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Intercultural Capability- Exploring First Year HE Students' Reflections on and Expectations of their Higher Education Experience (0150)

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Part 1: Abstract

This round table discussion presents the initial stages of a cross-institution project exploring the reflections and expectations of first year international and home students. This study aims to capture students' early experiences in Higher Education (HE), their sense of 'belonging', and development of intercultural capabilities embedded in international-home student interactions. This is the first study to adopt Sen's (1992) 'capability approach' as a means of framing exploration of these intercultural capabilities. Results are intended to shed light on the processual development of intercultural capabilities during students' first year in HE, and their perceptions of how these contribute to their employability. Although this discussion is based on one joint proposal developed by the research team, several themes emerge which may be of interest to HE academics and practitioners concerning 'Student Experiences', 'Employability, Enterprise and Graduate Careers' and 'Learning, Teaching and Assessment'.

Key words: intercultural capabilities, belonging, employability

Part 2: Outline

Students choose to embark on university education for a multitude of reasons including learning to be independent, gaining new friends, experiences and learning and becoming more 'employable' (e.g. Molesworth et al., 2010). Capturing the expectations, anticipations and lived experiences of students in the first few weeks of starting at university can help to better support them in settling into their university life. As they start at university, the importance of 'belonging' – at an institutional, programme and social level – is likely to impact on their ability to successfully complete their academic studies at every level of their programme. The more they feel they 'belong' at university, the more likely they are to complete their studies and succeed academically. These experiences whilst at university will also help to shape their plans and aspirations for employment on graduation. Studying and living alongside students of different cultural backgrounds provides the opportunity to challenge and inform their perceptions and values. They will study and socialise with students from a diverse range of backgrounds, nationalities and cultures, all of which can support them in emerging as knowledgeable, employable and confident graduates (e.g. Tymon, 2013; Tomlinson, 2007). UCAS data as at January 2016 suggest an increase in applications from UK, EU and international students, highlighting the ongoing need to support all students in their intercultural understanding and knowledge.

The research objectives to be addressed by this project are as follows:

- To explore students' experiences in the first few weeks of university life and how this supports a sense of 'belonging' to the institution, their programme and their peer groups.
- Linking in to this, to explore some of their expectations and perceptions of studying with students from other cultures and countries and preparing for, or anticipating, employment on graduation.
- To understand how these develop and change over the course of their first year.

The study will utilise the 'capability approach' developed by Amartya Sen (1992), to design and frame the data collection and analysis. This justice-based approach emphasises freedom, choice and opportunity ('capability') for individuals to do or be what they consider to be of value. It has already been used in the context of HE by one of the co-applicants (Bridges, 2014) who developed a 'capability set for being intercultural'. The capability approach is a means of helping students to choose for themselves what they consider to be of value and this study will use an 'intercultural capability set' to explore how the overall student learning experience – including their academic, social and personal progress - can be supported by a transformative, cosmopolitan-aware education.

For this study, we are particularly interested in applying this capability set to understand how the transnational and intercultural experiences of students might impact upon their first year at university. The capability framework, as well as enabling us to understand how students transition and settle into HE (i.e. 'belonging') will also help to illuminate the way in which students' acquisition of capability through university can influence their aspirations and expectations of transitioning out of HE (i.e. into graduate employment). The research will be conducted in 4 UK universities and will be based around focus groups and individual interviews with first year students at the start of the academic year, followed up by online questionnaires (to be designed following the qualitative stage of the study) at the mid- and end-points of their first year. This is an exploratory study, the results of which will be used to develop a longitudinal study to explore 'intercultural capability' and how this impacts on student belonging, intercultural competence and employability within the context of the wider learning experience as they transition through each year of university to graduation.

This study also aims to understand how first year students perceive these 'intercultural capabilities' in relation to their employability as graduates. Both UK HE policy and widespread empirical work (Dippold, 2015) draw attention to the skills agenda (Leitch, 2006), placing increasing pressure on universities to prepare their students for the job market via employability and skill development interventions. Yet, several authors (Hesketh, 2000; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Cramner, 2006; Jackson, 2014) insist that 'gaps' still exist between employer expectations of graduates and graduates' understanding of these expectations. Capturing the students' perceptions of how intercultural capabilities contribute to their employability prospects works towards closing this gap.

Regarding implications, we intend for this research project to inform the development of a larger scale study potentially involving other UK universities. Furthermore, the results are aimed at informing practice at a local institutional level. For instance how we, as HE academics, are approaching the development of intercultural abilities in our students/graduates, and how we foster collaboration between international and home students in the classroom.

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