Introduction to the Winter 2019 Special Issue
Integrating International Students in Local (Student) Communities: A Theory-to-Practice Perspective

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Over the past decade, the study of international student mobility and migration in higher education has become increasingly popular among scientists from different disciplines. As a consequence, studies from a range of different scientific fields have now covered a wide array of aspects related to the decision to go abroad, international students' experiences abroad as well as the outcomes of students' mobility experiences. This special issue particularly aims to contribute to our knowledge on the experiences of international students abroad, and more specifically their academic and social integration at the host institution and surrounding community.

Many studies indicated that when international students arrive in destination countries, they face significant challenges, such as different academic demands and cultural adjustment (e.g. Smith and Khawaja 2011; Brown and Holloway 2008; Zhou et al. 2008), language barriers (e.g. Jean-Francois 2019; Van Mol and Michielsen 2015; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007) and/or prejudices, stereotyping and discrimination (e.g. Bonazzo and Wong 2007; Jean-Francois 2019; Poyrazli and Lopez 2007; Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010). These challenges, on their turn, can have an impact on international students' academic and social integration, which is of key importance, as this shows to influence their overall academic performance (Hirschy 2016; Arthur 2017). Therefore, the first main aim of this special issue is to contribute to a better empirical understanding of the academic and social integration process of international students, focusing particularly on the perspectives of different actors involved in the process such as higher education institutions and international students themselves. The papers in this special issue clearly illustrate the role different factors that can explain the integration process of international students, such as social support (the papers of Cong and Glass; Nilsson), campus climate (Cong and Glass), socialisation processes in different cultures (Wang and Moskal) or institutionalised support services (the contributions of Asada, Ballo, Mathies and Weimer; Cong and Glass; and Sin and Tavares).

Furthermore, whereas the theoretical and empirical literature on the integration of international students is expanding and becoming increasingly diverse, the translation of empirical and theoretical insights into practical implications that can be applied or implemented in daily practice is also still relatively limited. Therefore, the second main contribution of this special issue is its intention to bridge the gap that often exist between theory and practice, in order to provide practical recommendations to practitioners to enhance international students' integration, based on theoretical and empirical insights from a range of studies conducted in different contexts. This approach frames within a more general argument to translate social research into social practice, as practitioners are often unaware of useful academic knowledge (Zetterberg 2018), and scholars often do not truly elaborate on the potential implications of their findings for daily practice, despite the potential their findings might have in this regard. Therefore, besides the academic contribution, this special issue also aims to make a practical contribution, contributing to the development of strategies that have the potential to improve the social and academic integration of international students, based on a solid empirical and/or theoretical understanding of the processes at play.

The papers in this special issue

The paper of Ballo, Mathies and Weimer starts from a theoretical inquiry, and investigates how student development theories can help us to better understand the academic and social integration of students. They particularly point to the need of tailored student services that may help to support their integration process. This is particularly important as international students are often considered to be a homogeneous group, and as such they are generally treated in a similar way, despite the heterogeneity of profiles that exist within this group. Their analysis thus indicates not all international students have the same needs.

The role of international student services in international students' academic and social adjustment is also explored by Cong and Glass, but now from an empirical viewpoint. Their quantitative analysis of a sample of international students in the United States covers both traditional predictors of adjustment (language proficiency, social support and campus climate) as well as institutionalised support services (educational service augmenters), and illustrates their complementarity. Similarly to the argument of Ballo et al., they also indicate the need to provide a broad range of services to international students for enhancing their academic and social integration. Finally, they underline the important role friendships with local students play in international students' adjustment process.

This role of social support has also been documented by other authors, indicating its significant association with international students' psychological adjustment (Bender et al. 2019) and experiences of integration in the destination country, as they can often provide students with the necessary links to the local (student) community which consequently may enhance social integration processes (Van Mol and Michielsen 2015). The literature thereby clearly indicates places of interaction also matter: when international students, for example, live segregated from the local population, there will generally be little interaction (Jean-Francois 2019; Van Mol and Michielsen 2015). The paper of Per Nilsson also addresses the role of social support in supporting students' integration. Interestingly, Nilsson's paper focuses on the role of buddy programmes in students' integration, blending the boundaries between social support outside academic studies documented elsewhere and institutionalised support as reported for example in the paper of Ballo et al. His analysis indicates the clear potential of buddy programmes for providing social support to international students. However, it also reveals the flipside of the coin, namely that international students' social circles become limited to individuals involved in the buddy programme, and as such integration with the local student community might only partially be achieved.

The role of institutions and programs in international students' integration is also explored in Asada's paper on American students in Japan between the 1960s and 2010s. Her findings illustrate the importance of program components such as curricular design and on-site administrative staff providing support. Furthermore, her analysis clearly indicates the diversity of the international student body, which leads to different experiences in the host country.

The paper of Wang and Moskal dives deeper into the classroom dynamics in classrooms consisting of international and national students. Their qualitative study indicates that the tension between international and national students' experiences, expectations and perceptions in the classroom can often be related to socialisation processes in different cultures. As such, and in line with studies in other contexts (Song and McCarthy 2018; Arthur 2017), their study indicates the need to take these cultural differences into account, as it takes time for students to get acquainted with the – often subtle – differences between academic cultures. As they indicate, this adaptation process should be an interactive and mutually inclusive process which appreciates classroom diversity. Therefore, their paper points to the crucial role teachers play in the integration process of international students (Arthur 2017), as it is rarely sufficient to just bring students together to foster meaningful interactions (Leask and Carroll 2011, cited in Arthur, 2017).

Whereas the previous papers particularly focused on the perspective of students' themselves, finally the paper of Sin and Tavares also adopts an institutional perspective, focusing on the perspective of top and middle managers in higher education institutions. Their findings clearly illustrate the need to articulate clear strategies to support

international students in countries where the diversification/internationalisation of the higher education student population is relatively new, strategies that need to be adequately implemented and monitored.

In conclusion, the papers in this special issue together illustrate the heterogeneity of the international student population as well as the need to consider the different actors involved in the integration process when designing interventions, namely international and national students, stakeholders (e.g. student associations and organizations) and higher education institutions (both faculty members as well as individuals working in support services). International students' academic and social integration clearly cannot be achieved fully without offering them specialised and differentiated services. These services should go beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, meaning there is a shared responsibility of the different actors mentioned above in the academic and social integration process. This also means an investment from the part of the host institution is needed: although there often is a dominant focus on investment in the attraction of international students, increasing the numbers of incoming international students because of the financial revenue they generate (see e.g. Universities UK 2017), there should also be attention for training of local students and teaching staff in order to foster cross-cultural competences and a sensitivity to diversity, as well as for the development of specialised services that can support the integration process of international students.

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