

# **Where am I? Enhancing Learning Experience for Local and International Post Graduate Students’: A Focus on Creative Learning and Teaching Diverse Students at a Midlands University**

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*This paper explores the learning experiences of overseas postgraduate students studying in the UK, with a focus on how creative learning and teaching approaches can be adapted for the students. A multi method approach was adopted to data collection, using a mini focus group and 18 individual reflective diaries. Qualitative content analysis was conducted to illustrate themes from the interview and individual reflective diaries. Fee incentives, affordable accommodation and a good social life motivated students to study at the Midlands University. This paper generates fresh insights into learning experience by overseas post graduate students in the UK.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The UK Higher Education (HE) sector is predicted to reach 750 000 students by 2016 (DBIS, 2011; Gill, 2014) almost triple the 269,020 students recorded between 2005-2006 (UUK, 2005, cited in Kingston and Forland, 2008). This comes at a time of tremendous metamorphism in the sector due to declining government funding and enrolment (Mai, 2005), global demand for products and changing consumer lifestyles (Levitt, 1993, cited in Mai, 2005). For students, the convergence of international qualifications and technology provides more options as they pursue HE qualifications. On the other hand, universities now compete to provide superior customer experience (Binsardi and Ekwulugo, 2003), engagement, creativity, increase consumer (student) satisfaction as well as raising perceived service quality (Russell, 2005) to assimilate international students in the UK educational system and society. At the same time, international students often come with high expectations of HE (e.g. quality) not ‘borne out’ upon arrival in the UK owing to a lack of clear standards and principles to steer progression of international activities (Kingston and Forland, 2008). This is supported by Scudamore (2013, p.3: In the HEA) who observed that, “Students beginning their study will have mixed experiences and expectations”.

International students studying in the UK have a respect for the UK HE system and recognise the value of a UK degree. Scudamore (2013, p.3: In the HEA) however argues that, “*our students’ previous experience may not necessarily have prepared them well, and their expectations may not match what they find.*” In addition, the majority of overseas students are dissatisfied with their university experience (Pereda, Airey and Bennett, 2007). Furthermore, Maringe and Carter (2007) refer to an insufficient evidence base to inform university planning on customer experience on international post graduate students. Similarly, Wilkins and Balakrishnan (2011) researching on student satisfaction in the United Arab Emirates observed the paucity of research into student experiences in transnational higher education. When we look at HE, we also realize the challenges of meeting the needs of both local and international

students sharing the same learning space. This calls for new ways of thinking: coming up with teaching strategies tailored to meet diverse needs of both international (overseas) and local students (home students). This study seeks to build on this body of evidence by exploring how creative learning strategies can be used to enhance learning experience for a diverse group of students studying in the East Midlands area of UK. As such the overarching question is; what are students' (local and international) perceptions on the learning experience in the UK?

## **EMERGING TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Globalisation is perceived to have propelled the internationalisation of HE. Brown (2001, p. 11) defined internationalisation as, *“a process in which resources are drawn from the global environment and combined with local talent to produce innovations which help fulfil institutional objectives.”* Internationalisation of HE is a developing field of study (Kingston et al., 2008) for example the increasing transnational provision by UK universities. For example, some midlands universities (e.g. De Montfort, Nottingham and Coventry) are increasing transnational provision (Kingston et al., 2008) as well as recruiting overseas students in light of the downturn in local post graduate student numbers. This decline can be attributed to recent changes in the HE sector which include liberty to increase fees in line with inflation to above £9000 per year depending on teaching quality standards (Coughlan, 2015: In the BBC) Secondly, UK HE has moved from a core focus on educating students to providing an experience package. *“While students once went to university to get a higher education, now they go to be given an ‘experience’ by that university”* (Scott, 2015, p.1: In the Guardian). Locally, student enrolment has either dropped (Barnes, 2007) or expectations have risen significantly. Conversely, international students are becoming more demanding of student centred learning in overseas universities (Lea, Stephenson, and Troy, 2003.p.323). For example, Bamford (2008) cites challenges in meeting needs for tailored services such as library, student's union, social and cultural information and services, learning materials. Furthermore, a case study of UK international students demonstrated how different English comprehension levels may hinder the educational experience for the entire group (p.1).

Overall postgraduate students are now more discerning (Coughlan, 2015) especially with the introduction of the Consumer Rights Act 2015; pressurizing universities to enhance student engagement among other factors (Student Loans Company, 2015; Burns, 2015: In the BBC). Furthermore, technology has become part and parcel of everyday life used to co-ordinate daily activities; the majority of graduate students (88%) are more likely to access their mobile devices in learning spaces (Smith, Rainie, Zickuhr, 2011: In Pew Research). Not surprisingly, therefore, a virtual assistant *application* (app) dubbed 'Sherlock' that can answer student questions was created by Cardiff University in response to the trends (Cardiff University. (2015). This development has been widely welcomed by UK universities and researchers (see Douglas, McClelland, and Davies, 2008) have long recommend research in this area focusing on responsiveness, communication, and access to university services.

## **TRANSMISSION OF KNOWLEDGE AND DIVERSITY MANAGEMENT**

The transition into HE by international students also raises diversity challenges (Kingston and et al., 2008) for example cultural diversity. Palmer (2016, p.218) puts this more succinctly, *“The cultural and academic differences with which these students enter programs of study overseas require students to shift and refocus their lenses from the familiar frames of home to the new frames of the host country and institution.”* The fusion of Western individualist Socratic traditions and Eastern collectivist Confucian traditions may cause a clash of traditions hence using generic teaching and learning approaches could result in misunderstandings (Kingston et al., 2008, p.205) which may ultimately influence students' (both local and international) experience. In addition, Wong (2004, p.154) sees problems in transmission where Western educators fail to understand international students (e.g. Chinese) who may lack spontaneity and thus conform to a teacher centred style of learning where students do not challenge the educator. Therefore, overseas students may be left feeling isolated as they grapple new social and cultural factors

(Cubillo, Sanchez and Cervino, 2006): may experience 'cultural and learning shock' at some point during their studies. Additionally, some international students may find the Western style of teaching and learning both traumatic and challenging: lecturers need to build rapport with students to help them cope with 'cultural and system shock' [university life overseas] (Jackson, 2003). It can be argued however that students from collectivist cultures and non-English speaking countries who are reluctant to speak up in class potentially affect the experience for the entire group. On the contrary, home students who enrol onto post graduate courses are confronted with different learning experiences altogether: often left wondering 'where they are', surrounded by students from diverse backgrounds.

Similarly, Biggs (2009) acknowledges the differences in culture but highlights the teachers' duty to motivate and engage students in active learning as, "*all students not in a coma want to do something*" (p.31). This is endorsed by Bamford (2008) who recommends that lecturers adapt teaching styles and materials to accommodate the needs of non-English speaking students. This calls for new approaches to tailor the style of teaching as well as implementing inclusive creative learning strategies. However, at present, there is no structure to guide a '*local to global strategy*' (Kingston et al., 2008); lack of understanding of experiences and needs of international students by tutors (Trice (2003, cited in Palmer, 2016, p.218); often resulting in students being forced to conform to the prescribed styles of learning and teaching. Another strand of thought links the expectancy- value theory of motivation extensively used to understand why students want to learn and how to motivate them. Feather (1982, cited in Biggs, 2009, p.32) maintains that for anyone to engage in an activity, they need to both value the outcome and expect success in achieving it. At present there appears to be a gulf between student expectations, learning strategies and engagement. In addition, there is debate on the exact role of students in this '*encounter*'. Zwass (2010) sees students as co-creators who must contribute immensely to the service through interaction with various services provided by the universities (e.g. student services, libraries, technical support, lecturer (s) and tutorials). In contrast, Kuppelweiser, Simon and Chiummo (2013, p.311) opined that value is created primarily between and among customers rather than the service provider (e.g. educator) per se: calling for deeper insights into student expectations by examining the services provided as well as the learning environments for students (MacManus, 2006).

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

The research questions aimed to explore the learning experience of post graduate students and establish how such experiences can be enhanced by creative approaches. Previous studies (Wright and O'Neill, 2002; O'Neill and Palmer, 2004; Chen, Yang, Shiau and Wang, 2006) used SERVQUAL (Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1985) to evaluate the learning experience of international students studying in the UK. The framework originally developed by Parasuraman et al., (1985) comprised ten determinants that influence service quality. The ten instruments were later narrowed down into five dimensions; RATER dimensions (Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, and Responsiveness). This instrument has been widely used in organisations to gauge quality and service performance (Douglas et al., 2008, p.22). The SERVQUAL framework has however been widely criticised for being unsuitable in assessing service quality (SQ) in the education sector (Abdullah, 2006). Cronin and Taylor (1992) proposed a performance only measure (SERVPERF) while Abdullah (2006) proposed the HEdPERF measures (Higher Education PERFORMANCE-only) now widely used in HE. HEdPERF is a new and more comprehensive service quality measure developed specifically for higher education. Four key dimensions of the HEdPERF framework (Access, Non-academic aspects, Academic aspects, Reputation and Access) are used jointly with SERVQUAL in this study. Like the SERVQUAL, HEdPERF dimensions are not universally adaptable hence need for constant adaptation. This methodological choice is also informed by previous education research (e.g. Abdullah 2005, 2006; Vrana, Dimitriadis, and Karavasilis, 2015) where a combination of these two frameworks was used successfully.

## STUDENT EXPERIENCE, SATISFACTION AND SERVICE QUALITY

Service quality is the customers' evaluation of the services received based on prior expectations (Palmer, 2011). A more elaborate definition by Parasuraman, et al., (1985, cited in Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Malhotra, 2002, p.368), refers to - perceived service quality as, "*the magnitude and direction of the discrepancy between service expectations and perceptions and depicts this discrepancy as a function of four organizational gaps associated with the design, marketing, and delivery of services*". In higher education, SQ covers the expectations and perceptions of students generated by the university information as well as evaluation of course delivery (Hills and Thom, 2005; Rastall, 2004). The UK government recently introduced the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), to ensure that student satisfaction and teaching quality is enhanced in universities. Kingston et al., (2008, p.210) observe that a record numbers of international students are entering the UK HE based on the perception that British education is of an excellent standard. While such perceptions often create high expectations for international students, an Ipsos MORI report (2006) indicated that 10 % of students had a somewhat poor experience owing to poor English: they found tutorials and lectures difficult to understand. At present, there is debate on the real determinants of quality teaching and student satisfaction.

## METHODOLOGY

A multi method interpretive methodological approach to data collection was adopted (one mini focus group comprising three overseas students and 19 reflective diaries), to establish respondent behaviour, satisfaction and experience levels (Aker, Kumar, Day and Leon, 2011). In the first phase, 15 post graduate students (13 Chinese, 1 Indian and 1 Saudi Arabia) were given reflective diaries at the end of their course to document lived experiences (Elliot et al., 2003) as opposed to what they may say. Findings from this stage informed the development of the interview schedule (Creswell, 2014); the identification of appropriate dimensions and variables that capture students' experiences with services at a UK university as well as recruitment for phase two. The second phase comprised mini focus group interviews with three respondents followed by completion of individual reflective diaries. Focus groups offer flexibility (open ended questions and triggers), and also enable further ideas to be generated (Snowball effect); something not possible using a survey (Bryman, 2016). A multi method approach enables the collection of 'credible' and well-founded data that can add deeper insight to research (Bryman and Bell, 2015), triangulation (Lacobbucci and Gilbert, 2010) and offers explanatory value (Creswell, 2013). An inductive approach to data analysis was adopted to establish relationships between theory and research (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative content analysis was conducted to illustrate interview themes and emerging trends in higher education. Non-probability sampling (judgemental) was used to recruit respondents from the university who had experience with university services and were enrolled on a postgraduate course of study. Recruitment occurred during four different classroom sessions; Phase one data collection started in the first week of November when respondents were given diaries to take home and return on the third week of December. Focus group members were then recruited upon the return of the diaries: resulting in 10 volunteers initially agreeing to participate. However, given the timing (week before Christmas) only three respondents managed to attend the one-hour interview during the last week of December 2015. Individual boxes of premium chocolates were offered as incentives during the interview stage. Faculty and ESOMAR ethical guidelines ([www.ESOMAR.com](http://www.ESOMAR.com)) were observed to ensure that honesty, integrity and consent is obtained throughout the entire research process (Denscombe, 2014).

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **Perceptions, Motivation and Expectations of International Students**

Findings (Appendix 1) indicated that course availability, fee concessions (e.g. scholarships) and cheaper accommodation motivated students to study at the Midlands University: "*I think it was one of the universities offering the type of course that I wanted to study which is Risk Management... I also got a*

*scholarship from...as well of 5000 dollars....*” (R1) *“Ok I was looking for first of all about what’s the cheapest city in the UK compared to the accommodations and the aah, and the type of people in the city....”* (R3). Interestingly, students also sought a city that offering a rich cultural life and a student friendly environment; evident in a cosmopolitan city such as Leicester.

This view was also supported by reflective diary accounts where some students were more elaborate stating that: *“Yes, the environment of Leicester is good and it suit for student study and living.”* (RD9). Consequently, social life played one of the key roles in student decision making (as expected from Cubillo et al., 2006; Mai, 2005). Respondents (focus groups and diaries) articulated a clear understanding of expectations at UK universities: *“Well I expected the courses would be sort of advanced courses and we aah, I expected the teachers would use advanced technology to teach students ....”* (R3). *“I expected the course to be practical and stimulating. It has exceeded my expectation so far.”* (RD16). Despite the well documented value of the UK higher education system; (see, Kingston et al., 2008, Scudamore, 2013) majority of students were overwhelmed with the amount of coursework: *“Actually, before I came, I heard like the post graduate here is like a compressed process like in a year and there is like lots of courses and lots of stress and I didn’t expect it as I heard...It’s like too many, it’ only 9 months or one year and it’s like compressed course stress and lots of assignments....”* (R2).

Findings from the reflective diaries also went further; the majority of respondents (-10 out of 18) expressed that tight schedules had led to loss of social life: *“Too much in a week, I mean maybe deadline should be different day or week.”* (RD6). *“The course made me don’t have a social life, study 16 hours per-day at least. I feel really hard too taken this”* (RD9). This last finding is however incongruent with the theory of motivation (Feather. 1982: cited in Biggs, 2009) as international students somehow fail to see the contribution of a rigorous assessment system to the value of UK higher education.

#### *Learning Experience and Teaching Style*

One key finding was the differences in the learning and teaching styles of UK higher education versus overseas universities (as observed by Wong, 2004): *“...I wasn’t expecting tutorials and lectures and seminars because in my undergraduate we aah we don’t have these kinds of classes...”* (R3). Nonetheless, the practicality and value of creative teaching methods such as videos and apps (e.g. Blackboard app) was commended: *“I think eeh it’s actually very practical as well the way that they offer the classes you know.... Something I didn’t do in my undergraduate...You just didn’t know the real world...”* (R1). *“And there’s an app for Blackboard which is good because you can check your courses wherever you are...”* (R2). Findings above demonstrate how ineffective standardized teaching methods are for a diverse group of international students (Kingston et al., 2008) with heterogeneous needs. This calls for new approaches to teaching informed by students’ needs (Scudamore, 2013: In the HEA).

#### *Learning Strategies and Satisfaction*

There was an apparent lack of consensus regarding preferred learning strategies with some students advocating for generic strategies whilst others preferred adaptive strategies: *“...the best strategy is that using dictionaries in class to translate the language and the aah, the aah every student must come here with an English language so that he can understand the course properly... You would take time to understand each other”* (R3). *“More consideration for the various backgrounds of the students so that teaching style can be adapted to be more suitable”* (RD15). There are also clear language problems here that may affect learning experience for the entire group. Findings also highlighted the need to use technology to enhance learning experience, as previously suggested by Smith et al., (2011: In Pew Research): *“...aah technology sort of makes it easier for them... a classmate from China and aah, they actually type the word on Google and then somehow they translate that into Chinese and they get to see that in Chinese.”* (R1). *“...we’re having group assignments and some students don’t have ‘WhatsApp’ so we find problem to, to contact with them, so if there is an application like that we can communicate easy...”* (R3). These findings are congruent with recent developments of an educational app by Cardiff University (2015) to enable easy communication and engagement. Another key finding was the reluctance to work in groups: *“Then you have people who are actually very aah (R2: Lazy!) Sort of like difficult*

characters where it's like they want to be right and they just want to help in actually trying to stand out and they don't listen to other people's opinions ...” (R1). “The group work is time consuming due to the various cultural dynamics which is a dis-service for a 1-year programme” (RD15). There are clear diversity issues here (see R1, R2, and RD15): as supported by literature (Kingston et al., 2008). In terms of overall satisfaction, most of the students were happy with help received from lecturers, tutors, librarians. “...I spoke to a friend she's at another college and she said they actually, they also have the same you know; they get an assignment then an exam and then what happens is, they take the lowest of the two, so that's gonna be like your grade in a total, I mean I'm ok, so I think ... they do it better. They actually average it” (R1). This was also corroborated by the majority of reflective diary accounts (16 out of 18) where high satisfaction with the course, teachers and general support is evident: “The course is good we can learn a lot from this course” (RD1). “Good course. Helped me a lot for Masters...” (RD3). “It is very useful when I come back to China” (RD5).

Besides dissatisfaction with assessments (e.g. R2), delivery of some ancillary services (payment of fees/accounts administrators) also resulted in bad experiences: “...initially when I got here, I wanted to pay my fees and the cashier wasn't actually too friendly and she sort of made me wait...” (R1). Despite this setback, respondents expressed high overall levels of satisfaction with the services at the university: would recommend the university to others or return to pursue a research degree in the future.

## **DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE**

International post graduate students entering HE seek unique experiences as part of their learning journey. The availability of a course of choice, fee incentives, cheap accommodation and a good social life emerged as key motivators in the students' decision making process (Appendix 1) as previously stated by Cubillo (2006) and Mai, (2005). This is congruent with some of the HEdPERF dimension (Access). Secondly, findings confirm the high expectations of UK higher education by overseas students (Kingston et al., 2008); however, students failed to see the value of work that goes into these qualifications. This result however contradicts previous literature on motivation (Feather, 1982: cited in Biggs, 2009) which relates value of an outcome to motivation. However, it appears congruent with the HEdPERF framework in terms of non-academic and academic aspects. What has been evident however from the combined findings is that assessments are poorly planned (R2, RD6, and RD9) and that students are not familiar with assessment strategies. Therefore, educators need to acknowledge the pressures that overseas student's experience (responsiveness-SERVQUAL) as a result of poorly scheduled assessments and provide better timeframes that motivate them as well as increase satisfaction with the programmes. Furthermore, there is need to adapt learning strategies to accommodate the needs of diverse students (Kingston et al., 2008; Scudamore, 2013: In HEA) as is being done at some universities such as Cardiff where apps have been introduced (Cardiff University, 2015). Findings have also demonstrated that international students have spontaneity; post graduate students are evidently challenging the existing learning systems (contradicts literature by Wong, 2004, p.154). Future research could incorporate more reflective and experience based dimensions such as technology and engagement to explore the changing education landscape. Secondly, this area could be researched further with a larger sample more representative of the post graduate student population. Whilst the overall learning experience could be improved, there appears to be high satisfaction levels with learning and teaching at the midlands university.

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## APPENDICES

**TABLE 1**  
**KEY FINDINGS FROM QUALITATIVE INTERVIEWS AND INDIVIDUAL REFLECTIVE DIARIES**

| <b>Motivation and Expectations about the programme</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       | <b>Learning experience, teaching strategies and Satisfaction</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <b>Implications for Educators</b>                                                                                                                                                                                                                            |
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| <p><i>“Ok. I think for my side I think it was one of the universities offering the type of course that I wanted to study (INT: Ok) which is Risk Management, not many varsities in the UK offered that course (INT: OK) I think in the UK I had about three choices and then like eeh, between those then I just opted for ... Umm, eeh in addition to that I also got a scholarship from ... as well of 5000 dollars, so eeh that was like a motivation for me.” R1</i></p> | <p><i>“Actually before I came, I heard like the post graduate here is like a compressed process like in a year and there is like lots of courses and lots of stress and I didn’t expect it as I heard, but when I came it’s like it’s true. It’s like too many, it’ only 9 months or one year (INT: 9 months yeah) and it’s like compressed course stress and lots of assignments so you have to follow, eeh manage your time.” R2</i></p> | <p>There is need to space out the assessment so that students can have quality of life whilst studying as this affects their satisfaction with the course and the overall learning experience.</p>                                                           |
| <p><i>“Ok I was looking for first of all about what’s the cheapest city in the UK compared to the accommodations and the aah, and the type of people in the city and aah I recognised that there are two universities in Leicester which is Leicester University and .... (INT: Yeah) And I applied for the ... through an agent and they found out it’s acceptable they contacted the Saudi Bureau to get my sponsorship and that’s why I chose ...” R3</i></p>             | <p><i>“. I think eeh it’s actually very practical as well the way that they offer the classes you know, in my undergraduate it’s like you get a topic and you link it to the real world. Which is something I didn’t do in my undergraduate, it was like you know here is the textbook and this is the theory you know. You just didn’t ...actually able to link it.” R1</i></p>                                                           | <p>Supporting facilities (e.g. accommodation), a good social environment as well as using creative learning means such as case studies and video are key to a superior learning experience. The learning experience should be viewed as a total package.</p> |
| <p><i>“I expected the course to be practical and stimulating. It has exceeded my expectation so far.” RD16</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           | <p><i>“More consideration for the various backgrounds of the students so that teaching style can be adapted to be more suitable.” RD15</i></p>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | <p>Whilst students’ expectations for the course are being met, teaching strategies need to be adapted to the diverse needs of the overseas students.</p>                                                                                                     |

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| <p><i>“Actually I came here aah, I came here by myself and aah I was looking for the various universities that are acceptable for my qualifications and ... was one of them so now I’m sponsored, aah I’m not sponsored, I pay for myself. So I want to go to Universities that relate to my qualifications, so that was one of them that was offering International risk management, so ...was one of them.” R2</i></p> | <p><i>“And sometimes, we’re having group assignments and some students don’t have WhatsApp (INT: Ok, yes) so we find problem to, to contact with them, so if there is an application like that we can communicate easy and they don’t have excuse that we don’t have a way to contact them.” R3</i></p> | <p>Diversity issues should be considered whenever group assignments are used as an assessment strategy. There may be a need to embed a ‘new’ culture of doing things that reflect the needs of a diverse group. Furthermore, technology can be used to engage and communicate better with students.</p> |
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