

Developing students as global citizens through the experience of transnational education: an achievable aim or limited concept?

Abstract

The paper explores the cultural experiences of the international students in the UK higher education environment during first semester of a course that is delivered in the UK and in France. The UK institution recruits a cohort of students from all over the world and the French institution recruits a cohort that is largely French in origin. Both cohorts of recruited students begin their semester in the UK, they travel to France for the second semester and are able to complete an internship and dissertation anywhere in the world.

The paper presents an analysis of some of their initial expectations and motivations for doing an 'international' postgraduate course, which provides some basis for an in depth discussion of what global citizenship is and whether simply doing a course with study in two countries develops students intercultural skills and promotes an idea of global citizenship.

One of the central questions of the research was whether students develop intercultural communication skills as a result of interacting with other overseas students in an overseas environment. Turner's (2006) arguments with regard to the 'emotional turbulence' that is experienced when making an intercultural transition between educational systems are considered as an aspect of the students' experiences. The expectation of the students with regard to becoming 'international' or acquiring international skills is also considered and compared with the observations of the students interaction and engagement with 'others' in their group.

The methodology used draws on ethnographic methods, where the researcher was a participant observer during the semester in the UK. Semi-structured interviews were also carried out. A key finding from the interviews was that students felt that they would achieve intercultural skills or become 'global' simply by being on the course. The observations of students' interactions, in other words the external 'reality', portrayed a very different picture. Further contradictions were also observed between what was said in interviews and the reality that was observed.