

An ethnographic study of the friendship patterns of international students in England: an attempt to recreate home through conational interaction

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## **Abstract**

This paper reports findings from an ethnographic study into the adjustment experience of a group of postgraduate international students at a university in the South of England. Friendship emerged as a major theme in this study; of particular importance to students was the desire and need to mix with conational friends. This desire was driven by the urge to obtain the comfort offered by shared language, shared heritage and access to instrumental support. It was also informed by fear of discrimination and compounded by an absence of host contact which was a source of deep disillusionment for students. The negative impact of segregated friendship groups on the improvement of linguistic and cultural knowledge was understood, but only a handful of students broke away from the confines of the monoethnic ghetto.

## **Key words**

Friendship  
Shared culture

segregation  
instrumental support

shared language  
restricting cultural learning

## 1. Introduction

Increased numbers of international students in British HE and intensified competition for their recruitment both nationally and internationally have put pressure on institutions to improve their product and to develop internationalisation strategies in order to attract international students and to provide an environment in which domestic and international students can benefit from their confrontation with diversity. Internationalisation strategies take many forms but a common aim is to foster an environment in which cultural awareness can grow in both the international and domestic student communities. The international sojourn, defined by Ward et al. (2001) as temporary between-culture contact, is often imbued with the power to transform individuals into intercultural mediators who learn to grow beyond the psychological parameters of the origin culture (Bochner 1981; Gudykunst 1983; McLeod 1981; Taft 1981). Such a mindset is connected by many writers to enhanced employability (see Cushner & Karim 2004) as well as improved prospects for world peace (Gudykunst 1998). Studies suggest that for international students, increased contact with the host culture is linked positively to improved language capability, increased satisfaction with the total student experience and greater host communicative competence (Bochner, McLeod & Lin 1977; di Marco 1974; Furnham & Erdmann, 1995; Gudykunst 1998; Kim 1988; Klineberg & Hull 1979; Kramsch 1993; Pellegrino Avenis 2005; Searle & Ward 1990; Toyokawa & Toyokawa 2002; Ward, Bochner & Furnham 2001; Ward & Kennedy 1992, 1993; Ward & Rana-Deuba 1999).

Meanwhile, it is often argued that for domestic students, studying and living on a multi-cultural campus promises the development of cross cultural competence that will lead to personal growth, improved career prospects and greater social cohesion both locally and globally (Gudykunst 1998; Huntingdon 1997; de Wit 1995). The benefits of intercultural contact are therefore not only accessible by international students but also by domestic students who can increase their intercultural skills without even leaving home (de Wit 1995). However, this is clearly predicated on the extent to which interaction between international and home students takes place.

Friendship has long been noted as a major contributor to emotional well-being and sojourner adjustment (Dyal & Dyal 1981; Hamburg & Adams 1967; Kim 1988; Owie 1982; Ward et al. 2001; Wisemann 1997): the interaction patterns of international students have therefore been the focus of much research. Despite claims for the benefits of internationalisation at policy level, most studies have observed a lack of integration between student groups (Killick 2007; Leask 2007; Peacock & Brown 2007), lending weight to Ward's (2001) claim that the benefits of the international campus are hypothesised and empirically untested. As de Vita (2005, p. 75) states, "the ideal of transforming a culturally diverse student population into a valued resource for activating processes of international connectivity, social cohesion and intercultural learning is still very much that, an ideal." To international student dissatisfaction, a low incidence of bonds between international and local students has been long and widely documented (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan 1991; Bochner et al. 1977; Cushner & Karim 2004; De Vita 2005; Furnham & Tresize, 1983; Klineberg & Hull 1979; Leask 2007; Peacock & Brown 2007; Pruitt 1978; Richardson 1991; Rogers & Smith 1992; UKCOSA 2004; Ward et al. 2000; Ward 2005). Thus international students are denied the optimal route to improving language and host cultural knowledge (Ward et al. 2001; Kim 1988).

Instead, the most common friendship group noted in studies of interaction patterns is the monocultural bond; a ghetto pattern is usually observed by researchers (Bauman 1999; Bochner 1986; Bochner et al. 1977; Dyal & Dyal 1981; Esack 1993; Furnham & Alibhai 1985; Furnham & Bochner 1986; Leask 2007; Sodowski & Plake 1992; Ryan 2005): the willingness to leave the confines of the monoethnic group is a rare phenomenon (Berry 1994; Gudykunst 1998; Ward & Chang 1997). It is acknowledged that friendships with compatriots, also referred to by Ward et al. (2001) as conational friends, serve an important function in diminishing loneliness and stress but they are also accredited with decreased intercultural interaction and diminished language progress (Bochner et al. 1977; Bochner, Hutnik & Furnham 1985; Furnham & Erdman 1995; Kim 1988; Klineberg 1981; Sykes & Eden 1985; Yang & Clum 1995; Ward & Rana-Deuba 1999; Ward 2001; Wiseman, 1997:). In their typology of friendship, which is still used to this day, Bochner et al. (1977) describe the bicultural bond as the most important link as the host national friend acts as a cultural informant, whereas segregated friendship groups act to obstruct host culture learning by entrenching sojourners' attachment to the origin culture.

The interaction strategies identified in the adjustment literature point to the consequences of the friendship patterns chosen by or forced upon sojourners. Five strategies can be identified:

- The sojourner may remain *monocultural*, clinging to their own culture. This is the segregation approach, which implies an absence of substantial relations with the larger society, along with maintenance of ethnic identity, heritage and traditions; this may be imposed by the dominant group or may be sought by the acculturating group (Berry 1994; Piontkowski, Florack, Helker & Obdrzalek 2000). This is described by Bochner (1981) as exaggerated chauvinism. When segregation is pursued, the implicit reaffirmation of heritage behaviour may lead to conflict between the needs and expectations of mainstream society and the individual (Schmitz 1994).
- The sojourner may become *assimilationist*, rejecting many or all aspects of their own culture and replacing it with the new one. The assimilation approach involves relinquishing cultural identity and moving into the larger society by way of absorption of a non-dominant group into an established dominant group (Piontkowski et al. 2000; Schmitz 1994). If an assimilation strategy is pursued, substantial behavioural change occurs (Berry 1994), as minorities are fully integrated into the dominant culture (Martin & Harrell 2004). Bochner (1981) argues that this is incompatible with the desired outcome of adjustment, that of a multicultural society, indeed, according to Furnham (1993), it implies cultural chauvinism on the part of the host, which has made it necessary for the sojourner to abandon the culture of origin.
- The sojourner may become *bicultural*, retaining their own and learning a new culture. This is the integration approach, which implies the maintenance of some cultural identity as well as movement to become an integral part of a larger societal framework, with a number of distinguishable ethnic groups cooperating within a larger social system and sharing common goals (Berry 1994; Piontkowski et al. 2000). Honeyford (1988) uses the term harmonious integration to refer to a situation whereby people maintain their original culture privately but assent to overriding principles common to all citizens. Ward & Rana-

Deuba's study (1999) indicates that integration is associated with the lowest levels of acculturative stress, given that change on the part of the incoming group reduces conflict and increases the confluence or fit between the environment and the individual.

- The sojourner may become *marginalised*, renouncing their own heritage and refusing a relationship with the dominant group. This involves feelings of alienation and loss of identity, as groups lose cultural psychological contact with both their traditional culture and the larger society (Piontkowski et al. 2000), through forced exclusion or voluntary withdrawal (Berry 1994). Though the dominant group usually dictates whether the outsider is allowed to form relationships with the host (Berry 1994), some sojourners voluntarily withdraw from the dominant culture if the experience of adjustment is too difficult (Storti 1990).
- The sojourner may become *multicultural*, retaining their own and learning several other cultures. Indeed, this is the acculturation strategy advocated by many writers (e.g. Bochner 1981; Furnham & Bochner 1986; Gudykunst 1998; Ward et al. 2001): only the mediating response provides a real framework for acquiring multicultural attitudes, skills and self-perceptions, providing the basis for a pluralistic society in which different groups retain their basic ethnic identity, practices, beliefs and language, while being united within an umbrella framework of national allegiance and having equal access to power and economic and political resources (Gilroy 2007; Kim 2001). According to Furnham (1993) and Martin & Harrell (2004), the multicultural approach avoids the ethnocentric trap of advocating the abandonment of the first culture. As Gilroy (2007) observes, assimilation to the host culture is not the appropriate response to all domains of life in the new society.

The models of attitudes towards adjustment put forward by Berry & Kim (1988), Schmitz (1994) and Ward et al. (2001) pose two questions, answers to which can be used as a predictive framework for determining sojourners' strategies: is it considered to be of value to maintain one's cultural identity and characteristics; is it considered to be of value to maintain relationships with other groups? The strategies associated with the maximisation of the positive outcomes of culture contact are multiculturalism, assimilation or integration (Berry 1994; Ward & Rana-Deuba 1999), but the multicultural approach is widely agreed to be the most relevant to contemporary society, given the implied fostering of the values of tolerance, cultural relativism and respect.

However, as noted previously, most studies of the international sojourn note an absence of host contact and a segregation approach to friendship in the international student community. This paper also documents a tendency towards mononational interaction; it is with the phenomenon of segregated friendship groups that this paper is concerned. Findings are drawn from a year-long ethnographic study of the adjustment experience of a 150-strong cohort of international postgraduates at a university in the south of England. Friendship emerged as a major theme in this research, its importance noted in every interview conducted with students, and its influence stretching into every area of academic and social life.

## 2. Methodology

The aim of the doctoral study from which this paper's findings are taken was to obtain the insider perspective on the adjustment process, an aim best fulfilled by the ethnographic approach which offered the opportunity to study students in the natural setting over a long period using the twin methods of participant observation and in-depth interviews that characterize ethnography (Fetterman 1998). The setting chosen for this research was the Graduate School at a university in the south of England, as the researcher works there as a lecturer in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and is already 'in the field'; she had direct access to students and ample opportunity for observation in an overt participant role. She did not mark students' work and had no input in assessment, and this was important when considering ethical issues. Of the 150 postgraduate international students in the School, the majority were from South East Asia, reflecting the most common source of international students for UK universities (UKCOSA 2006); around a third were from Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

Ethical approval to undertake this study was sought from the university's Research Ethics Committee, and informed consent was obtained to observe and record observations on a daily basis; all students were assured of confidentiality and anonymity. In addition, thirteen students from thirteen different nations volunteered to be interviewed at regular intervals over a 12 month academic year (each pre-arranged, tape-recorded interview normally lasted two hours). Although no individual can represent an entire culture, culture clearly has a defining impact on an individual's make-up (Hofstede 1991), meaning that there would be access to experience of the sojourn from many different perspectives. These interviews were complemented and enriched by the many conversations that took place outside these formally arranged times. Ethnography is initially inductive (Fetterman 1998), therefore the first interview with students was informal and unstructured, and as advised by Spradley (1979), grand tour questions were used to stimulate conversation. Subsequent interviews were guided by the topics and concepts that had emerged in previous interviews, indeed new ideas and themes emerged throughout the academic year.

The decision to study an institution at a particular time is significant. Students have particularly intense emotional experiences at the start of term when they would be attempting to adapt not only to a new sociocultural environment but also to unfamiliar academic situations. Thus both interviews and observations started at the beginning of the year, countering the criticism often made of studies of adjustment, that they are hampered by sojourners' retrospective accounts (Church 1982; Ward 2001). Data collection was completed at the end of the academic year, which meant that their total academic experience was captured.

In addition to formal interviewing, participant observation was conducted throughout the year, so that the experience of the whole cohort of 150 students was taken into account. Being a participant observer involves not only watching a scene but also participating in it and recording events and conversations as they occur (Hammersley & Atkinson 1995). Examples of observation sites included: the classroom, the corridor, the library, the coffee bar, the canteen, the office, induction, social events organised by the School or University and by students themselves.

After the first interviews had been conducted in the first weeks of term and observation had begun, preliminary analysis, involving coding field and interview data, was carried out. Coding

meant reading through notes and repeatedly listening to tapes and reading transcripts until themes or categories began to emerge, as certain phrases events, activities, ideas etc occurred repeatedly in the text. Transcripts, field notes and email correspondence were scrutinised, and recurring topics were highlighted to be followed up in further interviews. The major themes of this doctoral study were: language difficulties, academic challenges, social interaction, identity, food habits and changes in the self. Interaction was the most important research category, and it overlapped every other category of research.

With regard to the generalisability of findings, it is acknowledged that a small interviewee sample and the selection of one case will make it difficult to move to general classifications. Nevertheless, ethnographers often feel that similar settings are likely to produce similar data, and that theory-based generalisation can be achieved, involving the transfer of theoretical concepts found from one situation to other settings and conditions (Daymon & Holloway 2002). The setting for this research was chosen for the researcher's ability to transfer the findings to similar settings, i.e. Higher Education institutions in the UK that recruit international postgraduate students, and also to similar actors, i.e. international postgraduates on a one-year intensive Masters programme. It is possible to infer that such students may well face a similar experience to students in this study, with modifications according to differing external circumstances and personality differences. The review of the literature on adjustment reflects many of this study's findings, and point to a common experience among international sojourners. The present paper aims to convey the insider experience of this commonly documented picture.

### **3. Seeking out conational friends**

In this ethnography, conational friendship networks were established within days of students' arrival. The phenomenon of conational interaction that has been well documented by writers on the international student sojourn, from Bochner et al. (1977) to Ward (2001) is confirmed in this research; however, the speed of its establishment was surprising. As explained by the Indonesian interviewee, there was a clash between the need and desire to practise spoken English and the panic created by immersion in a new culture:

*I think in the first week we always together with Indonesian, so all speak a lot of Indonesian. That's not good. We need to practise English more, but we need to be together.*

Conational interaction was observed in class and in common areas such as the canteen and coffee bar. It also extended beyond the university setting; the Korean interviewee commented that all her social activities outside the university revolved around the Korean community, and this was typical of most students:

*We have social meetings with Korean community, we have party. Every Sunday, we make a Korean meal. We take in turns cooking, and we eat all together.*

Such dependence on the conational group was universally noted, however, as an inevitable and regrettable consequence of transition:

*Well, you know, people come from the same country, they will stay together. Especially the Chinese students, actually that's not very good.* Chinese interviewee

*I think it's not so good to mix with the Chinese a lot of time, but it's necessary.*  
Taiwanese interviewee

Gravitation towards compatriots occurred despite universal acknowledgement of the implicit disadvantages; it seemed that students felt unable to resist the pull towards the reassurance of sameness in a diverse community. Where there were pockets of same nationality members, the phenomenon of conational interaction could be observed, and it was particularly entrenched in the South East Asian cohort whose urge to form a primary network of mono-national bonds is said to relate to their socialisation in a collectivist culture that enjoys the company of an extended family (Hofstede 1991). It was unsurprising then that SE Asian students were perceived to be close to the point of exclusivity, even among those students who themselves had formed conational bonds:

*They are very close to each other, they stay with each other, you know the Thai, the Chinese, the Koreans; you always find them together in small groups. So it's difficult to get in this group, they always speaking their own language. And if they leave each other for one day, they feel 'oh my god!'* Jordanian interviewee

Outsiders perceived an intimacy among South East Asian students that encouraged overdependence and discouraged approach: the external view of such unity was usually disparaging. The perception of impenetrability and dependence was apt: according to Wheeler, Reis & Bond (1989), a central theme of collectivist culture is self-definition as part of a cohesive and impenetrable ingroup that provides support and protection in exchange for loyalty. However, it was clear that there was a continuum between multinational and conational interaction, and student opinion on the acceptable level of the latter varied among those from individualist and collectivist cultures alike. If there was a hierarchy of intransigence, Thai students were seen to be the most entrenched and the most unapproachable:

*I would say Thai students will stick together too. Even thicker. Because the Thai students usually come to the class in groups, I don't. I can sit where I like.*

Chinese interviewee

*Thai students don't mix. I didn't know that before. I don't really know them.*

Slovenian interviewee

Withdrawal in the face of inaccessibility was the common response to Thai segregation, with negative implications for the development of understanding between the Thai and non-Thai cohorts. These statements represent the common view of the Thai cohort, and alert us to cross-

national differences among collectivist cultures: Hofstede's cultural dimensions can be used to identify broad cultural features, but it is important to remember that countries will vary in their rating in each dimension, and that there are important individual and regional variations within one country. Furthermore, it is necessary to acknowledge that Hofstede's dimensions are dated and are not without their critics.

### *3.1 Needing to use the native tongue*

Students' explanation for the widespread phenomenon of conational interaction identified linguistic ease as an important factor: speaking the native language was a mobilising force, providing a physical break from the stress of communicating in a foreign language as well as an emotionally comforting reminder of home. This explains the feeling of relief that met the sound of the native language, reminding the researcher of Kramsch's (1993) likening of native tongue use to a return to paradise.

Interview 1 showed a unanimous desire to use host contact to improve English language ability, vindicating and supporting a correlation that features in all models of adjustment. Understanding of the importance of host contact is shown below:

*I am living with 2 English guys, they are very friendly, and I can practise my English with them. When I just came here I felt a little bit difficult to understand what they said but now it is much better.*  
Chinese student

*Speaking still, I have lots of problems. If I had English friend, I'm sure it was better.*  
Iranian interviewee

*I want to practise my English all the time. For me the important thing is language.*  
Indonesian interviewee

However, by Interview 2, it became clear that host contact was limited: English was spoken mostly with other nationalities, and this was seen as a very poor second best. Students often claimed that their language ability had deteriorated after one year of speaking with other poorly speaking international students; they felt that it could only have improved by speaking with English people. The absence of British friends was a serious handicap for those wishing to improve their language; nevertheless, students were aware that it was important to operate in English, albeit with other non-native speakers; a link was made between conational interaction and deterioration in language:

*Sometimes I feel if I had a Jordanian friend it would be easier for me, but on the other hand I can see it's really useful for me to improve my English and to be confident to know yeah, I can manage. If I always speak in my own language, my vocabulary would be maybe the same or lower. Maybe the Arabic students would help me if I missed a lecture, but maybe my English would be the same, so what's the point?*  
Jordanian interviewee

*It's getting worse because I speak Thai all the time, every day I meet all the Thais.*  
Thai interviewee

However, most students chose to speak in their native language with compatriots, describing despair over their poor speaking skills as an inhibiting force:

*I need to speak English. But my English is not so good. Always I feel difficulties in talking about the native speakers and I want to improve my English, but I'm so shy.* Korean interviewee

*I would like to mix with many nationalities but sometimes feel so shy because of my language.* Chinese student

Shame and the desire to avoid anxiety inspired the retreat from English-speaking scenarios into the comfort of the monoethnic ghetto. Ward & Rana-Deuba (1999) describe this as a common phenomenon among migrants and sojourners, which can be understood by referring to Goffman's (1972) description of communication breakdown as a disruptive event that causes confusion, discomfort and embarrassment for all parties. Defensive practices are a common reaction to such episodes, their aim being to avoid 'discrediting occurrences'. As Pellegrino Aveni (2005) points out in her work on language use and its implications for the self, poor linguistic ability undermines effective self-presentation, and can lead to avoidance of the host language.

The fatigue imposed by speaking in a foreign language was also cited as a reason for speaking the mother tongue, as the Taiwanese interviewee explained:

*When I with my friend, we speak in Chinese because we need to take a rest. It's a relief because we need to use a lot of words to express our thinking, it's a release.*

Self-expression was only truly possible in the native language: speaking in English was not only difficult; it was also alienating. The frequent use of words such as *relief, easy, familiar, cosy, home, relaxing* and *nice*, painted a vivid picture of the contrast between the discomfort of operating in English and the guilty pleasure of using the native language. Language and home were especially interlinked; indeed, recreating a sense of home is, according to Kim (1988), the most intrinsic and lasting function of ethnic social communication. Baumann's (1999) concept of *home* in his work on identity is relevant to ethnic language use: home is inside, 'it is a space where one seldom, if at all, finds oneself at a loss, feels lost for words, or uncertain how to act.' (p. xxiii). Conversely, being outside, or in this case speaking the host language, is a place people tend to avoid; it involves feeling out of place and out of one's element, inviting trouble and fearing harm. In more recent work, Block (2007) argues that identity is a key issue for second language learners, and calls for dedicated research on the role of identity in foreign language use.

As Edwards (1994) argues, language is the pillar of groupness; it is crucial to understanding issues of identity and belonging (Gumperz & Cook-Gumperz 1982). Giving up this link with home was not to be brooked: this was reflected in students' dogged attachment to speaking the native language despite awareness of the negative implications for English language development. The urge for comfort and belonging meant that over the course of the year the patterns of language spoken within the first few months were maintained, with students mixing mostly in conational groups and speaking their own language. This study corroborates theories that highlight the role of anxiety-management in the development of linguistic competence in the cross-cultural setting (see Gudykunst & Nishida 2001; Stephan & Stephan 1992; Wilder & Shapiro 1989), as those few students who overcame their nervousness and plunged into English-speaking situations made the most linguistic progress; however the need for the succour brought by speaking the mother tongue must also be taken into account when trying to understand attachment to the mononational group.

### 3.2 *Sharing the same culture*

Also identified by students as an important factor in understanding the gravitation towards compatriots was their assumption of mutual understanding:

*Sometimes it's more comfortable. You can communicate because you know each other. You know what they think.* Thai interviewee

*I come from a different culture, and I like to do different things. One of my flatmate is from China and the other is from India. The Indian girl has an Indian boy next door, so they stay together, I and my friend stay together. I think there is some reason related to the culture, that's the fact. We know each other better.*

Chinese interviewee

According to Arora (2005), an ethnic group is described as a group of people who are aware that they share a common cultural heritage, which in this instance referred to shared nationality: a sense of intimacy was created by the assumption of sameness, of known-ness: perhaps this contrasted a setting of often unnerving diversity. It can be inferred that exposure to difference drove students to find belonging with a group of previously unknown and disparate individuals. Often puzzled by the strength of their attachment to the conational group, students tried to identify specific aspects of their heritage that could explain their inclination towards compatriots: food, language, sense of humour, music and football were often mentioned, but the overriding consensus was that the binding tie was the feeling of oneness generated by shared national culture. An associated alleviation of homesickness was also important, as the Indonesian interviewee indicated:

*This is very helpful that I met Indonesian because you know I can speak more intense with them, I mean, compared with another nationality, because maybe we have the same homesick feeling. And because we are from Indonesia so we are more closer. Sometimes we miss our country so if we met another Indonesian it's helpful.*

Home was recaptured through interaction with compatriots, as reflected in the recurrence of the

words *family* and *home* to describe the conational group they had formed. Time spent with the 'family' varied, with some students sticking close to their 'siblings' and others using the conational group regularly but not exclusively, seeing it as a resource to use when they wanted to access the comfort of home:

*All my Indonesian friends live in the same flat! That's why I always go there, if I want to meet my Indonesian friends. When I think of home, that is where I go.*

Indonesian interviewee

Combating homesickness did not take the form of trying to forget home; rather, compatriots were seen as a vehicle for remembering and recreating what was missing. The importance of shared nationality derived perhaps from students' distance from home: as Ward et al. (2001) point out, patriotism is heightened during transition. This was most evident during times of national festival in the home country:

*In England, I've got to know two Jordanian students who are my friends, but both of them are Christians. I asked them to come to celebrate Ramadan. I cooked some typical Jordanian food and we celebrate together. It's like home for them. Yeah, we are like family.*

Jordanian interviewee

Nationality rather than religion was the unifying bond in this instance: the shifting of ethnic ties was a notable phenomenon in this study in which homesickness meant that national, cultural and religious bonds were all important in recreating family and home. The urge to find coherence in chaos informed both the drive to identify points of similarity and the changing priority of such similarity: finding belonging was paramount, offering relief from the existential anxiety that transition could bring.

### *3.3 Offering instrumental support*

Access to practical support in everyday life was the final explanation for the formation of conational groups, as the following typical comments reveal:

*I can talk to somebody when I have some problem, and they can give some advice. We Chinese students can have to depend on each other, we can share our knowledge, and maybe we will be less alone.*

Taiwanese interviewee

*It's better to stay with people from your home country. Yes. For living in the UK, they can give tips for me. 'Where shall I do the shopping? Which shop is the cheapest? How do they think the local people? What should I learn about the university?' There is very much information I can get. Always they are ready to help me, it feels very comforting.*

Chinese interviewee

*I met many good friends from China...I can adapt quickly.*

Chinese student

Mutual assistance, including the pooling of information, alleviated adjustment problems in the early weeks. This had positive consequences for emotional well-being as it helped to diminish loneliness and to offset disorientation. It is for this reason that Bochner et al. (1977) advise those dealing with international students not to 'sneer at' or obstruct conational bonds. Solidarity during a time of upheaval is reflected in the recurring use of the words *together*, *share* and *depend* in students' reference to their support network and to the implicit access to instrumental support which allowed them to feel supported both practically and emotionally. Dependability was all-important; this source of stability was a powerfully reassuring antidote to the stressors involved in transition:

*I think I should know them, as whenever I got a problem or they got a problem, I still have a friend, and they still have me.*  
Thai interviewee

*I just call if I need something or if they need something they just call; we feel the same.*  
Indonesian interviewee

*These declarations of loyalty were explained by reference to cultural differences between the collectivist East and the individualist West, and student interpretations are supported by theory. According to Wheeler et al. (1989), interdependence is correlated with collectivist culture, in which group needs are prioritised over personal interests. This is reflected in the prevalent use of the pronoun 'we', which students themselves commented on. According to Gudykunst (1998), this personal pronoun is symbolic of the collectivist's affiliation to the group rather than the individual. It can be inferred that students were driven to create interdependent relationships by the need to replicate the comforting reliability of group membership associated with home. The popular image of an unhelpful host community did little to encourage departure from the conational cocoon, as the Chinese interviewee explains:*

*When you turn to local people with a problem, they might seem so nice, but they don't help you, so finally it's the Chinese students who can offer you help. You don't know that?*

It seems that segregation was a tool of survival in a new culture that was widely perceived to be unforthcoming. However, this perception could be understood as a result of a clash of cultures: the tendency towards self-reliance in an individualist society contrasts with the need for direction and support that is typical of a country high in collectivism. Divergence in the approach to responsibility and autonomy reflects diverse cultural norms, and influences styles of relating. The image of an unsupportive host community might therefore be a function of cultural difference; having said that, students' perception might be an accurate picture of what is often described as an increasingly individualist society (see Bennett 2001; Hofstede 2001).

#### **4. Feeling constrained by the conational network**

The contribution made by conational interaction to emotional well-being has been acknowledged thus far. However, it came at the cost of the associated erection of barriers to intercultural contact.

A common complaint was that students felt they had not left home; that life in England was too similar to that in the origin culture, so great was their exposure to compatriots:

*At first, I thought it was good to be with Chinese, but not now. Why come here to stay all the time with Chinese?*  
Chinese student

*It's good to have some Thai friends, but you don't speak English. I feel I'm in Thailand still.*  
Thai interviewee

Ghettos had formed, and they felt inescapable. Deviance was represented by only a few exceptional students, such as a Taiwanese student whose awareness of the negative link between segregation and language ability drove him to break away from the confines of the conational group:

*X said that he is here to mix with the British or other nationalities, not speak his mother tongue, so he avoids such contact if possible. He said that the rest of his Chinese class mates don't like him, because he doesn't hang around with them. But he cannot see the point of being in England and speaking Chinese.*

Perhaps the avoidance of contact with compatriots posed a challenge to the group's cohesiveness, provoking their censure. According to Triandis, Bontempo & Villareal (1988), those from a collectivist culture view avoidance of the in-group as selfish, and will impose sanctions for deviant, non-conformist behaviour. Conformity pressure usually derives from the host environment (Zajonc 1952), but in this context, it derived from students' own ethnic groups. The desire to escape the confines of the ghetto was outweighed by fear of negative judgement as well as retribution upon re-entry: future consequences of present actions could not be overlooked. This was explained by the Thai interviewee:

*If I broke with them much, they would not like it. In this society, it isn't good to make yourself separate. They might look at you as strange or something like that. One day I have to go back and I have to meet them eventually so it's quite bad. 'Oh when you were at UK, you pretend that you don't know me' or something like that. You cannot...I think it's quite sensitive.*

Students were well aware that their sojourn in a culture with different values was only temporary; thus conformity pressure derived from a faraway culture to which they were set to return. This is an important finding: whilst the detrimental effect of conational friendships for intercultural contact has been well documented, the internal pressure on students who seek out and yet resist the demands of the ingroup has not been so widely acknowledged.

Reactions to conformity pressure are dictated, according to Triandis, Leung, Villareal & Clack (1985), by personality differences in the dimension of allocentrism/idiocentrism, the personality equivalent of the collectivism/individualism dimension. General cultural patterns are modified by individual differences so that allocentric people in collectivist cultures feel positive about accepting in-group norms and do not challenge the unstated assumptions of the culture, whereas idiocentric people feel ambivalent and even bitter about accepting in-group norms. Indeed, the

manifestation of resentment of conformity pressure ranged among students from complete withdrawal from the group, to complete segregation and to the multicultural approach. Intermittent reliance on her compatriots meant that the Indonesian interviewee trod a thin line between conformity and wider cross-national interaction, disguising from her compatriots both the extent of her social life with non-Indonesians as well as her dislike of their chauvinistic segregation approach:

*I think there are thirty or more Indonesian this year but only three of us who don't want to mix a lot. They always stick together. Sometimes it's good, but sometimes you want to run from them. Sometimes they make joke, 'ah you never come with us'. But I don't want to be tied! I have the whole of the rest of my life to be with them!*

It might be pertinent to wonder whether the Indonesian friendship group was more tolerant of deviance than the Thai: the Thai interviewee's fear of being ostracised, along with the view that the Thai group was the most segregated, suggest this could be true. On the other hand, personality differences might account for students' varying reactions to demands placed on them by their compatriots.

## **5. Conclusion**

The literature on the international sojourn points to a tendency towards ghettoisation in student interaction patterns: this trend was also noted in this study, particularly among South East Asian students. Students cited ease of communication and instrumental support as the main reasons for choosing this interaction strategy, which simultaneously implied minimum exposure to culture and language learning. Individual motivation to optimise the benefits of the intercultural experience and to tolerate the anxiety inherent in the cross-national context was found to be the key factor in the adoption of a multicultural attitude towards interaction and in the cultivation of multicultural skills. This was the route exceptionally chosen, as only a few students broke away from or reduced interaction with conational friends. It is widely claimed that the international sojourn carries the power to produce the intercultural mediator, but this study found that this potential was fulfilled by only a handful of exceptionally motivated students. The multicultural response to the mixed-nationality setting was rare, leading the researcher to observe a failure of the international campus to realise the benefits of cross-cultural contact, and to question the common claim that globalisation and increased cross-cultural contact will lead to a gradual homogenisation of cultural identity. Gudykunst & Nishida (2001) argue that communicative effectiveness is a function of the ability to tolerate anxiety: people tend to have negative expectations of interacting with strangers, with whom there is greater uncertainty in interactions than with people from their in-groups; meanwhile, cultural identification grows in proportion to increases in communication difficulties. It is time that Higher Education Institutions took some responsibility for encouraging students to maximise the opportunity for growth that the international campus offers. The transformative potential of the international sojourn and of cross-cultural contact will only be realised if cross-cultural interaction actually takes place.

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