

Touching the Elephant: A Holistic Approach to Understanding International Student Experiences

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ABSTRACT

In this editorial essay, the author uses the Indian parable known as The Blind Men and an Elephant to illustrate different perspectives that may frame the international student experience. It discusses the abundance of blinders and high stakes in a growth industry. The editorial illustrates the need to shift perspectives and widen the circle of support and why a holistic approach matters.

Keywords: international student experience; holistic perspective

In an Indian parable known as The Blind Men and an Elephant, several blind men approached an elephant, and each touched the animal in an effort to discover what the beast looked like. Each blind man, however, touched a different part of the large animal, and each concluded independently that the elephant had the appearance of the part he alone had touched. The story illustrates that our subjective experiences can be true, but that they are also limited to our individual context, which presents a need for shared information. The different perspectives that may frame the international student experience bring this lesson vividly to life.

AN ABUNDANCE OF BLINDERS

Support for international students, which is well documented in international education research, has certainly grown around the world in tandem with increasing institutional interest in improving revenue, diversity, and internationalization. But, as in the parable of the blind men and the elephant, different professionals specializing in different areas of support usually have only partial pictures of the students' experiences, needs, and strengths.

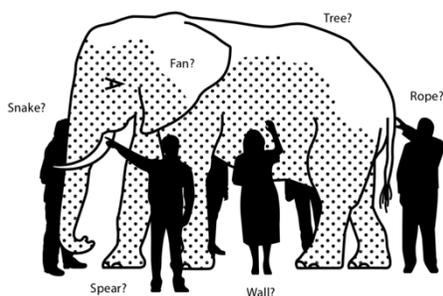


Figure 1. The Blind Men and an Elephant

The research focused on these issues commonly tends to view these students through a deficit perspective, only addressing student struggles with limited local languages or English language proficiency, cultural adjustment hurdles, student dissatisfaction, social integration issues with domestic students, and a lack of preparation to meet (Western) educational expectations.

For decades, colleges and universities in the major receiving (mostly English language speaking) countries have focused on building English language centers or programs, delivering week-long orientation seminars, lecturing on local cultures and university expectations, and providing students with a list of dos and don'ts—all designed around the assumption that “they” need to learn about education “here” in order to be successful. In substance, however, most institutions are barely scratching the surface in terms of understanding and responding to the complex realities of their international student populations, and hence are far from forming a true picture of international students’ lived experiences from admission to post-graduation.

HIGH STAKES IN A GROWTH INDUSTRY

Over five million students are currently pursuing a degree program outside their country of birth. There has been sustained global growth of international student numbers over the last several decades, as well as an evolving global marketplace, as political and economic developments have created new dynamics and served to shift student interest in key destination countries. At the same time, colleges and universities are restructuring and strengthening their support services. Indeed, many institutions of higher education proudly announce their “global vision” by pursuing foreign student recruitment; hiring international faculty members; promoting exchange opportunities and national and international scholarship program, such as Erasmus+ and Fulbright, among others, and developing other study abroad activities.

In the United States, for example, these global ambitions are primarily focused on recruiting students from non-traditional destinations such as Saudi Arabia and Brazil, particularly to tap into the scholarship programs offered by these governments. Non-English-speaking countries—including China, India, Japan, and South Korea—have also strategically aligned with this global ambition to recruit international

students from foreign countries. For instance, the fast-growing Chinese economy has transformed that country's higher education image into an "international education hub" with an enrollment target of 500,000 international students by 2020. China has strengthened its regional ties under its One Belt, One Road initiative and has widened its visa policies to attract the best and bright international students.

The ways in which international students are perceived and received by their host countries has always been important. But, as our understanding of the multifaceted experience of international study increases, and as the numbers of internationally mobile students grow, their ranks diversify, and the countries and institutions where they choose to study evolve, the stakes involved in getting the work of international student support 'right' takes on increasing importance.

THE NEED TO SHIFT PERSPECTIVES AND WIDEN THE CIRCLE OF SUPPORT

Whether they are called "foreign students," "Erasmus students," "alien non-immigrant," "non-resident alien," "mobile students," "study abroad student," or "international students," students who come from outside the national context are typically viewed as the "Other". As such, the local policies and programs directed toward them are structured in ways that classify them as "special people" who need things they lack—from language learning, to cultural adjustment, to understanding campus values, and becoming people who "fit in". Few people in the institutions hosting international students around the world know that international students are sometimes required to undergo complex administrative processes, may live in austere conditions, in some cases pay exorbitant fees, and often work doggedly trying to adopt local values while pursuing their uniquely individual dreams.

The kinds of support services they receive depend on how they are perceived in their host countries and institutions, which varies widely across the globe. International students may be seen as different types of learners, who can help to internationalize the campus environment. They are also often perceived as "cash cows" because of the revenue they bring to campuses, local communities, and national economies. Indeed, more and more institutions have strategic plans for increasing their international student population. Often missing from such plans, however, is the thoughtful provision of support services for these students and ways of integrating all students to foster campus diversity and student success. Yes, international students may struggle with writing, language, social engagement, and initial adjustment, but the best programs and services offered to this population are not designed as isolated treatments to "correct problems". Rather, the most meaningful supports recognize and attend to the contextual influences on international student learning, such as academic expectations, leadership development, personal motivation, etc, and help students leverage the many strengths they bring with them to the international study experience.

In addition to fostering support services that are grounded in students' strengths rather than their perceived deficits, the creation of synergies within institutions is vital. Student services and supports are only effective if students are aware of their existence and feel comfortable making use of them. Existing services may go

unnoticed or be underutilized if students are not effectively introduced to the resources available to them. Faculty and staff can play a key role here IF they are trained to recognize the needs of international students and are able to direct students to relevant supports. This requires that faculty and staff are made aware of the resources on offer at their institutions and are sensitized to the diverse realities of the international student experience. When existing programs and services such as the office of international students, writing center, health center, career center, counseling center and other campus units collaborate and coordinate with other departments across the campus, they may better address the larger picture of the international student experience.

WHY A HOLISTIC APPROACH MATTERS?

Globally ranked universities do aspire to provide meaningful international experiences for their domestic students; their leaders are also committed to the mission of global engagement and are willing to persevere in the face of challenges brought about by the current political rise in anti-immigration rhetoric. And yet, rather than [what?] nation-based framing of the discourse shapes perspectives about language, culture, politics, economics, and other terms of analysis in particular ways, and continues to make some questions seem less significant than others, some findings less meaningful, some realities less visible. It is vitally important to recognize the differences international students bring in terms of their diverse backgrounds and previous academic context in order to enhance campus diversity and academically prepare both domestic and international students. All of these students—domestic and international—represent the futures of our societies, many in the roles of leaders as professors, doctors, engineers, businesspersons, scientists, and other professionals of the 21st century. In spite of the anxieties and uncertainties of our time, educators should not hesitate to aspire to, plan for, and create the ideal situation where the focus is on the successful integration of international students and development of intercultural competences for all students.

There are certainly complexities in understanding international student experiences and their contribution to higher education, just as the blind men experienced challenges in understanding the true and full nature of the elephant in their midst. In the parable, the blind men did not see the whole elephant, no one said it was an elephant, no one asked the elephant, and they did not ask each other's views about what they were perceiving. An holistic approach to understanding international students will take time and effort, and includes a commitment to the value of fair treatment and the simple logic of reciprocity: inbound students are "international" in the host countries where they study in the same way that outbound students will be "international" by default in the countries that receive them. Receiving countries and institutions need to better appreciate these dynamics.

While the general trends show that many international students simply seek opportunities to study in places with less poverty, greater job prospects, low corruption, better infrastructure, increased safety and an overall better quality of life, the scenario is becoming more complex with the cultural and political changes our world has been witnessing lately. The journey of international students is riddled with

a spectrum of both positive and negative experiences (some of them life changing and transformational). And the international student population is not a single, uniform group; rather, it is heterogeneous by nature. This complexity requires greater nuance in terms of service delivery and a comprehensive approach towards addressing diversity and facilitating socio-cultural inclusion. Serving the international student population in higher education the world over today requires deeper understanding of these complex and shifting realities, and a commitment to addressing them substantively and comprehensively.

The ratio of international students and the support services is never balanced as the majority of campuses and universities have limited resources; office personnel and faculty members are often busy with regular schedules; and most importantly the programs and resources are structured from the perspectives of colleges and universities (what they want to offer) rather than what international students would actually need or benefit from in order to live, study, and work when they are overseas. As in the parable of Blind Men and the Elephant, the partial reality of understanding of the international student is reflected in the limited resources and programs put in place aiming to address the much larger and complex issues of international students (which are never fully understood by the so-called stewards in place). The magnitude of each international student experience varies based on personal educational differences, social integration, help seeking approaches, friendship development, funding issues, different communication styles and customs, career choices, and other soft skills. Most importantly, the human aspect is often ignored and what they bring to the table is minimized. At the human level, international students should not be seen as being different from their local counterparts – as they are real humans and their college experiences are as real as their counterparts' experiences are.

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