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A lonesome journey? Internationalisation and the postgraduate research student experience

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Introduction

In this opinion piece, I would like to reflect on the 'student experience' in the postgraduate context. Drawing on my own journey as postgraduate student at Leeds Metropolitan University, I am particularly interested in the contingent of international PhD/research students whose 'experience', with few recent exceptions (Trahar, 2011; Higher Education Academy, 2010; Pyhältö et al, 2009; Trigwell & Dunbar-Goddet, 2005), has received fairly little attention from writers on both higher education and internationalisation, and likewise from practitioners involved in programme development and strategic planning at institutional level. In view of the lack of sufficient research undertaken in this field, this piece offers few answers to how to tackle the decisive ongoing shifts in postgraduate education. Rather, it raises a number of questions which need to be addressed for the future international development of postgraduate research programmes at Leeds Metropolitan University – and, by extension, other HE institutions. For example:

- What are the major trends and challenges postgraduate/doctoral education faces in the UK at the moment?
- What characterises postgraduate student 'experience' at Leeds Met and is this experience appropriately accounted for with reference to international students?

Reflection

- What can international research students offer to the University and what, in turn, can the institution offer them in terms of academic and personal development, career planning, skills improvement and future employability?

The timing of this special issue of the ALT Journal is particularly appropriate and provides a good opportunity for such reflection. Some three years ago, as part of the University's centenary celebrations, Leeds Met awarded a hundred PhD scholarships and many of the successful applicants are currently 'writing up' or have completed their studies. These students, 'international' or not, have not only brought with them different academic and disciplinary backgrounds but have also contributed to the international and cultural fabric of the University. Before I set out to reflect on the Leeds Met experience in particular, I would like to discuss more general trends and current developments in UK postgraduate education.

Development and change of postgraduate education in the UK

If one believes current survey data and trend analyses about the future development of UK higher education, postgraduate study will continue to thrive over the years to come. In a recent Higher Education Academy publication, Park (2010) refers to the continuous rise in numbers of postgraduate students, which, among other factors, is tightly linked to the growing internationalisation of postgraduate recruitment as well as the emergence of new forms of doctoral awards in many UK universities.

According to Park, this trend is challenging and he urges universities to critically rethink issues related to curriculum development, students' skills development and the assurance of quality and standards of postgraduate awards. These recommendations, however, come at a time of far-reaching governmental reforms in HE which include the increase of student fees for both undergraduates and postgraduates and which, in turn, are heavily criticised for producing inequality for prospective students from less privileged social backgrounds. Park's diagnosis gains even more significance in view of the current graduate unemployment rate, which in

Reflection

2010 reached a new peak since the early 1990s and could lead to more students considering the continuation of their studies in postgraduate programmes (Shepherd, 2010).

In the light of such developments, international recruitment remains a key strategy for universities which continue to woo international students willing to pay expensive fees for a prestigious UK higher education. Indeed, some may conclude that in such a competitive political and economic climate, recruitment interests and 'marketisation' discourses are likely to rule out more 'ethical' or 'sustainable' aspects of internationalisation which have gradually gained momentum over recent years. These aspects include enhancing home students' international experience, widening perspectives, developing cross-cultural capabilities, encouraging the crossing of social and cultural boundaries, critical thinking and a sense of 'global citizenship' and, from a more pragmatic point of view, thereby enhancing students' chances for future employment in an increasingly competitive global job market. In terms of fostering such a quality-oriented internationalisation agenda, Leeds Metropolitan University has been a champion in the UK and has sought to enhance students' international experience through a variety of initiatives reaching from curriculum development related to internationalisation, to volunteering programmes and the launch of the innovative Centre for Academic Practice and Research in Internationalisation (CAPRI).

Internationalising the postgraduate research student experience – between fact and fiction

Drawing on my own experience, I think it is widely assumed that having undergone a competitive application and recruitment process, research students are well prepared for their academically and personally challenging journey. As for the aspect of 'internationalisation', many disciplines consider innovative doctoral proposals to be *per se* international and global in scope and imply an outward-looking approach to

Reflection

the dissemination and sharing of research outcomes in an international arena. This may be particularly the case for the social sciences but also for subjects such as business studies with a traditionally large international student proportion. Perhaps it is owing to assumptions like these that the term 'international' does not feature in any of the general criteria for 'PhD outcomes' as defined by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA). According to these criteria (which are currently being revised), holders of a PhD will "...make informed judgements on complex issues in specialist fields, often in the absence of complete data, and be able to communicate their ideas and conclusions clearly and effectively to specialist and non-specialist audiences." Furthermore, PhD holders will "... continue to undertake pure and/or applied research and development of new techniques, ideas, or approaches"; and finally, they "... will have the qualities and transferable skills necessary for employment requiring the exercise of personal responsibility and largely autonomous initiative in complex and unpredictable situations, in professional and equivalent environments" (QAA, 2001; QAA, 2011 draft document, pp. 20–21). Similarly, Research Councils UK have recently published a joint document outlining that training in research skills and techniques is the core element for producing "substantial, original contribution to knowledge", although this needs to be complemented by "additional requirements" which relate to a healthy research environment, successful project management, personal effectiveness, communication, networking and team-working skills, as well as career management (Research Councils UK, 2008, n.p.). Apart from showing "a broad understanding of the context, at the national and international level, in which research takes place" and loose references to the "wider research community", the 'international' skills profile of PhD students remains a rather vaguely defined element in this statement. This may seem surprising given not only the increasing number of international research students at universities across the country, but also in the light of the more general and equally loosely defined requirements of UK doctoral programmes: research students ought to contribute to innovative research, represent the university at international conferences, seminars and workshops and thereby raise the profile and reputation of their home institution. Eager to gain a foothold in the international academic community, they should smoothly connect to research networks spanning the globe, publish in international journals, engage in collaborations and joint research projects, etc. Not least, universities hugely benefit

Reflection

from international students' diverse disciplinary and academic backgrounds which they may incorporate in the curriculum through part-time teaching or tutoring.

Irrespective of these general assumptions, international research students face similar challenges to those of their colleagues at lower levels, in terms of both 'formal' and 'informal' aspects of student life (Montgomery, 2010). These may relate to insufficient language and writing skills; the lack of induction courses; institutional bureaucracy; discontent with the quality of mentoring and supervision; aspects of age, gender, race and equality and diversity; deficient interaction with UK peers; and problems related to finance and immigration, personal skills development and the social and cultural environment, as well as engagement with a new and in many ways different 'academic climate'. The latter aspect has received particular attention in a recent survey report on the UK postgraduate experience by Park (2009), who notes that a large proportion of international postgraduate and/or research students in the UK were much less satisfied with the 'intellectual climate' and 'infrastructure' than their UK peers. Deficits were mainly associated with a "weakly developed sense of community" within departments and with other research students across the university. Many international students also referred to the lack of a stimulating departmental 'research culture' and ambience, and pointed to the lack of research seminars and workshops.

As the above paragraph indicates, there are a number of myths surrounding the PhD 'experience', many of which are quite appropriately mocked on various student websites (see for instance www.phdcomics.com). Loneliness and social isolation during the writing-up phases is a prominent myth and clearly contrasts with the ideal picture of a vibrant, accommodating and team-working international research environment. Tightly linked to the image of the solitary and somewhat estranged PhD student is another popular myth that the success of a PhD is solely dependent on the relationship with the supervisor(s). Although there is some profound truth in that view, it somehow obscures the role of the department, faculty and the university as a whole in providing a stimulating student experience and facilitating a constructive research environment.

Reflection

On top of the various hurdles international research students face when starting and progressing with their programmes, additional difficulties arise when they finally complete their studies. This links not only to the academic 'glass ceiling' graduates may face owing to different levels of institutional reputation, but also to the fact that the PhD is no longer primarily an apprenticeship for future academics. In the UK at present, only three out of ten PhD students are likely to continue their career in academia (Park, 2010). Preparing PhD students adequately for the world of work beyond the academy is now a major challenge to all higher education institutions (HEIs) and should prompt redefinition of the nature of the doctorate as well as stimulating a critical debate about how to push this agenda forward. In this context, internationalisation is a particularly important issue not least because of the increasing global competition of doctoral programmes and PhD awards and ongoing debates about harmonising them with European standards, particularly through the so-called Bologna Process (Park, 2007, 2010).

Doctoral research at Leeds Met – a personal account

Having discussed both facts and some latent folklore linked to postgraduate study, I would like to reflect in this section on my own experience as an international PhD student at Leeds Metropolitan University. I consider myself in a truly fortunate position, partly because of the subject of my programme, tourism, which *per se* is associated as being inter- or trans-national, borderless and outward-looking, and implies the encounter with and the individual negotiation of 'other' people, cultures and communities.

In terms of supervision, I found the regularity and intensity of supervisory meetings essential for my progress and enjoyed their pleasantly 'informal' tenor which left no room for exerting any kind of power, authority or politics on the part of the supervisors, but encouraged a sense of self-discipline, ownership and responsibility for my research project. This 'affirming informality' clearly contrasts with more authoritative teacher–student relationships and academic traditions (Welikala, 2011),

Reflection

including my own German–Austrian one, where less frequent supervisory meetings and a formal “*Herr/Frau Professor*” form of address are the norm. On the other hand, however, my own academic background helped me to critically reflect on and rework seemingly traditional and formalised UK research and writing cultures. As for the latter aspect, I was particularly pleased that both my supervisors and viva examiners applauded the incorporation of contemporary non-English literatures and concepts into my thesis which otherwise, and ever so often, would have been ‘lost in translation’.

Equally relevant to this piece is that during my research I had the opportunity to study and work with colleagues from more than 25 countries, a fantastic experience that proved to be transformative not only on a personal scale but also in the ways I approached my subject and progressed my studies. This stimulating research climate and academic culture allowed for the exchange of experience in relation to fieldwork, research techniques, writing and analysis, and provided for the cross-reading and exchange of ideas through seminars, meetings and self-organised workshops. The personal encounter and collaboration with so many international colleagues also helped me to recognise and rework traditionally ‘Western’ approaches to research and to critically reflect on the “whiteness of the academy that seems to go unnoticed and uncommented” (Clegg, Parr & Wan, 2003, p. 164). In retrospect, I can say that I hugely benefited not only from a multi-national and culturally diverse environment, but also from the variety of disciplinary backgrounds represented in the department. The mutual exchange of ideas and approaches led to joint presentations and panels at international conferences, joint publications and the organisation of a series of workshops which attracted notable speakers and a large number of research students.

It is interesting to note that this inspiring research climate resembled in many ways key aspects related to my own PhD project, which addressed the interrelation between tourism, heritage and narratives of regional and national identities. For example it was interesting to observe in both ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ encounters with colleagues that national identities and cultural backgrounds became central means of self-representation and often a way to play with and negotiate a sense of identity

Reflection

and belonging in a different environment. Indeed, the insights I gained from my conversations with international colleagues, reaching from 'mundane' issues such as national cuisines, languages or social behaviours to more 'epistemic' ways of seeing and thinking about the world, were hugely beneficial for my ethnographic field work with international tourists.

As some scholars note, 'cultural contact' may have the unintended consequence of reinforcing stereotypes (Bennett, 1998) or producing certain ways of maintaining and rehearsing national and cultural identity among others (Furnham & Bochner, 1986). It may involve what anthropologist Michael Herzfeld (2005) calls 'cultural intimacy' – the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of a common sociality. If one refers to both 'cultural contact' and 'research cultures' in the context of international students' experiences, I think it is important to acknowledge the importance of spaces and moments of cultural reflection in which different worldviews meet, clash and grapple with each other and people continually negotiate a sense of meaning and self-identity. This involves, as Killick (2009) writes, the freedom of experimenting with oneself and one's identity, and requires a 'common ground', which is mostly provided by the curriculum, subject or discipline, but also involves full commitment at departmental, faculty and university level. One also needs to consider that access to research cultures may vary by gender, age, and other factors beyond nationality, and that in seemingly active research communities some students may still experience exclusion (McVitty, 2010).

On the matter of skills development and employability, it is also worthwhile mentioning that colleagues who successfully completed their studies have experienced a rather smooth transition into work which, in many cases, is now located outside the UK and outside their own countries of origin. From my own experience and from personal communication with friends and colleagues I can say that the unique character and scope of the programme as well as an overall outward-looking 'global' perspective was clearly beneficial for gaining a foothold in the currently unstable academic job market. The latter aspect of future pathways of PhD

Reflection

graduates is relevant to the following section which addresses possibilities for shaping 'international' postgraduates' skills and enhancing their engagement and experience on campus.

Postgraduate attributes? Enhancing the experience of research students

The last couple of years have seen an increasing interest in developing a curriculum to foster international 'graduate skills' and 'attributes' in a number of universities across the UK (Jones & Caruana, 2010). The idea of encouraging students to develop 'soft' and 'transferable' skills for their future employability and to bestow on them a sense of 'global citizenship' and a global perspective through various curriculum interventions has become a major theme for universities. The fact that such 'internationally' orientated skills schemes hardly exist for postgraduate students/researchers is perhaps not very surprising given the fact that there is no defined 'national curriculum' for the doctorate (Park, 2010), and it is also linked to the general assumption that postgraduate students are perfectly capable of defining their own intellectual needs and designing ways of meeting those needs (McVitty, 2010).

However, and precisely because of national, institutional and disciplinary variations and changes in PhD programmes, it is vital for universities to recognise postgraduates' 'international' experience and to give them a stake in actively shaping the departmental and institutional research climate and creating a sense of community through student-led initiatives. It is, therefore, even more important to maintain and increase opportunities for postgraduates to meet other researchers and gain practical experience by organising academic events, and to provide international intellectual opportunities which positively effect skills development, increase confidence, and create new networks and research directions. The institution, in turn, will benefit from showcasing intellectual creativity and achievements and from not having to put administrative resources into organising, marketing and running postgraduate research community activities (McVitty, 2010).

Reflection

Equally important for the enhancement of postgraduate research students' experience are institution-led initiatives. Leeds Met has developed and maintained a topical range of programmes, encompassing arts and cultural studies, environment, health, tourism, sport and leisure studies, and others, which provide particularly good disciplinary arenas for students to exert and enhance international experience and skills and to produce highly innovative research. In this context, it is necessary to provide room for knowledge transfers across all institutional levels and to encourage the exchange of research, training and teaching more vigorously. For example, this is achieved by enhancing teaching and tutoring opportunities for international research students and making good use of the innovative and close-to-data research which feeds 'international' approaches and perspectives directly into existing curricula. For doctoral students, in turn, this provides precious teaching and tutoring experience which enhances their chances for future employment in higher education and elsewhere.

From my own experience and from various conversations with PhD colleagues I know that the "if I had known about this earlier" or the "if only I could have made use of that" syndrome is fairly common. This relates not only (or inevitably) to the overall choice of the research topic and design but also to basic information about the general requirements, standards and structure of the programme. Even though there are a number of informal or loosely structured networks and initiatives providing useful guidance within the institution (especially the very active Leeds Met Postgraduate Research Society/PORESO network), there is clearly space to improve the dissemination of appropriate information and to provide international research students with details about programme entry, progress and exit requirements. A key aspect of this would be to inform students about skills development schemes, communicate institutional standards and supervisory responsibilities, and provide assistance in career planning. A general lack of such offers is reflected in the recent Higher Education Academy survey (Higher Education Academy, 2010) which suggests that, retrospectively, research students are hugely positive about their ability to learn independently and improve their analytical, research and transferable skills. However, few students say that they were given sufficient opportunities to reflect on their professional development needs or

Reflection

encouraged to think about the range of career opportunities available to them. Based on these findings, the authors of the report recommend the provision of information on institutional standards and expectations (including institutional responsibilities towards research students); more transparent channels for gathering feedback from research students; and more effective ways of communicating the range of future career opportunities. Beside the provision of online sources and materials, small and informal induction workshops or seminars with academic or professional doctorate holders or early career researchers could be useful for making such information more transparent for research students. Among other HEIs, the University of Edinburgh offers a host of activities for enhancing personal, transferable, employment-related and generic research skills, including face-to-face courses, workshops, web-based material, printed information, mentoring, networking, individual advice, career support and more. Other universities such as Manchester, Nottingham and Norwich have uploaded on their web pages reflective articles, interview transcripts, and audio and video reflections by PhD graduates which give valuable insights into their experience and into possible career pathways. Particularly helpful are the online sources provided by VITAE, a national organisation which seeks to champion the personal, professional and career development of doctoral researchers and research staff in higher education and research institutes (www.vitae.ac.uk). Many of these innovations have been initiated in response to the Roberts Report (2002) which, among other things, recommended the increasing of funding opportunities for doctoral degrees, the extension of doctoral programmes from three years to three and a half years, and the improvement of career development plans and transferable skills, as well as broader access to appropriate training opportunities. In addition, the report clearly outlines the significance of skills improvement to 'international migration' in the HE sector, and the increasing significance of 'foreign expertise' for universities and businesses in the UK (Roberts, 2002). Following Roberts' recommendations, funding opportunities and grants were mainly allocated to traditionally research-intensive universities, but have recently stopped owing to spending cuts across the HE sector (Fearn, 2010). For less research-intensive universities such as Leeds Met, which may expect little funding support for their postgraduate/research agendas, it is even more vital to develop innovative and transparent ways of enhancing the postgraduate research

Reflection

experience, to learn from teachers, alumni, and the students themselves, and to look at good practice already undertaken at a number of UK HEIs. In this context, transparency also relates to honesty in advertising and marketing postgraduate and PhD courses and meeting the promises made to the students.

With a relatively small number of research students, Leeds Met can provide high quality service and guidance related to their first-year experience, research planning and management, and preparing them for employment and future careers. In the current climate of far-reaching HE reforms, nationwide student protests, fierce international competition, and the uneven distribution of HE funds, it is crucial to embrace and 'make use' of the international, cultural and disciplinary diversity that doctoral students contribute to research and teaching on our 'home' campuses. Giving postgraduate students a more active role (e.g. through teaching, organisation of academic events, giving feedback, etc) would have a positive effect on the dissemination of innovative research and bring multiple perspectives to the institution. This is increasingly relevant for less research-intensive institutions which tend to have a more 'manageable' contingent of research students, and can produce appropriate means to access this group which is often considered hard to reach. Likewise, and following recommendations based on recent UK survey reports, universities should create channels and venues for knowledge exchange beyond the campus by exposing students to other research and professional cultures through such means as conferences, seminars and summer schools.

Having finally arrived at the end of this personal journey, I believe that the joys and tribulations on the way reflect those of many of my peers, international or local. In any event, I do hope this opinion piece has emphasised the value of sharing experience not only amongst students but across departments and faculties, and of actively making use of the manifold possibilities a diverse postgraduate student community offers to the University.

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Reflection

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