International students’ transitions into UK Higher Education – revisiting the concept and practice of ‘academic hospitality’

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Structure of the presentation

• Background and scope of research
• International student ‘transition’ and ‘academic hospitality’ - defining the key concepts
• International students’ experiences and reflections on transition and academic hospitality
• Some findings and conclusions
Background to research

- Building on previous research around international student mobilities, migration, resilience and ‘moorings’ (Ploner, 2017)
- Started life in 2016 as small-scale independent project for PCAP – (HEA Fellowship training); small internal funding
- Part of my own academic biography – reconciling current research with international students with my background in the anthropology of tourism and travel
- Feeds into current interdisciplinary research proposal/application on international student flows and transitions into UK Higher Education
(Academic) Hospitality – a timely research agenda?

- unprecedented movement of people worldwide as labour migrants, refugees, professionals/experts, tourists, students, etc. (Urry’s ‘mobility paradigm’)
- increasingly hostile political rhetoric around immigration and allowing people access to a country’s economic, social and educational resources worldwide
- increasingly restrictive immigration policies in UK Higher Education in recent years; strict Visa/Tier4 immigration policies; ‘labelled ‘bogus’ students who seek permanent residence through HE;
- concurrent discourse around HE students as ‘customers’, ‘consumer’ or ‘clients’ - particularly high fee-paying international students – HE as ‘service industry’ (Bunce et al., 2016)
- considers a wide range of aspects linked to the international ‘student experience’ (e.g. transition, international curricula, social/local environment, etc.)
International students’ transitions to UK HE

- A liminal ‘between and betwixt’ condition and rite of passage
- A key personal and existential condition which hugely impacts on students’ wellbeing, sense of belonging and identity formation (Collins, 2012)
- Prevailing one-way ‘deficit’ approaches to the transition of international students, i.e. ‘adaptation’, ‘acculturation’, ‘integration’ and ‘adjustment’ discourses. (Russell et al., 2010)
- Perpetuating myths of a seemingly coherent ‘mainstream’ UK HE/student body (i.e. white, middle class, anglophone, etc.)? (Hellsten, 2007; Waters, 2012)
- Few studies in the field highlight the positive aspects of transition (Moores and Popadiuk, 2011)
- Universities’ structural hospitality to help students ‘settle in’
Academic hospitality?

- A recurrent concept in international HE research (Bennett, 2000; Phipps and Barnett, 2007; Kenway and Fahey, 2009)

- Draws on long tradition in philosophical and anthropological research into hospitality (from Plato to Derrida)

- Represents a credible critique of the prevailing host/guest divide in international academia and education, however, with little empirical evidence

  “…extension of self in order to welcome the other by sharing and receiving intellectual resources and insights.” (Bennett, 2000, p.1)

  “…awareness that, however initially strange, the perspective of the other could easily supplement and perhaps correct one’s own work or even transform one’s self-understanding.” (…) [perceived otherness and diversity] “…can enrich us and draw us out of our own parochialism even as it also confronts us with our own limitations.” (Bennett, 2000, p. 1 and 2).
Forms and modes of academic hospitality
(Phipps & Barnett, 2007)

**FORMS**
- Material
- Virtual
- Epistemic
- Linguistic
- Touristic

**MODES**
- Celebratory
- Communicative
- Critical
About the research/methodology

• Small-scale explorative study with 14 ‘international’ students based at two northern UK universities

• Purposive, maximum variety sampling according to students geographical background (i.e. EU/non-EU, EEA, overseas student); level of study (i.e. UG, PGT); subjects/study areas; mode of international study (i.e. full programme, temporary student exchange, etc.)

• Students had to be in their ‘first year’ abroad; departmental student support services helped with recruitment

• In-depth, semi-structured interviews with students, focusing on educational biographies, prior international experiences, reasons for ‘going abroad’, transition experiences, reflections on ‘settling in’ – both educationally/academically and socially

• Thematic and deductive analysis according to Phipp’s and Bennet’s ‘forms’ and ‘modes’ of academic hospitality
“Well first, I have to be honest, I was pretty afraid that when I arrive here, it would not be enough, cos’ this is the first world and we are a developing country or whatever... so I was afraid that I was not able to give, like, my everything...like, in the other exchange programmes, I did not have to prove my knowledge, actually, because it was working, or just practicing English, so I didn’t have to show anything actually..., but here, it was like real, it would be grades, it would be exams... so I was a little bit afraid at first.” (Ines, UG Business, Mexico)

“I don’t like to prepare a lot, I like to be surprised, so I think, academically, I felt quite prepared, but I didn’t know a lot about England, I never have been here before...” (Theresa, UG Education, Germany)

“To be honest, I don’t know. I think English people are very polite, very warm-hearted, but I don’t know whether they are welcoming (...). Maybe, they are just used to people like us, to strangers (...)”  (Yi, BA Education, China)
Material hospitality

“...and I think that the staff at university are very helpful, so I took a flight from Paris to Manchester and they basically waited for me, ..., and then there was a coach ordered, that took us straight from Manchester to [name of university city], that was really nice, ...so I had zero difficulties, I just had to get to Manchester, and that was it...” (Natasha, MA International Law, Slovakia)

“The basic facilities are very...good, ...much better than I can ever imagine. I think there is a difference between a developed country and a developing country..., like the library, the computers in the library, very convenient. I feel like I can solve all my problems myself and don’t need others. Very, very convenient...” (Ma Jie, MA Mgt., China)

“...And then I had to pay all my rent in advance, but my bank only gave me £400 a day, so I had to widen my credit balance. And they wouldn’t give me the key to the flat before I give them all the rent, so I had to stay at a friend’s house and that was a bit uncomfortable because I didn’t want to burden them...” (Theresa, BA Ed., Germany)
“...in Spain, it was much more about by-heart kind of knowledge and everything, just memorising..., and here is more of a principle to try to be independent..., and it is quite hard, you know, to teach yourself and accumulate the subject knowledge, I think. It is fine, but if you’re not used to it, you can struggle...” (Manuel, BA Top-up in Business, Spain)

“...for example, in the courses, I think it’s not good that you can feel that you are an international student, if they let you feel that you’re international. Sometimes, when I felt I could not really say what I meant, I felt like everybody was looking at me, and, you know, the professor is a bit annoyed as well...” (Theresa, BA Education, Germany)

“...because here, it is often said that people are cold because of the weather, but you realise that that’s not true. Maybe they’re not like, yes I’m going to hug everyone, and whatever, but they are not cold. They are just like us. And you learn about that....” (Ines, Mexico, UG Business)
“The first few weeks I feel anxious, really, I don’t understand what others are saying, and I don’t dare to speak. I’m very anxious... I seldom speak to a foreigner and...I often don’t understand the teacher...all my teachers, I think they are very patient. Sometimes I would ask a question twice or three times, but every time they would answer me very patiently...I think I’m very touched.” (Yi, BA Education, China)

“I can understand why the English students stay together and also the exchange students, because they all have the same culture, it’s easier for conversation (...) and it is the language of course, because I know some American students and they know more English people than me, so because of the language it’s easy for them, but they don’t stay with the English people, they stay with us, and so, I don’t know why...” (Emily, MA Engineering, France)
Findings

- Overall positive experiences of transition and receiving academic hospitality (i.e. personal and academic growth; feeling accepted/valued; change of perspective; developing a sense of place, belonging and independence, etc.)
- Seemingly mundane, ritualistic gestures of structural/institutional hospitality are highly valued among international students
- Epistemic hospitality: strong sense among international students to have to ‘adjust’ and ‘fit in’ in terms of ‘local’ learning modes and ‘traditions’ (e.g. ‘critical thinking’, ‘independent learning’, threshold concepts, etc.); limited sense of reciprocal nature of academic hospitality (i.e. the engagement with the ‘other’ on behalf of teachers or UK domestic students)
- Varying performances of ‘self’ among international students during and after transition (oscillating between ‘critical’ and ‘celebratory’ modes of hospitality)
- Geographical and linguistic distance not always determining the quality of transition experiences, but seem to require heightened awareness of academic hospitality (i.e. self-stigmatization of students coming from ‘developing’ countries)
• Academic hospitality which emerges between institutional structures and students’ individual agency in terms of mobility, choice and taking risks

• ‘Virtual’ forms of academic hospitality important, but cannot replace ‘real’ and material forms (i.e. contact with lecturers, fellow students, library and on-site communal spaces as meaningful sites of contact and sharing...)

• Study mode (i.e. full programme, ERASMUS/study exchange) impact on experience of academic hospitality (i.e. ‘semi-detached’ experience of temporary exchange students)

• Finding ‘real’ hospitality and a ‘home from home’ among fellow international students

• Academic hospitality cannot be reduced to transition and related ‘induction’ phases but is integral part of the entire ‘international student lifecycle’
References


Thank You!

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