words

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