

A failure of communication on the cross-cultural campus

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Abstract

This paper reports findings from an ethnographic study into the adjustment experience of a group of postgraduate international students at a university in the South of England. Friendship emerged as a major theme in this study; of particular importance to students was the desire and failure to achieve contact with host nationals. An absence of host contact was a source of deep disillusionment for students who understood the positive impact of host friends on linguistic and cultural knowledge. A lack of host contact was attributed by students to indifference on the part of the host community, and in the extreme to racial and Islamophobic prejudice. Such suspicion was provoked by students' encounter with verbal and physical abuse, which also served to entrench the move to form monoethnic friendship groups. Research into the host perspective of international education is called for in order to inform the internationalisation strategies adopted by HEI.

Key words

Friendship host contact language and culture learning
Disappointment indifference bigotry

1. Introduction

Increased numbers of international students in British HE and intensified competition for their recruitment both nationally and internationally have put pressure on institutions to improve their product and to develop internationalisation strategies in order to attract international students and to provide an environment in which domestic and international students can benefit from their confrontation with diversity. Internationalisation strategies take many forms but a common aim is to foster an environment in which contact between the host society and international sojourners[1] can be made. Indeed, studies suggest that for international students, increased contact with the host culture is linked positively to improved language capability, increased satisfaction with the total student experience and greater host communicative competence (Kim 1988; Ward 2001; Toyokawa and Toyokawa 2002). Meanwhile, it is often argued that for domestic students, studying and living on a multi-cultural campus promises the development of cross cultural competence that will lead to personal growth, improved career prospects and greater social cohesion both locally and globally (de Wit 1995; Huntingdon 1997; Gudykunst 1998). Extended cross-cultural contact is often imbued with the power to transform individuals into intercultural mediators who learn to grow beyond the psychological parameters of any one culture (McLeod 1981; Taft 1981; Bochner 1981; Gudykunst 1984). Such a mindset is connected by many writers to enhanced employability (see Cushner and Karim 2004). The benefits of intercultural contact are therefore not only accessible by international students but also by domestic students who can increase their intercultural skills without even leaving home (de Wit 1995).

Despite claims for the benefits of internationalisation at policy level, however, many practitioners in HE have observed a lack of integration between students groups (Peacock and Brown 2007; Leask 2007; Killick 2007), lending weight to Ward's (2001) claim that the benefits of the international campus are hypothesised and empirically untested. As da Vita (2005, p. 75) states, "the ideal of transforming a culturally diverse student population into a valued resource for activating processes of international connectivity, social cohesion and intercultural learning is still very much that, an ideal." Instead, a pattern of ghettoisation has long been observed (Kim 1988; Ward 2001), with interaction taking place within conational groups, and with the willingness to leave the confines of the monoethnic group being a rare phenomenon (Berry 1994; Ward and Chang 1997; Gudykunst 1998).

Research on sojourner adjustment, including the international student experience of adjustment, reflects the importance of friendship during the process of transition (Hamburg and Adams 1967; Kim 1988; Furnham and Erdmann 1995; Ward and Kennedy 1999; Ward 2005). In their typology of friendship, Bochner et al (1977) and Dyal and Dyal (1981) found three categories: the host national friend, who acts as a cultural informant, the co-national who acts as a reference of values from the home culture and other nationality friends who act as a general social network. Ward et al. (2007) are not alone in referring to contact with the host as the most important friendship bond; although multicultural and monocultural friendships are valued for their stress-reducing capacity, host nationals promise the route to improving language and host cultural knowledge. However, student expectations of interacting with the host are usually unfulfilled as contact is described in most studies of friendship patterns as rare or non-existent (Ward 2001; UKCOSA 2004).

This paper also documents a lack of contact between international and domestic students, and offers international students' interpretation of a perceived host indifference and antipathy towards their presence. Findings are drawn from a year-long ethnographic study of the adjustment experience of a 150-strong cohort of international postgraduates at a university in the south of England. Friendship emerged as a major theme in this research, its importance noted in every interview conducted with students. The delineation of friendship into three categories by Bochner et al. (1977) was supported, and it was extended by the emergence of the formation of two further friendship groups whose focus of interaction was Islam and regional culture: all five friendship patterns were important to students, but the absence of host contact constituted a lasting source of disillusionment and disenchantment, and it is with this phenomenon that this paper is concerned.

2. Methodology

The aim of the doctoral study from which this paper's findings are taken was to obtain the insider perspective on the adjustment process, an aim best fulfilled by the ethnographic approach which offered the opportunity to study students in the natural setting over a long period using the twin methods of participant observation and in-depth

interviews that characterize ethnography (Fetterman 1998). The setting chosen for this research was the Graduate School at a university in the south of England, as the researcher works there as a lecturer in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), and is already ‘in the field’; she had direct access to students and ample opportunity for observation in an overt participant role. She did not mark students’ work and had no input in assessment, and this was important when considering ethical issues. Of the 150 postgraduate international students in the School, the majority were from South East Asia, reflecting the most common source of international students for UK universities (UKCOSA 2006); around a third were from Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

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

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

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

After the first interviews had been conducted in the first weeks of term and observation had begun, preliminary analysis, involving coding field and interview data, was carried out. Coding meant reading through notes and repeatedly listening to tapes and reading transcripts until themes or categories began to emerge, as certain phrases events, activities, ideas etc occurred repeatedly in the text. Transcripts, field notes and email correspondence were scrutinised, and recurring topics were highlighted to be followed up further interview. The major themes of this doctoral study were: language difficulties, academic challenges, social interaction, identity, food habits and changes in the self.

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 students in this study, with modifications according to differing external circumstances and personality differences. The review of the literature on adjustment reflects many of this study's findings, and point to a common experience among international sojourners. The present paper aims to convey the insider experience of this commonly documented picture.

3. Main Findings

3.1 Learning the host culture

All students expressed the aim in Interview 1 to mix with host nationals (the terms *British* and *English* were used interchangeably); there was a universal equation of the local community with improved host communicative competence that is supported in theories of culture learning (see Schild 1962; Kim 1988; Gudykunst 1998; Ward et al. 2001). Host national friends were viewed as the best source of information about host cultural norms, as this Iranian student indicates:

I need to know what they like, don't like, do I put a foot wrong?

Students understood that host contact offered the way to acquire the necessary social skills which are crucial for adjustment. The important role played by members of the host community in helping the sojourner to navigate host cultural norms was brought home to a Brazilian student when he was advised not to:

look at a woman in a straightforward way or you will get slapped. When I said 'oh why?' he said 'because you're not expected to, you don't do that.' He was English, talking about English women, you see. I didn't know that before!

Socialisation in a culture with different rules of etiquette for social situations could lead to miscommunication as enculturated views on acceptable public behaviour might place an obstacle in the way of interpretation of the cues on display. Indeed, cross-cultural communication theory places interpretation skills in a central position: communication is seen as an interactive process involving the exchange of messages and the creation of meaning (Geertz 1973; Gudykunst and Nishida, 2001). To interact successfully in a social situation it is necessary to be able to understand and predict others' behaviour (Detweiler, 1975); however, if the culture is unfamiliar, inaccurate predictions and interpretations of behaviour are likely, as strangers' messages are interpreted using original cultural norms (Gudykunst 1984). By alerting his Brazilian friend to the rules of operation in the new culture, the host national friend acted as a mediator between the two cultures; it can be inferred that in this he played a vital role in his adjustment process, easing his integration into mainstream society. However, given that opportunities for host contact were rare, culture learning could only be fulfilled through observation of local behaviour rather than active engagement with the host. This represents a departure from the various models of adjustment, as the observation stage does not usually outlast the initial stage of the sojourn (Liu 2001).

3.2 Improving language skills

Underlining the importance attributed in the literature on adjustment to the role played by the host community in language acquisition (Kim 1988; Furnham and Erdmann 1995; Hofstede 2001), it was widely understood that host nationals offered the chance for students to improve their language ability. Therefore, a secondary negative impact of a lack of host contact was that access was barred to improving conversational skills, as these students comment:

I don't know why but I can't find a lot of British friends Sometimes I want to practise my English more. Only slowly I make progress, very slow! Indonesian student

I don't get the chance to communicate that much. I'm sad about that.

Thai student

Language skills were improved mostly through contact with other international students; this represented a long delay in improving linguistic competence that served to sustain a widespread sense of inferiority over language status, and acted as a deterrent to speaking with locals. As Ryan (2005) indicates, some local people may not be willing to make the effort to befriend international students if conversation is difficult, they may be unwilling and unused to adapting their communication patterns. Indeed, this was suggested in the common nervousness over engaging in conversation with locals, and in the contrasting ease reported by native and near-native speakers; fluency permitted a feeling of being at home, of being accepted:

I think that language is very important, I don't feel I'm abroad, I don't feel an outsider. German student

Good language skills diminished the distance between students and the host society; they removed the discomfort of foreignness. The widespread attribution of importance by students to language ability is reflected in the place occupied by familiarity with the host language in models of adjustment (e.g. di Marco 1974; Ward et al. 2001). However, this study paradoxically suggests that though low language level is an impediment to host contact, penetration of and acceptance by the host community is not the logical result of linguistic fluency. A good grasp of the host language is an important precondition to but no guarantee of host-visitor contact. As observed by Ward and Kennedy (1993, 1999) and Hall (1992), linguistic ability alone does not mean there will be interaction with the host.

3.3 Trying to reach the host community

Inapproachability was cited as an obstacle to interaction with local people and British students, as the following cry of frustration reveals:

We cannot reach them, we don't know how! Taiwanese student

It was commonly felt that the British had withdrawn into a segregated group in an attempt to avoid cross-national interaction:

I don't have feeling that they have need to make interaction with us. I think they are trying to be more by themselves. Slovenian student

This air of disinterest acted as a powerful deterrent; the image of an alienating and indifferent host finds its echo in other studies of host-visitor contact, which have observed that home students demonstrate a low inclination to interact with their international peers (Ward 2005; Leask 2007). This mirroring in the Australian context of an aloof and disinterested host might suggest that outsiders in all societies are objects of indifference; on the other hand, both the UK and Australia are individualist cultures and a lack of interest in others might be a response borne of cultural programming (see Hofstede 1991). Indeed, Bennett (2001) argues that self-interest is on the increase in individualist societies as a result of intensified global competition and pressures on people's time and energy resources.

There was a strong emotional reaction to the host's unfriendliness, suggesting agreement with the argument made by Ward and Chang (1997) for a link between the sojourner's happiness level and the degree of host contact enjoyed. This is reflected in the following exclamation from an Indonesian student:

The British are weird! So cold! They don't want to talk at all. International students don't like the people here. They do not match with their expectation. The British is not friendly; they never mix with us! Are they shy? Sometimes it makes me worry, is it the culture, don't they like me?

Firstly, students were puzzled; they had arrived with high expectations of a positive reception and were disenchanted and bemused by the reception they met. Secondly, they were apprehensive: what could the host attitude mean? Finally they felt vulnerable in a climate that was perceived to be cold and unresponsive. Okorocha (1996) cautions against accepting international students' version of their encounter with the host: culture fatigue, defined by Guthrie (1979) as a mood of disappointment with the host that encourages sojourners to make negative interpretations of the motives and character of host nationals, might distort their perceptions. Nevertheless, that difficulty in achieving host contact

was experienced by socially adept and outgoing students tends to support the observation of a reluctance to engage on the part of local people. Such students were highly motivated to establish host contact, but pointed out that this was not reciprocated. Much emphasis is placed by Berry (1994) and Furnham and Erdmann (1995) on the sojourner's motivation to interact with the host but this study shows that motivation alone did not ensure that contact was made. Indeed, a common complaint was that British students did not often respond to friendly overtures; the image of the friendly host member as deviant was clear, and finds an echo in studies of host-international student contact conducted by Furnham and Erdman (1995) and Ward (2005). Using Schild's (1962) typology of the host attitude to strangers shows that in this study the host community conforms to the closed group: the open group accepts and initiates contact with and encourages absorption of the stranger; the indifferent group accepts the stranger if they take the initiative; and the closed group is disinclined to accept the stranger. This is supported by the International Student Experience Report (UNITE, 2006) which found that home students did not generally perceive international students negatively, but were indifferent to interaction and many did not identify the benefits associated with intercultural contact.

Feeling cut off from the host community helped to increase students' attachment to the immediate community of international postgraduates, which offered belonging and shared identity. This is reflected in the following typical comments:

We are all international students together, all in the same situation. Taiwanese student

We come all over the world, have different culture, speak different language, but now we are all in the same big classroom and it's hard for us all. Thai student

It is hard, I cry everyday, but I know a lot of nice guys in my school, which make me feel happy to stay here. We have many different nationalities and we all feel the same.

Chinese student

Share, all, same, together, everyone: these recurring words testify to the comfort obtained from students' unity in difference from the host society, in their shared linguistic inferiority, their foreignness and their vulnerability. Bochner et al. (1977) claim that the international enclave is the least important friendship group in the cross-cultural setting, however the finding that emotional stability derived from this source of support and empathy calls this into question. The inference made by this study that isolation intensifies stress gives us pause to reflect on the lonely experience of those international students who find themselves on a course outnumbered by host nationals whose familiarity with their surroundings might not encourage empathy.

A pattern of conational interaction was also observable, echoing a trend that has been well documented by writers on the international student sojourn, from Bochner et al. (1977) to Ward (2001). Gravitation towards compatriots occurred despite universal acknowledgement of the implicit disadvantage of decreased language ability; a key reason offered for following the pull towards conationals was to obtain the reassurance of instrumental and emotional support that was unforthcoming on the part of the host community. Thus, there was a positive link between friendship and coping ability that is supported by Hamburg and Adams (1967), Furnham and Erdman (1995) and Wiseman (1997) whose theoretical and empirical work highlights the importance of companionship in helping sojourners to withstand acculturative stress.

3.4 Being a victim; being suspicious

Ethnographers commonly seek the meanings attached by participants to cultural patterns, and it was found that racism was feared to lie behind a lack of host contact. This was inferred from the incidents of racial and Islamophobic abuse experienced by a large number of students at the hands of British teenagers and drunks, details of which were quickly passed around the international student community:

Ah, the teenagers! I think they quite rude to international people, they shouting, they, what, annoying

sometimes. One day I walk around the road, they on bicycle, they shout at me. Very scary. Another time I'm walking in a shop and they come in after me and make a noise like 'ooh'. Because I'm Asian. Many times, when I walk on the road, and shouting from the cars. It's like you're not welcome.
Thai student

I heard from some of my friend, they didn't have good experience, they say they had the teenagers threw the bottle of soda at the Chinese people. Oh that's terrible!

Taiwanese student

That abuse was visited by local teenagers might not be surprising; this section of the British population is also feared by the vulnerable in the host community itself, cast regularly in the media as a social problem. However, negative inferences were inevitably drawn from this form of host contact, and a fear of verbal or physical abuse became widespread, particularly among Asian students, whose physically distinguishing appearance increased their vulnerability. A study by Brown (2003) supports this association, as she found that their whiteness protected Polish economic migrants from attack in the UK.

Indeed, the distance between the white European and the Asian student bodies was physically manifested on the university campus, as students themselves pointed out:

You could see that there is a pattern there. European students automatically sit on the European side and this is Asian side.
Slovenian student

There are two camps. European students are usually mix with the European students. And we stay together too.
Chinese student

As the word 'side' indicates, a stand-off had emerged; the use of the term 'pattern' denotes the recurrence of the phenomenon. Affiliation to the Asian *camp* was attributed in part to the bolster it offered against racial abuse. Fear of discrimination was therefore a contributory factor in the formation and maintenance of mononational and monocultural friendship groups. This anxiety was engendered by the encounter with verbal abuse from European students on campus:

I came to the library to use the computers, and I remember clearly that a European student sat next to me, and just said, 'go back home'...In the holidays, I don't have the feeling of being a minority. I feel more comfortable, when the campus is empty. I discovered I feel less comfortable when European students come back.
Chinese student

Minority status was a source of vulnerability whilst European students, the dominant group on campus, were a source of threat: visible distinctiveness aided the detection of difference and increased the fear of attack, which was fuelled by word-of-mouth reports of racial discrimination. It can therefore be construed that collective defensiveness and an urge to find safety in numbers strengthened group identification; the perception of danger helped to motivate students' withdrawal into the safety of segregated groups. Gudykunst's (1998) theory that miscommunication is most likely between highly prejudiced majority group members and suspicious minority group members is relevant to this study in that Europeans, including the British, the majority, were cast as prejudiced and SE Asian students, the minority, were clearly suspicious.

Islamophobic abuse was also visited by members of the host community upon Muslim international students: an Egyptian student was verbally and physically attacked in the street (her religious affiliation was revealed in the wearing of the hijab); a Jordanian student was told to go home; a Turkish student was assaulted in a nightclub. Students concluded that they were subject to harassment because of international tension over Islamic terrorism, which serves to underline the important link between the international student experience and the macro context. The link between a visible manifestation of affiliation and vulnerability to attack allows us to draw a parallel with the experience of the Asian cohort whose physical dissimilarity made them targets; this was evidenced in relief that faith was not always detected by the host community. In a climate of Islamophobia, it was felt that their safety was guaranteed by mistaken identity: an external appearance that allied them with the host, or with the Christian world, allowed them to relax their vigilance. This supports the claim made by Honeyford (1988) that visitors are less

vulnerable if their separateness isn't reflected outwardly. Fear of disclosing religious faith to others and feeling vulnerable upon disclosure were understandably common, as confessed by a Malaysian student:

You do fear if someone asks you if you're a Muslim, especially with the war. I mean, my friends in America, they're not so secure anymore, and they worried in case something happens. You have to be strong and hope that nothing bad happens. During Ramadan, people ask why you aren't eating, and then you have to explain 'I am a Muslim', and it doesn't feel safe.

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 and the growth in Islamic fundamentalist terrorism. Statistics show a rise in the verbal and physical abuse of Muslims in the UK since September 11 (see Bunting 2006; Castle 2006), serving to justify students' concerns. Furthermore, Roberts (2006) identified a growing suspicion of the British Muslim community deriving in part from the radicalisation of young British Muslims, which would intensify students' real and imagined fears. Tension between a suspicious non-Muslim population and a vilified and vulnerable Muslim community (Omar 2006) clearly makes for an insecure living environment for those visitors caught up in this unresolved struggle. As Brewer (2000) observes, small-scale micro settings can have common features with the broader social world, with the effect in this study that individuals reluctantly come to represent greater social and national forces.

Suspicion and apprehension were rife: even if they had not suffered racial and Islamophobic abuse directly, students were disturbed by stories of mistreatment. Indeed, distrust of local people became commonplace; encounters with the host were scrutinised for hints of discrimination; comments and behaviour were questioned and vetted. This is reflected in a Chinese student's explanation for a bus driver's offhandedness:

We are international so they don't care!

It can be surmised that anger over the experience of explicit racism fed suspicion that discrimination by nationality was routine; level of suspicion was a function of mistreatment. This study noted widespread apprehension among students towards strangers; in the following accounts, hysterical fear meant that students ran from perceived danger:

I saw some young, maybe teenagers, on the subway and they are drinking. It's terrible for me, I'm a little nervous. So I walk quickly! A little run. When they are drunk, they may do something bad to me. It make me feel bad.
Taiwanese student

One night I walked home quite late, and I saw one British cycling, he asked me for a light, and I was worried. Did he intend something, or did he want to check if I was ok or not? I was trying to reach my home, running walking running walking, like I was running away from something!
Thai student

Being alone was a source of apprehension; being outwardly distinct from mainstream society intensified fear, especially at night, when danger was amplified by the chance of meeting drunks. Indeed, drunkenness was associated with aggression until the end of the sojourn, to the degree that many students adopted a strategy of withdrawal from society at night:

I don't think it's wise to go outside at night because I always heard about, well people talking about the drunk men. I feel the place is quite dark so makes you feel insecure.
Ning

Darkness, the outdoors and drunkenness were negatively associated, and the researcher was minded that a similar strategy of avoidance is also undertaken by an increasingly nervous host community in reaction to a rise in alcohol-fuelled aggression. This is pointed out, not to diminish the especially vulnerable status of the foreign visitor, but to offer confirmation for students' fears. Anti-social behaviour is feared by both the host and visiting student population: lawless teenagers and alcohol-related crime have increasingly become subjects of media attention and government intervention policies. Though international students perceive themselves to be targeted for abuse for reasons of race,

and this cannot be discounted, it can be argued that any point of difference and vulnerability would be sought out by those on the look-out for violence. The outsider, the international student in this case, thus offered a glimpse of crisis in the social fabric that is not without foundation.

3.5 Achieving a distance from ‘undesirable’ immigrants

Resentment of the decision to study in the UK was a predictable response to negative experiences, as the following exclamation shows:

Why? Why I came here? I paid a lot for my education and I contributed to the economy here. We contribute a lot of money, aren't locals aware of this? Chinese 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 PMI initiatives (1 and 2) reflect government awareness of the contribution of international students to the local and HE economy, but education on the benefits of international education is clearly lacking. Making these explicit might secure a better welcome for international students and it might also diminish their confusion in the mind of the host with the larger immigrant population. Indeed, sympathy with a perceived host resentment of immigration and the consequent pressure placed on local resources was an interesting finding, expressed by many students:

If I was a local resident, I wouldn't like it. They feel uncomfortable because their facilities are shared. I become more understanding now. I try to think from their position. Chinese student

Confusion over British immigration policy was common: and the observation that ‘we’ were good to ‘take in so many immigrants’ (Brazilian student) was frequently made. Perhaps siding with the host diminished students’ sense of vulnerability; by distinguishing themselves from unwanted immigrants, they could assert their superiority over those sojourners whose contribution to British society was felt to be questionable and they could reaffirm their right to be in the UK. This supports the link made in the model created by Crocker and Luhtanen (1990) between outgroup derogation and enhanced self-esteem. Certainly, not being part of the host culture meant that students did not censor thoughts and questions that might be widely deemed politically incorrect: according to Zajonc (1952), this is because the special status of the stranger means there is some degree of freedom from conformity. The perceived mistreatment of the international student as an unwanted immigrant points to both intracultural tension in British society and to a clash between the politics of immigration and public attitudes to multiculturalism and diversity. This ethnography thus shone a light on the paradoxical and yet recognisable portrait of British society as simultaneously accepting and unwelcoming.

By documenting students’ exposure to bigotry, this study asks questions about the receptivity offered by the UK to its growing number of international students, economic migrants, asylum seekers and refugees. Official exhortations to the British public to display tolerance sit side by side with acts of violence and often xenophobic media reporting which perhaps more accurately represents (or informs) public attitudes. The UK is often cast as a tolerant multicultural society (Bassnett 1997; Goodhart 2004), an image that clashes with student experiences of an unwelcoming and uncaring host. This portrait serves to question the oft-claimed automatic link between international education and increased cultural awareness in the host. Indeed, reports of a rise in violent crime against foreign visitors (see Russell 2006) and against international and Asian students in particular (Bradley 2002; Pai 2006), along with increasing incidences of Islamophobic abuse (Roberts 2006; Castle 2006), suggest a growing antipathy towards the outsider that justified the prevalence of fear. Encouragement is offered by Gilroy (2007) who argues that Britain is the safest place for immigrants in the western world, given its comparatively high level of tolerance. However, it is important also to heed his Ghandi-inspired response to the question of British multiculturalism: *It would be a good idea.* This study offers support for the implication that multiculturalism has not yet been achieved, and echoes Kim’s (2001) call for the influence of the macro setting to be taken into account in models and discussions of adjustment.

4. Conclusion

This paper has reported findings from an ethnographic study of the adjustment process of a group of international students in England, which revealed friendship as a significant research category, offering the power to reduce stress and to offset loneliness. The bicultural bond with the host was valued by students for its capacity to stimulate cultural and linguistic learning; this understanding informed widespread disappointment over their inability to form friendships with host nationals. Difficulty in making host contact was attributed to host indifference and to racist and Islamophobic abuse, which fuelled suspicion and acted to entrench segregation into conational groups. This study is unusual in its account of such discrimination, which is described by Pai (2006) as a hidden problem. Islamophobia meanwhile is described by Bunting (2006) as the most common form of bigotry in the UK: access to student accounts of prejudice tends to support this view. The common claim that the presence of international visitors can foster cultural awareness in the host society (see Hofstede 1991) was not upheld in this research; instead the local community was portrayed as unfriendly and at times threatening.

To counterbalance studies that document the student perspective, research into the attitudes and perceptions of the host community and of the domestic student community towards international education is now needed. Little research has been conducted into the home student experience of growing numbers of international students although the few studies that have been undertaken tend to support an attitude of indifference. This paper calls for more systematic research into the domestic student body whose findings can be used to inform the internationalisation strategies and interventionist policies created by HEI in and outside the British context. Meanwhile research into the attitudes of the local population towards an increasingly targeted source of income for the Higher Education and local economy will help to inform local and national education initiatives. The impact of the reception offered by the host population on international student satisfaction level cannot be overlooked though many might argue that it is outside the remit of Higher Education to influence the behaviour of the local community towards international visitors.

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[1] The sojourn is defined by Ward et al. (2001) as temporary between-society contact.