'Globelongers' - Inspiring, Intrepid International Students (0087)

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Studies exploring the transition of international students to UK universities (e.g. Kingston and Forland 2008; Sawir et al. 2008 and Gu et al. 2009) note the importance and impact of intercultural adaptation, conflicting traditions, loneliness and settling in. This paper contributes to understandings of how some international students transition into and cope with these issues, focusing on what we term the 'globelongers' – adventurous, open-minded and inspiring students who 'belong' wherever they are. We argue that a better understanding of the backgrounds, experiences and mind-sets of these students will allow UK universities to better meet their needs and inform how other students could be supported in their transition into higher education (HE) and maximize their sense of belonging.

From a practitioner perspective, understanding the importance of students belonging or fitting in to university life helps HE institutions to prepare students for this transition, thus supporting student retention and success (Thomas 2012). This is particularly important for first year undergraduate and international students, most of whom are entering HE for the first time. Thomas (2014, p.1) argued that part-time, mature undergraduates have 'multiple identities, cross-cut by age, gender, race and class, [which] position them on the periphery, restricting access to means of belonging prioritised in dominant institutional discourses'. Arguably, international students studying in the UK also present diverse and complex characteristics, challenging accepted notions of 'belonging' in terms of transitioning into and through HE.

Baumeister and Leary (1995, p.497) described belonging as 'that pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships'. Belonging, they argue, goes beyond mere social contact and encourages co-operation and collaboration through 'an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern and continuation into the foreseeable future' (p.500). We argue that 'belonging' as a synonym for identity or citizenship also embraces the intertwining of 'feeling at home in a place (place-belongingness)' and 'socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)' (Antonsich 2010, p.645). His analytical framework supports the exploration of the personal dimensions of belonging and the broader, social context into an holistic means of understanding how and why feelings of belonging are developed and maintained over time.

This study aimed to explore the proximal and distal, personal and social precursors to international students joining an undergraduate programme in a UK university, and the impact that these have on their ability to fit in or belong as a member of the student cohort. A phenomenological approach was adopted, allowing the participants' lived experiences – how they '[make] sense of their personal and social world' (Smith and Osborn 2003, p.51) – to be explored. This approach acknowledged that each participant was likely to have very different lived experiences but 'an analysis of the meanings being lived … can be highly revealing' (Giorgio and Giorgio 2003, p.27). First year international students across the Faculty were contacted and five came forward from non-English-speaking countries to participate in two focus groups, one each at the beginning of Semesters One and Two. Both focus groups were unstructured, starting with the same broad question inviting

participants to share their experiences as international students at a UK university. Four of those participants were later interviewed in depth. They were all European, which is acknowledged as a limitation of this study. However each articulated experiences which led to them studying at a UK university. Their narrative included explaining and reflecting on key influences in their lives, whether family and friends, experiences or planned personal achievements.

Data from the discussions and interviews were analysed holistically to enable themes to emerge, which in turn could be transformed from the implicit to the explicit revealing 'meanings that are lived but not necessarily articulated or in full awareness' (Giorgio and Giorgio 2003, p.34). The analysis revealed that this group of students had experiences, influencers and qualities which supported their successful transition into HE. These included the influence of parents or family, experiences at school, engagement with the wider world and social interactions. Key identified qualities were a determination to succeed – to the extent of going against parental wishes, independence and being able to analyse or critically evaluate their options, and inquisitiveness and curiosity about their own and the wider world

The following field notes made by the interviewer describe one globelonger:

> Sofia is determined, single-minded and focussed. She knows what she wants to achieve and where she wants to go – perhaps taking her studies as far as a PhD. She was educated at a German School (Steiner) and learned English from media (English films etc.), rather than school. Sofia had an instinct that this university was the place for her to be.
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> Sofia hasn't travelled as widely as some of the other students interviewed. Her family and friends were against her decision to come to the UK. Normally she lives alone with her mother who is funding her studies and is particularly against her being here - is it loneliness on her mother's part perhaps or the money? Some harsh comments were made regarding the way she [mother] feels about the British. Sofia's father is more understanding as he is with a different wife and has two more daughters both of whom are journalists living abroad.
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> Sofia is independent and adamant that she achieves her goals. She has no time for those who say they want to do something but never actually do it and broke up with her boyfriend for this reason last Christmas. Sofia prefers to socialise with friends over a coffee rather than drinking alcohol and nightclubbing – she has a select group of friends at the University and has little time for other students who are not as interested in their studies as she is.

It seems that some international students have prior experiences and influences which give them the confidence and determination to 'fit in' at their UK university. This is despite, rather than because of, institutional endeavours around induction and welcome events. These students 'belong' wherever they are. They are adventurous, open-minded and inspiring and will seek out and maximise opportunities, mix with a broad range of other students and fit in to any social or academic situation. Transition to HE is part of their adventure or life-journey. They arrive as independent and confident students able to quickly establish themselves. Understanding the positive elements of belonging that these students demonstrate may help in supporting other students' transition into HE.

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