

## **THE TRANSFORMATIVE POWER OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOJOURN: an ethnographic study of the international student experience**

### Abstract

The findings from an ethnographic study of international postgraduate students' adjustment journey through life in England illustrates the transformative potential of the international student sojourn. It is shown that removal from the familiar home environment gave students freedom from cultural and familial expectations and the opportunity for self-discovery, whilst exposure to a new culture offered them the chance to improve their cross-cultural communication skills. The durability of change was questioned by students who were apprehensive about re-entry to the origin culture and the receptivity of those left behind to the changes they had made. By pointing to the possible similarities between the experiences of international students and long-stay tourists, this paper calls for research into the outcome of long-stay tourism, in order to measure the extent of change in tourists' self-concept and cross-cultural awareness.

### **Keywords**

Sojourners      personal growth      intercultural competence      life changes      going home

## **INTRODUCTION**

International education is a major export industry at university level, with fierce competition among the key markets of the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Ryan and Carroll 2005). Since 1997, the number of international students studying in the United Kingdom has soared, and their recruitment by British universities has steadily grown; within the U.K. context, international students constitute 13% of the total student population (318,000), though the percentage varies across institutions (UKCOSA 2006). In 2006, then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair announced the second phase of an initiative to promote British HE following the success of his 1999 program, which set an original target of 75,000 additional international students and was comfortably exceeded. The second initiative urged British universities to build overseas partnerships that would help them recruit 100,000 more international students by 2011 (MacLeod 2006). The relationship between income generation and overseas recruitment in Higher Education (HE) has been well documented; income from international students plays an important role in the financial health of the HE sector, representing almost one-third of the total income in fees for universities and HE colleges in the United Kingdom (Ward 2001; Leonard, Morley and Pelletier 2004; Ryan and Carroll 2005). The advent of full-cost fees means that most British HE institutions depend on income from international students. In 2004, they earned £4 billion in fees, and students spent as much again on living costs; this level rose to £5 billion in 2006 (MacLeod 2006).

Accompanying the steady rise in the number of international students in global HE has been a growth in research dedicated to the international sojourn, and cultural adjustment and personal change represent two of several research interests. The move to a new environment represents an important life event (Kim 2001): when a sojourner has completed their primary socialization process in one culture and then comes into contact with a new and unfamiliar culture, a process of adjustment takes place as the person adopts new behaviours (Gudykunst 1998). In this context, adjustment refers to the process and outcome of change experienced during the international sojourn. According to many theorists, the best outcome for a globalised and multicultural society is the development of intercultural competence, which is maximised in those who adopt a multicultural interaction strategy: this implies a willingness to both embrace other cultures and retain one's own ethnic identity; it therefore has the capability to produce mediating personalities, with positive implications for world peace and understanding (Bochner 1981; Gudykunst 1998; Kim 2001).

This paper reports findings from an ethnographic study of the international student experience, and uses its focus on the transformative power of the international sojourn to encourage tourism researchers to carry out similar studies focused on the power of long-stay tourism to effect change in the tourist.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The impact of tourism on the destination and on residents is well documented; however there has been much less attention paid to the process of change undergone by the tourist (Hottola 2004; Fletcher 2005). According to Hampton (2007), this is the neglected dimension of tourism impact analysis. As Furnham (1984) and Hottola (2004) point out, the sojourner adjustment literature can be used to understand how tourism can act as a catalyst for change in the tourist's outlook and in their behaviour following their time away from the origin culture, although both authors complain that there is little cross-over between the two fields. The majority of sojourner adjustment research has been conducted into an easily accessible international student population; the theories that have been tested and developed in this literature have been subsequently applied to other sojourner groups, including businesspeople and migrants. Indeed, the relationship between international tourism and international education means that meaningful comparisons can be made: as Ritchie, Cooper and Carr (2003) point out, an important segment of the educational tourism market is the university student whose primary purpose is to gain a qualification but whose impact on the destination is similar to other categories of tourist and upon whom the impact of travel is likewise significant. The parallel between the international student and the long-stay tourist is revealed in the common definition of the international sojourn as temporary between-society contact for a duration of 6 months to 5 years (Jandt 2001; Hottola 2004): indeed, in their treatise of culture shock and transition, Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) include tourists alongside migrants, business people, refugees and international students in their typology of sojourners. Hottola (2004) argues that the lack of empirical evidence of tourists' encounter with a new culture means that tourism academics must engage with the sojourner adjustment literature in order to find sophisticated theoretical discussions of the change brought by cross-cultural contact. It is hoped that this paper will encourage academics to conduct

dedicated research into the impact of long-stay tourism, especially as this represents a growing global phenomenon (O'Reilly 2006; MINTTEL 2008), whose impact on the individual and society is not to be underestimated (D'Amore 1988; Hottola 2004; Milstein 2005; Muzaini 2006; O'Reilly 2006; Steyn and Grant 2006). As Hottola (2003) notes, tourists constitute the majority of contemporary exposure to intercultural contact: their experiences should be analysed so that an empirical evidence base of the outcome of culture contact for tourists can be created and new theoretical constructs can be applied specifically to the tourist. It is insufficient to draw conclusions solely from sojourner research, as among the many categories of sojourner, there is variance in the purposes of travel and the types of infrastructure and superstructure used during the stay.

It is well acknowledged in the literature on the international sojourn that exposure to a new culture has transformative potential. Firstly, the sojourn has the power to increase cross-cultural understanding (Adler 1975; Kim 1988; Ward et al. 2001); many writers (from Bochner in 1981 to Gudykunst in 1998 to Cushner and Karim in 2004), state that increased tolerance transforms the sojourner into a human bridge between cultures upon their return home: the development of a nonethnocentric value system enables them to go on to become a mediator between cultures (Bochner 1981, 1986). It is for this reason that the international sojourn is described by Gudykunst (1998) as a major contributor to a reduction in world conflict; this is a claim also made by d'Amore (1988) for tourism, whilst O'Reilly's study (2006) found an association between backpacking and the development of a sense of common humanity. Indeed, according to Bochner (1986), international education and tourism are the most powerful positive influences on world relations. However, it should be noted that Litvin (1998) argues for a less idealistic treatment of the link between tourism and peace by researchers, arguing that tourism (including educational tourism) is a beneficiary rather than a generator of peace. Nevertheless, he concedes that travel is important to the 'human psyche'. Given that the signs are for growth in both tourism and international education (Ritchie, Cooper and Carr 2003; Ryan 2005; O'Reilly 2006), the potential contribution made by travel to world relations is a subject worthy of more research. There is so far only limited evidence that tourism improves international understanding (for example Askjellerud 2003; Noy 2003; O'Reilly 2006; Hampton 2007), and the claim that this is a largely unsubstantiated inference remains (Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001; Hottola 2004).

Secondly, prolonged absence from the home world carries the potential to force a revision in how sojourners view their domestic and professional role (Biddle 1979; Vasiliki 2000; Martin and Harrell 2004): this carries implications for how sojourners will feel and behave upon re-entry to the old culture (Bamber 2007). Adler (1975) states that the sojourn evolves from a confrontation with a new culture into an encounter with the self. Similarly, Tucker (2005), Hottola (2004) and O'Reilly (2006) state that tourism offers an opportunity not only for pleasure but also for self-exploration, as freedom from domestic constraints allows tourists to develop a stronger sense of self. In common with the sojourner adjustment literature, O'Reilly (2006) refers to the transformative potential of travel. It is commonly claimed that sojourners undergo a journey of self-discovery as removal from the comfort of the familiar forces them to test and stretch their resourcefulness and to revise their self-understanding (Kim 1988; Berry 1994; Milstein 2005). The currency of the focus on the link between displacement and personal change is reflected in the attention recently paid to the subject by psychoanalysts/philosophers (see Madison 2006; Hayes 2007) who use the term 'voluntary' or 'existential migration' to refer to extended trips abroad and who use psychoanalytic theory to understand the process of change undergone by sojourners. So great is the change in the self that the return home can be a source of apprehension, as sojourners may face similar difficulty in adjusting to the home culture as they did upon arrival in the new culture (Kiley 2000; Ward, Bochner and Furnham 2001; Steyn and Grant 2006). Nevertheless, the benefits of travel for long-term career prospects are cited by researchers into sojourner adjustment (Martin and Harrell 2004; Cushner and Karim 2004) and tourism (O'Reilly 2006)

The degree of change wrought in the tourist is arguably a function of the purpose and duration of the trip undertaken: a shift in personal and cultural outlook is less likely in the mass and business tourist whose contact with and immersion into the local culture is often limited (Hottola 2004; Muzaini 2006). Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) state that short-stay tourists are not usually committed to their new location, which Jandt (2001) explains by focusing on motivation: most tourists visit a country for a short period of time for such goals as relaxation and leisure; a sojourner on the other hand typically lives in a country for a longer period of time, with a specific and goal-oriented purpose, such as education or business, and is usually inclined to adjust to some extent to local cultural norms (Gudykunst 1998). Motivation to broaden their education is also commonly attributed to backpackers who usually

betray a desire to distance themselves from the mass tourist: the hallmarks of the long-stay tourist are openness, flexibility and tolerance (Muzaini 2006; O'Reilly 2006). The outcome of cultural change in the tourist/sojourner tends to increase in line with the acceptance shown towards new cultural norms and practices (Berry 1994; Gudykunst 1998). Meanwhile, distance from the home culture is sufficient to promote change in personal self-construal; the longer the sojourn, the more embedded the new self can become (Kim 2001; Hayes 2007). It should be observed however that the extent and type of change experienced by the sojourner are a function of variable cultural, environmental and personal characteristics (see Berry 1994; Kim 2001).

## **THE OUTCOME OF THE INTERNATIONAL SOJOURN**

### *Study methods*

The aim of the 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'; they had direct access to students and ample opportunity for observation in an overt participant role. The researcher 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. Interviews were complemented and enriched by the many conversations that took place outside these formally arranged times with both interviewees and students from the larger 150-strong student cohort. 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 that arose 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 as they attempted 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 students' total 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 and Atkinson 1995). Examples of observation sites included: induction activities, the classroom, the corridor, the library, the coffee bar, the canteen, the office and social events organised by the School or University and by students themselves. On a daily basis, the researcher observed students in various university settings and conducted conversations with students both in and outside of the classroom. This was a useful way to corroborate the data generated by the interviewing aspect of the research, and to allow the researcher to find a saturation point in the codes and categories generated by analysis of both sources of data. Access to students outside pre-arranged interview times also allowed the researcher to probe further issues that required some clarification.

After the initial 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 and ideas 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 and observation. The author's supervisory team offered their expertise during the analysis phase when codes and themes were identified, helping to make the study's findings more objective. One of the major themes of this study concerned the changes in the self that students reported throughout and at the end of the data collection period. As with all other research categories, the data produced during the interview and observational aspects of the research were used to complement each other and to offer corroboration of the categories generated.

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 and 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 participants 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 points to a common experience among international sojourners. The present paper aims to use the experience of international students to sensitise readers to the possible experiences of international tourists, and it adds its voice to calls for dedicated research into the tourist experience.

### ***Learning about other cultures***

Asked to reflect on their year away from home, all students highlighted a growth in intercultural competence that carried implications for their future professional and interpersonal relationships. Taylor's (1994) transformative learning theory illustrates the learning process of becoming interculturally competent: when a sojourner moves to another culture to live for an extended period, they often experience a transformation out of a necessity for survival and a need to relieve stress and anxiety. This requires the sojourner to look at their world from a different point of view, which is often in conflict with personal values and beliefs: when they have an experience that cannot be assimilated into their original meaning perspective, the experience is rejected or the perspective changes to accommodate the new experience. This was simply articulated by the following students:

*I've learned a lot about life, about the world, it's amazing. I see life in a different way now!*  
Brazilian student

*I think I learned to understand: there were things I didn't know which I now know. I think now I am more open-minded. I have changed; I like to know what's happening around the world, more interested. I think that will continue, like when I listen to the news, or newspaper I don't only concentrate on what's happening in my country. I am more aware of things.*

South African student

The mononational perspective that students had arrived with had shifted: becoming attuned to world events denotes a multinational frame of reference, which is according to Bochner (1986), a common product of both tourism and international education. Empirical evidence of such change in the tourist has also been reported in recent studies of backpacking and gap-year tourism (Noy 2003; Tucker 2005; O'Reilly 2006).

Exposure to other cultures led to a growth in tolerance and acceptance of new practices and values: the words *open*, *open-minded*, *understand* and *tolerant* were often used to describe how students felt their outlook had changed. Tolerance and cultural relativism, defined as the recognition that no single culture has the absolute criteria for judging another (Hofstede 1991), were linked, as the following common refrains illustrate:

*I think if I know more about that I will have a more wide mind to accept different things. That's why we say in Chinese, when we travel it's better than reading.* Taiwanese student

*Love your country, but be open to others' culture, and try to understand them.* Chinese student

*I believe that this multicultural experience will teach us that people are as unique and right in their values, beliefs or behaviours as we ourselves are.* Indonesian student

It was understood that their cross-cultural experience could have long-term consequences for intergroup relations. The dynamic link between individual and society was appreciated; that cultural learning influences both sojourner and their immediate social circle was widely acknowledged. Attitudinal change was irrevocable; it would outlast the sojourn, and would carry implications for future business and interpersonal relationships, its impact extending beyond the individual concerned. Indeed, cross-cultural contact had not only transformed students into global citizens but the acquisition of culture-specific skills had also enhanced their employability, equipping them to operate in an increasingly globalised working environment. Indeed, this is a notion that is shared by international industry experts (Westwood and Barker 1999; Cushner and Mahon 2002), with reference not only to international students but also to the growing gap-year market (Inkson and Myers 2003; O'Reilly 2006).

### ***Changing perspectives on life***

Reflecting on the past year, students commented extensively on changes in their personal attitudes to life. This common theme of conversation in Interview 4 vindicates the widespread emphasis in the literature on transition on the power of the sojourn to effect changes in outlook; all interviewees confessed to life-changing developments in philosophy and behaviour. The term perspective transformation was used by Taylor (1994) to refer to change in cultural outlook, but it can also be related to change in personal and professional attitudes. It must be emphasised that change in personal rather than cultural outlook was the more preoccupying; this is possibly because of the implications of discovery of a new self for personal and professional relationships, and for its potential impact on everyday life. In order to understand the process of change that students underwent, it is pertinent to think of the sojourn as a therapeutic pause in the life they had thus far constructed. Indeed, Todres (2002) states that psychotherapy involves reviewing and revising the self as previously understood, whilst Giddens (1991) argues that the anxiety provoked by transition threatens existential security and demands the exploration and reconstruction of the self. Away from the routines and rituals associated with home and security, individuals come face to face with 'disturbing existential questions' and the threat of personal meaninglessness (ibid).

### ***Becoming independent***

Achieving autonomy was one of the many changes discussed by students, particularly among those who had been under parental control at home and who contrasted freedom of control in the UK with restriction in the home environment:

*I have to meet my family every day, sometimes every meal, because we live in the same house. Sometimes, I have to have lunch with them, and then I have to come back home and have dinner again. It's boring. Here, it's freedom. I think I can control more here.* Thai student

Self-control had become important; it was liberating and empowering. An initial source of stress, self-reliance culminated in a growth in self-confidence, as the Malaysian student's typical comment reveals:

*You don't depend so much on people cos you live alone. Everything you do yourself. I would say now I can depend on myself. You are comfortable to go out there. I could go away again.*

Early feelings of disorientation were replaced by new-found strength; fear of being alone contrasted a new capacity to withstand stress. Self-efficacy was therefore the product of the confrontation with hardship: this was the necessary precursor of a universal growth in self-belief. This echoes Kim's (1988; 2001) conceptualisation of the adjustment process as a dynamic interplay between degeneration and regeneration: the resolution of internal stress leads to a greater pliability and capacity to cope with other environmental stressors. A connection between travel and improved self confidence is also supported in studies of the impact of the gap year (Inkson and Myers 2003; Hampton 2007).

Personal autonomy was not just cultivated among young, single students; indeed, the older, married students in the cohort described a similar shift from reliance on their husband to self-direction, and a consequent rise in self-belief and confidence:

*I think I can do things better than I did before. I don't need company. Before, I always want people with me. It make me stronger and more independent.* Taiwanese student

Independence, stress and strength were positively linked; the word *strong* was frequently used to describe changes in the self that had resulted from the resolution of stress. The sojourn was viewed as a testing but life-changing event; it was common to hear students say they would be better wives and mothers because of their improved capacity to bear stress. This was articulated by the Korean and Iranian students (respectively) who overcame the challenge of balancing motherhood and academic life:

*Yeah, I can do it, first my kids and study! If I get over it, I become stronger.*

*I am stronger than before. I am better than before.*

This study therefore supports the claims made for the mastery of crisis that is inherent in transition to increase resilience and coping capability (e.g. Kim 1988; Giddens 1991). There is a thin line between an experience that threatens and strengthens the self, however, and on the other hand, the Iranian student confessed that the life of a single parent student was too hard, that it had almost broken her, proving that the sojourn has the capacity to undermine as well as build character:

*I don't want to do it again. I don't want to go through these things again. I have had enough, it was too much to tolerate.*

Painful life events might provide the foundation for personal growth, but she didn't feel that this justified the personal cost. According to Giddens (1991), loss and self-actualisation are intertwined; if an individual risks entering a transition in life, they will face stress, but they will develop internal strength as a result. This delicate balance is reflected in this study as students veered between debilitation and pride in their ability to cope, and some would swap a strengthened internal capacity for a less stressful emotional life. The stressful nature of transition is possibly irrelevant to tourism in that gappers tend to be younger and unattached (Muzaini 2006), whilst the other growing market for long-stay tourism is constituted by older people (Ritchie et al. 2003; Hampton 2007) who may be similarly unburdened by domestic constraints.

### *Confronting stress*

The opportunity for testing and building character was not provided solely by the challenges inherent in transition; this study reveals the unpredictability of life events as unforeseen personal crises compounded the stress imposed by immersion in a new culture. A number of personal and medical problems beset many of the 150-strong cohort of students (physical and psychological illness in self or significant others, financial problems, political or economic crisis, natural disaster at home, accidents and injury, family troubles): distress was exacerbated by their distance from home and their inability to access or offer support. The seemingly high incidence of trauma allows us to wonder whether the sojourn was the trigger, or whether significant life events are universally experienced in life but are highlighted during the sojourn and compounded by isolation. For the Iranian student, such an event was the crisis in her marriage which started in May 2004 and led her to comment:

*Now my future is over. That is just my life, it is terrible. My life has a bad taste.*

Marital problems were short-lived, but were intensely distressing. Biddle (1979) argues that suffering a crisis can improve people's resistance to stress, but such ability did not compensate the temporary deterioration in her relationship.

The most distressing event of personal significance to occur during the sojourn was faced by the Taiwanese interviewee, whose father became critically ill in April 2004. Entries in the field journal tracked her concern and stress, which were manifested during every meeting in tears. In May, she found out that her father was dying of cancer. Finding herself far away from home, not being able to support her parents and not knowing whether or not her father would survive until she returned to Taiwan was agonising:

*(Crying.) It hurts his body, so he's weak now. I feel I am useless because I can't do anything for them. If I could just stay with him, I would feel better. June 12*

*Her dad has deteriorated badly, the doctors don't know if it's treatable. She was crying as she spoke, streams of tears down her face, had to fetch toilet paper for her. Said it's the hardest time of her life, she feels helpless, as her parent don't keep her informed, they don't want her to worry. I feel helpless in front of her grief. June 30*

Powerlessness and anxiety are common reactions to serious illness in a loved one (Kritek 1997), but these emotions were understandably magnified by geographical distance. Giving up her course was not an option, given the financial sacrifices already made in order to study abroad, but her absence was a heavy burden. Given that the motivation for educational tourism is to gain a qualification, it is more likely that students will have no choice but to endure any hardship faced during their stay, whereas tourists whose plans are less fixed may enjoy more flexibility. Nevertheless, it is possible that a return home is unfeasible and a similar endurance test may be faced. Indeed, Inkson and Myers (2003) point to increased resilience as one of the benefits of long-stay tourism.

### *Changing priorities*

A change in philosophy on life is a common reaction to the confrontation with mortality (Lloyd 1996), but such a reordering of priorities was frequently reported in the final interview, revealing the potential of the international sojourn to influence the future. Removal from familiar routines and the imminence of re-entry prompted an exploration of old attitudes, and professional life received much attention as quality of life became a priority. This is shown in an excerpt from an interview with a Chinese student:

*My philosophy is the most important thing is I have to enjoy what I do. Now if I don't want to do it at all, no matter how high the salary is, I will not get involved. I still want to find a decent job, to be a manager, but it doesn't matter what kind of job, so far as I enjoy it.*



The elevation of happiness above financial reward was interpreted as a direct result of freedom from conformity pressure during the sojourn:

Going back means pressure. Here I feel more relaxed. There is no pressure at all. I think if I could stay here I could do whatever I like.

Freedom of choice in individualist culture served to contrast the demands of the ingroup in collectivist society. How sustainable the prioritisation of life satisfaction over career success would be in China was a source of misgiving, and this raises a concern that was preoccupying for those who proposed to change their old life: their evaluation had taken place under conditions that prevailed in the host not the origin culture; there might be a mismatch between their expectations and the receptivity of their home society.

The Slovenian interviewee made a similar critique of her former work ethic; following a period of reflection afforded by the sojourn, she made a commitment to achieve a work/life balance upon her return:

On your year abroad you have to ask yourself what is not right. I think I appreciate this free time, so now I think I can make a perspective on work. When I go back, I hope I change this so that I will be clever enough not to repeat this mistake again of spending hours, unpaid hours, for no-one to really appreciate. I worked really hard in every job I get. Now I've had time to reflect on that.

Breaking a negative pattern of behaviour would be a significant step, and it would not have occurred without the objective view on her former life that was provided by distance. Depending on reactions in the professional community, such transformation could have important implications for emotional and physical well-being: this study therefore echoes the call made by Martin and Harrell (2004) for research into the attitudes of colleagues of returning professionals. Extended tourist trips may equally lead to feelings of dissatisfaction with pre-departure work and careers; indeed the successful re-assimilation of returnees is noted by Martin and Harrell (2004) and Hampton (2007) as a significant Human Resource Management problem.

A similar change in outlook between the beginning and end of the sojourn was the Thai interviewee's rejection of a career choice dictated by her family, one that she had initially, albeit reluctantly, accepted. To a home student, the following simple statement might be a common expression of uncertainty over their future career:

I still keep thinking about what I'm going to do after I finish the course.

This statement was qualified however by reference to a pull between the individual and the family that would not be so common in individualist culture:

*I know that my family need me to help them but I need to go on my way.*

The willingness to prioritise the individual over the group marked a fundamental shift, representing a break from the norm for obedience in collectivist society to family (Hofstede 1991). This was reflected in the contrasting emotional reactions of depression at the start of the sojourn over a feeling of inescapability to elation in September 2004 when she started to talk about finding *my own path*:

Making decisions and planning things yourself, deciding yourself what is going to come next. *If I can*

*change, I will. I cannot figure it out right now.*

Whereas in September 2003, she felt a prisoner of *destiny*, a word she used frequently to refer to a life she had no control over, one year later, she was using language that reflected an evolution towards autonomy, thereby calling into question not only family loyalty but also a concept that is fundamental to eastern religion. According to Giddens (1991), belief in preordained determinism offers comfort in a world of seeming chaos, but rejection of the notion of a mapped-out future was liberating rather than unnerving. Nevertheless, there was apprehension over her family's reaction to her new-found assumption of control over her own future. It is worth considering that re-entry problems might be greater among those students who, having developed individualist tendencies, must return to life in a highly conformist society. As Martin and Harrell (2004) note, the reaction to such evolution is under-researched; this constitutes a serious shortcoming in an era of growing international travel for education, business and other purposes.

### ***Renegotiating domestic life***

Re-evaluation of home life was another outcome of distance from the familiar home world. For the Korean interviewee, this involved painful reflection on her mothering style, afforded by a cherished hiatus in a stressful working life:

*Study make me very, very refreshed, very happy. First time in a long time. I feel so happy. In Korea, I got so much stress dealing with my housework and my work so I cannot do well for my kids. I didn't intend it to stay like that, but because of my stress, I complained and scold, 'do this do this don't do this'. I thought about my attitude to my kids, and I regret it.*

Distance from ingrained habits and routines had engineered a new perspective that would have life-long implications for her children: thus the sojourn could be life-changing not just for the sojourner, but also for those around them. Equally, Muzaini (2006) and O'Reilly (2006) argue that some forms of tourism such as backpacking can represent a life-event that has far-reaching consequences for both career and personal development.

This was also pertinent to the spouse left behind in the home country; removal from the domestic sphere led the Taiwanese interviewee to review the way she communicated with her husband:

*I think meeting different culture will help our relationship. I think some people here, they will do whatever they want, not only what husband want her to do. But before that, I usually do what my husband wants me to do. Although I have my opinions, I will put his first priority because in our culture, it's better to respect. We usually say your husband is the sky and you are the ground.*

Observation of culturally different communication styles made way for reflection on changes in her married self, which had been imposed by national culture. The perception of equality in other relationships reminded her of her single self; suppression of her voice was an aspect of her married persona that she did not want to resume, and indeed by the end of the sojourn, she had reverted to her younger, more authentic self:

*Usually if I give him my opinion, he will think about it and he will respect my opinion. And I think that is good. This is mental change. I think I know more about how to get along with my husband. Sometimes if I do what he wants, it is not really me. And I don't like that feeling that I do that. I think at the beginning, he loves me for what I am but I changed for him, maybe that is not what he really wants. I think if I can keep growing, I think it's very good for both of us, we can have more mental communication. It's just like when*

*we fall in love.*

Separation had acted to return the couple to a time in life when they viewed and valued the other as separate beings, before routine and conformity had taken hold. The ability to express long-withheld opinion was empowering, and it restored intimacy. However, the concept of assertiveness, which Furnham (1979) defines as the proper expression of any emotion other than anxiety toward another person, is a culture bound and specifically North American attribute. In many other cultures, asserting oneself in the way that is normative in the US and parts of Europe is neither encouraged nor tolerated, especially in women (Martin and Harrell 2004). Therefore, a change in culturally-defined wifely behaviour would not necessarily meet approval, and this student was perhaps fortunate in her husband's positive reception to communication differences. Indeed, it might be more common that female sojourners have to lose the mantle of emancipation if marital tension is to be avoided.

Posing a further challenge to traditional norms was the vow made by married students to renegotiate their domestic role and the allocation of tasks upon their return. Reluctance to resume the demanding role of wife (and mother) was attributed to a change in expectations following both observation of the equality in the UK and extended reflection on their domestic workload before the sojourn started. Indeed, according to Martin and Harrell (2004), female returnees tend to experience more stress upon re-entry than men, especially if the sojourn has been in a country whose gender roles are less restrictive. As Hofstede (2001) points out, the masculinity-femininity dimension affects how families develop role differences between boys and girls, and the gap varies by country. Nevertheless, students were hopeful that their absence might have provoked some evolution in attitude towards domestic labour, as the Taiwanese interviewee explained:

*In Chinese society, usually women do everything. But I think it's different here. I always compare like that. When I come to study here, everything he does alone, so when I go back, maybe there will be some progress. He says he appreciates what I have to do for him.*

This hope is not naïve; indeed Bamber (2007) has coined the term transformation by proxy to describe the changes in attitude and behaviour effected in or imposed on immediate friends and family in the origin culture (his study refers to VSO returnees). In this study, resocialisation had taken place at home, involving the assumption of the domestic role in their spouse's absence, and this might lead to willingness to accept shared responsibility, given the link between mundane activities and attitudinal change that has been previously observed. As Atkins and Bowler (2001) state, gender roles and definitions are flexible and dynamic, and are therefore open to change: a new approach to domestic life was not out of the question.

### ***Going home: a new beginning***

The vow that life would be different upon re-entry was dulled by awareness that realigning students' new self with the home culture might be problematic. The final interview revealed unanimous concern over implementing changes in a freshly evaluated personal and professional life. If the home environment did not receive change well, students would perhaps need to face the task common to returnees of 'living on the cultural borderlines', to borrow Featherstone's (1995) description of the outcome of cross-cultural contact. To illustrate, improved self-mastery, vaunted in the literature on transition as a positive outcome, might not be prized in the origin culture, as students' apprehension over the imminent return to stricter control indicates:

*I'm just relaxed. I prefer life more, I'm independent. I don't need permissions. Here, I'm alone, I have to organise myself. I like that. How can I go back?*      Russian student

Aged 21, this was the first time in her life that this student did not need to defer to parental authority: the freedom

afforded by the sojourn could therefore be viewed as a product of removal from family life as well as the immersion in a culture, where individuality is prized over conformity. Indeed, the cultivation of an individualistic outlook was commonly observed. As previously noted, independence and self-reliance are themes of individualism, as is priority of the self. Could it be that a society high in individualism gave students the freedom to do as they pleased?

*I feel I accept something in your culture, which I didn't like before, I think the distance between me and my culture is a bit bigger now, and between me and English culture a bit more closer. I don't bother myself now.*

Iranian student

*I don't care what people think now. I am reluctant now to please someone.* Chinese student

The elevation of self-direction over public opinion was a new development; however, such an attitude would be met with hostility in collectivist society, where expression of individuality is not so widely accepted (Triandis, Bontempo and Villareal 1988). Perhaps self-responsibility necessitated a distancing from others, but for students re-entering the home country, such fundamental change might not be acceptable. The journey was not over until they had negotiated the return to their old home world. Evolution in attitudes and behaviour may not necessarily be accommodated at home; reluctance to return to the old self may not be the prelude to life-enhancing change. The anxiety among returning students over the accommodation of their new values and behaviours points to conflict between the new and the home cultures. Unless sojourners become successful in moving fluidly between different life worlds, they might be compelled to undergo the painful and conflicting process of unlearning the new norms and values absorbed during their journey through a new culture. Sojourners are in the unique position that the outcome of the sojourn is only life-enhancing if positive change can be maintained at home. A change in attitudes may not be easily tolerated if it implies a threat to others' understanding of the world and by extension, to their existential security. If the newly constructed self is not sustainable, we might wonder how sojourners will react; it is possible that the international experience could finish by disabling returnees: they may be unable or unwilling to assume their old role, to forget the journey of self-discovery they have travelled. Todres (2002) states that psychotherapy involves the undoing of identity which helps people to navigate a plurality of contexts: this has some relevance to this study in that the sojourn acted as a catalyst for self-exploration. However, the parallel between the psychotherapeutic and the international student journey ends at the point of re-entry, when the response to sojourners' new self-understanding is unknown. A similar dilemma may face the international long-stay tourist, whose experiences may act as an excluding and marginalising force, so that they no longer fit in at home. This is one of the findings of Bamber's (2007) study of VSO returnees. As Krippendorf (1986) points out, people are often motivated to travel by the desire to escape from the monotony of daily life: returning to such a life might prove problematic.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that the international sojourn has the power to effect a growth in intercultural competence, as well as a shift in self-understanding, with long-term implications for personal and professional life. Such change is the result of exposure to diversity and of the geographical and emotional distance from the home environment. The findings of this study undermine the claim made by Ward, Furnham and Bochner (2001) that change is more evident among younger sojourners, including gap-year tourists, whose socialisation is incomplete, as all students, regardless of age, underwent fundamental personal change. It also contradicts the link made by Sussman (2002) between cultural identification and change: even those who were highly identified with their nationality and culture experienced a movement in self-concept. It can be construed that during transition, sojourners are faced with the fundamental existential question about what constitutes the self. Todres (2002) argues that although this existential question is affected by culture and exposure to cultural differences, it is essentially transcultural. The apparent absence of a link between cultural origin and change in self indicates that change appeared to result from removal from routine and transfer to a new role. The self was shown to be developmental, but there was no clear association between type of change and nationality or culture. Transition offered the foundation for re-evaluation, for freedom from cultural and familial expectations and for self-discovery that routine tends to prohibit. It is therefore logical to suggest that such change will also be experienced by long-stay tourists who are similarly displaced from both the

origin culture and everyday routine. The transformative power of the international sojourn is captured in Figure 1. It is shown that, depending on environmental receptivity, the sojourn has the capacity to produce life-enhancing change upon re-entry. However, if the home culture environment does not tolerate these changes, frustration may result. There are possible parallels to be made between the international student and long-stay tourist markets in that both types of visitor to the new culture are often motivated to adjust to the local culture for a temporary period and to learn culture-specific skills. The prolonged absence from the home environment and exposure to new cultural norms and ways of behaving and relating can result in profound changes in cultural and personal outlook that have implications for the future of both the tourist and society, if we are to accept that a growth in intercultural competence is beneficial to global relations. It is hoped that research on the impact of long-stay tourism will encourage greater understanding of this growing market in the tourism industry: as MINTEL (2008) suggests, the global gap year market is set to increase significantly in coming years, with a trend for more flexible working practices allowing professionals to take extended leave and sabbaticals to embark on Round The World/backpacking trips. In addition, it will provide multinational companies with a better understanding of the change which can occur during the international sojourn, with potential impacts on their recruitment and selection procedures.

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