



Research report

A taste of the unfamiliar. Understanding the meanings attached to food by international postgraduate students in England

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ABSTRACT

Using findings from semi-structured interviews with international postgraduate students in England, this paper explores the meanings attached to the food they eat in a new culture. Our study, using interviews, aimed to uncover student responses to both the food they eat whilst abroad and to the food they have left behind. Many students criticised local English food as bland, fattening, and unhealthy; nevertheless, most showed an openness to new foods, trying not only local food but also dishes prepared by their international friends, but this sat alongside a strong attachment to their home country dishes. Eating together was a popular leisure activity, and food of the origin country or region was the most popular cuisine. Eating home country food offered emotional and physical sustenance; students felt comforted by familiar taste, and that their physical health was stabilised by the consumption of healthier food than was available locally. Despite acknowledgement of the importance of food to cultural identity and overall quality of life in the anthropology and nutrition literatures, there is a dearth of research into this aspect of the international student experience; this study, therefore, marks an important beginning.

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Introduction

International education is a major export industry at university level, with fierce competition among the key markets of the United Kingdom (UK), Canada, New Zealand, and Australia (Cushner & Karim, 2004). In the UK since 1997, there has been a steady increase in the number of international students studying in Higher Education (HE); and currently there are 351,465 international students in British HE, one-third of whom are postgraduates (UKCISA, 2009a). In the UK, international students constitute 15% of the total student population, although the percentage varies across institutions. The two biggest markets for international students to the UK in the past five years are China and India (UKCISA, 2009a). Income from international students plays an important role in the financial health of the HE sector, representing almost one-third of the total income in fees for universities and HE colleges. The advent of full-cost fees means that most British HE institutions depend on income from international students (Leonard, Pelletier, & Morley, 2003). In 2004, they earned £4 billion in fees, and students spent as much again on living costs; this level rose to £5 billion in 2006 (MacLeod, 2006).

Accompanying the steady rise in the number of international students in global HE has been a growth in research dedicated to the international sojourn, which is defined by Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001) as between-society contact. The economic dependence of universities on fees from international students makes it critical to gain a clear understanding of the issues that face students during their study abroad. Whilst an institution cannot address all problems associated with the move to a new culture, awareness of the painful adjustment journey often made by international students may inform the type of institutional support provided (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Louie, 2005). Not only might the delivery of adequate pastoral and academic support improve student retention, but it will also lead to positive word of mouth and increased recruitment (Ward, 2001). Indeed, it is increasingly acknowledged that if institutions do not consider international students' needs, their future recruitment may be endangered (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Ryan & Carroll, 2005).

The move to a new cultural environment represents one of the most traumatic events a person can experience, and for most sojourners, some degree of culture shock is inevitable (Kim, 2001). Culture shock is defined as anxiety that results from losing the familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse and substituting them with other cues that are strange (Hall, 1959). Many writers liken the shock to a period of mourning for the home world, characterized by feelings of grief and separation anxiety (Brown & Holloway, 2008; Furnham, 1997; Garza-Guerrero, 1974). A common symptom of culture shock is an excessive preoccupation with food (Garza-Guerrero, 1974; UKCISA, 2009b). Finkelstein

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(1999) notes that food habits are inseparable from the culture that a person inhabits and that these habits vary from culture to culture. Consequently, some degree of food shock is inevitable upon moving to a culturally dissimilar country. Foodways have been the focus of extensive research by anthropologists (Gosden, 1999). Yet a recent literature search indicates that very little empirical research exists on the role of food in the academic sojourn of international students; food is usually mentioned only incidentally as one of the aspects of the sojourn that students find distressing (Furukawa, 1997; Okorocha, 1996; UKCISA, 2009b). There has been little dedicated research into international students' eating habits: studies by Henry and Wheeler (1980), Zwingmann and Gunn (1983) and Hall (1995) are rare but old examples. Given the increase in international student numbers in recent decades, changing source markets and changing receiving and origin societies, there is a clear need for more contemporary research that is pertinent to new conditions. Nevertheless, all concluded that food habits and practices represent a central element of culture, and that it is to be anticipated that sojourners would struggle to break away from their habituated food choices. This was confirmed in a more recent ethnographic study of the international student adjustment process, in which food emerged as a major research category (Brown, 2009). It was shown that the food students ate was of great importance both emotionally and physically and was one aspect of student life that was least open to change.

These findings are further reflected in anthropological and nutrition studies of migrants' eating habits, which document both the experience and impact of changes made by migrants in their food habits upon the move to a new culture. Locher, Yoels, Maurer, and van Ells (2005) explain that emotional attachment to home food is a result of the positive association between familiar taste and nostalgic thoughts of home and belonging. This was found in Jamal's (1998) study of perceptions of English and Pakistani foods among British-born Pakistani people, which showed home food to be associated with family unity, maternal love and cultural belonging. Anthropologists (Counihan & Van Esterik, 1997; Ikeda, 1999) assert a strong link between cultural identity and food choices.

In terms of the physical health of immigrants, studies show that deteriorated health (including a higher incidence of obesity and diabetes) is associated with an increased consumption of Western-style food (Burns, 2004; Gordon-Larsen, Harris, Ward, & Popkin, 2003; Himmelgreen, Bretnall, Peng, & Bermudez, 2005; Kedia, 2004; Saleh, Amanatidis, & Samman, 2002). Indeed, research has shown that migrants are unlikely to be overweight or obese upon arrival in a western country, but that they slowly converge to native-born levels over time (McDonald & Kennedy, 2005). It has been shown that transition to a new culture can lead to substance abuse, a high alcohol intake, altered dietary practices and an increased Body Mass Index (Abraído-Lanza, Chao, & Flórez, 2005; Gordon-Larsen et al., 2003; Lara, Gamboa, Kahramanian, Morales, & Bautista, 2005; McDonald & Kennedy, 2005). Neuhouser, Thompson, Coronado, and Solomon (2004) found for example that highly acculturated Hispanics tend to eat fewer fruits and vegetables than those who are less acculturated although they still ate more than their non-Hispanic white counterparts. An early dietary acculturation change included adding butter and margarine at the table to foods such as bread and potatoes. The less acculturated used smaller amounts of fat and oil when cooking products such as tortillas, than highly acculturated and non-Hispanics. Similarly, significant increases were observed by Pan, Dixon, Himgurg, and Huffman (1999) in Asian students' consumption of fats, salty and sweet snack items, and dairy products. There were also significant decreases in the consumption of meat and meat alternatives, and vegetables. Students ate out less often but when they did, they chose American fast foods.

Changes in meal patterns have also been observed; Pakistani and Sri-Lanka immigrants to Norway, for example, changed their meal patterns from 3 to 1.5 hot meals per day to conform to the host country's norms, primarily because of changes in work patterns and climate considerations (Wandel, Raberg, Kumar, & Holmboe-Ottesen, 2008). Immigrants to the UK from South Asia ate significantly fewer meals than those from Europe; the former also eating their evening meal 2–3 h later (Simmons & Williams, 1997). Asian students in the United States, who had been there at least 3 months before the start of their studies, reported the number of meals per day decreased with nearly half of them missing breakfast more often than the other two meals, primarily because of their class timetables (Pan et al., 1999).

The aim of our study was to explore students' feelings about the food they consume in a new culture. This paper presents the findings from semi-structured interviews that were conducted in 2008 with 10 international students in their first week on a masters course in the south of England. The findings contribute to our understanding of an aspect of transition that has been neglected by researchers but that has a significant impact on students' well-being in the new culture.

Methods

It was decided to adopt a qualitative approach to our research because we felt that only in conversation would students be able to fully express their relationship with the food that they choose to eat. A quantitative approach could capture the food eaten every day, the cost of such food, and the interaction surrounding food consumption but it could not access the meanings associated with food choices, and the emotional reactions to these food choices. Indeed, the probing that the in-depth interview allows was used to maximum effect in order to encourage students to reflect on their feelings about the food they consumed: as Locher et al. (2005) point out, food and emotion are strongly intertwined. According to Cushner and Mahon (2002) and Warren and Hackney (2000), only the qualitative approach can adequately explore issues of emotion and identity. Furthermore, in the sojourner adjustment literature, the qualitative approach is underrepresented, and is a gap in the methodologies used to explore transition that needs to be filled (Ward, 2001). We hope that this study marks the beginning of qualitative research dedicated to understanding the everyday life of students in a new cultural setting.

The research setting was the Graduate School of a university in the south of England which provides direct access to students. Of the 150 postgraduate students, the overwhelming majority were international students (defined in this study as non-UK students). Most were from Southeast Asia, which reflects the most common source of international students for UK universities (UKCISA, 2009a); approximately one-third were from Europe, Africa, or the Middle East.

Ethical approval to undertake this study came from the university's Research Ethics Committee; furthermore, all students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity and no financial or other incentives were offered to take part. A request for volunteers was made in person and repeated on the Graduate School website. Subsequently, students volunteered in person and by email to participate. Ten students, all from different nations, volunteered to be interviewed. Although it is acknowledged that no individual can represent an entire culture, culture clearly has a defining impact on an individual's perspective (Hofstede, 1991), and we sought an interview sample of diverse nationalities in the understanding that we would be offered access to the experience of food from many cultural perspectives. Further volunteers were identified, in case saturation point was not reached during the data collection. The

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