The Language Scholar Journal

Exploring internationalisation and the international student identity

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Exploring internationalisation and the international student identity

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Abstract

This study explores the phenomenon of internationalisation within higher education institutions in the UK and its various effects on the identities of the international postgraduate students at these institutions. I conducted the research through focus groups and interviews with students from the University of Leeds, and extrapolated key themes relating to their particular experiences from the discussions. I argue that it is essential that higher education institutions consider these themes, such as the implications of the label of international student, the desired amount of interaction with UK students, and the motivation to attend a university abroad, when looking towards the future of international study.

Key words: interculturality, internationalisation, student experience.

INTRODUCTION

This study addresses issues of internationalisation within higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK on a small-scale basis, and aims to provide a better understanding of how the international postgraduate student (IPGS) perceives his or her own identity when analysed in the context of the UK university student life. As the primary researcher, I was drawn to this topic as it relates to my own experience as an IPGS at the University of Leeds, as I understood my own identity and connection to the university to be shifting constantly throughout the year spent in the programme. I felt that my position as a colleague amongst other IPGSs would allow me to better understand the issues being discussed, and would also provide a useful

way of holding my own judgements and opinions up to the light for further questioning and personal analysis.

It is the aim of this study to provide insight into the individual experiences and expressed identities of a small group of IPGSs at the University of Leeds, and to relate what they express to findings from other studies focusing on internationalisation and the international student experience in the UK. After laying out the findings of the study, I will discuss common themes that emerge through the data, and in this way aim to provide an approach that is based both in theory and in practice for the future of internationalisation of HEIs. It is essential that the reader understand that my aim here is not to affix any of the opinions expressed in this study to all IPGSs; however, it is my hope that by listening to and considering the opinions of these individual IPGSs, administration staff of HEIs can more effectively analyse the overall repercussions of university policies with respect to international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

When considering the topic of internationalisation within the context of higher education, it is pertinent to get an understanding of some key terms in the discussion, and to problematise such terms so as not to simply accept them at face value. It would be useful to keep in mind that most of these terms, such as 'internationalisation' and 'international student', have been constructed within the university society, and typically consist of a multitude of varied meanings and implicit assumptions about how this society does, or should, function. While there are many terms within the realm of the internationalisation of HEIs that deserve 'unpacking' and further analysis, for the purposes of this study I will be focusing on the terms internationalisation, integration, and international student, all of which I believe to be of central importance to the findings of the research.

Internationalisation

Much of the current literature centring on the topic of internationalisation of HEIs is concerned with problematising certain ideas that we take for granted when engaging in discussions on internationalisation (De Vita & Case 2003; Ilieva, Beck & Waterstone 2014; Knight 2011; Stier 2004). Jonas Stier (2004), when discussing the concept of 'internationalisation' within the context of HE, points out that although different cultures have been coming into contact with one another ever since the existence of human beings, we still somehow consider the concept of internationalisation to be a phenomenon of recent times. This new conceptualisation of the idea of internationalisation, Stier (2004) argues, contains within it three implicit ideologies: idealism, whereby we assume that internationalisation is of benefit to everyone, instrumentalism, which focuses on the end goal of providing a large group of skilled workers to the global labour force, and educationalism, which argues that internationalisation automatically enriches the academic experience of every student. By challenging common conceptualisations of internationalisation, Stier (2004) allows his readers to understand that in taking the concept of internationalisation at face value, we blindly accept the ideologies that are packed into this single term without considering possible exceptions to these assumptions.

For the purposes of this study I have chosen to incorporate the definition of internationalisation as 'an ongoing process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education' (Knight 2003, p. 2), and being 'associated principally with an ethos of mutuality and practices geared at strengthening cooperation' (Kreber 2009, pp. 2-3). I found this combined definition to suit this study in particular because it stresses the motivations behind internationalisation as well as the benefits HEIs aim to achieve through its implementation. Noted amongst the many aims and benefits of internationalisation are: a curriculum that incorporates educational aspects from different cultural systems, the development of intercultural networks and relationships (Arthur & Flynn 2011), a more diversified educational experience for the home students (Hanassab &

Tidwell 2002; McMurtrie 2011), and, as stated during a meeting of the International Association of Universities in 2000, a way of showing 'commitment to international solidarity, human security…[helping] to build a climate of global peace' (Fielden 2011, p. 8).

When considering different ways in which to address the continued development of internationalisation, it seems helpful to analyse the approach taken by Ilieva, Beck, and Waterstone (2014), whose study examines practices of the internationalisation of HEIs in terms of the sustainability of those practices. The scholars analysed salient practices of internationalisation in order to view their long-term effects, and by this method they determined whether they understood the practices to be beneficial or detrimental to the goals of internationalisation. They concluded that practices which were seen as both 'valuing diversity and mutuality/reciprocity' (2014, p. 883) were to be viewed as practices that should be continued in the future, and that practices which promoted 'commercialisation, lack of awareness or understanding of internationalisation, and containment of diversity' (2014, p. 882) constituted unsustainable practices. Though their definition of the long-term goals of internationalisation may very well differ from others', I have chosen their model to include in this study because their goals match up with my own personal goals for the direction in which I would like to see internationalisation progress in the future.

Integration

Within the discussion of internationalisation of HEIs it is common to encounter the word 'integration' with reference to international students at these institutions. I agree with many of today's scholars who suggest that in order for students and staff to fully reap the benefits of an international HEI, the university should promote an environment incorporating interaction between international and home students (de Wit 2011; Trahar & Hyland 2011); however, we must exercise caution when using the word 'integration', which carries connotations of efforts to combine separate factions in order to create a single homogenous group. Previous studies

have discussed the dangers of attempting to integrate international students completely into a host country, and suggest that efforts to simply instruct international students on stereotypical behaviour in the host country denies them the opportunity to develop and co-construct innovative ways of interacting with other host and international students (Dervin & Layne 2012; Marginson 2014).

One of the more prominent discourses that emerges through discussion on internationalisation and integration presents the idea that a higher number of international students in attendance is equivalent to a greater degree of internationalisation on the part of the HEI. This is especially poignant in UK policies, as in recent years the UK has enjoyed one of the highest global rankings as a destination for international students, and the increased flow of international students into the UK is a constant goal in order to maintain this status. However, as the study performed by Peacock and Harrison (2009) discovered, higher numbers of international students on campus often correlate with more instances of home students reporting feeling threatened, experiencing subversive competition, and constructing and perpetuating negative stereotypes with regard to the international students. Therefore, it is advisable that the HEIs do not simply aim to increase international student participation without taking into consideration how the numbers will affect the overall dynamic of the university population.

The International Student

The label of 'international student' is an intriguing one, as it is used all across HEIs around the world in a variety of different ways to address specific groups of students within the university. For example, the University of Leeds uses the label primarily in order to distinguish between those students who pay home fees and those who do not, and secondarily to provide supportive services to students who come from outside the UK to study at the university. Even though the variation in use for the label of 'international student' across HEIs can prove to be

quite problematic, this labelling practice still continues within the HEIs as a simple way to address what the university sees as issues relating specifically to those students it deems 'international', whether those needs be sociocultural, academic, or psychological (Nancy 1997; Ward & Kennedy 1993). Altbach (1991) notes that there is a gap in the current literature when it comes to individual issues relating to international students, and points out that often times Western-oriented counselling services provided by the HEIs are ill equipped to address the specific health and psychological needs of many international students. This example demonstrates that as we look towards the future and as internationalisation of HE becomes an increasingly complex issue, the need may arise for a different approach in order to better address these issues without claiming to have a 'one size fits all' remedy for all matters relating to international students.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The methodology chosen to carry out the research consisted of discussions with twenty IPGSs from the University of Leeds in their first year of study. These discussions were held in the form of focus groups and individual semi-structured interviews with students. The students were each asked a series of thirteen questions during both the focus groups and the individual interviews, beginning with more close-ended questions (pertaining to basic information about the students, their programme, and why they chose to study in the UK), and gravitating towards more open-ended questions (seeking their opinions as to the university's label of 'international student', and inquiring as to changes they had noticed in themselves throughout the year).

The twenty participants interviewed through the research process consisted of students from the following countries of origin: China (five), Japan (four), India (two), Iran (one), Italy (one), Malaysia (one), Poland (one), Romania (one), Saudi Arabia (one), Slovenia (one), Taiwan (one), and USA (one). Most of the students were studying in the School of Languages,

Cultures and Societies (eleven), while others studied in the School of Design (two), the School of Engineering (two), the Leeds University Business School (one), the School of Civil Engineering (one), the School of Media and Communication (one), the School of Mathematics (one), and the School of Politics and International Studies (one).

KEY FINDINGS

Motivations for Studying in the UK

To begin each discussion with the participants, I chose to explore the reasoning and motivations behind these IPGS's decisions to come to study in the UK. Ninety per cent of the students mentioned the specific programme they were enrolled in at the university as their main motivation for coming to Leeds, while forty-five per cent noted the university ranking, and thirty per cent simply wanted to study in the UK. The students also consistently mentioned the desire to improve their English, their wish to join family or friends who were already living in Leeds, and their efforts to improve their prospects in the future job market, as Romanian student Emilia remarks:

'…it's the UK and it's a high standard all around the world. If you studied in the UK, then you must be good…People have this in mind, and you will not have a problem with English. They don't ask for an English certificate, and it's [much] easier.'

Interaction with UK and International Students

Nearly all of the students discussed a desire to build relationships particularly with students from the UK in order to gain a deeper understanding of British culture, lifestyle, and academics, as well as to improve their English; however, over half of those students noted that this proved more difficult to do than they had hoped it would be. The students generally attributed their difficulty in forming connections with UK students to the feeling that the UK students were not

as open to meeting international students as they would have hoped, as Chinese student Daiyu explains:

'English people are very lazy here because they are in their own country, so they don't want to be changed. If they go to China, I'm sure they will change.'

This remark gives insight into the notion that making friends from other nationalities can sometimes be challenging, and that it would often be much easier simply not to make the effort. This general feeling from my participants complements the findings from Peacock and Harrison's study (2009) which analysed the same phenomenon from the perspective of the UK students, and found that those students also tended to stick with 'what was easy'. However, this conflict between an inner intellectual desire for intercultural communication and a more basic fear of putting oneself into an unknown situation applies to the international students as well, as Romanian student Emilia says:

'I didn't really have the chance to meet UK students because in our small group there were no students from the UK. But, yeah, I kind of regret it. I also would like to improve my English…and also to know more about what life is like here.'

In this case, she recognises that interaction between international and UK students is something that needs to be supported from both sides, and she expresses regret at not having made more of an effort to pursue those relationships. A number of my participants noted having initial contact with UK students, but lamented that these relationships remained rather superficial throughout their time spent in the UK, a finding that correlates directly with the findings in other previous studies (Urban & Palmer 2014; Montgomery & McDowell 2009).

A majority of the participants expressed a strong desire to make connections with other international students upon arrival in the UK. These students mainly explained their aspirations to form these bonds as a way to learn about cultures which were different from their own, to help each other out with problems they were having while adjusting to life in the UK, and to support each other in the areas of academics and speaking English. Overall, the students recognised the mixing of cultural backgrounds within one's social sphere as something inherently beneficial to all parties involved.

'International Student' Label

When questioned as to their feelings regarding the label of 'international student' as used by the university, half of the participants responded that they felt entirely comfortable with it, typically citing their status as a student outside their home country as the only necessary requirement to be labelled in this way. The other half of the students claimed either to identify with only certain aspects of the label of 'international student', or not to identify with the label at all. Most often the students who identified only partially as 'international' originated either from countries inside the EU or from other mainly English-speaking countries, and cited their familiarity with various aspects of life in the UK as the reason for this. Overall, these findings suggest the identity of the IPGS in the UK to be an extremely nuanced and dynamic phenomenon, constantly shifting and changing its meaning for each individual categorised in this way by the university.

Many of the students made comments concerning the perceived benefits and drawbacks of the label 'international student', and of being categorised in this way. Among the benefits noted were the activities and amenities provided for international students, an increased level of 'helpfulness' from the university staff, and a better ability to relate to other international students. On the other hand, many of the students expressed that they strongly disliked certain implications of the label, including increased university fees for international students, the

requirement to take pre-sessional English courses, and, more generally, a feeling that the label created a barrier between the international students and the UK students, as Chinese student Hua explains:

'I don't really like this label, because I have the feeling that it separates the international students out from the local students. But I think the UK is a very multinational country, so I think both international students and local students should be treated equally…I feel that it separates us, so I dislike this label.'

Hua's comment draws attention to a perceived barrier that is automatically built between international and UK students by the mere label of 'international student' by the university. This separation has most likely purposefully come about in order to facilitate communication between the university and its students, and in order to address particular needs of different students. As the data from my research suggest, however, many of the students who are put into the 'international' category by the university do not feel that the international services apply to them, and so perhaps this system for student categorisation may not be the most productive.

Marketisation Discourse

A few of the participants mentioned feelings of discomfort with regard to the university's attempts to connect with them, because they felt that these efforts were presented under the guise of creating a relationship between the university and the student, but that in reality these efforts were made in an attempt to promote a different agenda, as Malaysian student Hani says:

'I feel a low attachment with University of Leeds…sometimes because I am studying business, that's why I think some campaign, or activities, or the slogan that they provide is a marketing skill…So for me, it's just a business thing.'

This 'marketisation discourse' has been previously identified by many scholars (Ilieva, Beck & Waterstone 2014; Robertson 2011; De Vita & Case 2003) whose studies proclaim that modern HEIs view the student as a client, and their education as a commodity to be bought and sold. This argument has considerable weight in the UK upon consideration that international students provide more than seven billion pounds annually to the UK economy, and that the HE department currently receives approximately one-eighth of its revenues from the tuition fees of international students (Universities UK 2014). As of 2014, nearly thirteen per cent of all the world's international students were attending university in the UK, putting it only behind the US in top destinations for international students. These numbers are impressive, but the competition has only increased since then (Universities UK 2014). A combination of recent changes to visa requirements and tougher laws on immigration has contributed to a decline in the numbers of international students coming to the UK in recent years, and postgraduate courses have been affected the most as a consequence of these policies (Universities UK 2014).

While there is clearly significant economic motivation behind the promotion of international study in the UK, it seems important that these students feel themselves to be an incorporated member of society rather than a mere tuition check. I believe Dr Camille Kandiko Howson, research fellow at King's College London and co-editor of the Global Student Experience: An International and Comparative Analysis, states it best in an article of The Guardian (2014) that claims that 'international students need to be treated as people and learners, not numbers on a balance sheet.' She argues that HEIs should consider students as individuals, and their needs as specialised, in order to better create a more positive UK university experience for

more international students. I believe that this approach will help to increase student connection with the university, which will, in turn, help to increase the overall appeal of coming to study in the UK for international students.

Changes Noted in Self

Nearly all of the participants interviewed through this study claimed to have noticed changes in themselves since coming to the UK. In some cases these changes were small, such as gaining a few extra interests, but in other cases the changes were much more significant, such as an increase in self-confidence and independence. The students often noted that this increase in self-confidence directly correlated with an increase in their English-speaking abilities, as they felt they could more easily express themselves in their new surroundings. The most common change noted by the students when reflecting on the past year, however, was not directly related to academics nor English speaking abilities. In fact, fifty per cent of the students reported a change in their tolerance and cultural awareness levels, and this seemed to stem mostly from close bonds that had formed with international students from other countries, as exemplified by a statement from Indian student Eila:

'I have a really, really nice Iranian flatmate…A lot of things you learn about the people, their culture, the general notion which is created by the world and the media is just gone.'

Like Eila, some students chose to use such examples of friendships they had established with students from other countries in order to better illustrate how they came to their new sense of cultural tolerance and understanding, while others stated that this heightened awareness came merely from being surrounded by different cultures throughout their daily lives. All those who professed to have gained this awareness and cultural tolerance over the past year appeared to express this idea with much pride and satisfaction.

DISCUSSION

Reasons for Coming to the UK

By far, the most popular reasons for my participants' decision to continue their education at the University of Leeds included the desire to improve their English, to get a better understanding of UK culture, and to gain more worldly knowledge as to other cultures and ways of life. In the end, the students generally felt able to achieve these goals, with the sole exception of their interaction with UK students and knowledge of British culture. By listening to these students we can get a better understanding of certain trends in these motivations to study in the UK, which may allow universities with the intent of improving the IPGS experience to better address the goals of these students.

'International Student' Label

One of the central aims of this study was to address issues pertaining to the label of 'international student', and how the university's use of this label matches up, or does not match up, with the way these international students perceive their own identity. The findings in this study indicated that only half of the participants labelled by the university as 'international students' feel that they fit completely into this category, while the rest either claim not to fit the label, or to find themselves fitting only in certain aspects. Eva Hartmann's warning that 'research on higher education needs to overcome a methodological nationalism that has dominated the field of study so far' (2011, p. 2) should be heeded, as I believe that by labelling all students from other countries 'international students' the university is potentially glossing over the modern reality of a diversified and complex global system in which the boundaries of nation are becoming less and less relevant.

While this may be the case, it is still the author's own opinion that at this point in time the use of the 'international student' label is of greater benefit to the students than it is detrimental to their university experience. One's time spent in university is often a process of self-discovery, as well as coming to understand how the student perceives himself or herself in a context of

other students from backgrounds that are different from their own. As the 'international students' at the University of Leeds were constantly exposed to messages targeted towards this group, the first necessary step to take was to decide whether or not they felt these messages applied to them individually. It was my understanding from talking to these students as well as from my own personal experience that each individual made a decision, whether consciously or unconsciously, regarding to what extent they sensed they fell into this category, and how much they felt that this label could be beneficial to their university experience.

All of the students were able to articulate in some way how they related to the label of 'international student'. Those that did not identify in any way with the label chose not to engage in the various activities and assistance provided for these students, and those that felt themselves to be fully 'international' were able to feel that the overall support provided to the students by the university could be helpful in their transition. Others, like myself, found themselves to relate to certain aspects of the label without feeling fully 'international', and were able to pick and choose which aspects of university support we might like to utilize to create a more involved and meaningful university experience. Considering these points, it is my opinion that the 'international student' label is still useful, as it allows for students to take advantage of certain resources available to them if they choose to, and it does not typically take any enjoyment away from their time in university if they choose not to identify as a part of this group.

The central complaint that the students made regarding the label is the feeling of separation between student groups that occurred whenever the label was applied. For this reason, I believe it to be imperative that the label be used with caution, and that members of the university faculty and student union communicate consistently with the students as to how they feel being an 'international student' impacts their experience overall. It may also be helpful to, when holding events for 'international students', encourage attendance from all

students as more of an international community in order to foster increased interaction between different groups. In this way, the students can feel free to pick and choose the aspects of the aides targeted towards international students in which they are interested, without the same feeling of separation between the different groups of students.

After the Discussions

Although the discussions that were held provided valuable insight regarding the IPGS experience at the University of Leeds, one of the most significant aspects of this study to me as the researcher was what occurred directly after these discussions. Once the recording device was turned off, it was often the case that students would elaborate on a particular issue that was discussed, or would offer some personal insight that they did not choose to share while the formal session was taking place. What was discussed once the recording device was turned off was of great relevance and would have perhaps provided more candid insight into the issues than what was offered during the formal session, but what I believe to have been of more importance than the comments themselves is the fact that these students chose to continue talking about these topics even after they were no longer required to do so. To me, this indicated a general interest in these issues and a potential for similarly engaging discussions to take place in the future.

CONCLUSION

As HEIs look towards the future of their institutions and of internationalisation, I would choose to reiterate the importance of the idea of sustainability within practices of internationalisation as put forth in the study by Ilieva, Beck, and Waterstone (2014). If the goal of internationalisation of HEIs does indeed reflect the feelings of the International Association of Universities of 2000 in that it aims 'to build a climate of global peace' (Fielden 2011, p. 8), then surely incorporating the idea of sustainability can help determine which practices are to be continued in order to continue towards that goal, and which practices would be best left behind.

Through my research I was able to get a glimpse into the experiences of just a handful of IPGSs, and yet I came to understand that the only way to achieve HEIs that successfully implement the sustainable and beneficial processes of internationalisation is to allow this student voice to be heard. These IPGSs will continue to hark back to lessons learned while interacting in such a multicultural environment as a university all their lives, and I believe it to be essential that they come away from their studies with the skills required not only to engage with diversity, but to learn and grow from it as well.

Current research on the subject of internationalisation, alongside my own findings, presents a picture of a system that is functioning but flawed. However, I believe that continued conversation with international students pertaining to their particular experiences as IPGSs would provide an effective method for keeping the communication open and the systems flexible. As I have attempted to explain through this article, internationalisation of HEIs is a complex and multi-faceted process that will not be implemented successfully through a 'one size fits all' approach, but which must continuously be examined and negotiated as global patterns shift and bring about IPGSs with increasingly diverse backgrounds. I believe that if HEIs keep their long-term goals in mind and maintain a policy of open communication with their IPGSs they will have greater success with the results of their institution's processes of internationalisation in the future.

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Discussion Questions

1. Please state your name, your home country, and your area of study here at the University of Leeds.

2. Why did you choose to study at the University of Leeds?

3. What do you like to do in your spare time, and with whom?

4. How important was it to you to try to establish relationships with other students from the UK?

5. How important was it to you to try to establish relationships with other international students?

6. What has helped the most in making new friends here in Leeds?

7. Have you noticed any changes in yourself since coming to Leeds?

8. How do you feel about the label of 'international student'? Do you believe that you fit neatly into this category?

9. Do you feel that the university has provided the right kind of support for you as an international student adjusting to life in Leeds?

10. How connected do you feel to the university as a student?

11. How do you think your experience would have been different if you had been attending the university to complete your undergraduate degree?

12. How often does the conversation topic of 'differences between cultures' come up when talking to someone from another culture?

13. Is there anything else about your experience as an international student at Leeds University that you would like to share that hasn't been covered?