

Living or Surviving in an Intercultural Context: A Study on Transformative Learning of UK Students in China and Chinese Students in the UK

Authors : Yiran Wang

Abstract : As international education continues to expand countries providing such opportunities not only benefit but also face challenges. For traditional destinations, including the United States and the United Kingdom, the number of international students has been falling. At the same time emerging economies, such as China, are witnessing a rapid increase in the number of international students enrolled in their universities. China is, therefore, beginning to play an important role in the competitive global market for higher education. This study analyses and compares the experiences of international students in the UK and China using Transformative Learning theory. While there is an extensive literature on both international higher education and also Transformative Learning theory there are currently three contributions this study makes. First, this research applies the theory to two international student groups: UK students in Chinese universities and Chinese students in UK universities. Second, this study includes a focus on the intercultural learning of Chinese doctoral students in the UK filling a gap in current research. Finally, this investigation has extended the very limited number of current research projects on UK students in China. It is generally acknowledged that international students will experience various challenges when they are in a culturally different context. Little research has focused on how, why, and why not learners are transformed through exposure to their new environment. This study applies Transformative Learning theory to address two research questions: first, do UK international students in Chinese universities and Chinese international students in UK universities experience transformational learning in/during their overseas studies? Second, what factors foster or impede international students' experience of transformative learning? To answer the above questions, semi-structured interviews were used to investigate international students' academic and social experiences. Based on the insights provided by Mezirow, Taylor, and previous studies on international students, this study argues that international students' intercultural experience is a complex process. Transformation can occur in various ways and social and personal perspectives underpin the transformative learning of the students studied. Contributing factors include culture shock, educational conventions, the student's motivation, expectations, personality, gender and previous work experience. The results reflect the significance of differences in teaching styles in the UK and China and the impact this can have on the student teaching and learning process when they move to a new university.

Keywords : intercultural learning, international higher education, transformative learning, UK and Chinese international students

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