

Applying the Walking-with Approach to Understand Cultural Coping Strategies of International Students in the Higher Education Sector of the UK

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Abstract

The foreseeable plunging number of international students is worsening the financial crisis of the higher education sector in the UK. There is a need to explore new ways to find out how overseas students can be attracted and retained. Funded by the British Academy ECRN Seed fund, this study uses the rather novel walking-with interview method to leverage physical prompts (Mak et al., 2022) to explore the adaptation challenges and role of cultural practices (Bourdieu, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1986; Shove, Trentmann and Wilk, 2009; Warde, 2005) in students' coping strategies. Walking with while talking to 20 postgraduate and undergraduate international students along their daily routes to and from schools, shops, accommodations, places of leisure and part-time work, the study reveals trajectorial pattern of coping challenges and strategies. Most students found life lonely, scary and confused at the beginning amidst the maze-like campus and cities, even though physically they were surrounded by study peers, hallmates and university staff. Instead, mentors and friends from senior years or interest groups are more effective source of support and cultural socialisation. Surprisingly, peers from the same programmes and ethnic groups only come into the trusted, smaller social circle in later stages. Our en-route data also advocate sensational recollection of memories which add nuances to the well-aware challenges of language barriers and discrimination. Although they could generally write well in English, and they use practices and technical apps to improve speaking and listening skills, students are most troubled by the cultural sensing and knowing of the suitable channels, timing and content of social communications. This further worsens discriminations (possibly rooted from mis-communications) which happen beyond academic realm, involving also daily-life encounters with housing agents, landlords, service people at shops, clinics and utilities. Apart from continuous trial-and-error, seeking informal mentorship, window-shopping, exploring interests and practising hobbies emerged as primary ways of distressing and coping. More findings will be shared at the conference presentation.

Keywords

International students, Higher Education, UK, coping, adaptation, cultural communications.