



Alina Schartner, Tony J. Young: Intercultural transitions in higher education: international student adjustment and adaptation

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COVID-19 has shed a light on what it is like to be international students and the issues that they face in higher education (Cheung, 2020). Although there has already been a burgeoning literature on international students' experiences, research in this area is largely fragmented and under-theorised, since different research fields (e.g. cultural studies, applied linguistics, social psychology, and educational research) have adopted different approaches to investigate international student mobility. Schartner and Young integrates a number of theoretical and methodological approaches to address this issue by presenting a conceptual model and empirical findings on the multifaceted experiences of mobile students, based on a research project in British higher education.

The book comprises three parts. Part 1 addresses the theoretical and methodological approaches of the research project presented in the subject matter, Part 2 focuses on the empirical data informing the new model of international student experiences, and Part 3 explores the implications and applications of the findings. Throughout Chap. 1, the authors contextualise their study within the current political and social circumstances, providing a rationale for how ecumenical approaches to interculturality best fulfil their research purposes. The introductory chapter also clarifies the meaning of keywords, such as 'adjustment' and 'adaptation', which have been used ambiguously by earlier researchers. Chapter 2 outlines previous research on the transitional experiences of international students. It explores the multifaceted nature of the issue, which requires academic, psychological, and sociocultural adjustment/adaptation. The chapter also summarises earlier findings on the major factors including linguistic and sociocultural resources that contribute to the successful transition of mobile students. The authors turn to a methodological discussion in Chap. 3 and emphasise how a mixed-method design can (1) address the dichotomy between positivist and interpretivist approaches to intercultural research and (2) synthesise both adjustment and adaptation, the process and outcome of transition.

Chapters 4–8 provide empirical data, both quantitative and qualitative, on the adjustment and adaptation experiences of international postgraduate students, which were

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collected from the authors' own research project. First, the *academic* aspect of intercultural transition is discussed (in Chap. 4). According to Schartner and Young, the academic adaptation of mobile students is determined by a number of factors 'both pre-sojourn and in-sojourn' (p. 79), while the academic adjustment of the students is depicted by a 'steady ascending learning curve' (p. 80), not a U-shaped curve as commonly believed. Chapter 5, which addresses *psychological* adjustment and adaptation, demonstrates that the experiences of international students are, in general, psychologically rewarding, especially for students who are equipped with strong agency, linguistic and emotional tools, and intercultural competence. Chapter 6 outlines the findings about *sociocultural* transition and highlights the linear growth process of sociocultural adjustment as well as positive relations between sociocultural adaptation and a number of factors identified in Chap. 2.

Following the chapters about each facet of intercultural transition, Chap. 7 explores the interactive relationship and conceptual overlap between academic, psychological, and sociocultural adaptation by calculating the predictability of adaptation indices. The book then addresses the retrospective experiences in international higher education by using the data from the alumni students, mentioned in Chap. 8. The retrospective accounts reveal how the alumni students' short-term studies abroad affected their personal growth in the long term. In Chap. 9, the research questions of the research project, repeated throughout the book, are revisited. A summary of the empirical findings and theoretical contributions of the conceptual model in the field is also provided. The final chapter, Chap. 10, highlights the useful implications of the research for policymakers, institutions, and students in international higher education.

The comprehensive nature of the book is its main strength and can be seen in the ecumenical approach taken to conceptualise interculturality, which integrates positivist and interpretivist viewpoints; the mixed-method research design, which is suitable for examining both adaptation and adjustment; and the conceptual model, which synthesises psychological, academic, and sociocultural transition. This consolidatory approach assists in addressing the paucity of the conceptual framework in the literature on international students' experiences. A similar endeavour was undertaken in a recent book by Jane Jackson, titled *Interculturality in International Education*. Jackson (2018) aimed to provide a comprehensive review on the language and intercultural development of ESL international students (students who use English as their second language) by placing a distinctive emphasis on the power relation in intercultural encounters. Meanwhile, Schartner and Young delve deeper into the adaptation and adjustment process, which centres around intercultural transition, by adopting a more encompassing paradigm on interculturality.

According to the authors, the distinctive educational value of the volume is that it serves as a timely response to the recent call for 'more inclusive, sustainable and ethically focused approaches' to internationalisation of higher education (p. 172). However, this statement is disputable. The recent paradigm shift in international education research rejects earlier models that neglect student agency by regarding mobile students as deficient, weak, and difficulty-coping subjects (Marginson, 2014; Tran & Vu, 2018). Although Schartner and Young also argue against seeing international students as 'victims of culture shock' (p. 172), the standpoint of non-agentic frameworks is still maintained in the theoretical foundation and the methodological approach of their study. For example, the two main background theories of the authors' conceptual model, the stress-coping and the culture-learning frameworks, only acknowledge agency in responding to the environmental changes but fail to acknowledge agency that intentionally produces challenging environments for self-development (Bandura, 2018). The problem-focused paradigm underlying Schartner and Young's book, thus, appears to be an ill-timed response to the emerging discourse, in

which higher education is viewed as students' agential, proactive self-making processes (Marginson, 2014, 2018).

In spite of its weakness, the book is a useful contribution to the field. It introduces a guiding conceptual model, which incorporates a range of contributory factors and adjustment outcomes. Providing a fruitful summary of international student experiences from the transition perspective, the book is recommended for readers who need an accessible and inclusive resource on the research on mobile students' adaptation and adjustment.

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