

A taste of the unfamiliar: **understanding the meanings attached to food by international postgraduate students in England**

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Abstract

Using findings from semi-structured interviews with international postgraduate students in England, this paper explores the meanings attached to the food they eat in a new culture. Our study, using interviews, aimed to uncover student responses to both the food they eat whilst abroad and to the food they have left behind.

Many students criticised local English food as bland, fattening, and unhealthy; nevertheless, most showed an openness to new foods, trying not only local food but also dishes prepared by their international friends, but this sat alongside a strong attachment to their home country dishes. Eating together was a popular leisure activity, and food of the origin country or region was the most popular cuisine. Eating home country food offered emotional and physical sustenance; students felt comforted by familiar taste, and that their physical health was stabilised by the consumption of healthier food than was available locally. Despite acknowledgement of the importance of food to cultural identity and overall quality of life in the anthropology and nutrition literatures, there is a dearth of research into this aspect of the international student experience; this study, therefore, marks an important beginning.

Key words

Food, transition, international students, culture shock, taste, comfort, togetherness

Introduction

International education is a major export industry at university level, with fierce competition among the key markets of the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (Cushner and Karim, 2004). In the UK since 1997, there has been a steady increase in the number of international students studying in Higher Education (HE); and currently there are 351,465 international students in British HE, one third of whom are postgraduates (UKCISA, 2009a). In the UK, international students constitute 15% of the total student population, although the percentage varies across institutions. The two biggest markets for international students to the UK in the past five years are China and India (UKCISA, 2009a). Income from international students plays an important role in the financial health of the HE sector, representing almost one-third of the total income in fees for universities and HE colleges. The advent of full-cost fees means that most British HE institutions depend on income from international students (Leonard et al., 2003). In 2004, they earned £4 billion in fees, and students spent as much again on living costs; this level rose to £5 billion in 2006 (MacLeod, 2006).

Accompanying the steady rise in the number of international students in global HE has been a growth in research dedicated to the international sojourn, which is defined by Ward et al. (2001) as between-society contact. The economic dependence of universities on fees from international students makes it critical to gain a clear understanding of the issues that face students during their study abroad. Whilst an institution cannot address all problems associated with the move to a new culture, awareness of the painful adjustment journey often made by international students may inform the type of institutional support provided (Louie, 2005; Brown and Holloway, 2008). Not only might the delivery of adequate pastoral and academic support improve student retention, but it will also lead to positive word of mouth and increased recruitment (Ward, 2001). Indeed, it is increasingly acknowledged that if institutions do not consider international students' needs, their future recruitment may be endangered (Ryan and Carroll, 2005; Brown and Holloway, 2008).

The move to a new cultural environment represents one of the most traumatic events a person can experience, and for most sojourners, some degree of culture shock is inevitable (Kim, 2001). Culture shock is defined as anxiety that results from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse and substituting them with other cues that are strange (Hall, 1959). Many writers liken the shock to a period of mourning for the home world, characterized by feelings of grief and separation anxiety (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; Furnham, 1997; Brown and Holloway, 2008). A common symptom of culture shock is an excessive preoccupation with food (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; UKCISA, 2009b). Finkelstein (1999) notes that food habits are inseparable from the culture that a person inhabits and that these habits vary from culture to culture. Consequently, some degree of food shock is inevitable upon moving to a culturally dissimilar country. Foodways have been the focus of extensive research by anthropologists (Gosden, 1999). Yet a recent literature search indicates that very little empirical research exists on the role of food in the academic sojourn of international students; food is usually mentioned only incidentally as one of the aspects of the sojourn that students find distressing (Okorochoa, 1996; Furukawa, 1997; UKCISA, 2009b).

There has been little dedicated research into international students' eating habits: studies by Henry and Wheeler (1980), Zwingmann and Gunn (1983) and Hall (1995) are rare but old examples. Given the increase in international student numbers in recent decades, changing source markets and changing receiving and origin societies, there is a clear need for more contemporary research that is pertinent to new conditions. Nevertheless, all concluded that food habits and practices represent a central element of culture, and that it is to be anticipated that sojourners would struggle to break away from their habituated food choices. This was confirmed in a more recent ethnographic study of the international student adjustment process, in which food emerged as a major research category (Brown, 2009). It was shown that the food students ate was of great importance both emotionally and physically and was one aspect of student life that was least open to change.

These findings are further reflected in anthropological and nutrition studies of migrants' eating habits, which document both the experience and impact of changes made by migrants in their food habits upon the move to a new culture. Locher et al. (2005) explain that emotional attachment to home food is a result of the positive association between familiar taste and nostalgic thoughts of home and belonging. This was found in Jamal's (1998) study of perceptions of English and Pakistani foods among British born Pakistani people, which showed home food to be associated with family unity, maternal love and cultural belonging. Anthropologists (Counihan and van Esterik, 1997; Ikeda 1999) assert a strong link between cultural identity and food choices.

In terms of the physical health of immigrants, studies show that deteriorated health (including a higher incidence of obesity and diabetes) is associated with an increased consumption of Western-style food (Saleh et al., 2002; Gordon-Larsen et al., 2003; Kedia, 2004; Burns, 2004; Himmelgreen et al., 2005). Indeed, research has shown that migrants are unlikely to be overweight or obese upon arrival in a western country, but that they slowly converge to native-born levels over time (McDonald & Kennedy, 2005). It has been shown that transition to a new culture can lead to substance abuse, a high alcohol intake, altered dietary practices and an increased Body Mass Index (Gordon-Larsen et al, 2003; Lara et al 2005; McDonald & Kennedy, 2005; Abraído-Lanza, et al., 2005). Neuhouser et al. (2004) found for example that highly acculturated Hispanics tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables than those who are less acculturated although they still ate more than their non-Hispanic white counterparts. An early dietary acculturation change included adding butter and margarine at the table to foods such as bread and potatoes. The less acculturated used smaller amounts of fat and oil when cooking products such as tortillas, than highly acculturated and non-Hispanics. Similarly, significant increases were observed by Pan et al. (1999) in Asian students' consumption of fats, salty and sweet snack items, and dairy products. There were also significant decreases in the consumption of meat and meat alternatives, and vegetables. Students ate out less often but when they did, they chose American fast foods.

Changes in meal patterns have also been observed; Pakistani and Sri-Lanka immigrants to Norway, for example, changed their meal patterns from 3 to 1.5 hot meals per day to conform to the host country's norms, primarily because of changes in work patterns and climate considerations (Wandel, et al 2008). Immigrants to the UK from South Asia ate significantly

fewer meals than those from Europe; the former also eating their evening meal 2-3 hours later (Simmons and Williams, 1997). Asian students in the United States, who had been there at least 3 months before the start of their studies, reported the number of meals per day decreased with nearly half of them missing breakfast more often than the other two meals, primarily because of their class timetables (Pan et al, 1999).

The aim of our study was to explore students' feelings about the food they consume in a new culture. This paper presents the findings from semi-structured interviews that were conducted in 2008 with ten international students in their first week on a masters course in the south of England. The findings contribute to our understanding of an aspect of transition that has been neglected by researchers but that has a significant impact on students' well-being in the new culture.

Methods

It was decided to adopt a qualitative approach to our research because we felt that only in conversation would students be able to fully express their relationship with the food that they choose to eat. A quantitative approach could capture the food eaten every day, the cost of such food, and the interaction surrounding food consumption but it could not access the meanings associated with food choices, and the emotional reactions to these food choices. Indeed, the probing that the in-depth interview allows was used to maximum effect in order to encourage students to reflect on their feelings about the food they consumed: as Locher et al., (2005) point out, food and emotion are strongly intertwined. According to Cushner and Mahon (2002) and Warren and Hackney (2000), only the qualitative approach can adequately explore issues of emotion and identity. Furthermore, in the sojourner adjustment literature, the qualitative approach is underrepresented, and is a gap in the methodologies used to explore transition that needs to be filled (Ward, 2001). We hope that this study marks the beginning of qualitative research dedicated to understanding the everyday life of students in a new cultural setting.

The research setting was the Graduate School of a university in the south of England which provides direct access to students. Of the 150 postgraduate students, the overwhelming majority were international students (defined in this study as non-UK students). Most were from Southeast Asia, which reflects the most common source of international students for UK universities (UKCISA, 2009a); approximately one-third were from Europe, Africa, or the Middle East.

Ethical approval to undertake this study came from the university's Research Ethics Committee; furthermore, all students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and no financial or other incentives were offered to take part. A request for volunteers was made in person and repeated on the Graduate School website. Subsequently, students volunteered in person and by email to participate. Ten students, all from different nations, volunteered to be interviewed. Although it is acknowledged that no individual can represent an entire culture, culture clearly has a defining impact on an individual's perspective (Hofstede, 1991), and we sought an interview sample of

diverse nationalities in the understanding that we would be offered access to the experience of food from many cultural perspectives. Further volunteers were identified, in case saturation point was not reached during the data collection. The interviewee profile offered below details the various personalities noted in this paper (all names are pseudonyms to protect confidentiality).

Isla: Female, 29, Turkish, living at home with parents, in shared accommodation in the UK, Muslim;

Anna: Female, 31, Italian, living at home with parents, in shared accommodation in the UK, Christian;

Nik: Female, 21, Malaysian, living with parents at home, in shared accommodation in the UK, Buddhist;

Michelle: Female, 41, Grenadian, married and living at home with parents but living alone in the UK, Christian;

Panu: Male, 33, Thai, living at home with parents, in shared accommodation in the UK, Buddhist;

Jiang: Female, 35, Chinese, living at home with parents, in shared accommodation, atheist;

Zheng: Female, 26, Taiwanese, living at home with parents, in shared accommodation in the UK, Buddhist;

Kang: Male, 32, South Korean, living at home with parents, in shared accommodation in the UK, Christian;

Miguel: Male, 35, Spanish, living alone in Spain but with a host family in the UK, Christian;

Marie: Female, 22, French, living at home with parents, in shared accommodation in the UK, atheist.

The timing of research was important as international students have particularly intense emotional experiences at the start of the academic term, as they attempt to adapt not only to a new sociocultural environment but also to unfamiliar academic situations (Brown and Holloway, 2008). Thus, interviews were arranged and conducted at the beginning of the academic year in September 2008, a choice of timing that helps counter common criticisms of studies of transition, namely, that they are hampered by sojourners' retrospective accounts (Potter, 1996; Leonard et al., 2003).

We used a semi-structured interview approach, a list of topics was devised covering the following issues: daily food consumption, interaction surrounding food, changes in consumption and interaction patterns, and responses to the food consumed and to changes in food habits.

Interviews took place in one of the researchers' offices, and they were recorded by digital recorder. Advice on conducting and analysing interviews by Mason (2002) and O'Reilly (2005) was built into the study design. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were transcribed in full by the researchers; transcripts were printed and repeatedly read, in order to get a sense of the whole. Then we coded the interview data: recurrent words, phrases and incidents were highlighted with the aid of different colour highlighter pens until key categories were identified, thereby staying true to the participant perspective. These categories were:

1. the emotional and physical benefits attached to eating national dishes;
2. the sensory differences between home and international food, and;
3. the social interaction permitted by the consumption of food associated with home.

Results

A memory of home

Many interviewees revealed that eating familiar home country food was positively associated with feelings of comfort and reassurance. This is indicated in the recurrent juxtaposition of the words *familiar, the same, home* and *expecting* to describe food and *happy, enjoy, satisfied, at ease* and *nice* to refer to students' emotional state. The following comment is indicative of students' feelings about eating national dishes:

I was familiar, I knew what it was like. When you eat the same food, which tastes the same, you've got this nice emotional feeling that it's part of whole you. When you close your eyes you think you are in your kitchen in your family home and you are lost in time.

(Anna)

It seemed that in its familiarity, home country food could be reassuring, nurturing and stabilising, and was credited with alleviating stress and loneliness. Eating such food was capable of transporting students to a place and time when they felt safe. It cushioned them from the stress associated with a world that is *not home*, which is encapsulated in Anna's rather poetic reference to being *lost in time* when eating Italian food. The allusion to familiarity in student comments is significant. In the literature on culture shock, stress is usually shown to be a function of the perception of strangeness and of cultural distance. The loss of familiarity provokes anxiety, and the comfort brought by the maintenance or creation of ethnic ties, in this case, represented by food, is a powerful antidote (Kim, 2001). Locher et al. (2005) explain that food can become a nostalgic object for sojourners, carrying the power to manipulate their emotional states and feelings. As such the consumption of home country food is driven by the desire to feel both physically and emotionally sated. In Brown's (2009) paper on the importance of food during the international sojourn, comfort also described the act of eating national dishes, and it was common to imbue certain foods with the power to [alleviate feelings](#) of homesickness. In this and the present study, food became associated with home, and was able to reduce feelings of grief for

home and significant others. The consumption of home food helped compensate for other unavoidable stressors, offering the sojourners a chance 'to remember a happy past and forget an unhappy present' (Zwingmann and Gunn, 1983).

Deviance from a correlation between home food and emotional comfort was found in interviews with Kang and Jiang, for whom avoidance of home food minimised homesickness:

If I eat Korean food, the desire gets stronger and stronger and so I try to keep away – I feel homesick you know. (Kang)

Thus, food could stimulate despair as well as fond nostalgia: this is an interesting finding that has not been widely documented.

Students were fully aware of the origin of their attachment to home food, that it was a result of cultural programming, as Isla points out:

You know, 25 years eating one stuff, and then coming here!

The powerful influence of cultural background on eating behaviour is acknowledged in the anthropology literature (Gosden, 1999; Finkelstein, 1999), and explains why food habits are the slowest to change following the move to a new culture. Warde (1997) points out that food choice is not as open to individualizing tendencies as are other consumption fields.

Tasting the difference

Not only was home food associated with emotional sustenance, but for many reasons, it was also deemed to taste different, nay better. Brown (2009) found that the more dissimilar the original food culture from the food available in the new culture, the greater the adverse reaction to the local food supply. The extent of difference between their home and local food meant that, for example, Southeast Asian students experienced significant food shock. This was also found in Jamal's (1998) study, which showed that English foods were perceived by British-born Pakistanis to be bland and unhealthy; similarly, in Brown's (2009) study, local food was widely deemed to be *tasteless, bland* and *boring*. This confirms the importance of cultural distance in the degree of shock faced by the migrant; the experience of difference rests at the heart of this culture shock (Hall, 1959; Ward et al., 2001). In the present study, however, all interviewees, regardless of cultural origin made reference to the blandness of locally available food: in the words of Panu, it is, '*not spicy, it has no flavour*'. Such was his distaste that like many Asian students in a western

country (see Brown, 2009), he had arranged for his family to send spices from home, while Nik on departure from Malaysia filled her suitcase with spices, rather than with clothes, enough to last for a year. The reason for this is given below:

I had a few clothes, and I put the seasoning on top! I always use spices, curry powder, Chinese herbs. I would miss them. I'm so used to eating what I cook at home, so I prefer to have the same taste...I don't know, it's like stimulation of your brain! (Nik)

Such a course of action was also followed by Jiang who filled two suitcases (*the food I have should last me*), and by Marie, a French student whose food supply would be replenished at regular intervals by her mother.

It was not of comfort to students that such spices and food ingredients could be bought in England, as they were either too expensive or they did not taste the same; alternatively, they were unavailable locally. There was, furthermore, a common perception that the version of their origin culture food sold in England was fake. Anna cited Italian coffee, and Panu and Nik (a Malay of Chinese descent) mentioned Thai and Chinese take-away food. This finding echoes research by Smart et al. (2006), which described such supply as both inauthentic and alienating for migrants. A drive for frugality, which is typical among international students in an expensive western country (UKCOSA, 2009b; Brown and Holloway 2008), which was also documented in the current study, was thus outweighed by students' need to recreate the familiarity and comfort of home, however expensive such imports may be.

Nevertheless, despite a reluctance to abandon home food, students were keen to describe themselves as open to new food cultures; they had access to a diverse range of cuisines offered by their peers, as well as local food. Preferred cuisines included Chinese, Japanese, English, Italian, American, Thai, Taiwanese and Greek. Nevertheless, the foods that were most favoured were students' own national dishes:

I'm a kind of open-minded person, I try everything new, but for new food, I have to taste a little bit first, is it ok? But I try! (Panu)

There was therefore *some* acceptance of new foods, which is described by Henry and Wheeler (1980) as an indicator of a willingness to embrace diversity in food habits. Students were not food neophobes, defined by Dovey et al. (2008) as those who reject foods that are novel or unknown. What this study points to is an intermittent embrace of new food and a simultaneous retention of origin culture habits that indicated the presence of two selves. The ideal multicultural self who embraces cultural diversity and the actual conservative day-to-day self whose resistance to change is acknowledged and accepted.

Maintaining physical health

It was unanimous among participants that eating home country food was the route to preserving their physical health and to avoiding weight gain. Indeed, many students perceived their culture's food to be medicinal and this was set in contrast with locally-bought food which could be deleterious for health:

I'm getting worried about my health – because there is too much fat – my level of cholesterol must be very high. (Miguel)

Students saw a clear link between what they ate and their physical health. It was also clear to them that they should take responsibility for their physical well-being by following a healthy diet. Therefore, not only did home food taste better, but it also offered physical sustenance, thus providing additional motivation for adopting a home culture diet.

Sitting alongside an attachment to the healthy properties of home country food was the perception that the English diet typically contains too much fat and sugar that had to be avoided if good health was to be maintained.

To be honest, it's horrible, it's really unhealthy for me, it's all fried, not fresh food...no salad. In Spain, it's salad every day and lots of fruit. It's completely different. (Miguel)

This echoes findings from previous studies of both international students' food habits (Henry and Wheeler, 1980; Brown, 2009) and migrant foodways (Jamal, 1998; McDonald and Kennedy 2005), which documented negative perceptions of the food available in the new culture. Local food was thus viewed with some trepidation, and students spoke often of the need to resist temptation:

I think it will be very hard to resist because now I control my own food, I do my own shopping and when I shop I see the chocolate, and then I buy and then it's sitting there, calling me, eat me, eat me. (Nik)

Self-deprivation of fattening food, such as chocolate and cakes, was also a common theme in Brown's (2009) study. After only a few months of living in England; students started to use self-denying phrases such as *I daren't* or *I can't* in reference to the temptation of food high in sugar and fat. Is it possible that this and the current studies reflect a tension that is widespread in contemporary Western society between individual responsibility and environmental supply,

between consumer freedom of choice and awareness of the dangers of overeating?

The desire for authentic and healthy home country food meant that, like most students in HE (Edwards and Meiselman, 2003), participants had to learn how to cook for the first time in their life, as commented on below:

I never cooked before I came here, but my mum, she taught me to cook. Something simple, so I survive. Lucky me, that I found myself as a good chef, that's a surprise and new territory for me. (Panu)

Students felt compelled to cook for themselves; their health depended upon it. This was also found in research into international students' eating patterns by Brown (2009). Learning to cook was the only route to guaranteeing both emotional and physical sustenance. It also led to an increased sense of self-efficacy and independence that are among the desired outcomes of the international sojourn (Giddens, 1991; Kim, 2001).

A further negative reflection on the food supply in the UK is indicated in recurrent complaints among students that the fresh food on sale in supermarkets was not of the same quality as at home. Not only was English food fattening but it could even be harmful to health, and it certainly tasted different. Of importance to the Turkish and Italian students was the fear that fresh produce was tainted by the use of pesticides:

I know that it's healthy at home and it tastes good. I don't know, I feel better eating my food. Basically though I can survive without it. I'm here and at least I know I'm not going to be here forever. (Anna)

Such distrust of and dissatisfaction is linked by Townsend and Asthana (2004) to the increased consumption of organic food, which is often deemed to carry healthful properties. However, the cost of such food is prohibitive to international students on a tight budget (Brown, 2009), and dissatisfaction and enduring suspicion might continue to mar their enjoyment of eating food they could not avoid. If the consumption of some foods such as fruit and vegetables was unavoidable, students cited the transience of their position as a comfort; this was important in trying to ignore their feelings of disquiet. Such reliance on the temporariness of their stay in overcoming stress was also found in research by Brown and Holloway (2008) into the stress provoked by the move to a new culture. Gratification was to be deferred until the return home when fresh natural food could be consumed again.

Eating together

This study found that the joint preparation, cooking and eating of food was an important leisure activity; for those with access to compatriots, eating was a social and physical act; for others, food allowed them to communicate an important aspect of their origin culture. Food therefore played a central role in both the construction and maintenance of social relationships. Anthropologists often highlight the social component of eating. Counihan and van Esterik (1997), for example, state that eating and sociability are usually intertwined, and this was students' experience. Such was the importance of sharing the cooking and eating of home country food that some students chose to live with their compatriots, even though they were aware of the detrimental impact of conational interaction on language and culture learning (see Kim, 2001; Brown, 2008):

I think it's easier, cos when you live with people with different taste, it's hard. We eat together almost every day. It's kind of Asian hospitality. That's important. Food plays an important role in Asian culture, it's kind of mixing. It means I feel we have someone to share with, we speak and listen. I feel happy that we give something, that we offer some good thing to another. (Panu)

Food was therefore a vehicle for both socializing and eating familiar national cuisine. For students living in shared accommodation with a mixture of nationalities, eating together was a focus of sociability but it was also a way of communicating national distinctiveness, as the following students pointed out:

I feel I want to introduce them a little bit to what we eat at home. I am very proud of my country. (Nik)

As well as offering companionship, the giving and receiving of food also sealed a bond, denoting both generosity and friendship, and signalling an acceptance of diversity (see Counihan and van Esterik, 1997). Furthermore, cooking and offering home country food allowed students to maintain and promote an important aspect of their cultural identity. Smart et al. (2006) refer to a tendency among anthropologists to present eating as a rite of passage, as recognition of the role of food in intercultural exchange. Nonetheless, mealtimes also led to feelings of homesickness, as they reminded students of the community associated with home:

I don't think that it's much fun to eat alone – it's not how I see a proper dinner – that's why I eat with my French friend because she can understand that too. (Marie)

As research by Brown (2009) notes, homesickness was accentuated still further for those living alone (for example, the Grenadian student, Michelle), for whom eating seemed to be a source of nostalgia for a life full of companionship and sharing. This was set in stark contrast with the loneliness of life in England, which was the focus of the interview with her. Never more was the link between food and sociability more clearly expressed than in her vivid portrait of the contrast between the tedium of her diet in England and the rich and varied diet in the Caribbean. The following comment captures the contrast between Grenada and community and England and isolation:

We have a lot of British expats and when they come, they are taken aback by how friendly and easy going we all are, and how willing we are to help! It wasn't until I moved to the UK that I realised the difference!

The above excerpt underlines the role of food in cementing relationships (in Grenada) and in reflecting a lack of ties (in England). This finding echoes Simmel's (1950) point that eating is both a personal and a social act. The sensual pleasure of eating is subjectively experienced, but it is often undertaken in groups. This point is particularly relevant for collectivist cultures, the origin of the majority of international students (UKCISA, 2009a), which emphasize shared experiences and group interactions (Triandis et al., 1988). Therefore, it seems unlikely that these students would distinguish eating from interaction; furthermore, Michelle's diminished diet in England supports the negative link suggested between the motivation to cook and reduced social contact (McIntosh and Kubena, 1999). Though Michelle *could* continue to eat a Grenadian diet during her time in the UK, the inability to share food acted as a barrier: the norm of eating Grenadian food *in company* was so ingrained in her that one without the other was meaningless and unconscionable.

Conclusion

This paper opens a window onto the role of food in the living and food consumption experiences of a sample of international postgraduate students in England. We have shown that students preferred to eat mostly home-cooked national dishes because they perceived this food to be healthy, tasty and emotionally comforting. Home culture food was an object of nostalgia and comfort. Food also played an important role in the social life of interviewees, as mealtimes were a time for bonding and for sharing food. Equally all students commented on the harmful effect on physical health of eating local food which was deemed to be not only less tasty but also high in fat and sugar.

There are some important implications from the findings of this exploratory study, which could be tested in further research. Firstly, a link is shown between sociability and food; the drive to eat home country food implies the formation of mononational friendship groups, which may impede language and culture learning. Secondly, the study suggests that improvements could be made to

the food provided on university campus and in the areas populated by international students. This has been recommended by the Food Studies Centre of SOAS, the School of Oriental and African Studies (London), which is undertaking research into the quality and derivation of on-campus food provision. Access to food that is both nutritious and locally sourced might help international students to overcome their concerns about the reliability of local food, as well as to offset their anxiety about gaining weight if they eat fast food.

It is hoped that this study might prompt debate about the role of food in the international student experience, and it certainly signals the need for more dedicated research into this subject. The limitations of the approach we have used related to issues of sample size. Ten international students were interviewed, varying in age, gender, nationality and religion; this means that we cannot claim generalisability. Instead, this qualitative study has helped us to understand the underlying reasons for students' food choices and to explore their responses to changes in diet. A quantitative study could now usefully target a larger sample in order to investigate the prevalence of the adoption of a home country diet and the avoidance of food in the new culture. In fact, such a research project is being currently undertaken by members of the Centre for the Foodservice and Applied Nutrition Research Group at Bournemouth University: findings will be published in 2010.

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