

## Students interviewing students: the Aston University–Hong Kong project

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### Biographies

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## **Abstract**

This article provides an account of undergraduate sociology students conducting in-depth interviews with international students from Hong Kong. The research is located in a broader project of identifying rationales for the recruitment of international students. One of the shortcomings of previous research was that the student voice and rationale were missing. We have addressed this by involving undergraduate researchers in the collection and analysis of data. This project report draws on one of the reflections of the student researcher.

**Keywords:** international students, students as researchers

## **Introduction**

In this project report we give an account of the research process undertaken by three undergraduate students researching Hong Kong international students coming to Aston University in 2007. This is part of a larger project undertaken by Bolsmann and Miller on university rationales for the recruitment of international students. The project has charted and discussed international student flows within the global political economy, so far focusing on the policy and practice of recruitment of international students by four English universities (Bolsmann and Miller, 2008a), and compared it with seven South African universities (Bolsmann and Miller, 2008b). We have now expanded this research to include a significant aspect of international student recruitment, the students and their views, and adopted a new methodology. While in previous research we primarily used traditional methods, undertaking face-to-face interviews with a range of stakeholders across the universities (Bolsmann and Miller, 2008a,b), we complement this approach by involving three undergraduate sociology students in undertaking interviews with Hong Kong students prior to their enrolment in Britain.

We have structured the paper into three sections. In section 1, we provide a context for international student recruitment, its significance for universities and a summary of our research. In the second part we consider debates on undergraduate students as researchers, and in the final section we report briefly on the research on the Hong Kong students and include the reflections of one of the student researchers, Agnieszka Ignatowicz, on her experience and that of her colleagues.

### **The political economy of international student recruitment**

Prior to 1967, international students in the UK paid the same fees as home students and were effectively subsidised from public funds (Williams 1987: 107). International students in the UK grew from 28,000 in 1955–1956 to 64,000 in 1962–1963. During this

period they were seen as contributors to international relations and development, as enriching student life, as a source of students for vacant places, and finally as a source of revenue (Silver and Silver, 1997). In 1977 a student quota limit was introduced for international students to reduce public contributions and, in particular, the subsidisation of foreign students (Silver and Silver, 1997). In 1979, the Conservative government raised the cost of fees for all non-European Union (EU) international students (with certain exceptions such as students from the Commonwealth) and lifted the quota scheme. The decision to increase student fees 'sent shock waves through a number of Britain's international relationships, ... severely affected the flow of students ... and promoted re-evaluation of policy towards overseas students' (Overseas Student Trust, 1987: 1).

Thus, while international students were initially subsidised and seen as a cost to the system, from the 1980s they came to be viewed as a benefit in economic terms to universities, the state and the economy. The shift to a view of international students primarily as a source of revenue dates from 1979 with the accession of the Thatcher government. This was part of a broader shift in policy and discourse towards neoliberalism, where universities were seen as contributors to the national economy and were expected to compete globally for international students who would pay fees. Tony Blair, New Labour prime minister from 1997 to 2008, and Gordon Brown, chancellor of the exchequer and currently prime minister, adopted much of this neoliberal orientation and emphasised globalisation as the context within which universities should contribute to the competitive knowledge economy. Universities UK (the vice-chancellors and principals of UK universities) stated in its 2005 international strategy document:

'UK universities and the UK as a whole benefit greatly from international activities and, particularly, from the opportunity to educate citizens of other countries. This provides the UK with significant geopolitical and cultural benefits as well as broadening the

educational experience of UK students and ensuring the diversity of the student body. The international activities of UK universities make an important and growing contribution to their income and export earnings for the UK economy.'

(Cited in Leadership Foundation for Higher Education, 2006: 4)

The above quotation highlights the perceived importance of international students and their contribution to the UK in a variety of spheres. But note the emphasis in the last sentence on income and export earnings. In the UK, a distinction is often made between international students, often designated as 'overseas students', and EU students, including British students, on the basis of the differences in fee regimes. EU students pay the same fees as UK domiciled students in British universities. In this definition used by university administrations, the financial and economic aspects of the recruitment of students are dominant.

In the twenty-first century, international students, in terms of a broad definition to include all foreign students, constitute a significant part of the student population, particularly at postgraduate level, in many advanced developed economies such as Australia, Canada, the UK and the USA. The USA has the most international students, with 491,000 in 1999 and 586,000 in 2003 (British Council, 2004, 29). In 1999, this 'export' generated more than US\$9 billion (fifth place among US service export industries). Measured by revenue and numbers, the UK, Australia and Canada follow (Scherrer, 2005: 486). Education and training, along with insurance and transport, ranks in the top five sectors in Britain that generate export income (Tysome, 2004a).

There are approximately two million students globally who study outside their countries of origin (Altbach, 2004a: 18). This figure is up from one million in 1980 (Marginson, 2002: 413). Within the English speaking market for international students, the UK attracts almost 25 per cent of students, second place behind the USA. Within the

international market overall, the UK attracts around 12 per cent of students (MacLeod, 2004).

In 2004–2005 there were over 318,000 international students (EU and non-EU) enrolled in higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK (MacLeod, 2006). This figure represents over 10 per cent of students in higher education (HE) in the UK. The numbers are up from 198,000 in 1997, 213,000 in 1999 and 273,000 in 2003 (British Council, 2004: 29). Approximately 175,000 of these students originated from outside the EU (Tysome, 2004b). In 2003, nearly two-thirds of all international students in the UK originated from China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, India and Singapore. In 2003, international students contributed £3 billion to the British economy, with £1.5 billion generated from fees (Tysome, 2004a). Furthermore, revenue from the export of goods associated with education and training includes educational publications and equipment and consultancy services that generate over £13 billion (Tysome, 2004a). Within the Commonwealth, the UK charges the highest fees for education, up to 50 per cent more than institutions in Australia and New Zealand (Jobbins, 2004).

### **Globalisation and the recruitment of international students**

These figures illustrate how international students and HE operate within the global context. The functioning of universities within the contemporary global context has been defined as internationalisation, in which ‘specific policies and programmes undertaken by governments, academic systems and institutions, even individual departments or institutions cope with or exploit globalisation’ (Altbach, 2004b: 6). The recruitment of international students can be seen as internationalisation that engages with processes of globalisation that are primarily economic and competitive but also worthwhile and valuable in their own right.

The neoliberal market agenda has been dominant in the USA, the UK and Australia for the last 25 years. Now, following the financial and political crises of 2008–2009, this view is being challenged, but it has found expression not only among economists and policy think-tanks, but also in the pronouncements of heads of states and ministers of education. The agenda sees education, including HE, as an investment in human capital, which enhances competitiveness and rewards to the individual, corporations and the national economy. This view stresses the economic importance of education, and sees market competition as the most efficient means for the delivery of goods and services. This constructs academics, departments and universities as competitive providers of a service, and students as rational, individual consumers who know what they are buying. There is still a tendency for knowledge and learning, particularly when provided in discrete modules, to be viewed as a commodity to be provided and bought (Naidoo and Jamieson, 2005). This neoliberal agenda market agenda has been located within the broader process and ideology of globalisation.

We recognise the power of the overarching discourses which claim truth for globalisation and neoliberalism. These discourses have been articulated by politicians, policy makers and commentators at the national and international level. They provided and increasingly dominated the cultural and ideological context within which university managers formulated policy and practice towards HE. They largely replaced previous dominant discourses, Keynesian economic management and social democratic education, and equity policies or nation building (Marginson, 2002). This is particularly apposite when we consider how universities' international offices formulate policy to recruit international students in terms of an economic language of the market. However, by contrast, Yang (2002: 85) argues that 'the rationale for internationalisation lies in an understanding of the universal nature of the advancement of knowledge'. Universities are by nature international in their outlook and should co-operate in their search for knowledge. Scott (2000) suggests how the internationalisation of universities was manifested in terms of imperial expansion and the universal nature of science. Scott



(2000: 5) remarks that 'in a rhetorical sense, of course, internationalism has always been part of the life-world of the University'. Yet half of all universities globally were established after 1945 and three-quarters after 1900 (Scott 2000: 5). Thus Scott (2000) argues that modern universities are national institutions and were created to address national issues. In an era of globalisation, this model is has been under threat (Marginson, 2002). The older co-operative models of internationalism and the national university have been increasingly challenged by the need to become economically viable institutions that generate income, compete in a global market and contribute to national economic competitiveness. Within this model, attracting, recruiting and retaining international students who provide considerable income and, at postgraduate level, research capacity has become for many universities an essential part of their mission.

This analysis and figures on the recruitment of international students form part of the overall project. The empirical work was based on a documentary analysis of the policies towards international student recruitment in four diverse English universities in the Midlands and seven very varied South African universities. We identified three major strands or traditions present in the recruitment of international students, which were referred to explicitly or implicitly by interviewees. The first is an enlightenment 'republic of letters or of science' tradition of universities recruiting international students. This we label 'academic internationalism'. The second is a discourse which involves a civilizing, controlling, training and development discourse originating in colonial empires, which we call 'colonial'. Third, there is an economic discourse which uses the language of costs and benefits, an 'economic competition' discourse. The first and oldest is the idea of the international 'republic of letters or of science', where universities are places of learning, research and scholarship which attract students, scholars and teachers irrespective of their national origin. Fenwick (1987: 128) refers to an 'international exchange' that 'implies reciprocity of benefit, an overall net gain to the individuals concerned and the quality of future international understanding'.

The second, 'colonial', tradition has involved the provision of education and training for dependencies abroad. This has had elements of religious missionary or a more general civilizing mission. Historically, in the case of the UK, it was focused on the colonies, including Hong Kong and South Africa and the dominions. After 1945, this provision became increasingly conceptualised as help for underdeveloped countries and the Commonwealth in particular. There was, however, a shift from a neocolonial discourse to one that operates in terms of a globalised market; the dominant discourse here is neoliberalism, operating at the level of both the state and the university. 'Academic internationalism' also becomes 'economic competition' and, at the level of the university, recruiting overseas students is seen as an economic resource for the university. So the dominant discourse for the universities has become one of economic benefit.

We had so far concentrated mainly on the perspectives of the university at the level of senior academics with managerial responsibilities for particular sectors of the university and from the university's international offices. We had not looked at the situation from the point of view of practitioners – neither from the perspective of the academics delivering the courses, supervising research, nor from that of international students themselves. This was one good reason for extending the project to include the interviews with international Hong Kong students. The pervasive discourse in our English universities was economic and market oriented, not just in terms of financial revenue, but in terms of recruiting in different markets with more or less prestigious brands. It may be that, in practice, many international students do receive life-changing educational experiences. This may enhance their earning capacity, increase their status and enable them to contribute to the effectiveness and profitability and welfare of their corporations, families or countries. One important reason for investigating the motivation and experience of international students from Hong Kong was to see how far their rationales relating to economic advance, enhancement of status or seeking an

international educational experience matched the rationales of the university recruiting them.

We have established the importance in economic, academic, human and institutional terms of international students and their recruitment. There are different rationales but the economic seems to be dominant. In investigating the trajectories, aspirations and experiences of a number of students from Hong Kong at Aston, the student researchers aimed to provide a picture from the international students' perspective which could be compared with the rationales for recruitment of international students by universities.

### **Undergraduate students as researchers and researching students**

In 1998, the Boyer Commission published *Reinventing undergraduate education: a blueprint for America's research universities*, where it was argued that undergraduate students at universities in the USA were 'shortchanged' (Boyer Commission on Educating Undergraduates, 1998: 5). The undergraduate student population generated significant income streams for universities and comprised the majority of students on many campuses. However, they were often not taught by the professors who may have attracted them to the institution in the first place and received very little exposure to research in the form of facilities and practice. This meant that advanced research was distinctly separate from undergraduate teaching, with the latter seen as a burden and the former as a generator of prestige. The Boyer Commission suggested ten ways to change undergraduate education. It argued for 'making research-based learning standard', a 'construct and inquiry-based Freshman year' and 'cultivat[ing] a sense of community' amongst others. Moreover, the Commission's notion of a 'scholarship of engagement' (quoted in Lambert et al, 2007: 529) is useful in moving beyond the distinctions between teaching and research to broader inclusive goals that deal with issues outside the academy. Brew (2007: 80) contends that funding bodies in the USA 'encourage undergraduate research' but that in Australia and the UK this is not the

case, and often only during the doctorate are students considered independent researchers. Broader debates insert undergraduate students into roles as active researchers in attempts to integrate research and teaching (see Boyer, 1990; Zamorksi, 2002; Brew, 2006, 2007; Jenkins et al, 2007; Hu et al, 2008).

In previous research projects, we focused on international student recruitment at the level of university administrators, officials, vice-chancellors, departmental heads and academics at a range of universities in England and South Africa (see Bolsmann and Miller, 2008a, b). The comparisons between universities and across countries were useful in that they highlighted the similarities, continuities and differences in an era of neoliberal globalisation where HE was increasingly provided in a context of commodities and consumption. At that stage we intentionally avoided undertaking interviews with international students so as to understand the 'official discourse' in terms of international student recruitment. As a result of this decision, one of the major pitfalls of our research was that the student voice and student insight were missing.

A wide range of research has focused on the student perspective and experience (see Spurling, 2007; Turner, 2006; Waters, 2005, 2006, amongst others). Rather than replicate excellent research, we decided to embark on a longitudinal project where we would initially meet with students in their home countries prior to enrolment at Aston University. We envisaged undertaking yearly interviews with our sample over a three-year period: prior to enrolment; towards the end of the first year; and at the end of the final year. An immediate concern arose with members of staff (in some cases we were potential lecturers) undertaking interviews with potential students. We felt that final-year undergraduate students could potentially be excellent researchers. They would have completed an independent piece of research in their final year, they would consider themselves to be undergraduates and would be able to reflect on three or four years studying at Aston University. For this reason, we sought funding to take three final-year sociology undergraduate students to Hong Kong to conduct interviews with students

prior to enrolment in Britain. Hong Kong was selected as a destination due to the significant numbers of students who attend British universities, the relative ease of travel and the ability to contact students. Funding was received from the Centre for Sociology, Politics and Anthropology and the Centre for Staff Development at Aston University. The international office at Aston University provided a list of contact details of Hong Kong students accepted at the university for the forthcoming academic year. One of the authors contacted the Hong Kong students electronically and 12 interviews were scheduled.

### **Agnieszka's reflections**

When I embarked on this research project, I was unquestionably a novice to social science research in all aspects of the word. I was not familiar with the issue of the internationalisation of HE, and the idea of interviewing people brought back memories of my final-year dissertation and the struggle to transcribe the interviews. While I was prepared for the fact that the research would involve more than just a trip to Hong Kong, I was surprised at how deeply this project challenged and continues to challenge my sense of self and my perspective on my role both as a student and a researcher. Although I had conducted research before, had some experience working with other student researchers and had done my best to prepare practically, there was nothing that could have braced me fully for the journey I was embarking on.

In all research projects, decisions have to be taken by the researcher or researchers. All of these influence the way the project is set up, the data collected and analysed, and the final results presented (Gray, 2008). Student researchers are often unsure how to make these decisions and I was happy to be guided by two more experienced colleagues. Along with probably every other beginner in qualitative research, I struggled with questions relating to methodology and epistemology. In our research, I was a

student researching other students. However, when I embarked on the interviewing process, I was ignorant about reflexivity.

During the first round of interviews, I was so busy completing the task that I thought little about my role in the research process. In fact, all the reflexive writing practices I did before becoming involved in this research amounted to little more than sporadic references to the researcher's impact on those researched and how this might be avoided. The major problem I encountered was that it was incredibly difficult to think and write in the reflexive way. As students, we were always told to avoid using first person pronouns or acknowledge our own feelings. Despite this background, in the aftermath of the first round of interviews, I tried to be critical about my emotions and how I perceived my own sense of self as an international student who now found herself researching fellow international colleagues. This was the start of a long process of reflecting on myself and the research situation.

However, it was not until I studied for my master's degree that I truly began to understand the meaning of reflexivity. Gradually, I started realising that my identity as a researcher would have an impact on the project. I often wondered whether it was possible for me to be 'objective' as I struggled with my position both as a researcher and as a student. Research is a product of the relationship between the researcher and the participants. How then could I present the voices of my fellow international students when I was conscious of our shared identity? The student and the researcher are not mutually exclusive representations, and there were moments during this research when I had to negotiate my own identity.

The biographies of the qualitative researchers have long been known to have a major influence on research projects, their methodological and theoretical foundations, and the results as well as the final analyses (Russell, 2005; Arendell, 1997). Recognising that there was a tension between being a researcher researching students and being a

student was, however, only a first step in developing my own personal reflexive stance. Different dimensions of my personal disposition may have influenced my relationship with participants. I was a white, Polish female and a novice in conducting qualitative fieldwork. At the same time, my age (24 at the time of the first round of interviews), gender, small height and build may have influenced how Hong Kong students interacted with me. It seems likely that the small age gap between the participants and me made it easier for them to discuss their experiences. Moreover, I would always introduce myself as a student, which seemed to imply closeness, socially and in age, to the participants. During the second round of interviews, from the very beginning of the interview process, I became aware of how being a female and introducing myself as a student could make a difference to my rapport with males. In general, the male participants turned out to be more talkative and willing to share their opinions. I was able to ask them more detailed questions and it was easier to have them agree to the follow-up interviews. In those cases, my gender, age and 'student' status may have had a strong influence on the research relationship and students' accounts of their experiences. All these interactions revealed my cultural assumptions about gender, age and identity and made me realise and see my own gender and identity as negotiated during the research process rather than assumed and given.

Similarly, my cultural biography was informed by five years of living and studying in England, during which time I was able to attend English educational establishments and be socially active with native speakers. Having been in the UK for such a long time 'silenced' certain aspects of my Polish background, such as appearance, and allowed me to use the English language comfortably. The particular way in which these experiences and personal characteristics articulated themselves in the research process also informed the manner in which I negotiated my role and identity in the research.

During the second round of interviews, I was more aware of the relationship between the researcher and the researched. But, as a student, I was able to see myself and my own experiences in the participants' stories. In a way, being an 'insider' in the research was a comfortable and easy role to act. I was just myself. All my participants were international students. We shared the same initial worries about studying in England. I could identify with them when they spoke of their motives and rationales for studying abroad. Through understanding my own situation and experiences, I understood theirs better. My past experiences gave me insights which 'outsiders' could have not picked up. Yet, at the same time, this assumption of 'sameness' between me and my participants put me in danger of missing points of difference. This came to me most forcefully during the transcription and analysis of the first round of interviews. I too often assumed that, as international students, my participants would have a lot in common with me. It came as a surprise to find out that because I was white and European this could mean that our experiences were different. What I did not realise that I was doing was disregarding everything that contradicted my own notions of what it meant to be an international student studying in the UK. Reflecting on this, I wonder about the extent to which my assumptions about the participants' positioning influenced my behaviour during the interviews and the analysis of the data.

Moreover, reconsidering my interview approach, I now realise that either I had been following the interview schedule rather too strictly, preventing participants from following their own thoughts, or exactly the opposite – I dominated the interview. I not only asked the questions but also made comments on particular issues. It strikes me now how little I struggled to remain objective. Instead of collecting data, I was often engaging in personal conversations with my participants. As I transcribed the interviews, I also became aware of other mistakes I made. For example, because of my preoccupation with interview questions, I missed some opportunities to obtain a greater depth of data, especially from female respondents. I also noticed that the experiences of conducting the first round of the interviews impacted on my attitude and behaviour during the



second round. This was not without its challenges as I had specific thoughts, expectations and reflections on how the follow-up interviews should look this time. I also realised that the researcher rarely has it all her or his own way and certain things are out of her or his control.

It was also after the first round of interviews, during the subsequent discussions with my colleagues, that I became aware of the importance of discussing my concerns with other researchers. The willingness of more experienced colleagues to share their experiences made me see the whole interview process not only as a way of eliciting information from participants but also as social encounter. I was encouraged to be attentive, not just to what the students said, but also to the ways in which they spoke and presented themselves, including emotional tone, body language and silences. What is more, being involved with this project turned out to be not only about what I found out about other international students, but about what, in the process of the research, I found out about myself. This research allowed me to reflect not only on the relations I established with the students I was researching, but also about my own group affiliations as a student. As a student, making particular kinds of identifications while at university, mixing with certain students, I was in an ideal position to map and investigate international students' motivations and rationales for studying in the UK. However, I always saw myself as a 'home' student, even though I was in fact an international student. This was probably due to the fact that all my university friends were 'home' students or because I was white European. My status changed when Poland joined the European Union in 2004 because I was no longer subjected to international fees. However, to other students, the lecturers and the university staff I was still a foreigner, and therefore international student.

What is more, the very process of doing this research, reflecting on my own identity and discussing it, enabled and encouraged me to engage with other international students in ways I had not previously. I tended to mix with international students on a formal level,

and this research made me revise my opinions about them. For example, prior to this research, I held strong preconceptions about Chinese/Hong Kong students' ability to speak English and socialise only with other Chinese students. Throughout the research, I became aware that many of my presumptions came from the discussions I had with 'home' students rather than my own experiences with Hong Kong students. Similarly, I entered the fieldwork process thinking of and treating Hong Kong students purely as research participants and went out with a consciousness of our shared experiences. The research encounter takes place within particular socio-personal contexts. As a result, knowledge is co-produced by the researcher and the researched. In this research project, my identity and personality shaped the experiences during the interviews and my personal identification with participants. Being Polish, white and female may have influenced Hong Kong students' behaviour and the nature of the information I gathered. My age and, related to that, lack of experience as a researcher meant that specific issues were experienced differently from those of more knowledgeable researchers. All the interacting factors of my identity and personality influenced this research. While these sometimes acted in my favour, allowing me to gain information from participants that my research colleagues would probably not have gained, at other times they played against me.

During this project, I have thought a great deal about the journey I underwent as a student researcher researching international students. I acknowledge now that my sense of self, my values and beliefs are tied up with how I frame the relationship between myself and participants. I have now embarked on a doctoral research and I am currently researching recent Polish migration to the UK. The social and personal aspects of migration are close to my heart, but the formulation of the research question, methodology and especially ethical procedures could have not been possible without the influence of this project. In a way, being involved with this research project put my doctoral research decisions up for scrutiny. This time, however, I am convinced of the value of what I have learnt and I am sure that it will be put into good use.

## **Conclusion**

In this research project report we have described the context of international student recruitment. We have acknowledged that our previous research was limited in that the student voice and input was missing. We are attempting to rectify this with our ongoing research, not only by including the 'missing' international students but also by attempting to broaden our research methodology beyond traditional postgraduate researchers to include final-year undergraduate researchers. This has meant that the undergraduate researchers have taken a central role in the direction of our research on international student recruitment. Moreover, as the reflections of one of the student researchers has highlighted, this process is ongoing and the experiences gained have been used valuably and drawn on in that student's own doctoral research.

But how does this research report help others attempting a similar enterprise involving undergraduate researchers? We think that all our undergraduate researchers, including Agnieszka whose reflections constitute a considerable part of this paper, would agree that they benefited from being part of a broader project. The academic staff already engaged (Bolsmann and Miller) could explain the issues at stake and the students could benefit from relatively close supervision and discussion of the process of interviewing. The significance of the interview material gathered was a subject of discussion and analysis between all three major researchers. From the point of view of the established older academics, we benefited from fresh insights, which probably only young student interviewers could have gleaned from interviewing potential and actual fellow students. From the point of view of the Hong Kong students, they seemed to enjoy and benefit from contact with students from a university they were destined to attend. Finally, student participation in the research and the views of the Hong Kong international students added a much-needed dimension to the project in a way that may be of use to others engaged in similar work.

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