3
Student Adjustment: Diversity and Uniformity of Experience

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Introduction

Internationalization of higher education has become a global phenomenon, as reflected by the fact that around four million people are now engaged in study outside their country of origin, a fourfold increase since 1999 (OECD, 2011). The UK is the largest single national destination in Europe and the second largest worldwide, after the USA. Among full-time ‘taught’ postgraduates (as opposed to those studying for research degrees) in the UK, 66 per cent are non-UK nationals (HESA, 2010). For countries in net receipt of international students, higher education has come to be seen as central to economic development (Wright & Rabo, 2010); furthermore, ‘universities are no longer just servicing the economy: now educating international students is itself a lucrative trade’ (ibid., p. 3; cf. De Wit, 2002) for receiving nations, as ‘neoliberalisation and the increasing mobility of people, ideas and practices around the globe are forcing local institutions to reposition themselves, and redefine their missions and social functions’ (Codó & Pérez-Milans, 2014, p. 1). In the UK, international postgraduate students generate significant income for higher education institutions (HEIs) and it is thus in the interests of HEIs to support such students, to facilitate their retention and to attract new postgraduates. Until recently, there had been relatively little research which specifically focused on international students’ (ISs) perceptions of their transition to postgraduate study overseas, although there are related bodies of research about, for example, the shift from school to tertiary level education; from education to work (Tobell & O’Donnell, 2010); the extent to which student perceptions reveal the degree to which UK universities foster interculturality (Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009, p. 463); ways in which ISs, who take part
in varied but deliberately constructed institutional activities, indicate increased ‘levels of learning and development’ (Glass, 2012, p. 228); and how transition among ISs is viewed by academic staff (Barron et al., 2010). In this chapter, we are interested in ISs’ subjective views and reflections about their experiences, as a means of gauging what they perceive as salient – negative and/or positive – to the quality of their overall experience. And, in this chapter, we report on sentiments expressed by ISs managing a formal education overseas sojourn. Our specific aim is to describe perceptions by postgraduates working towards a taught Master's degree in Cross Cultural communication, at a single HEI in the UK, over the period of an academic year (equivalent to a calendar year), i.e. diachronically, and to try and derive some useful insights about the transition process.

Theoretical background

The transition from one (professional) context to another inevitably requires some degree of personal, cultural and/or social realignment. The demands of a new context are unlikely to be entirely congruent with contexts previously experienced. Regarding formal education, in ‘the shift from one educational environment … to a different one … students must negotiate the multiplicity of discontinuities that construct the new community’ (Tobell et al., 2010, p. 265). Research indicates that the shift to higher education (HE) presents challenges that are generally more varied and substantial for ISs than domestic students (Young et al., 2012). Of course, ISs are not a homogeneous entity (as is also true of home students) and the ‘prefix “inter-” implies a dynamic and transformative confrontation and intermixing of entities’ (Zhao & Wildermeesch, 2008, p. 58). Nonetheless, ISs may share some (or all) of these features, distinguishing them from local students: citizenship of a home country separate from the site of their chosen higher education institution (HEI); a different first language from the language medium of the HEI; temporary residence in the country where the HEI is situated; and an intention to return to the home country at some point following study abroad (Sercombe, 2011, p. 44; cf. Pyvis & Chapman, 2005).

There have been ongoing efforts to capture and theorize the variables of adjustment to a new situation. This is reflected in detailed reviews of approaches towards the study of adjustment processes (for example Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Berry, 2005; Yang et al., 2006, among others), and the applicability of relevant models, relating to ways in which people deal with new contexts in which they are immersed for study.