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A small-scale interview-based study of sojourning students' expectations and experience of intercultural development.

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Abstract

The focus of this research is to advance understanding of the expectations of sojourning Higher Education students that might motivate them to seek out the opportunity to further develop intercultural competencies and to explore if and how intercultural learning and adaptation was required to adapt to the UK and their post graduate studies. Through investigating whether students' decisions to move to the UK for their studies are, in part, informed by the potential for intercultural development, and whether intercultural learning and adaptation takes place during their sojourn, this research offers a contrast to the notion of intercultural learning as a passively gained side-effect to the university student sojourn. This research was based on interviews with six post graduate sojourning Development Studies students for whom English was not their first language and a thematic analysis of the data collected from the interviews was conducted. The findings from this research show the potential for development of intercultural competencies to have been a key factor in their choice to study in UK HE and the students to have been proactive in their intercultural learning and adaptation during the sojourn. This dissertation then goes on to offer a brief overview of recommendations for educators to begin to support and promote intercultural learning and adaptation in the classroom.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

The internationalisation of UK universities continues to increase, and last year more than twenty percent of students studying in UK Higher Education (HE) were non-UK students (HESA, 2022), with that proportion currently being higher at the University of Sussex where they represent thirty percent of the student population (sussex.ac.uk). This increased internationalisation continues to represent a significant source of income for the UK, local economies and universities themselves (HEPI, 2023) and this financial incentive has led to discussion of the commodification of international students (Gill, 2007, p.168; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009). Such monetising of the value overseas students represent for HE institutions is commonly viewed in research as a barrier to the meaningful internationalisation of institutions (Young et al., 2017, cited in Schartner & Young, 2020, p.10; Schweisfurth & Gu, 2009) with the surrounding internationalisation and widening participation discourse hiding a lack of true interculturality and integration (Ippolito, 2007, pp.749-750).

The increased internationalisation of UK HE has been accompanied by narratives that often problematise international students around areas such as language, study skills and cultural adaptation (Morrison et al., 2005). This application of a deficit model would seem to be grounded in narratives of the West as the educational centre contrasted against 'the rest', who are often typified as having Confucian educational ideologies (Wang, Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2022, p.600), and relies on a reductionist view of international students in which they are often "lumped together uncritically as a group" (Morrison et al., 2005). Whilst this 'us' and 'them' divide (Tajfel, 1974; Holliday, 2021, p.104) may be reinforced by both the existence of different fees for home and international students and the labelling of the cohorts from a national perspective, it does little to acknowledge the "multiple identities, positionings and needs" of either group (Ippolito, 2007, p.749).

The increasing mobility of students and "broadening and deepening [*of*] the international and global connectivity of higher education', is a progression that is seen by many as essential (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010, p. 8) and increasingly there is recognition that it must be supported by increased intercultural understanding (Knight and de Wit, 1997; Knight, 1999 cited in Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010, p. 8). The promotion of intercultural

competence is not only required for improved knowledge sharing but will increase the future employability of students in an internationalised job market and of at least equal importance in a culturally diverse world, is the fact that "graduates are future neighbours and friends potentially impacting our lives at many levels" (Haigh & Clifford, 2010, cited in Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p.533).

Despite the culturally and linguistically diverse classroom culture in HE (Wang, Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2022, p.600), much research into interculturality seems to employ a definition of culture built on essential features of ethnic, national or international groups (Holliday, 1999, pp.240-241) by either focussing on a 'homogenised international cohort' or the struggles of a specific cohort identified by nationality. Furthermore, much of the literature seems to view any intercultural development that does take place as a side-effect of discipline specific learning, passively absorbed through contact with other cultures also defined through nationality. Firstly, this reductionist approach of assuming characteristics are determined through nationality does not in any way reflect the interactions I have had with students through many years of teaching and negates the diverse backgrounds, experience and communicative skills they bring with them. Secondly, a desire for intercultural development would seem to be, to some extent, inherent in making the choice to study abroad in an institution that markets itself as an international place of learning. As such, the conceptualisation of these students assuming a passive role in their intercultural learning is again at odds with the image I have of the sojourning HE students I have taught.

As UK universities become increasingly internationalised, the focus on differences epitomised by essentialist ideas of culture (Hall, 1996) would seem not to offer a theoretical framework that is particularly conducive to gaining understanding of students' interculturality. Here, the move away from equating culture with nation to a "broader, more flexible conceptualisation of culture" pioneered by critical intercultural communication scholars (Jackson, 2014, pp.2-3) would seem to offer a more fitting interpretation of the intercultural learning, adaptation and development sojourning students are engaging in.
To this end, for the purpose of this study 'intercultural' will be defined as "whenever or wherever we encounter cultural practices and values that lead us to position or reposition ourselves" (Holliday, 2022, p.7). This should allow for an exploration of the possibility that

students are making informed choices and proactively engaging with intercultural development from the non-essentialist view of intercultural development occurring through interaction in small cultures.

1.2 Overall research aim and research questions

The overall aim of this research is to advance understanding of the ambitions and experiences of sojourning students that might motivate them to seek out the opportunity to further develop intercultural competencies and aid them in the intercultural development required to adapt to moving to the UK and studying in HE.

The specific research questions being addressed are as follow:

- Does the opportunity for intercultural learning inform students' choices to move to the UK and study in UK HE?
- Is student expectation of intercultural adaptation and learning in line with their experience of UK HE?
- Did intercultural learning and adaptation take place during their sojourn?

1.3 Value of research

This research aims to provide a counterpoint to the prevalent research narrative of an international student population passively developing, or not, a degree of interculturality as a happy side effect of their discipline studies by investigating whether students are aware of the potential for intercultural development offered by international study and, if so, how they are adapting to the cultures they find themselves in. In the hope of providing a more complete picture of student experience, the focus is on the experiences of six sojourning post-graduate (PG) development studies (DS) students for whom English is not their first language. All of the students could be considered to be successful with their studies and I believe this focus to be of value in providing a contrast to a tendency in research literature to focus on students who are struggling to adapt to their academic studies. By avoiding 'methodological nationalism' and its focus on nations (Holliday, 2008, 2020) in favour of a small culture, bottom-up approach, I hope to not only provide insight into how students' multivarious life experiences effect their intercultural development but also to add to a growing body of valuable work focussing specifically on student experience of academic

culture and socialisation (Wang et al., 2022, p.600). In keeping with this aim I will not be providing information on student nationality unless it is pertinent to their experience.

The role of educational institutions in preparing students to "contribute towards tolerant and peaceful societies" in an increasingly diverse world is an important one, (Council of Europe, 2008, cited in Lantz Deaton, 2017, p.533) and it is the responsibility of education practitioners to gain understanding of student experience in order to create an education environment that promotes equity. To this end, conducting this research is of great value to me as a lecturer in providing the opportunity to raise my awareness of where essentialist narratives may inform my own thinking and that of my students.

1.4 Overview

Chapter 2 discusses a sample of existing literature on interculturality and international students in UK HE and aims to identify the key approaches being used in such research before proposing an alternative theoretical framework for use in this study. Chapter 3 will present the research methodology, first outlining the research objectives, before going on to detail the participants and data collection and analysis methods. Relevant literature will be cited to elucidate the reasons for the proposed method. The summary and discussion of the interview findings are detailed in chapter four, with each research question being addressed in turn and recommendations for practitioners made. Chapter 5 will conclude by summarising the findings of this research and offering some recommendations for future research and thoughts on the value and limitations of this study.

Chapter 2: Literature review

2.1 Introduction

This literature aims to explore the common theories, frameworks and themes being drawn on in research into the intercultural competence of international students in UK HE. The following section will aim to outline the potential for developing more nuanced views of students interculturality by questioning our assumptions about international student identity, the process of intercultural adjustment, and how culture is being defined in research into interculturality within UK HE. The potential for nuanced insights into the intercultural expectations and experience of international students in UK HE offered by the use of Holliday's Grammar of Small Cultures (1999) and Negotiable Grammar of Culture (2016) as a theoretical framework for this research will then be outlined.

2.2 Research into interculturality and international students in UK HE.

2.2.1 Intercultural development as transformative.

The transformative nature of the intercultural adaptation and intercultural learning necessary to successfully engage with international study is a common theme in literature focussing on international student experience of UK HE (for examples see: Gill, 2007; Gu, Schweisfurth and Day, 2010; Lantz-Deaton, 2017; Ramirez 2016; Schweisfurth and Gu, 2009; Tran & Pham, 2016). Gill's (2007) and Gu, Schweisfurth and Day's (2010) research provide two examples of the use of transformative frameworks, with Gill's drawing on earlier research by Taylor (1994) in which he argues that international student intercultural learning can be explained, in part, by Mezirow's theory of perspective transformation (Taylor, 1994, p.154). As with Taylor's findings, Gill asserts that as intercultural adaptation occurs, intercultural learning must also be taking place and, as such, intercultural awareness is developed and therefore intercultural identity is shaped (Gill, 2007, p.180). Her small-scale study of ten postgraduate Chinese students sought to focus on the positive aspects of international education from a "holistic perspective" (Gill, 2007, p.168) and specifically to investigate the changes these students underwent while studying in UK HE. Interested in student' perceptions of their experiences, Gill identified often profound, transformative shifts in student understanding of "the learning experience, self-knowledge, awareness of the Other, and values and world view" (Gill, 2007, p.167).

This view of intercultural adaptation and learning as transformative is supported by Gu, Schweisfurth and Day's (2010) two-year research study into the experiences of undergraduate international students across four universities. The intercultural learning experiences of the participants are found to have been "both transitional and transformational and to necessitate identity change". This research however ascribes two explanations to the change in identity of these students, viewing maturation as a transformational process alongside intercultural learning, with growth in both areas leading to identity change (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010, p.20). Both Gill (2007) and Gu, Schweisfurth and Day's (2010) focus on a fixed chapter of these students lives and, whilst both studies offer insights into the transformative nature of the adaptation and learning students experience in this context of UK HE, Gill's holistic interview-based approach perhaps provides a more complete view of the active role of the students in negotiating and adapting to this setting.

2.2.2 Intercultural development as a linear process.

As well as expanding on the explanations for identity change by considering the age of the international students in the research, the findings of Gu, Schweisfurth and Day's (2010) study also challenge the seemingly prevalent idea of intercultural adaptation as "linear and passive". Rather, the students are seen to have a more complex and fragmented experience of intercultural development in which their successful adaptation is brought about through their proactive management of a "set of shifting associations between language mastery, social interaction, personal development, and academic outcomes" (Gu, Schweisfurth & Day, 2010, p.20). This finding, to some extent, refutes the findings of Gill's (2007) study which stated that students followed a three-stage process during their year of studying and living in the UK. The first stage was a period of stress and anxiety seeming to result from a mixture of culture shock and lack of preparation for the experience of living and studying abroad, this was then followed by a period of adaptation to the sociocultural and academic norms of UK HE. The final stage saw the development of intercultural competence and a shift in student perceptions of self and Other (Gill, 2007, pp.170-171).

There is more than one model of intercultural competence that uses stages of growth to outline development, and examples include King and Baxter Magolda's intercultural

maturity model (2005), Cross' cross-cultural continuum (1988) and Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity (DMIS) (Deardorff, 2011, p.68). Lantz-Deaton (2017) makes use of the Intercultural Development Inventory (IDI) (Hammer, Bennett and Wiseman 2003, cited in Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p.536), which is grounded in the theory of the DMIS, to assess the intercultural development of both international and home first year UG psychology students. The IDI developmental continuum represents intercultural learning as a linear process in which people first move through three separate 'ethnocentric' stages, before progressing to two final 'ethnorelative' stages (Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p.536). Interestingly, the results of the study found students started at the lower ethnocentric stages and made very little progress, with most participants not developing beyond these ethnocentric stages (Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p.544). Lantz-Deaton acknowledges the limitations of the IDI's linear developmental stance, using Deardorff's non-linear Process Model of Intercultural Competence (Deardorff, 2011, p.67) to highlight the multivarious components intercultural competence involves, before concluding:

> The literature suggests that intercultural competence is a complex concept… …While the IDI places individuals on a developmental continuum ranging from ethnocentric to ethnorelative views, it may not account for the myriad of components discussed in the literature. (Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p.544).

Whilst linear models of intercultural development offer useful frameworks for the analysis of research data, they do not seem to allow for the complexity of intercultural adaptation and shifting identity but rather rely on a model of students moving from a monocultural worldview to a new intercultural space in which the lines of national cultures have been 'blurred' by globalisation (Holliday, 2022).

2.2.3 Points of interest and research gaps

Not only is there not an enormous amount of research focussing on international students' experiences of interculturality within UK HE, but much of it would seem to define culture on a national basis (Holliday, 2016, p.1). Whilst this may well be determined by the institutional labelling of student cohorts as 'home' and 'international', it should be recognised that this ignores the multifaceted nature of identity. Although the literature would seem to view identity as dynamic rather than fixed, in that student experiences of intercultural learning are seen as 'transformational', the defining of students' cultural

identity here could be seen to be somewhat essentialist and, as such, incongruous with the growing move towards the recognition of identity labels as intersectional (Benwell and Stokoe, 2012, p.25; Hall, 1996, pp.173-176). With this in mind, it would seem that, whilst there is much to be learnt from existing research into the barriers and opportunities for intercultural learning, holistic narrative research such as Gill's (2007) is of great value in providing representative accounts of individual student experience and acknowledging the multifaceted nature of students' identities. Such approaches provide some much needed balance to existing literature by addressing a lack of research into the diversity of the international student cohort (Peacock and Harrison, 2008, p.500) and, in doing so, draw into question any persistent notions of international students as a homogenous group.

Much of the research makes use of linear theoretical models of interculturality to track students' intercultural development over a period of time, beginning with them starting HE study in the UK and seeming to ignore any previous intercultural competence they may have developed. While Lantz-Deaton's (2017) research would suggest there are some students who start with little intercultural communicative competence, it seems unlikely that international students are arriving as ethnocentric 'blank slates' ready for intercultural learning. This may be influenced by student age but the possibility of students having prior experience of study, travel and work seems to be omitted from literature, as is the intercultural awareness they may have developed through the media, the internet (Holliday, 2016, p.4) and the possibility that their home and family may be neither monocultural nor monolingual. Furthermore, if we are to assume that students' judgement of what constitutes "effective and appropriate behavior and communication in intercultural settings" (Deardorff, 2006 cited by Deardorff, 2011, p.73) is informed by previous experience, it seems unlikely that the process of adapting to UK life and study is not marked by both advances and backslides as they navigate the complexities of daily life and all the potential for successes and mis-steps that entails. Much of the literature affords international students little agency in their own intercultural development, and there is a lack of exploration around student awareness of the potential for intercultural learning provided by study abroad and the extent to which their expectations of international study match their experiences.

2.3 Theoretical Framework

2.3.1 Small Cultures

If an essentialist view of culture and international student identity is to be avoided, then it is necessary to give careful consideration to how culture is defined. Holliday's small cultures (1999) provides an alternative to old essentialist definitions of culture by not drawing on essential features of ethnic, national or international groups but rather looking at any cohesive social group (Holliday, 1999, pp.240-241). In the case of this research into HE, examples of small cultures that could be of interest are classroom culture, institutional culture, specific discipline culture or student culture, among others. In contrast with essentialist ideas of large cultures which view "small, non-ethnic or non-national culture" as subordinate parts of large cultures, the small culture paradigm does not require small cultures to be contained within large cultures (Holliday, 1999, pp.240-241). Where essentialist ideas of culture focus on differences (Hall, 1996, p.619; Holliday,1999, p.240), small culture allows a focus on our commonalities through its concern with understanding the "cohesive process of any social grouping" and, as such, avoids the "reductionist overgeneralisation and otherization of 'foreign' educators, students and societies" resulting from a large culture/essentialist approach (Holliday 1994b, 1997a, 1999 cited by Holliday, 1999, pp.237-238). Thus, Holliday's notion of 'small' culture allows for the exploration of the complexities of intercultural development within a UK HE institution by providing a definition of culture that centres on the social groupings the students are both adapting to and shaping.

2.3.2 'A negotiable grammar of culture': a lifelong everyday view of intercultural development.

In order to interpret student accounts of their intercultural experiences, Holliday's (2016) framework of 'a negotiable grammar of culture' is employed. This framework is particularly appealing as it acknowledges that culture is changing and being shaped all the time and we are all taking part in it, a concept Holliday terms 'on-the-go'. He takes the view of intercultural interaction as any situation which causes us to "position or reposition ourselves as we encounter cultural practices and values" (Holliday, 2022, p.7), giving family meal times and institutional discourses as examples of 'small' cultures we have been navigating throughout our lives and in which we learn to negotiate the self and Other (Holliday, 2016,

p.2). The recognition of the transferability of what has been learnt from previous experiences of negotiating social processes seems particularly appropriate when trying to gain insight into students experiences of intercultural adaptation (Holliday, 2016, p.3). In Holliday's (2016) model, prior experiences or 'threads' are drawn on in order to find connections with others and navigate social groupings, and in doing so cohesive small cultures are created and 'us' and 'them' politics are diminished (Holliday, 2016, pp.4-6).

The strength of this 'grammar' is that it avoids taking a reductionist view of people by allowing for the complexity of their identities and prior experiences to inform their intercultural competence whilst also allowing for acknowledgment of how 'large' culture might interact with their ability to find 'threads' (Holliday, 2016, p.4). The pervasiveness of essentialist ideas of culture in the popular imagination could result in students having 'blocks' that impede the building of connections. Such, ideas of "uncrossable cultural barriers" limit exploration of commonalities and, through their focus on difference, ensure cohesive process is unlikely to progress beyond tolerance (Holliday, 2016, p.5).

Students do not only learn what constitutes cohesive social practice within each small culture they encounter from observing the "behaviour and misbehaviour" of others (Holliday, 2016, p.3) but also, through understanding these behaviours, are able to be part of shaping the culture by negotiating the rules and their identity within it (Canagarajah, 2022 cited by Holliday, 2022). 'A negotiable grammar of culture' places international students' in a position of equal ownership of the cultures they encounter as they navigate UK study and, in doing so, supports education practitioners and researchers in questioning any ingrained essentialist ideas we may hold around international students and their position in UK higher education. As a theoretical framework for the analysis of interview data of student experience, part of its appeal lies in it prompting researchers to notice and question the pervasive narratives around international student identity that could influence their (my) assumptions about why intercultural learning might be necessary and what might support or hinder intercultural development (Holliday, 2021, p.110).

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Objectives

This research study aims to explore the expectations and experience of sojourning students' intercultural development when moving to the UK and studying in HE and, as such, three key research questions will be addressed:

- Does the opportunity for intercultural learning inform students' choices to study in UK HE?
- Is student expectation of intercultural adaptation and learning in line with their experience of UK HE?
- Did intercultural learning and adaptation take place during their sojourn?

This chapter will set out the details of the research strategy selected to address the above research issues and the target population of the study, before outlining the data collection method and the framework for data analysis. Finally, limitations and potential problems of the research strategy will be discussed.

3.2 Research Strategy

3.2.1 Overall Research Strategy

Small scale semi-structured interviews followed by a thematic analysis of the interview transcriptions were used to conduct this research. The decision to use interviews as the research method was informed by the fact that the research questions are "realist" in nature, that is to say they are driven by an interest in hearing students' own accounts of their experiences and the interpretations and meanings they attach to them (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p.3354). As there were specific research questions to investigate, a theoretical thematic analysis was used rather than an inductive approach (Braun & Clark, 2006, p.84.). Thematic analysis was chosen as it provided:

> …a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However frequently it goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998, cited in Braun & Clark, 2006, p.79).

Despite the researcher having an active role in selecting the themes, and therefore not truly providing a means to "give voice" to the students (Fine, 2002, cited in Braun & Clark, 2006,

p.80), thematic analysis as a research method seemed to provide the flexibility to allow student narratives to remain key to the findings, as well as being particularly suited to research within the field of learning and teaching and the diverse topics that it incorporates (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p.3352). The research questions were used to inform the coding and identify the themes as coding "means putting aside preconceived notions about what the researcher expects to find in the research, and letting the data and interpretation of it guide analysis" (Corbin & Anselm Strauss, 2008, p.463). Thus, while the role the researcher has in selecting and reporting the themes cannot be denied, thematic analysis presented an appropriate research method with which to conduct an in-depth exploratory study of the meanings students bring to their experiences of living and studying in the UK.

3.2.2 Research population

The target population for this study was international students who had moved to the UK to study for a master's degree in the social sciences. More specifically, sojourning students following taught post graduate programmes and studying disciplines with a focus on development from two schools at the University of Sussex: Global and International Development Studies (IDS). In order to provide consistency with the time frame students had in which to adapt, the target population was limited to those studying full-time. The students who were selected could be considered to be successfully navigating intercultural adaptation as they were meeting the requirements of their specific disciplines and had actively sought out and participated in academic support available to international students in the form of English Language for Academic Studies (ELAS) workshops and tutorials. The participants had varying degrees of prior experience of DS ranging from no prior experience to professional experience and three of the students had some experience of international education (see appendix A).

A further criterion for participation was that students should be able to communicate their ideas with ease in a semi structured interview being conducted in English. Whilst Pavlenko (2007, cited by Prior, 2018, p.240) asserts that interviewees should be given the choice to use their L1, this was not an option as I would be conducting and transcribing the interviews and would need to work in English. However, as the participants were all students studying in a UK university and interacting with me in English due to my role as an ELAS lecturer prior

to the research, it could be argued that a "linguistic, and even cultural match" already existed (Miller, 2011, cited by Prior, 2018, p.240) through our prior participation in EAP workshop culture and dialogic tutorial culture throughout the academic year.

The willingness of students to participate also played a key role, as I contacted students who knew me through my lecturer position at the university. As qualitative research can raise ethical issues (Mason, 2002, cited in Brown, 2008, p.8), approval to undertake the research was obtained from the university Social Science and Arts Research Ethics committee. Students were then contacted and asked if they would be interested in participating, and it was clearly stated that there were no consequences if they did not wish to. The risk of ethical issues arising was further abated by the fact participation required students to volunteer and so this was a self-selecting group and students were told they could withdraw from the research at any point and likewise, could stop the interview at any time. Convenience sampling is clearly being employed here and while the sample is by no means random and we cannot know if the results would be applicable to a broader population base (Young, 2016, p.5m), the findings should still be of value in providing insights into the experiences of sojourning students in UK Higher Education.

Although this research focuses on an extremely small target population with very specific characteristics, there are some elements shared with the wider population of international students studying in UK universities. The time frame for adaptation is the same for all full-time masters' students and they are being asked to perform in a language that is not their first at the same level as students for whom English is their first language and, as such, are positioned within a group of students using English as a lingua franca (ELF). Even with these commonalities, there are many factors that impose limitations to generalising any findings and conclusions to be drawn from this research. For example, the ease with which the target population are able to communicate in English is not consistent throughout the international student population, and for many students, language level may have an impact on their experience. It is also worth noting that IDS and Global both have higher numbers of international students than many other schools, which may make integration easier than for

students in schools with lower numbers of international students were international students may be seen as a minority.

3.2.3 Data Collection

The case study site was Sussex University and interviews were used to collect data. This research was not intended to be exhaustive as, in order to provide meaningful results, a longer time span than available would be needed and it would be beneficial to cover all schools/departments. Rather, the intention was to allow for the sharing of what may be diverse experiences and perceptions, and as such, one-to-one interviews were employed as "a transparent means to elicit data that will inform understandings of the meanings that participants make of their lived experiences" (Atkinson & Silverman, 1997; Potter & Hepburn, 2005; cited in Roulston, 2010, p.203). Whilst any findings are non-generalisable, the use of semi-structured interviews should provide opportunities for student voice to remain at the forefront by allowing participants to share their experiences "in their own words" (Prior, 2018, p.225).

The use of small-scale interviews as a means of data collection was selected to maintain a focus on, as Prior (2018, p.228) states, "the connections and meanings speakers attach to their experience" or, as in Hua's 2016 (p.5z) study, the "thoughts, perceptions and experiences of the interviewee". In order to try to ensure focus on the experiences and interpretations of the students being interviewed, semi-structured interviews were employed. This approach allowed room for interviewees to direct the conversation and share their experience, whilst also answering some standardised questions (Gibson & Hua, 2016, p.2) so as to provide some structure and points of comparison between the individual interviews. As well as selecting an interview approach that allowed for the collection of data that provided insights to the research questions, it was also important to take into account my own communicative style (Roulston, 2010, cited in Prior, 2018, p.230). A more open-ended exploratory style (Prior, 2018, p.231) seemed to align well with both the research aims and my communicative style.

Open interview questions (See appendix B) were used to try to minimise the influence of the interviewer (Roulston, 2010, p.217) and allow the participant to reveal their "inner or

authentic self" (Roulston, 2010, p.204). In order to create some "disjuncture" between the research objectives and the interview questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.85), the language of the research questions was not used, but rather the students were asked about their experiences of study and social interactions. Some standardised questions were used to introduce the topics to be covered, however, decisions around which questions to omit and which to explore further were made during the interaction as the "ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview" (Kvale, 1996, p.145, cited in Roulston, 2010, p.202). The avoidance of a standardised interaction that might "pressure respondents into categories that fail to capture their experiences" (Schaeffer, 1991, p369, cited in Prior, 2018, p.227) was employed as a means of eliciting meaningful "first-person perspectives" (Prior, 2018, p.225) and hopefully reducing the impact of my preconceptions on the data.

Once the interview questions had been written the materials were piloted and assessed using Kvale's (1996, p.145, cited in Roulston, 2010, p.202) best practices for interviews (see appendix C). This approach seemed particularly suited to this research as interviews were being conducted in English rather than the interviewees L1, and so were in themselves an intercultural exchange (e.g. Briggs, 1986; Pavlenko, 2007; Prior, 2014; Roulston, 2010 cited by Prior, 2018, p.240). Indeed, Kvale's framework allowed for assessment of both the suitability of the materials and the meaningfulness of the interaction. Firstly, the focus on criteria such as the relevance, length, richness and spontaneity of interviewee answers (Kvale, 1996, p.145, cited in Roulston, 2010, p.202) provided a means from which to judge the clarity and accessibility of the interview questions. Secondly, the pilot interview provided opportunity for practice of interpretation of the interview as it was conducted, by raising awareness of the interviewer's role in verifying understanding of student answers. This insight into the usefulness of the interview questions was used to adjust them to ensure the responses gave a true representation of the interviewees' real-life experiences and reflections (Prior, 2018, p.227). When the interviews were then conducted recordings were made and transcriptions created so as to allow for ease of analysis of the data.

3.2.4 Framework for Data Analysis

In order to reflect the main objectives of this research, some structure was given to the interviews through the order of the topics covered. The set questions moved through the

students' experience chronologically asking them to reflect on various stages, beginning from making the decision to move to the UK to study and ending with their reflections on the sojourn experience as they complete their studies. The decision to impose some structure on the interviews was made to facilitate analysis of the data sets and provide points of comparison. Once the data was collected, thematic analysis was conducted on the full verbatim interview transcripts.

The data analysis followed the six phases laid out in Braun and Clarke's (2006, p.87) framework for doing a thematic analysis (see appendix D). The transcripts were read, highlighted, reread and rough notes were made before open coding was used to develop codes. Here only the sections of the transcripts identified as relevant to the research objectives in the initial stages of familiarisation with the data were focussed on. Once themes were identified, Maguire and Delahunt's (2017, p.3358) suggested questions for reviewing their coherence and distinctiveness were used (see appendix E) and the themes were then revised to identify "the 'essence' of what each theme is about" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.92, cited in Maguire & Delahunt, 2017, p.33511).

The identification of themes moved beyond the semantic to look at latent themes in the hope of identifying or examining "the underlying ideas, assumptions or conceptualisations – and ideologies – that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data." (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.84). It is worth noting, that while Braun and Clarke's six step framework would seem to outline distinct stages in the data analysis, the reality is that these steps overlap and the overall process is not a linear one (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.86). The "ongoing reflexive dialogue" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.82) required by the framework they have provided would seem to fit well with Mishler's (1986, p.112, cited in Roulston, 2010, p.202) assertion that, qualitative interviewing and data analysis as a research method, provides no absolute 'truth' but rather demands interpretation and the assessment of which interpretation is most plausible. In order to ensure interpretations of the data were meaningful and that sufficient information was available, follow-up questions were sent to participants where necessary, and they were given the option of replying by email or in a brief follow-up interview.

3.3 Limitations and Potential Problems

There were a variety of limitations and potential problems to be considered around the use of qualitative interviews as a research method. Indeed, interviewing itself is not "a neutral transaction" (Prior, 2018, p.226) but rather distinct from conversation in that participants' "situated identities" are predetermined by the very act of taking part in a prearranged interaction between interviewer and interviewee (Zimmerman, 1998, cited in Prior, 2018, p.226). Whilst these interviews were designed to collect data to provide insight into students' intercultural experience, Prior (2018) cites Briggs (1986), Pavlenko (2007) and Roulston (2010) as proponents of the idea that both language and interculturality are "*constructive of* and *constructed by* the interview interaction itself". It is therefore interesting to note that, the interview itself is another component of these students' intercultural experiences and, as such, demands of them an aptitude for intercultural communication.

In addition to the dynamic created by the interview context, the potential effects of the teacher-student relationship created by my role as a lecturer should be considered. Whilst my positionality could be argued to negatively affect the reliability of student answers and reflections, I believe it may have had benefits as our pre-existing educational relationship had allowed for the creation of rapport, which was essential for encouraging open and honest reflection (Atkinson, 1998; Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015, cited in Prior, 2018, p.239). Indeed, this prior experience of having worked with these students to support them in communicating their ideas in English may also have limited any discomfort around the questionable "status quo of L2 interviews conducted in the primary language of the interviewer" (Pavlenko, 2007, cited by Prior, 2018, p.240). The very fact the students had agreed to be interviewed would suggest they felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me. Another aspect of this pre-existing teacher-student relationship requiring consideration, was its potential impact on my role as an interviewer, as it could have been tempting to take on the role of conversation partner rather than actively listening and seldom speaking (Charmaz, 2006, p.25, cited in Gibson & Hau, 2016, p.2; Roulston, 2010, p.200; Kvale, 1996, p.145, cited in Roulston, 2010, p.202).

A further potential issue created by my positionality within the university was that preconceptions created by classroom experience and university policy could influence the findings. Whilst I attempted to counter this by selecting a research method that allowed for the participants, to some extent, to direct the themes of the interview, there were still many potential pitfalls. Ideas I have around the need for meaningful internationalisation of HE and the importance of interculturality could have resulted in interviewees finding themselves restricted by the questions I had selected (Prior, 2018, p.226). In order to counter this, as well as opting to keep interviews semi-structured, the questions were open and did not use the language of the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.85). I also tried to embody the concept of 'listen carefully and be slow to speak' (Roulston, 2010, p.200) in order to limit my influence as far as possible.

The possibility of my preconceived ideas influencing the research did not stop with the interviews but also had the potential to influence the data analysis. The use of semi-structured interviews was intended to ensure student voice was kept at the forefront of the research and so the key themes of the findings were determined by their narratives. This to some extent, also allowed for the possibility that the participants' accounts of their experiences were entirely individual and thematically diverse. According to Prior (2018, p.92), a common weakness in research within the social sciences is a lack of specificity in describing the data analysis, and so the application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines to the thematic analysis not only provided a specific procedure to follow but also allowed me to ensure I was checking my work at every stage and so limiting my influence on the selected themes. Maguire and Delahunt's (2017, p.3358) review questions (See appendix E) also provided an opportunity to recheck the findings. Once the themes had been identified the follow-on questions allowed me to not only gather any further information but also to check the credibility of my interpretations.

A further consideration around the credibility of the data was the reliability of participants' answers. In order to lessen issues caused by potentially faulty memories of their experiences (Walford, 2007, p.147, cited by Roulston,2010, p.203), a list of the general topics to be covered in the interview was included with the information sheet that was sent out to students prior to interview so as to allow them time to reflect. It must also be

acknowledged that interviewees' answers are subjective, influenced by life experience and only include what they are willing to share with the interviewer (Walford, 2007, p.147, cited by Roulston, 2010, p.203). Of further note is the fact that these perceptions are likely to be dynamic and alter with changing time and circumstance. This is reflected in the research objectives which focus on the students' own perceptions and interpretations of their experience of moving to the UK to study in HE. This research did not aim to identify a generalisable 'truth' (Mishler, 1986, p.112, cited in Roulston, 2010, p.202) and, as such, the research questions evolved following data collection and analysis.

Chapter 4: Summary and discussion of interview findings.

4.1 Introduction

Through analysis of the interview data three clear themes emerged:

- Discipline specific learning.
- English as a lingua franca (ELF).
- Interaction with diverse people.

In the following section, the interview findings will be presented in conjunction with the discussion of the research questions with the hope of maintaining a focus on student voice through the use of accounts of the participants particular experiences to explore these themes. Each research question will be dealt with separately and for questions 1 and 2 a summary of the key findings with information on the small cultures both informing and being shaped by the students' expectations and experience is presented in the appendices. For both question 2 and 3, the themes were linked to the small cultures in which the students reported experiencing them. It should be recognised that there is a good deal of overlap between the themes and the cultures they relate to, however, the cultures that emerged from the analysis of the interview transcripts were:

- Student culture.
- Seminar culture.
- Academic development studies (DS) culture.

Question 3 will report and discuss the student experiences and then a brief overview of suggested recommendations for education practitioners in response to the interview findings will be provided.

4.2 Summary and discussion of findings for research question 1: Does the opportunity for intercultural learning inform students' choices to study in UK HE?

(For a summary of the key findings see appendix F)

Not only do these students have an expectation of intercultural learning taking place during their studies, but this expectation would seem, for most, to inform their decision to select UK HE as study abroad will signify the gaining of intercultural communicative transferable skills that will increase their employability (Jones, 2013; Tran & Pham, 2016). By drawing on their prior experiences they have identified the communicative tools required to take part in

professional DS culture as the discipline specific knowledge necessary to gain entry or progress within the culture and the ability to communicate with diverse people in a global language. In terms of experience to draw on, the participants spoke of membership to a variety of small cultures (Holliday, 1999) from which they had extrapolated the requirements of professional DS, and for those who stated they had researched the HE options online, the concept of international study as a means of "improving student 'contacts with diverse individuals' to help develop their work skills for the 'global workplace'" (Baez, 2010, pp. 44-45 cited by Shahjahan, 2014, p.225) would likely have been promoted.

Whilst student 5 explicitly stated the need to gain a masters degree in order to progress in her career with:

> "I was starting to struggle with not having a masters, like… was something that was pushing me down because I was young, and I didn't have the master. So, yeah, it was starting to be a bit of a problem",

for others the value of completing it in UK HE was in showing their ability to live in another country and study in a global language, and through doing so signalling to future potential employers that they had the necessary communicative competencies for international work. Indeed, student 2's belief that "in order to be more professional internationally, I have to learn English" was echoed in five of the six interviews, showing a general view of ELF being one of the keys to gaining entry to particular professional fields and opportunities (Jenkins, Baker & Dewey, 2017, p.561). Whilst the identification of proficiency in a global language was largely informed by prior lived experience, for some of the participants there was also a pervasive element of native-speakerism (Fang, 2018; Holliday, 2021) in the idea that study in UK HE would provide the opportunity to "learn English in its classical form" (Student 1).

On the whole students spoke of their expectations that the British education system would be 'different' without seeming to have considered in what ways it might differ and student 1 held the idea "education in the UK, it's had to be, like… to be the world number one", placing it as, in some way, superior to that offered in her home country but without specifying how. It is possible these notions stem from prospective students checking university rankings, but it is also worth noting the prevalence in the popular imagination of ideologically constructed narratives that place the west as the 'steward' ready to educate

the underperforming 'rest' or 'other' (Hall, 1996; Holliday, 2018, p.79-80). The assumption that these narratives have guided the choice of some of these students would seem to be misplaced as the interviews presented not only awareness but clear critiquing of such politically motivated discourses. When student 4 explained her choice to come to the UK she stated:

> "…development studies, is originally from the UK. So, if I… if I want to study more, I
> I wanted to come to the UK. It's sad, but you had a history of colonialism… so…yeah, because of the reflection of that colonisation you developed the study of the development studies."

Questioning of inequalities created by the ideological placement of the West as centre was also apparent when Student 6 shared the fact that part of her reason for electing to study in the UK was to tackle the waste of resources in her home country created by inappropriate development schemes:

> "I want to like, engage in other cultures, to think about if we need this [*development project*], or because it's just one western [*development project*] and we have to just accept it".

The sharing of such views would certainly not indicate students who were set to arrive in the "lower (ethnocentric) stages of intercultural development" (Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p.532) but rather students who were actively opting to "encounter cultural practices and values that lead us to position and reposition ourselves" (Holliday, 2022b, p.7).

The findings around student expectation and experience of UK HE were in keeping with Holliday's (2016) argument that intercultural competence is not a new skill to be learnt by students, but rather involves them accessing the intercultural knowledge they already have from navigating everyday life in order to understand the behaviours of the cultures and interactions they are now taking part in. The specificity of the students' expectations correlated to not just the richness of the cultures they had to draw on but also to their relevance, with those who had prior experience of DS work, international study and the like, forming a more nuanced idea of what they expected from their sojourn. For those who were shaping their expectations from information gathered from their home country education culture, while there seemed to be an expectation of educational difference and interaction with diverse people, there was no real preparation for what that might entail. Student expectations of encountering diversity, for some included diverse communities in Brighton, and for others seemed to centre on the idea that interculturality would develop simply

through contact with different nationalities and speakers of other languages (Borghetti, Beaven & Pugliese, 2015, p.31). Regardless of the extent to which student expectations were informed by essentialist or non-essentialist ideas, all the participants had an expectation of intercultural development during their sojourn, motivated by recognition of the increasing demand on them to exhibit the skills necessary to adapt and communicate effectively in culturally diverse fields in order to compete in an international workforce (Jones, 2013, p.95).

4.3 Summary and discussion of findings for research question 2: Is student expectation of intercultural adaptation and learning in line with their experience of UK HE?

(For a summary of the key findings see appendix G)

The gaps between expectations of course content, educational styles and sociocultural elements of the sojourn and the reality of UK HE presented some challenges for students in negotiating the cohesive behaviours of the small cultures (Holliday, 2016, p.1) they needed to participate in. As with Gill's (2007) study of intercultural adaptation, finding themselves in an unfamiliar educational system and socio-cultural environment was a cause of some stress for these students. What was clear from the interviews was that the greater the gap between their expectations and their experience, and therefore the greater the need for adaptation, the more anxiety the students seemed to feel.

The students' expectations of academic culture, classroom culture and student culture, for the most part, were informed by prior experience of HE in their home cultures, and they were clear on where their expectations had originated, as with Student 2's comparison between his prior experience and UK HE:

> "that [home HE culture] was like a normal higher education system in my, my head. And then I came here and I find out its just two module a week. And the rest of the time I have to do reading stuff. Oh, okay… then it was quite challenging things. Yeah, but it was like, not my expected thing."

During the interviews the key theme that emerged around student expectation differing from experience was classroom interaction:

> "Oh, okay, so the Japanese style is like more lecture thing, just like, just lecture. You can just listen to the, you know, professor's lecture and write some essay. That's it. So, it's easy in Japan… here… …it's

> like more workshop, or like some discussion and… or like presentation time, it's, it's quite, you know, it's hard, but it's nice." (Student 3)

Whilst for the two students who had prior experience of UK HE the social practices of seminar culture did not come as a surprise, for four of the students the need to adapt to the demands being placed on them by their studies presented them with challenges in managing the amount of reading required and in understanding and negotiating the social processes of seminar culture (Holliday, 1999, p.240) and in participating in student culture.

The unexpected participatory, discursive nature of seminar culture seemed to present some of the students with 'blocks' (Holliday, 2016, p.5) to engagement through their concern with the potential for 'us' and 'them' groupings to occur. The students' self-consciousness of their "fragile… or not perfect English" (Student 2) would seem to have some degree of origin in ideas of language ownership or native-speakerism, perhaps to be expected given the prevalence of "standard native speaker ideology" throughout language teaching, HE and the world in general (Jenkins, 2007, cited by Jenkins, 2010, p.933). Within the small culture formation of a seminar, exposure to such narratives around global position and politics could be the cause of blocks to engagement by suggesting the potential for these students to be cast as the 'them' to a linguistically 'superior' 'us' and thus, to create questions around the students right to membership to the seminar culture (Holliday, 2019, p.4). Insecurities around the possibility of unfavourable 'us' and 'them' comparison also existed for three students around their lack of prior work experience in the DS field, where the students with less development experience to draw on could potentially be cast out of the 'us' group who merited inclusion through their membership to professional DS culture and the knowledge that came with that.

Concerns about the right to belong to academic DS culture could also stem from having come to the DS masters from a different disciplinary background, and here blocks to participation could be created through the negotiation of face issues (Jackson, 2014, p.262-264; Holliday, 2013, p.10) and the desire to show "the best version of [*oneself*] in front of the people" (student 6). This not only applied to interaction with classmates, about which two students described concerns about "struggling to catch up [*with*] the other classmates" (Student 6), but also to interactions with practitioners where blocks to engagement were

created by power dynamics in which the professor was in the hierarchal position of being able to question the students' right to be on the course:
"…so sometimes I can't reach out them because I don't want them to think like they made the wrong decision to let me join this subject" (Student 6). Many of the blocks to engagement with seminar culture would seem to have been caused by a lack of clarity around the expectations of interaction within the seminar context, often stemming from not understanding that seminars provide a space for exploring ideas rather than producing completed 'correct' answers (Alexander, Argent & Spencer, 2019, p.252). For students to be communicatively competent within a culture, the understanding of its social processes is, according to Holliday (2019, p. 1), drawn from "past experience of small culture formation" and this is where intercultural competence is exhibited. If past experience shows classroom interaction to be something very different to the current situation students find themselves in, then a greater level of adjustment is demanded of students through the ongoing process of small culture formation 'on the go' (Holliday, 2019, p. 1). What is clear is that where students perceive the potential for unfavourable judgement, be that based in essentialist ideas such as language ownership or in questioning their membership to the culture of the discipline they are studying, it creates blocks to engagement with seminar culture. Such blocks keep students from actively making use of their 'culture-making ability' to shape the social processes of the seminar and hamper intercultural exploration.

Throughout the interviews it was apparent that, as with Gill's study (2007, p.173), the students recognised a need to be proactive in adapting to a new learning context and this was particularly true of those who arrived to discover the reality of UK HE was very different from their expectations. For most students this meant academic responsibilities such as module reading and preparation for seminars were prioritised. Whilst being well prepared for seminars allowed for some management of potential face issues arising from a lack of knowledge, the workload was clearly a source of stress for four of the students and this impacted on their ability to participate in student culture, leaving two students describing the experience of having felt isolated for a semester. What can be seen from these students' accounts of their expectations is that for those with a wealth of relevant small culture experience to draw on, their intercultural experience endowed them with informed expectations. For those students whose expectations were further removed from their

subsequent experience, moving to the UK and studying in HE demanded a level of intercultural adaptation that created a degree of stress and anxiety as they made sense of their circumstances in order to understand how to operate meaningfully within them (Holliday, 1999, p.248).

4.4 Summary and discussion of findings for research question 3: Did intercultural learning and adaptation take place during the sojourn?

4.4.1 Contact with others.

The extent to which intercultural learning and adaptation to the small cultures the students needed to participate in occurred, was not only affected by the wealth and relevance of prior experience they had to draw on, but by their ability to draw threads to enable them to understand and negotiate the social processes involved (Holliday, 2016). Perhaps most evident from the interviews was the importance of contact with others. As well as being essential for staving off loneliness and meeting the students' "personal and emotional needs" (Hendrickson, Rosen, and Aune, 2011, cited by Yu & Moskal 2019, p.662, Gbadamosi, 2018, p.137), interaction with others allowed students to learn and adapt to unfamiliar cultures through dialogue, cultural modelling and participation (Gill, 2007, p.175). Membership to student culture allowed these students to manage the academic expectations placed on them through providing a space in which to position and reposition themselves as they encountered unfamiliar cultural practices and values and made sense of and adapted to studying in UK HE (Holliday 2022b, p.7). Equally as importantly for intercultural development was that, where friendships were formed, it was through a view of their peer group as "people just like 'us', but with different histories, geographies and structures, struggling to work things out just like 'we' do" (Holliday, 2016, p.11) and that seemed to shape a culture in which the cohesive behaviours were built around mutual support. This shared membership to student culture and its focus on common experience showed most students views to be non-essentialist with student 2 responding to my question 'do you feel you've learned about other nationalities?' with "…most of my friends are from like, the International, like Egypt or other countries. I don't know internationally, I think they all have a like, a different individual identity things".

The benefits of having sociocultural elements of the sojourn in place is epitomised by student 4's account of her experience. Her prior experience of UK HE meant she was aware of the potential academic and sociocultural challenges and so actively sought out opportunities for support with both by applying "for everything… as many [*university social/ academic programmes*] as possible" and so started her course with in-sessional academic support, membership to a community allotment and a fellow student 'buddy' through the university's buddy scheme in place. The buddy scheme in particular allowed her to both build a meaningful connection and gain peer support with her studies, and she described how her and her 'buddy' had developed a weekly routine to enable them both to keep on top of module reading:

> She was always helping me… and I was, I was doing the pub reading with her… we study… we do the reading while drinking beer. The best British friend here. Reading and beer and chips and gravy. Yeah, so I think I have a really nice and good enough depth friend (student 4).

Throughout the interview student 4's account of her sojourn not only took for granted that there needed to be a balance of sociocultural and academic elements in place to achieve her academic goals, but the building of relationships with a diverse range of people was an important part of her time in UK HE through which she was able to develop intercultural competence.

The wealth of prior experience student 4 had to draw on when setting her expectations of studying DS in UK HE and the peer support she sought out meant that minimal intercultural learning and adaptation was necessary. When reflecting on her sojourn, she had not only exceeded her expectations in terms of discipline specific learning but had also formed more interpersonal relationships than she had expected, and was surprised and pleased that they were from both student culture and the wider Brighton community. Overall, student 4's account and interpretation of her experience does not fit the image of an ethnocentric student arriving with the possibility of passively accruing some intercultural competence (Lantz-Deaton, 2017, p.544) but rather a student drawing on a wide range of experience and taking a proactive approach to finding support to manage the demands of her studies and actively seeking out opportunities for intercultural development.

4.4.2 ELF

Where the students' past experiences had formed their expectations of UK HE, the process of identifying 'threads' from their present (Holliday, 2016, p.12) was integral to addressing the gaps between expectation and the reality of UK HE and allowing students to successfully adapt to seminar culture and academic DS culture. One such area in which the lessons from one culture was used to develop understanding of another was around the use of ELF. For student 2, his observations of the use of ELF in student culture had a large impact on his participation in seminar culture, which at the start had been hampered by concerns about his English not being accurate and embarrassment about speaking in front of native speakers. When asked if anything had changed for him over the course of his time here, he described his attitude to English having evolved from feeling that "I have to speak appropriately, completely grammar things, and complete vocabulary things…" to now viewing English as:

> just communication tools for us, so I think I change the way to see English. Even, I didn't understand 100% of what the other says… but partly, if I understand partly, I can respond well… and if I does this wrong, he or she will respond, we can do it together. So, I will keep using my fragile English" (student 2).

Both student 2 and 3 described gaining confidence to participate in seminar culture through the shift in their attitudes to English ownership brought about through the social processes of student culture.

Given the block native speakerism places on the development of intercultural competence, this shift in attitudes to English language would seem to represent some fundamental intercultural learning and adaption. It is in keeping with Adolph's (2005 cited by Jenkins 2010, p.934) finding that this change in attitude to English is common for international students studying in UK HE and is not just brought about through the use of ELF in student culture, but also through observing the gap between native speaker English and the standardised version they have experienced through English language education. Unfortunately, this was not universal and student 1 reported having been subjected to the "prejudicial politics of Self and Other" (Beaven & Borgheh, 2015, p. 12, Holliday, 2016, p.3) when her English was ridiculed by an international student whose first language was English. The native speakerism being used here to place one student as culturally inferior to another

through language ownership (Holliday, 2018) had the effect of acting as a block to intercultural exploration (Holliday, 2016). This experience caused student 1 to feel that she had been stripped of the identity she held in her own country as an experienced professional in the development field and, due to her English, was instead viewed as "dumb" (student 1). Thus, the creation of an 'us' and 'them' block to culture formation undermined any sense of "belonging and camaraderie" (Jackson, 2019, p.145) that had existed.

Student 1's experience of being othered (Jackson, 2018, p.145) underlines again the importance of contact with others, as she had found little opportunity for social interaction in her accommodation and, in the absence of peer support, found that her confidence and general wellbeing were impacted enormously. She described participating in seminar culture less and questioning her right to membership to professional development culture despite having a decade's experience and having attained a scholarship for her studies on the back of her career history. The importance of dialogue about intercultural encounters was further underlined when during the interview, through recounting this experience of discrimination that had led her to "give up [her] dream" of working internationally, she reflected on the importance she was placing on the views of the people involved in these discriminatory interactions, saying "when you were asking your question, I just realised… what happened to me was about two, three people, what they are done to me. It's not that big. I didn't think… I just realised" and went on to describe their views as having come about through a lack of intercultural experience.

4.4.3 Discipline Specific Learning

The peer support provided within student culture also seems to have played an important role in these students' adaptation to academic demands by providing a space in which discussion of discipline specific topics and practice of interaction in English could take place with a much lower risk of face issues occurring (Jackson, 2014, p.263). The confidence students gained within the social processes of this culture allowed for greater participation in seminar culture and validation of their integration into academic DS culture. Student 2 and 3 in particular, described a variety of peer support such as students helping each other to address knowledge gaps or difficulties following lecture or seminar content, students

with prior PG study experience providing academic skills advice and those with professional DS experience acting as a "mentor" (student 2). As well as student culture providing a space for practising discussing new concepts and ideas outside of the possible power dynamics of the classroom, students actively engaged in strategies to enable peer learning and make workloads more manageable. Three of the six participants stated that they had formed reading groups with other students, with one group dividing the readings between them and meeting up to share notes in order to reduce their workload. Whether through putting strategies in place with their peers to meet the demands of their studies or through the confidence gained through peer interaction, support and feedback; participation in student culture had been a key component of successfully negotiating both seminar and academic DS culture and, further, for many had provided validation of their right to membership to academic DS culture.

4.5 Recommendations for education practitioners.

The insight gained from the findings of this research has some implications for education practitioners, in that the shared experiences of these students underline the potential for lecturers to ease the burden of intercultural learning and adaptation during their sojourn through creating space for dialogue around the social processes of seminars and discipline specific cultures and their conventions. The need for fundamental institutional shifts to occur for a truly internationalised environment to be created in HE can easily be argued (Gill, 2007, p.181), however, it is worth noting that through clarity around expectations and discussion with students about challenges and learning strategies, we can reduce some of the barriers to intercultural learning they face.

From the findings of this study, clarity about the nature of self-study is of great importance in supporting students in adapting to UK HE. The requirement for students to be autonomous in terms of recognising where they need extra support and the space seminars provide for asking questions and gaining clarity should be made explicit (Alexander argent & Spencer, 2019, p.252). Likewise, the expectations placed on students around reading should be explicitly stated as PG readers are expected to be fast and highly autonomous (Alexander argent & Spencer, 2019, p.133), and reading speed is substantially lowered for most readers when not working in their first language (Alexander argent & Spencer, 2019, p.128). There

may also be a difference in experience leading to an unnecessary workload, as exemplified by student 3:

> Yeah, for the first term I read, like all of the reading every time, so that you know I, I spend a lot of time to reading these. But now it's like, I just like pinpoints some article, and also like, I just get like what I want to get. So, it's quite selective.

Thus, it is important to make students aware of the need to identify their reading purpose, use global strategies for fast reading and read critically (Alexander argent & Spencer, 2019, p.140). The promotion of peer support through classroom interaction patterns and encouragement of students setting up study groups could also be of great benefit.
In terms of fostering a culture in which diversity is embraced, an environment that encourages the "open exchange of ideas and experiences of students" is essential (Wang, Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2022, p.614) and here the encouragement of more interactions involving discussion and reflection, both inside and outside the classroom is of benefit to students' intercultural development (Wang, Moskal & Schweisfurth, 2022, p.613).
As educators it is also our responsibility to question ideas, opinions or narratives that feed into an essentialist discourse and to raise awareness amongst our students of the potentially limiting effect ideas such as native speakerism can have on their learning. Of equal importance is to remain vigilant about our own opinion formation (Holliday, 2016, p.12).

Ultimately these minimal recommendations represent an argument for the teaching of academic skills and social processes to be integrated into subject teaching and for the formation of the culture of a classroom to involve some element of dialogue between practitioner and students so as to demonstrate their participation in its culture formation. This should be seen as desirable, as outlined by the findings of this study that students' choice to attend UK HE is informed by the potential for intercultural learning. There is also inherent with my recommendations an underling assumption that intercultural learning is desirable for all students. This assumption is informed by my own beliefs that interculturality is not just of benefit for all our students, both home and sojourning, but essential for participation in HE and the wider world.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and recommendations

5.1 Introduction

The overall aim of this research was to advance understanding of PG students' expectations and experiences of intercultural learning and development when sojourning in UK HE. The specific research questions were:

- Does the opportunity for intercultural learning inform students' choices to move to the UK and study in UK HE?
- Is student expectation of intercultural adaptation and learning in line with their experience of UK HE?
- Did intercultural learning and adaptation take place during their sojourn?

This conclusion will revisit the research objectives, summarising the findings and offering specific conclusions for each objective. Recommendations for future research will follow and the contribution of this research to providing insight into sojourning students' intercultural learning, adaptation and development will be clarified. There will then be a consideration of the limitations of the research and reflection on the research process.

5.2 Research objectives: summary of findings and conclusions

For all the participants in this research the decision to come to UK HE to study PG DS was informed by an expectation of intercultural development during their sojourn with regard to subject specific knowledge, language skills and experience of interaction with diverse populations. Whilst for some participants the goal of studying the masters was gaining entry to professional DS, and for others already working in the field, the aim was career progression, gaining a recognised UK HE qualification not only represented the means to accumulate the "forms of capital" required for the job market (Bourdieu, 1986, cited by Jones, 2013, p.98) but also provided the means to signal to potential employers that they had the skills necessary to adapt and communicate effectively in culturally diverse fields.

The extent to which student experience of UK HE met expectations varied depending on the wealth of experience students had to draw on when shaping them and ranged from students arriving with minimal need for adaptation to UK HE academic culture, to students arriving largely unprepared for academic demands being placed on them. The onus on self-study in UK HE was unexpected for four of the students and this presented challenges for

them in terms of participation in seminar culture, keeping up with reading, processing of discipline specific knowledge and, as a consequence of the academic demands, a lack of free time for social interaction. However, whilst there were some common themes around gaps between expectations and experience, they did not exist in each area for every student.

For most students, intercultural development occurred not just in terms of their understanding and adapting to the social processes of academic DS culture, seminar culture and student culture, but also with a shift away from essentialist views of language ownership and identity. Where intercultural communicative competence was further developed through the experience of their sojourn, it came about through their proactive and wilful engagement with course content and, as the interview data revealed, through contact with others. Whilst for most of the students their interaction with diverse people did not extend far outside student culture, it provided a space for peer supported learning and for the modelling and practice of social processes and reflection on the challenges presented by adjusting to a different academic culture, as well as allowing students to build meaningful friendships within it. In the case of a student being subjected to discrimination, the impact on her sense of belonging to student culture created blocks not just to participation in that small culture but to her sense of membership to other small cultures both within UK HE and outside of it.

However, for most participants, their ability to position and reposition themselves in order to adapt to the social processes required for participation in both academic and sociocultural small cultures showed them able and willing to negotiate “ever new formations of reality while being capable of negotiating the conflicts and tensions inherent in cross-cultural contacts” and, as such, showed them to be truly intercultural people (Ryan, 2006, p.21 cited in Jackson, 2010, p. 29). As the decision to study in UK HE was informed by the opportunity for intercultural learning in the areas of discipline specific knowledge, ELF and interactions with diverse people, then for almost all of the participants their expectations of intercultural development were met, and the students were able to reflect on the factors that had got them there. The importance the students placed on making connections with people to their intercultural learning cannot really be overstated but the

experience of developing intercultural competencies is perhaps best summed up in student 5's summary of their learning:

> I think it's just like… when you go to different places, you get more like easier for you to adapt to new situations, it's just like a muscle, you practice… practice…. so, every time, it's… like… easier to just, even you don't like things or… so you just adapt. I think that thing is good.

5.3 Recommendations

Firstly, the results of this research have shown a variety of possible barriers to intercultural development but more importantly have shown the students' proactive engagement in overcoming them. A focus in future research into the potential and efficacy of bringing the reflective process around intercultural learning into the classroom could be of great interest. Secondly, this study focussed on six PG sojourning DS students and, whilst it offers insight into their experience, more information on the intercultural learning taking place throughout the student population would be of use in gaining understanding of the barriers to and opportunities for intercultural development. There would seem to be value in building a body of research that centres on student experience around the everyday small culture formation they are engaged in and the sense-making that goes with it. Such insight could serve to foster an appreciation of the diversity of students by challenging the easy application of characteristics to students through the labelling of cohorts.

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5.4 Contribution to knowledge

Whilst it is hardly a revelation that the more experience in relevant fields a student has to draw on, the less learning and adaptation is required for them to achieve their academic goals, this research offers a counterpoint to the depiction of international students as a homogenised cohort or deficient 'other' and hopes to add to a sorely needed body of work that acknowledges the multifaceted identities and diverse life experience of sojourning students. In showing that these students are actively seeking out opportunities for intercultural learning and proactively engaging with their own intercultural development, I hope to provide a reminder that as practitioners, we must maintain awareness of political and ideological narratives that can feed into our assumptions around international student's abilities, interests and worldviews. The insights provided by the students about both the challenges they faced and the strategies that supported them in their intercultural learning

and adaption should prove useful in informing teaching practice, and certainly in informing my own.

5.5 Limitations

Thematic analysis meant a good deal of interesting interview content had no part in this and so while one of the goals of this was to recognise the individuality of our students to create a contrast to literature that treats international students as a homogenous group, there were some limitations. By its very nature, the thematic analysis focussed on commonalities and whilst this provides some useful insight, in doing so, much of the richness of these students' individual accounts and interpretations of their experiences was erased and, as such, the insight the interviews gave into these students as individuals drawing on differing life experiences and worldviews was dampened.

The nature of interviews and the fact participants often contradicted interpretations they have previously given as they recounted and reflected on their experiences meant a certain amount of interpretation of the data was required. While I was as vigorous as I could be with checking and rechecking the themes that were emerging, it should be acknowledged that it is impossible for me as a researcher to be truly objective.

5.6 Self-reflection

The interviews with these students were valuable not only as a source of insight into how and where students were engaged in intercultural learning, but also in being part of the reflective process I found myself engaged in with the students as they reviewed their progress from the point of making the decision to come to the UK for their masters, through to almost the end of their studies. The process of analysing the data from a non-essentialist perspective highlighted the need for me as a practitioner to actively consider and check where my assumptions about student experience stem from. Whilst some essentialist views (Western educational superiority, native-speakerism) are glaringly obvious, the nuance of when the use of national identity acts as a block or a thread required more consideration.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Participants prior education, professional and DS experience.

Student	HE background	Voluntary DS work	Work experience
1	Home country HE	-	Development in Mongolia, lawyer and human rights activist
2	Home country HE	Development project in Zambia	-
3	Home country HE	-	-
4	Home country HE with 1 year exchange programme in UK HE	Development project in Ghana	Worked for international corporation, freelance lectures to primary, junior high and high school pupils about international cooperation.
5	Home country HE and ERASMUS in UK HE	-	Education in Thailand: programme manager in government school.
6	Home country HE and additional journalism course in Jerusalem.	-	Journalism in Taiwan.

Appendix B: Interview questions/ topics.

(used selectively and supplemented or changed as necessary)

- **Why did you decide to study at Sussex?**
- **What were your expectations of living in the UK?**
- **What with your expectations of university/ your studies/ your course?**
- **What with your expectations of meeting other people/ other students?**
- **When you first arrived what did you find easy/ difficult?**
- **Who did you meet? What interactions did you have?**
- **Has anything helped you to cope/ adapt?**
- **Who do you usually interact with?**
- **How was the experience of studying in the UK the same or different to your expectations before you arrived?**
- **How was the experience of living in the UK the same or different to your expectations before you arrived?**
- **Is there anything else you would like to share?**

Appendix C: Kvale's best practices for interviews (Kvale, 1996, p.145, cited in Roulston, 2010, p.202).

• The extent of spontaneous, rich, specific, and relevant answers from the interviewee.

• The shorter the interviewer's questions and the longer the subjects' answers, the better.

• The degree to which the interviewer follows up and clarifies the meanings of the relevant aspects of the answers.

• The ideal interview is to a large extent interpreted throughout the interview.

• The interviewer attempts to verify his or her interpretations of the subjects' answers in the course of the interview.

• The interview is 'self-communicating' – it is a story contained in itself that hardly requires much extra descriptions and explanations.

Appendix D: Braun and Clarke's *Phases of thematic analysis* (2006, p.87)

Phase	**Description of the process**
1. Familiarizing yourself with your data:	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes:	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes:	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes:	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report:	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.

Appendix E: Maguire & Delahunt's (2017, p.3358) suggested questions for reviewing themes.

- Do the themes make sense?
- Does the data support the themes?
- Am I trying to fit too much into a theme?
- If themes overlap, are they really separate themes?
- Are there themes within themes (subthemes)?
- Are there other themes within the data?

Appendix F: Summary of findings for research question 1: Does the opportunity for intercultural learning inform students' choices to study in UK HE?

Figure 1: Discipline specific learning.

Theme: Discipline specific learning.			
Expectation of Intercultural learning	**Reason for choosing UK HE**	**student**	**Prior experience/ information being drawn on (if mentioned)**
Develop subject knowledge to better take part in development culture.	Reputation of academic DS in UK/ reputation of institution allows entry to/ progress within professional DS culture.	1	Professional DS culture, home country friends.
		3	Home country academic culture.
		4	Professional DS culture and academic culture.
	Course content fits beliefs around DS and so allows student to position themselves within professional DS culture.	5	Internet research.
	Course content in UK covers topics unavailable on home country course and so allows student to position themselves within professional DS culture.	6	Journalism culture reporting on development, home country friends, internet research, university literature.
	UK DS education believed to be superior to home country so allowing entry to/ progress within professional DS culture.	1	Professional DS culture.
		3	Academic culture.
	Study in UK/ US increases employability in home country.	6	Professional journalism culture, home country work culture.

Figure 2: ELF

Theme: ELF			
Expectation of Intercultural learning	**Reason**	**student**	**Prior experience/ information being drawn on (if mentioned)**
Improve communicative competence in ELF.	To communicate in an international DS culture.	1	Professional DS culture.
		2	Home country education experience, voluntary development studies experience.
		3	Home country education experience, travel.
		6	Prior home and international education experience.

Figure 3: Diversity of people

Theme: Diversity of people			
Expectation of Intercultural learning	**Reason**	**student**	**Prior experience/ information being drawn on (if mentioned)**
Reflect on the nature of identity through experiencing diversity in Brighton (students mentioned: sexuality, gender, cultural differences, freedom around lifestyle choices)	Develop ICC for work in human rights.	1	Home country friends who had studied here.
Communicating with diverse nationalities among student population	Develop ICC for international development professional culture.	3	

Appendix G: Summary of findings for research question 2: Is student expectation of intercultural adaptation and learning in line with their experience of UK HE?

Figure 4: Discipline specific learning

Theme: Discipline specific learning **Small culture: Academic DS culture and seminar culture.**			
Student	**Gap between expectation and experience**	**Challenge created by mismatch**	**Prior experience being drawn on**
1, 3 and 5	No gap: expanded prior knowledge, introduced new topics, enjoyed intellectual challenge.	-	Professional/ voluntary DS culture (students 1 & 4), online university information.
4	Expectations and experience of education system match but a mismatch of expectations and experience around the demands of PG study compared to UG study exists, enjoyed intellectual challenge.	Academic demands challenging.	
2	Previously held views challenged by course content.	Feeling prior learning was negated.	Prior educational experience, voluntary development studies experience
6	Gaps in knowledge: UG study had not covered the areas other students already seemed well versed in.	Stress around whether lecturers would feel they should not have been accepted on the course. Relevance of content for future work.	Prior educational experience.

Figure 5: ELF

<table>
<tr><td colspan="4">Theme: ELF
Small cultures: Academic DS culture and seminar culture</td></tr>
<tr><td>Student</td><td colspan="2">Gap between expectation and experience</td><td>Challenge created by mismatch</td><td>Prior experience being drawn on</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="4">1, 2, 3 and 6</td><td rowspan="4">Unexpected reliance on self-study: onus on seminars over lecture-based teaching.</td><td>Amount of reading.</td><td>Increased workload, lack of free time.</td><td rowspan="4">Prior educational experience, experience of home culture.</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="3">Sharing of opinions/ knowledge in class discussion.</td><td>Concern material has been misunderstood.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Concern language is inaccurate.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Concern other students or lecturers have been misunderstood.</td></tr>
</table>

Figure 6: Diversity

Theme: Diversity **Small culture: Student culture**				
Student	**Gap between expectation and experience**		**Challenge created by mismatch**	**Prior experience being drawn on**
4	Made friends outside of course and outside of university and had only expected to make friends with classmates.		-	Prior educational experience (UK HE), voluntary DS work.
1, 2, 3, 5 and 6	Unexpectedly difficult to meet people outside of course and accommodation.	Cause: lack of free time due to study pressure.	Loneliness and/or lack of balance between study and recreation.	Prior educational experience, experience of home culture, portrayal of UK HE and culture in TV and film.
		Cause: lack of university organised events in which to meet students from other schools.		