'Vive la différence'? The 'international' experiences of UK students overseas

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Introduction

Various meanings have been recently ascribed to the growing number of international students populating university campuses around the world. The 'economic imperative' driving the internationalisation of higher education is frequently invoked - international students are often crudely termed 'cash cows', indicating the significance of their fee-paying status (e.g. Bayley et al., 2002; Lewis, 2005; Baas, 2007). As the public sector in many countries withdraws funding from higher education, and domestic enrolments are often capped, so the revenue generated by (unrestricted numbers of) international students becomes increasingly significant for both governments and institutions. An emergent body of research is openly critical of what appears to be a highly mercenary approach to internationalisation adopted by some institutions in particular, pursued at the expense of wider ethical concerns (Matthews and Sidhu, 2005; Waters, 2006; Baas, 2007; Sidhu, 2006 Fincher and Shaw, 2009; Madge et. al, 2009). International student mobility has been inextricably linked to broader processes of neoliberalisation and the privatisation of state education (Mitchell, 1999; Mitchell, 2003; Lewis; 2005).

There is, however, another perspective on international students and the meanings they elicit. Rather than focusing on the narrow and potentially pernicious 'economic' drivers of internationalisation, this view stresses instead the social and cultural 'richness' of students' experiences (Murphy-Lejeune, 2002). It emphasises the formative *possibilities* of international education. This is the notion that international students may embody an

emergent 'global citizenship', or 'global subjectivity', inculcated through their travel and encounters with 'cultural difference' (Hannerz, 1996). As young, cosmopolitan subjects (Rizvi, 2000), international students (and overseas-educated graduates) are 'internationally orientated and interculturally aware' (Findlay et al., 2006, 314). Their international experiences undermine nationalistic tendencies and prejudices (Hayden et al., 2000), and may help disseminate an ethos of care for 'distant strangers' (Madge et al. 2009). Borrowing from Vertovec and Cohen's (2002, 8) description of cosmopolitanism, this view evokes 'the positive, socioculturally and politically transformative meanings' of international education.

There are also more individualistic benefits to be gained from studying overseas. Murphy-Lejeune (2002, 51), for example, conceptualises these as 'mobility capital', to indicate the way in which 'the richness of the international experience' may translate into labour market success for graduates. An overseas education is an opportunity to accumulate valuable 'cultural capital' (Ong, 1999). In addition to such 'strategic' personal advantages, pursuing study abroad can also change one's life in more fundamental ways. Favell (2008, 11), writing about European mobility, describes: 'The European *movers*... [who] open up dimensions in their life, inaccessible to the national *stayers*: the people back home whose lives are immersed and contained in their own national culture'. An international education is often seen as a life-enhancing, formative experience.

Such progressive views have been widely espoused by policy makers and practitioners of international education. The British Council (2008), for example, which coordinates the internationalisation of UK education, talks of 'build[ing] trust and understanding between people worldwide' (n.p.), fostered through international education. The UK government's stance on international education has been recently articulated through the 'Prime Minister's Initiative on International Education' (PMI) (1999 – 2004), and the PMI2, which was launched in April 2006. The PMI2 is a five year strategy, with the aim of securing the

position of the UK as a 'leader in international education'. Whilst recognising the financial benefits of internationalisation, the PMI2 puts forward the view that international education 'is not merely an export industry. It helps us to build friendships with people from around the world, enabling us to understand more about each others' cultures and opening the doors to greater trade, investment and political influence' (British Council, 2007, n.p.). At the level of Europe, the Bologna process has attempted, amongst other things, to facilitate an emerging European identity, principally through the vehicle of higher education (see King and Ruiz-Gelices, 2003; Findlay et al., 2006). The Institute of International Education (2007), reflecting upon the US situation, said

'public officials, academic leaders and citizens are increasingly aware of the risks to America's national security, economic competitiveness and global leadership if the next generation of students fails to experience and understand foreign cultures and languages or acquire the self-confidence, independence, and leadership qualities that result from studying abroad' (IIE, 2007, 6).

There are, these would suggest, not just economic but also social, cultural and political imperatives attached to the experience of 'foreign cultures', of the kind instilled through an international education. Underpinning all of these debates is a common assumption that an international education invariably involves rich and intense inter-cultural encounters. Indeed, this has been the basis of a large number of (predominately) psychological and medical studies on 'culture shock' and adaptation processes amongst international students (Townsend and Wan, 2007; Zhou et al., 2008; Brown, 2009).

However, countervailing arguments have also recently emerged, suggesting that whilst an international education has the *potential* to engender cosmopolitanism and a new 'global consciousness' amongst students, this generally does not occur in practice (Matthews and Sidhu, 2005). A number of recent studies have concluded that overseas students rarely 'mix'

with individuals from the host society (Candery et al., 2008; Ehrenreich, 2008; Tsoukalas, 2008). When cultural mixing does occur, it is usually within the confines of an 'international student community'. Fincher and Shaw (2009), for example, show the extent to which institutional factors have enforced the *segregation* of international students from 'wider society' in Melbourne, Australia. Work by Collins (2008) has similarly demonstrated the reality of social and cultural segregation for international students in Auckland, New Zealand, although in this case separation occurred through 'choice'. Despite the fact that cultural 'mixing' is widely considered an essential component of any international educational experience (Hayden and Thompson, 1997), a mounting body of evidence therefore suggests that international students' exposure to 'difference' when living and studying abroad is somewhat restricted.

Other, related academic literature dealing with elite cosmopolitanism also challenges assumptions about the inherently 'international' nature of overseas experiences. Research on this topic has shown that transnational and supposedly 'cosmopolitan' expatriate elites often live and work in social and cultural isolation (Beaverstock, 1996; Hardill, 2004; Yeoh and Willis, 2005). If anything, cultural differences are heightened (rather than diminished) in this environment. In discussing the everyday experiences of transnational businessmen, Ley (2004, 157) describes a 'circumscribed lifeworld [...] the social geography of the transnational elite may be highly localized, restricted to particular territories'. Waters (2007) has discussed the ways in which international schools in Hong Kong may actively create a 'transnational', internationally mobile elite group of youngsters by inculcating them into similar social networks and mores. These individuals, however, form an exclusive and impenetrable 'club'. International education does not, in this context, work to break down social barriers and expose individuals to cultural 'difference'; rather it serves to create social

networks that limit experiences of difference and maximise encounters with 'people like themselves'. Ultimately, it functions to ensure the social reproduction of class status.

In this paper, and emerging out of these debates, we examine the 'international' nature of students' intentions and experiences, drawing upon a study of 85 British students and graduates. Very little work on international students has considered those of British origin. Extant research has tended to assume that international students flow in one direction only; from non-English speaking, non-Western countries, to English speaking, Western locations. Consequently, a focus on student mobilities and how these intersect with cultural identity has stressed the 'Westernisation' of international students (Rizvi, 2000). There has been little room for a discussion of 'Western' students (e.g. students from the UK) and their encounters with other Western or non-Western environments (although see related work on 'gap years' and overseas voluntary work, for example, Jones, 2008). It is possible, of course, that British citizens make 'exceptional' international students, and that our findings speak more to the mentality of contemporary 'Britishness' than they do to the experiences and views of international students more generally. However, we use this example to interrogate and expose various persistent assumptions around international education and the 'international student experience'.

In what follows, we provide some brief context and background to the recent international mobility of UK students, before describing our methodology and key characteristics of our sample. We then discuss our findings in three main parts: first, we highlight the decisive influence of *the media* on students' thinking about overseas study. Media-derived images have made certain overseas locations seem familiar (and therefore desirable) to students, lessening the anticipation of 'culture shock'. The work of theorist Arjun Appadurai (1996) has been particularly helpful in conceptualising this apparent link between educational migration and popular media. Appadurai posits the role of the 'imagination' in driving

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contemporary migration, and emphasises the importance of global media images in creating a 'sense' of distant places. In the second part of the paper, we discuss students' actual encounters with 'cultural difference' when studying overseas. These encounters, we discovered, were commonly confined to a relatively 'closed' international student community. Here, theoretical ideas concerning the creation of cosmopolitan elites (such as Sklair's (2001) 'transnational capitalist class'), with tightly bound social networks and similar social outlooks, are apposite. By affecting separation through segregation in an international student community, overseas study may in fact produce a distinctive and homogeneous 'class' of privileged individuals that, after Lasch (quoted in Vertovec and Cohen, 2002), have more in common with each other than they do with many of their 'fellow countrymen'. In the final section of the paper, we consider some examples of where cross-cultural encounters *have* occurred, invoking more traditional ideas around culture and assimilation (Gordon, 1964). Here, 'overseas educated' graduates have formed meaningful relationships with foreign nationals, and consequently seek permanent residency or citizenship abroad. We begin, however, with a brief discussion of what is known about British international students.

UK students overseas: empirical and methodological issues

UK students overseas are part of a much bigger picture of international student mobility. Taken as a whole, international students are an increasingly important component of global population flows – the OECD (2007) recently claimed that there were more than 2.87 million at tertiary level world-wide. The last five years or so have seen a surge in the number of academic studies specifically examining the geographies of international student mobility (e.g. Baláž and Williams, 2004; Lewis, 2005; Collins, 2008; Waters, 2008; Brooks and Waters, 2009; Madge et al., 2009; Fincher and Shaw, 2009). As noted above, however,

comparatively little is known about international students from 'Western' countries (or non-traditional source countries) such as the UK.

An exception to this is found in research conducted by the Sussex Centre for Migration Research (2004) and the Centre for Applied Population Research at Dundee, which examined, amongst other things, the EU-funded Erasmus and Socrates programmes. These programmes promote short-term educational mobility within Europe and their focus was on UK students and their opportunities for migration. They noted a number of significant trends. Whilst the UK has always *received* a high number of European students (over 20, 000 for the period they examined, 1999 – 2000), the number *leaving* the UK to attend universities elsewhere in Europe has been relatively small (10, 000). Until very recently, the number leaving has also been *declining* over time (King and Ruiz-Gelices 2003, 233), although a recent article in the Times Higher Education reported that the UK saw a 42 per cent increase in outgoing Erasmus students between 2006-07 and 2007-08, from 7,235 to 10,278, following the programme's introduction of work placements (Baty, 2009). More generally, the Sussex centre research showed that UK students *are* moving overseas, but to places outside Europe. Their survey data show that 'flows to non-European destinations, particularly North America, have been substantial, and in some cases, such as Australia, the rate of increase has been dramatic (up 69 percent between 2000 – 01 and 2002 – 03)' (Findlay et al. 2006, 298-299). We will explore, shortly, the implications of these trends in relation to our data.

Some evidence suggests that while the number of UK students who study overseas for the *whole* of a degree is small, it may be increasing (Clark, 2006; Shepherd, 2006; Institute of International Education, 2009). We sought to explore this qualitatively through in-depth interviews (lasting between 1.5 and 3 hours) with 85 individuals either seriously considering overseas study or those who had completed a degree abroad. The interviews were conducted during 2007 and 2008. They included 40 sixth-formers or undergraduates thinking seriously

about going overseas for higher education, and 45 graduates who had recently completed a degree (undergraduate or postgraduate) abroad. These individuals were all British citizens. Participants were recruited through different channels, including the Fulbright Commission, the Canadian Rhodes Scholars Foundation, the Commonwealth Scholars Commission, 65 alumni associations, university notice pages, and state and private schools in the UK (within Surrey, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cumbria). Participants were pursuing a diverse range of academic subjects. The countries they had chosen to study in, however, were considerably *less* diverse, with implications for the 'international' nature of their experiences.

Of the 20 sixth-formers interviewed, *all* were seriously considering the United States as a study destination. One student was also thinking about France. We also interviewed 11 individuals who had completed an undergraduate degree overseas. Of these, five had studied in the US and two in Canada (in their decision-making, Canada was perceived as similar or 'equivalent' to the US). The other four destinations were: Ireland, France, Japan and South Africa. This depicts a notable bias for Anglophone countries, the connotations of which will be discussed below.

We also interviewed 20 undergraduates seriously considering studying overseas for a postgraduate degree. The US was named as a possible study destination 15 times, compared to the three mentions given to the Netherlands, Sweden and Australia. Other countries that received only one mention were: Canada, France, Germany, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Singapore and Taiwan. These destinations are clearly more diverse than those reported by our sixth-former sample. However, only two of those destinations (France and Germany) would have involved instruction in a language other than English. Finally, to those individuals (34) who had completed a postgraduate degree overseas – the most popular destinations were: Canada (9), the US (8), Italy (6) and Australia (5). Belgium and South Africa both featured

twice, and Finland, France, Germany and Sweden only once.[1] Of our total sample, only two interviewees had studied for a degree in a 'foreign' language. Our findings mirror those of the Sussex study (Sussex Centre for Migration, 2004) in terms of the popularity of North American and Australasian destinations, and the desire for study in English.

There are implications of this Anglophone bias for the kinds of 'cultural encounter' experienced by UK students overseas. Hayden et al. (2000: 120) state this simply: 'being able to speak more than one language fluently' is necessary to 'being international'. The extent to which UK students can been described as truly 'cosmopolitan' (i.e. actively seeking out and embracing cultural difference) is called into question, when they eschew any possibility of interaction in a foreign language. It points, instead, to what John Urry (1995) has termed 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism', concerned with the superficial 'consumption' of overseas places (cited in Vertovec and Cohen, 2002), with little personal investment or effort on the part of the traveller. Our findings would certainly suggest this - a general reluctance to study (or interact socially) in any language other than English was widely expressed. One undergraduate, thinking of going overseas to study for an MA in politics, said: 'Sweden is a place where I know I'll be able to get away with speaking English rather than having to learn a language.' Another postgraduate who completed a PhD at the European University Institute (EUI) makes a similar point:

'The EUI is an EU institution...and in fact the social and political science department works almost exclusively in English, so from the point of view of my studies it wasn't going to be a problem. And I knew no Italian whatsoever...I think if I'd have been going to study in an Italian institution where I'd had to study in Italian, that would have been a nightmare.'

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[1] It should be noted that two individuals had studied at more than one overseas institution.

The propensity to study and socialise only in English inevitably limits the 'international' nature of students' encounters. As noted above, there remains a clear bias towards certain Anglophone countries (United States, Australia, New Zealand and Canada) despite the fact that an increasing number of European countries are now offering very competitively-priced courses taught in English. We might still ask *why* these traditional English-speaking countries remain so popular. There is, we argue below, a strong case to be made for the role of the media (films and popular television series) in making particular destinations, such as the US and Australia, seem so attractive.

It is also interesting to observe that amongst the 45 graduates, although the majority had returned to the UK, 10 were still overseas at the time of the interview – in Canada (2), the US (2), South Africa (1), Australia (3), Ireland (1) and the Netherlands (1). We will explore some of their reasons for 'staying on' in the discussion below. The UK interviews were conducted face-to-face whilst the overseas interviews were conducted over the telephone.

Finally, in terms of our methods and sample, we wish to stress the *qualitative* nature of the research and its limitations in terms of the 'generalisability' of our conclusions. Whilst we sought to achieve as broad and balanced a sample of interviewees as possible, we found that some schools and associations provided us with much more help than did others (in some cases, no help was provided). What we present here, then, is not statistically significant, but instead offers an in-depth insight into UK students' decision-making and experiences of overseas education.

Overseas study, media and the imagination

In this section, we examine the popularity of Anglophone study destinations (particularly the United States) and the implications of this for 'international' encounters. The majority of our research participants desired, in some way, to experience 'something different' during

overseas study; they valued the opportunity for mixing with individuals from diverse social and cultural backgrounds. For many interviewees, particularly those undergraduates considering postgraduate study overseas, 'knowledge of a different culture' was a strong motivating factor. Ceri, who was considering applying to the US for doctoral studies, explained what she thought she would 'get out of going overseas':

'Well, a different experience from a different country.... If you travel to somewhere you usually see it and you see the sights, but you don't actually really get to know what a place is like unless you live there. ... I feel going to study abroad I can get the knowledge I want from a PhD but get a lot of other experiences as well....and meet different people, different lifestyles, different cultures.'

Idris similarly said: 'I've always had, wanted to see different places and kind of seek out those experiences and try and get a greater understanding through seeing different places.' This notion of difference was frequently evoked, and was inextricably tied to a sense of 'excitement' and 'adventure'. 'Difference' was almost always articulated in a positive way; as a benefit resulting from overseas education. However, when probed further, interviewees suggested that there were limits to what was considered 'acceptable' difference. Very few participants felt that they were entering the 'unknown' by going abroad for education. Rather, *familiarity* was also important to them; that they were able to *imagine* their lives overseas.

The role of the imagination in modern life has been extensively theorised by Arjun Appadurai (1991, 1996). In his work, he proposes a perspective that 'takes media and migration as its two major, and interconnected, diacritics and explores their joint effect on the *work of the imagination* as a constitutive feature of modern subjectivity' (Appadurai, 1996, 3). The contemporary imagination, he argues, is intimately connected to the spread and growth of global mass media events, films and television programmes. These ideas came out strongly in our interview data: for many individuals, preconceived notions about overseas

places were formed through exposure to certain media – particularly Hollywood films and internationally successful television programmes. This is not a trivial observation – Appadurai (1996, 4) has gone as far as to describe the 'relationship between mass-mediated events and migratory audiences' as 'the core of the link between globalization and the modern'. Yet very little work has examined the role of the media in directing the international migration of students (see Rizvi, 2000).

In our study, we found this link to be especially strong in relation to the US – students articulated a sense that the US represented a 'knowable' difference. This is seen in the following quote, taken from an interview with a postgraduate who studied for an MA in French Literature at the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA. She said:

'I wasn't that worried about the...culture shock. It seemed to me that America would be even less of a big deal than France because you know I spoke the language, we have the impression that we know America a lot because of the cultural familiarity.'

One sixth-former highlights the role of the media when reflecting upon pursuing an undergraduate degree in the US:

'I'm just going for the ones [places in the US] that I know are nice already.' [Interviewer: how do you know they are nice already?] *'Well, like, obviously just TV, and certain places in the States that are renowned for being nice places. Or, you know, you hear a lot about them in the media.'*

The locations chosen for study by UK students would seem to be unconnected, in nearly every case, to spatial proximity. Instead, individuals opted for places that they already had some knowledge of, or familiarity with. However, in only a few cases did this result from

direct prior experiences linked to physical travel. In the following example, a student recounted how a particular institution in the US has become 'familiar' to him:

'You've always heard about those unis if you like, either films or on the TV or news and all that ... Brown was an interesting one because it actually came to my attention through the TV, which was a bit odd. I didn't know about Brown before having watched the OC [US drama series]*, to be honest. You get an insight into the college, really, even though it's like a fictional presentation...and I was like, 'oh wow, that seems like a cool place'.'*

The influence of Hollywood films and popular television programmes on UK students' decision-making around overseas education was considerable. They played an important role in the formation of geographical imaginaries for our research participants. In some cases, as in the following extract, the salience of an 'aesthetic cosmopolitanism' was strongly implied when participants recounted the main influences guiding their decision-making around international education:

Linda: 'The movies, you know, the cheerleaders and the people with their little flags and everyone is like – my friend and I were chatting about it and she wants a little flag, one of those little triangle things which has her university on it. I mean, it's quite – it's an exciting prospect. It's going away from home but it's a completely different experience as well.'

For Linda, as for many others, travelling to the US for study provided the opportunity to live out a fantasy. Televised sport featured strongly in many accounts, as Dominic demonstrates:

Dominic: 'Because America kind of fascinates me. I don't know. I like the idea of America. I want to experience something new and especially, when I watch TV and I see the shows, especially how big basketball is, because I love basketball and seeing how big basketball is over there [...]. So I'd be doing my degree, I'd be getting my qualifications as well as experiencing the world, like travelling to new places, living abroad – not just away in another city, I'd be living overseas. And so that was what really attracted me.'

Appadurai (1996, 3) describes the role of the media as 'offer[ing] new resources and new disciplines for the construction of imagined selves and imagined worlds...they are resources for experiments with self-making...They allow scripts for possible lives to be imbricated with the glamour of film starts and fantastic film plots...'. For many students, international education is therefore so much more than simply acquiring qualifications or undertaking a 'learning experience'. It is a chance to construct a new life, as seen on TV. Interestingly, in almost all cases, the experience (as reported by graduates) would seem to have lived up to expectations.

Experiences of cultural 'difference'

In the above quotations, the seemingly contradictory way in which students discuss a desire for 'something new' at the *same time* as they craved familiarity, is apparent. Although individuals generally wanted to experience 'difference' through overseas study, then, there were clear limits placed upon this. In some ways, their accounts evoked Ulf Hannerz's (1996) notion of 'the cosmopolitan' – coveting cultural difference and yet always 'knowing where the exit is'. The spaces inhabited by cosmopolitan subjects are often 'bounded and elitist' and 'marked by a specialized and – paradoxically – rather homogenous transnational culture, a limited interest in engaging 'the Other', and a rather restricted corridor of physical movement between defined spaces' (Vertovec and Cohen, 2002, 7). The tendency for UK students to

pursue 'difference' in 'familiar' countries, such as the US, would seem to represent just that – a rather circumscribed engagement with 'the Other'.

When abroad, however, the limits placed upon students' social and cultural interactions were often not (obviously) of their choosing. Many talked of the difficulties in escaping an insular and tightly bound 'international student community' (see Fincher and Shaw, 2009). Sometimes, this community involved close contact with other British students. As one interviewee, who studied for an MA at UBC in Canada, told us: 'I wouldn't say I integrated with Canadian students. My best friends were the other Brits that went there or, funnily enough, a couple of Americans. But we were all foreign students really.' Another, who studied for an MA at Syracuse University and a PhD at the University of Washington, both in the US, said of her experience:

'I went straight into an international student community...We all arrived for international orientation...and we stayed in halls of residence....By the end of it you were expected to have found private accommodation, and for most of us that ended up being together. So yes, I did end up living with international students and doing things with international students.'

This separation was clearly good for the development of friendships and social capital. On the whole, however, interviewees lamented the fact that they had little contact with others 'outside' a narrow social circle. One graduate, who studied for an international diploma in Paris, France, observed that 'local' students returned 'to their families' in the evenings, limiting the possibilities for social contact. Consequently, 'the international students all stuck together a bit...it was quite difficult to sort of break into French networks.'

As noted above, Italy was a popular destination for UK students and this is largely due to the presence of the European University Institute (EUI). Several students mentioned the

strong 'international student community' at EUI. One postgraduate, who completed a PhD in politics at EUI said:

'The slightly bizarre thing was it was like this EU bubble...It's actually on a hill outside Florence, the institute, and it is a bit like a bubble on a hill, and you kind of socialise very much with the people at the institute, rather than being integrated particularly with the local community.'

This notion of living in a 'bubble', shut off from the 'real world' outside, resonates strongly with the findings of research on British expatriate enclaves overseas (e.g. Beaverstock, 1996; Yeoh and Willis, 2005). Inadvertently, an international student community may serve an important function, in the creation of a segregated and separated educated 'elite'. As one of our interviewees argued: although, ostensibly, there was 'cultural' diversity amongst the international student body, there was very little social diversity to be found. The vast majority had privileged backgrounds – the international student experience offered little when it came to meeting people truly 'different' from oneself.

Arguments about the privileged nature of overseas study and its role in the reproduction of class status can also be made in relation to students' institutional choices. Private universities in the US were by far the most frequently mentioned – interviewees talked again and again of their desire to attend Ivy League schools. Twelve individuals had studied in the US; of those, three had gone to Harvard, and one to Brown, Yale, Pennsylvania, Columbia, Chicago, North Western, Washington, Syracuse and Missouri. One interviewee said:

'I never seriously considered going to the UK if I was accepted by Harvard or Yale or Princeton or Stanford. Any other universities, that were less famous, I was not so keen on.'

Such decisions about institutions lead us to question the degree to which students were exposed to social and cultural diversity in these environments. When asked why she had decided to study French, Elizabeth said: 'it was a subject that I'd always enjoyed at school [...] I thought, study something you enjoy', and her emphasis on enjoyment was common. However, when then asked if the 'status' of her chosen institution (which 'I came across almost by accident') was important, she said:

'Yes, I wouldn't have gone to some hick university in the mid-West you know. [I'd] probably have not gone to a state school as well, unless it had been a very good one. So yes, the fact of the University of Pennsylvania being an Ivy League institution was important, yeah.'

Taken together, our findings support those of others, who have argued that an international education may serve to inculcate certain elite and classed mores (Sklair, 2001; Caroll, 2004; Waters, 2007). The separation and (to a certain extent) isolation involved in studying overseas creates an exclusive cultural environment, wherein a transnational cosmopolitan class of the kind described by Favell (2008) and Sklair (2001) is created. In a different context, Bourdieu (1996: 102) has claimed that 'through the magical operations of separation and aggregation [elite schools tend...] to produce a consecrated elite, that is, an elite that is not only distinct and separate, but also recognised by others and by itself as worthy of being so'. This notion of separation producing a 'consecrated elite' has salience, we argue, for understanding the social and cultural experiences of UK students overseas.

Going native?

In this final section of the paper, we consider those individuals whose inter-cultural experiences overseas have been significant and, possibly, 'life-changing'. If, as a large body

of research on immigration has concluded, marriage (or partnerships) is the ultimate indicator of cultural assimilation (Gordon, 1964; Blau et al., 1984; Pagnini and Morgan, 1990), then several of our interviewees have clearly 'assimilated' to an alternative cultural milieu. We observed at least five examples of where individuals had married or established a life with long-term partners whom they had met when studying overseas. In some cases, like the example below, a foreign partner, met overseas, has moved with them back to the UK:

'My girlfriend, who I met when I was out there, my current girlfriend, we live in the UK but she would like to move back to Canada in a couple of years...So I suspect when she's ready and willing to go back, I'll go with her.'

For this particular individual, then, a future return move back overseas is a likely possibility. Another post-graduate, Cecil, currently lives in Berlin with his German girlfriend. He completed an MA at the University of Applied Sciences-Munich in 'Inter-cultural Communication and Cooperation'. He said: 'There was certainly a period when I was looking [for work] in the UK, but then ultimately my search went back to Germany again and for this reason – it's because of my relationship here – that I have stayed here.' In one further example, an individual went to Australia on a 'working holiday' and ended up staying on after meeting her partner. She then applied for a Masters degree programme and, after graduating, has worked as a civil servant for the Australian government since 2006. There are clear indications in our data of what Scott and Cartledge (2009) have described as 'going native', in their study of UK citizens working in France. They stressed the significance of 'mixed nationality relationship migrants'; in other words, 'migrants who have committed to a life outside their home country because of the presence of a foreign partner' (Scott and Cartledge, 2009, 60). Whilst it is likely that the majority of overseas students do not develop relationships in this way, a small but significant number clearly do.

We also found some evidence that UK students use studying overseas as a way of securing permanent residency abroad (this has been frequently reported for other national student groups – see Baas, 2006). One graduate said of studying in Australia: '[it] allowed me to stay in Australia, it's as simple as that'...it 'ticked a lot of boxes for me for other things like immigration and job prospects'. Some sixth formers interviewed implied that they may like to 'stay on' in the US after completing their studies there. They stressed the significance of life-style factors in their decision-making. Of those 20 individuals thinking about going overseas for postgraduate study, 12 were also enthusiastically contemplating the possibility (however vague) of acquiring permanent residency abroad. We should not, therefore, dismiss the relationship between acquiring overseas credentials and other, long term mobility objectives.

Conclusions: 'Vive la différence'?

This paper has drawn on a study of UK students either seriously considering, or having completed, a degree overseas, to examine the 'socio-cultural' dimensions of their intentions, expectations and experiences. Research in the area of international education has traditionally focussed on students from non-Western, non-English-speaking countries in 'the West' and has considered, in particular, issues of 'culture shock' and 'Westernisation'. Our sample of UK students, in contrast, had other intentions – theirs were not the usual concerns of international students (i.e. seeking the opportunity to learn or improve proficiency in English and to acquire a 'Western' university degree). Our research has taken place in the context of debates around the declining foreign language skills of young people in the UK and a general disinterest in engaging 'internationally' (particularly within Europe). In this paper, we wanted to examine the extent to which UK students thought about, and experienced, 'cultural diversity' through overseas study.

Our findings point to two particular trends. The first concerns the influential role of the media (films and popular television programmes) in directing migration decisions in relation to education. Appadurai (1996) has theorised the role of the imagination in contemporary mass migration. The imagination, he argues, is fuelled by global media images. Our interview data strongly suggested the power of film and TV in creating a sense of familiarity for British students seeking study in a foreign location. Many students chose to study in places they had seen on TV or in movies. We had imagined that the media would occasionally have been mentioned as a vague influencing factor in students' decision-making. Instead, we found that in many cases, media images (particularly in relation to North America) were centrally important. They explain, at least in part, the enduring popularity of the US and Australia as international student destinations. A second finding reported in this paper concerns the limited socio-cultural interactions experienced by many UK students overseas. Their relationships, both inside and outside the classroom, were generally confined to an 'international student community'. This has a number of implications. Most obviously, it limits the extent to which students encounter cultures 'local' to the destination country. Their experience of cultural diversity is, to a certain extent, manufactured. Usually, UK students would socialise with other UK students, and there was very little social interaction occurring in any language other than English. The separation and isolation of the international student community, however, does serve a useful function in terms of the wider process of elite class formation and social reproduction. Interviewees reported very little by way of 'class' diversity amongst international students. Our findings suggest what others have found in relation to transnational elites: that they form a distinctive and separate 'club', with similar cosmopolitan mores and outlook (Beaverstock, 1996; Ley, 2004, Waters, 2007).

The paper makes an additional observation with respect to the cross-cultural encounters of UK students overseas. Some of our sample appear to have 'gone native' (Scott and Cartledge,

2009), forming significant and meaningful relationships with foreign nationals, often as a direct consequence of their experiences of studying overseas. Clearly, this suggests a very direct engagement with 'cultural diversity'. We also have evidence that some UK students, like other international student groups, view studying abroad as a step towards more permanent relocation overseas.

In examining the cultural perceptions and experiences of UK students in respect to international study, our research therefore moves away from some of the recent academic focus on the mercenary objectives of higher education institutions and governments. Instead, we offer an in-depth qualitative account that foregrounds the students and their decision-making around (international) higher education, and points to the importance of cultural imaginaries in constructing ideas about 'difference', the role of the international student community in limiting students' cultural encounters, and the significance, for some, of overseas study in determining future migration.

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