

## **International Students and Higher Education: New Perspectives on Cultures and Communities**

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I was very pleased to be invited to be the guest editor for this issue of the *Journal of International Students*, not least because the journal presents cutting edge research that is generating new perspectives in the field. The journal is filling a gap in the literature and its significance is drawing attention from other established journals such as the *Journal of Studies in International Education* (see the editorial of JSIE, 16 (1) 2013, p.3). One of the main strengths of the journal is its combination of contributions from established researchers and emergent researchers many of whom have experienced international mobility themselves and are undertaking doctoral studies in this field. Previous work has noted the under-exploited nature of research work carried out by international students and staff themselves and its potential in informing the field.

Too much of the early research relating to international students and their experience of higher education concentrated on individuals or national groups and, at times, sought to problematize the international student experience. In previous decades, ‘culture’ was used as an explanatory concept for tensions in the higher education learning environment and this allowed for the racialization of interaction between international students and their teachers and peers (Lee and Rice, 2007; Trouillot, 2003). It is striking to see in the collection of articles in this volume that perspectives on cultures and communities in higher education have changed. Many of the articles here present a broader view of the cultures of university campuses and communities beyond, underscoring the significance of enabling all students to experience wider engagement with faculty staff. Luo and Jamieson-Drake’s article (this volume) presents a convincing and well-evidenced argument for “the role of the institutional environment in providing students with varied academic and social opportunities for involvement with new ideas, people and experiences.” This focus on the part played by the institutional learning environment is an important step away from laying ‘blame’ with the students and towards recasting our conceptions of the social and learning experience of all participants in the university environment. These new perspectives on the cultures and communities generated by internationalisation depict contexts where intercultural interaction enables all participants (students and staff) to question their own beliefs and positions and develop the criticality so highly prized in higher education (although I sometimes question if we really know what we mean by this – see Vandermensbrugge, 2004). A number of the contributions in this issue suggest this link between positive intercultural learning environments and educational outcomes. The aim is to improve intercultural interaction not because it is kind or because it supports international students but because it is important for the learning experience of the whole academic community.

Contemporary perspectives on cultures and communities of higher education acknowledge the blurring of the boundaries between the academy and the community beyond. Nguyen’s article

(this volume) points to the crucial role of sustained and personalised relationships between students and staff, underlining the impact of these relationships on academic outcomes, not just within the university but on students' experiences in the longer term. The significance of the world beyond the university is a recurring theme throughout this collection, with Manguvo, Whitney and Chareka (this volume) presenting research which examines the role of 'volunteerism' in promoting social inclusion within the university. The authors suggest that the social and cultural capital gained during involvement in active voluntary work contributes to the development of "high quality social networks, a sense of belonging and trust, and an enhancement of self-esteem" (p.113), all qualities which provide positive conditions for learning (Cope and Kalantsiz, 2009). Acknowledgement of the role of volunteering (or what is sometimes called 'service learning' in the US) in higher education is not a new phenomenon, however. Caruana (2011) charts the development of service learning in the US across the 1960s and 1970s and considers its role in preparing multi-skilled graduates. The association between international students, intercultural interaction and service learning or volunteering presented by Manguvo, Whitney and Chareka (this volume) is significant though, as it demonstrates the different ways in which the cultures and communities of international higher education are being construed. Engagement with voluntary activities not only makes a link between the formal learning of the university and real world experience but has the potential to reshape reductionist views of the world (Caruana, 2011) through encountering people "with sharply differing backgrounds, ideas and perspectives" (Luo and Jamieson-Drake, this volume).

The different perspectives presented in the articles in this issue could not be realized without the broad range of methodologies inherent in the research. Claims regarding the international student experience have in the past been dogged by anecdotalism and a lack of systematic empirical enquiry. The articles in this issue contextualise the international student experience in a range of theoretical frameworks and engage a range of research paradigms, thus enabling new and different perspectives to emerge. The discourse analysis approach employed by Rommerhausen (this volume) is a case in point. The documentary analysis of the discourse of handbooks and webpages of universities illuminates the cultural and institutional values implicit in the texts. The particular approach to generating data in this case gives us a unique insight into the interaction between the university and the student, highlighting ways in which universities construct their learning and assessment environments. Rommerhausen implies that these constructions can be clumsy and may lack a nuanced response to the individual student. It is also clear that such discourses that continue to present a deficit model of international students can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. A contrasting approach to this research is evident in the work of Zhang, Jie and Hagedorn (this volume) where survey data exploring female Chinese students' choice and intentions in studying abroad provides a gendered perspective that is unusual in the literature. In some of the research here it is the sampling methods which provide the new perspective and the focus on data gathered from alumni across three decades in Luo and Jamieson-Drake's article (this volume) is a fascinating, large data set that outlines the major predictors of intercultural interaction at university. One of the final contributions to the volume (Veal) is in stark contrast to the large scale quantitative projects of the two preceding articles (Zhang, Jie and Hagedorn; Li, Liu, Wei and Lan) as it is a narrative travelogue of the author's experience of study abroad. Despite the fact that these sorts of accounts are not based on the systematic research I mentioned above, I always find something of value in these sorts of narratives whenever I come across them. In fact, I seek out these sections in the back issues of the *Journal of International Students*. In reading Veal's account in this issue I was particularly struck by her choice of quotes for the epigrams that begin each section. As this is a summer issue and plans are being made for summer holidays, who could fail to be struck by the quote: '*A good traveller has no fixed plans, and is not intent on arriving*' Lao Tzu (p.168, this volume). This is particularly pertinent to me personally as I am currently planning a summer trip with a close friend who I met when I was an undergraduate. We are planning to revisit (in a rather Proustian way) our undergraduate travels by train and these always began with no fixed plans, with

the details of arrival usually rather scant. Thirty years later we are setting off with a much more detailed itinerary and we are quite focused on both arriving at our destination and returning home!

I have very much enjoyed reading and editing the articles in this issue. Both this collection and the rest of the *Journal of International Students* present fresh perspectives on a field that needs such new and innovative work.

### References

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### About the Guest Editor:

**Dr. Catherine Montgomery** is Reader in Education and Graduate Research Director in the Faculty of Education at the University of Hull, UK. Catherine's research interests center on intercultural education, internationalization of the curriculum and the development of graduates as 'global citizens'. She has published widely in this field including the book *Understanding the International Student Experience* published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2010 and her book co-authored with Val Clifford *Moving Towards Internationalization of the Curriculum for Global Citizenship in Higher Education*, which came out in 2011. Catherine was previously the Research Director for the Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning at Northumbria University, UK, where she led a research team focusing on the impact of innovative assessment in Higher Education. Catherine was awarded a UK National Teaching Fellowship in 2010 in recognition of her contribution to internationalization in Higher Education and her innovative teaching and learning in diverse student groups.