

Laying Down Foundations for an International Student Journey. Students as Academic Partners Project Report

Augusta Amaechi, Clare Bennett, Kafilatu Ganyu, Irene Kayit, Sue Lillyman,
Jennifer Okeke and Thea Paciente.

University of Worcester

c.bennett@worc.ac.uk, s.lillyman@worc.ac.uk

Key words: International students, culture shock, studying in the UK.

Abstract

The aim of this project was to explore the lived experiences of being an international student studying at a University within the UK and to make recommendations for future provision. There are increasing numbers of international students studying at Universities within the UK. Positive learning environments and arrangements are the responsibility of the host University and international students' needs should be taken into consideration. This project was led by international students in collaboration with academic staff. It involved a qualitative exploration of international student perspectives and their experiences of studying within the UK. Ten international students completed a questionnaire that was designed by international students. Respondents were asked questions in relation to three areas: coming to the UK, arriving in the UK and studying in the UK.

In relation to 'coming to the UK' there was a mixture of positive feelings of excitement in gaining further qualifications and the opportunity to study and live in the UK and anxiety in relation to concerns of separation from family and friends and the cost of living prior to coming to the UK. On arrival the students who had planned for accommodation and transport had more positive experiences. Strange food and cultural aspects of life in the UK had caused some concerns. The students developed and adapted quickly with coping strategies in relation to language with positive experiences regarding the different approaches to teaching. However there was limited engagement with social activities of the University.

A positive learning experience for international students involves academics and administrators engaged in the course preparation and delivery and the University in providing a positive learning environment.

Introduction

The initial project arose from the many rich discussions that a group of international BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies (top up degree) students had with their Course Leader concerning their lived experiences of studying abroad. The students felt that they wanted to share their personal experiences in a constructive manner to assist future students and the University as a whole to provide a positive experience. This project was undertaken and led by five students attending the top up BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies in partnership with two academic staff from the Institute of Health and Society.

International students

International students are defined in this project as students that are enrolled in an institution of higher education in a country where they are neither citizens nor refugees nor immigrants (Al-Quhen, 2012). In this study all the students were completing undergraduate or postgraduate courses with the majority studying in the UK for one year. Three students studying for more than one year were in their final year at the time of the study. Twelve students were mature students who had completed professional qualifications within their own country prior to coming to Worcester to gain top up degrees and masters. The two students from the Business School and the one studying Creative Arts were all in their final year of study and therefore the minimum age of twenty one. The students in the study were from Nigeria, China, Uganda and the Philippians.

Background

In the UK there was an estimated 428,225 students enrolled in higher education establishments in 2010-2011 academic year (UKCISA, 2012) and this is currently on the increase. Universities have a responsibility to provide learning environments that offer international students the opportunity for positive learning experiences. With limited literature available in relation to international students studying within the UK,

literature from other countries was included in the literature review in order to identify key areas of concern and possible solutions for this group of students. One of the main issues identified from the current literature is that much of the evidence tends to be seen from a deficit frame (Tran, 2011 and Wang, 2012). However Ippolito (2007) notes that research can also focus on how international students can be enabled to contribute to the curricula as found in this project. Other positive aspects for international students included the richness of diverse student populations, fresh perspectives within the classroom, increasing of tolerance, understanding and appreciation of different countries and cultures around the world (Lee and Rice, 2007). Some of the main issues that international students identified are included in Bartram's (2008) taxonomy which highlighted three specific areas - social needs, academic needs and practical needs. These three areas are where international students often require some assistance and are explored within this project.

The main issue noted by many authors in relation to social needs is that of change of culture. Brown and Holloway (2008) noted that moving to a new environment can be one of the most traumatic events in a person's life and culture shock is one of the main areas of concern for the international student identified within the literature (Brown and Holloway, 2008; Edwards et al., 2010; Erchisen and Bolliger, 2011; Gornisiewicz and Bass, 2011). However Brown and Holloway (2008) also highlighted that students are willing to improve their cultural knowledge and according to Pietro and Page (2008) often choose to study abroad to gain cultural experience. Adjusting to academic culture can also be compounded by misunderstandings and complications with communications with others (Erchisen and Bolliger, 2011) leading to increased anxiety and stress and lack of student participation in the classroom. Hwang et al. (2011) however, reported in their study that academic stressors were not as significant as environmental and social stressors. It is interesting to note, as Ippolito (2007) described, that students can often experience more problems with culture reverse when returning home.

Student needs can also be compounded with the second need identified in Bartram's (2008) taxonomy that of 'academic needs'. Huang (2012) termed this as 'academic cultural shock' and 'learning shock'. This is a result of students having to develop new academic skills as independent thinkers and agents for change (Campbell,

2010) whilst experiencing different pedagogical approaches to learning from their home country. These differences may arise, for example, with female students coming from countries where women assume a subservient role (Campbell, 2010). Similarly, as found by Huang (2012), with Chinese students where they are uncomfortable in classroom activities possibly due to what Signorini et al. (2009) reported as approaches to classroom communication that is often driven by the teachers. However Tran (2011) warns that we should avoid simply attributing learning styles to cultural backgrounds and remember that all students adapt differently.

Practical needs in this study relate mainly to pre arrival information (Brown and Holloway, 2008 and Bartram, 2009) especially in relation to accommodation and financial advice as well as food neophobia (Dovey et al., 2008).

The project

The main aim of the project was to examine the lived experiences of international students studying at a University within the UK. Through identifying and examining the personal experiences the aim was to make recommendations to the University for future provision for international students and to provide useful information to assist potential students.

Design

The project engaged the principles of phenomenology as a focus on international students' perceptions and experiences of studying within a University in the UK. Students were sampled purposively, through a peer student network studying within one University. All students were studying away from their home country and classed as international students. Fifteen students were identified and given questionnaires by the students leading the project. Of the ten respondents two were studying within the Business School, one was a Humanities and Creative Arts student and seven were from the Institute of Health and Society. The questionnaires were given out personally and collected manually by the five international students who led the project. These were given to their peers and social network of international students within the University campus.

Data collection and analysis

The students commenced the project through discussion and sharing their own experience of coming and studying in the UK. From these discussions, three themes emerged in relation to: coming to the UK, arrival in the UK and studying in the UK. Through the discussion of the international students' experiences the questionnaire was developed to examine the three areas in more detail. The questionnaire was piloted with an independent international student to check the use of language and identify any areas that were not explicit or could potentially cause confusion for the participants. The questions were broad enough to enable the respondents to describe their experiences in depth. A thematic approach was used to analyse the data and involved descriptive coding, interpretive coding and identification of themes as suggested by (Parahoo, 2006).

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was sought and obtained from the University ethics committee. Confidentially and anonymity was ensured for all participants with no personal data collected.

Findings

Coming to the UK

The students were asked three questions including: how did you feel about coming to the UK? What were your expectations before coming to the UK? What were your concerns regarding living in the UK?

In discussing their feelings regarding coming to the UK nine of the respondents described positive feelings such as 'excitement', three students noted that they were 'anxious' or 'nervous' and other responses included words such as 'curious', 'lonely' and 'good'. Other student statements included 'I was really excited because it was like a dream come true', 'I was excited because I was looking forward to a set of new experiences' and 'my expectations are to have a good UK degree and to meet nice people from different countries, studying in a constructive learning environment'. Brown and Holloway (2008) also found in their study that students were excited and

welcomed the opportunity to mix with a wide range of nationalities that they may not meet again.

Domonic (2011) in his study noted that students often have strong preconceptions about British culture and society and this was an area the current students wanted to explore in this project. In relation to the question of expectations with regards to studying in the UK nine students referred to the opportunity to gain a UK degree as highlighted in Kelly (2010), Kettle's (2011) and Zhang and Hagedorn's (2011) studies. Personal development was also identified by the respondents and this again is supported in the study by Goldbart et al. (2005). Other responses discussed the opportunity to meet other people and living in the UK as also found by Brown and Holloway (2008). One student stated that the experience would be 'cost-effective' and another noted that they anticipated that 'things would go smoothly'. Concerns that students had with regards to coming to study in the UK mainly centred on the cost of living and being separated from family and friends. Comments included 'living expenses, too expensive, accommodation very expensive to afford by students...', 'it's quite expensive, some of the values held are in dissonance with me' and 'security, separation from my immediate family'. The concern of separation and culture shock is one of the main concerns identified in much of the literature related to international students as discussed previously (Brown and Holloway, 2008; Edwards et al., 2010; Erichsen and Bolliger, 2011; Gornisiewicz and Bass, 2011). Several students were concerned regarding potential racism and included comments such as 'some levels of racism' and 'no proper arrangements for international students'. This was also a concern found by Goldbart et al. (2005) amongst students coming to the UK. Participants were also concerned about meeting their religious needs. Brown and Holloway (2008) support this concern for students and highlight the importance of counseling, spiritual support as well as academic support within the first few weeks of the student's arrival in the UK. One student was concerned regarding their job back at home whilst another noted a concern regarding academic support.

Arriving in the UK

Six questions were asked in relation to how the students felt when arriving at the University including the location of the University, arriving at the University,

accommodation, food, weather acclimatization and finally what they would recommend future students to pack to bring to the UK.

Seven respondents noted how easy it was to find the University but stated that this was due to pre planning in relation to transport from the airport in advance, whilst others who had not made arrangements did not find it easy to get to the University. One student stated that 'it was easy for me because I used a map to locate my destination' and another that 'I was picked up by the student ambassador from the airport to the University' however another stated that the 'means of transport was entirely different and there was no one to help with my luggage'. Bartram (2008) also highlighted the importance for pre arrival information not just with course material but also accommodation and directions. Zhou and Todman (2009) used a video for students to provide information to potential students to highlight some of the problems that students might face.

In relation to accommodation, again those who had pre-arranged it were positive and included comments such as 'good no problem really', 'well, I had already booked for accommodation before coming to the UK and had a place to stay...' and 'easy and un-stressful'. Housing was arranged through the University, friends or lecturers. Negative experiences with accommodation related to the cost, the lack of accessible information about it, explanation of contracts and for several students access to accommodation was delayed although they had booked it in advance. These students stated 'it was terrible, spent 3 days before got accommodation outside the school', 'my worst experience in the UK is with accommodation' and 'it was daunting'.

As Dovey et al. (2008) found, food neophobia can be problematic and even result in negative effects on students' diet and health. In this project the students were asked about their experiences of feeding themselves in their first week of arrival to the UK. Five students had no problems but five students had significant issues due to a lack of access to supermarkets, the cost of food and lack of kitchen facilities and also commented that they had 'problems with food expiring soon', 'I cooked for myself although had to survive on bread initially', 'non availability of Nigeria food' and 'difficult to cope with eating junk and processed food'. However seven students

would recommend students to pack food from their own country to bring with them. Edwards et al. (2010) noted that eating food from the student's home country can help alleviate homesickness.

In discussing acclimatization to the weather, one student stated that they were still adjusting at the end of the year. This was an issue also found in Okorochoa (1996) and Ying's (2005) studies when studying in colder countries than students were used to. In this study eight students said that they adjusted by changing the way they dressed stating 'was always wrapped up in sweaters and jackets', by 'wearing layers of jumpers before wearing jackets' and 'adapting to wearing warm clothing was a real struggle'. However one student loved the weather, stating 'wonderful I love the weather in England because I like the raining days'. When asked about what students should bring with them to the UK they included familiar food, warm clothing, money, laptop and 'uncompromised attitudes concerning our culture- morally, religiously, socially'.

Studying in the UK

Six questions were included in this section and related to coping with the accent, method of teaching, learning experiences compared with home country, library resources, social activities and the student lecture relationship.

Tran (2011) found that students often use their first language and culture as a resource rather than seeing it as problematic. In this project four students had come from English speaking countries. Three students had to develop coping strategies such as careful listening, lip reading and asking people to repeat what they were saying. Haigh (2008) found that students learn from their total environment and not just the classroom and this was evident within the responses of these students when one stated that ' [I] got used to it after working every day at the nursing home before and talking to my colleagues who are British'. All of the respondents relied heavily on their peer group for support and learning together. Of the three students that found accents and language problematic initially, they all found that they had adjusted over time. This was also found by Wang et al. (2012) who reported that these stressors decreased after the first semester.

In relation to teaching methods the majority were happy with the methods stating that they were encouraged to read a wide range of literature and the focus was innovative, practical and comprehensive. They stated that this is 'a lot different with regards to teaching methods and instruments for teaching', 'much different because I have to study and prove what I understand' and 'learning here is of high standard. More so I have had to do most of the learning personally through research which has enhanced my way of approaching education'. Only one student felt it exceeded their abilities. All students were very positive about the student-lecturer relationship with statements such as '[It's] different here they are ready to help so that you can achieve your dream. Back home it's the opposite' and 'excellent as lecturers here are more open to help students any time students need it and very approachable', and 'lecturers do not really spoon feed student like back home therefore giving the students some sense of responsibility and dedication to study'. However Wilcox et al. (2005) found that academic tutors for support were not as important as peer support.

In describing their learning experiences at the University all respondents found their learning experience to be very good in comparison to their home countries because students are allowed to talk with lecturers. They reported that the availability of books was impressive, although they noted limited access to international books. In describing the library resources the majority described the resources and library assistants as 'splendid' although they stated that the role of IT staff needs to be more clearly defined. Three students outlined difficulties with accessing core texts and having to pay for inter-library loans.

Social activities in the University were described as poor by six respondents because of poor publicity and 'late events rather than early for example clubbing till late' and 'cost to join extracurricular activities i.e. gym'. Hwang et al. (2011) suggests that a social supportive campus can have significant impact on the international student's adjustment however students in this study stated that they 'can't say much as I haven't participated in them' and 'neutral since I have not attended much social activities'.

Discussion

All the students were mature students in this project however Swami (2009) found that age, gender and length of residence were not significant predictors of sociocultural adjustment. Wang et al. (2012) noted that adjustment is not uniform but differs across individuals and decreases after the first semester as found in this study. Although international students do have different needs to home students (Biggs, 2003) it is important to look for the similarities rather than focus on the differences (Signorini et al., 2009). When developing courses, adaptation in relation to space and time and learning cues will assist the international student to adjust to different approaches (Huang, 2012) and students will need to be active in their own adjustment process (Hwang et al., 2012).

Conclusion

There are a number of issues raised through the study that could assist the students and help provide a positive learning experience. These include good pre-arrival information that includes practical information especially in relation to pre-booking transport and accommodation and about the cost of living in the UK. On arrival students need to be introduced to peers and academic staff as soon as possible. A good induction programme to teaching and learning styles and inclusion in social activities are all part of the positive learning experience.

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Biographies:

Clare Bennett is a Senior Lecturer in the Academic Unit of Applied Professional Studies, Institute of Health and Society. Clare has been a Senior Lecturer in a number of Universities for over fourteen years. Her specialist areas of teaching and research are trans-cultural teaching, leadership, health promotion, sexual health and HIV. Clare was a Clinical Nurse Specialist in Immunology and she has also nursed in the fields of HIV, Infectious Diseases and Sexual Health.

Sue Lillyman is a Senior Lecturer in the Academic Unit of Applied Professional Studies, Institute of Health and Society and is Course Leader for the BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies top up degree and Masters in Nursing Studies for international students. She has worked in Nurse and Health Education since 1989 with a three year gap working in Peru with street children and running medical clinics on the Amazon River. Her specialist areas of teaching and research are in reflective practice, working with older people, clinical supervision, caring for people with dementia and working with international students.

Augusta Amaechi, Kafilatu Ganyu, Irene Kayit, Jennifer Okeke and Thea Paciente are students that led the study and are all qualified nurses. They all completed the top up BSc (Hons) Nursing Studies at the University of Worcester in June 2012. They have all now returned to their respective countries and taken up nursing posts. Several of them are currently looking at completing Masters degree courses to continue their academic careers.