Intercultural Transitions in Higher Education

International Student Adjustment and Adaptation

Alina Schartner and Tony Johnstone Young
Intercultural Transitions in Higher Education
Studies in Social Interaction
Series Editors: Steve Walsh, Paul Seedhouse and Christopher Jenks

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Alina Schartner and Tony Johnstone Young
For Rupert, who is growing up to be a citizen of the world.

To Carolyn, Thomas and Anna, who are all the better for being ‘international’. With love.
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PART I

1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 AIMS, STRUCTURE AND SCOPE

This book addresses a global, international and intercultural phenomenon – the fact that more than five million people are studying for a higher education (HE) degree abroad (OECD 2018). These numbers have grown considerably in recent years, and despite attempts by some governments to slow or reduce them, are still on the rise (UIS 2013; OECD 2018). In this book, we specifically address the human side of this phenomenon. We explore what it is 'like' to be an international student (IS), and what makes it a positive and successful experience – or otherwise. We investigate how, within this phenomenon, people's experiences are researched, understood, supported and enhanced. The book is centred in ongoing research by the authors, conducted since 2011; some has been published elsewhere, some for the first time here. It also explores how others have investigated similar phenomena. We aim, essentially, to bring it all together in a conceptually new way and point to ways forward.

Specifically, we first present a survey and summary of our own and others' recent research, drawing together and analysing thought and findings from across the spectrum of relevant interest areas – social psychology, education, applied linguistics and intercultural communication studies. From this, we have developed a new heuristic integrated conceptual model of the IS experience that can gauge the adjustment and adaptation trajectories of this unique and important sojourner group. This integrates theory and recent empirical research exploring the academic, psychological and sociocultural aspects of, and influences on, the experience of study abroad.

The model was developed through the deployment of a methodological toolkit that shows how different ontological perspectives on culture, interculturality and identity can be integrated into a mixed-methods research design. The toolkit will provide a guided practical application of the conceptual model by showcasing how qualitative process-oriented perspectives can be integrated with quantitative outcome-oriented approaches in the study of intercultural transition across different contexts. Through this toolkit, we will also show how the model can serve as a reference point for a research agenda. Another important contribution is a longitudinal perspective, which is very unusual in research in the area, where a phenomenon with effects that are likely to run through a lifetime is investigated. The data we present recognise that
the 'international student experience' begins with factors that influence whether, when and where to study abroad, extends into the experience itself, and continues into the effects of the experience on the future life of former alumni.

The book is divided into three parts. Broadly, we first introduce, contextualise and discuss our approach. We then present, survey and discuss our research and that of others. Finally, we present applications, conclusions and implications arising from this research. More specifically, Part I consists of this introductory Chapter 1, which provides a general introduction; Chapter 2, which reviews relevant literature; and Chapter 3, which outlines our methodological approach. Chapter 1 introduces and discusses the idea of 'internationalisation', and outlines 'international' students' place in this increasingly important, complex and dynamic phenomenon. It also says something about the specific context of the work presented in this study –HE in the UK. Chapter 1 also details how approaches to 'intercultural' transitional experiences undergone by ISs can be best captured with 'ecumenical' ontological and methodological approaches. These aim to take account of both the 'culture simple', positivist orientation manifest in much of the social psychological literature in the area, and the frequently competing 'culture complex' epistemological perspectives manifest in research that claims to approach intercultural interactions from a more critical, interpretivist, ontological standpoint. We argue that there is considerable value and originality, when addressing the nature and consequences for people of the 'international student experience', in drawing on both of these, usually antagonistic, perspectives. This chapter concludes by briefly unpacking some key concepts and terminology, such as adjustment, adaptation, sojourners, and 'international' and 'home' students. Chapter 2 then surveys, reviews and consolidates recent research into the 'international student experience'. It draws together research literature from the intersecting fields of intercultural communication, international education and applied linguistics, detailing research into ISs' experiences worldwide. Chapter 3 presents methodological applications of the ecumenical position outlined in Chapter 1. Here, we detail our mixed-methods approach and longitudinal research design, and present information on research participants, data collection instruments and analysis.

Part II presents empirical data informing a new model of IS adjustment and adaptation. Each chapter analyses and integrates interview and survey data from ISs, present or past, in mixed-methods research designs. The aim of Part II is to present the dynamics and patterns of IS adjustment over time, and the relationships between the intersecting domains of adjustment and adaptation, and their association with a range of contributory factors. The potential contributory factors integrated into the analysis are drawn from the literature detailed in Chapter 2 and include variables such as motivations to study abroad, prior knowledge about the host country, proficiency in the host language, previous academic achievement, and patterns of contact with and support from people such as hosts, co-nationals and ISs of other nationalities.

Chapter 4 introduces, integrates and discusses qualitative interview and quantitative survey-based data related to the academic adjustment and adaptation of ISs. This includes adjustments to the demands of academic life in the new environment, such as styles of learning and teaching at the host university, as well as explicit measures of
academic achievement. The quantitative data demonstrate the positive effects that an explicit study of intercultural communication might have on academic adjustment and adaptation. Chapter 5 then turns the focus to students’ psychological adjustment and adaptation. It details the dynamics and patterns of psychological adjustment over time and the relationships between a range of contributory factors and individual ISs’ subjective sense of their psychological wellbeing and their general satisfaction with life in the new environment. Chapter 6’s focus is on the third domain in the model – sociocultural adjustment and adaptation. Here, qualitative interview data provide a fine-grained and nuanced picture of participants’ ‘lived’ sociocultural adjustment: this includes their experience of ‘fitting into’ the host environment, and their social contact with and support from ‘home’ students and others. The quantitative data demonstrate which factors contribute to sociocultural adjustment over time. Chapter 7 analyses and discusses the interrelationships between the three adjustment domains in the three previous chapters in Part II. Here we present data that demonstrate the links and conceptual overlaps between the domains, and discuss how these strong but complex interrelationships might influence future research and practice in ‘internationalising’ universities. Part II ends with Chapter 8, which deals with the presentation and analysis of data collected from international alumni – an analysis of survey and interview data relating to the retrospective experience of ‘being international’ in HE. Here we use the three domains of adjustment and adaptation in our model as frames of reference, and detail how these may relate to personal change, growth and perspectives in later life.

Part III details the many possible applications for our findings. Chapter 9 revisits our focus on the human side of ‘internationalisation’ detailed above, and offers some conclusions related to our empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions, which, we argue, are many and significant. It also details how the data presented in Part II have informed a guiding conceptual model of IS adjustment (over time) and adaptation (‘outcomes’), which was developed by the authors, and presents the model itself. This model, we argue, can provide an important organising principle and point of reference for the burgeoning field of research into the IS experience. The chapter concludes with an agenda for further research and a call to arms. The final chapter (Chapter 10) discusses some of the implications from our research – for ISs and students-to-be, for host HEIs, for researchers and for policy makers.

1.2 CONTEXT – THE SCALE AND PATTERNS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENT MOBILITY

There has been a huge global growth in the number of people studying abroad in HE over the last thirty years. Exact figures are hard to determine, but as we highlight above, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2018) calculates that there are around five million students currently studying in higher education institutions (HEIs) outside their home countries worldwide. This is more than double the two million who were doing so in 1999 and more than triple the number only a decade before that. This growth has occurred in the context of what was, until very recently, an increasingly globalised world, in which economies are
closely tied to others within their region and beyond. In the context of globalisation and an aggressively neoliberal political and socioeconomic world order, goods, capital and services have been flowing more freely across many borders and from many more sources than ever before. So, too, are people seeking employment, knowledge and skills. In terms of IS mobility, International Consultants for Education and Fairs (ICEF 2015: para 2) characterise things like this:

Once accessible only to the world’s elite, higher education is now open to the masses, particularly the burgeoning middle classes now found on every continent. And especially in countries lacking higher education capacity, students are looking for opportunities to study abroad.

The extent to which the burgeoning middle classes equate to ‘the masses’ is, of course, debatable. What is not debatable is that the phenomenon of IS mobility is huge and is having a considerable impact on people, institutions and countries.

About half of internationally mobile students move from Asia or Africa to predominately English-speaking countries like the USA, UK, Canada or Australia. Another quarter move between countries in the European Higher Education Area, which comprises states across Europe and so includes everywhere from all the EU countries to the Holy See and the Russian Confederation (Marginson 2013). At the national level, IS enrolment varies greatly between countries, ranging from below 1 per cent for the vast majority of countries in the global South, to more than 10 per cent in some global Western contexts. ISs account for 10 per cent or more of the tertiary student population in New Zealand, the UK, Switzerland, Austria, Australia, the Netherlands, Belgium and Canada (OECD 2017). English-speaking countries are the most popular destination for ISs, with four countries hosting over half of globally mobile students (OECD 2018). In 2017, the USA hosted 30 per cent of the total number of ISs in the OECD area, followed by the UK (14 per cent) and Australia (10 per cent). However, France, Germany and the Russian Federation also hosted considerable numbers (OECD 2017). The largest group of ISs enrolled at HEIs in the OECD area are from Asia (55 per cent or 1.9 million), with China being the most dominant country of origin (some 860,000 students) (OECD 2018).

There are strong indications that general attitudes towards migration, particularly in the global North, are hardening, as evidenced by the ‘Brexit’ vote and the US presidential election outcomes in 2016, and the presidential elections in Brazil in 2018. We will return to this point in our Conclusion (Chapter 9, below). Nevertheless, all indications are that, on a global level, the phenomenon of IS mobility will continue to grow, although patterns of flows of students and distributions of ‘market share’ are likely to change.

Reasons for the increase in student mobility include changes in infrastructure and capacity of HEIs, as well as broader sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors. National governments frequently support and subsidise IS recruitment for reasons of soft power enhancement and increase in national global visibility, influence and prestige. So do supranational organisations like the European Union, which tend to see IS mobilities between national members as a means of creating greater cohesions
across the Union, as well as an engine of individual personal growth and development (e.g. EACEA 2016).

For most universities around the world, the recruitment of ISs is now a central element in measures of institutional success as global research and teaching institutions. It is also, usually less overtly but no less crucially, of direct financial benefit and so is a means of continued viability or profitability for HEIs (Wright and Schartner 2013). In terms of world HE institutional rankings, among the multifarious evaluative ranking and rating surveys currently operating, numbers and ratios of international staff and of students are usually a key metric (e.g. QS 2018). The rapid expansion of the HE sector in many countries and the related intensification of financial pressure on education systems have made tuition fees an essential source of income for many universities (OECD 2010). ISs represent a particularly lucrative source of revenue, as their tuition fees are usually higher than those of domestic students. Fees are usually paid by the students themselves or by their families, or through bursaries or scholarships from either their own, or the receiving institutions’, governments, or from a combination of these sources. Whatever the national or institutional motivations, recruitment of ISs provides a monetary benefit for HEIs in the receiving countries, while, at the same time, offering citizens of smaller or less developed countries and HE systems a relatively cost-effective alternative to national provision (Verbik and Lasanowski 2007).

As noted above, this benefit of IS recruitment has been particularly felt among host countries that are predominately English first language-speaking, although they are now being challenged and patterns may be changing. Several factors have historically made predominately English first language speaking-countries in the global North key players in the worldwide HE market (Verbik and Lasanowski 2007). Firstly, these countries have well-developed and relatively well-funded HE sectors. They have also consistently sourced students from a variety of countries, and so have created a diverse market and ensured relatively stable recruitment numbers, despite changes over time in areas of demand. Thirdly, they have traditionally recruited large numbers of students from India and China, which are still strong source countries (UKCISA 2018). Intrinsically linked to this successful establishment of target markets are aggressive, often highly professional and well-funded marketing strategies on behalf of the universities, established over a long period of time in most cases. Finally, these countries have the capacity to provide a service that is in high demand: the opportunity to study in English at internationally renowned facilities. Indeed, the perceived utility of the English language has also been identified as the main driving force behind the popularity of these countries as destinations for ISs (Forest and Alltbach 2006).

While English-speaking countries remain popular, new destination countries for inward student mobility are emerging. In Europe, between 2013 and 2016, Estonia, Latvia, Poland and the Russian Federation each nearly doubled their incoming IS numbers. Other countries that saw a large increase include Turkey (an increase of 62 per cent), Mexico (58 per cent) and Chile (52 per cent) (OECD 2018).

As Coughlan (2011) sees it, the international HE market is becoming more like international air travel, with ‘trade routes’ of recruitment for the multibillion business of selling HE wrapping themselves around the globe. English-speaking universities
can therefore no longer rely on their central position in the global HE market, but are working very hard to maintain their dominant role in an increasingly challenging 'marketplace'.

As a reaction to the dominance of English-speaking countries, some European states have increased their marketing efforts in countries with which they share historical and linguistic relations (such as France with francophone Africa, Portugal with lusophone Africa and Latin America). Also, to overcome their perceived linguistic disadvantage, some countries previously using languages other than English have changed their medium of instruction for certain degree programmes to English (Forest and Altbach 2006), often very precipitately (Piller and Cho 2013). Change to English as a medium of instruction is especially seen in the Scandinavian and north-west European countries, where the use of English across curricula is increasingly widespread (see Table 1.1).

This book's main empirical focus is on the UK, which, for various reasons discussed below, is a particularly interesting and representative example of a 'mature' market for ISs. Expansion in IS numbers in the UK HE sector over the past four decades has been particularly marked. In 1973, there were 35,000 ISs sojourning in UK universities. By 1992, this number had increased to 95,000 (McNamara and Harris 2002). Currently, well over 700,000 non-UK students are enrolled at UK HEIs (HESA 2017). Overall, the increase in students undertaking full-time postgraduate degrees has been much bigger than the rise in full-time undergraduates, with around 37 per cent of master's students in the UK being 'international' (OECD 2017). Internationally, the picture is much the same, with postgraduate degrees attracting considerably more ISs than bachelor-level degrees. In the OECD area, some 19 per cent of students who graduated with a master's degree or equivalent in 2015 were ISs, compared to only 7 per cent of those who earned a bachelor's degree (OECD 2017). On average, there is more than one IS for every ten enrolled students at master's level, and the proportion of ISs at least doubles between bachelor's and master's levels in two-thirds of OECD countries. After Australia, the UK has the largest increase of ISs at master's level compared to bachelor's level (36 per cent versus 14 per cent) (OECD 2018).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1.1 Countries offering tertiary programmes in English (Source: OECD 2012)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All or nearly all programmes offered in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, UK, USA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Many programmes offered in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Denmark, Finland, Netherlands, Sweden</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some programmes offered in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium (Flemish-speaking), Czech Republic, France, Germany,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary, Iceland, Japan, Korea, Norway, Poland, Portugal,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Slovak Republic, Spain, Switzerland, Turkey</td>
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<tr>
<td>No or nearly no programmes offered in English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria, Belgium (French-speaking), Brazil, Chile, Greece,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Israel, Italy, Luxembourg, Mexico, Russian Federation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The reasons why students come to the UK are similar to those for other predominantly anglophone countries. They include the perceived overall standard and quality of education in the UK, and the English language as a medium of instruction in a variety that is perceived as especially prestigious among many prospective students – 'British' English (e.g. Snodin and Young 2015). Also important is the generally good international reputation of UK education and the presence of well-known universities, often of long historical standing (McNamara and Harris 2002).

ISs make a significant contribution to the UK economy. Recent estimates suggest that, in 2014–15, on- and off-campus spending by ISs and their visitors generated £25.8 billion for the UK economy and supported more than 200,000 full-time jobs (Universities UK 2017). However, recent and apparently ongoing changes in immigration policy to counter perceived abuses of the student visa route place severe constraints on students from outside the European Economic Area (EEA, which includes all EU member states as well as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway and Switzerland). These policy-level changes have triggered a public debate about the effects of politics on UK HE. Uncertainties over the process and outcomes of UK ‘Brexit’ from the European Union mean that it is possible that such constraints will, in future, apply to all ISs, with potentially very serious effects on recruitment.

Despite these threats and uncertainties, the recruitment of ISs to UK universities remains large-scale; the substantial growth in absolute numbers observed above has, however, to some extent, slowed in the past few years. In 2004/5, around 4 per cent of ISs at UK universities came from other EU countries and 9 per cent came from outside the EU. In 2013/14, those numbers were 5.4 per cent and 13.5 per cent, respectively. However, this overall increase masks a fall in student numbers from the EU in 2012/13, with numbers 5.5 per cent lower in 2013/14 compared to 2011/12 (Universities UK 2015). Student enrolments from other EU countries decreased by 4 per cent between 2011/12 and 2015/16, with Ireland showing the largest percentage decrease (HESA 2017). However, non-UK students still constitute 19 per cent of the overall student body in the UK, with almost 70 per cent of students pursuing full-time taught postgraduate degrees. Although China, India, Malaysia and Nigeria were the top four sending countries of ISs to the UK in 2015–16 (HESA 2017), ISs as a whole come from a variety of different countries and thus represent a diverse and heterogeneous group. The participants in our studies, reported in Part II, reflected this multicultural heterogeneity.

In sum, the patterns of IS migration have shown considerable growth and a general flow from economically less developed locations to those in a more advanced state of economic development. Our focus, the UK, has been a major destination for and beneficiary of this flow.

1.3 INTERNATIONALISATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

'Internationalisation' has been framed as the institutional response to this phenomenon of globalising HE (Young et al. 2017). Jane Knight's (2003: 2) definition of
internationalisation has been one of the most frequently cited and, among researchers looking to frame ‘internationalisation’, perhaps the most influential. Knight defined it as ‘the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education’. Within this broad definition, internationalisation encompasses a number of areas of activity, not solely associated with student mobility. These include:

- Recruitment of non-national staff
- The participation of HEIs, staff and students in international exchange programmes (like the Erasmus programme in Europe)
- Participation in internationally focused research
- The development of international ‘branches’ of HEIs
- The growth in the delivery of programmes in ‘international’ languages (predominantly English in recent years) or with an aim or focus of increasing international and/or intercultural understanding
- Attempts to ‘internationalise at home’: that is, to make the linguistic and intercultural benefits of international mobility available to the non-mobile majority of ‘home’ students and staff
- The recruitment of non-national students. (Young et al. 2017; Robson et al. 2017; Schartner and Young 2016).

The internationalisation of HE brings powerful practical and moral implications for universities who receive and host large numbers of ISs. There have been ever-increasing calls among those involved with the enhancement of the quality of the ‘student experience’ to value and promote diversity, and to approach international, multicultural student populations as resources and opportunities rather than as constraints, challenges or problems (e.g. Montgomery 2010). The surge in IS numbers has led to a burgeoning literature on their adjustment and adaptation, and the effects that their presence brings to campuses and classrooms around globe, including in the UK (see Chapter 2, below). An understanding of ISs’ experiences and institutional commitment to students’ needs is paramount if universities are to attract and retain ISs and aid them in their adjustment processes.

How actually to operationalise ‘internationalisation’ is one of the key contemporary debates in HE, both in the mature ‘receiving’ markets of the global North and in the increasingly important non-Northern hubs seeking to challenge their hegemony. Globally, it has become commonplace since 2000 for universities to proclaim their ‘international’ status. However, there has been little, if any, consensus about how this status can be justified, defined and operationalised institutionally (Robson et al. 2017). Internationalisation of HE has been associated with developments such as promoting change and improvement in the quality and relevance of HE programmes for diverse student bodies (Urban and Palmer 2014; Hénard et al. 2012; de Wit et al. 2015), and with enhanced strategic cooperation between HEIs transnationally (EACEA 2016). Such understandings of internationalisation accord with broader national and transnational goals, such as those of the EU strategy for internationalising European HE and the underlying strategic partnerships in the Erasmus+ scheme
(EACEA 2016), and with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Universities Network (AUN 2017). Internationalisation has thus been framed ubiquitously as an important, co-operative, positive and idealistic development, essential to prepare students for a globalised workplace, to strengthen research, and to foster development in an increasingly global knowledge economy (Altbach 2013).

However, in many HEIs, particularly among those in the West and in more longstanding Asian markets such as Japan (MEXT 2014), the strategic emphasis has increasingly shifted to competition, with internationalisation regarded as a means to generate revenue, to enhance national and institutional prestige and global ranking, and to increase the market share of ISs in an increasingly volatile HE landscape (IAU 2012; Seeber et al. 2016; Hazelkorn 2016; van der Wende 2001). A major challenge, which this book addresses directly and critically, will be for those working in international universities to foreground the positive benefits of internationalisation in such an increasingly competitive environment. This requires the political and economic rationales underpinning internationalisation strategies and processes to be approached with integrity (İnan et al. 2014), with greater emphasis placed on the social, cultural and academic goals of HE. Central to this must be prioritising the quality of the ‘international student experience’ in universities purporting to be internationalising entities.

1.4 THE ‘INTERNATIONAL STUDENT EXPERIENCE’ AS AN INTERCULTURAL TRANSITION

In examining the ‘international student experience’, this book draws on two key concepts for its main focus – notions of the intercultural (discussed below) and the idea of transition. The latter is relatively straightforward, the former much less so. To discuss our approach to transition first, we are guided by Meleis’s (2010: 11) definition of a transition for a person as ‘a passage from one fairly stable state to another fairly stable state […] triggered by critical events and changes in individuals or environments’. The move to a new national environment for the purpose of tertiary study is such a critical life event (Ward et al. 2001), which, to some extent, prompts the students’ move from one state (that is, pre-sojourn state) to another (that is, post-arrival adaptation state) – this transition requires adjustments to the new environment by the individual – and, as we will see, also needs some kind of adaptive response from the host institution if this transition is likely to be a successful and positive experience (for examples of the forms this response might take, see Chapter 10).

International postgraduate students are the specific empirical focus for our research (see Part II, below). They present a particularly interesting case, as these students typically go through a ‘triple transition’ (Jindal-Snape and Ingram 2013, Figure 1.1). Firstly, they move to a new country, usually one with which they are less familiar than the one in which they received their primary education. Secondly, they move into an unfamiliar educational system, often one with a high degree of unfamiliarity across a range of academic and sociocultural domains. Thirdly, they move on to a new level of academic study (that is, the postgraduate level), which
generally requires a greater deal of independence, self-reliance and, ultimately, academic achievement relative to undergraduate study. Research indicates that any of these student transitions can lead to adjustment problems such as anxiety, loss of self-esteem and low academic achievement for any student (Jindal-Snape 2010; see also Chapter 2 below), but ISs undertaking postgraduate degrees are confronted with all three transitional processes simultaneously and so are likely to be especially challenged. The very scale and intensity of the adjustments they go through therefore make them particularly worthy of study.

In this book we approach the transitions experienced by ISs as intercultural phenomena, and need to say something here about the nature of our perspectives on ‘culture’ and the intercultural. The need for perspectives in HE internationalisation that take account of intercultural factors is now being frequently raised, by ourselves and others:

What is becoming increasingly clear is that the various manifestations of internationalisation currently operationalised are not in themselves panaceas for institutions seeking to engage positively with the globalizing education ‘market’, and that greater numbers of international students or a higher global institutional ranking do not necessarily reflect a higher degree of beneficial intercultural interaction or education. (Young et al. 2017: 189)

In order to deepen our understanding of the experiences of ISs ‘in transition’, we adopt an inclusive, epistemologically ‘ecumenical’ position in relation to notions of culture and cultural identity. Such an ecumenical position attempts to marry a relatively static, received, ‘culture simple’ stance to issues of intercultural transition
with a more critical, interpretivist ‘culture complex’ approach (Schartner et al. 2019). We develop our ideas about this position below.

Often sitting alongside HEIs’ claims to be ‘international’ entities is a related and equally prominent claim to be working toward the promotion of intercultural dialogue, learning or some variation of ideas of global citizenship, intercultural effectiveness or intercultural competence (Zhu et al. 2017). In calling for a recalibration of institutional aspirations fully aligned with these aspirations, particularly in the global North, Young (2016) calls for a move towards ‘Internationalisation 2.0’, which places intercultural perspectives and intercultural communication at the heart of universities’ institutional goals and activities. He argues that this is not what they have hitherto tended to do, with financial motivations overriding interculturally focused mission statements and publicly declared institutional aims and aspirations. The exact conceptual nature of such intercultural perspectives, and how they are realised in how people communicate and interact across ‘cultural boundaries’, are central concerns of this book and one of its most significant contributions, and are therefore worthy of some focus in this introductory chapter.

Intercultural communication as a field of enquiry is concerned with how people from different backgrounds – backgrounds in some way ‘cultural’ – interact with each other. By ‘cultural’, we mean clusters of commonalities centred around everyday practices, understood with reference to normative attitudes and beliefs negotiated by groups whose interactions are conditioned by particular forms of social organisations (Corbett 2012). A central focus for scholars interested in intercultural communication is how cultural differences are perceived and made relevant through interactions. Also of interest is the impact that such interactions have on group and intergroup relations, and on people’s sense of themselves, their attitudes and their behaviours in culturally unfamiliar situations, and where encountering and interacting with cultural ‘others’ (e.g. Zhu 2016; Young 2016). The recent boom in the study of inter– or cross–cultural communication, in universities and elsewhere, has occurred in tandem with the increased contact between, and perceived need to understand, cultural ‘others’ in the overall context of globalisation. Intercultural competences are increasingly promoted as desirable aspirations and target attributes in a range of academic and training contexts – for example, language education, human resource management, business, teacher education, social work, aid and development, engineering and medicine – and among religious organisations (Deardorff 2009; Zhu et al. 2017). There are also some indications that the study of intercultural communication might help sojourner adjustment and adaptation (Young and Schartner 2014; see below and Chapter 4).

Within the growing field of study that is ‘intercultural communication’, and indeed across the social sciences as a whole, it is possible to discern a continuum running between research influenced by broadly ‘positivist’ epistemologies at one end, and those with a more critical, interpretivist stance at the other. Positivist approaches are rooted in the natural sciences and an objectivist, natural science ontological position. These begin with assumptions that social phenomena and categories like ‘culture’, ‘gender’, ‘ethnicity’ and ‘personality’, which are used in everyday discourse, are isolatable, sufficiently stable to be approachable and researchable, and so ‘real’.
Interpretivist approaches are rooted in constructivist ontologies. These hold that such phenomena and categories should be considered as social constructions formed from the perceptions and actions of social actors (Bryman 2016). At either end of this continuum sit, respectively, approaches to intercultural communication in cross-cultural psychology and the social psychology of language and communication at the positivist end, and epistemologies rooted in postcolonial and critical cultural theory at the interpretivist.

A criticism of an objectivist ontological stance is that individual and cultural identity can tend to be reified – made into an observable entity separate from and independent of social actors (Lukács 2000). They can also be essentialised: that is, approached as located ‘inside’ individuals, a product of cognition rooted in the processes of socialisation. From such a perspective, cultural identity can be approached as a characteristic of a person that tends to be absolute, relatively static and knowable (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). It can foster a tendency, in extreme cases, to equate nationality with cultural predispositions (e.g. Holliday et al. 2004) – with research rooted in assumptions that suggest, or overtly assume, that '(a) Culture = (a) Nation = (an) Independent Variable' (Young 2016). Figures such as Geert Hofstede operate from this stance (for a summary of the approach and associated publications, see Hofstede 2017). They see intercultural communication as influenced by core cultural values, indexical for different nationalities, or for people in countries in geographical proximity. Differences between these value systems can, to some extent, predict differences and associated difficulties between people from different national/cultural backgrounds. Such a stance has been very influential in theory informing practice in international business and human resource management, including, on some evidence, how universities themselves frame and approach ‘international’ students, as discussed below (Zhup et al. 2017).

The critical, interpretivist stance in intercultural studies tends to position itself as directly oppositional to the positivist stance identified above, characterising it as a dominant epistemology that needs to be challenged and, ideally, refuted, for its tendency to cultural simplification, reductionism and stereotyping (Young et al. 2017). It approaches cultural identities as emergent, dynamic, dialogically constructed and multiple. Such a position has been particularly influential in applied linguistics over recent years, and is illustrated in much of the work of scholars such as Claire Kramsch (e.g. 1998) and Adrian Holliday (e.g. 2013), among many others. Holliday (2017: 207) summarises this position in this way:

> It is no longer possible to talk simplistically about cultural differences or what it is like to travel to ‘another culture’ as though it is a solid and boundaried place [...] This opening up results from a postmodern realisation that the concept of culture is socially and ideologically constructed, and a critical cosmopolitan view that culture is open to travel and creative innovation across boundaries.

An interpretivist approach arguably accounts for the observed realities of real-life, real-time intercultural interaction more accurately. It may even be more ethically focused in its explicit rejection of stereotyping and ‘othering’, and so better aligned
with idealistic calls for truly ‘intercultural’ goals for internationalising universities. However, the practical, applied benefits of such an approach are perhaps harder to discern at organisational and institutional levels. This may explain the ongoing influence outside the interpretivist research community of more objectivist perspectives on the intercultural in organisational policy and practice (Young et al. 2017; Zhu et al. 2017).

Our stance in this book, and in much of our recent work, attempts a ‘middle-ground’, ‘ecumenical’ (Atkinson 1999) approach to considerations of the intercultural, which marries the benefits of a positivist approach with those of an interpretivist approach. In doing so, we pick up ideas evident in the work of Michael Byram (1997) and Dwight Atkinson (1999) during the ‘cultural turn’ in applied linguistics in the 1990s. Addressing changing perspectives and priorities in foreign language education, these scholars called for approaches to the intercultural that attempted to take account of both positivist and interpretivist perspectives, getting the best out of both world-views, while acknowledging the strengths and the limitations in both. As Atkinson (1999: 649) puts it, when proposing ways forward for the study of culture in language learning:

I am trying to present a way of looking at the vexed notion of culture ecumenically – of taking into account a wide range of cultural understandings and critiques, and trying to show that they do not necessarily need to be viewed as oppositional or mutually exclusive. To put it more positively, I believe that I am trying to show how concepts that have often been seen as working against each other can work together, and in so doing provide us with more expansive and useful vantage points.

This contention segues with our own position vis-à-vis culture. We see culture as a powerful and pervasive but messy and imprecise concept. It is rooted in people in terms of some kind of individual and social identity, permeable and dynamic but bounded sufficiently for some kind of useful analysis and understandings in relation to external circumstances and social organisations to be carried out. Within these parameters, notions like personality, adjustment and adaptation can be studied both as definable and measurable concepts and processes, and as the contingent, almost infinitely variable natures and experience of individuals. In order to capture a ‘thick’, generalisable picture of the intercultural transitions of ‘international’ students, and one sufficiently fine-grained and individualised to be true to the individual experience in all its myriad richness, we need to try to bring the two perspectives – the positivist and the interpretive – together.

This approach is detailed when we discuss our methodology in detail in Chapter 3, below. For now, it is sufficient to state that to operationalise our ‘ecumenical’ position, we employ a mixed-methods (or ‘multi-strategy’ – Bryman 2001) approach in the studies reported in this book. This combines both quantitative and qualitative research methodologies. The former are usually rooted in positivist epistemologies, the latter in interpretivism. Bringing the two together allows us to augment the strengths of each of these methods, while mitigating the weaknesses. For example,
then, we are able to refer to quantified data on the academic, psychological and sociocultural adaptation of ISIs, and the interrelationships between these different domains, beyond the specific context of study and beyond the particular groups of students who were our participants. We are also able to draw on qualitative interview data that are highly individual-, person- and context-specific with which to deepen our understandings of what particular people are going through more or less while they are going through it, in terms of how they are perceiving and responding to the changed, transitional, circumstances in which they are finding themselves. One dataset converges with, talks to and enriches the other, enabling a multilevel analysis of the complex phenomena we are exploring (Dörnyei 2007). This convergence and corroboration, we contend, can only serve to improve the validity of our research outcomes. It can also help us, we hope, reach a wider audience than a study cleaving closely to one particular paradigmatic stance.

1.5 KEY CONCEPTS AND GLOSSARY

An issue bedevilling studies of ‘internationalisation’ in global HE, and of the ‘international student experience’ – and, indeed, of intercultural ‘transitions’ in general – is a lack of agreement and clarity around the meaning(s) of key concepts and terminology (Matsumoto and Hwang 2013). To end this introductory chapter, we therefore explore, unpack and – where necessary – define concepts and terminology that are important in the presentation of our own and others’ research in these areas.

1.5.1 ADAPTATION AND ADJUSTMENT

Ambiguity surrounds key terms and concepts used to describe the affective, cognitive and behavioural changes experienced by intercultural sojourners (Kim 2001). The determining variable for a successful sojourn abroad is typically conceived in the literature in terms of ‘adjustment’ or ‘adaptation’ to the new environment (Ward et al. 2001), and these notions are employed as the two main conceptual frames of reference in this book. However, there is little consistency in the literature in defining and conceptualising adjustment and adaptation: indeed, many researchers and theoretical frameworks make no clear distinction between the two – often, the terms are used interchangeably (Stanton et al. 2007). For clarity and consistency, we use ‘adjustment’ to refer to the dynamic, interactive processes involved in functioning in the host environment (Anderson 1994), while we use ‘adaptation’ to refer to discernible outcomes of these adaptive processes (Pitts 2005). In this conceptualisation, adjustment is best approached longitudinally as a process that can be explored over time, while adaptation can be viewed as measurable outcomes of the sojourn in areas of high salience to the student sojourner, including academic, psychological and sociocultural aspects.

While much of the literature reported below (Chapter 2) does not make this distinction explicit, it is crucial for this book and the work it reports that we make such a differentiation. We aim to monitor academic, psychological and sociocultural adjustment processes and experiences in and among students over time, but also
measure and attempt to predict outcomes of these (that is, adaptation). In addition, and in accordance with Ward and colleagues (2001), we distinguish ‘psychological’ and ‘sociocultural’ domains of adjustment and adaptation. Moreover, as the students in this study sojourn for the purpose of obtaining a degree, ‘academic’ adjustment and adaptation are also included as a conceptual focal point. The three adjustment domains are further discussed in Chapter 2.

1.5.2 SOJOURNERS

Similar ambiguity surrounds the term ‘sojourner’, which has been used to refer to a range of groups such as refugees, missionaries, diplomats, military and humanitarian aid personnel, and expatriates on overseas assignments, as well as ISs (Ward et al. 2001). For the purpose of our research, we approach the students at the heart of our investigations as voluntary sojourners. They are not, primarily, individuals who might live or seek to live in a new society more or less permanently (as immigrants), but are more like those who undergo intercultural transition as a more temporary state. While some transition experiences might be shared by all sojourners, regardless of the length of their stay abroad, some might be more specific to either long-term or short-term timeframes. It is also the case that some individuals relocate out of necessity (as, for example, refugees or displaced persons), whereas others ‘volunteer’ to relocate for a set amount of time, after which they intend to return to their country of origin or relocate to another country yet again (Ady 1995; Ward et al. 2001; Pitts 2005). The latter assumption is of course not always hard and fast. For example, many ISs remain in their country of choice after completion of their studies to look for work (Ward et al. 2001).

In our research, the term ‘sojourner’ refers to a person who has temporarily relocated to a territory outside of her or his country of origin for an extended period of time and for a specific purpose, such as obtaining a university degree (Ward et al. 2001; Pitts 2005). It is important to note that what distinguishes sojourners from tourists or travellers is that the length and nature of their stay abroad usually demand a certain degree of immersion and adjustment beyond that that might be needed by a visitor (Martin and Harrell 1996; Ward et al. 2001). For example, ISs need to adjust to differences in the education system in order to be successful academically (Zhou and Todman 2009). As we detail in our Conclusion, the HEIs operating within these education systems also need to adjust if they are to help ISs through this complex process.

1.5.3 INTERNATIONAL AND HOME STUDENTS

Although it is important to acknowledge that ISs represent a diverse and heterogeneous set of people, they do nevertheless share some common characteristics and circumstances that allow them to be identified as a group (Misra and Castillo 2004; see Chapter 2 below). Various terms have been used to refer to this sojourner group, including ‘international students’, ‘foreign students’ and ‘overseas students’. All these terms commonly describe individuals who leave their countries of origin to
undertake tertiary study abroad. However, it is important to distinguish between those students who relocate to obtain a degree and those who travel abroad as exchange students for a more limited period and who, without obtaining a degree from the ‘foreign’ university, instead return to their universities of origin to complete their degrees (Pitts 2005). The experiences of these two groups might differ quite substantially, particularly in terms of academic demands. In this book, the term ‘international students’ refers to individuals who have left their country of origin for the purpose of study and are now pursuing tertiary education in a different country: that is, they are enrolled in HE programmes outside of the country where they have received their prior education (OECD 2012). Our specific research focus, as noted above, is on postgraduate students who are undertaking a full programme of study abroad.

Who exactly is considered an ‘international’ student may vary from country to country for legal or tuition fee purposes (Gürüz 2008). ISs have previously been defined as non-citizens of the country in which they study; however, this definition is now widely regarded as inappropriate, as it includes permanent residents as a result of immigration and can therefore lead to an overestimation of IS numbers (OECD 2010). In the UK, at the time of writing, students from EU member states are counted as ‘international’ in the national statistics (cf. UKCISA 2018), while they are classed as ‘home’ students for tuition fee purposes and therefore pay the same rate as UK students. Students from EEA member states, such as Iceland, Liechtenstein, Switzerland and Norway, are in an intermediate position, as they currently pay the higher ‘international’ fees but do not need to obtain a visa to live or study in the UK. These terminologies and designations are likely to change as a result of the negotiations currently under way to secure the UK’s exit from the EU.

For simplicity, in our research, the terms ‘non-UK students’ and ‘ISs’ are used interchangeably throughout to refer to all students who have relocated to the UK to study. We also specifically refer to ‘international postgraduate students’, as those that have relocated abroad for one year or more to complete a master’s or doctoral degree, to distinguish this group from undergraduate students.

These groups contrast with ‘home’ students. A range of terms are commonly used to refer to students who are attending university in the country where they have previously been educated (Carroll and Ryan 2005). This includes ‘home students’, ‘domestic students’, ‘host (country) students’ and ‘local students’. In this study, these terms will be used synonymously to refer to students who have spent their formative years in the country of their citizenship and are now enrolled at a university in that country, with the intention of securing a degree there. The distinction between ‘international’ and ‘home’ students is, in many ways, blurred, with some home students exhibiting traits that might be considered more characteristic of ISs (for example, using English as a second language) and vice versa (Harrison and Peacock 2008). Nevertheless, as we shall see, there are characteristics of ISs that make their experiences sufficiently distinctive to be able to approach them as a distinct category, while acknowledging that there is no single, unitary ‘international student experience’.
1.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter we have outlined the aims, structure and conceptual, empirical and methodological scope of this book. We have also explored the context for our research focus – IS mobility and its effects on those undertaking it. We have critically examined the nature of ‘internationalisation’ in HE, and how it is framed and approached by governments and institutions as a response to student mobility. We have explained how the ‘international student experience’ can be conceptualised and studied as an intercultural transition and, in doing so, unpacked notions of ‘culture’ and ‘the intercultural’ in relation to our work and more broadly. A major contribution of our work, we have argued, is how an ‘ecumenical’ position on culture and the intercultural can be framed and operationalised in examining the phenomena of internationally mobile students’ adjustment and adaptation: that is, the process and outcomes of their individual intercultural transitions. Relatedly, we have defined, critically examined and unpacked key concepts such as adjustment, adaptation, sojourning and sojourners in order to frame our approach and to understand better the effects of mobility on individuals undertaking study abroad.

In the following chapter we critically review and consolidate recent research on the ‘international student experience’ in the fields of intercultural communication, education and applied linguistics. We discuss and integrate findings from both quantitative and qualitative studies on IS adjustment and adaptation, detailing contributory factors identified in the literature.

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INTRODUCTION


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