

Positive Shock: The PhD Journey of International Students at UK Universities: A Qualitative Interpretative Phenomenological Study

Authors : Dounyazad Sour

Abstract : This research examines international doctoral students' reflections on their journey and experiences of studying for a PhD in the UK. Since the early 1990s, the international students' number in the UK has increased. The significant contribution of these international students to the cultural and academic diversity of the UK universities' doctoral programmes is widely acknowledged. The substantial fees these students bring to British Higher Education institutions is also much appreciated. The rationale for undertaking this study grew from personal experience of studying in the UK. Through membership in different groups both online and, when regulations permitted it, face to face social groups, it quickly became apparent that among all students, there were both shared and individual experiences of struggles and triumphs. This insight led to the decision to investigate these matters in greater detail. This in-depth qualitative interpretative study, inspired by a phenomenological approach, offers fresh insights into academic, social and cultural experiences of international PhD students in the UK. Data collection was carried out in the UK over a period of three months, deploying focus groups, individual semi-structured interviews, and images selected by participants that represent their feelings towards their experiences. The ten participants are attending different UK universities, studying a range of disciplines and have diverse backgrounds. Interviews and discussions took place in the participants' preferred languages; Arabic, English and French. The analysis shows that the participants had experienced two types of shock: negative and positive. Negative shocks, which have seen considerable attention in the field of international students' experiences, relate to unexpected incidents that happened to the participants in relation to their interactions with others: people from different backgrounds and people from the same background. This impacted their experience negatively through experiencing feelings of anxiety, stress, low self-esteem and xenophobia, all these hindering factors contribute to make international students struggle to adapt to the new environment. Positive shocks, which have remained largely under-researched in the field of international students' experiences, refer to all the positive occurrences that participants experienced. For instance, a shop assistant saying: "do you need any help, honey?" which brought a sense of belonging, feeling home, safety, and satisfaction to the respondents, and made their experiences less challenging. This investigation will offer insights into the PhD international students' experiences and shed new light on the shocks that can work as facilitators, rather than as inhibitors.

Keywords : international students, PhD journey, phenomenological approach, positive shock

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