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Becoming an International Distance Learner: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on the Initial Period Study

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Abstract: Although internationalisation has been one of the central themes of Business and Management education research over the past two decades, student perspectives on the subject particularly in the context of distance learning context have been largely overlooked. This paper reports on the findings of a research project conducted at the Open University in the United Kingdom and at the International Institute of Management (IIM LINK) in Russia which analysed perceptions of the initial period of distance study in a sample of 25 Business and Management students. Interview analysis showed both similarities and variations in the themes that students studying on different types of courses raised in their responses. The paper calls for more comparative research on the subject using mixed-method approaches through cross-cultural comparisons and comparisons across different types of distance teaching and learning contexts.

Introduction

Over the past decade there has been a growing body of research on learning experiences of students, attending universities in countries other than their own (Kehm and Teichler, 2007). Among a number of possible drivers behind interest in the topic two seem to be of particular relevance in the context of this study.

On the one hand, numbers of students choosing to study with an institution based in a foreign country continue to grow. For example, in 2009 3.7 million students were studying outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2011) and in a number of English-speaking countries, such as the UK, New Zealand and Australia international students constituted between 14.6 and 21.5 percent of the overall tertiary level enrollments. In the academic year of 2011-12 international student numbers in the UK increased by 8% for undergraduate courses and by 5% for postgraduate courses compared to the previous year and reached 435,230 (UKCISA, 2013). In the same academic year in the United States a record number of 764,495 international students were enrolled into tertiary level studies (Institute for International Education, 2013).

On the other hand, due to improving connectivity and growing Internet penetration across the globe (Internetworldstats, 2013) distance study on online courses seems to carry significant potential for attracting international students, particularly those who continue to be resident in their home countries. Recent data from the UK confirms the salience of this trend. In 2011-12 116,535 international students were enrolled in some form of distance, flexible or distributed learning with a UK institution of higher education (UKCISA, 2013).

Given the importance of the topic one would expect extensive literature on internationalization, but this does not seem to be the case. The emphasis of studies in the area is on institutional and policy perspectives on internationalisation rather than the views of students (Ramanau and Tyler, 2011). Where student perspectives are considered samples are limited to students coming to campus-based universities outside their home countries and experiencing acculturation to another (typically Western) academic culture and life in general. Distance learners are typically not considered as a separate sub-group, while they can often be quite distinct in terms of both their demographic profiles, motivations, expectations and preferred approaches to study.

Although not experiencing problems with social, personal or cultural adaptation that international students arriving to a new country go through (Sawir et al., 2007) distance learners regardless of their cultural background or experiences of distance learners report the feelings of insecurity about their prospective learning experiences (Knapper, 1988), lower self-confidence compared those enrolled on more traditional courses (Kahl and Cropley, 1986). A comparative study of a distance international engineering course delivered by a Swedish university to both campus-based and distance students concluded that the two groups varied in their support needs and learning experiences (Popov, 2009). Views of distance students were shaped by both characteristics of the immediate design for learning (e.g. communication between tutors and students, organization of feedback

etc.) and their own characteristics, such their cultural, previous educational background and their professional contexts. Other comparative research on the subject echoed these conclusions by suggesting differences in cognitive learning styles (Graff et al., 2004), patterns and online collaborative behaviours (Kim and Bonk, 2006) between international students and students studying in their home countries, typically English-speaking. If the course is delivered in a language other than their own students also needed to become familiar with new communicative strategies in a distance learning environment (Kennedy, 2010).

Context and Methodology

This study aimed to shed more light into the nature of challenges that international students face when starting their first distance course. The project was carried out at the Open University (OU), the only purely distance teaching university in the United Kingdom. Three courses in Business and Management were selected for the study – one first-, one second- and one third-level undergraduate. The courses were presented over a period of six to nine months and their approach to tuition can be described as being of a blended format, i.e. individual reading activities and contributions to online conferences were combined with regular face-to-face sessions. Online technologies were typically used asynchronously, i.e. real-time events were not part of the tuition strategy, although those were organized in some tutor groups. Course content was very similar across the two versions of the course, although more face-to-face tutorials were organized to supplement individual learning at IIM LINK.

For the purposes of this study international students were defined as learners for whom English was not their first language and who completed their secondary or tertiary education outside the UK. The students sample for can be divided into two main groups:

- a) Student directly registered with the OU based in the UK and in other European Union (EU) countries and studying their courses in English
- b) Students registered with the OU through IIM LINK, the university's official partner in Russia and other countries of the former Soviet Union, and studying their courses in Russian translation.

Participant recruitment processes varied across the two institutional settings due to differences in accessing student records, processes of obtaining permissions to collect data, pertinent regulations regarding student participation in research projects and ease of access to potential respondents. Students directly registered with the OU who were eligible to participate in the study were contacted by email and after written consent to take part in the project was obtained suitable time for interview was agreed with the respondent. Students taught on courses in translation were approached both by email and face-to-face before their first tutorial with request to take part in the study. Consequently despite comparable sample sizes interview data was collected in different modes across the two sample groups – mostly through telephone interviews for the UK and other EU students (referred to as European students in the paper) and mostly during face-to-face interviews for Russian students.

A total of 25 students were interviewed in the first weeks of their studies (see Table 1 on type and method of interview data collection). European students came from eight different European Union (EU) countries and represented 13 different nationalities. Russian students were studying with two regional centres of IIM LINK in the Urals and the north of European part of the Russian Federation.

In addition 7 participants returned responses to an email that was sent in the third month of the courses asking students about progress in their studies, number of contact hours with their tutor, other students and work with course materials and any difficulties that they faced. Three students participated in follow-up interviews towards the end of their course. Student interviews were complemented with three tutor interviews (two in Russia and one in the UK) which also focused on distance learning experiences of students starting their first modules with the OU and IIM LINK.

A semi-structured interview format was selected for data collection with several groups of questions regarding student expectations of their learning experience, approaches to planning their studies, possible sources of difficulties in the initial study period nature of learning and use of information and communication technologies. After being transcribed the interviews transcripts were coded using the “deductive coding” (Ryan and Bernard, 1998, p. 613) and came from the provisional list of key interview themes, while others were inductively inferred from the participants' responses.

Table 1. Interview Characteristics by Type and Method.

	Telephone	Face-to-face	Follow-up Telephone	Total
UK and European				13
Level 1	3			
Level 3	10		2	
Russian				12
Level 2		2	1	
Level 3		10	2	

Findings

Results of interview analysis showed that while some themes in the interviews were common for both European and Russian students there were also differences across the two groups with respect to some of the key aspects of distance learning.

a) *Common Themes: Lack of Knowledge about Tutor-Supported Distance Learning Model and Challenges of the Initial Period of Study*

Students both studying in Europe and in Russia generally had a vague idea about UK educational system and the different emphases in the study process compared to the approaches that they adopted in their previous studies. They also lacked awareness of the OU approach to organizing distance teaching and learning. There was an overall positive impression of British education, but most of the students based in the continental EU countries found out about their courses of study through friends or colleagues from the UK. This was the case with Katarzyna, an administrative assistant in an international organization in Switzerland:

“I didn’t really know that there was an Open University in the UK where students from other countries can actually study. It was my colleague, she’s British, and she mentioned to me that there also an Open University in the UK and that I can do distance studying with that university ... when I spoke to my colleagues who come from the UK for them it’s like “Oh, my goodness, it’s so famous!”

Russian students did not seem to have interpersonal contacts with colleagues or friends in the UK and their idea of OU model of distance learning was even vaguer. Andrey, a senior manager in a Russian medium-sized manufacturing company described his associations with UK education in the following way:

“[the fact that OU is a British university] is not a decisive factor. But it does add some sort of reputation; because it is British ... The BBC Channel creates some sort of an image. Even sort some of silly series, jokes about British scientists... One the one hand, they are stupid ... But through its programmes, stories, attempts to bring scientific knowledge into masses it creates an impression that ... Another example is Discovery – or is it American?”

Both groups of respondents noted the usefulness and flexibility of the online mode of distance course delivery and stressed that it was possibility to study at their own pace and in their own time without frequent attendance at face-to-face lectures or seminars that was one of the deciding factors in their choice of the course of study. Unsurprisingly all of the participants had other commitments in their lives around which they had to fit their studies. Except two Russian students doing a second level undergraduate course the rest of the interviewees were coming back to part-time education after a substantial break in their education. Thus not surprisingly students studying on both directly taught courses and on courses in translation experienced considerable difficulties in the first few weeks of their studies, because their initial expectations seemed to be quite different from reality of online distance tuition.

Jonathan, a South African engineer living in the UK found the first few weeks of distance learning to be quite overwhelming:

"I must say that it was a little of a shock for my system, because I had to suddenly start thinking about myself ... Things that they asked for in the first few weeks, I didn't expect those sorts of things. I didn't expect anything how they're going to do it. It was a little bit of a shock that there wasn't much theory they bring in, it was more practical ..."

This was echoed by Laura, an Italian executive assistant who lives in Switzerland:

"... of course I was expecting it to be very different. Honestly, I was expecting it to be a bit slower as well as in the first few months there is a lot to do ... Probably most people think because it's distant, because it's online, because it's flexible, I can organize myself more or less with the time and do what I want. Well, you really have to find the time because it takes a lot to do it."

Vladislav, Director of Sales at a Russian dairy manufacturer also admitted the challenges of getting used to the new approach to study:

"...It's something completely different [comparing the initial period of OU study with previous education]. How do I aim to organize my work? I don't know yet ... Yesterday after the tutorial ... there was a little bit of a mess in my understanding [of the study process]... You have to read books, do your course work and complete tasks, you have to set the goals and achieve them ... It's the time when you want to relax and not think of anything ... I guess I have to organize myself in some way."

Regardless of their previous education or country of origin all international students found their previous educational experience to be completely different from the new type of learning. Feng, a junior manager who did his first degree in China and who currently lives in the UK described his previous educational experiences as something completely different to his current studies with the OU

"I think my [present and past educational experiences] are very different ... I think Chinese higher education was very much modeled after the Soviet Union ... When I did my first degree in Electronics Engineering, we spend the whole year just studying the foundation of very much the theories. ... A lot of emphasis on learning the theory, the Mathematics, the Physics, Chemistry, all those subjects ..."

Franz, a German Marketing Manager who works in Switzerland, also found no parallels between his first degree in Germany and his distance studies with the OU.

"It was a totally different way ... It was a totally different time of my life ... I didn't know really where to go, in which direction etc. and now it's completely different ... I remember there were little exams, course tests at the end, every three months ... And it was very few practices, mostly based on your own initiative and engagement and interest of course. So we had to develop certain projects on our own, but it wasn't necessary ... It was quite open-ended structure"

b) Differences in Themes – Degree of Localisation, Role of Synchronous Interaction and Face-to-Face Events

While international student experiences were similar with respect to some aspects of their distance study there were distinct differences between students directly registered with the OU and studying in Europe and students taught in Russian translation in Russia. The most salient differences had to do with student understanding of the underlying approaches to organizing their work, the roles of synchronous vs. asynchronous interaction, face-to-face events and degree of contextualization of course materials.

Russian students were familiar with other models of distance education be it in the form of purely online study or in the form of *zaochnoe* education (a form of part-time study widespread in Russia and other former Soviet countries which combines individual study with intensive three-weeks examination or study sessions) and distinguished an OU approach from other models. However, in addition to individual study their preference both in the beginning of their studies and especially towards the end of the course was towards giving more prominence to the face-to-face component and personal communication with their tutor and other students.

Vitaly, a sales manager in a large multinational company in Russia, although being initially enthusiastic about the use of online tools on his course found himself using asynchronous forms of electronic communication only occasionally and preferred to get in touch with fellow student and the tutor in real-time and using a range of technologies.

“No I didn’t use online conferences very actively to be honest, as I don’t see them as instrument of getting new knowledge ... I did get notifications of new messages and I did access the conferences, but I rarely took part in them myself ... I preferred to communicate with the tutor through telephone, Skype or personal messages or by email. In principle I preferred personal communication with the tutor despite tutor involvement in online conference discussions.”

His biggest disappointment toward the end of the course was that his tutor group “*did not gel as a group*”. Andrey, who had extensive experience of working for different types of organizations in Russia and found that the notion of “*the collective*” still influences many aspects of the way Russian society functions:

“... the human side of things still appeals to me ... Because of the collective component, working collectively, those subtle things ... It’s much more pleasant personally when people around you think in the same way. This atmosphere ... I think it is good.”

Possibly it is due to this emphasis on collectivist thinking that is still prevalent in Russian society that led even younger generation of Russian students to seek more personal contact in their context. Gennady, an undergraduate student on a second-level course, was invited to attend a three-day residential course with a group of postgraduate LINK students in another regional centre of the country and found that the residential component was something that his course was missing.

“It was very exciting, really good! I think that what I got from the Residential school was possibly 70 percent of my knowledge after one year of studies ... The Residential school gives a lot and we really missed it on our course ... Possibly if we could have more of these schools, perhaps shorter than three days ... some sort of a practical tasks, not just in terms of discussing the situation but also applying it in the specific context”

European students were mostly happy with infrequent interactions in the tutor forum in the form of asynchronous conferences and did not aim to interact with other students more frequently. Martin, a Czech IT manager living in the UK was happy with the amount of interaction with fellow students in the tutor forum.

“I think [the level of interaction] was enough because in the end there are reasons why people choose their online sessions rather than face-to-face. So they expect that there will be less, slightly less interaction. So I think it’s good.”

Feng shared the same view of the usefulness of online facilities.

“When I contact my tutor or I post something on the forum I pretty much get an answer within a couple of hours, so that was really instant and I think that really worked for me. And also, I mean, personally I’m quite comfortable with Internet technology, I love it ... it really works for me.”

There was sometimes a sense of regret about the lack of interaction in tutor forums, but these cases seemed to be exceptional. Laura, an administrative assistant with an international company in Switzerland, thought that the amount of discussion in the online tutor group was disappointing.

“I: Could you tell me about your interaction with other students? I mean in what form did they happen? And how frequently?”

Basically only in the tutor group forum, when the tutor was posting the questions ... Again it was sometimes ... maybe once in ten days or so ... It was not very lively to be honest. I mean people tended to do the minimum that the tutor was requiring you know ... people were just posting their replies ... I don’t know if it’s my group that was not very lively or ...”

It was not only localization in terms of approach to tuition at a distance that Russian students tended to prefer compared to students in Europe, but also the emphasis of course materials which they thought should be shifted towards reflecting the nature of Russian business contexts to a larger degree.

Vladislav thought that adapting case studies to the Russian context was almost inevitable if the course were to be taught in the context in question

“International cases are very good ... but there should also be Russian examples adapted to our [Russian] mentality ... Because reading books on management and considering some case studies ... and films you see how people relate to some things in Europe or in America. And you compare how our [Russian employees] relate to them. Well, they are completely different. Very different.”

Andrey shared this view of a particular nature of business in his country.

“You know Russian business is really based on personal relations ... So your education, skills do not play an important role today. Even I work in a management role and do not have higher education. It was achieved through personal contacts ... In Russian business, including our company, there is a lot of chaotic work in terms of allocation of work, resources of all kinds. Most companies in Russian operate like that.”

Anna, an experienced tutor at IIM LINK thought that localization was necessary not only by introducing Russian examples, but through introducing cases that deal with companies that are well-known in a particular region so students can relate to these companies in an easier manner.

“Of course it would be more interesting if those were cases on the companies that are familiar with them. Not just some small, unknown Russian company, but some well-known companies of Russian from retail r from other sectors ... Because when you analyse something that is familiar to you even as a customer, it generates more interest than some unknown, abstract cases from an unknown country ... So we even have to write our own local cases for tutorials ... We did not name the companies, but they [students] understand which enterprises we have in mind, as our city is not that big.”

Russian students typically had little exposure to foreign cultures and expected their studies to fit into their careers in their home country. Alena, a product manager in a Russian branch of an Italian fashion company, thought that the international character of qualification did not affect her choice of the programme of study.

“[The fact that the programme is international] is less important than the programme content, because I am unlikely to study or work abroad later in life. Most likely I'll stay to live and work in Russia. Maybe it will come useful when I transfer to another company, another position ... But it has little importance, because our head office in Italy is also a small family business. That is why expanding into European market is hardly possible.”

Virtually all international students based in the EU countries came outside of and in most cases were living in English speaking countries. They were fluent in at least one additional foreign language, frequently more, therefore studies with a British higher education institution were perceived as natural step in their international careers and as some sort of a validation of their international identities. They welcomed a possibility of studying in international group and therefore focused on skills and knowledge transferable in different national contexts.

Franz viewed the international nature of his studies as the foremost reason for choosing the OU programme of distance study.

“First of all, it's international ... there are all sorts of students from my course that are from several different countries, that's very interesting, and they have very interesting backgrounds and they all – what's the word in English? – walks of life. [international qualification] is very important ... especially in Zurich, there are many international professionals ... it's very famous to do a kind of second or third education”

Eric, a British IT consultant working in Spain, also thought that an international qualification seemed to be an advantage in his professional context.

“... I'm not sure exactly whether [international degree and degree from a Spanish university] are directly comparable ... But I would say it wouldn't hurt, by any means, having an international degree in your curriculum. If anything else it would kind of make you stand out a little bit from possible competition for the same job because pretty much everybody else is going to go to the same universities, study exactly the same degree, all the same subjects ... whereas maybe somebody who's done the same or similar degree from abroad... is going to come with a completely different perspective.”

At the same time European students felt that focus on European if not UK examples was almost inevitable in course materials. Feng, a Chinese student living in the UK thought that some kind focus on UK context was almost natural to a course from a UK university.

"I think at the level I'm currently studying I think it's probably better to focus on the UK business. Because looking at my fellow students all of us are working for a UK employer. None of us actually have much to do with international business, so all of our business is very much focused on the UK. So I think maybe at this level it should be mainly focused on the UK business, maybe with some element of international, but not majority."

Discussion and Implications

To sum up, there were interview themes that were both common to directly registered OU students in the EU countries and students taught in Russian translation and that were quite different. Small sample sizes, differences in student characteristics and their learning contexts, self-selecting nature of the respondents and reliance on semi-structured interview method often in the form of phone interviews do not give enough room for generalizations based on the findings of this study.

However, although initially the study used a zero difference hypotheses between two types of student groups due to very similar course content and approach to module delivery cross-cultural differences in student study behaviours and perceptions of the learning context became quite salient when interview transcripts were analysed.

For most EU students studies on the international distance course were an extension of their own personal identity which was international to some degree. Their expected approach to learning can be described as being in line with a *global model of distance teaching and learning* with:

- Focus on independent learning
- Moderate amount of interaction with their tutor and fellow students
- Use of asynchronous forms of communication
- Infrequent face-to-face sessions
- Focus on European perspectives in the curriculum.

In contrast Russian students perceived their distance studies to fit into a *glocalised model of distance teaching and learning*, where:

- Equal emphasis is placed on independent learning, frequent interaction and input from the tutor
- There are regular interactions with the tutor and fellow students
- There is preference for face-to-face or synchronous communication via phone or audio-conferencing
- "Western" perspectives in Management are embedded into curriculum, but course content is enriched with examples relevant to the Russian context.

This study lays the groundwork for further research into cross-cultural and cross-national differences in e-learning, although being situated in quite a distinctive context where course content, approaches to organizing distance teaching and learning and assessment are similar despite tuition being organized in different institutional contexts and delivered in different languages. Although modern technologies allow for delivery of learning content in various formats and on an increasingly wide range of devices, previous educational experiences, exposure to international perspectives and aspects of national culture all seemed to have some bearing as to how students in the contexts in question perceived their distance studies. Thus a more nuanced view of student needs and expectations is necessary for effective delivery of distance teaching and learning in international contexts. As the case of Russian students showed new distance students educated in a different system of tradition education expected contextualization of distance teaching and learning to occur at several levels (Ramanau and Krasheninnikova, 2012) – level of learning materials, level of teaching methodology and level of online technologies.

Future research should draw on both qualitative data on student distance learning experiences and quantitative comparisons in patterns of learning activity using a range of methods (e.g. learning analytics) and going beyond

self-report of learning behaviours. In addition to cross-cultural and cross-national comparisons, comparisons across different types of distance learning models (e.g. purely online self-directed learning, learning on MOOCs (massively open online courses) etc.) are particularly scarce at the time of writing and can be one of the potential directions of research in the future.

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