

From ‘Sense of Entitlement’ to ‘Disenchantment’? The Lived Experiences of International Students in the UK

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From 'Sense of Entitlement' to 'Disenchantment'? The Lived Experiences of International Students in the UK

1. Introduction

Each year, international students contribute £2.5 billion to the UK economy in tuition fees alone and an overall estimated contribution of £8.5 billion (Home Office UK Border Agency, 2008). Yet, there are growing criticisms of the British government's approach to international students. There is recognition that it is of vital importance for the UK university system and more broadly for the UK economy as a whole to keep attracting and retaining international students in the context of increased competition in the international education market. In 2009-2010, there were 251,310 international students (defined as students from outside the EU and the EEA) in Britain, equating to 14% of the student population. Their fees provide 8% of the higher education sector's income per annum (Hartwich, 2011).

Yet, international students are classified as part of the economic migrants group by the Home Office UK Border Agency. Since coming into power in May 2010, the British coalition government has pledged to reduce net migration (defined as immigration minus emigration) from current levels of 200,000 to "tens of thousands" by the end of this parliament in 2015 (Cavanagh, 2011). Following this, the government's policy objectives have aimed to tighten and restrict the rights of international students in terms of their: 1) entry into the UK to study, 2) right to work during study, 3) right to work post-study, and 4) right to settle (to reside and work without restrictions) in the UK. One of the most drastic changes is the closure of the Post-Study Work (PSW) Visa Route, which allows international students who have gained a UK degree to stay on and work in the UK for up to two years post-study. The closure was announced in April 2011 and will come into effect in April 2012, which will impact all international students who complete their studies after this date.

Even before the announcement of the PSW closure, visa regulations and employment have been raised as problematic yet under researched issues for international students. Many international students regard the chance to gain relevant UK work experience both during and after their studies as an integral part of their UK education. Interestingly, despite a 2004 report produced by the United Kingdom Council for Overseas Students (UKCOSA) that indicates international students' difficulties in seeking paid employment during and after study, no published research exists on this issue (Bailey, 2006). There are clear economic and social implications for this.

Against this backdrop, the study aims to understand international students' lived experiences and their expectations of employment during and after their university study in the UK. Much has been speculated about the repercussions of these proposed structural constraints, yet little is known about how they are interpreted by the international students themselves and how the constraints shape these social actors' perceptions and experiences as international students in the UK.

2. Research aims and objectives

The research aimed to understand the lived experiences of non-EU and non-EEA international students as temporary migrants and their expectations of employment during and after their university study in the UK. Specifically, the research aimed to address the following objectives:

1. To explore and contextualise the lived experiences of international students studying and working in the UK.
2. To relate the international students' accounts to the context of stricter immigration policy objectives and examine how current provisions shape their employment expectations and broader perceptions of the UK as a welcoming place to study and to work.

3. Account of the research carried out and outcomes

3.1 Data collection

The data collection for the research was conducted in two phases. Both phases entailed conducting a series of semi-structured interviews with international students to obtain narratives of their lived experiences as students and future workers in the UK.

Phase I: April 2011

The first set of narrative interviews (Riessman, 2004) were conducted with 10 international postgraduate students who were studying for their Masters in Business and Management degrees in London. Using a purposive sampling strategy, I recruited international students through an e-mail call for participants, which was circulated to students by colleagues at Middlesex University and the LSE. Students were invited to contact me for further information if they were interested in taking part in the study. Upon the receipt of e-mails from interested students, I supplied an information letter and an application form to each student via e-mail (see Appendices). Students were also invited to contact me with questions about the nature of the study and their participation in the research.

All students started their Masters degrees in September-October 2010 and were due to complete their studies in September-October 2011. Table 1 provides demographic and background information of the participants. Nine participants arrived in the UK in September 2010 to start their degrees and therefore had been living and studying in the UK for seven months at the time of the first interview. One participant, Ann, entered the UK in August 2007 to study for her BSc in London and remained after graduation to study for her MSc and therefore had been in the UK for three years and eight months at the time of the first interview.

Table 1. Participants' demographic information

Pseudonym	Nationality	Gender	Age (in April 2011)
Rajesh	Indian	Male	24
John	Japanese	Male	24
Ken	Chinese	Male	23
Ann	Chinese	Female	23
Michelle	Australian	Female	24
Ananya	Indian	Female	32
Ziggy	Malaysian	Female	21
Rich	Canadian	Female	26
Jenny	Chinese	Female	23
Alice	Chinese	Female	23

The first set of interviews was conducted in April 2011, which was seven months after the students' arrival in the UK to commence their studies. Each participant was given a choice of venues for the interview to be carried out. Before the start of each interview, the student and I discussed the aim of the research and the nature of her/his involvement as a participant. An informed consent form was signed after this discussion (see Appendices for a blank form). All interviews were recorded with the participants' informed consent and transcribed in full.

Phase II: August-September 2011

In the second phase, I conducted a second set of interviews with the same cohort of international students from the first set of interviews. Only one student was unable to participate in the follow-up interview (Jenny). Again, all participants were given a choice of venues for the interview to be carried out.

Taking place one year after their first arrival into the UK (except in the case of Ann), the second set of interviews aimed to follow-up on each student's expectations and plans for employment after their studies, in particular their plans to remain in the UK to work. Again, all interviews were recorded with

the participants' informed consent and transcribed in full. At the interview, participants were asked to complete a receipt of participation payment form (see Appendices) and the £40 payment was transferred to their bank accounts within 24 hours. Each participant was asked if s/he would be willing to be contacted in the next six months for a brief follow-up on his or her post-study employment situation. All participants had agreed to this and provided their personal email contacts as well as their pseudonyms to be used in the research.

3.2 Data analysis and findings

Drawing on a thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), the transcripts from both phases were analysed for emerging themes in relation to the two research objectives. Given the rich and complex data obtained from both sets of interviews, only an indicative summary of emerging findings and themes are presented in this report. Table 2 provides an indication of emerging themes.

In Phase I interviews, the participants were invited to tell a story of their experiences as international students. They were encouraged them to their stories with a beginning, a middle, and what they anticipated the future to hold for them post-study, particularly in terms of employment. The focus was not only on their experiences so far as international students in the UK, but also on the story of how they had decided to come to the UK to pursue their postgraduate studies and the processes involved in making that happened. The analysis paid particular attention to these processes as well as each participant's subjectivities in how they have made sense of their experiences so far in the UK as international students.

All the participants told stories of the challenges they faced and overcame in the run up to leaving their home countries to come to the UK to study. They included: justifying to their families and themselves that studying in the UK was the best next step (compared to working or studying for their Masters in another English-speaking country e.g. the US and Australia), applying for their student visa, and preparing for the move to a new country. All of them spoke about the commitment they had made to come study here and all regarded this journey to the UK as an important one for their future.

Upon arriving into the UK and starting their new lives as international students here, the students spoke of the challenge of the adjustment period in the first few months. Encouragingly, all spoke of the excitement they had experienced once they arrived here and the opportunities to learn, not only from their Masters studies, but also from being in a new city and a new country.

Five months on after the initial interviews, all the participants had completed their final exams and close to submitting their Masters dissertation by the time the second set of interviews were conducted. The follow-up interviews revealed that there had been a shift in the international students' thinking and planning for the immediate future. They have had more time to reflect on the government's decision to scrap the PSW visa for the next cohort of international students. Many students had planned on applying for the PSW visa, as this would enable to stay on in the UK after graduation for a further two years and to look for work. Many felt that the government's strict approach to international students will damage the recruitment of future international students and they themselves would have thought twice about coming the UK to study for their Masters degree if the PSW was not available to them at the time of their decision of where to study overseas.

Table 2. Emerging themes of the lived experiences of international students in the UK

Theme	Description	Indicative quotes
The promise of the student visa	This theme illustrates the arbitrary nature of the student visa application process. The majority of the participants experienced uncertainty and anxiety during the application process, from submission to waiting to hear the outcome. It also relates to the power UKBA officials have in changing the course of an international student's life.	"I think happy cannot be enough to describe it. It was like oh, my God, I've got my visa. It was like I'd got my future... It is very, very important, especially for the very ordinary students. You know, their parents are not so high power status, they are not rich enough. They have got this offer to actually go to the UK to study there, get the degree, come back and have a reasonable work job, so that is their life and it is very important for them." (Ken, Chinese male student, 23)
Reminders of being an outsider	This theme relates to the participants' accounts of instances in which they have been made to feel different and as foreigners in the UK. Two participants (Michelle and Rich) who were English-speaking countries spoke about their observations of how other international students from non-English-speaking countries were sometimes differently to them in public situations and encounters.	"I felt really bad about that incident. I felt that probably the city is not that welcoming and I felt that probably because I am Asian because sometimes I do get some people who disturb me when I walk on my way to school." (Ziggy, Chinese-Malaysian female student, 21) "If I had an Indian accent and went and asked somebody something they wouldn't be as welcoming as with my so-called American accent." (Rich, Indian-Canadian female student, 26)
The importance of the PSW	The existence of the PSW was a major consideration for all the students in influencing their decision to come study in the UK. Although some did not end up staying on the UK post-study, the option to be able to do so via PSW was valued by all participants.	"If it was scraped, everything would have been wasted" (Rajesh, Indian male student, 24)
Disenchantment with the government's immigration approach to international students	There was a clear consensus that the government's revised policy approach sent a mixed message to international students about their value and their potential contribution to the British economy and society.	"In fact, those who are able to stay here are really high skilled labour. So they are actually way more competitive than normal peers who are competing for the same job. So, I was actually thinking they shouldn't have been hostile to students who are in a similar status because they are actually the ones who can contribute to the maximum." (Ziggy, Chinese-Malaysian female student, 21)

4. Conclusion and next steps

4.1 Conclusion

This project has adopted a multi-disciplinary perspective combining applied social psychology and public policy studies to firmly locate individual subjectivities within the wider socio-political context and to identify potential policy mismatches and unintended consequences of recent immigration policy changes. The research contributes to advancing our understanding of international students as social actors whose lived experiences are complex and heterogeneous, as shown by the accounts and narratives of the participants of this study. Policy makers must recognise that existing discourses and treatment of international students as 'cash cows' or 'bogus students' are simplistic. If the government continues to pursue the policy objective of reducing net migration at the expense of international students, then they can and are likely to pursue their studies and contribute their skills and talent to other western countries with more welcoming immigration policies to study and work.

4.2 Next steps for dissemination

The project is now completed, but the work of ongoing analysis and refinement of findings continue as an academic journal article relating to the issues of international students as both temporary student migrants and migrant workers is being prepared for *Work, Employment, and Society*. To assist in the preparation of this manuscript, I will be presenting a working paper at two academic conferences. The first is the BPS Annual Conference 2012, at which I will be chairing and convening the accepted symposium titled "Richard Benjamin Trust: A Showcase of Innovative Research in Social and Occupational/Organisational Psychology" in cooperation with three fellow RBT recipients. The second is an ESRC Research Seminar Series, titled "Young workers and precarious employment", where I have been invited to present the findings. In terms of bringing the findings to a wider audience, including policy makers and other stakeholders with an interest in international students, I plan to organize an end-of-project one-day workshop in May 2012 to disseminate the findings. This is timed to mark the end of the PSW route in April 2012. Experts on international students and immigration policies and policy makers will be invited to participate and respond to the findings. Therefore, I would like to ask the Trustees to allow the remaining funds from the research to be used for conference attendance and end-of-project workshop organization as part of the project's dissemination strategy.

5. References

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Appendices

From Sense of 'Entitlement' to 'Disenchantment'? A Confrontation of Expectations of International Students and Policy Makers

Application to Participate

Chief Investigator

Dr. Uracha Chatrakul Ayudhya
Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour
Middlesex University Business School (u.chatrakul@mdx.ac.uk; tel: 0208
411 4614)

Please take several minutes to answer each of the questions below. It should take you no more than 5 minutes to carefully complete both pages. Please **type** your answers directly onto this form.

The information disclosed on this form will be used purely for the purpose of this research and **will not be passed on to anyone else**.

1. Surname
2. First name
3. Nationality (based on the country that issued your passport)
4. Are you currently on a student visa? Yes or no.
5. Age
6. Gender
7. Course/programme
8. Starting and end date of your course/programme (month and year)
9. University
10. E-mail
11. Daytime contact number

12. Are you currently working or have you worked on a part-time basis during your MA/MSc studies in the UK? (Please choose one)

Yes (*If yes, please describe your work and how long you have been doing this for*)

No

13. When you graduate from your course/programme this year, are you planning to enter full-time employment in the coming year? (Please choose one.)

Yes (*If yes, please describe where you are planning to work after your studies. If it is in the UK, please indicate if you will require a work permit or visa to work here after your studies*)

No (*If no, please state below what you plan to doing instead*)

14. Are you currently applying for positions in full-time employment?

Yes (*If yes, please state in which country/countries and what kind of work you are applying for*)

No

15. Please indicate your availabilities for interviews in April and August/September 2011.

April 2011 (Interview 1)	August /September 2011 (Interview 2)
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Thank you very much for your time and for your interest in taking part. Please e-mail your completed form back to u.chatrakul@mdx.ac.uk as soon as possible. I will then contact you within 2-3 days of receiving your form to arrange a time for you to be interviewed. In the meantime, please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions you may have. My contact details can be found in the information letter attached to this form.

Best wishes,
Uracha

From Sense of 'Entitlement' to 'Disenchantment'? A Confrontation of Expectations of International Students and Policy Makers

Information Letter for Participants

Chief Investigator

Dr. Uracha Chatrakul Ayudhya
Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour
Middlesex University Business School (u.chatrakul@mdx.ac.uk; tel: 0208
411 4614)

This information letter aims to explain the nature of the study and your participation in it. If you have any questions about any aspects of the study, please do not hesitate to contact me directly. I will be happy to clarify any points of query.

The Study Aims and Objectives

The overall aim of the study is to understand the lived experiences of non-European Economic Area (EEA) international students and their expectations of employment during and after their university studies in the UK.

Each year, international students contribute £2.5 billion in tuition fees and an overall estimated contribution of £8.5 billion to the British economy. It is, therefore, of vital importance for the British university system and the economy to keep attracting and retaining international students in the context of increased competition in the international education market. Yet the current British government's policy objective of reducing net migration to "the tens of thousands" looks to target international students as well as other groups of economic migrants. Against this socio-political backdrop, this study offers a timely and original contribution by exploring the missing link between policy makers' stated policy goals and the lived experiences and expectations of international students, with wide implications for the attractiveness of the UK as a place to study and work.

This research is funded by the Richard Benjamin Trust (<http://www.richardbenjamintrust.co.uk>). The Trust aims to support innovative research in social and occupational/organisational psychology that has the potential to make a difference to families, organisations and communities and to people's lives.

Your Participation

The study will explore and contextualise the lived experiences of international students studying on MA/MSc courses and working in the UK. It will also relate international students' accounts to the changing context of immigration policy and examine how current provisions shape their employment expectations and broader perceptions of the UK as a welcoming place to study and work.

As this study intends to explore participants' views on the current immigration policy for international students in the UK, **it is important that all participants are from non-EEA countries and have entered the UK on a student visa**. Please click here to check which countries are members of the EEA: <http://www.ukvisas.gov.uk/en/howtoapply/infos/inf18eeaswissnationals#22862675>. If your country is not listed, then you are eligible to take part in the study.

It is anticipated that the study will take place over the period of 6 months (from March 2011 until September 2011). Before you consider whether you would like to participate in the study, please read carefully what your involvement would entail. The study is broken up into two phases. In the first phase, you will be invited to attend an individual interview session, which will take place in March or April 2011. You will be asked to share and reflect on your experiences as an international student in the UK so far. You will also be asked to discuss your plan and expectations of working in the UK during your studies and after completing your degree. This should last no more than 60-90 minutes. In the second phase, you will be asked to attend a follow-up individual interview session, which will take place in either July or August 2011. The nature of the questions will be similar to the first

interview. The aim is to find out more about your plan for employment as you approach the end of your Master degree. Specifically, you will be asked to discuss your experiences of applying for post-study work and the post-study work visa in the UK. The interview is expected to last no more than 60-90 minutes. It is intended that all sessions will be audio recorded (subject to full consent from each participant) and transcribed. All participants' identities will remain anonymous at all times.

Usage of Disclosed Information

All information provided by you and other participants in the study will be used purely for this research project. The raw data derived from the study will be handled and analysed only by me. At this point, it must be made clear that research data cannot be kept entirely confidential. This is because it must be made available for discussion within the research team and some data may be included in any written report or publication of the study. However, it is important to emphasise that while full confidentiality of data cannot be guaranteed, full anonymity of all participants will be upheld at all times. Each participant will be asked to provide a pseudonym, which will be used in all reporting of findings.

Right to Withdraw

Please be aware that, as a research participant, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage. You will not be asked to offer a reason for your withdrawal and any information you have provided up to that point will be destroyed immediately.

Reporting of Findings

Subsequent to data analysis, the findings from the study will be reported in an end-of-grant report as condition of the Richard Benjamin Trust award. The findings will be of interest to a range of stakeholders, especially governmental actors and the UK HE system. It is hoped that the research will inform policy, especially as most evaluations do not really take into account international students' lived experiences. These should be of interest to policy makers and universities if they are seriously committed to improving the international students' experience, as there are wide implications for the attractiveness of the UK as a place to study and work. International students are referred to as "key stakeholders" in the UK HE system (UKCOSA, 2003), especially at the postgraduate level. If this is the case, it is extremely important to give them a voice and to report back to policy makers. A written report of key findings will be made available to all participants upon request at the end of the study.

Payment of Participants

Each participant taking part in the two interviews in March/April and July/August 2011 will be offered £40 in exchange for her/his time. The guideline for payment is that each participant will receive £40 payment in her/his bank account no later than one week after the second interview. As a paid participant, you are not obliged to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer and you still have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage if you wish to do so.

Further Information

Thank you for taking the time to read this information letter. Please consider carefully whether you would like to assist in my research by making your voice heard in the ongoing and important discussions of the treatment of and policies on international students in the UK. As a former international student in the UK myself, I sincerely hope you will decide to take part and I look forward to learning more about your experiences as an international student. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions that you may have.

Contact

u.chatrakul@mdx.ac.uk
Middlesex University Business School
Room W129, Williams Building
The Burroughs, Hendon
London NW4 4BT
United Kingdom

Best wishes,
Uracha

From Sense of 'Entitlement' to 'Disenchantment'? A Confrontation of Expectations of International Students and Policy Makers

Statement of Informed Consent

Chief Investigator

Dr. Uracha Chatrakul Ayudhya
Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour
Middlesex University Business School (u.chatrakul@mdx.ac.uk; tel: 0208
411 4614)

I, _____, agree to participate in the research project "From Sense of 'Entitlement' to 'Disenchantment'? A Confrontation of Expectations of International Students and Policy Makers". I have read the attached Information Letter and understand the conditions of my participation.

I understand that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that if I wish to withdraw from the study or to leave, I am free to do so at any time, and that I do not need to give any reasons or explanations for doing so.

I understand that the purpose of this study is to hold two interviews to explore my lived experience as an international student in the UK. I understand that the interviews will be audio recorded and I give my consent to this recording for the purpose of this research.

I understand that the interviews will be transcribed and quotes from the session may be used in the reporting of this study. For this reason, any information disclosed cannot be considered confidential. However, I also understand that the raw data will only be seen and used by the Chief Investigator and her team. I accept that while research data cannot be kept entirely confidential, full anonymity is guaranteed at all times.

The Chief Investigator has offered to answer any questions I may have about the study and what I am expected to do.

I have read and understood this information and I give my informed consent to participating in the study.

Your Signature

Chief Investigator's Signature

Date

If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact Dr. Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya on u.chatrakul@mdx.ac.uk. Thank you for your participation in the study.

From Sense of 'Entitlement' to 'Disenchantment'? A Confrontation of Expectations of International Students and Policy Makers

Receipt of Participation Payment

Chief Investigator

Dr. Uracha Chatrakul Ayudhya
Lecturer in Human Resource Management and Organisational Behaviour
Middlesex University Business School (u.chatrakul@mdx.ac.uk; tel: 0208
411 4614)

By signing this, I acknowledge the receipt of £40 in payment for my participation in the study "From Sense of 'Entitlement' to 'Disenchantment'? A Confrontation of Expectations of International Students and Policy Makers".

As per the Information Letter for Participants, the following condition was agreed regarding payment:

"Payment of Participants

Each participant taking part in the two interviews in March/April and July/August 2011 will be offered £40 in exchange for her/his time. The guideline for payment is that each participant will receive £40 payment in her/his bank account no later than one week after the second interview. As a paid participant, you are not obliged to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer and you still have the right to withdraw from the study at any stage if you wish to do so."

Please transfer the sum of £40 to my bank account. My bank details are as follows:

Name (for anonymity purposes, please only provide your initials): _____

Name of bank: _____

Bank account number: _____

Bank sort code number: _____

Your Signature

Chief Investigator's Signature

Date

This research is funded by the Richard Benjamin Trust (<http://www.richardbenjamintrust.co.uk>). The Trust aims to support innovative research in social and occupational/organisational psychology that has the potential to make a difference to families, organisations and communities and to people's lives.

If you have concerns or questions about this study, please contact Dr. Uracha Chatrakul Na Ayudhya on u.chatrakul@mdx.ac.uk. Thank you for your participation in the study.