

Academic Identities in Transition

Authors : Caroline Selai, Sushrut Jadhav

Abstract : Background: University College London (UCL), the first secular university in England to admit students regardless of their religion and gender, has nearly 29,000 students of which approximately 30% are international students. The UCL Cultural Consultation Service (CCS) for staff and students is a unique service that provides assistance to staff and students experiencing challenges in their teaching, enabling, support work or studies which they believe may have a cultural component. The service provides one-to-one and group consultations, lectures, seminars, 'grand rounds', interactive workshops and bespoke interventions. Data: This paper presents a content analysis of CCS referrals over the last 36 months. We focus on the experience of international students, many of whom experience not only a challenge to their academic identity but also a profound challenge to their personal cultural identity. We also present 3 vignettes to illustrate how students interpret, accept, contest and resist changes in their cultural and academic identity. Discussion: This paper highlights (i) how students from collectivist cultures attempt to assimilate within an individualistic, highly competitive western university that is bound by its own institutional norms; (ii) problems in negotiating challenges at the interface of culture and gender (iii) the impact of culturally different hierarchies of power, discrimination and authority and (iv) the significance of earlier traumatic and kinship conflicts. Many international students' social identities are shaped by their cultural and family scripts. A large number have been taught that their teachers are to be revered and their teachings unchallenged. This is at odds with quintessential goal of the western university to encourage healthy scepticism and hone students' critical thinking skills. Conclusions: Pupil-teacher 'cultural transference' and shifts in cultural academic identities of students underscore critical aspects of developmental and learning challenges for students. Staff-student cultural conflict requires a broader, systemic analysis of students, staff and the wider organisation. Our findings challenge Eurocentric psychodynamic concepts such as the nature of parent-child relationship in Western Europe. We argue for a broader, more inclusive approach to develop both effective pedagogic skills in euro-american academic institutions and culturally- appropriate psychodynamic theory to underpin counselling international students.

Keywords : academic identity, cultural transference, cultural consultation in higher education, cultural formulation, cultural identity.

Conference Title : ICAIHE 2015 : International Conference on Academic Identities and Higher Education

Conference Location : Copenhagen, Denmark

Conference Dates : June 11-12, 2015