A 'Roller Coaster' experience?

An exploration of Postgraduate International Students’ perceptions of teaching, learning and assessment and integration with home students and building a campus community

Tomasz John
My spin

This presentation is a part of a wider PhD research study which aims to contribute to an understanding of the international student experience from the perspectives of teaching, learning and assessment as well as social participation.
Theoretical Background

Literature Review

- the internationalisation of HE theorised in the literature at the organisational, strategic level
- focuses on the growing numbers of 'international students'
- there are very few comprehensive investigations of the interactions between international students and academics

Shift of the focus of study

- more and more in-depth studies which make use of stories from the field and accounts of the experience of both students and practitioners dealing with internationalisation
- such research involves allows to explore the complexities of interactions between international students, home students and academics in constantly changing intercultural higher education landscape
- there is still a strong need for cultural sensitivity in pedagogical approaches

Where does my research fit?

- EU MA and PhD student in the UK studying with international students
- ERIP Lecturer working with international student and staff
- response to diverse students' needs of an increasingly internationalised university
- this study allows a deeper understanding of the impact of internationalisation
- a tool to maximise and benefit from the opportunities for intercultural learning
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Aim?
Explorations of the experiences of international postgraduate students

Areas:
- Teaching, learning and assessment
- Student support services/living
- Integration with home students and building campus community

4 focus groups
23 postgraduate international students (including 2 EU students)
4 different campuses of the university
April and June 2013.

Why focus groups?
- used increasingly in educational research, have proved to be a valuable tool to generate data in the form of facts, opinions, experiences and feelings
- the interaction procedure can inspire recollections and discussion which is less likely in an interview situation
- home students and staff placed in separate focus groups to reassure open expression of opinions

Design, recruitment and data analysis
- study is based on a qualitative critical ethnographic case study
- the research has taken a form of an in-depth investigation of a purposive sample
- opportunity sampling and snowball technique was used to recruit participants through university website, social networks and emails
- the primary data focused on content rather than conversation analysis or discourse analysis tradition
- finally both thematic analysis and narrative analysis were conducted to gain an in-depth understanding of issues under investigation
Methods

Why focus...

- used increasingly in educational settings, opinion analysis

Course?

International postgraduate students
Aim?

Explorations of the experiences of international postgraduate students

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Emerging themes have been cross referenced with the research questions in the main research.

**Selection of students views on:**

- teaching, learning and assessment
- integration with home students and building campus community
Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Positive

- New education system: challenging but exciting
- Internationalised curriculum

Challenges

- Insufficient learning support
- Understanding staff
- Disappointment of photographs of the course, making the transition to the technical areas of the university
- Lack of friendly learning environment due to sharing spaces with other courses
- Lack of adequate language and mobility in text or academic information in them

Emerging themes have been cross referenced with the research questions in future research.
Teaching, Learning and Assessment
Positive

New education system challenging but exciting

"When I studied in China, students got graded letters without jury, you must have to read the exact text, to answer the question. I consider many things I have to read in class we don't have to read in my book, even though the theory is much bigger than the one here. Books are extinct here."

The reason why I really enjoy the course is that now I feel like I really understand how to be an international student. It was more difficult for me, but for myself, it's normal for me to worry about my work, there's a lot from sculpture.

Internationalised curriculum

"Even though my main teacher is British, he will always show examples from different countries, because I have associates from Columbia, China, India and America. So I think, it's a good thing for it, because before I learn about this, it is a new experience for me. I can guess something about the different examples."

"In general, the tutors give different examples from different countries, they do not only focus on examples for western culture."

Students enjoy feedback in tutorials and feel they are respected

"We have nice tutors, last term I told them I didn't understand them at all, but one thing always help me a lot. I ask them, 'Are you with me?' and they say, 'Yes, I am with you.' I think I get more attention from some tutors."

"We have a lot of attention from the tutors, they often advance, and they treat you like you are not actually, you just check your work, but because the numbers are more, I get more attention from them."

Pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP programme

"If you are successful in your study, it means you will have more opportunities. Looking forward to the future, looking in the mirror, focusing on my work and in my subjects."

"If you have a successful course and good EAP programme, you will feel better. The tutor taught me a lot of things, and I learned how to write a lot of things. To your own words, you can read it, but you need to write it in English. You need to write it in English, and don't worry that you do not have a pronunciation or a word."

"I have a lot of experience with EAP, it's good for you to write better."
New education system challenging but exciting

“when I studied in China, students just joined lectures without joy, you must come to uni, it’s easier, but here is different - I consider many things, I have more books to read, in China we don’t have to read any books even though the library is much bigger than the one here. Books are useless there”

“The reason why I really enjoy the course is that here I feel like I’m really studying! I have to be more independent, it’s more beneficial for me in general, I do it for myself, even if my marks are not too good, it’s is useful for me to write about my work, I learn a lot from feedback”
Internationalised curriculum

“even though our main tutor is British, he will always show examples from different countries, because I have classmates from Colombia, China, India and America. So I think it is a good thing for us, because I believe that I learn a lot, each time we talk it is a new experience for me. I can guess inspiration from the different examples”

“in general the tutors give different examples from different countries; they do not only focus on examples for western culture”
Students enjoy feedback in tutorials and feel they are respected

“we have nice tutors, last term I told them I didn’t understand them at all. but noe they always help me to catch up with things, writing essays, working on proposals, how to explore things, provide solutions”

“I have a lot attention from the tutors, that’s another advantage, at big unis there’s no personal relationship with your tutor, they treat you like nobody, they just check your work, here because the numbers are low, I get more attention from tutors”
Pre-sessional and in-sessional EAP programmes

“it was very helpful to come here for 10 weeks to improve my English, I cannot imagine that time I started understanding my course, vocabulary or some knowledge without the pre-sessional course, it turned out to be very helpful in the first semester”

“We joined the in-sessional EAP course where discussed difficult texts with, styles, topics. The teacher helped us to understand texts, discuss them, and we learnt how to read the longer texts. It was beneficial. The paper was more than 10 pages. It was hard to finish. So I learnt how to speed up my reading and skim through text. We also learnt to proof-read each others’ work, very helpful!”
Challenges

**Insufficient learning support**

I work mainly by myself so it is more about you being motivated or I guess that it's a little bit distinctive. As much I expected more from group work, tutorials, and lectures. And first I got a feeling of frustration that you should think on your own. I would like to study more effectively, especially at the beginning of the course. I only have one tutorial, so we have only one tutorial every week. 20 minutes per week, that's all. And for international students, we spend three times more money than home and EU students.

**Understanding staff**

We have to decide, it's something we have to learn as well because it's a different culture in the peer group and critical right. Okay, we jump into conclusions, were used to a developed country, we don't go round like that, so when talking about projects, sometimes I wish I could get a single answer.

"During tutorials, tutors will always say a positive thing, and then you have to face the reality when you receive a written feedback, it's totally different. It's a disaster" I was crying when you receive a written feedback, it's totally different. It's a disaster. I was really frustrated as I wasn't sure if I could trust that person, as they actually mean what they say in written/online.

- Dissatisfaction of the organisation of the courses involving late inductions into certain technical areas of the university
- Lack of friendly learning environment due to sharing space with students from other courses
- Long handbooks with difficult language and inability to find or understand information in them
Insufficient learning support

“I work mainly by myself so it is more about you being motivated so I found that a little bit disturbing, too much freedom. I expected more from group work, tutorials, and lectures. Yeah. At first I felt a little bit frustrated that you should study on your own, I would like to be guided more effectively, especially at the beginning of the course”

“we only have one teacher, so we have only one tutorial every week, 20 minutes per week, that’s all we get! And as international students, we spend three times more money than home and EU students”
Understanding staff

“we have to decode, it’s something we have to learn as well, because it’s a different culture, in HK people generalize and criticize right away, we jump into conclusions, we’re really straightforward, we don’t go round like Brits, so when talking about projects, sometimes I wish I could get a simple answer”

“during tutorials, tutors will always say a positive thing, and then you have to face the reality when you receive a written feedback, it’s totally different! It’s a disaster! I was really frightened as I wasn’t sure if I could trust that person, if they actually mean what they say in tutorials!”

“it’s the language barrier, acronyms, euphemisms, colloquialisms, how they approach you. It’s really clear when I receive feedback from a non-British tutor. It’s straight to the point”
• Dissatisfaction of the organisation of the courses involving late inductions into certain technical areas of the university
• Lack of friendly learning environment due to sharing space with students from other courses
• Long handbooks with difficult language and inability to find or understand information in them
Integration with home students and building campus community

Positive

- Virtual communities
- International students bonded well among themselves

Challenges

- Limited choice or lack of relevant clubs and societies in S2A
- Lack of opportunities to practice English
- "It felt that my English is not improving, and every day, the burden of peer evaluation or international, but it's like this, really. And the other thing is that all international students are quiet and polite, but we don't meet each other as long as they present here, they prefer to work, they have no time for socializing in our accommodation. There are mostly international students."
Integration with home students and building campus community
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Virtual communities

International students bonded well among themselves
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International students bonded well among themselves
**Challenges**

**Collaboration with home students**

"I think home students have to put more effort towards understanding us and try to have a normal relationship with us. Sometimes, they don't really meet and experience by collaborating with international students outside of class, and then they get used to get confused with us."

"Meetings, parties, events are very helpful because international students are home sick and they only stay in their rooms or walk around and they do not have many friends. We want to socialize, that much, maybe once a month but there are other kinds of activities... cultural exchange and activities that would help to make better communication with home students."

"We don't have any British friends. I mean they are nice, friendly and smiling but there is not a warm, I don't know, maybe it's the language barrier. Our British friends sometimes is closed, it's not a good example of integration (laugh). I think if you talk to a British, if you have little in common, it's difficult. They don't want to talk the same, they don't listen to the same music, we have different outlooks."

**Lack of opportunities to practise English**

"I feel that my English is not improving a lot, sorry! It doesn't matter if we are Asian or international, but it's like that, really. And the other thing is that UK postgraduate students are nice and polite, but we don't meet quite often as they have their personal lives, they commute to work, they have no time for socialising. In our accommodation there are mostly international students."

**Limited choice or lack of relevant clubs and societies in SU**

"There was only one event last year! In HK and Berlin they have buddy scheme systems, each student gets a buddy who then is responsible for introducing the student to university life and place. It's really helpful. Here, there are not enough groups for socialising. No societies, activities going on! I only walk on the campus, just this."
Limited choice or lack of relevant clubs and societies in SU

“There was only one event last year! In HK and Berlin they have buddy scheme systems, each students gets a buddy who then is responsible for introducing the student to university life and place. It’s really helpful. Here, there are not enough groups for socialising. No societies, activities going on! I only walk on the campus, just this”
Collaboration with home students

“I think home students have to put more effort towards understanding us and try very hard to explain things to us. We know, we see that. Sometimes, they have never had any experience in collaborating with international student, especially MA degree, and then they see us, get confused with us”

“meetings, parties, events are very helpful because international students are homesick and they only stay in their rooms or walk around and they do not have too many friends. We don’t like clubbing that much, maybe once a month, but I think other kind of activities... cultural exchange and interaction, that would help to make better communication with home students”

“we don’t have any British friends. I mean they are nice, friendly and lovely but there is still a barrier. I don’t know, maybe it’s the English culture. Our British friend’s girlfriend is Chinese, so he’s a good example of integration possible! It is difficult to find the same topic with British if you have little in common, it’s different cultures. They don’t watch the same movies, they don’t listen to the same music, we know different celebrities”
Lack of opportunities to practise English

“I feel that my English is not improving a lot, sorry! It doesn’t matter if we are Asian or international, but it’s like that, really. And the other thing is that UK postgraduate students are nice and polite but we don’t meet quite often as they have their personal lives, they commute to work, they have no time for socialising. In our accommodation there are mostly international students.”
Challenges

Collaboration with home students

“I think home students have to put more effort towards understanding us and try very hard to engage with us. We need to see that sometimes, they may not have any experience in collaborating with international students, especially the local ones, and then they just get confused with us.”

“Meetings, parties, events are very helpful because international students are rare, and they only stay in their rooms or walk around and they do not meet too many friends. We want to stay with that idea, maybe once a month, but then other kind of activities – cultural exchange and interaction that would help to make better communication with home students.”

“We don’t have any British friends. I mean they are nice, friendly and lovely but there is not a proper feeling of belonging. I don’t know, maybe it’s the British nature. Our British nature is different.

Lack of opportunities to practise English

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Limited choice or lack of relevant clubs and societies in SU

“There was only one event last year! In HK and Berlin, they have buddy scheme systems, each students gets a buddy who then is responsible for introducing the student to university life and place, it’s really helpful! Here, there are not enough groups for socialising. No societies, activities going on! I only walk on the campus, just this!”
What's next?

These findings have formed the basis for discussion for the next stage of the study: focus groups with SU, home students and academics as an attempt to finding ways in which improvements might be achieved at the target university and more widely.
Bibliography


Thank you for attention

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An exploration of postgraduate international student perceptions of academic learning and assessment and integration with home students and building campus community.

Tomaz Juhlin

Teaching, Learning and Assessment

Positive

Challenges

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Thank you for attention

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International students viewed and using forums.

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- integration of academic and personal support
- need for the conceptualisation of the interactions between students and academics

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