

**Resilience, transition and the international student experience in diverse university settings (0225)**

## Abstract

Whilst students value working in the ‘international classroom’ benefits from these cross-cultural encounters tend to be incidental because cultural diversity alone does not automatically lead to intercultural learning experiences. In effect, the social experience of ‘otherness’ has to be transformed into a personally relevant learning experience which can lead to stress and negative feelings ‘...caus[ing] cognitive irritation, emotional imbalance and a disruption of one’s own cultural worldview...’ (Harrison and Peacock, 2010a; 2010b; Otten, 2003). Thus it seems clear that in negotiating these learning experiences resilience is a determining factor.

This paper reports the findings of a HE Academy C-SAP funded project exploring how understanding the dynamics of difference and resilience can assist in identifying curriculum and pedagogic practices that enable students to develop as ‘resilient thinkers’ capable of negotiating cultural boundaries and complex world views. The project assumes a narrative approach engaging diverse students’ perceptions of resilience within the context of their past, present and future life journeys.

## Outline

The internationalised university of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not only diverse, but also aims to prepare graduates for their future lives and careers where they are likely to encounter volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity. Researchers in the field of internationalisation have long regarded intercultural competence and cross-cultural capability as key concepts in providing a learning experience which incorporates the global perspectives essential to operate effectively in a complex globalised world. However, there is much evidence to suggest that despite this focus on global perspectives voluntary self-segregation is the most common response to the cultural diversity encountered on multicultural university campuses, not only in the UK but elsewhere (Caruana, 2010; Caruana and Ploner, (2010).

This paper reports the findings of a HE Academy C-SAP funded project exploring how understanding the dynamics of difference and resilience can assist in identifying curriculum and pedagogic practices that enable students to develop as ‘resilient thinkers’ capable of negotiating cultural boundaries and complex world views.

The central research questions for the project were:

- What forms of resilient practices do students from diverse backgrounds bring into social science multicultural higher education settings?
- How do these students perceive the ‘risk factors’ arising from intercultural encounters in diverse higher education settings?

- How do these students draw on their resilience when encountering challenges in higher education settings?
- How do the diverse cultural capitals of students help to build resilience?
- To what extent are course leaders aware of the cultural dimensions of resilience and how do they see this relating to learning in multicultural settings?
- What interventions might course leaders use to build resilience, facilitate intercultural encounters and develop resilient mind-sets?

The research was primarily qualitative in approach focusing on the use of narrative interviews with students from diverse cultural, social and economic backgrounds to understand their perceptions of resilience within the context of their past, present and future life journeys. A key interest was to explore how student diversity and resilience can be harnessed to encourage students to negotiate the complexities of living in a global society building a positive self-image, confidence and openness to engage with multiple perspectives and alternative worldviews.

Key findings of the project include:

- The need for international (and home) students to develop meaningful and positive relationships based on trust with their teachers, their peers and others supporting learning in order to be resilient in diverse HE settings, is more important than simply getting to know the 'learning system'.
- For all students and at all levels of study being 'introduced' into new diverse learning environments requires acknowledgement of transition as a concept which pervades the entirety of the journey through HE and requires the continued maintenance of an authentic connection with prior and ongoing learning and life experiences.
- For many international students their prior learning has adequately equipped them with resilience and a determination to succeed which will enable them to make a successful transition in terms of learning styles etc. and difficulties are more associated with social issues (the challenge of 'fitting in' with peers). This challenge probably represents the single most important barrier to learning for international students since it undermines the 'sense of self' can lead to feelings of self-doubt and isolation and in turn, negatively impact on academic performance. Resilience is however, apparent in the variety of responses to this scenario.
- For international students in the social sciences higher education is less about acquiring a qualification that might support a future career and comfortable life-style. A common resilient trait is the thirst for knowledge which represents the response to the experience or observance of hardship and suffering in their native homelands. Knowledge is regarded as the key to understanding the world in which they live (their own personal biographies) and to future attempts to change that world whether it be through political participation and leadership or other means.

- For many international students resilience has been developed from a very early age, drawing on the essential human instinct for survival in a world characterised by political turmoil and conflict. In many ways they are ‘resilient thinkers’ before they come to university and the student body as a whole can only benefit from pedagogic and curriculum interventions which encourage the sharing of life experiences.
- Students effectively negotiate the boundaries of difference within their personal and social lives, learning in diverse HE settings should be designed in a way that captures these processes, integrates them within curriculum contexts and takes them forward in ‘real world’ learning environments. Developing cross-cultural capability is likely to be an uphill struggle with few positive outcomes if curricula fail to connect with students in their own time and space.
- Students having been bombarded with knowledge from an early stage of their development will naturally tend towards a ‘cut and paste’ model of learning which fails to engage their sense of ‘self’. Curriculum interventions that take them out of the classroom to explore their surrounding communities in contrast, engage the sense of ‘self’ and prepare students to be future ‘resilient thinkers’ in a complex, globalised world.