



Negotiating the complex geographies of friendships overseas: Becoming, being and sharing in student mobility

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ABSTRACT

International students are a fundamental part of the global higher education system providing a critical income stream for many universities but also diversifying and enriching culturally our campuses and the learning experiences of host students. Further, beyond selling the 'prestige' of the degree from the host institution, many universities often claim that international study is culturally enriching for the international students also. Or so the argument goes. This UK case study reveals that the reality for international students can be very different by examining the difficulties they face in forming robust cross- and multi-cultural friendships when overseas. In so doing it makes important contributions to the burgeoning networks, and more established transnationalism and mobility studies literatures by reflecting on how we negotiate the unfamiliar and geographically distinctive places through the social networks that we establish there. Principally it aims to overturn previous assertions that distinctive international student networks are the result of liminality and exclusion by showing that they are also a conscious choice made by the students themselves, functioning as an important source of social, cultural and political support when living overseas.

1. Introduction

The last thirty years have witnessed a significant increase in the volume of students seeking an international education; globally the numbers have tripled since the 1980s (Madge et al., 2009), and was particularly pronounced between 2000 and 2008 when there was a 70% rise in their number (Raghuram, 2013). Notwithstanding such recent increases, it is essential to note that this is not a new phenomenon with evidence that 'international' students were present even in the earliest university establishments. It is well documented that the elites travelled to renowned centres of learning throughout the European continent (Ennew and Fujia, 2009; Rivza and Teichler, 2007), and Jöns has written extensively on academic mobility in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Heffernan and Jöns, 2013; Jöns, 2009, 2016; Jöns et al., 2015) all of which suggests that we ought exercise care in how we approach geographies of student mobility and its 'newness'. It is undeniable, though, that as international students have become more important to universities, so geographers (and those in cognate disciplines) have turned increasingly to their study. There is now a well-developed literature considering the processes and dynamics of international student mobility ranging from the economic, through to the social and cultural dynamics of being, becoming and recruiting international students (Beech, 2014, 2015, 2018; Brooks and Waters, 2011; Collins et al., 2017; Findlay et al., 2017; Lysgård and Rye, 2017).

Part of this surge in academic interest has focused on the place(s) and role(s) of international students on campus. The benefits of their presence are oft cited as giving graduates the opportunity to develop multicultural and international experiences before they are sent forth into a global job market (for instance see Brooks and Waters, 2011), and yet this sits uncomfortably within increasingly marketized, commercialised and neoliberal higher education landscape. In the UK, for example, the geographic focus of this paper, state financial support for teaching is being eroded gradually, and international students are first and foremost conceived as critical income streams, with fees largely unregulated and as much arbitrarily set as determined by the global market. This is supported by evidence that UK universities invest considerable time, effort and money into their recruitment (Beech, 2018).

This paper investigates the international student experience by analysing their friendships and social networks when overseas. There is much evidence that, when overseas, international students do tend to cluster within tight, homophilious groups with other international students and interactions between local/host student communities and their international counterparts are a rare occurrence (Montgomery, 2009; Pandit, 2009; Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Waters and Brooks, 2011). Consequently, they often socialise apart, developing their own norms and routines outside of those of the host community (Montgomery and McDowell, 2009; Simpson et al., 2010). The reasons for this 'segregation', and the factors which may hinder or prevent

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international students from developing robust cross-cultural (defined in this article as international-host student friendships) and multi-cultural friendships (comprised of people from multiple different socio-cultural and national backgrounds), are various (Dunne, 2009). This paper offers a departure in its consideration of the benefits that these homophilious groups can bring to international students when overseas. It shows that the formation of these friendships is often quite deliberate and strategic on the part of international students, giving them political power within institutions, as well providing a means of social support and acting as a surrogate family when they are living away from home. They are not only a response to liminality – defined as a process that arises when a person (or people) find themselves in a space “betwixt and between” (Turner, 1977:95) the usual round of their being and the new identities that arise as a result of this (Beech, 2011). In examining these dynamics, what follows is structured around two key ideas. First the desire for a multicultural experience which prioritises study overseas not only as an opportunity to gain a better education, but also to gain a variety of softer skills as well. Second, by detailing the three aspects to friendship and social network formation when abroad categorised as experiencing liminality, choosing apartness and bridging divides.

2. Choosing overseas study: the importance of friendship

The reasons for choosing a higher education overseas are highly complex, multifaceted, and influenced by a range of factors which are both internal and external to the students. First, there are now much greater opportunities for international student mobility than there have been in the past. These have arisen as a direct result of a progressive marketisation and internationalisation of higher education systems, initially in the UK and USA, but now also a feature of ‘new’ international student destinations such as China, Malaysia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Ma, 2014; Sidhu and Christie, 2014; Universities UK, 2014). This has created a favourable policy-driven environment for international student recruitment (Blackmore et al., 2017; Gribble, 2008; Gribble and Blackmore, 2012) at a time when mobility is more accessible and information technology and social networking sites enable students to maintain relationships at home much more easily (Larsen et al., 2006). This lessens the upheaval of studying overseas, emotionally at least.

The latter of these has had other impacts as well. Evidence shows that students rely on their social networks to build a comprehensive understanding of the overseas experience. Their friends and family who have chosen to study abroad, and can share their experience with them (whether virtually, face-to-face or otherwise), become key information brokers who normalise the process of overseas study (Beech, 2015; Cairns and Smyth, 2011), and instil within students an ideology of the ‘right’ way of gaining a higher education (Holdsworth, 2009). This can be explicit by encouraging students to travel abroad, but tends to be rather more implicit in nature as cultures of mobility gradually become established (Beech, 2015; Brooks and Waters, 2010). Clarke (2005) wrote that mobility experiences can be shared by a process of ‘traveling-in-dwelling’ either while away by contacting friends and family or on returning home. Since then, the internet and social media have become positively ubiquitous and this creates important links and connections between international students when they are overseas and their homelands (Hjorth, 2007; Kim et al., 2009; Gomes et al., 2014; Collins, 2009). These exchanges are now immediate and take place in real time with social media users able to portray their travels and adventures overseas, but also to reconstruct them for others and also relive their trips themselves (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010). There are therefore three realms in which social media and travel come together: first when searching for experiences before leaving home; second, during their travels; and third when they return and offer comments, feedback or engage in discussion and sharing further pictures and so forth (Amaro et al., 2016). This is highly

significant as it is indicative of the abilities of social media not only to disseminate information, but also to influence the expectations of others as they plan or consider travel abroad (Narangajavana et al., 2017).

These networks are also likely to mythicise the international student experience and the benefits that it can bring, creating an imaginative geography of the overseas experience, as well as an imagined connection to their homeland (Gomes et al., 2014). Study overseas is often viewed as a transformative period whereby the students can develop new intercultural communication skills, and return home qualitatively changed in terms of how they think, feel and behave (Simpson et al., 2010). However, whilst sojourners may form friendships with other international students coming from a range of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds (Prazeres et al. 2017; Matthews and Sidhu, 2005), research shows that interactions between international and ‘local’ or ‘host’ students is often infrequent (Andersson et al., 2012; Dunne, 2009; Peacock and Harrison, 2009; Jones 2013). There are numerous reasons for this. There may be difficulties in communication caused by poor language skills which may inhibit conversation (Kudo and Simkin, 2003). Furthermore, both parties may experience feelings of anxiety associated with intercultural communication, and the perception that to build these relationships requires greater effort as it may involve altering conversation or communication norms so that all parties can be understood. The result of this being a segregation between international and host students (Dunne, 2009). Some authors have gone further, suggesting that this is not only the result of the anxieties and problems detailed above, but in fact is also a form of xenophobia, normally subconscious, amongst host students which disincentivise them from having multicultural friendships forcing international students to socialise separately (Fincher and Shaw, 2011; Harrison and Peacock, 2010). Universities can worsen this segregation by keeping international and host students apart for a variety of reasons (such as for administrative motivations or to house them separately) (Dunne, 2009; Fincher, 2011; Sidhu et al., 2016; Jones 2013).

The problem is not resolved by simply recruiting more international students either (and this is surely something which is easier said than accomplished anyway). A study conducted at the University of South Australia, where one quarter of the students (at the time) were from overseas, showed that interaction between local and host students would remain limited, even if they were accustomed to working with and speaking to each other on a regular basis (Leask, 2009). Instead there was a need for mentoring schemes and cross-cultural events before these issues could be overcome in any meaningful way.

As such it is very common to see students clustering into homophilious groups of individuals who are similar in terms of cultural background or language (Gareis, 2000; Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). Cicchelli (2013), for example, discusses how the social lives of Erasmus students (an exchange programme for European students and academic staff) often revolve around other Erasmus students in part, he suggests, because host students have less drive for a cosmopolitan experience; a phenomenon which he terms ‘the Erasmus bubble’. These bubbles even have the potential to influence the very cities in which these students inhabit, if they are present in great enough numbers and if there is a sustained tradition of international mobility between the home and host country. Collins’ (2008, 2010a) work has shown that Auckland, New Zealand was a city so popular with South Korean students that distinctive international student spaces had emerged with dedicated student housing and businesses designed to cater to their consumption practices; effectively an international studentification of areas in the city.

Relationships are therefore a critical element of international student mobility both before they leave and when choosing where to study, as well as when overseas. Rawlins (2009) writes that friendships can be identified by a range of different attributes; they are a voluntary undertaking whereby both parties express a mutual concern for each other, but they are also a shared project or narrative which evolves over

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