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Improving Student Learning

Theory, Research and Scholarship

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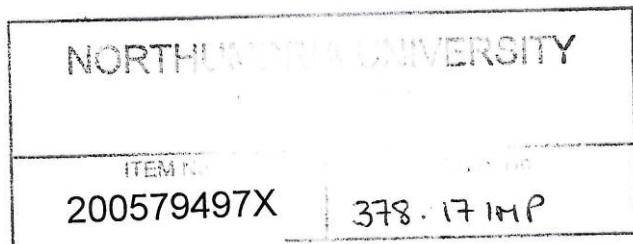
Social networks and learning: a study of the socio-cultural context of the international student.

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Introduction

This paper considers the impact of social context on the learning experience of a specific group of learners, international students in UK HE, and also examines the implications of the nature of social interaction for other groups of students who learn with international students. There has been long-standing concern about the nature of the international student experience and, in particular, how well they settle and adapt to societal and study conditions away from their home country (Barker et al, 1991). The social context is sometimes viewed as an adjunct or pre-requisite to successful study, but the increasing adoption of social theories of learning suggests that social interaction and its role in the experience and learning achievements of international students merits further investigation. Thus the main premise of this paper is that learning is affected by social context. Although we try to create social interaction and exchange within the classroom it is an artificial construct and we may not attribute enough significance to the social environment outside of the classroom.

This paper presents the initial findings of a qualitative research project exploring the social networks of international students and considering the link between social interaction and educational and personal achievement. The research draws upon concepts from the fields of Social Network Analysis (Wasserman and Faust, 1994) and Social Capital (Baron et al, 2000), and looks at the relationship between social ties and educational achievement. The first section of the paper will provide a brief overview of the background issues. A brief description of the research project and its findings will then be presented and the emerging issues and their bearing on the learning context will be examined. Finally there will be a discussion of the implications of the issues raised for the teaching and learning context.

Context: international students in UK HE

The last two decades have seen profound changes in both the philosophy and administration of British universities. In particular, the student population has undergone a rapid transformation in terms of social class, educational background, age and culture.

In the early sixties universities such as the University of Essex were pushed to change by the demonstrations and 'sit-ins' of their radical UK students. In the nineties the same university has one of the highest ratios of international students in the UK (around 25% according to a recent Guardian survey) and the policy and practice of the university have been forced to adapt in order to accommodate this.

This change is mirrored in many Higher Education institutions in the UK; universities are now driven by market forces and thus by a need to recruit higher and higher numbers of international students. Indeed, the increase in recruitment of international students has recently been given political sanction by Tony Blair's announcement in June 1999 that he was setting a new target of attracting 75,000 more international students to the UK by 2005 (Blair, 1999). However, laying aside the economic factors involved in the increase in international students, it is interesting to consider universities' academic motivations in making their environment an international one. In the same way that governments are now favouring international or global perspectives on trade and relations, so universities are advocating internationalisation as a means of bringing an extra dimension to education and of introducing innovation in the institution and in the curriculum itself (Van der Wende, 1999: 3). Indeed some institutions report that they have been required to defend the decision not to internationalise their courses (Sandgren et al, 1999: 34). Thus the contribution and contact which international links and international students themselves provide is seen as being highly beneficial to the development of the university as a whole.

Background

Internationalisation and its effect on the learning experience

In the field of education and in particular in higher education, internationalisation is a strong and recurring contemporary theme. Despite its contemporary relevance, however, it is certainly not a new phenomenon. As Bruch and Barty (1998) point out:

> *The wandering scholar has been with us for a very long time. For centuries students have travelled to broaden their learning and widen their horizons.'*
> *(1998: 18).*

In the last decade, developments in the use of electronic communication for educational purposes have created enormous potential for fast and effective exchange of information across very great distances. This has increased the focus on international collaboration and exchange both at institutional and curricular levels.

Definitions of internationalisation abound yet vary considerably according to their source and context. A common perception of internationalisation is that in higher education it is the integration of an international or intercultural dimension into the teaching and research of an institution (Wachter, 1999:12; Knight, 1997:42). Many sources also agree that the introduction of this intercultural dimension is a seen as a means of increasing the quality of the institution and the education it provides. Further to this, Schoorman's

definition underscores the relevance of the relationship between an education system and its global environment. She states:

> *'internationalisation is an ongoing counterhegemonic educational process that occurs in an international context of knowledge and practice where societies are viewed as subsystems of a larger, inclusive world. The process of internationalization at an educational institution entails a comprehensive, multifaceted program of action that is integrated into all aspects of education'* *(1999:21).*

Some also maintain that 'the training given to international students by the institution might assist in the development of their societies and even contribute to global and economic stability' (Bruch and Barty, 1998: 21). Urry (1998:8) states that globalisation should be perceived as cultural and environmental as much as economic and political. Callan stipulates that international and academic activities should be integrated into the 'everyday life' of the institution (Callan, 1998: 45). These ideals for internationalisation must be put into context against claims that UK HE retains an inward-looking, arrogant, culture-centric aspect. Teichler writes that the British 'expect that knowledge of the world will be carried to them and will be accessible in their language' (Teichler, 1996, cited in Elliott, 1998: 38). Indeed some British attitudes to joining Europe are a good indicator of this sort of attitude. It is interesting to consider whether the attitudes expressed by the idealist internationalists are more prevalent in UK HE than the attitudes expressed by the Euro-phobes.

It has been noted, however, that the basis and commitment to internationalisation 'rests on a relatively fragile foundation' (Haarlev, 1997 in Callan, 1998:45). Callan points out that 'observers note a continuing fragility in the institutional penetration of community or government inspired commitments to Europeanisation / internationalisation' (Callan, 1998:45). Bonfiglio suggests that many colleges have adopted a 'piecemeal' approach to internationalising the curriculum where they have encouraged students to study languages, study abroad and have introduced academic exchanges and redesigned syllabi. Structures are often put in place but an internationalised undergraduate curriculum should be something more than a collection of programmes on international subjects. Bonfiglio states that:

> *'An international curriculum should prepare students for life and work in a global society so that they can learn about their world and find ways of acting in it and on it'* *(1999: 13).*

We need to make learning relevant to the students who will enter a global society, help students connect knowledge to world events, see the relationship between local and global societies, understand and deliberate over social as well as economic and political issues. 'An internationalized curriculum should steer away from a programmatic approach and focus on the needs of students who will live and work in the global century' (Bonfiglio, 1999: 13).

This paper suggests that this can partly be achieved by placing more emphasis on social exchange with the international resources we have at hand in the classroom – the students.

Social capital and learning

The term social capital has become widely used and is part of the discourse of modern politics. The theory of social capital also relates directly to study of social networks and these concepts have become a means of interpreting modern society. Baron et al (2000) state

> *'Social capital – broadly, social networks, the reciprocities that arise from them, and the value of these for achieving mutual goals – has become an influential concept in debating and understanding the modern world' (2000: 1).*

Early definitions of the term social capital can be traced to Bordieu who produced a series of studies throughout the 1960s and 1970s and considered social capital to be 'real' or stored money, language, cultural knowledge and credentials, including education. He also offered a theory that suggested links between culture, social class and social capital (Baron et al, 2000: 3). Coleman took up the idea of social capital during the 1980s and saw the concept as being a highly significant means of interpreting the relationship between educational achievement and social inequality (Baron et al, 2000: 5). Coleman argued that social relations provide useful capital resources 'through such processes as establishing obligations, expectations and trustworthiness, creating channels for information, and setting norms' (Coleman, 1988, cited in Baron et al, 2000: 6). Thus membership of social networks is seen as a means of acquiring advantage both socially and educationally.

The bearing of these discussions on this paper is interesting; these studies provide an empirically developed relationship between membership of social networks and educational achievement. This relationship is at the basis of this study; it is suggested that international students' inclusion in membership of social networks could affect their educational and personal attainment and ultimately their learning. These important social networks extend further than the geographical boundaries of the university but despite their geographical distance they may still influence the learning experience.

There has recently been extensive discussion relating to social inclusion in schools and this has mainly targeted the lower socio-economic sections of our society. The government has stated aims to improve the social inclusion of these disadvantaged groups of young people as a means of tackling youth crime and increasing their access to Social Capital[1]. As part of this programme, the issues of race and exclusion have begun to be addressed with particular attention to schools in cities such as Bradford and Oldham where social, cultural and economic factors have combined to produce a racially segregated set of schools (cf 'Parallel Lives', The Guardian, 15/01/2002). However, very little of this concern for racial integration has filtered through into HE and the same principles of equality and inclusion do not seem to be applied, particularly in the case of

international students. It is an aim of this study to try to apply some of the principles behind the idea of social capital to the context of international students and their friendship groups, with a view to identifying factors which may allow better access to the educational advantages social capital brings.

A study carried out by Ridge (2002) suggests that friendships and social interaction with peers are highly significant in the acquisition of both social identity and social capital. In addition to this her study underlines the importance of friendships for inclusion and support:

> *'the value of friendships as a source of support in the face of breakdown of other traditional forms of support has only recently been explored. Friendships can act as a 'social glue' binding us into the social structure' (Ridge, 2002: 60).*

Ridge further maintains that friendships and social networks are now seen as important social assets and they are considered to play a significant part in the acquisition of social capital. Furthermore, friendship is 'an essential part of cultural reproduction' (2002: 60) and it helps to develop a secure social identity. Friendship can enable learners to enter wider social networks, opening the door to other relationships with friends' parents and siblings and from there they can begin to develop social capital.

Thus it is the suggestion of this paper that HE should embrace more social theories of learning. Wenger (1999) points out that our HE institutions approach learning as if it is an individual process and as though it is the direct result of teaching. He suggests that classrooms are introspective in nature and they bar participation with the world outside. Guidance is through one to one tutorials and exams are an individual challenge. Wenger says we should 'place learning in the context of our lived experience of participation in the world' because 'learning is a fundamentally social phenomenon' (1999: 3). Wenger's theories of communities of practice see the idea of 'participation' as learners becoming active participants in 'the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities' (1999: 4). This involvement with the social group and social context within which we learn forms a 'community of practice' with which we come together when we have a shared and common purpose. This type of learning has the evolution of our perception of both meaning and identity at its core and thus as we learn we change.

The research

Brief background and methodology

The research referred to in this article is part of a five year project begun in March 2000 and will be submitted as a PhD thesis in early 2005. The study aims to establish how far and in what ways international students' social support networks contribute to the development of their personal and academic potential. This has involved observing and analysing the role of social networks in the academic and personal experience of a particular group of international students. In addition to raising both sociological and

teaching and learning issues, the study considers the implication of findings for institutional practices in UK universities. The study employs a qualitative methodology, using semi-structured interviews and shadowing schemes to collect data. The data has been examined through the development of a coding system and has used the database Nudist 5 (N5) to aid the analysis.

Subjects studied were of a range of nationalities including Chinese, Indonesian, Italian, Dutch and Nepalese. All subjects had been studying in England for at least one academic year and had therefore had an opportunity to establish social networks and overcome any elements of 'culture shock'. Students on taught courses were chosen (mostly undergraduates) as opposed to research degree students who quite often have a very different social profile, being more mature and coming to the UK with their families. Students chosen were identified as being 'socially successful' as it was felt that selecting this type of individual would enable the study to identify factors which contributed to this success and subsequently establish any links between this social success and academic or personal achievements. Of the twelve subjects studied in detail, six were part of a linked social network and knew each other to a larger or smaller extent, although they also formed part of a very much wider network. Subjects were interviewed twice at length and shadowed over two days in their everyday life at the university.

Below is presented a selection of issues which emerge strongly from the data along with some direct quotes from subjects.

The early analyses in this study paint a picture of a learner who is independent and highly motivated, supported by complex and extended social networks locally, nationally and internationally. The student appears highly perceptive about the cultural and learning context here in the UK and is not necessarily socially reliant on his/her own national group. The early data also points to factors within international students' social networks which may be influencing their academic and personal achievement; these include perceptions of isolation, language as a barrier and the desire to live in a multi-cultural environment. In contrast the study shows a teaching context that appears slow to respond to changes in the student group and retains some presuppositions about international students' learning strategies. In addition to an apparent adherence to 'traditional' modes of teaching, course content, case studies and examples remain in places Euro-centric.

Emergent issues

The following issues have emerged from the data and this discussion will firstly consider selected areas across the respondents and then in order to present another perspective a case study will be briefly outlined and discussed. Hollway (2000:8) warns against making assumptions about data gathered across a group of individuals and maintains that respondents' meanings must be seen in relation to their circumstances. Hollway is anxious that assembling responses into base data subgroups such as age and gender produces artificial aggregates which do not represent 'reality.' Hollway quotes Josselson (1995:32) as saying 'when we aggregate people, treating diversity as error variable, in

search of what is common to all, we often learn about what is true of no one in particular.' (Cited in Hollway, 2000:8).

Success, motivation and independence

The subjects were in their own views socially 'successful' and described with enthusiasm extensive social contacts that were, for the majority, other international students. Contact with UK social networks was more infrequent and was of a more superficial nature. One of the female Chinese subjects says that one of her contacts is a very good friend but when I asked her if she could get emotional support from her she said no, not emotional support. I asked her why not and she replied 'no because she does not know a lot of my stories'. This was very interesting as it suggested that the subject believed that to give support to someone you have to know them well or to know their 'stories'. She also suggested that her difficulty in forming friendships with non-Chinese students was related to language but she also felt that 'Maybe it's culture as well.'

Many of the subjects also considered that they were academically successful and 'were doing the best that they could' in the circumstances and often could not think of other factors which could make them 'more successful' academically. They did not, however, link their academic success with their social success but rather demonstrating fierce independence and self-reliance. One of the male Chinese students said

> *'What I do is I depend on myself. If you want to get a high mark you have to work hard God won't get you a high mark. Some parts [sometimes] my friends say I'm very reality [too realistic] but I think it's true. I have to depend on myself'.*

Another subject, a female Chinese student, says that she doesn't rely on her close group of friends totally. She says that if she didn't have these friends she would find others but ultimately she also purports to rely on herself. This strength and independence would, in my opinion, exert an influence on learning experience.

In addition to this the subjects studied appeared highly motivated and very focused on their aim of achieving good results in their degrees. One of the subjects talked about getting the best results possible in order to 'pay back' his parents for their investment in paying for his course in the UK by getting very high grades and making them proud of him. Failure and drop out of courses does not appear an option. This strong social and emotional motivation to do well is an influencing factor and one which perhaps international students feel differentiates them from some of their UK counterparts (whilst this may not be a true differentiation). One Dutch male student said

> *'They don't care what kind of marks they get. They don't care if they have to re-sit and if there's a group presentation I do 90% of the work and they get a good mark for that.'*

Peer group learning support and social and emotional support networks

The subjects studied on several occasions described a well-developed system of peer group learning support. This involved not only going to each other's houses and exchanging information, discussing exams and possible exam content but also supporting each other emotionally where academic problems arose. This academic support for each other was often evident during shadowing of subjects when they would discuss the content of lectures and seminars before and after class and go to the library in groups in between lectures. This extended into their time outside of the university as the subjects often lived with the groups of friends they have on their course. Sometimes in the case of Chinese students their friendship groups are made up of contacts they had back home in China at college and have travelled to the UK to study on the same course together and have ended up sharing accommodation. Thus students living in close proximity and studying on the same course appear to develop quite strong academic support links. This occurs even across courses where international students exchange essays with each other to try to improve their work. One male Nepalese student said

> 'We normally get together for assignments and sort it out or if they have a problem they come to me. Read each other's assignments and try to figure it out if something is not clear, like sharing our knowledge. Yes, it's like sharing ideas and then once we have finished we let our friends read it [to see] whether they understand it or not or if I've made a mistake. It's two different things at the same time. I can know her, what she has studied and what her course is all about and she knows mine as well.'

Furthermore, even in mixed nationality friendship groups (all non-UK) the support extends to sharing cooking and shopping and supporting each other where illness occurs. One student in particular, a male Nepalese, talked about needing his friends and needing to know that if he was ill someone would come and help him and he would not 'just lie alone ill in my room'. This is a link to his own culture as he comes from a small village where people support and help each other much in the manner of an extended family.

Views of identity and culture

The social and cultural experience of the international students studied often seemed to be in sharp contrast to those of the UK student population of our university. There was a perception by the subjects that their fellow students were less mature than themselves for reasons relating to their background; one male student from Palestine said

> 'At the beginning I said they were childish, throwing beer at each other. Then I realised that is just 19 or 20 years old. [Back home] I stuck with people who were more or less the same age as me...because of the problems they have there is more to worry about – from childhood to adult – because of the problems. When you are 16 you are a man. There are no teenagers you are a child or a man'.

Some of the students studied were slightly older than their fellow UK students and most were 24 years old in the final year of their degree. Where close academic links were made with UK students these were on more than one occasion with mature students who appeared to the international students to be better motivated and to have more experience and knowledge to share. In addition to this a number of the students in the study had lived abroad in other countries before they had arrived in the UK and they felt that this had given them some previous experience of being in a different culture. One male Italian student had lived and worked in Reykjavik in Iceland before he came to the UK and felt that this had enabled him to acclimatise in the UK more quickly and efficiently. He said

> *'Well you said I'm easy-going but you see I think living in different countries [has helped] maybe the first time I left Italy I wasn't. I left there the first time in 1998 and I had some quite rough times. I was trying to settle down in Iceland and I arrived there in the middle of winter. It's a new culture, a way of thinking, a completely different language. I'd say I needed some time to adapt to a new life abroad so now you see me as easy-going but I went through the experiences everyone ha… In this sense I am at ease here compared to my previous experiences'.*

This was not the only reference in the data to a changing sense of 'self'; other students in the study talked about how their attitudes to people of different nationality and culture had changed since they had come to live in the UK. This self-awareness and wider view of self and culture appear to me to contrast with the mono-cultural background and cultural inexperience of some of our local UK students. As widening participation increases and universities receive students from non-traditional academic backgrounds and from lower socio-economic groups, the UK student profile may be of students who have not travelled extensively abroad and may not even have lived away from their home city.

Views of UK students and staff

The subjects perceive UK students to lack motivation and to be only interested in having a good time and drinking. They say that it is difficult to make strong academic relationships with them because they don't attend class regularly enough. They feel that they aren't interested in their subject or in discussing their subject and they bemoan the lack of academic exchange between their fellow students and themselves. One Dutch male student said

> *'As soon as they walk out of the seminar they're talking about beer or the game that's about to kick off. I can talk about that as well [but] the thing is that I want to talk about something that is less superficial. I mean I can just walk into a pub and start talking about Newcastle United and before you know it you're talking with 4, 5, 6, or 7 people. It is very easy, for me it's no problem but it's not the kind of thing I want to talk about. I want to talk when I'm out of a seminar that has just made an*

impression on me. And really I feel more isolated in this way and I don't want to feel like that.'

Whilst this paints a rather bleak picture of the intellectual motivations of the UK student this does not appear to me to be necessarily a completely accurate view. While shadowing one international student a group of UK students with whom the subject was socialising were discussing study groups and meeting at each other's flats to study for exams (albeit the night before the exam). There are perhaps preconceptions on the part of international students and also perhaps on the part of staff that local students are not motivated at all and are simply part of the blatant and obvious drinking culture which is so prevalent on university campuses. Perhaps it is because this drinking culture is so well-advertised on campus that staff and international students alike make assumptions about the motivation of the majority of UK students.

These preconceptions extend also into the classroom where students quite frequently remain in their separate nationality groups and make assumptions about each other from simple impressions such as where students sit[2]. Experience from the observation element of this study has shown that nationality and indeed gender groups tend to sit together in classes. To take one class on one course as an example, in a widely mixed nationality grouping including French, German, Chinese, Greek and Russian, the Chinese students regularly sat at the front, the German and French in the middle and the Greeks at the back. There was also separation along gender lines with the Chinese girls sitting together in strongly formed groups and the Greek boys forming a strong group at the back of the classroom. From observation there appeared to be some social exchange across nationalities between the male students who tended to talk in a joking way about topics such as sport but it seemed to be less frequent for the female members of the group to interact across nationality and particularly unusual for girls to talk to boys of another nationality, eg Chinese girl talking to Greek boy. Still on the topic of gender the predominantly female Chinese groups of one particular discipline were in contrast with the predominantly male, local staff who taught them. All these contextual aspects would, in my opinion, exert a strong influence on the learning experience.

Case study: an individual student

It is interesting to look at an individual student in the educational context in order to get a more complete picture of a student's experience. The student in question is male, 22 years old and from a very small village in a remote part of Asia. For the purposes of this description we will call the student Yan. His village cannot be reached by car and is in a mountainous region which is two or three days travel from the nearest large city. His parents are illiterate but Yan has been educated in schools set up by British charities and was an outstanding student at school, having been chosen to represent his region at a conference of international students in Scandinavia. After school he became involved in Health and Education projects in his village, helping young people there with literacy and also with health and hygiene issues. He is in the North East studying in Health and Social Work and plans to go back to his country to make improvements in his community.

As far as Yan's educational context in the UK is concerned he is the only international student in his year group and is in a class with mostly local students who range in age from 19 to 40 years. Yan works most with a mature female student and another younger girl but gets on very well with everyone and is evidently very popular, not just in his group but across the university campus. He contributes well to discussions in class and is not reticent in group work or in getting involved with other students. However, the course which he studies has a UK perspective in terms of its content and often relies on local examples. When shadowing Yan to a lecture and seminar on one particular occasion the discussion turned to housing. There was a lively discussion relating to Local Authority housing and issues such as overcrowding in houses. The discussion was involving a large proportion of the group many of whom were voicing their ideas from experience as they themselves lived in local authority housing or had close relatives who lived there. This background and the shared socio-cultural knowledge of this was directing the discussion but Yan had no background knowledge whatsoever of this area. The students were talking about parking problems on council estates where families have more than one car. In Yan's home village there are no cars at all. After the lecture Yan told me he didn't understand much of the discussion and also couldn't understand the discussion about overcrowding as in his own village most families share one room. A wider discussion in that class incorporating Yan's background and experience of his country would have made a very interesting contrast to the issues being raised and would have increased the other students' awareness and knowledge of international issues relating to their subject.

Discussion points: learning and teaching implications

Despite the wide-ranging changes in the student body and the educational background over the past decade, the research carried out in this study suggests a teaching context which is slow to respond to the increase in diversity both educational and cultural. Traditional modes of teaching such as lectures and question and answer seminars remain but this is not as significant as the fact that the process of learning in the classroom shows some inflexibility. The density of course content and the demands of units and assessments mean that staff feel they have little room to be creative or flexible within the time allowed. Often the content of the course is seen as completely separate from the learning process within the classroom and the social interaction and academic exchange is artificially set up rather than drawing on the social relationships which already exist between students. We could be drawing on existing social patterns and networks rather than trying to create artificial ones. In the case of international students, social integration in terms of the learning experience does not appear to be high on universities' agendas. More meaningful academic and social exchange between UK and international students would not only provide a more profound learning experience for all students but would also contribute to the 'internationalisation' of the university as a whole. Current attempts to internationalise the curriculum pay attention to course content and do not address the social processes both within and outside the classroom. The process of social and academic exchange between students of varying backgrounds and cultures is an essential element of a positive and profound learning experience. Content and delivery need to be

more flexible so that there is a contributory atmosphere where students feel that they can offer aspects of their culture and background and where other students are open to receiving their contributions.

In addition to this, the international elements which are included in the curriculum are an attempt to internationalise but the examples tend to be rigid and appear artificial. If there was some release from the rigors of the syllabus the atmosphere in the classroom could be more contributory and this would give students the opportunity to contribute from their own experience and cultural background. This use of the international or diverse that is already in our universities is what Cope and Kalantzis (1997) term 'productive diversity'. This idea appeals to anyone who perceives international students and international issues from a market driven approach, and is likely therefore to be a successful strategy with more chance of being adopted than an idealistic one. Productive diversity is an optimistic and ingenious idea which could gain pragmatic acceptance. Cultural diversity is seen not as a problem but as an advantage and it is not about changing attitudes because it is friendly or kind, but because it is more effective. Society is diverse, the world is diverse. People are now more mobile and there are international relationships developing on a scale which we have not seen before. Universities have a duty to respond to the diversity of their student population with appropriate changes in their curriculum to reflect the nature of that population and the needs of graduates in an ever-growing internationally focused and inter-cultural employment market. In such an environment, diversity of language, knowledge of other countries and cultural differences are advantages to other students and the organisations that can learn from them. Adoption of this approach benefits both lecturer, with a new area of resources, and student, with widening perceptions on culture and diversity.

Summary

The research carried out in this study suggests that some prejudices and misconceptions remain on all sides; international students see a lack of motivation and commitment in their UK counterparts; UK students see a closed group who 'want to stay with their own nationality'. Some lecturers retain a deficit view of the international student and assume plagiarism, low levels of English and an unwillingness to take part in discussion. The data collected in this study presents a different view from this and examples from individual international and UK students and staff could be quoted to debunk these stereotypes. In general a more positive view of international students needs to be projected and an attitude which values the 'different' in all groups (including UK students) needs to be encouraged. Currently the university approach to raising staff and student awareness of cultural issues is a rather detached and centralised programme of 'cultural awareness' courses for staff and students. Whilst this is valuable in itself it cannot be wholly effective without incorporation of these principles into the learning process within the classroom. A more extensive adoption of social learning and exploitation of the social context inside and outside of the classroom would be an effective approach to increasing international and cultural awareness. In addition to this, issues of race and culture in terms of international students should be perceived in a

similar light to the issues of race for the permanent ethnic population of the UK. As mentioned above, government measures to effect social inclusion in schools could be extended to consider HE and also involve examination of the social inclusion of international students.

Thus, this article suggests we attach more significance to the social context of learning, acknowledge the complexity of learning and see the process of learning as a cultural act which 'depends on far more than fixed personal styles, traits or schemata' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000: 584). As students learn it is hoped that their views change and as part of this their views of their own identity also change. If syllabi and courses could take account of this process then we would be working towards the idea that 'context means far more than simply the setting where learning is located' (Bloomer and Hodkinson, 2000: 596). In the case of international students attaching importance to their views of their learning context and changing identity would be a positive process which would improve not only the depth of their own learning but also impinge on the learning processes of our UK students.

Notes

[1]Tony Blair stated 'I will set out our historic aim, that ours is the first generation to end childhood poverty forever, and it will take a generation.' Blair, 1999: 7.

[2]It is worth noting at this point that stereotyping is also an issue in terms of the study itself. One of the aims of the study is to break down the stereotypes that surround the interaction between cultures by presenting empirical evidence. However, although there may be references made in this article to specific nationalities, no generalities are intended and the statements made are based solely on the data collected in this study.

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