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International Students' Cultural and Social Experiences in a British University: "Such a hard life [it] is here"

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ABSTRACT

The authors in this qualitative study examined international students' cultural and social experiences using data collected through case studies and semi-structured, in-depth, informant style interviews. Participants were all international students (n=18), mostly postgraduate from Asian and Far Eastern countries studying at a British higher education institution. The students' personal journeys are traced through a three-stage process that moves from (1) high initial expectations, through (2) culture shock, to (3) various eventual patterns of accommodation. In addition to capturing the sometimes raw personal experiences of individuals, the study also delineates the ways in which geopolitical and social-emotional factors coalesce to shape students' personal experience and self-concepts.

Keywords: International students / international education / cultural barriers / student adjustment / culture shock / human needs / geopolitical climate

The United Kingdom (UK) is a global leader in international education, the second largest destination for international students. The numbers of international students accessing higher education in the UK appear to be increasing (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2012) despite the global financial crisis and the challenges of a post 9/11 world. This contributes to the UK's economy and profile (BIS, 2011).

The impetus of this small-scale qualitative exploratory study is to find the extent to which a particular higher education institution is successful in meeting international students' cultural and social–emotional needs. Unlike other studies that examine the discourses of international students based largely on theoretical frameworks and the global market paradigm, this study explores the lived experience of a specific group of international students, living and studying in the UK, through their own first-hand accounts about how they make sense of their overseas university experiences and incorporate these into their lives and identities. The students' personal journeys are traced through a three-stage process that moves from (1) high initial expectations, through (2) culture shock, to (3) various eventual patterns of accommodation.

Data was gathered by interviewing 18 international students, mainly postgraduate, from Asian and Far Eastern countries studying at a high-ranking British University, Middle University (MU), in three phases over a period of six months between 2007 and 2008. Given that the study took place in the post 911 world, the geopolitical climate provides the back drop of the study and the ways in which the macro geopolitical events and the micro implications of the geopolitical climate are experienced by international students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Culture and Culture Shock

It has been argued (Tarry, 2011) that the practice of travelling overseas for higher education could have the effect of transforming cultures. There are various discussions as to what international students gain by studying abroad. Scholars argue that the purpose of studying abroad is to gain experience in the host country rather than to abandon cultural heritage and adopt the culture in which international students live for a relatively short period (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Kingston & Forland, 2008). Language is an important part of this process.

However, in addition to being required to learn in the medium of a foreign language, these students are sometimes challenged at the level of deeply ingrained cultural and religious taboos, such as in relation to lifestyles, social rules, social behaviours (e.g., the consumption of alcohol), gender relations and sexual mores. Clearly there is potential for disruption and conflict in this situation. And this is one of the main issues for this current paper.

Sometimes, being confronted by a new culture can be a positive and enlightening experience, which leads to a deepened awareness of self and

the appreciation of different cultures. On the other hand, this confrontation can also be experienced as 'culture shock' (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), whereby individuals find themselves faced with challenges to their deeply held beliefs and understandings which in turn pose potential threats to their sense of identity and sense of well-being (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008).

Culture shock may be the first step in a longer and sometimes positive process of development of beliefs and understandings, which may on the one hand strengthen individuals' commitment to their cultural heritage, and, at the same time, provide them with a perspective which enables the harmonious assimilation of new cultural experiences with their existing culture through stages of crisis, recovery and adjustment (Devito, 2004).

Alternatively, culture shock may lead a more visceral 'flight or fight' response, whereby individuals feel the need, above all, to protect themselves from cultural and psychic harm. Whilst such responses reflect forms of what Devito (2004) refers to as 'adjustment', they are qualitatively different from responses, which involve assimilation and/or accommodation.

Maslow's Culturally Holistic Hierarchy

Maslow (1970) theorized that human development could be understood through his model of human needs, which he characterized as falling into an ascending hierarchy of five basic needs: a) physiological; b) safety; c) belonging and love; d) esteem; and c) self-actualisation. It has been suggested that whilst the lower level needs (physiological, safety, and belonging) may persist across cultures, the higher levels of the hierarchy are less applicable to collectivist cultures, where higher level needs relate more strongly to the individual's engagement with key social networks. This means that higher level needs in such cultures tend to be defined in terms of the individual's contribution to group needs, rather than in terms of personal achievements for their own (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003). In collectivist cultures, therefore, the individual's achievement is validated by its contribution to the benefit of the collective, as opposed to being viewed as something that sets the individual apart from the masses, as is in the case in cultures which celebrate individualism (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003).

The Hofstede and Hofstede Cultural Dichotomy Model

The theoretical background of this paper hinges on the Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) Cultural Dichotomy Model. Specifically, it refers to the collectivist and individualist cultural dimensions, as well as the large power distance and small power distance dimensions, which help illustrate some of the striking differences between Eastern and Western cultures that are revealed in the current study.

The Lives of International Students

Individuals who encounter alien cultures for the first time in their early adulthood often experience a sense of dislocation which thrusts them into culture shock. This is because, as adults, they are required to adjust to an unfamiliar culture, economy, education, family, government and society without the benefit of the many years of gradual socialization that most indigenous members of the host culture have experienced (Brown, 2008; Ku, Lahman, Yeh & Cheng, 2008; Sovic, 2008).

The advantages of citizenship that international Students have enjoyed in their home countries are lost (Brown, 2008) and they acquire a new status as members of a minority group (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008). They must adjust to losing their identities (Tseng and Newton, 2002), to general displacement (Russell, Thomson, & Rosenthal, 2008) and, in some cases, access to newfound freedoms, which leaving home culture and family magnifies (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2008).

International students face specific adjustments on and off campus (Brown & Holloway, 2008). These adjustments relate to a wide range of personal and practical challenges, including: day-to-day living, (e.g. housing accommodations) (Brown & Holloway, 2008); social norms (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008); cross-cultural gender relationships (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007); anxiety; depression; stress; cultural fatigue; unfamiliar social activities and lifestyles; feelings of worthlessness; frustration (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Russell et al., 2008); and homesickness (Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007). Loneliness is a particularly serious challenge to individuals who come from collectivist cultures (Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

In addition, international students must adjust to a foreign language (Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010). Even more, international students face threats to safety (see Nyland, Forbes-Mewett, & Marginson, 2010), which have been reported in the UK (UKCOSA, 2004) as well as financial difficulties (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010).

Alienation, isolation (Ku et al., 2008), bewilderment (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007) and confusion (Russell et al., 2008) also frequently confront international students. For example, international students have unpredictable encounters when they define their role as 'foreigner', respond to host nationals' ignorance about international students' original culture and establish new social contacts (Sawir et al., 2008). International students are temporary foreigners, and as such caught in a limbo status as being neither insiders nor outsiders (Sawir et al., 2008). This tends to lead to international students being inclined to have minimal relationships with host

nationals as a means of avoiding the discomfort associated with cultural conflict (Russell et al., 2008).

There are, of course, individual differences, which sometimes moderate the cultural challenges faced by international students. For example, adjustments are more difficult for international students who have false assumptions about similarities between the host culture and their original culture (Zhou et al., 2008). The adjustments are more difficult, too, if international students have unrealistic expectations about family and self (Russell et al., 2008). International students seem do best when they amend their culturally based expectations to fit in with the new cultural setting (Mathiesen & Lager 2007). Unrealistic expectations correspond to what Maslow (1970) regards as a precursor to an unhealthy psychological state. International students who have fixed expectations may attract more stress and anxiety than international students who do not hold preconceived expectations (Sovic, 2008).

Social support is another key ingredient contributing to international students' survival in an alien host culture (Ramsay et al., 2007). International students with inadequate social support are at a higher risk for dropping out (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007). Adequate social support, however, may not eliminate loneliness (Sawir et al., 2008).

Several studies (e.g., Hanassab, 2006; Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007) have found that skin colour may underlie considerable discrimination against international students.—Neo-racism, of this kind, "emphasizes cultural differences as a basis of discrimination that appeals to popular notions of cultural preservation" (Lee & Rice, 2007, p. 383). Discrimination pushes international students into self-segregation based "not on who they are, but on who they are not" (Schmitt, Spears, & Branscombe, 2003, p. 9).

RESEARCH METHOD

The study required a deep involvement with marginalised cultural groups, and this inevitably led to the selection of a qualitative method (Creswell, 2007) within the interpretive paradigm. The research problem is to define international students' cultural and social experiences in a British university during the current geopolitical climate.

The research questions were open-ended and of necessity, were primarily exploratory in nature. They are as follows:

RQ1: How do international students describe their adjustment to British culture?

RQ2: How do international students describe their social interaction with people in Britain?

Setting and Sample

MU is a medium size university that is internationally respected and achieves well on a number of indicators (e.g., The Complete University Guide, 2009) (see above, for more detail). At the time of this study approximately one in four full time and distance learning students came from more than 100 countries outside the UK, with more than 50% of these coming from the People's Republic of China.

Using non-probability and snowball sampling, the achieved sample was 18 international students. An equal number of female (n=9) and male (n=9) students participated in the interviews. The majority of participants came from Asia and the Far East, specifically, the countries of: India (n=1), Pakistan (n=5), Taiwan (n=4), China (n=3), Japan (n=1) and South Korea (n=1). The remaining three students were from Palestine, Hungary and the United States. Fifteen students were holders of postgraduate degrees, 3 had undergraduate degrees. Fourteen students were enrolled in the Social Sciences Faculty, 3 in the Science and Technology Faculty and 1 student in the Humanities Faculty.

Data Collection and Analysis

The authors intended to explore international students' personal accounts of their cultural and social experiences. Qualitative methodology allowed the authors to delve into the participants' subjective and unique experiences using the case study approach (Tsui, 2003) and semi-structured (Ribbons, 2007), in-depth (Nisbet, 2005), informant style (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996) interviews. As such, descriptive data were gathered based on students' own words, own definitions and personal interpretations (Silverman, 2006). All participants were interviewed at least twice over a period of 6 months between 2007 and 2008. This enabled the authors to chart changes over time in participants' perceptions and experience. Data analysis was completed with the aid of NVivo 7. The informants were actively involved in confirming data interpretation through the process of respondent validation (Bassey, 2007; Creswell, 2007; Ribbons, 2007).

Field Relations and the Development of Rapport

The term 'field relations' refers to the quality and pattern of relationships that develop between researchers and study participants in the course of fieldwork, and the processes by which researchers manage their identities in order to maximize the trustworthiness and authenticity of data (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Social scientists use the term *reflexivity* to describe the process for understanding and attempting

to control how a researcher's presence influences the study context (Morrison, 2007). This involves "a reflexive, reactive interaction between the researcher and the decontextualized data that are already interpretations of a social encounter" (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 368). Therefore, the authors examined their personal values, assumptions, and biases (Powney & Watts, 1987; Creswell, 2003) and took measures to control possible influences emanating from their age, gender, and race (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In addition, the authors scrutinised possible influences associated with their use of language in the research setting (Darlington & Scott, 2002). They were also sensitive to cultural interrelationships in their field relations and data analysis (Dimmock, 2007).

The first author, who is of Middle Eastern nationality, conducted the interviews. Her non-British status was signalled by her surname and accent and was declared to informants in the opening initial briefing with informants. It was felt that the fact she was not British would help participants be more at ease in portraying their feelings about their experience of British culture and interactions with British people than they might have been if interviewed by a British national. The interviewer strove for an informal interactional style in order to inspire trust and a willingness to share confidences (Cohen et al., 2007); to encourage informants to feel safe and at ease; and to minimize pressures that might lead to defensive reactions from participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This informal approach was intended to encourage participants to share their authentic stories as active informants rather than as research 'subjects'.

To achieve sound relationships with all informants, the interviewer invested considerable time at MU, but was also careful to identify too closely with informants as over-identification might have inspired them to self-censor their accounts in accordance with apparent shared attitudes and beliefs about the topic under consideration (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Ultimately, the author's intent was to establish rapport with informants whilst maintaining neutrality in relation to informants' accounts (Ribbons, 2007). This involved employing the techniques of active listening and empathy whilst avoiding indications of approval or disapproval of informants' views and opinions (Creswell, 2007). This said, the interviewer took care to respect informants' limits when she probed their stories (Darlington & Scott, 2002) and offered them support, recognition, and positive reinforcement in the form of unconditional positive regard (Ribbons, 2007).

Rapport as an objective motivated the author "to combine ease of manner, trustworthiness and approachability, whilst presenting the

image of being of a status worthy of the subjects' time and effort" (Cooper, 1993, p. 263). This combination of attributes helped imbue the interviews with the quality of exchanges between friendly acquaintances. In addition, the combination reduced inhibitive influences that could invade formal interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The approach also helped minimise the visibility of the power researchers inevitably have over research participants (Creswell, 2007). The importance of self-presentation, appearance, speech, and demeanour in field relations cannot be over emphasized as it has a major influence on establishing the integrity of data collected (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

RESULTS

This study charts international students' experiences from when they arrived in Britain up to the time they were interviewed. As such, the following sections reflect the narrative given by these students, which are traced over a six months period.

RQ1: How do international students describe their adjustment to British culture?

Culture Shock
   Many of the international students in this study came to Britain with very high and unrealistic initial expectation, as illustrated in the following comment:

   I expect […] Britain to be heaven (Emma/Chinese).

After a brief honeymoon period, those who expressed such expectations were often disenchanted. They experienced feelings of distress in response to the unfamiliarity of their surroundings. They also commonly expressed a sense of alienation and bewilderment in response to the racism and hostility to which they were exposed. Such passive responses are symptomatic of culture shock (Zhou et al., 2008), which often places the individual in a state of crisis (Devito, 2004).
   One aspect of culture shock is dealing with daily responsibilities, such as budgeting, which challenged all of the students in the current study. This links with the financial burden for satisfying students' fundamental physiological needs (Maslow, 1970):

> At present I am living with six persons in a two-bedroom flat so that
> I may save some   money (Karim/Pakistani).

Financial difficulty in meeting high living costs is a common problem among international students that is reflected in several other studies (Brown & Holloway 2008; Sawir et al. 2008; Gu et al., 2010).

A core feature of culture shock is cultural differences. Common patterns of cultural differences include international students' unfamiliarity with local lifestyles, customary social behaviours, such as social alcoholic consumption, and rules pertaining to politeness. This is how one student interpreted social politeness in Britain:

> The British culture, well politeness is really important here [...]. In
> Taiwan [...] we don't   usually use polite language like: *Could you*
> *please? Would it be possible?*   (Kala/Taiwanese).

Some students complained about what they saw as insincerity in the British approach to politeness:

> When they [British people] smile it is not from their heart, you can
> feel it [...], it's not so sincerely. In the office, maybe the lady will
> smile at you and say: *Oh! Darling or dear lady*. The way they call
> me was very sweet, but actually they didn't help you [...]. It's not
> really friendly (Sandi/Taiwanese).

These nuances in the social rules governing politeness in British culture, which international students often find confusing, are reflected in other studies (e.g. Brown and Holloway, 2008).

Other cultural differences noted by participants in the current study include social rules relating to: the class system; relationships between genders; gender roles; networking; respect between elders and children; and friendships. An interesting example of a culture clash affecting social relations is provided by Nawaz, who is a Pakistani student:

> The people here [in] the West they [...] like their independence
> more. They don't like people intruding into their independence. But
> in Pakistan people socialise.

In this example, Nawaz is referring to what Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) describe as dependence-interdependence dichotomy, whereby people from collectivist (Eastern) cultures favour interdependence whilst those from individualist (Western) cultures place a greater

emphasis on independence. Therefore, international students are prone to difficulties when placed in situations where independence is expected and interdependence is seen as less appropriate. According to Maslow (1970), independence and interdependence together are essential to an individual achieving her or his highest potential in any culture. Though, as we noted in the introduction to this paper, individualistic cultures are more inclined to see group attachment as something that the highest achievers in a society transcend, whilst collectivist cultures see attachment to the collective as a constant and irreducible need. One of the dangers inherent in this dichotomy is the potential for cultural misunderstandings whereby attachment to the collective might be construed as reflecting a form of arrested development in individualistic cultures, whilst self-actualization may be interpreted as a form of self-aggrandizement from a collectivist cultural perspective. In both cases, the challenge of determining an appropriate and effective course of action for individuals who find themselves in an alien culture are enormous and may have seriously negative consequences.

Culture shock also generated feelings of frustration and inadequacy for many informants. For instance, Sandi's (Taiwanese) frustration coloured her entire British experience:

> I don't like the feeling. I just hate everything because I need to find a house, and I need to cook, and I have language problem [...]. So I don't like living here now.

Communication difficulties were frequently cited as a source of frustration that led to wide ranging problems preventing students from accessing information that may have facilitated more effective engagement with the new culture:

> When it comes to communication I need more information, I need more background, I need more support [...]. If I'm the only one in the situation, I feel insecure. At last if I don't have a strong will, I will give up (Kala/Taiwanese).

In some cases the weight of such negative experiences led to threats to students' psychological safety needs (Maslow, 1970). In an echo of previous studies (Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007; Russell et al., 2008), five students in the current study suffered depression. These students often cited a relationship between their thwarted expectations and their depressed mood, which accords with Maslow's (1970) view of the nature of depression.

International Students' Relationships with British Culture

A key concern shared by many participants was the difficulties they encountered in establishing a relationship with British culture, which led to feelings of alienation. This is illustrated starkly in the following quotation in which the informant reveals such extreme detachment from the host culture that she has no conscious sense of having experienced it, in spite of the fact that her daily life is immersed in it:

> I haven't experiences [with] the British culture (Dana/Japanese).

For Muslim students, religion and geopolitical events were cited as hindering their integration with British culture. Nawaz (Pakistani) described living in Britain as being analogous to being "in jail" in that he felt he could live in Britain, but could "never be part" of the British culture owing to what he saw as fundamental challenges to his identity as a Muslim:

> They would never accept me like that and I would never forego my values to be with them or [to] be part of their culture.

Other Muslim students also were keen to protect their Muslim identity in the face of what they saw as potential threats to their basic cultural values. They resisted Britain's more openly sexualized culture, to avoid what some informants referred to as 'incidents'. Karim (Pakistani) defined these as "illegal activity, illegal culture," and elaborated:

> Socially it is difficult to live here [Britain]. Keeping your identity [...] is difficult [...]. When I see that free single boys and girls kissing each other [...] naturally you will be attracted towards that, but it is not my culture [...]. Religion [Islam] [...] teaches us to stay away from those things, but it is difficult.

As for the geopolitical events, the Muslim Pakistani students could forecast the repercussions they would suffer when unpleasant events occurred in their home country, which is consistent with Anwar's (2008) study:

> If something happens in Pakistan, [British] people will judge me from that perspective [...]. So they'll have a pre-conceived judgement about me if they don't know me […] they will be acting

according to that. After 9/11 or these kinds of incidents things have changed quite a bit and [Western] people they've become more reserved and that makes me want to go back home (Nawaz/Pakistani).

Western media are at fault for creating a misleading image for Muslims, according to the Pakistani informants in this study. Nawaz makes the point that Western media are not the "source of ultimate truth" and argued that if the Western media were better informed it would know "true face" of Islam and be more welcoming to Muslims.

RQ2: How do international students describe their social interaction with people in Britain?

International Students' Relationships with British People

Just as the students experienced difficulties in establishing a relationship with British culture, they found barriers to forging a relationship with British people.

I have zero contact [with British people] apart from my job (Ameya/Indian).

In describing their contact with British people informants, for the most part, portrayed the people with whom they had come into contact as reserved, distant, rude, and unfriendly. In addition, participants complained that they often endured racial discrimination, neo-racism, and hostility. For example, Sally (Chinese) pointed to racism as a key challenge to engagement with British people, as she recalled one apparently racist incident:

The problem is culture […]. It's difficult for [the] Chinese people to make friend for the British people […]. The most problem is the skin colour […]. White skin […] will have not good impression for the yellow skin people [...]. My skin is yellow and this cannot change.

British people, however, do not *openly* discriminate against Pakistanis as Fazal (Pakistani) explains:

There are a few reasons that [British] people do not like us [Muslims] [...]. They may be racial [...]. They have certain feelings [against Pakistanis], but [British] people live by rules and laws, you

know there is a government and if anybody does wrong he will be made accountable for that, so it is a reason [why British people do not openly discriminate against Pakistanis].

Without any intention to discount students' opinions it is important to register the possibility that racism may sometimes be conflated with cultural insensitivity or basic rudeness that is real but racially motivated. Nevertheless, informants shared the perception that British people's racism against international students exacerbated their sense of alienation from the host culture and feelings of isolation and unhappiness.

International Students' Relationships with Local Students

In common with findings from previous research (e.g. Scanlon et al., 2007; Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008) informants in this study were unanimous in claiming that they were not able to establish relationships with local students. Nawaz (Pakistani) provides a comment that speaks for all students:

I don't have British friend. No, no.

Differences in culture and language are often cited as hampering meaningful interaction between international and local students.

Every one of international students [thinks that] home students don't want to talk with us. I don't know why. I think it's the accent we speak, or it's the language we speak, or the thinking (Ameya/Indian).

If they [local students] see that ok my English is not perfect and I don't understand everything, there is a wall (Erriske/Hungarian).

As a result of being rebuffed by local students, many informants surrendered their expectations to forge friendships with local students. Having highlighted experiences of racism indicated by most informants it is interesting to note that few students reported explicitly racist incidents perpetrated by local students, though Ameya (Indian) reported:

I know British people [referring to local students] do not like us. Some might be racist or something.

This indicates that racism can be subtle and is not always easy to detect. For example, Ameya gives the example of an occasion when "white"

students ignored and undervalued him as he voiced his opinion during a classroom group discussion. This account is consistent with the phenomenon of neo-racism (Lee & Rice, 2007; Poyrazli & Lopez, 2007), however, in the absence of testimony from the 'white' students it is difficult to determine the intentions of the local students. This said, it is this international student's perception that is of most significance in the context of the current study because it indicates the negative impact of the experience.

Along with feelings of alienation from British culture, British people, and local students, it is unsurprising that participants expressed feelings of loneliness and homesickness:

> I need friends, I need friends and societies and things. At least [then] I can go out or I can invite and I can be invited […]. It's very difficult (Nala/South Korean).

A clearer expression of affiliation and love needs (Maslow, 1970) would be hard to find. Similarly, the lack of positive reinforcement, on which self-esteem depends, adds further to the sense of helplessness that participants express. The main source of solace for informants comes from other members of the international student ghetto:

> I don't know if there is British culture in my life because we are always talking to international students, not really [to] local students (Kala/Taiwanese).

Further Positive Dimensions of Student Experience

In this study, after international students experienced culture shock, they passed through a period of appraisal, which was a transitional stage. This transitional period, even if brief, involved students in the appraisal of their personal situations, the identification of their needs, and formulation of challenges. This corresponds to Devito's (2004) recovery stage in terms of individuals acquiring functional skills.

Seven students started developing functional skills to survive. A representative opinion is provided by Sally (Chinese): "The important thing we learn here is how to survive."This is also the stage where students realized that their high initial expectations are not going to be met:

> Oh I was at the moon! Still, I remember the moment [that I got accepted at MU]. [It was] the happiest moment [...]. But here [...]

everything happened which was totally different than my expectations (Nala/South Korean).

Following the transition stage, some students actively responded to challenges in the individuation stage, which corresponds to Devito's (2004) recovery stage in terms of how individuals' confidence increases. Individuation describes the process by which students developed insight into their own identities, which enabled them to engage in sociocultural situations more effectively. This means that these students, most of whom came from Eastern collectivist cultures, were challenged by the Western, individualist culture they encountered, and, as a result, started discovering their individuality (Maslow, 1970) and began to find ways of exploring and expressing individualist characteristics (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). It is important to stress, however, that this was at times a deeply uncomfortable process involving challenges to self-esteem, which is a core feature of "functional autonomy" (Maslow, 1970, p. 58), which is in turn, central to self-identity.

Five students showed significant signs of going through the individuation process and deriving personal benefits as a result:

> I now have the confidence to deal with things by myself [...], better than [when I was] in China (Bambi/Chinese).

> This experience is a vast experience. It's not just about studying here, it's about living here when there aren't relatives around, when you don't have people even speaking your own language [...]. So, it's an experience of living alone, on your own, being very responsible personally, away from relatives […]. [I] start being independent which I never was (Aisha/Pakistani).

The important point here is that Aisha and Bambi expressed their independence positively – as a triumph. In contrast, Ameya (Indian) also expressed the ways in which he became independent, however, it was a negative form of independence, meaning it was rooted in a sense of alienation from the people around him:

> I have learnt a lot: that I cannot trust anyone, I have to care for myself, and I'm the only one who is going to help myself (Ameya/Indian)

There are other examples of broader changes in a number of students in terms of how they see themselves – their self-images and how they perceive their culture. Eric (Taiwanese) talks about becoming more international and

now views his lifestyle in Taiwan as requiring adjustment to fit in with his international perspective; a desire to "relax myself", and a determination to "try to get more personal space."

Whereas Eric believes that his experiences in the UK have changed his views about himself (individual self-expression), Sally (Chinese) claims that her experiences in the UK changed the way she views her own culture and she became more tolerant of other people. She believes that she is now able to understand a behaviour that she had witnessed back in China, which at the time was "strange."

> When I go back to China I can understand why foreigner people like to do things. For   example, in China I like to go to Starbucks […]. One day I go there very early I saw some foreigners dancing in the centre of the Starbucks. I feel […] strange because no   Chinese people were dancing in the coffee shop. I ask the staff why they do dancing   and they told me this couple always buy coffee here and they [are being] romantic [...]. I   can understand what they are feeling. But in China, at that time, I cannot understand why   they're dancing.

These examples of individuation indicate a relatively positive adjustment to life in the UK, with the exception of Ameya. They also reveal a strong sub-theme characterized by a positive attitude towards individualism, the scope of individual activity, as well as personal expression. These findings are consistent with previous studies which conclude that international students' intercultural learning experiences can precipitate identity change (Gu et al., 2010) and can be associated with Eastern students developing more individualistic values, attitudes, and opinions (Tarry, 2011).

The third and final phase of positive adjustment involved accommodation or dropout. Of the 18 international students, only five illustrated positive adjustment to living in Britain. One of these five students is a Muslim Palestinian. His religion and nationality (place of birth and residence) both played a role in his adjustment, given that students' adjustment (or lack of adjustment) needs to be examined in terms of their history, background, and narrative. He purposefully chose MU because it is located in an area with a high proportion of Muslims, which in turn, allowed him to easily practice his religion because of the availability of facilities and resources, such as having a section in the supermarkets for *Hallal* food. Another factor to consider is that he reported a sense of physical safety in Britain as opposed to what he felt in Palestine's unstable political

environment. His background makes him less critical from people who come from more stable environments.

It is important to note that these students, with the exception of the Palestinian student, showed positive signs of individuation and two of these students had harmonious and stable relationships with partners who accompanied them to the UK. In Maslovian terms, this signifies that their belonging and love needs were being met in contrast to the majority of their international colleagues, who were singletons.

Three of the remaining students dropped out of their courses and returned home. Two of these students were explicit about the difficulties they encountered in adjusting. Adjustment is a fluid state, and there are examples of people talking about partial adjustment. 10 students established partial adjustment to life in Britain, meaning that they displayed acceptance of or resignation to their situations. At the time of the interviews, these individuals appeared to be settling for what can be best described as a basic survival orientation, wherein they narrowed their social and emotional expectations, and concentrated on an instrumental engagement with their environment, which was geared towards achieving academic outcomes.

A key difference between those who dropped out and those who opted for partial adjustment was the willingness of members of the latter group to accept feelings of loneliness and isolation. The role of their attitudes towards their studies is also an important factor here. In a subsequent paper, the authors will deal in depth with these students' academic experience.

CONCLUSION

This study traced 18 international students' journeys from high initial expectations, through culture shock, to various eventual patterns of accommodation. The study showed that participants faced barriers to satisfying their human needs. The initial culture shock triggered a regression through Maslow's Hierarchy. In some cases this is followed by a form of accommodation that enables the individual to re-establish access to having their needs met. For others this is not the case and these individuals drop out.

This small-scale study resonates with other studies and at the same time goes beyond the existing literature, which point out the difficulties that international students have in adjusting. The particular contribution of this study is in the detailed account that the international students provided about their personal journeys. A particular concern is the sense that some of the students express the view that they were victims of racial discrimination, economic exploitation, and disingenuous marketing. Having said this, several of the students clearly believed that they had gained personal

enrichment from this experience. These tentative conclusions should form the bases for further and large-scale research into these important issues.

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