# Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Exploring the Acculturation of Transnational Education Students into a UK Professional Doctorate

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**Research Domain:** Postgraduate Scholarship and Practice (PGSP)

**Abstract:** This paper reports on research tracking the acculturation experiences of short-term sojourner Chinese students into a UK professional doctorate transnational education programme. During their initial six-month immersive and intensive stay in the UK, the experiences of eight Chinese students were captured using innovative data collection methods. The research combined visual methods (weekly 'postcards home'), photo-elicitation interviews to access experiences of acculturation and focus groups to reflect on collective transition journeys. Preliminary findings highlight the interplay of academic, social and personal challenges that epitomise transition for many international students; the value of the collective mapping of cohort journeys to indicate pressure points during this initial period of study; and the impact of the approach to data collection on the participants' reflexivity and their development as practitioner researchers. The findings contribute to understanding of how to best support international students' acculturation into professional doctorates that are delivered within dual-location, transnational education models.

**Paper:** Chinese students feature prominently in UK higher education; far exceeding students of any other nationality and China is the only country demonstrating a significant increase in numbers coming to the UK over recent years (HESA, 2018). Chinese students studying in the UK have received research attention (e.g. Gu & Maley, 2008); the research project reported here adds to this body of research by studying a novel model of programme delivery through innovative data collection methods in order to explore the acculturation experience of Chinese professional doctorate students.

Recently, there has been a rise in professional doctorates in the UK (Pratt et al, 2015); while they are not unknown in China, they are less common. This research reports on a professional education doctorate offered through a transnational education (TNE) model at one UK university. In most TNE models, students enrolled on UK degrees either study their entire programme outside the UK, or complete part of their degrees (usually the final part) in the UK (HEFCE, 2014). The TNE model adopted here runs in flying-faculty mode, with UK teachers visiting the students in China at intervals during the four-year programme, and with two immersive UK-based experiences at the beginning and

the end, making it quite different to other TNE professional doctorates (e.g. Chapman 2008). This design makes it ideal for studying the experiences of short-term sojourners (Pitts 2009). Drawing on Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth model, the research explores this cohort of eight Chinese students' experiences of acculturation into a different country, educational culture, and programme of study.

The research project was exploratory and used visual methods to engage participants in the recalling and recording of experiences. The main data collection method was through 'postcards home' – a relatively novel data collection approach that researchers have found useful for recording 'noteworthy experiences' that are sent to 'an absent other who can only imagine the experiences written about' (Millman, 2013: 13). Participants were given blank postcards each week, and asked to draw, photograph or source an image for the front of their card, and then to write a few words at the back summarising their experiences that week. Mid-way through the participants' six-month stay in the UK, they attended a focus group, to review the postcards. The focus group involved developing 'string lines' (Beard, 2010: 163) for the whole group, highlighting the highs and lows of their acculturation experience, as depicted by a piece of string mapping their journeys. A focus group, following the same format, was conducted at the end of the cohort's stay. Finally, participants engaged in individual photo-elicitation interviews (Harper, 2002), which provided opportunities for sharing personal stories, using the postcards as a stimulus to recall experiences and feelings. The findings were analysed to identify common themes representing the participants' experiences. The analysis also focussed on the experience of engagement in the research and the impact that had on the participants' development as practitioner researchers.

Preliminary findings suggest that:

- The postcards tracked the participants' experiences over their stay in the UK. They described the challenges of adapting to a different academic culture (e.g. navigating new processes and procedures) and coming to terms with a different kind of programme (e.g. understanding the expectations and requirements). As with other transition research, the participants focused on the academic (e.g. accessing resources, reading, writing assessments, preparing for vivas), the social (e.g. travelling, visiting local festivals, participating in sports) and the personal (e.g. homesickness, friendship). The findings reveal the interplay of these aspects and their role in transition.
- Collectively mapping their journeys allowed participants to better understand how shared experiences had both enhanced and, at times, held back their acculturation. Their collective journey aligned with Kim's (2001) stress-adaptation-growth model, as the group identified downward initial dips where the combination of new processes, a new country, and a lot of work created stress. There was a levelling out as routines and working relationships became more familiar and the participants became more confident about expectations. The collective journey ended on a high with the pride of successful progression vivas and the prospect of returning home. The collective pinch points were useful to note for the research/teaching team in order to prepare for future cohorts.
- The final photo-elicitation interview provided a useful tool for developing reflexivity. It allowed participants to reflect on their experiences; returning to initial feelings and seeing their growth and development in their new roles as practitioner researchers.
- An unexpected outcome was the benefit of the participants' experiential engagement with

novel data collection tools. The participants, engaging in a programme to support the development of higher-level research skills, experienced those methods themselves and could consider whether such approaches would be appropriate for their own research projects.

Overall, the findings provide a rich, visual and textual image of the experiences of short-term Chinese sojourner students coming to the UK and embarking on a professional doctorate. The condensed nature of their study foregrounded challenges that may be present, but less magnified, in other international students. The participants were all experienced professionals with undergraduate and postgraduate degrees, and while the specific experiences may differ, their general transition follows the trajectory of many international students as they acculturate into new environments, work patterns, and ways of learning. The findings contribute to our understanding of how to support international students as they engage in practice-focussed doctoral work, by outlining novel approaches that both foster reflexivity and support the development of research skills. Finally, the findings demonstrate the importance of longer, immersive experiences at the beginning of their study for students enrolled on dual-location TNE programmes. Such immersive and intensive experiences help students identify what is expected of them and develop relationships with their supervisors who will provide ongoing support when they return home to their own personal and professional contexts to implement their research plans.

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