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Acculturation into UK academic practice: the experiences of international doctoral students and academic staff at two research-intensive universities (0010)

Programme number: F2

Research Domain: Academic Practice, Work and Cultures

This paper reports on a study funded by the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in 'Preparing for Academic Practice' at the University of Oxford. The study investigated how international doctoral students and international academic staff experience the process of acculturation into UK academic practice. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 Chinese and Central/South American doctoral students and 8 Chinese lecturers – all from Science and Engineering disciplines at two research-intensive universities in England. The interviews explored the areas that facilitated or challenged the process of acculturation. Salient themes emerged around interpretations of academic practices, the role of relationships, the importance of disciplinary identities and cultural affiliations. These are discussed in relation to the significance of the 'international university' in facilitating acculturation. The study provides insight into aspects of academic practice that are universally experienced, and aspects that may be more situationally defined.

Acculturation into UK academic practice: the experiences of international doctoral students and academic staff at two research-intensive universities

Part 2: Outline (word count: 996 excl References)

Background

There is growing interest in the concept of 'internationalisation' in higher education. This is paralleled by scholarly discussions about the notion of 'academic practice', a 'nested concept' (McAlpine & Hopwood, 2007) which aims to capture the positioning of different members (students, lecturers, managers) within the complex array of higher education networks and contexts, including disciplinary groups, departments, institutions and national and international domains. Our research aimed to unravel the notion of academic practice as experienced and perceived both by international doctoral students and academic staff in two English research-intensive universities.

A key aspect of the international university is student and staff mobility. Park (2007) argues that the internationalisation agenda poses particular challenges for doctoral education in terms of attracting international students in a competitive market and ensuring the format of the degree is fit for purpose. The traditional practice of the doctorate in the UK has been for the student to engage in a large-scale research project under academic supervision (Park, 2007). This 'apprenticeship' model serves to induct students into academic practices and disciplinary culture. It is recognised in the literature that

joining and feeling part of an academic community is a transition process (Hasrati, 2005). Research has indicated that international students may experience particular challenges in this respect (Deem & Brehony, 2000) – possibly because their own educational and cultural background differ notably from UK practices. International staff may also have come from different academic environments and have to adjust to new ways of working. However, the experiences of this latter group have largely been neglected to date despite their growing numbers in the higher education sector (see Universities UK, 2007). The cultural diversity that international students and staff bring to UK universities provides an enhanced learning experience for students, whilst also challenging the attitudes, beliefs, professional backgrounds, academic traditions and cultural values of the host group (Campbell, 2000; Trahar, 2007). International staff and students will therefore experience acculturation into UK academic practices but how this happens and is experienced by the individual remains largely unclear. It is often assumed that adjustments should be made by the incoming individual (whether students or staff) with few changes made by the host (Cadman, 2000). This view challenges some definitions of acculturation which emphasise a two-way process with both parties changing as a result of the encounter (Berry, 2002; Jiang et al, in press). Understanding the experiences of acculturation can help institutions to identify how the process can be facilitated and supported, and contribute to institutional development and enhancement.

Aims and objectives

The study investigated how international doctoral students and academic staff coming to join UK institutions experience the process of acculturation into UK academic practice.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 18 Chinese and Central/South American doctoral students and 8 Chinese lecturers. These two ethnic affiliations were chosen in order to avoid any influences from a British colonial past which could have resulted in more similar HE systems therefore perhaps making the process of 'acculturation' less significant for the individuals concerned. All of the participants were from Science and Engineering disciplines and were based at two research-intensive universities in England, UK. The interviews explored their experiences of acculturation into UK academic practice, and the areas that facilitated or challenged the process.

Findings and discussion

Analysis of the transcripts revealed salient themes underpinning participants' experience of acculturation (see Borg et al, in press; Jiang et al, in press). Interviewees mentioned that having diverse staff and student groups with an international composition eased the transition - individuals felt part of a multicultural environment rather than alone in a homogenous culture. In addition, disciplinary knowledge and focus enabled shared understandings that were not culturally bound. This was particularly the case for international staff whose disciplinary identity was already established. Their acculturation appeared to be eased greatly by this. Doctoral students saw the development of disciplinary recognition and identity as an important objective – granting them full entry into academic

culture on completion of their doctorate. Relationships with key individuals such as their supervisor, fellow students and research group were also regarded as central for their acculturation. There were however different interpretations of academic practices between home and UK cultures and differing expectations which led to some uncertainty. This was particularly the case for doctoral students who reported difficulties adjusting to the supervisory relationship which was often less directive than expected. Staff reported adjusting to differences in teaching approaches and relationships with students and academic colleagues. Finally, language barriers created difficulties for both groups in teaching and social situations. Whilst we recognise that international students are not a homogenous group (Trahar, 2007), we note some similarities between our findings and other studies (e.g. see Cadman, 2000; Kashima & Loh, 2006; McClure, 2005).

When considering the notion of 'academic practice', we can regard it as having core elements such as inquiry (scholarly and empirical research), teaching responsibilities, institutional and disciplinary service (McAlpine & Hopwood, 2007). However, it seems that there are nuances to how this concept is experienced and understood based on social, institutional and disciplinary differences (McAlpine & Hopwood, 2007). Academic practice can be conceived as existing within an intellectual community where there are strong disciplinary traditions (Becher & Trowler, 2001). In support of this, Cousin (2006) argues that "disciplinary communities are relatively borderless" (p.35). In our study, the strong disciplinary identity of academic staff facilitated their acculturation. For doctoral students, developing their disciplinary identity was regarded as crucial. As such, disciplinary identity appeared to be a key aspect of successful acculturation for both staff and students and was therefore a 'universal' aspect. The study does indicate however that there are aspects of academic practice that may be more situationally defined. We assert that some of these aspects are based on institutional differences and also different cultural practices on a national level (such as approaches to teaching and supervision). Further research into different institutions, disciplines and cultures is therefore suggested in order to advance understanding of the 'international' nature of academic practice.

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