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Chapter 10

Being ‘international’: The opportunities and challenges of studying education as an international student

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Abstract

Although still in a minority, there has been an increase in numbers of international students joining undergraduate education studies degrees in the UK in recent years. This chapter, co-authored by current and recent international education students, explores the many reasons why this group elect to study in the UK. Reasons include perceived prestige and quality of the higher education system, prior familiarity with English language and culture, and links with institutions in their home countries. Drawing on literature pertaining to the UK education studies context the chapter notes that, whilst international students typically enjoy and value the transition to UK study, there can be many personal, linguistic, social, cultural and academic challenges. International students bring distinct perspectives to the study of education which are of great value to home students and staff, but can also find engaging with the complexities of UK education policy and culture difficult at times. The chapter concludes with a range of practical suggestions for how international students can be

supported within the undergraduate subject of education, and how staff and home students can contribute to a learning environment which benefits and includes everyone.

Summary Points

- Although still in a minority, there has been an increase in numbers of international students joining education studies degrees in the UK in recent years.
- International students can elect to study in the UK for various reasons, including perceived prestige and quality of the higher education system, prior familiarity with English language and culture, and links with institutions in their home countries.
- Whilst international students typically enjoy and value the transition to UK study, there can be many personal, linguistic, social, cultural and academic challenges. This group bring distinct perspectives to the study of education which are of great value to home students and staff, but can also find engaging with the complexities of UK education policy and culture difficult at times.
- We offer a range of practical suggestions for how international students can be supported within our subject, and how staff and home students can contribute to a learning environment which benefits and includes everyone.

Introduction

Take a moment to think about your Education Studies classes. Who are your peers? What do you know about their backgrounds or their lives outside of university? Do you know if they are 'home' students or 'international' students? And have you interacted much with students from both of these groups? In this chapter we consider the experiences and perspectives of international students on Education Studies degrees. We explore the opportunities and challenges that this group of students may face, and reflect upon what this means for aims of equality, diversity and inclusion within higher education. In the spirit of these values, this chapter is aimed at students from all backgrounds – whether home or international. Our chapter, and the contributions and shared experiences from our co-authors, Yutong, Lingxi and Tasha, highlight the wealth of knowledge and insight that international students can contribute to Education Studies courses: as such, we encourage staff and students alike to consider how we can work together to promote a positive, mutually beneficial environment and experience for international students on UK Education Studies courses. Reflecting both the lived experiences of our co-authors and the available literature, some discussion draws

particularly on perspectives of international undergraduate education students from East and South East Asian countries including China, Malaysia, Japan, and South Korea. However, we aim to draw out more general considerations as well.

Let's spend a moment reflecting on what we mean by 'international students.' In universities, home or international status is typically used to determine the level of tuition fees students pay for courses. This rather crude distinction essentially places UK-based (home) students into one group and those from all other countries into another group (international). It's also worth pointing out that students from countries within the European Union (EU) and certain other European countries were formerly regarded for official purposes as 'home' students. However, following the UK's exit from the EU this situation has now changed and incoming students from other European countries should check their individual circumstances carefully. Of course, such simplistic groupings are not particularly helpful for those of us interested in students' experiences of education as they ignore the diversity *within* the groups while also reinforcing difference between them. International students, just like those from the UK, are a diverse cohort with varied backgrounds and experiences. For the purposes of this chapter, we want to acknowledge this diversity while also seeking to understand common issues or factors which might influence international students' experiences, and which might be important and relevant for all students and staff working on Education Studies courses.

International Students studying Education

In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the number of international students joining Education Studies degrees in the UK (Table 1). While this group are still in the minority, their share of the total subject cohort grew to nearly 4 per cent in 2020/21 (HESA, 2022).

Table 1: Number of UG Education students in the UK

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
UK students	69,145	57,855	56,985

International students (including EU)	1,775	1,760	2,225
Total	70,920	59,615	59,210

(Source: HESA Student Data, Open Data Tables 22 and 52)

We also know that in some universities, proportions of international students are much higher than in others; universities with greater international prestige and/or more pro-active marketing operations have tended to be the ones attracting higher numbers of undergraduate education students (Furlong, 2013). Reduced state funding for HE has produced increased financial incentives to attract international students across the whole UK university sector (Barnett, 2018). The intertwined nature of HE and globalisation is also key here. Universities contribute to globalisation, but are also driven by it. These forces have contributed to international student mobilities and increased opportunities for some groups of students to study abroad. (See Marginson (2022) for a helpful, critical discussion of these issues.

Students' backgrounds and decision to study in the UK

As Seo (2020) notes, some international students, particularly those from East Asian countries, can be attracted to programmes of UK higher education as an investment in graduate career potential: 'Educational credentials from globally-renowned universities, as a certificate of accumulating global cultural capital, can determine an individual's access to certain activities' (Seo, 2020: 379). A key attraction of study in the UK is therefore the prestige and social capital associated with educational institutions in this country. Some, but not all, international students will also have a desire to remain in the country for further work or study. Beyond any prestige associated with particular UK universities, however, some international students also draw contrasts between the culture of higher education in the UK and at home. Students from some Eastern Asian countries in particular can perceive that the university education available either at home or in nearby nations is restrictive and lacking in creativity. By contrast, the UK university experience might be regarded as offering greater opportunities for student ideas, reflection and agency, supported by good teaching resources and a strong learning environment. For our co-authors, general attractions of the perceived 'British experience' were further strengthened by a desire for broader-based engagement with education, i.e. going beyond school teaching to embrace economic, political, cultural,

historical and social justice perspectives. All the same, international students can experience the same misconceptions about what an education studies degree covers as home students! For instance, it might be interpreted as a preparation for English language teaching.

Yet home students, university staff – and indeed international students themselves – should avoid adopting a ‘deficit model’ or UK-centric perspective and assuming that the group-based, discursive and collaborative learning style common within many undergraduate education programmes is superior to educational cultures associated with students’ home countries. Whilst our subject can be good at emphasising these forms of learning, not all UK-based degrees might do so to the same extent.

Beyond the style of learning on offer, international students will typically have also considered their choice of host country very carefully, particularly in regard to the necessary language skills. They might have weighed up the various advantages of different English-speaking countries when deciding on the UK. Other European universities might be perceived to have similar benefits to the UK but are less favoured due to the pre-eminence of English language. Perceptions of crime and safety, and their likely reception by the local community are possible further considerations. Moreover, it is worth remembering, of course, that whilst the UK might be perceived by some international students as attractive for its cosmopolitan and global student population, many undergraduate education programmes will be offered at universities located in provincial or even rural areas. This can impact on the cultural diversity in these locations and might in turn have a bearing on international students’ ease at engaging with the local community. These problems can be exacerbated in smaller institutions and those with a predominantly White British intake (Murphy, 2009).

Whilst international students on undergraduate education programmes might be gaining their first experiences of life and education away from home, this does not necessarily mean they will be newcomers to British (or possibly European) educational cultures. Some will have previously studied at institutions with links to UK universities, and some might have taken advantage of formal institutional links allowing them to transfer to a UK programme partway through. (The latter can cut tuition fees considerably and is thus an attractive option, although joining a programme late from elsewhere in the world can present combined challenges). As a result of their previous experiences, some international students can arrive in the UK already prepared for aspects of their undergraduate education experience. All three of our student co-authors reflected on prior experiences (such as studying at an international campus

of an English university) and skills (such as oral presentations) which prepared them well for their UK-based Education courses.

Other international students might have family or educational ties to other European or English-speaking countries. This again serves as a reminder not to make assumptions about such students' backgrounds. Studying in the UK might present a natural next step. As Hutchinson (2020) argues, some international students consciously develop a cosmopolitan identity based on having successfully navigated a range of prior travel and international study experiences. However, for other international students, these transitions between cultures much harder to manage. As Seo (2020) notes, it is necessary for them to not only navigate potentially unfamiliar educational cultures and settings, but at the same time reorganise lives and build new social networks. They may also come to re-evaluate aspects of their home culture and education. As a result, it is known that some experience a period of 'transition shock' or 'culture shock' as they manage the various challenges; this has the potential to lead to reduced mental wellbeing. Moreover, some international students feel unable to express how they are feeling to others in their new setting, yet are also unwilling to open up to their families back home for fear of causing them to worry (Hutchinson, 2020).

Questions to consider

Whether you are an international or home student, what were the factors that influenced your decision to study Education at your current institution? Do you recognise similarities with some of the issues and experiences described above?

Advantages and challenges in the Education Studies curriculum

International students can bring distinctive critical perspectives to programmes or modules exploring intercultural or global issues in education. The process of having undergone transitions between education systems themselves positions them well to offer comparative views and to evaluate education systems from objective, detached positions. Indeed, as Wang (2015: 200) notes, in relation to the experience of Chinese international students, 'the interactions of the two cultures of learning accelerate not only the development of the student's intellectual and intercultural maturity but also the formation of an intercultural learning identity'.

On the other hand, international students may not initially be familiar with UK educational policy or practice and its associated vocabulary. Furthermore, securing and completing work placements can be more challenging for international students. They might be less able to draw on existing family/social networks to find relevant placements and less familiar with British workplace culture. By contrast, having navigated paths through the UK education system, home students possess potential advantages when undertaking study or practice in these areas. To draw on ideas from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (see also Chapter 24 in this book), such partial familiarity might give the impression of a stronger ‘feel’ for the ‘game’ of UK education as a whole. Yet it is important to bear in mind that this system’s complexity means that experience with some of its strands does not automatically result in a greater general understanding. Examining issues objectively and within broader contexts is thus just as important for home students as it is for international students; there is probably more common ground between these groups than is often acknowledged. Problems can also occur due to the presence of ‘hidden curricula’ in the UK context. Specifically, some international students can experience confusion because each member of staff might have slightly different tacit assumptions and expectations (Seo, 2020).

Yet despite potential challenges, our co-authors found that the styles of teaching and learning common on UK undergraduate education programmes – whilst novel to an extent – did not take too much getting used to. Opportunities to reflect on their individual student identities, self-efficacy and metacognition, to explore culture and career planning, and engage in interactive questioning and debate were all highly valued, as were opportunities to undertake personally meaningful research topics.

Feelings of belonging and making social connections

As readers might be aware from their own experiences, travelling to a new country – even just for a holiday – can bring lots of exciting new opportunities to meet people and participate in new social experiences. It can also bring challenges, particularly if you need to communicate in a different language, or if you are less familiar with the social and cultural norms of your host country. To what extent do international students feel integrated and included in the ‘social world’ of their university? What are the barriers that exist for students to interact socially, both in academic contexts and those beyond the classroom? Many educational studies have revealed that a feeling of belonging and ‘fitting in’ can be central to fostering academic success and wellbeing. There are many areas to consider in relation to

feelings of belonging at university (see e.g. Mackenzie and Morris, 2019; Meehan and Howells, 2019; Mountford-Zimdars *et al.*, 2015). For the purposes of this brief discussion, however, we are going to focus on issues relating to language, labelling and stereotypes which have emerged from the literature and from the co-authors of this chapter.

As we saw in the sections above, an interest in developing and utilising language skills is often a key driver for students wishing to study abroad. While students who arrive from non-Anglophone countries have to produce evidence of English language proficiency (usually via an independent test score such as IELTS or Duolingo English), many still report a range of, often interconnected, challenges. These can include not being easily understood by native speakers (staff and students); not having confidence to practise and ‘try out’ English usage in real-life academic and social situations; not being able to follow or contribute to conversations; or struggling to translate and use more complex or unfamiliar academic terminology. In a seminar or class situation, this can make it more difficult for those from non-Anglophone backgrounds to contribute to activities such as informal discussions, paired or group work. Magne (2019) and Murphy (2009) point to examples where international, non-Anglophone students are perceived negatively by home students because of their use of English. Magne (2019), for example, found that some BA Education students described a Chinese speaker of English as ‘not fluent’ or ‘wrong’ whereas those who had Spanish or French as a first language were judged much more positively for their language and pronunciation.

Questions to consider

What does inclusion ‘look like’ in your seminar group sessions? How do individuals with different background characteristics contribute to and participate in sessions? How do teaching staff support and facilitate this?

Where international students feel that their English is not as strong as it could be or where they feel less confident to ‘have a go’ at speaking in English, it is likely to lead to a reluctance to use the language in some academic or social settings. For some students, in some situations, these may result in ‘diglossia’, where the two different languages are used for different functions i.e. English becomes the language of academic writing and the student’s home language is used for social and personal communication (including perhaps conversations with peers in academic contexts). These issues are at least part of the reason

why some international students can find themselves gravitating towards working with other international students more than with home peers. Working with those from the same country and with a shared linguistic background might be regarded as providing opportunities for more detailed and clearer discussions, and a less nerve-wracking experience.

One of our co-authors noted that day-to-day English, used in informal communications, both in and out of class, could be difficult because of the use of slang, different cultural norms and references, and the speed of speaking. To avoid the anxiety associated with trying to join in and potentially misunderstanding, she and her peers described working separately in their own group. It was noted that this was not necessarily their preferred way of working but that it provided a more comfortable space for speaking and sharing ideas. Our co-authors, however, are clear that they would have preferred to be more meaningfully included during class and small group discussions, and feel that this would have led to benefits such as supporting their learning and their sense of belonging within the cohort and university.

Often closely linked to the issues of language for international students are concerns around stereotyping and labelling. Gu (2009) and Hutchinson (2020) have both highlighted how East Asian students, particularly those from Chinese backgrounds, are sometimes perceived in UK universities as a homogenous group of learners with similar needs, proficiencies, characteristics and interests. While these may sometimes be framed as positive stereotypes (see e.g. Hutchinson's comments on Chinese students being characterised as 'hard working'), they are stereotypes nonetheless, and thus are unhelpful in terms of the provision of an equitable, fair and supportive learning and social environment for all students. Making assumptions about one's 'hard working' nature with little information other than their cultural background is problematic in itself; however, it also has potentially harmful effects too if, for example, it is coupled with an assumption that because of this hard work they are doing well academically and thus do not need additional support or guidance with their studies.

How can we work to make things better?

Ideas and suggestions for home students and university staff

As Murphy (2009) notes, individual academic staff and institutions have a role in supporting international students to overcome the issues identified in this chapter. Staff can make significant positive impacts in their teaching, and through roles such as personal tutoring. Moreover, institutional practice and policy can be reviewed to consider how longstanding and

potentially tacet conventions and expectations of the UK university experience are perceived by those from elsewhere. Home students have an equally important role to play here. The following recommendations (inspired by contributions from our student authors) are aimed at university staff and home students to support effective inclusion of international students:

- Avoid referring to international students collectively based on country they are from, e.g. ‘the Chinese students’. Labels such as these have the potential to segregate them from home students and imply they might be less familiar with topics under discussion. They may also result in groups of international students working together, emphasising their ‘separateness’ still further and potentially reinforcing unhelpful stereotypes. Such broad-brushstroke labels are liable to conflict with the individual, nuanced identities of international students.
- During discussion and activities, intentionally mix up students from different countries so that those from outside the UK are encouraged not to revert to their home language. Not only can this limit opportunities for further development of language skills, but it can also restrict students wishing to collaborate with those from other backgrounds but who might feel compelled to remain with their compatriots. Working with students from different countries and backgrounds can be a powerful driver for academic development.
- During class discussions it is important for staff to balance a desire to support and give attention to international students with the need not to single them out and thus enhance feels of stress.
- Listen to, and don’t interrupt, international students when they are expressing their ideas. Listen *beyond* accents or grammatical errors, and instead engage with the ideas and contributions that international students are making.
- Encourage everyone to start from the premise that we can learn from each other’s prior knowledge and experience. Keep an open mind and focus on creating safe, inclusive spaces where everyone has a voice.

In addition, Seo (2020) describes how a peer-assisted learning scheme was beneficial in helping first year international students of BA Education Studies from East Asian backgrounds overcome ‘transition shock’ and engender a sense of belonging. According to Seo, peer mentors can function not only as role models for international students (since they have gone before them and made a success of this transition), but also as a ‘bridge’ between

international students and staff. The latter is beneficial in helping international students navigate the sometimes ‘hidden’ assumptions, expectations and implications of small group seminars, individual tutorials, and assignment feedback.

Ideas and suggestions for international students

International students can also be pro-active in addressing some of the issues raised in this chapter, and our co-authors have shared the following recommendations.

- It’s important to persist in making friends with home students. There is much fun and friendship to be had through sharing language and culture.
- Take the initiative to step out of your comfort zone and introduce yourself properly to the teaching team and other students on your programme. Allow your drive for education to come through in your approach to your studies. Make your passion to learn evident to tutors, who are likely to be very supportive and helpful.
- Be reassured that it’s OK to ask staff and students questions about language and context. Similarly, be bold when contributing to class discussions or answering questions. Active engagement in class will result in a better learning experience overall.
- Don’t suffer in silence. Be sure to tell someone you trust if you are unhappy about something. One of our co-authors recalls raising concerns about being ‘labelled’ as part of a group of international students. When she shared this with a trusted staff member, things immediately changed for the better and the staff member also asked other colleagues to be more aware of how they referred to international students.

Conclusion

Education Studies is a subject with diversity and inclusion at its heart. Whether we are thinking about pupils in schools or students at university, those who participate in the education system, are entitled to positive, supportive learning environments which promote their achievement and wellbeing. Our co-authors have pointed to a number of great reasons why they would recommend coming to study in the UK. However, our discussions have also shown that for international students, undergraduate study is not always a completely positive experience. It is not just international students who lose out when this happens; home students and university staff are also missing out on a huge wealth of knowledge, insight and

enthusiasm if international students are not fully included in their courses, departments and wider institutions.

Higher education in the UK is characterised at present by growing numbers of international students generally, and in Education Studies specifically (HESA, 2022). In light of this, and in line with wider inclusivity movements (e.g. widening participation, decolonisation), universities need to continue working hard to support and enhance the experience for *all* students in their institutions. Ideally, this should be done in collaboration with international students themselves. Their voices and input are needed to bring about and sustain positive change. Education Studies departments and courses are arguably in a strong position to lead on and embrace this work: modelling and embodying the inclusion of international students is likely to have a positive impact for the students, staff and universities involved, as well as for the wider education systems and societies that our students go on to work in.

Despite the challenges that our international student co-authors have shared about their studies, they are keen that we end on a note of optimism. Their hard work and enthusiasm for their studies has led to some ambitious and exciting post-university plans. All will be (or have already) engaged with further, postgraduate study, and are keen to develop their knowledge further so that they can make positive contributions to the field of education and society more broadly. We wish them all the very best with this.

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