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Addressing the needs of international postgraduate students: the role of social capital

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Abstract

Self-evidently, international students are likely to have considerable informational and social needs when coming to study in the UK. This paper reports the findings of a small study of such needs among international postgraduate students in the School of Health Sciences. It was an interview study, with twelve students participating. Though the study was designed to support the creation of an online resource, the findings suggest that meeting those needs satisfactorily requires a multi-faceted approach. Both face-to-face and online processes are needed to help students to develop the social capital necessary to success in undertaking the course, getting to know the university, and adjusting to life in England.

Key words International students; postgraduate students; information; support; online resources; social capital.

Introduction

This paper reports the findings of a small research study of the needs of international post-graduate students in the School of Health Sciences. It begins with some background information, describes the study and presents the results. It discusses the findings in terms of social capital, a term denoting the resources (information and support) that accrue to individuals from their social contacts and networks. .

Background

The internationalisation of the university sector and the global skills agenda has led to increasing demand for higher education (HE) and UK post graduate programmes by students from overseas (Leitch, 2006; Ryan and Zuber-Skerritt, 1999). Many universities in the UK are competing to attract international students because of the revenues their fees generate (Bennell and Pearce, 2003). Moreover, the Prime Minister's Initiative (DfBIS, nd) aims to:

- attract 70,000 international students to UK HE with an additional 30,000 to UK FE;
- double the number of countries sending 10,000 students per annum to the UK; and
- improve overall international student satisfaction.

There is a body of evidence that attests to the problems international students experience studying abroad, and Pelletier (2003:9-10) identifies a 'taxonomy' of overseas students' needs, based on a review of the unpublished literature, which includes practical, emotional and cultural issues, linguistic, curriculum and assessment issues and finally issues relating to performance outcomes. Bartram (2008:660) describes the difficulties that international students have with unfamiliar models of higher education (e.g. 'academic and linguistic conventions in writing, study methods, independent learning and group participation'). Also, students may be more accustomed to a more deferential relationship with academics (Bates, 2008).

The current policy emphasis on Information and Communications Technologies (ICT) in Higher Education (for example, the E-learning strategy (DfES, 2004)) raises the question of whether and how ICT can be used to support the academic and social support needs of international students prior to arriving in the UK and throughout their studies.

Various models have been put in place. A number of websites exist or have existed to support international students (see Appendix 1 for a sample) and one in particular focuses on pre–sessional advice prior to arrival in the UK: 'Prepare for success', developed by the University of Southampton in conjunction with the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), is an interactive web learning tool containing twenty-three learning activities which aim to orient students to academic study in the UK, including English language improvement.

International students are often viewed as isolated and as experiencing problems adapting to the host culture (Sovic, 2008). Some universities, such as Edinburgh, have set up virtual international communities (Heywood, 2004), in the belief that a system of e-buddies/ambassadors (pairing up prospective international students with a student from the host University prior to arrival and thereafter) could help to induct students and provide an important contact with the University and academic life. A study of PhD students in the US highlighted the potential role of international alumni as an important source of social support by providing information on how to navigate the university system (Westin, 2008). The University of Manchester has further explored the use of online networks, alumni links and interactive resources to support the development of international students' employability (UKCISA, 2010, pp. 10-12). The University of Central Lancashire runs virtual international careers fairs, bringing together employers, students and alumni (http://www.nases.org.uk/content/424353/research_and_publications/prime_ministers_initiative_2/pmi2_employability_2009-2011/international_alumni_networks/university_of_central_lancs/)

This paper reports the findings of a small qualitative study which asked international post-graduate (IPG) students to identify their support needs, particularly those which could be met or partly met by appropriate ICT mechanisms. The study took place between July 2011 and January 2012 in the School of Health Sciences, City University London. It was funded by the university's Learning Development Centre, and was approved by the School Research Ethics Committee.

Aims and methods
The project aimed ultimately to develop an online resource to support IPG students both before they arrive at City University London and throughout their studies, and, involved interviews with current IPG students to inform the design of the resource. (As will become clear, the findings did not set a clear direction for such a development.)

On two occasions in two academic years, all current IPG students in the School of Health Sciences were sent an invitation to be interviewed. No student was invited on both occasions; 112 in total were invited. Nine responses were received. Three students who had not already replied to the invitation were reminded about the study by a lecturer and thereafter agreed, so that a total of twelve students (all female) were interviewed. Eleven interviews were conducted face-to-face, and one over the telephone, all using the topic

guide in Box 1. All interviews were audio-recorded, although the record of the telephone interview was inaudible, so the analysis used notes taken by the interviewer during the interview. Those participating were given a voucher to spend at a national chain of shops. Box 2 gives details of those interviewed.

General:
What course are you studying?
Have you studied abroad before?
Did you know UK / London before the course?
What support did you receive from CUL before arrival:
- before and during application
- finance
- accommodation

Academic support:
- level / expectations / requirements
- assessment methods / marks
- workload
- teaching methods, interactive, doing presentations

Social support
What should be included in online resources for international students?

Box 1. Interview topic guide

The transcripts were analysed thematically: the data were read and re-read, compared, and significant themes were identified and categorised.

Findings

Twelve students were interviewed (see Box 2 for more detail). They studied in only three of the nine programmes within the school and cannot therefore be taken as representative. In other respects too, this group was probably unrepresentative: for example, only one had had to arrange accommodation from abroad themselves, without the help of friends or relatives.

Normal residence:
N America 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6
Asia 7, 8, 9, 11
S America 10
Europe 12

Language
First language English 1-6
First language not English 7-12

Moving to England
Stayed with friend/relative: 1, 2, 5, 7, 9, 12
Living with partner: 4, 8, 9, 10, 11
Already living in UK: 6
Needed to find accommodation: 3

Box 2. Description of interviewees

The themes identified were:
- Information
- Guidance
- Social needs

This paper reports data illuminating the second and third themes. Data about information, the first theme, reflected important concerns about deficits in information provision both in general and online. Topics about which more information was sought included: programmes of study, academic practice, life in England, other students' views of programmes, and future work opportunities. We do not report these data in detail, as further itemising of the foregoing list would add little. This is not to detract from the importance given by those interviewed to information, and their frustration when it was not readily accessible. However, the second theme of Guidance offers indications of how information could become more accessible.

Guidance

Unsurprisingly, there were compliments as well as complaints about whether and how administrative staff guided students through both internal and external administrative systems (application and registration processes, arranging accommodation, obtaining a visa, registering with a doctor, getting a mobile phone account, etc.). Compliments were generally directed towards staff whose role was dedicated to supporting students. But there were complaints about departmental staff who appeared to lack appropriate knowledge.

> *'It seemed that the department was completely confused about what a visa even meant … my department just seemed very confused about the whole thing.' (S4)*

One clear theme was the value students placed on academic staff who took on the role of guide, helping students navigate the various information and bureaucratic systems. Some students had received help from a single member of staff who acted as personal tutor to all who studied on her course.

> *'Actually she was very helpful and she was - I could, any time, I could directly talk to her and I could email her and she was replying to me and very - She had a very good relationship with doing everything to come here to do, to sort out the things.' (S9)*

This might even include facilitating social contact.

> *'She help me to know some Arabic people and advise me to go to them, and this was helpful.' (S11)*

Students without such support made it clear that they would have welcomed it.

> *'You don't really know where to kind of go, you want to ask that question. And I did get that answer a lot of times, 'Well, go look in your handbook', and I'm like, 'Well, what are you here for then?' … like have someone kind of go over it with me… and say look, like this is the handbook, this is the way you find things… Because it takes a lot of time and effort to try to dig, dig these things out of, of like a website, and it may not be as clear, and there's different policies, they may not be updated. And so I just, I would always rather have a phone number that I can call and talk to someone … And I know it sounds like, well, you kind of want things sugar coated, and you're adults and you shouldn't, and I understand that. But it's still like, it's kind of scary enough to come to a different culture, to come to a different country … there are*

those few students who might say, 'Oh, I'm glad this person is there', to give you that kind of sense of security' (S2)

Other students supported the idea of such a guiding role being taken by other students acting as 'buddies'.

> *'The school I went to before also had many international students. And they had this buddy system so when they had international students coming they would get a volunteer student attached to them. … I don't know if that's possible when you only have one year because they would normally be students that were further along in study. But it could also just be a national, an English national that knows how things work here...' (S12)*

The importance of such guides was both practical and symbolic: they embodied a recognition of the special needs of IPG students, a recognition that one student felt was lacking:

> *'The teachers kind of, not purposely, but kind of ignore the international students in that, like just kind of assuming they have the same knowledge as the other, as the other students... So I think like if every, that every programme you could take the international students, as I said, for like an hour and just kind of address their concerns, and just kind of mention to them the way it works and, and kind of like where they can go to if they're encountering a problem or kind of, just, just I think, I think, just making them feel secure… There was nothing extra for me as an international student… like they didn't want to take the time to say, well, she's an international student, she may not know this.' (S2)*

A particular example of this was the marks system. Students from North America in particular were shocked that 70% constituted an excellent result. While they acknowledged that the marks systems were explained, they had found that simple information had not been sufficient: because the system was so alien to them, they needed to have a conversation about it, either with academic staff or with more experienced students, before they felt fully informed about and accepting of the system.

Social needs

Although there were plenty of comments, both positive and negative, on the quality and accessibility of information for IPG students, the data demonstrated a strong sense that information in itself was not enough. Students from abroad felt the need to be connected with others, even those (the majority) who were here with their spouses or who had friends or family members already living here.

> *'I definitely do wish there were more social things. I think London in particular is so daunting… So I have kind of felt like there could be more available in that way.' (S4)*

The structure of the courses being studied by our respondents was such that they reported few opportunities for social contact arising from classroom sessions.

> *'If you're a fulltime student, you have two modules, so you come on Monday and Tuesday evenings. And it just seems like everyone just leaves quickly after that, and there's no sense of community... I just wish that we could have some kind of maybe university-led or faculty-led downtime, if that makes sense. Just to go out for a drink … We end up just talking about our programme and our assignments and our professors … I'd like to meet other international students here who are in other programmes and to get a feel for what else goes on in this university.' (S5)*

> *'There's not a lot of classes. We only had six hours of lecture a week. So there was a lot of solitary independent research study time. It's not a lot of group work.' (S1)*

One suggestion was that classroom sessions could use group study more.

Some students felt much more connected because fellow students on their course had started a Facebook group even before the course began.

> *'Everyone was posting 'When do we start school, what does this mean, can someone show me where to find the schedule?' ... we are really good about sharing information.' (S3)*

Where students didn't have such a resource, they would welcome it. As well as facilitating contacts between IPGs, ICT could also be used to connect IPGs with others.

> *'If there was sort of a blog or something just for international students, and maybe if they had events coming up or whatever information can be there. Yeah, or yeah, I think, I guess the database would be such that they have international students and local students so even if there is a, via email, if there's some sort of information that's passed across maybe even that would be fine.' (S7)*

Such a resource could have a value after studying as well as before and during the course.

> *'It will be helpful to keep in touch with the older students, not the, all the recent ones, because this will make it very helpful to make a big community and keep in touch. And I think students will use it a lot, even if they go back to their countries, yes, I'm sure they will use it. For me, if I know anyone, I will keep in touch even if I get old, very old, I will keep in touch with them. And I think if you, if the university needs any help in the website, international students will be happy to support the website, for example, made a representative for each country, they will be happy to do it I'm sure.' (S11)*

> *'And I think in our field especially we need that, we need the networking, we need, because the jobs are so few and far between and especially because it is … an international programme.' (S5)*

'It's probably a really good idea to have a place where you have suggestions of what to do afterwards or students who have gone out and gotten work somewhere telling about that.' (S12)

Discussion

Though this was a small study focusing on IPG students in one school, the findings resonate with the existing literature as illustrated in the introduction: the practical, emotional and cultural needs of IPG students, and the pedagogical, curriculum and assessment issues that they face; the perceived value of information-sharing among students and alumni, for support and for networking in relation to future job opportunities.

Perhaps the most striking and important finding is the recurrent emphasis on the importance of personal interaction. Those interviewed again and again stressed (a) the need for and importance of personal help and support, whether this be university staff or 'buddies', even when the information sought was available on the website, and (b) the support that students could, and sometimes did, give each other, using social networking sites. Moreover, (a) and (b) were not alternatives: many of those interviewed clearly articulated a wish for both interactive online resources and easy access to personal support which might include but also go beyond the resources available online. Rather than seeing information as a distinct category sought for its own sake, they saw it as one aspect of the benefits of social networks. This emphasis supports Stiles' (2007) argument that online resources can be used in traditional and unimaginative ways (that is, as repositories of information rather than as interactive, generative sites of co-constructed knowledge); evidently, the risk is that if used in this way, they may lose value.

The literature explaining the concept of social capital (e.g. Putnam et al, 1993; Putnam, 2000; Coleman, 1988) has illuminated the links between social networks and the exchange of information. It has also examined the links between social interaction and social support. Social capital is a contested word with no agreed definition (Foley and Edwards, 1999; Lochner et al, 1999), but it includes (without being restricted to):
- distributing and accessing information via social networks;
- interactions between members of a group or community; and
- social support (individuals helping each other).

It should be clarified that some theorists exclude social support from social capital, although in practice much empirical social capital research includes it (Abbott, 2009).

Other elements such as trust and reciprocity are often emphasised as key to social capital, but turn out to be problematic conceptually (Abbott and Freeth, 2008).

Different forms of social capital have been recognised, including 'thick' and 'thin':
> *"Some forms of social capital are closely interwoven and multistranded, such as a group of steelworkers who work together every day at the factory, go out for drinks on Saturday, and go to mass every Sunday. There are also very thin, almost invisible filaments of social capital, such as the nodding acquaintance you have with the person you occasionally see waiting in line at the supermarket, or even a chance*

encounter with another person in an elevator." (Putnam and Goss, 2002, pages 10/11)

Our students were clear that they were looking for a form of social capital somewhere near the middle of the spectrum: instrumental ties that provided information and support for a discrete period of time in which they experienced particular challenges, rather than ties that created an enduring and tightly-knit community.

The term social capital is used to refer to groupings of very different sizes. Coleman (1988) generally focuses on small groups where members know each other directly. His illustrations (page S102) include: wholesale diamond merchants in New York; student activists; a market; the family; schools. Putnam, by contrast, discusses social capital in terms of Italian regions, American states or the USA as a whole (Putnam et al, 1993; Putnam, 2000)**.** Putnam also draws a distinction between 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital:

> *"Some forms of social capital are, by choice or necessity, inward looking and tend to reinforce exclusive identities and homogeneous groups. Examples of bonding social capital include ethnic fraternal organisations, church-based women's reading groups, and fashionable country clubs... Other networks are outward looking and encompass people across diverse social cleavages. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement, many youth service groups, and ecumenical religious organisations.*" (Putnam, 2000, page 22)

The social capital our informants had in mind was nearer to a small group, whose members share a specific interest and know each other (bonding). Some interviewees thought of social networks for all IPGs; others, networks based on their own course. In either case, networks would be relatively homogeneous because members have a similar focus of interest, that is, post-graduate study in a foreign country, and therefore have comparable information and social needs, though naturally course-based networks would have subject-specific interest and needs as well. Though in looking to include alumni, whom they would not have met, as an aid to job-seeking, they were including an element of bridging, one function of which is to 'get on' (de Souza, quoted by Putnam (2000, page 23): acquiring information and ideas from people with a broader range of experience, which can make others aware of opportunities. Such a function has been criticised as creating and sustaining privilege: in Bourdieu's definition, social capital is a resource for individuals, by which social advantage is maintained (Bourdieu, 1986, page 248). One conceptualisation of SC is 'the availability of resources which can be accessed through social relationships' (Ferlander and Timms, 2007, page 3), or, more specifically, 'the collection of resources owned by the members of an individual's personal social network, which may become available to the individual' (Cummings et al, 2006, p. 575).

The relationship between SC and ICT has been debated at length, often in terms of whether online interactions enhance, erode or supplement existing social capital (Wellman et al, 2001; Best and Krueger, 2006). But here, the emphasis is more one of complementarity: how ICT and social networks together provide time-limited instrumental social capital, for people brought together into transitory groups. Some research has suggested that online activity is indeed more conducive to the development of weak than strong ties (Best and Krueger, 2006), and that online activities are primarily 'lubricants' (Kobayashi et al, 2006) to

the sharing of information. Sessions (2010) suggests that the combination of online and offline interaction is stronger than one that only exists in one mode, which supports our informants' belief that both modes were preferable to only one.

Conclusion

Self-evidently, IPG students are likely to have considerable informational and social needs when coming to study in the UK. Less self-evidently, the findings of this small study suggest that meeting those needs satisfactorily requires a multi-faceted approach that provides parallel face-to-face and online processes for support as IPG students undertake the course, get to know the university, and adjust to life in England. The support they need is not limited to information, which may be provided online: students preferred face-to-face assistance to be available as well, to help find and interpret information and perhaps also to go some way to meeting some social needs. Departmental support should be thoughtfully planned rather than provided ad hoc or not at all; the school (and university) should also consider how IPG students could be supported in using online social networking to share information and establish social contacts.

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Authorship
The project was conceived by GC and designed by GC (principal investigator) and EJB. EJB obtained ethical approval and conducted some interviews. SA conducted some interviews and analysed the data. GC and SA drafted the paper, which was revised by all three authors.

Appendix 1. ICT resources for international students

Name	University /Host	Resource	Aim	Evaluated?	Country	Reference
The International Student project	The University of Manitoba's (UM) Libraries and Learning Technologies Centre	On-line tutorial	to create an online tutorial to support the development of international students' information literacy skills. Used broad definition of literacy to encompass the development of social and cultural skills in addition to information-seeking ones. Developers incorporated Web 2.0 functionality to enable students to interact outside of the classroom. Homed: The final product was placed in the university's new Virtual Learning Commons	Not stated	US	Braaksma, B Drewes, K, Siemens, G, Tittenberger, P (2007) Building a Virtual Learning Commons: What do YOU want to do? IFLA Conference Proceedings;, p1-17,
University of Glamorgan		On-line		Not stated	UK	Glamorgan - http://intsupport.glam.ac.uk/life/
ESMOS (En-hancing Student Mobility through Online Support)	University of Salford	On-line	A range of VLE and Web 2.0 technologies used to link students, ex-alumni and employers	Not stated	UK	Enhancing student mobility through online support networks http://www.ae.salford.ac.uk/extras/esmos/index.php

Developing alumni links and online networks to support international student employability	University of Manchester	On-line	The University of Manchester has been exploring the use of online networks, alumni links and interactive resources to support the development of international students' employability. As part of a PMI2 (see for e.g. http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/index.php) funded project the university has developed new initiatives including forums, web-chats, LiveGuidance technology, online networks and mentoring groups to build links between staff, current students and international employers and alumni resources have been pulled together to create international employability zones for 4 key country groups	Not stated		*www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/ppt/conference/.../a4_alumni_technology.ppt* link broken
Prepare for Success	University of Southampton and the UK Council for International student affairs (UKCISA)		*Prepare for Success* is an interactive web learning tool for international students preparing to study in the UK in HE. It contains 23 learning activities which aim to orient students to academic study in the UK including scope for English language improvement.	Not stated	UK	http://www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk/