

The Need to Investigate Greek Students' Experiences in British Universities: The Use of Ethnography in the Identification of Such a Need

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The growth in international students coming to the United Kingdom has well been documented, but little research has been undertaken into the implications for specific national cohorts, particularly with regard to students from Greece. There is lack of research into the nature and persistence of issues faced by such students. This article presents the results of the initial interviews, which were held in order to decide the parameters of the research and to understand the sort of issues, which it would be helpful to investigate further. The article also underlines the importance of ethnographic perspectives in the identification of research questions in research.

Greek students, Ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews,
support mechanisms, British Universities

INTRODUCTION

The literature on international students' education in institutions outside their own countries has demonstrated that they encounter problems when they come to study in other countries and that these problems are complex in that they involve a range of different issues, which are not fully understood by those interacting with students from other countries.

There are pre-arrival problems, on arrival problems and problems that appear in the longer term. Institutions have, to some extent, recognized the need for better support services to respond to international students' needs. A number of studies have been carried out in order to identify the nature of the problems international students experience (for example, Okorocho, 1997; Cunliffe, 1993; Kinell-Evans, 1990). The profile of the students covers various nationalities both non-European and European. There are studies that examine the Chinese and Hong Kong cultures, in particular (Barker, et al 1991) but there are no studies that specifically focus upon Greek students' experience in British higher education institutions.

It is evident that recruitment policies need to be kept under review and that institutions should make use of the feedback current students offer. Studies have presented information about recruitment methods used in British institutions and have indicated the difference between recruitment and pre-arrival information (Warner, 1990; Stevenson, 1991) without, however, including evidence as to whether or not recruitment methods have proved to be useful to students in any institution. In particular, there is no qualitative evidence, which indicates how far the issues of concern to international students are satisfactorily handled. There is no discussion moreover of schemes which are directed to specific national groups of students, nor of strategies based on Information and Communications Technology (ICT). It would appear that many problems would be alleviated if improved pre-arrival strategies were introduced. Studies carried out by Stevenson (1992) and Rogers and Smith (1992) underlined the complexity of understanding recruitment

policies and the perceptions among substantial numbers of international students that improvements are necessary. Research lends support to the recognition that international students have invested much to come and study in the United Kingdom and that they have special needs so that Universities and Student Unions should take the problems seriously and provide services to make their adjustment quicker and less painful (McDonough, 1996; Hodgen, 1993).

As shown, there is an increasing body of evidence which attests to the problems experienced by international students but, for the most part, such studies are general and do not relate to students from a specific cultural background. The overall aim of the investigation presented in this paper is to understand better the issues related to the acculturation of international students, particularly Greeks and to examine possible solutions. The specific objectives of the initial research presented in this paper are to better understand the background of Greek students taking courses in the United Kingdom, to examine the nature and importance of the problems facing such students and consider ways in which the issues identified may be effectively addressed.

THE CHOICE OF THE INITIAL INTERVIEWS

The need for the study of the problems facing Greek students was established in the literature. This current paper describes how initial interviews were used in order to identify issues to be explored in later stages of the survey concerning Greek students' experiences in the United Kingdom. In particular, it describes the value of the ethnographic perspective in the identification of the research questions to be investigated.

Following close consultation of the literature, an initial research phase used 19 initial interviews in order to set the parameters for the most important issues faced by students from Greece. It was decided to base the interviews on an interview guide enabling focused interactions with individual perspectives.

Hoepfle (1997) argued that interview guides make the interviewing of multiple subjects more systematic; and they help to keep interactions focused. The interview guide can be modified over time and can provide a framework within which the interviewer develops questions, sequences them and decides which information to investigate in depth, or which questions the researcher has found to be unproductive and should be excluded from the aims of the research. According to McDonough and McDonough (1997) the interview questions should be written in exactly the way they are going to be asked in the actual interview. The basic purpose is to minimize interview effects by asking the same question to each participant. The interview is then systematic and the analysis of the data is easier since it allows the interviewer to organize the responses and pull together similar answers.

The weakness of this standardized approach is that the interviewer does not have the chance to cover any topics that were not anticipated when the interview questions were written. Moreover, the interviewer cannot change the wording of the questions or the sequence of them. Mindful of this problem, a semi-structured approach was adopted. Thus, the interviews had the structured overall framework described above but allowed the flexibility, for example, to change the order of the questions. The researcher remained in control of the direction of the interview whilst giving scope for more personalized responses.

The interviews were used to gather data in order to develop the framework of the study of Greek students' experiences in British universities. The researcher used the notion of ethnography to justify the choice of the interviews as a method to gather data.

Schwandt (1997) argued that ethnography is a particular kind of qualitative inquiry, which describes and interprets cultural behaviour and that ethnography unites process and product,

fieldwork and written text. Patton (1990) had adopted the same stance as Schwandt arguing that ethnography focuses upon the question: “What is the culture of this group of people?” For him the idea of culture is central to ethnography and the assumption is that every human group that is together for a period of time will evolve a culture. Atkinson and Hammersley (1992) observed that ethnography can be integral to social research and certain features were apparent through the use of the initial interviews.

Specifically, as Atkinson and Hammersley (1992) argue, ethnography places emphasis on exploring the nature of particular social phenomena. The initial interviews served as a means to gather information on Greek students’ experiences in British universities. Ethnography moreover tends to work primarily with unstructured data that has not been coded at the point of data collection. The initial interviews were carried out in order to proceed to the construction of the questionnaire. Investigation on a small number of cases is an ethnographic feature. The initial interviews were conducted with 19 students.

Sampling for these initial interviews was based on the notion of intensify sampling as Patton (1990) calls it. The researcher tried to select rich cases, which could manifest sufficient intensity to illuminate the nature of the problems. Patton (1990) argued that intensify sampling involves the possession of some prior information and considerable judgment. Some exploratory work was done by reading and reviewing the literature in order to determine the nature of variations in the situation. Much of the literature throws light on the experiences on international students from the Middle East and Asia, China and Japan. However, there is little research on students from Mediterranean countries.

The model of illuminative evaluation also helped in the sampling decision process. Illuminative evaluation treats each case as unique and enables each student interviewed to offer valuable support and unique data. Illuminative evaluation places primary emphasis on description and interpretation (Patton, 1990).

The analysis of these initial interviews was based on deductive and inductive analysis. The first part of the analysis involved deductive analysis by moving from the general to the specific (Holloway, 1997) and categorizing the Greek students’ specific experiences. This led to inductive analysis, working from specific cases, to a more general conclusion (Schwandt, 1997; Patton, 1990), helping the researcher draw conclusions to frame the structure of the next stage of the research. These two techniques were used as justification for the notion of grounded theory. According to Corbin and Strauss (1990) grounded theory methods involve a specific set of procedures for producing a theory of social phenomena. Data generates hypotheses and generative questions, which are explored through further data collection. Grounded theory starts with an area of interest followed by the collection of data allowing relevant ideas to develop.

ANALYSIS OF THE INITIAL INTERVIEWS

The questions used in the initial interviews were divided into four categories: pre-arrival information, on arrival, post arrival and suggestions for further support.

According to Patton (1990) a simple way to analyse interviews is by combining case analysis with cross case analysis. Case analysis involves the process of writing a case study for each person interviewed. Cross case analysis means grouping together answers from different persons to common questions and analyzing different angles and perspectives of the issues raised.

In this study, the researcher recorded the actual words the Greek students used in each part of the semi-structured interview (case study). Next, the data were organized in terms of similar patterns

and other emerging patterns (cross-case). This process was an essential part of the work since it allowed scope to look at the data from different perspectives.

The next stage of the analysis involved the process of identifying, coding and categorizing the primary patterns in the data, a process that Patton (1990, p.382) refers to as content analysis. This labelling of the kinds of data leads to a classification system. Patton argues that this classification system is very important because without classification there is chaos.

Direct quotations from Greek students were also used to provide further context for the analysis. The Greek students' quotations show different perspectives of their experience and throw light on the effect of cultural factors on the adjustment to a different academic and social environment.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS FROM THE INITIAL INTERVIEWS

The interviews were held in the universities of Essex, Brighton, Sussex and Bradford. They were held in private houses and quiet public places and were tape-recorded to prevent any loss of crucial data.

For each question, the main findings have been summarized and a number of direct quotations are included in order to emphasize the importance of the individual findings.

Qualifications in English and entry procedures

Most of the Greek students did not have very high qualifications in English. The majority of them (15 students) held the First Certificate in English, though some students held a higher qualification such as the Cambridge Proficiency in English (6 students) and satisfactory scores in TOEFL (around 560) and IELTS (6.5). The majority of them gained admission to their university on the basis of one of the above certificates in English or by getting satisfactory university entrance examination marks in Greece. There was evidence that students were unaware of the university's entrance requirements.

I wasn't aware of the procedures to get accepted in a British university. Some of my friends who already studied in the United Kingdom did A levels and entered a British university so I thought I had to do them.

Foundation courses and pre-arrival information

The Greek students were asked whether they attended foundation courses in Greece or in Britain and whether these courses were useful. They were also asked whether they knew enough about the United Kingdom and the British university they were going to attend including information about the general educational system, the program of specific studies and life in Britain.

Most of them had attended foundation courses in Greece (14 students) or in the United Kingdom (5 students). The Greek students' responses revealed that the majority of them were not satisfied with the preparation they received on these foundation courses. The teachers on the foundation courses in Greece largely provided information based on their own personal experiences of academic life in the United Kingdom, experiences that were frequently out of date.

Most students made inquiries about the reputation of different British universities with regard to their main course subject. A large number of them had sought specific information on living expenses in the United Kingdom and the different aspects of personal life in Britain. The most frequent complaint the Greek students reported was that the subjects they were taught in the foundation courses were irrelevant to the courses they were doing in the United Kingdom. Some Greek students were worried about how to relate to their tutors in the United Kingdom. Most of

them reported that they were not informed fully about the British education system and that they had to rely primarily on information from friends and family.

There appeared to be a lack of specific information and an inaccurate portrayal of tutors' roles and university regulations, which underlined the fact that many students perceived their preparation as being inadequate.

They told us that British tutors are strict.

The teachers in the foundation courses terrified us by saying things like 'if you don't submit an essay on time, you will get a zero'. However, I realized that I could get an extension as I usually do.

Some of the positive comments revealed what Greek students considered important to know before the commencement of their studies in the United Kingdom.

I was informed about the British education system in the foundation course in Athens. The structure of the courses there was similar to the British one. They were giving us papers stating our coursework and the assessment procedures.

Other sources of pre-arrival information

Students' comments indicated the variety of extra institutional information encountered by students coming to the United Kingdom.

I had a good impression of British education through the big flashy pictures and impressive advertisements in newspapers in Greece presenting studies in Britain as organized.

My English aunt has informed me. She explained to me the procedures to enter a British university and also said that if a student doesn't have money to study, the government is giving money to the student.

Additional information required

Students were asked to list any information they would like to have had before arriving in the United Kingdom. Responses suggested that more information on the specific course programs and on the learning context was needed.

It would be very helpful if I knew beforehand the technique of good essay writing.

I would like to know more details about subject courses and particularly terminology.

It was also clear that more information on British culture and life in the United Kingdom in general would have been appreciated.

I would like to know more about British culture. I believe that when British people come to Greece, their behaviour blends with the Greek mentality.

Expectations

Greek students were asked to comment on their expectations before arriving in Britain. Their comments referred to academic concerns and indicated that there was indeed a perceived lack of information particularly on British study methods.

I expected the teachers to help more than giving me the opportunity to search alone and study individually. I expected more teaching hours and more supervision.

Some students reported that they had not experienced adjustment problems although the adjustment process varies among individuals. This does not preclude the value of more descriptive information.

I did not feel as if I am in a different planet. I just had the strange feeling that I am in a different country.

I did not expect to feel homesick. At the beginning I could not wait to go back to Greece.

It is interesting to note that Greek students seemed to welcome any opportunity to meet other Greek students and some even suggested they would have welcomed Greek-speaking university support staff.

I wish there was a Greek agency at the university so that Greek students could arrange trips to Britain.

It would be nice if there was an experienced Greek person who could help us and guide us during our studies in the United Kingdom.

Impressions

Greek students were invited to discuss their first impressions of the first few weeks in the United Kingdom. Their experiences seemed to have often involved negative relationships with British students. Most of the Greek students reported that differences between Greek and British cultures made it difficult to develop effective relationships with native speakers.

I have real problems interacting with my British flat mates. Sometimes they are ironic towards Greece and what Greek students say in class.

I was shocked by the British students' amount of drinking every night.

Even though Greek students seem to enjoy each other's company, they admit that these close relationships have lessened their chances to practice English

Greek students should practise English a lot more. I wish there were fewer Greeks at the University.

It was evident that students were often worried about finding appropriate and inexpensive accommodation.

I had problems acclimatizing to hall life. I thought that the place and my other flat mates were dirty and I didn't like sharing the bathroom with others.

I am worried about seeking accommodation for next year and about my money budget since I find the cost of living in the United Kingdom expensive.

Some Greek students had difficulty in relating to the British education system where the relationship between tutors and students is less formal and more relaxed than in Greece. Some comments illustrated their misunderstanding of their university roles and their expected behaviour.

My tutors sometimes did not explain clearly what they expected from us.

Tutors seem to pay attention to British students and not to Greek ones. I felt uncomfortable and attributed this discrimination due to Greek students' deficient linguistic capabilities.

Many students experienced homesickness, which affected their ability to adjust to life in the United Kingdom.

The most important thing for me was to adjust socially rather than academically. I did not care about the courses at first. I was so sad.

A further important issue is that students experienced language problems, which they did not expect.

I struggled at the beginning speaking English. I thought that the English language is strange and different from what I was taught in Greece. I felt as if I had to learn another language.

Language skills

Listening

Not surprisingly many students experienced uncertainty about the adequacy of their English abilities. Students admitted having difficulties in understanding spoken English. Some particular problems are noted including issues about the pace of delivery, accents, study skills and communication with native speakers.

Due to a very long absence of English practice, at first I could just grasp the gist of the whole lecture

Not all my tutors are British; some of them were Irish, some Scottish implying strong accents.

Speaking

A large number of students reported that they lacked confidence and flexibility in speaking. They hadn't spoken English for some time and thus they were embarrassed to speak. They could understand what other people were saying but they could not speak. Some particular problems in speaking are listed below.

I had the tendency to pronounce the last syllable of the words and I used to translate Greek into English, which was wrong since Greek and British syntax differ.

It was an absolute shock when I had to present a paper in front of the whole class.

Writing

All students reported that they had problems in academic writing. They felt that these difficulties could be minimized if their tutors explained to them exactly what to do and if they had been taught how to write essays and reports before the start of the academic year. Some of the following comments reflect the ignorance of academic writing techniques.

I had the impression that academic essays are just compositions including only the students' ideas and opinions without any bibliography. Thus, the first time I wrote an essay I got a very low mark.

I expected my tutor to explain to me exactly what he wanted me to include in the report and even help me individually.

Reading

Students in all four universities said that they used dictionaries when they came across unknown words in their reading texts. In general, they did not seem to have serious problems in comprehending the written word.

How students deal with language problems

Students were asked to state ways in which they had dealt with any language problems. Interestingly, there was a significant uniformity of opinion.

Several noted that the best way to overcome any English problems is to talk to British flat mates or watch television in order to listen to spoken English. Some students went to lectures even though they considered them irrelevant to the course content.

Others noted that they tried to enrich their vocabulary by reading books and newspapers. As far as course work is concerned, one suggestion was first to read books with additional background information in their subject and then, if they still did not understand, to go to a tutor. Several added that if they had serious problems, they would go to their tutors who were regularly available and supportive.

Weekly timetable

Almost all students talked about gaps in between their classes, which in practice led them missing some of them.

It is not necessary to go to all the lectures since the lecturer is not explaining anything at depth during the lecture and thus the handout is enough.

My timetable is normal apart from the hours in between my daily schedule. It is tiring to wait for hours for the next lecture.

Subjects presenting most difficulty

Most of the students (16 students) said that they considered theoretical subjects difficult because they had to read a lot to understand the theory. Additionally, students stated that difficulties in understanding some courses were, in their view, sometimes related to the tutors' approach to teaching the subject.

Assessment is not always subjective in my literature subject.

There are no difficult subjects... there are interesting and not interesting ones. The difficult ones are those which the teachers do not do their job properly.

Assessment differences

All Greek students understood that the British assessment system is different from the Greek and interestingly all of them preferred the British one. They reported that the British is fairer in that it combines assignments and examinations. In Greece it is not compulsory to attend lectures, as in the United Kingdom and each academic year is divided into two semesters and examinations are held at the end of each of them. It is more difficult to get accepted into Greek universities but once students are accepted, there isn't the same pressure since any number of re-sits are permitted. Several noted that they do not like the fact that in the British institutions, if a student fails twice, he or she does not have the chance to re-sit the subject.

I like the fact that I can improve my mark by doing oral presentations and essays.

I like it when I can pop into my teacher's office whenever I want to and ask for help.

Relationships with teachers and personal tutors

Students from all four universities unanimously stated that their tutors were helpful whenever they asked for advice and further explanation. They did not go to their personal tutor very often because they did not need him or her. Some of them did not even know who their personal tutor was.

My tutor is always helpful and polite to me.

A minority, however, stated that some of their tutors were prejudiced against them because they were Greek.

One of my teachers even told in front of the whole class that it is not possible for a Greek student to master the language that well and she was always giving me bad marks.

Language support

All Greek students thought that language support was not very helpful. They mentioned that they went once or twice and they noticed that they were taught elementary English which they had already learned in schools in Greece. The following comments capture their complaints and their suggestions for improving the usefulness of such classes.

I suggest that these classes could be held as a combination of teaching advanced English and meeting other students practising English.

It would be better if teachers gave a general mark for the whole essay and a separate one for the English used in it. In this way, students would be more motivated to improve their English.

Other problems students encounter

Students had the chance to report other problems they had encountered at university.

Unfortunately in Falmer there are not any Greek videos or books in the resource centre.

SOME KEY IMPLICATIONS OF THE FINDINGS FROM THE INITIAL INTERVIEWS

The findings from the interviews revealed that there are indeed serious concerns expressed by Greek students about the support they receive when preparing to come and study in the United Kingdom. Specifically, Greek students are concerned about their academic success in Britain and worry about a lack of understanding of issues relating mostly to study methods and assessment. Insufficient pre-arrival information is a serious problem affecting the students' preparation. Students' false expectations concerning the new academic and social environment created problems for their adjustment on arrival. Students experienced culture shock and there was concern about their relationships with British people. Students encountered language difficulties on arrival and during their studies, especially in understanding spoken English and in academic writing. Finally, students thought that contacts with other Greek students could make them feel confident during the first weeks in the host country.

It is evident that the issues identified in the initial interviews appear to corroborate the implications drawn in the literature. It is recognized that students from Greece require a specially targeted approach. These issues were useful in the construction of the questionnaires, which were

subsequently piloted and distributed in September 1998 in the universities of Essex, Sussex and Brighton.

TOWARDS THE DEFINITION OF THE RESEARCH QUESTION

According to Black (1993, p.26) research questions should not be vague but specific. He discussed general categories of research problems, one of which is particularly relevant to this study. The current research problem results from previous accumulated propositions, which become the starting point for the establishment of a comprehensive model. There is evidence in the literature that international students experience difficulties when adjusting to the United Kingdom, but there is not much evidence on the effectiveness of support mechanisms directed to specific national groups.

This problem requires the collection of data to clarify issues and thus the researcher needed to define the topics, which should be further elucidated in the questionnaire survey.

It is incumbent on those involved in British institutions to ensure that efforts are made to understand better the nature of the problems experienced and the effects that problems have on the success of the period of study within the context of the various cultural backgrounds presented.

It was therefore very important that the framework for the questionnaire survey should be carefully designed to ensure that specific topics are researched in order to bring to surface answers that will smooth the transition of Greek students to the British cultural and educational environment.

CONCLUSION

This article seeks to discuss the methods adopted to achieve the aims and objectives of the initial study. It describes the focus of the initial research and develops its significance by framing it within a broader theoretical perspective. Results of the initial survey are presented in order to establish the parameters of the investigation and to set out the most fruitful lines of inquiry. The major study that followed from this initial investigation has been reported by Katsara (2002).

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