International Students' Experience of Western Pedagogy

in a British University

Linda Katherine Newsome[1*] & Paul Cooper[2]

[1] Arizona State University, Phoenix, United States

[2] Brunel University, London, United Kingdom

[*] Linda K. Newsome, E-mail: linda.newsome@asu.edu

Abstract

This qualitative study examined international students' experiences with Western pedagogy using data collected through case studies and semi-structured, in-depth, informant style interviews. Participants were all international students (n=18), mostly postgraduate from Asian and Far Eastern countries studying at a British University. This paper focuses on students' engagements with Western pedagogy as they struggle to adjust to what they experience as unfamiliar and alien approaches to teaching and learning. Reported here is a detailed case study of the lives of these students as they engage with specific pedagogical demands, including: academic self-expression and critical argumentation, self-directed learning, class discussions, presentations, and English language proficiency. It also exposes students' perceptions of the value of the instructional methods of their tutors and their impact on approaches to learning.

Keywords

international students, cross-cultural education, academic experiences, Western pedagogy

1. Introduction

It has been argued that the "secular educational paradigm of the west" (Grigorenko, 2007, p. 165) dominates the world of higher education to the extent that it is often being offered as the blueprint for *the* international paradigm of higher education. Furthermore, the curricula and pedagogy of Western universities are primarily designed to serve Western cultural assumptions and economic interests in general and the needs and priorities of their native countries in particular (Lee, 2005; Ditton, 2007). This barely hidden educational hegemony creates enormous challenges for international students who are often drawn to Western universities on the basis of claims of international excellence, supported by performance data which are themselves products of Western-centric thinking, only to find university curricula, teaching methods and assumptions about learning which are alien to their cultural expectations

and inappropriate to their needs (Hussain et al., 2007; Tharp & Dalton, 2007; Neri & Ville, 2008).

To date, this issue has been explored largely at a theoretical level through analyses of cultural traditions, and studies of cultural differences in the social and psychological processes involved in teaching and learning. There is a dearth of research exploring the lived experience of international students through their own first-hand accounts. This means that there is a shortage of information about how international students make sense of their overseas university experiences and incorporate these into their lives and identities.

The purpose of the qualitative research study reported in this paper was to provide a group of international students with a platform to air their feelings and experiences in a confidential setting that would not jeopardize their academic objectives. This is not to say that the study was grounded in the assumption that theirs would be a negative experience. Rather, the researchers sought to "bracket" preconceptions of the type described at the beginning of this paper, and facilitate opportunities for participants to talk about their experiences in their own terms and without leading or judgment from the researchers. In this sense, the study resides broadly with the grounded theory tradition (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

This study raised awareness concerning the toll international students are incurring to realise their academic aspirations. The study draws on interviews conducted in three phases over a period of six months with 18 international students, mostly postgraduate from Asian and Far Eastern countries, studying at Middle University (MU), a high-ranking British public University, between 2007 and 2008.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Western Pedagogy in Higher Education Institutions

To what extent can international students adjust to Western pedagogy? This question is pertinent to this paper and to future research if Jackson and Wasson (2002) are correct about early experiences organising into definite thought systems. Valiente (2008) is confident that international students studying at a Western university have the capability to develop "accommodative techniques to survive and succeed" (p. 86). The short periods of time often allocated by universities to the process of cultural transition, however, are seen to be insufficient for international students to acclimate to Western teaching and assessment methods. Valiente proposes that Western higher education institutions, particularly in the UK, employ cross-cultural communication and management theories to help accommodate diverse cultures and learning styles.

Furthermore, Valiente urges higher education institutions to consider the theoretical and practical implications that accompany internationalisation within higher education institutions. The implications reach cultural commonalities, curriculum content, teaching styles, and assessment techniques. Valiente's (2008) preference is "to focus on what each culture contributes to the learning process and to the knowledge within specific subjects" (p. 87). Thus, "the attention to cultural diversity and its influence on learning styles is a step forward from the traditional proposals that insist in correcting

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others' cultures and behaviour, either by imposing or transposing on them 'generally accepted' Western standards" (Valiente, 2008, p. 87).

What responsibility do Western higher education institutions have for assisting international students with their adjustment, and for accommodating the differences between Eastern and Western pedagogy? Tomalin (2007) suggests that higher education institutions in the UK "have a responsibility towards both students and staff to couple the financial and policy driven requirements of widening participation and internationalisation with adequate training and institutional support" (p. 631). Tomalin's study identified concerns about cultural and religious diversity in the UK. Young, Glogowska, and Lockyer (2007) discovered staff who explained attrition with factors that are internal to students, whereas students focus on their experiences at the university. The scholars suggest that higher education institutions in the UK should consider opinions students and staff provide regarding their attrition.

To counter Western pedagogy's hegemonic narratives, Rebollo-Gill and Moras (2006) want more reflexivity among academic staff and students. Rather than focus on social and ethnic differences in pedagogy, Haggis (2004) focuses on "learner difference" in pedagogy (p. 349). Haggis (2004) argues for a pedagogy in Britain's higher education institutions that takes account of "difference" by avoiding simplistic and inaccurate assumptions:

It is an acceptable practice to give out a reading list or set of essay questions expecting that students will know how to think, read and write in response to these […] [and that] the essay feedback which refers to "structure", "evidence" and "argument" is transparent and self-explanatory (pp. 349-350).

Tharp and Dalton (2007) suggest a dialogical pedagogy that connects educational goals to different cultures. This suggestion reflects efforts to promote a balanced mix between traditional Confucianism and Western pedagogy for Taiwan and China (Shenghong & Dan, 2004), and Niu's (2007) observation that Chinese universities are receptive to incorporating "western psychological and educational models to guide its education reforms" (p. 88). The problem here, of course, is the absence of concomitant efforts being made by Western universities.

Of the international students attending higher education institutions in the UK, high proportions have homes in the Far East (Kingston & Forland, 2008). Their educational systems are often characterised as promoting passivity in students being teacher-centred, favouring rote learning or surface learning (Phillips, Lo, & Yu, 2002; Brown, 2008). It is also argued that these education systems emphasise learning as a one-time process for the young as a collective group (Kingston & Forland, 2008).

Similarly, Far Eastern and South Asian cultures are primarily collectivist (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Whilst it is important to beware of simplistic cultural stereotypes, it is also important for Western higher educational institutions to take into consideration potential and actual differences in the educational socialization of international students who enrol with them, and to question existing assumptions about thinking, learning and teaching processes (Holmes, 2005).

2.2 Western Pedagogy and International Students

A key challenge that international students who are unfamiliar with Western pedagogy face relates to the emphasis on critical thinking, self-expression, argumentation, and self-directed learning that is found in Western higher educational institutions (Brown, 2007; Russell, Thomson, Rosenthal, Huang, Silen, Uhlin, & Sovic, 2008).

The Socratic Method, which is often claimed to be at the heart of Western pedagogy, is argued to confound the expectations of many Eastern international students who expect their teachers to transmit information authoritatively (Beykont & Daiute, 2002). Specifically, Chinese international students are often said to prefer to think about a topic before they participate in a class discussion in order to save *face* (Phillips et al., 2002), since avoiding shame is important in Confucian culture (Kim, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Furthermore, Chinese students—even more than their Western counterparts—are socialized to demonstrate knowledge through terminal examinations (Phillips et al., 2002).

The consequences of such cultural dislocation can be academically and personally damaging. Hsieh (2007) provides the example of a Chinese international student who, rather than participate in class discussions, was silent in class with her American peers whom she believed overpowered her and judged her as "stupid and weird" (p. 384). She also believed academic staff labelled her as incompetent. As a result, this student adopted a negative self-concept as a voiceless and incompetent student.

Silence was the choice for one group of Turkish graduate international students in the USA. Their background was in a teacher-centred culture wherein students speak in class only when teachers allow them to do so. Although academic staff in the USA encouraged classroom participation, the Turkish international students abstained. They attributed not participating to linguistic barriers, cultural differences, and the attitude that academic staff and local students projected (Tatar, 2005). Tatar (2005) concludes that academic staff and local students should be more proactive in acknowledging international students and more active in including them in class discussions which, in turn, should be should always be closely related to prescribed pre-session reading material. Furthermore, academic staff should adopt more effective strategies for facilitating and managing class discussions rather than relying on spontaneous student engagement. Zhou, Knoke, and Sakamoto (2005) generated similar findings and conclusions to those of Tartar in a study of Chinese international students in Canada.

Pritchard and Skinner (2002) identified a problem that engulfed a group of international students who studied in the UK. The international students tended to delay responding to remarks made by academics out of respect for staff and to show that they were giving careful attention to what had been said. British students, however, talked rather than tolerate gaps in conversation. Whereas British students had to acquire patience as international students gathered their thoughts, international students had to learn how to eliminate gaps in conversation. The findings exposed the gulf in classroom behavioural mores between the two groups.

Academic staff who modify students' attitudes and behaviour can help moderate the effects of culture

on teaching and learning (Dedoussis, 2007). Brown (2007), for example, describes the way in which the frustration Western academic staff and international students sometimes experience by explicitly teaching the skills of critical thinking.

Critical thinking demands related study skills, learning styles, and taking notes (Peelo & Luxon, 2007). Asian international students who were accustomed to *text-based* teaching were deficient in the confidence and skills for reading, for analysing and referencing multiple authorities, and for formulating and justifying arguments (Hayes & Introna, 2005).

Davies (2007) argues that Asian international students are "less well-inculcated in western patterns of critical thinking" (p. 23) than their Western counterparts, which serves the interests of Western students disproportionately (Neri & Ville, 2008). It is argued that Western academic staff need to be able to explain the nature of Western pedagogy, and to communicate their expectations explicitly to international students (Hayes & Introna, 2005; Duff, Rogers, & Harris, 2006). In this context, university teachers' poorly articulated expectations equate with inadequate student supervision and this translates into negative academic outcomes and for international students in UK universities (Sovic, 2008) and Australia (Scanlon, Rowling, & Weber, 2007).

2.3 Academic Staff Relationships with International Students

Close interaction between academic staff and international students is necessary (Duff et al., 2006). Formal and informal interaction between academic staff and students has a fundamental role in academic performance (Mortenson, 2006), motivation (Hufton, Elliott, & Illushin, 2003), and identity formation (Scanlon et al., 2007). Students work harder when they know that academic staff recognise and respect their efforts and aspirations (Hufton et al., 2003). Students also flourish when they experience unconditional acceptance (Kohn, 2005), and understand their responsibilities as they interact with academic staff (Scanlon et al., 2007). Informal interaction reveals the norms for communication between students and academic staff (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008). This helps to foster functional relationships between academic staff and students which on turn contributes to the positive well-being of students (Hyun et al., 2007).

Ku, Lahman, Yeh, and Cheng (2008) showed that international students in the USA appreciated academic staff who *cared* about their students (Ku et al., 2008), noting that "*caring* may be interpreted as being available, working with the students and showing extra patience" (p. 375). Interpersonal *caring* is highly valued in collectivist cultures (Kim, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). This is reflected, for example, Chinese students' expectations of their teachers (Phillips et al., 2002). The ideal staff-student relationship in China is one of interpersonal closeness in which authority and "heart" interrelate, and wherein the teacher transmits knowledge and guides students in their personal development like a parent (Phillips et al., 2002, p. 353).

It is not surprising, therefore, that when students with such inbuilt predispositions and expectations do not establish a *successful* relationship with academic staff, they are at a higher risk of failure. In this respect, academic staff must consider how international students from collectivist cultures and local

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students, who will tend to be more individualistic in orientation, may have different needs (Ku et al., 2008). An illustrative example here is the reference that students from collectivist cultures show for written rather as opposed to oral feedback (Kingston & Forland, 2008).

This all points to the need for orientation programmes for international students that address the difference pedagogical expectations between Eastern and Western students (Brown, Kingston, & Forland, 2008) that forms an integral part of an ongoing institutional commitment to accommodating the specific, culturally based needs of international students (Brown, 2008). Higher educational institutions that do not devote the necessary time and attention attend to such basic needs hinder the extent to which students integrate and thrive socially, emotionally and academically (Prescott & Simpson, 2004). Strong evidence shows that international students who fail to adjust to Western pedagogy risk low grades or failure and are at increased risk of dropping out (Brown, 2008). In the face of evidence of the sense of neglect that many international students often complain of in Western universities it is hard not to conclude that the such failures to adjust and the regrettable consequences that flow from this represent institutional failings rather than shortcomings of individual students. Put simply, if Western universities aggressively market themselves to potential students in non-western cultures then it is reasonable for such students to expect that universities will show a serious commitment to proactively supporting them when they enrol in their adjustment to the prevalent social and academic cultures that are dominant in their institutions.

3. Method

The study required a deep involvement with distinctive but culturally diverse social group. This inevitably led to the selection of a qualitative research method within the interpretive paradigm (Creswell, 2007). The research problem was to define international students' experiences with Western pedagogy in a British university.

The research questions were open-ended and of necessity, were primarily exploratory in nature.

RQ1: How do international students describe their experiences with Western pedagogy in a British university?

RQ2: How do international students describe their relationship with academic staff?

3.1 Data Credibility and Trustworthiness

This study achieved ethical approval from the authors' and participants' respective institutions in accordance with formal institutional administrative and ethical guidelines. Ethical commitments include protection of participants' rights to privacy through the guarantee of anonymity which was achieved by the assignment of pseudonyms to the institutions and all participants.

3.2 Setting and Sample

Midland University (MU) is a medium size university that is internationally respected and achieves well on a number of indicators (e.g., The Complete University Guide, 2009) (see above, for more detail). At the time of this study approximately one in four of MU's students came from more than 100

countries outside the UK, with more than 50% of these coming from Asian countries.

Using non-probability and snowball sampling, the achieved sample was 18 international students. An equal number of female (n=9) and male (n=9) students participated in the interviews. The majority of participants came from Asia and the Far East, specifically, the countries of: India (n=1), Pakistan (n=5), Taiwan (n=4), China (n=3), Japan (n=1) and South Korea (n=1). The remaining three students were from Palestine, Hungary and the United States. Fifteen students were holders of postgraduate degrees, 3 had undergraduate degrees. Fourteen students were enrolled in the Social Sciences Faculty, 3 in the Science and Technology Faculty and 1 student in the Humanities Faculty.

3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The authors intended to explore international students' personal accounts of their cultural and social experiences. Qualitative methodology allowed the authors to delve into the participants' subjective and unique experiences using the case study approach (Tsui, 2003) and semi-structured (Ribbons, 2007), in-depth (Nisbet, 2005), informant style (Cooper & McIntyre, 1996) interviews. As such, descriptive data were gathered based on students' own words, own definitions and personal interpretations (Silverman, 2006). All participants were interviewed at least twice over a period of 6 months between 2007 and 2008. This enabled the authors to chart changes over time in participants' perceptions and experience. Data analysis was completed with the aid of NVivo 7. The informants were actively involved in confirming data interpretation through the process of respondent validation (Bassey, Creswell, & Ribbons, 2007).

3.4 Field Relations and the Development of Rapport

The term "field relations" refers to the quality and pattern of relationships that develop between researchers and study participants in the course of fieldwork, and the processes by which researchers manage their identities in order to maximize the trustworthiness and authenticity of data (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Social scientists use the term *reflexivity* to describe the process for understanding and attempting to control how a researcher influences the study context (Morrison, 2007). This involved the authors examining their personal values, assumptions, and biases (Powney & Watts, 1987; Creswell, 2007) and led to measures to control possible influences emanating from their age, gender, and race (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). In addition, the authors scrutinised possible influences associated with their behaviour and use of language in the research setting (Darlington & Scott, 2002). They were also sensitive to cultural interrelationships in their field relations and data analysis (Dimmock, 2007). The process continued into the data analysis stage where the researchers engaged in "a reflexive, reactive interaction between the researcher and the decontextualized data that [were] already interpretations of a social encounter" (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 368).

The first author, who is of Middle Eastern nationality, conducted the interviews. Her non-British status was signalled by her surname and accent and was declared to informants in the opening initial briefing with informants. It was felt that the fact she was not British would help participants be more at ease in portraying their feelings about their experience of British culture and interactions with British people

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than they might have been if interviewed by a British national. The interviewer strove for an informal interactional style in order to inspire trust and a willingness to share confidences (Cohen et al., 2007); to encourage informants to feel safe and at ease; and to minimize pressures that might lead to defensive reactions from participants (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). This informal approach was intended to encourage participants to share their authentic stories as active informants rather than as research "subjects".

To achieve sound relationships with all informants, the interviewer invested considerable time at MU, but was also careful not to identify too closely with informants as over-identification might have inspired them to self-censor their accounts in accordance with apparent shared attitudes and beliefs about the topic under consideration (Darlington & Scott, 2002). Ultimately, the interviewer's intent was to establish rapport with informants whilst maintaining neutrality in relation to informants' accounts (Ribbons, 2007). This involved employing the techniques of active listening and empathy whilst avoiding indications of approval or disapproval of informants' views and opinions (Creswell, 2007). This said, the interviewer took care to respect informants' limits when she probed their stories (Darlington & Scott, 2002) and offered them support, recognition, and positive reinforcement in the form of unconditional positive regard (Ribbons, 2007).

In order to establish an appropriate level of rapport the interviewer set out "to combine ease of manner, trustworthiness and approachability, whilst presenting the image of being of a status worthy of the subjects' time and effort" (Cooper, 1993, p. 263). This combination of attributes helped imbue the interviews with the quality of cordial exchanges between acquaintances. In addition, this approach reduced inhibitive influences that could invade formal, respondent style interviews (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). The approach also helped minimise the visibility of the power researchers inevitably have over research participants (Creswell, 2007). The importance of self-presentation, appearance, speech, and demeanour in field relations cannot be over emphasized as it has a major influence on establishing the integrity of data collected (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

4. Result

This study charts international students' experiences from when they arrived in Britain up to the time they were interviewed. As such, the following sections reflect the narrative given by these students, which are traced over a six-months period.

4.1 RQ1: How Do International Students Describe Their Experiences with Western Pedagogy in a British University?

4.1.1 International Students' Experiences with Western Pedagogy

4.1.1.1 Alien Approaches to Teaching and Learning

The students were unanimous in highlighting the point that the pedagogical approach they experienced at MU was very different that in their home countries:

In China, the teacher […] talk *to* us we just listen and take notes and prepare and recite everything he

tell us and recite textbook to have the examination and we pass. But here no examination and teacher want to talk *with* us and they will give us the hand-out and give us the questions and require us to prepare the questions before the seminar and we discuss (Bambi/Chinese).

Huge difference […]: we rely more on rote learning in Pakistan, [learning is] exam orientated [...]. Here it is through assessments where you get [the] chance to [...] [learn] through understanding (Fazal/Pakistani).

Chris (American) observed that the USA has more *hands-on* teaching and learning concepts. When he inquired about this issue, the answer he received from a British professor was "that's just the way it is".

[In the USA] for graduate students you would have a quiz every week to make sure you've absorbed the material [...]. Here there are no assignments, there are no quizzes, there are no milestones that you can say: "alright I've absorbed the material I understand it". There is just the final examination in all of my classes. But how do they [staff] relate to what is ultimately going to be the metric of my success or failure in this programme? I have no clue (Chris American).

Chris, as a Western international student familiar with Western pedagogy, amplifies a trying situation for international students who are not familiar with Western pedagogy.

4.1.1.2 Self-Expression, Argumentation, and Self-Directed Learning

Self-expression, argumentation, and self-directed learning dominate Western pedagogy (Huang, Silen, Uhlin, & Sovic, 2008). This group of students were, by and large, uncomfortable with self-expression and argumentation because of their expectations of teacher-centered pedagogy (Beykont & Daiute, 2002; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). It follows that argumentation was uncomfortable because these students were not accustomed to challenging staff authority (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; Hussain et al., 2007).

As for self-directed learning or autonomous learning, international students faced challenges in understanding and applying these approaches (Scanlon et al., 2007; Brown, Kingston, & Forland, 2008). There was a tendency for students to perceive such approaches as an absence of pedagogy:

[In Britain] we [students] teach ourselves (Bambi/Chinese).

International students coming from individualistic and collectivist cultures reported how staff members simply tended to provide "broad guidelines" and then require students to solve problems by themselves. In short, self-directed learning was construed in terms of a lack of support from academic and other staff. This was often described in contrast to their prior experience of university level learning:

[In China] you will feel that [the] teacher is standing behind you, he will support you [...]. But in Britain unless you do enough research [...] [that] you can discuss with the teacher, the teacher won't help you (Bambi/Chinese).

Furthermore, they tended to interpret the emphasis placed by staff on students' self-determination as a lack of interest in and *care* for students:

I don't think they [academic staff] care. You do it, you don't do it—it's up to you (Aisha/Pakistani).

Self-directed learning was also perceived as a waste of students' time because they felt unsure about

what they were supposed to be learning. They also often felt handicapped by what they saw as what they saw as staff refusals to give them direct answers and the tendency for staff to require students to provide their own answers:

When I was back in [China] the teachers will [sic] tell us all *what we should do*, but here [Britain] the teachers ask us to tell them *what we have done*, this is the biggest difference—completely different (Emma/Chinese).

This sense of disappointment and frustration at the perceived absence of clear guidance and support reflects findings from various existing studies of the problems faced by international students in Western universities (e.g., Scanlon et al., 2007; Skyrme, 2007; Sovic, Brown, Kingston, & Forland, 2008).

Equally important, international students complained about staff providing only broad feedback on student work. This echoes Haggis's (2004) assertion that higher education staff in Britain assume that students will know how to respond actively to broad feedback. Clearly, some international students do not know how to do this.

4.1.1.3 Class Discussions

Students coming from collectivist cultures (e.g., those from Pakistan, Japan and China) in this study referred to their unfamiliarity with and inability to participate in class discussions. In this way, they reflect Halstead's (2004) finding that certain non-western pedagogies subordinate critical thinking to "acceptance of authority" (p. 526).

According to Dana (Japanese), Japanese staff rarely engage students or welcome their emotions and ideas. Rather, Japanese staff expect students to mainly listen. This viewpoint was echoed by a Taiwanese student:

I think it's a very interesting thing, you can see the cultural difference in all of our lectures. You can see Chinese [international students] they don't speak, but other students [...] they have a lot of conversation with the tutor […]. It is our social culture [...]. In Taiwan and in China students seldom ask question or give feedback on [sic] the class. It is our culture (Dan/Taiwanese).

The consequence of this situation is marginalization:

We [Far Eastern international students] don't really speak much [...] because when they [staff] ask an open question we don't know how to answer, so the less we answer the less [they ask] question[s], or the less interaction between us happen[s] (Kala/Taiwanese).

4.1.1.4 Presentations

As in class discussion, students coming from collectivist cultures expressed their unfamiliarity with and/or dislike for presentations. Sandi (Taiwanese), for example, recounts how they hold no value for her:

I can't learn [...] [when] we just watch other students' presentations.

Kala (Taiwanese) elaborated in that presentations in Taiwan entailed copying textbook material and presenting it. Kala spoke of how in Britain she was required to present additional sources and her own

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viewpoint, which she found difficult.

4.1.1.5 English Language Proficiency

With the exception of the American student Chris, students expressed their need to improve their English language proficiency, echoing the findings of similar studies (Ku et al., 2008; Russell et al., 2008; Sovic, 2008). More directive approaches to teaching may make problems with fluency in language production less handicapping, but in a learning environment that places a major emphasis on real time *dialogic* interaction, the impact of language difficulties can interfere significantly with academic engagement and learning to the detriment of many international students for whom English is a second, third, fourth or fifth language (Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Zhang & Brunton, 2007; Brown & Holloway, 2008).

International students indicated varied responses to their English language problems. For Bambi (Chinese) improving her English language took priority over the degree. When she first arrived in Britain, Bambi felt "like a fool" and "stupid" in class although she did not discuss her weakness in the English language with staff.

All Far Eastern students reported that they did not have confidence in their English language abilities. They added that understanding English in class requires concentration and that they often did not understand staff during class, but felt too shy to ask staff to repeat an explanation. Similarly, the Hungarian student, Erssike, explained that her lack of English proficiency affected her ability to work collaboratively with local students in class. Kala (Taiwanese) complained that MU has not helped international students improve their English language efficiently.

4.1.2 International Students' Perceived Competency with Western Pedagogy

"Shocking", is how Kala (Taiwanese) first described Western pedagogy because "we don't [sic] know how to learn and we don't [sic] even know how to prepare". Gradually, she understood Western pedagogy as "a habit of learning". Nevertheless:

I don't feel like [I'm] learning gradually, because I don't know how to improve and sometimes I feel like maybe I should go out and have fun instead of learning, because there's no sign to show that I have improvement [sic].

As Kala depicts Western pedagogy in Britain, "basically it's a kind of interaction with culture, people, life and culture is invisible in education". Moreover, searching for academic help was a daunting task. Kala also expresses the difficulty in implementing Western pedagogy:

Every time he asks me: *Kala, do you understand*? I will say: *yes I understand what you are saying, but I don't know how I'm going to do it* because it seems that knowing is simple, but doing is another thing.

Western pedagogy remained the less preferred choice for many international students:

Since I was a pupil I have begun to accept the way the Chinese teachers teach (Emma/Chinese).

How they teach [in Britain] is not for me (Sandi/Taiwanese).

I'm not used to the […] studying style or the academic teaching style (Dana/Japanese).

I'm sort of like fish out of water (Chris/American).

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Existing research points to the fact that international students with origins in collectivist cultures find Western pedagogy to be alien (Brown, Kingston, Forland, Neri, & Ville, 2008). All the students in this study communicated a distaste for Western pedagogy in whole or in part.

4.2 RQ2: How Do International Students Describe Their Relationship with Academic Staff?

4.2.1 International Students' Perceived Relationships with Academic Staff

The international students coming from collectivist cultures, regarded staff in their home countries as *gurus of knowledge*, *parent figures*, and *spiritual leaders*. More often than not, MU staff considered themselves as *experts* or *specialists* rather than *gurus*. From the viewpoint of students in this study, the staff professed the intention to guide students to independent thinking whilst universally failing to see this individualistic intention as being culturally based and, therefore, potentially problematic for students coming from non-individualistic cultures. This has important implications for the quality of staff-student relationships in the context of a Western university which claims to welcome international students.

In this study, students expected MU staff to provide emotional security and support, to *care* for them (Ku et al., 2008). *Caring*, as we have already noted, is highly valued in collectivist cultures (Kim, 2001; Phillips et al., 2002; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). In this study students described staff as *uncaring*, *unfriendly* and distant:

The teachers there [India] are quite friendly […]. But [in Britain] I haven't seen [it]. Not all the teachers in this system are like not friendly and stuff, but there is still some element missing […] caring yeah, the *teacherly* feeling […] that's completely missing (Ameya/Indian).

Although the greater sense of distance between staff and students contributed to positive feelings of being much freer from supervision than they were used to, it also contributed to feelings if destabilisation.

The common practice of addressing staff informally was disconcerting for some of the students in this study (cf. Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008). Fazal (Pakistani) reported difficulty in becoming accustomed to calling staff by their first names because it challenged his expectations of appropriateness in staff-student relationships. He illustrated the problem by referring to the way in which male teaching staff in Pakistan are seen as *father figures* to be addressed as *sir*.

Formal and *distant* is how many students in this study described their relationship with MU staff and stated a preference for the more personal student-staff relationship in their home countries. Fazal (Pakistani) felt that MU staff were "more professional than humane":

The role of [a] teacher in Pakistan [...], he was [a] spiritual leader of students, he was [a] father, he was [a] teacher, he was [a] friend [...]. If I compare the role of [the] teacher here in Britain with [the role of the teacher] in Pakistan [...] there is [a] huge difference. The teacher here seems to be a worker in a factory because he seems to be more professional than humane. In Pakistan, he is more humane than professional.

This is why he claimed that "teachers in Pakistan are so many times better than [...] [teachers] in here".

Fazal continued, complaining at what perceived as the instrumentalism of teaching staff at MU:

Because the concept of a teacher in Eastern world is quite different than we have in the Western part of the world. An Eastern teacher is more than you know, just coming and teaching in a class, it's more like a father, it's more like a friend, it's more like a helping hand [...]. Here they [staff] are not more than just professionals—they are just professionals [...], just getting themselves ready for particular topic, deliver it successfully in a class, this [is] their job.

By applying Maslow's (1970) needs theory we can see how students are motivated to learn when they feel as though they belong and have their self-esteem needs met through a positive staff-student relationship (Snowman & Biehler, 2003). This, in turn, drives academic performance (Kohn, 2005; Mortenson, 2006). Clearly, for Fazal, the distance and formality in staff-student relationships he experienced at MU failed to meet his emotional needs.

There are some superficially paradoxical aspects to students' views on this topic. Whilst on the one hand they complained about the impersonal nature of staff-student relationships at MU, they also referred to the marked inequality in student-staff relationships in their home countries which they contrasted with the relative equality in their relationships with staff at MU. For example, whereas staff were always referred to by their formal titles in their home countries, at MU the status differences between staff and students were softened by the use of first names. The problem with the apparent equality implied by the informality of relations at MU is that it replaces the protectiveness and parent-like supportiveness of the collectivist model teacher with a set of obligations requiring students to be more self-directing and self-supporting. The effect of the abrupt transition from the teacher as parent to the teacher as co-worker model is to create a sense of dislocation and insecurity in students.

The Eastern international students in this study experienced negative feelings because of their unfamiliarity of how to operate based on their prior collectivist academic perceptions. The vast differences in how international students described their relationships with staff can be attributed to Eastern and Western cultural-based perceptions. This viewpoint is supported by other studies (Phillips et al., 2002; Pritchard & Skinner, 2002; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005).

5. Conclusion, Implications, and Future Research

This qualitative study investigated 18 international students' experiences of studying at a British University. A key finding is, the international students coming from both individualistic and collectivist cultures, struggled to cope with Western pedagogy and relationships with staff, though individual outcomes varied. Three of the students dropped out (two of which came from an individualistic culture) and for the remaining 15 students, final outcomes were not accessible to the researcher because the study ended whilst they were still engaged in their courses.

Students are increasingly studying abroad to improve their language skills, enhance their cultural enrichment, and to gain a competitive edge in the labour market. This study suggests that universities, such as MU, that aggressively market themselves to potential international students, must actively

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facilitate procedures for monitoring the experience of such students, and create channels for clear communication with this group.

The answers future research can deliver will prove interesting: Will the international students apply Western pedagogy to academic or professional endeavours in their Eastern cultures? To what extent could Western international students adjust to Eastern pedagogy? Can and/or should higher education institutions blend Eastern and Western pedagogy effectively? If so, then will higher education institutions serve all students better ultimately?

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