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Identifying factors that influence the learner empowerment of international students

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ABSTRACT

The internationalisation of education promises to prepare students for diversity in the global workplace. However, many international students do not thrive in their host academic communities. A sample of 196 international students enrolled at a New Zealand (NZ) university between 2011 and 2012 completed an online survey, which explored cultural concepts identified as relevant to the acculturation process. A multiple regression of the quantitative data identified that prior knowledge, perceived relevance, belongingness and cultural distance accounted for almost 50% of the variance in the successful acculturation of students into the university culture. The high level of self-reflectivity throughout the qualitative data provided insight into the integral role of both staff and host students as a catalyst in this process. Findings of this research illustrate that alongside functional support, there is a need to develop the intercultural communication competence of faculty and host culture students. Recommendations to achieve enhanced outcomes for international students include future curriculum development, staff training, host student education and enhanced structural support in areas identified as barriers to successful acculturation.

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1. Introduction

As globalisation leads to greater mobility, more of us are living, working and studying away from our home culture. The increased transnational flow of students calls for different approaches to facilitate learning to accommodate a variety of expectations and modes of learning. Meaningful and productive outcomes depend on understanding the process of acculturation and the skills and attitudes required for success in multi-cultural learning contexts.

Recognising the importance of competence in a global context, there has been exponential growth in the internationalisation of education as a key strategic initiative. Universities, in particular, look to international students to provide both additional income and add diversity to the student body to enrich the educational experience (Ross, Heaney, & Cooper, 2007, p. 113). In turn, a multicultural education helps to prepare students for diversity in the global workplace (Haigh, 2002). Indeed, one of the goals of an international university education is to develop culturally competent students (Deardorff, 2006).

Although the definition of intercultural competence is contested, the development of knowledge (both self and other), skills to interact and the aptitude to adjust to the social reality of a new environment are central tenets (Gregg & Saha,

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2006; Ridley, Baker, & Hill, 2001). Students do not learn in a vacuum; their educational experience is situated within a social and historical context (Deardorff, 2006; Johnson, 2008), in which they need to learn to adapt. The primary difficulties international students grapple with are social and cultural differences in matters of choice, communication, learning and participation as they move through the transition process of acculturation (Heggins & Jackson, 2003).

Findings from earlier research indicate that both sojourning and host students will retain their own cultural traits (Campbell & Li, 2008). However, there is an important learning opportunity presented for host students, who are also being prepared for a workplace context that will be multi-cultural, even if they never leave their native country. Fostering self-awareness and recognising the importance of developing their own cultural empathy and skills bode well for developing intercultural effectiveness. A number of studies suggest that interaction with students from the host culture is beneficial to sociocultural and psychological adjustment for international students (e.g., Bird & Holmes, 2005; Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005). Despite these potential benefits, many international students do not thrive in their host academic communities. They experience isolation and fail to develop a sense of belonging (Krause, Hartley, & McInnis, 2005), under-perform academically (Rientes, Beausaert, Grohnert, Niemantsverdriet, & Kommers, 2012) and have difficulty interacting and integrating with host students (Holmes, 2004; Yeh and Inose, 2003).

Cultural diversity is now a feature of university life, and thus continues to influence the nature of education (Marginson, 2006, 2013). Educational institutions must address problems international students face if the international educational experience is to be beneficial to both guest and host students (MacDonald, 2009). This paper uses a mixed method approach to identify factors that influence the process of acculturation in an educational context and to suggest coping strategies for students going through this process.

2. Acculturation

As students move internationally, they must adapt to new ways of both living and learning. To study the process by which individuals accommodate an unfamiliar multi-cultural environment, we adopt the early and enduring definition of acculturation posited by the Social Science Research Council, which “can be seen as the selective adaptation of value systems, the processes of integration and differentiation, the general of developmental sequences” (Barnett, Broom, Siegel, Vogt, & Watson, 1954, p. 974). The authors continue that this definition recognises that individuals are “empirically the culture bearers and that they are the mediators of any cultural process” (p. 975). Therefore, the process of acculturation is one in which an individual is actively involved – it is not a passive process. The process involves variations in the strategies used to manage the process of developing cultural competence in dealing with life in the host society. Although acculturation is typically a broad concept which encapsulates all aspects of life, in this paper we limit application to the learning context of the tertiary academic environment.

Ideally, Berry (2009) argues, acculturation involves psychological adjustment as individuals integrate into another culture, recognising that differences exist, while still holding a firm sense of one’s own cultural identity. It is neither assimilation (where sojourners lose their own cultural identity), nor separation (where sojourners avoid interaction with the host culture). Berry argues that it is rather a process in which individuals experience differences that may cause difficulties in adjusting to different ways of living. Acculturation is a process of “psychological and sociological adaptation” (Berry, 2005, p. 699) in which individuals develop “competence in the activities of daily intercultural living” (p. 701). Thus, attitudes and behaviours of individuals when acculturating are powerful definers of success.

As pointed out earlier, the term acculturation has historically had multiple meanings. In common, most authors use the term ‘adaptation’ to define the acculturation process, suggesting that acculturation is a specific case of adaptation (e.g., Barnett et al., 1954; Berry & Sam, 1997).

3. Acculturation as adaptation

Acculturation is interactive as sojourners are expected to develop new behaviours that are appropriate to the cultural context they inhabit. Such adaptation requires both an individual response of “psychological acculturation” and “adaptation” to the broader sociocultural context, as “changes take place in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands” (Berry & Sam, 1997, p. 13). People in transit across countries and cultures are seen as adapting to change, through a process of acquiring culture-specific skills in new cultural domains (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008).

4. Internationalising the academic environment

Students are classified as international students if they leave their country of origin and move to another country for the purpose of study (OECD, 2011, p. 330). Almost four million tertiary students are enrolled in universities outside their own countries (OECD, 2011). Some 77% of foreign students are enrolled in the tertiary education system in OECD countries, and many countries rely on international students to supplement domestic enrolments. Internationalising the academic environment has led to new challenges for both student and teacher.

According to Holmes (2004) and Ward, Bochner, and Furnham (2001), differences in education systems and unfamiliar social norms and values influence the learning experiences of international students in the classroom. It has been argued that international students lack an understanding of what western tertiary education involves, and the combination of cultural

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