

## Encounters with racism **and the international student experience**

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### **Abstract**

This article makes a contribution to the existing and extensive literature on the international student experience by reporting on the incidence of racism and religious incidents experienced by international students at a university in the south of England. Out of a survey of 153 international postgraduate students, 49 had experienced some form of abuse. In most cases, this took the form of verbal abuse though racism manifested physically for nine students. Strong emotional reactions were reported, including sadness, disappointment, homesickness and anger. There was a consequent reluctance to return to the UK as a leisure tourist or to offer positive word of mouth to future students. This article offers a portrait of the reception offered to international students against a backdrop of increased racism in the UK. A link is thus made between the micro experience and macro forces. Implications of racist abuse for student satisfaction and future international student recruitment are drawn.

## **Key words**

Britain racism impact reaction international student recruitment

## **Introduction**

International education is a major export industry at university level, with fierce competition among the key markets of the UK, the US, Canada, New Zealand and Australia (Marginson et al. 2010). Within the UK context, international students make up 16% of the total student population, with the percentage varying across institutions (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2011). The relationship between income generation and overseas recruitment in higher education has been well documented: income from international students plays an important role in the financial health of the higher education sector, representing almost a third of the total fees income for universities and higher education colleges in the UK (Ryan and Carroll 2005).

Accompanying the steady rise in the number of international students in higher education has been a growth in the research dedicated to the international sojourn, defined by Ward et al. (2001) as temporary between-culture contact. Given the economic dependence of universities on the fees from international students, it is important that there is a clear understanding of the issues facing them if an optimum service is to be delivered, so that student retention is improved and positive word of mouth helps to increase recruitment. Increased numbers of international students in British higher education and intensified competition for their recruitment both nationally and internationally have put pressure on institutions to improve their product. Ryan and Carroll (2005) argue that responsible recruitment demands that adequate provision is made to cater for the special needs of international students: welfare provision should not be confined to crisis management. If institutions do not consider international students' needs, it is possible that their future recruitment will be endangered (Brown and Holloway 2008; Ryan and Carroll 2005).

Host receptivity towards international students is an important ingredient in international student satisfaction; however, successive studies of international education in the UK have pointed to an unfriendly and indifferent host community, with whom contact is hard to achieve (Brown 2009a). In the Australian context, loneliness and racism are cited as two factors in international student dissatisfaction (Marginson et al. 2010; Ward et al. 2005). The literature on migration also reveals an unapproachable host community (Brown, 2003; Ryan 2010; Spencer et al., 2007). Similarly, a 2007 survey found that the UK is seen to be unwelcoming by tourists from non English-speaking countries (People 1<sup>st</sup> 2007): the welcome received by overseas tourists has long been recognised as a weakness for the British tourism industry, both by those charged with promoting Britain overseas, and also by private sector industry leaders (VisitBritain 2009). Indeed, the receptivity of the host community was identified in a report by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (2007) as a key issue to be addressed in the tourism strategy for 2012 and beyond, and the Welcome to Britain campaign was set up in 2009 to improve the welcome to all tourists, including international students (VisitBritain 2009).

Though some research has focused on the extent of host contact enjoyed by international sojourners, there has been little research into the incidence and impact of discrimination against international students, either racial or religious, which is described by Pai (2006) as a hidden problem. This article addresses this shortcoming in the literature by reporting findings from a mixed-method investigation into the incidence of racist and religious incidents among a 149-strong cohort of international postgraduates. This study will show what happens when international students suffer racial abuse; it will point out the impact of abuse and the strategies adopted by victims in order to cope with their experiences. Finally, the implications of their experiences for the future recruitment of international students are drawn.

## **Racism in the UK**

It is important to understand the sociocultural context of the country in which participants were studying, in this case, the UK. This allows the reader to locate the findings and permits a link between the macro setting and the micro experience of international students that is often lacking in the study of the

international sojourn (Kim 2001). As Brewer (2000) observes, small-scale micro settings can have common features with the broader social world, with the effect that individuals reluctantly come to represent greater social and national forces.

The population of the United Kingdom stands at just over 60 million, of whom approximately 4.6 million (8%) come from an ethnic minority background (Office for National Statistics 2009). This includes 2.3 million people who describe their background as Asian, 1.1 million who are Black Caribbean or Black African, and nearly 700,000 of mixed race (Morris and McSmith 2007). However, racial segregation remain an important problem; Trevor Phillips, chairman of the UK's Commission for Racial Equality, has described many British cities as fully-fledged ghettos with a clear racial divide. He has accused the United Kingdom of "sleepwalking toward apartheid" as it fragments increasingly into isolated racial communities: "literal black holes into which no one goes without fear and trepidation and nobody escapes undamaged" (Leppard 2005, online).

Furthermore, racism is on the rise. A race crime is any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim, to be motivated by prejudice or hostility against victim's race or perceived race (Crown Prosecution Service 2004; 2010; Office for National Statistics 2002). Religiously aggravated crime was introduced late in 2001, and the Crown Prosecution Service is now asked to indicate whether an incident was a religious or a racist incident (Crown Prosecution Service 2010). In an era of growing tension between Islam and the West and of increasing Islamophobia, this is an important distinction, though there is often an overlap. This was revealed in a series of attacks on Muslim students at City University in central London in 2009, which were motivated by both racial and religious hatred, according to the Federation of Student Islamic Societies (Bates 2009).

In 1999, the risk of being the victim of a racially motivated incident was considerably higher for members of minority ethnic groups than for white people. The highest risk was for Pakistani and Bangladeshi people at 4.2%, followed by 3.6% for Indians and 2.2% for black people. This compares with 0.3 % for white people. Racially motivated incidents represented 12% of all crime against minority ethnic people compared with 2% for White people (Office for National Statistics 2002). A similar situation pertained in 2002/03 (Office for National Statistics 2005). The British Crime Survey, a systematic victim study, carried out by the Home Office, revealed an increase in race crime by 12% in the year 2003/4, including religious aggravated crimes (Crown Prosecution Service 2004) and figures showed an increase in subsequent years. After the London bombings in July 2005, the Metropolitan Police reported a six-fold rise in faith hate crime though levels returned to pre-7 July levels by 3 August (BBC 2005a). There were 269 religious hate crimes in the three weeks after 7 July, compared with 40 in the same period of 2004. Most were verbal abuse and minor assaults, but damage to mosques and property also occurred, carrying a great emotional impact (BBC 2005b).

During the following year, the Crown Prosecution Service revealed statistics pointing to an increase in race-related crime, with prosecutions for racially or religiously aggravated offences up by more than a quarter (28%) on the previous year (Morris and McSmith 2007). A similar picture pertains in 2009, when the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2010) reported an increase in racist incidents and offences. This was attributed in part to the economic downturn, which has led to an increased hostility towards migrants (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010). This is particularly acute, according to the Federation of Poles in Great Britain, in small towns without a history of migrants where resources are stretched (Lojek-Magdziarz 2009; Rogers et al. 2009). Furthermore, a Financial Times survey for 2008-09 showed that negative attitudes towards immigration were not softening, as the number of people who want a cut in immigration remains stable at more than three-quarters (Boxell 2010).

A large-scale qualitative study of the incidence of racism in the UK, commissioned by the BBC in 2010, also reveals that 60% of blacks, 59% of Asians and 21% of whites had personally experienced racial abuse.

Of these, a third of incidents involved physical abuse (BBC 2010). According to the Crown Prosecution Service (2009), perpetrators are white in 80% of cases. Worryingly there has been an increased number of white supremacist groups in Britain's towns and cities, described by Hope (2009, online) as 'the spectre of rising white racism'. The success of one such group, the British National Party, formed in 1982 through drawing on members of various right wing groups such as the National Front, is indicative of this trend. The British National Party has, in recent years, attempted to portray itself as a mainstream (although far right) party, a strategy leading to a number of electoral successes, such as the election in June 2009 of two British National Party MEPs, a disquieting sign to the European Parliament (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010).

Notwithstanding the above increase in race crime, all official recording and monitoring bodies acknowledge that their statistics may not represent the *actual* levels of racist crime. Though more defendants are being charged, race crime reporting is still weak (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service 2009; Crown Prosecution Service 2009; 2010; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010). This is also noted in a report on anti-Muslim hate crime in London by Githens-Mazer and Lambert (2010).

The above figures indictate that Britain is a racist society, an assertion made by half of the BBC (2010) survey's participants. This is revealed in its differing treatment of ethnic groups in the penal and education system and in the workplace. It is also reflected in and encouraged by media and political discourse. Blacks are six times more likely than whites to be stopped and searched, and Asians are twice as likely (Morris and McSmith 2007). The police's Stop and Search policy is also more likely to target Muslim men, leading to feelings of stigmatisation (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010). Black and Asian people are also more likely to be imprisoned than white defendants - and, if found guilty, receive longer sentences than whites. Meanwhile the proportion of non-white people whose details have been added to the national DNA database lies at 10%, compared to only 5% of white people. Furthermore, blacks are 4.5 times more likely and Asians 1.7 times more likely to be victims of manslaughter or murder (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010).

The BBC survey (2010) also probed in depth participants' perceptions of racial discrimination in education and at work, and revealed that almost one-third of blacks and Asians said they had faced racial discrimination at school, college or university, compared with 1% of whites. Similar proportions of black and Asian respondents said they had faced discrimination at work, compared with 3% of whites. Whilst 28% of whites thought colour affected how individuals are treated in education, 48% of blacks and 42% of Asians subscribed to that view. When it came to work, half of black and Asian respondents thought colour made a difference to how they were treated, compared with one-third of whites.

According to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2010), media and popular political discourses of certain ethnic groups (in particular Muslims and Jews) pose a problem, tacitly encouraging racist views (Anderson and Clark 2009). Furthermore, the debate in public discourse on immigration verges on xenophobic and racist, thus stigmatising groups including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The Federation of Poles in Great Britain has also condemned media misrepresentaion of Polish migrant workers and has linked it with an increase in racist incidents in 2008 (Anderson and Clark 2009).

Since 2000, two thirds of reports in the media on Muslims have portrayed them as either a threat or a problem. Brown's (2009b) study of Muslim international students found that geopolitical tension impacted on the everyday life of Muslim students, who saw a clear link between their safety and the September 11 terrorist attack, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan the growth in Islamic fundamentalist terrorism and negative media reporting. Tension between a suspicious non-Muslim population and a vilified and vulnerable Muslim community clearly makes for an insecure living environment for those tourists caught up in this unresolved struggle, and has led Omar (2006) to claim that being Muslim in a Western country is characterised by inner turmoil and a drive to protect a vulnerable self-esteem.

If Britain is a racist society with a growing problem of racist and religious hate crime, it is perhaps logical to expect that international sojourners might be caught up in national unresolved tensions, that they may fall victim to racist or religious abuse. This article explores the experiences of a sample of international students who do encounter incidents of racist abuse.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this study is to gauge the incidence of racism visited on a cohort of international students in England and to explore its impact on the student experience. A two part design was adopted in order to fulfill both aims. For the first part of the study, it was decided to use a short questionnaire; for the second part, unstructured interviews were conducted, offering the researchers the chance to delve deeply into participants' feelings (Daymon and Holloway 2010).

The research setting was the Graduate School of a university in the south of England whose annual intake of international postgraduates is high. The university itself is located within a medium sized town, with approximately ten per cent of the population being of black or ethnic minority status. Official statistics suggest that the town itself does not have a particular issue with racism, with the local Police Authority identifying 324 racially related crimes and 273 incidents in the year in the county as a whole (Dorset Police Authority 2009), although the key issue of racism being generally under-reported means that caution is needed (Karlsen and Nazroo 2006). These official figures are, for example, on a par with those reported in Plymouth, a town which, according to the local Race Equality Council, experiences fifty race related incidents a day (Burnett 2011).

Access to the 153-strong cohort of postgraduate students (academic year 2009/10) was permitted via the gatekeepers, the head of school and the framework leader for postgraduate study. The cohort is made up of a diverse range of nationalities, the most prominent groups being from China, Taiwan, Thailand and India. This reflects the national pattern (United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs 2010). At the end of a mass lecture (belonging to a core unit attended by all students in the cohort, the vast majority (150) of which was international), the research topic was presented and all students present (153) agreed to complete a short questionnaire. This was designed to gauge the incidence of racism and to discover the following: gender, age, nationality, religion, location, nature and perpetrator of the assault. At the end of the questionnaire, which took only a few minutes to complete, students were asked to indicate whether or not they were willing to be interviewed about their experience and if so to provide their name and email address.

Out of 153 students, 49 stated that they had experienced racism; however it is noteworthy that fifteen students refused to be interviewed, commenting that they felt too distressed, angry or uncomfortable to talk about their painful experiences. This points to the sensitive nature of the subject, which would require care and empathy from the interviewer, as is common in qualitative research into sensitive topics (Holloway and Wheeler 2010). This was particularly noted in the interview with the German participant whose

suffering was reflected in her demeanour: she was nervous and jumpy, there was pain in her eyes, and throughout the interview, there was nervous laughter.

Willing interviewees (33) were contacted by email and a mutually agreeable time was arranged to conduct the interview. Interviews took place in May and June 2010 in one of the researchers' offices, and were recorded by digital recorder. As advised by Mason (2002), interviewees' physical comfort was attended to: lighting was not too bright, seating was comfortable, a hot or cold drink was supplied, the phone was taken off the hook, and a 'do not disturb' sign was put on the door. The demeanour of the researcher has an impact on the quality of the data generated as well as on the emotional comfort of the interviewee (O'Reilly 2005), thus we made sure that we were friendly and attentive, and that eye contact was maintained. O'Reilly (2005) advises that the interview *should* feel like a conversation with a friend, but as Mason (2002) mentions, the effort needed to sustain conversation in an interview can be tiring; this was particularly pertinent in this study as all interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. An unstructured approach was adopted: each interview started with the same question, '*tell me about your experience*'. The evolution of the interview depended on the topics raised by interviewees. Each interview thus reflected the biases of the participant, though there was much commonality in the themes that were generated by analysis.

All interviews were transcribed in full by the researchers: this has the advantage of bringing them close to the data, allowing them to recall incidents from the day of the interview and permitting initial analysis to take place during transcription when nascent ideas may form (Daymon and Holloway 2011). Subsequently, transcripts were printed and repeatedly read, in order to get a sense of the whole. Then we began to code the interview data: coding entailed separating and labelling the data, which were placed into broader categories. The research categories that emerged from the data therefore reflect participants' priorities. The literature review was processual, conducted at the start of the research and throughout in response to emergent themes.

With regard to the generalisability of findings, qualitative researchers acknowledge that a small sample and the selection of one case makes it difficult to move to general classifications (Mason 2002). Nevertheless, they often claim that similar settings should produce similar data, such that theory-based generalisation, involving the transfer of theoretical concepts found in one situation to other settings and conditions, is possible (Daymon and Holloway 2010). As Hammersley (1992, p. 16) argues, it is possible to produce research that identifies generic features: 'to find the general in the particular; a world in a grain of sand.' The setting for this research permits the transfer of the findings to similar settings, namely, higher education institutions in the UK that recruit international students. The findings may also resonate with those working with international students in countries other than the UK where racism is also a feature of society that may impact on the international student experience.

## **Findings**

### ***The incidence of racist abuse***

The short questionnaire administered to 153 international students revealed that 104 reported *NO* experience of racism: of these, 62 were non-EU and 42 were EU students. In particular, just one out of 22 Thai students experienced racism. A similar number of Chinese, Taiwanese and Indians did experience racism as didn't.

Thus, almost one third (49) of students experienced racism, and some experienced multiple incidents. The breakdown is as follows: Anonymous – 1; Bangladeshi – 2; Barbadian – 1; Chinese – 11; Cypriot – 1;

German – 3; Ghanaian – 1; Indian – 11; Japanese – 2; Korean – 4; Nigerian – 1; Polish – 2; Syrian – 2; Taiwanese – 6; Thai – 1.

In terms of religion, 19 classified themselves as having no religion (from China, Korea, Taiwan and Japan); 11 were Buddhist; nine were Christian, three were Muslim, one was Sikh; six were Hindu. The age profile of participants was as follows: early thirties (9); between 21 and 29 (40). This reflects the age range of the whole cohort. Finally, there were 19 men and 30 women: this also reflects the gender profile of the cohort under study, which in turn is indicative of national trends (UKCISA 2010).

Skin colour is an important indicator of susceptibility to racist abuse: according to McDowell (2009), the whiteness of immigrants offers some protection against abuse: sojourners are less vulnerable if their separateness isn't reflected outwardly (Brown 2009a). Brown (2003) supports this association, as she found that their whiteness protected Polish economic migrants from attack in the UK. In the Australian context, this is reinforced by Marginson et al. (2010), who state that non-white international students experience exclusion and are more vulnerable to attack than their white counterparts. It is important then to record that 43 of the above students were from non-EU countries and were non-white, whilst 6 out of 48 (white) EU students did experience racism (this related to economic migration and to unresolved post-war hostility towards Germany). This study therefore confirms that physical distinctiveness from the host community increases a sojourner's vulnerability to abuse.

### ***The nature of the abuse***

The data have led to the creation of a typology of racist abuse, which distinguishes between the physical (assault and the throwing of objects) and the verbal (swearing, laughter and negative comments). A breakdown of the type of assault experienced by participants is as follows: swearing (28), being told to go back to their own country (12), missiles thrown (10), physical assault (3), pejorative comments about the home country (13), and aggressive laughter (6). Some students had experienced multiple incidents. The majority of racist incidents were verbal assaults; there was however physical abuse, including throwing bottles, stones, eggs and water (10). On three occasions, students were physically manhandled. It is important to record that *none* of these incidents were reported officially. Similarly, in Brown's (2009a; 2009b) studies of racist and religious abuse of international students, *no* incident had been officially reported either to the police or to the university authorities.

This study therefore tends to support the claim that the real incidence of racism in the UK is higher than official figures suggest, given a general trend of non-reporting of racist crime (Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service 2009; Crown Prosecution Service 2009; 2010; European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010). A challenge faces the management of higher education institutions if better reporting mechanisms are to be put in place, so that the incidence of abuse can be gauged and pastoral support can be offered to victims.

Personal accounts of the incidents encountered by students are offered below, bringing life to the data provided:

*There was this group of boys outside of the pub, about 25 boys wearing sporty clothes. They started shouting 'go away'. They had bottles. They said 'al-Qaida' two or three times. I was nervous because my wife was with me. I thought they might have got vicious and push and shove.* Bangladeshi student

*I was walking back home when it was starting to get dark. I heard some swearing and shouting and then at the same time I was hit by something. Then this car passed and someone threw something from the car. It was a hard object, really hard. In another case, people were shouting 'go back home'; horrible word violence.* Japanese student (this student faced multiple incidents)

*There was this aged man I think he was drunk. He saw me in the bus and he said 'hey you Nigger, you black man. Do you have some weed on you?' I just looked away and everyone had their eye on me. He kept on asking and shouting on me.* Ghanaian student

*I had a terrible experience two times. Some young guys like only 20 they called me and my friend 'hey!' and then threw their apple what they eaten. They shouted 'dirty Chinese' and 'yellow monkey go back to your country'. The second incident happened in the library, I was using the copy machine. Two boys were standing behind me and one guy said 'dirty China'.* Korean student

As the above interview excerpts reveal, much of the abuse suffered was verbal and included pejorative comments about students' perceived race; however these comments also involved physical assault, albeit at a low level. The perpetrators of the racist assault were always white, mostly male (in five incidents they were female): they included teenagers (16), men in their twenties (12) and thirties (3), undergraduates (3), old couples (3), and young boys, aged around ten (2). In two incidents, the perpetrator used a vicious dog to threaten their victim; in many incidents (18), the perpetrators were in a group, or a 'gang', as a Japanese participant recalled. The profile of perpetrator fits that identified by the Crown Prosecution Service in its report on race crime (2009), underscoring the notion that the sojourner may become embroiled in existing tensions between host and diverse ethnic groups (Brown 2009b).

### ***Being suspicious and fearful***

It is important to remember that the Crown Prosecution Service (2010) defines a race crime as any incident which is perceived to be racist by the victim, to be motivated by prejudice or hostility against the victim's race or perceived race. For many participants, racism was suspected to lie at the root of negative incidents, such as physical assault or perceived menacing staring, as encapsulated in the following comment by an Indian student:

*I've had glimpse in the pub, glimpses that they've acknowledged me in a negative manner maybe. I notice that they make eye contact and their eye contact doesn't give positive aura. I assume it's because of my colour. There is some research that says if colour is the same you are more easily accepted in England.*

Participants' explanation for a high level of suspicion was that it was borne of personal and word of mouth stories of negative experience. Indeed, a pronounced number of participants talked about their friends' experiences, which only fuelled their anxiety.

*All of my friends had an experience of racism; everyone had one time a bad experience.* Korean student

*My sister lost her first baby inside her womb after she was punched and thrown to the floor in Birmingham. She was going to meet her husband. My other sister was verbally abused by some boys.* Indian student

*I heard so many stories from my friends, like one had someone throw eggs at her. I think half of them have had a bad experience, either physical or just shouting.* Japanese student

*I have a friend who was abused. He went back home. I think most of them when they have this issue they can't stand it.* Ghanaian student

Even if they had not suffered racial abuse directly, students were disturbed by stories of mistreatment. Brown (2009a) argues that the experience of racism feeds suspicion that discrimination by nationality is routine. Furthermore, visible distinctiveness is an added source of vulnerability and threat, aiding the

detection of difference and increasing the fear of attack. In this study, a combination of personal and word of mouth accounts of racism impacted negatively on students' sense of personal safety. This has consequences for future recruitment, if students pass on their fears. As Chen and Zimitat (2006) note, security is an important factor in choice of university.

### ***The impact of racism on the victim***

Emotional reactions to racially motivated incidents are generally more severe than for non-racially motivated incidents (Office for National Statistics 2002). Indeed, according to the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (2010), racism severely affects both victim and community well-being. In this study, a strong emotional reaction to abuse was also noted. The first reaction to the confrontation with racism was shock, as expressed by the following typical comments:

*I was really surprised because I expected something different especially because the UK is so close to Germany. Shocked, but after third time, I got used to it.* German student

*I was so upset, because I never think somebody was going to say that in the university. I mean outside some teenagers or uneducated people who are not that open minded, they can make a mistake. But in this case, they are intelligent, they are at university, they are smart, they study many things and they see so many international students here.* Korean student

*I was so surprised, and I felt, why do people know so little about Muslim countries?* Syrian student

Students were therefore unprepared for the treatment they had received, especially when the perpetrator was in education and arguably more open to diversity. The importance of preparedness for the new culture has been noted in previous research (e.g. Kim 2001; Brown and Holloway 2008), but it is clearly not in the interest of higher education institutions to refer to the prospect of racist abuse. Indeed, Marginson et al. (2010) point to a marked silence on the part of educational authorities in Australia about racial attacks against international students. Having said that, the importance of the internet is highlighted as an important source of pre-travel information among student travellers by Wong and Yeh (2009), Brown and Holloway (2008) and Xu et al. (2009), and participants spoke of using online fora to warn prospective students from their national group about risks of studying in the UK.

Once their shock had worn off, students experienced strong and lasting emotional reactions of sadness, depression and disappointment, as indicated below:

*I felt belittled, nothing.* Barbadian student

*It was upsetting, 'why people do that?' I wanted to go home.* Japanese student

*For two days I was crying in my room. I felt like just running back to Ghana. What I realise is that they saw me not to be part of them. I don't belong with them. They didn't want to see me. They don't like my presence.* Ghanaian student

Racism had a strong and lasting impact on well-being. This can carry implications for interaction strategy, according to Brown (2009a), who notes that the demoralisation brought by racist abuse can lead to ghettoisation, as collective defensiveness and an urge to find safety in numbers strengthen group identification.

An emotion commonly expressed was anger over their treatment, as well as resentment over their decision to choose England as their study destination:

*I paid more than them, I flew from quite far. I stopped my career, I spent a lot of money here, I can't see my friends or family. I want to study here and not have the experience of racism! I deserve better than that and I'm treated like not the right person or below them.*

Korean student

*I am shocked, angry and disappointed in England! They should be friendly – if they were in my country I should be friendly to them! I think a lot of Chinese come here to study and they bring a lot of money to that city. They bring a lot of benefits so why would they think like that? It's strange.*

Chinese student

*We pay a lot of money to study here. Sometimes if you're treated with violent words you think, 'I can go anywhere, some different country if I'm treated better. Why am I here?'*

Japanese student

This is a pertinent question, and one which the government, both nationally and locally, would do well to consider if the consequences of negative word-of-mouth for international student recruitment are to be avoided. The Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI) initiatives (1 and 2) was a scheme designed to ensure the growth of UK international education delivered both in the UK and abroad, focusing on long-term relationships overseas with a number of intended outcomes. These include increasing overseas student numbers, improving international student satisfaction in the UK and positive change in perceptions of students considering the UK as a study destination. This demonstrates Government awareness of the contribution of international students to the local and higher education economy, but host education on the benefits of international education is clearly lacking. Students showed a strong awareness of the contribution they make to the local and higher education economy and of their consumer power. As Smith (2006) and Brown (2009a) claim, an increasingly assertive attitude is visible among many international students who are now aware of the contribution they make. Several students went as far as to avow that they wouldn't recommend or visit England again:

*I don't feel very comfortable in the country I must say. It's shocking because I actually thought that England was a really nice country and that I could settle here. I would tell German friends that England is really prejudiced against Germans because I think it is an important thing.*

German student

*I feel that England made me disappointed; I have to say be careful otherwise they will have a similar experience like me and they could blame.*

Korean student

The above comments show a clear link between mistreatment and word-of-mouth marketing, which is recognised as an important recruitment tool (Goldblatt 2007). There would also be a negative impact on repeat visitation to the UK as leisure tourists. As Gursev et al. (2002) point out, anger, apathy, or mistrust on the part of the host will result in a reluctance to repeat visit, and it will impact negatively on destination image. The economic dependence of British universities on full-fee paying international students means that institutions have to work hard to improve the international student experience. The contribution made by international students to the local economy and to the local, regional and national tourism industry should not be underestimated either (Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe 2008). Therefore, it is important that higher education institutions work together with local authority bodies to address the student experience both on and off campus.

### ***Keeping a perspective***

For some students, the severity of their emotional response to racism was a function of the conditions in

the home country; a contrast was made between violence that can occur at home and abroad, as pointed out by the following two students:

*With respect, you have made a big issue out of racism. In my country, everyday people are dying so racism is irrelevant to me. People are much discriminated against at home. Bad experiences like this are nothing. The reason I am so cool about it is because other countries like Bangladesh are more violent. You have justice in your country. We are used to violence in our country. In England it's paradise, attacks are not personal. I appreciate things. I have met loads of people who have acknowledged me positively. We count our blessings. We know the goodness of a first world country. There is order here that is not available in our country.* Bangladesh student

*I think this society is not so bad, I think students will have more guarantees of safety than in developing countries. Especially in China there are a lot of bad things happen every day. I think Britain basically is safer.* Chinese student

Downward social comparison theory can be used to understand this drive to obtain succour by drawing attention to a worse situation or experience elsewhere: people tend to make such comparisons when they want to feel better off than another person whose problems are perceived to be more serious than their own (Suls et al. 2002).

There was also recognition that racism is a universal problem:

*In every house there is one good person, even if the family is bad.* Ghanaian student

*Racism is not only a problem here; it's in many other countries as well. It's a big problem.* Korean student

*Every country there is a bad man and a worse man but in Britain the better is more than the worse. A lot of people here are so nice and so friendly. Most days good things overtake the bad things.* Chinese student

A similar position is adopted by British race relations expert, Gilroy (2007), who argues that Britain is *despite* its level of race crime *still* the safest place for immigrants in the western world, given its comparatively high level of tolerance. This is supported in a report released by the organisation, Equality and Human Rights in 2010, entitled *How fair is Britain?*, in which a portrait is offered of growing tolerance alongside a rise in racism. Thus, for some students, their encounter with racism, though unpleasant, did not do lasting damage to their well-being or to their judgement of the receiving country.

### ***Understanding the underlying causes***

An attempt was made by many students to understand the root of their mistreatment. It can be construed that this would alleviate their distress; empathy with host attitudes might act as a compensatory mechanism to protect a vulnerable self-esteem. The most common cause of racism was deemed to be the pressure placed on the host society by increased immigration:

*We have taken your jobs; you have too many immigrants; it's time to say 'no'.*  
Taiwanese student

*They think that international people are taking all the jobs so some people have got negative feelings towards them. Though we are taking the jobs that English people don't want to do!* Japanese student

*It makes sense because these guys are not getting work. When I'm coming here I'm taking over the employment of some other people. This is a small island and we have saturated it. We have come and we*

*have taken your food and employment.* Bangladeshi student

The insider view was that tension over immigration to the UK caused racist behaviour. Indeed, there was sympathy with host feelings of resentment of migrants, particularly during a time of economic recession. This link is also made by Anderson and Clark (2009), whose particular focus is on Polish migration. Migrants constitute a source of community tension, if they are perceived to be a burden on community resources, to represent competition for jobs or if they do not integrate into the host society and thus seem to challenge social norms (Rogers et al. 2009). This is also an understanding found in government discussions of migration and increased acts of racist abuse (see European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010).

Nevertheless, some students commented that they might avoid studying in a destination that is not ethnically diverse, believing it to be less safe for non-white visitors:

*I wouldn't recommend the south to my friends because living there is very difficult. You will never feel confident because you are the minority. Not like London or the midlands or the north.*

Ghanaian student

Whilst host resentment of increasing immigration was blamed for incidents of racism, a diverse ethnic mix might offer the promise of safety in numbers.

### ***Withdrawal from danger***

There was understandable fear among those who had experienced racism that such incidents would recur, and withdrawal from a situation of perceived risk was a noted response to fear for their safety:

*Racism made me stay at home and not want to go outside. I'm afraid if somebody chased me. Any one I see who is not Asian I feel that way. That experience made me just afraid, so I don't go out on my own.*

Korean student

*I felt unwelcome, threatened. I don't walk alone in the night because of these incidents and because of my friends' experiences.*

Chinese student

*I am vulnerable because of my skin colour, because I'm Muslim so I stay in.* Pakistani student

Apprehension towards strangers was strong; being outwardly distinct from mainstream society intensified fear to the degree that some students adopted a strategy of withdrawal from society. Deviance is shown in the person of a Taiwanese student, who having been attacked and chased by a gang of teenagers, learned kung fu in his refusal to be dominated by fear:

*I didn't want to be nervous again. Now I no longer cross the street to avoid a gang of men. I can walk with confidence, I walk straight ahead.*

Meanwhile a German student adopted as a strategy for avoiding racism denial of her national identity, as shown below:

*What I started doing, I don't like doing it but I started saying I'm not from Germany, I started saying I'm Italian. Most people anyway think that I am Latin but I would prefer to say I'm German and not get the bad reaction. I sometimes think afterwards, 'what would happen if I said I was German?' I get such a bad reaction that I don't want to say it anymore.*

Thus, in a climate of anti-German feeling, safety was guaranteed by a false identity. It can be construed that the creation of an alternative identity is the last resort, a stage further along the continuum of avoiding danger. The first stage is avoiding places of danger; the second is withdrawal to the confines of the home; the final stage is to assume a more secure national identity. Negative bias theory can be used to understand most students' fears and self-protecting avoidance of possible situations of danger. When assessing a situation, Baumeister et al. (2001) argue that negative information and negative events predominate, that trauma and the risk of trauma hold greater power over individuals than positive occurrences ones.

## **Conclusion**

This study shows that one third of an international student cohort of around 150 postgraduate students experienced some form of racism. The emotional impact of such abuse was shown to be strong, and in many cases, the encounter with racism led to behavioural change and left negative impressions of the host country. By documenting students' exposure to bigotry, this study asks questions about the receptivity offered by the UK to its growing number of international students. The UK is often cast as a tolerant multicultural society (Equality and Human Rights 2010; Gilroy 2007), an image that clashes with a portrait of racial abuse offered by this and other research that suggests a growing antipathy towards the outsider (e.g. European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010).

Community attitudes are an important ingredient in the welcome extended and thereby in the visitor experience and impression of a country, however Brown (2009a) argues that they are hard to influence as they belong to the private sphere. Furthermore, behaviour towards international visitors can be mixed up in community attitudes towards immigration and tension between different ethnic groups (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010). International visitors can thus be caught up in unresolved conflict between residents and government policies on migration. They can also become victims of misguided stigmatisation and harassment by host nationals of countries associated with terrorism (European Commission against Racism and Intolerance 2010).

Whilst it is therefore beyond the remit of education sector bodies to resolve the problem of increased race crime, which afflicts the sojourner as well as the resident, the topic of racism is clearly one that must be addressed by a number of stakeholders. At an institutional level, the management of higher education institutions need to consider measures must be put in place so that students feel that they can confide in staff at their university and receive pastoral support if needed. An increase in the reporting of race crime (to police and/or educational authorities) will allow higher education institutions to build a picture of the reception offered to this important segment of the student population and to use this information to start a dialogue with the relevant authorities in the receiving town. After all, the economic contribution made by international students benefits both the university and the host community (Llewellyn-Smith and McCabe 2008). International student recruitment is a competitive business and a negative student experience may well impact on the ability of higher education institutions to sustain their competitive advantage. A downturn in international student recruitment would have a deleterious impact on both the higher education institution and the local economy.

At a broader level, there seems a clear need for stakeholders such as The UK Council for International Student Affairs and the National Union of Students to take an active role in identifying solutions. Both UKCISA and the National Union of Students have an explicit role in enhancing the student experience, in raising awareness of the values and benefits of international students, in reducing barriers to mobility, and in encouraging institutional support for international students. They would therefore make a valid contribution to the development of models of good practice, the provision of appropriate resources and other supporting mechanisms. The National Union of Students, especially, through its network of institutional unions, would seem to be a logical choice of institution to identify such resources.

Financial incentives notwithstanding, from an ethical point of view, it is important that the problem of racism is addressed by all stakeholders, affecting as it does both society at large and international visitors. To echo the passionate call made by Marginson et al. (2010), it is the ethical duty of higher education institutions to work to protect the international students it has worked so hard to recruit.

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