

## **Transitions and Transformations at Home and Abroad: The Impact of Internationalisation on the Student Self**

This paper discusses the nature of international students' transitional experiences both in terms of their maturation and human development and their intercultural adaptation within a different educational environment and a different culture and society. It also explores how, why and to what extent such experiences may (or may not) contribute to their personal and professional development on their return to work in their home country.

### **Background**

Despite the current growth, proliferation and diversification in global higher education, internationalisation is not a new phenomenon for universities. Historical accounts of scholar exchanges and intercultural education can be traced back to 272-22 BC (Ward et al., 2001). However, the concepts, forms, focus and movement of the internationalisation agenda have changed profoundly over time in modern times, from aid in the 1970s, cooperation and exchange in the 1980s to trade by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (de Wit, 2008). Towards the end of the first decade of the 21st century, the competition for international students, particularly in the form of the provision of cross-border education in the developed world, has increased significantly (de Wit, 2008; OECD, 2008; UNESCO 2009). Outgoing mobility for students, student exchanges and attracting international students were found to continue to be the highest priority internationalisation activities for higher education institutions (IAU, 2010).

However, as new forms of cross-border education emerge and grow in the current global economic crisis, so too has the complexity of the internationalisation of higher education increased. The economic difficulty has seen governments and institutions impose limits on certain internationalisation activities (IAU, 2010). The UK Coalition Government's harsh crackdown on immigration may stand out as one typical example.

The latest phase of the internationalisation of higher education is thus qualitatively distinct, and ensuring the quality of provision of HE offering to international students in times of change has become even more important for institutions which endeavour to continue to attract the talent and skills and, also, the financial income that they bring along with them.

### **Methodology**

Empirical evidence of the paper is drawn upon key findings of two studies. The first is a two-year Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded research project which was designed to provide an investigation of the experiences of first-year international students during their undergraduate study at four UK higher education institutions. The second is a British Academy funded pilot study which investigated the perceived impact of overseas studies on the lives and careers of Chinese returnees.

Both studies combined quantitative and qualitative methodologies. The first stage was a questionnaire survey which provided a baseline description of the sample students' purposes for their overseas studies, expectations and a range of personal, social and academic challenges that they had experienced by the time of the survey. A series of individual interviews and group meetings to explore their experiences were then conducted, with special attention to critical incidents, changes over time, and respondents' explanations for how their experiences were unfolding.

The integration and synthesis of the findings of both qualitative and quantitative instruments enabled the identification of the extent to which intercultural, personal and professional experiences in the UK influenced the experiences of the informants involved.

### **Results and Implications**

By bringing together patterns and themes identified in both studies, it becomes clear that despite various intercultural challenges and struggles, most students have managed to survive the demands of the learning and living environment, and to adapt and develop. Key observations of their journey of study abroad include:

- International students come to the UK for language and cultural experiences, but primarily, for academic accreditation.
- Academic achievement and personal independence are the most important achievements for most students.
- Whilst some students may have fitted in better socially than others, most have managed to achieve in their academic studies.
- The most profound change lies in their success (or otherwise) in managing the influences which challenge existing identities.
- There is an important relationship between students' sense of belonging, identity and self efficacy [the belief that they can achieve and succeed].
- They have experienced three major aspects of change: i) interculturality: Cross/Intercultural experiences; ii) maturity: Human growth and development; and iii) intellectual development.

In terms of the perceived impact of overseas studies on returnees' personal and professional lives, themes related to identity change and transformation across time and space surfaced. Chinese returnees negotiated and reconstructed their personal and professional identities at the interface between cultural and social values, norms and behaviours while studying abroad. Having returned to China, their study-abroad experiences were found to continue to influence the change in their personal and professional self over time. This is despite that certain 'primary identities' (Jenkins, 2004) and values which were established earlier in life in China are more resilient and robust to change than others.

In particular, their identity change and transformation over time was found to occur at four inter-related layers (Hecht et al., 2003): i) personal (referring to returnees' enhanced self-efficacy and international awareness); ii) enactment (referring to their enhanced performance in communication in which identity is enacted); iii) relational (identity was perceived as jointly negotiated through social and professional relationships); and iv) communal (returnees learned to negotiate and form group identities both at work and in their social lives).

Taken together, results of both studies show that when exposed to a different societal and educational context, international students are constantly engaged in a reflexive process of change, adjustment and development through interaction with others in the UK educational and societal environment. Evidence points to well-being connections between language mastery, social interaction, personal development and academic outcomes in relation to intercultural adaptation, indicating that 'identity' is the key. On their return home, the returnees not only bring new cognitive, social and emotional experiences, but also engage in new processes of re-enculturation, socialization and professionalisation. The studies provide important empirical evidence which contributes to understandings of the impact of the increasingly rapid internationalization of higher education on the lives and careers of individuals in today's knowledge economy.

(996 words)

## **References**

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