The non-linear mobilities of international students to UK Higher Education – resilience, moorings and academic hospitality

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Origins of the Project

• ‘Promoting students’ resilient thinking in diverse HE environments’ commissioned by HEA Subject Group – Sociology, Anthropology, Politics (C-SAP)

• Project date: 2011/2012

• Revisiting the ‘rich’ data in 2014/15

• Partners: 3 Northern HEIs (Russell Group, Post-92, Further Education College)

• Participants: 21 students (13 ‘international’ and 8 ‘domestic’ with international or migration histories)

• Main method of data collection: biographical interviewing
International student mobilities to the UK

Total of Non-UK students 2015/16: 438010 (=19.2% of total UK student population)

Source: HESA (2017)
UK Idea(l)s of the ‘international’ student?
Resilience?

• ‘trendy’ and contested concept (surge alongside recent discourses around ‘risk’ and ‘vulnerability’, etc.)

• Multi-disciplinary concept (transport studies, ecology, developmental psychology, education, health studies, etc.)

• ‘mastery’ or ‘thriving’ in the face of adversity

• “…ability to recover rapidly from difficult situations.” (Walker et al., 2006)

• Basic psychological and emotional strength underpinning positive human characteristics (deterministic reading)
Why ‘resilience’?

• International students’ transitions demanding resilience? (e.g. discourses around ‘culture shock’, adaptation, ‘acculturation’, ‘academic adjustment’, etc.)

• Prevailing (Hidden) student discrimination in relation to race, gender, age, cultural, social or national backgrounds, sexual orientation, etc.

• Focus on ‘non-traditional’/’non-mainstream’ student cohorts (if there is such a thing as ‘traditional’?) in UK HE

• Most studies on students’ resilience in HE focus on ‘in situ’ learning cultures, curricula, and ‘resilient thinking’ as a form or critical thinking – less work on resilience in relation to biographies and the wider social and ‘everyday’ environment of (international) students
(Mobilities and) Moorings?

- Mobilities and moorings in a dialectical relationship (Urry, 2007)
- Moorings configure and enable mobilities, creating a ‘spatial fix’
- Spatial detachment or ‘deterritorialisation’ always accompanied by (rhizomic) (re-)attachments and reterritorialisation (Hannam et al. 2006)
- Affording different degrees of ’motility’
- Urry’s reading of moorings inspired by Simmel’s idea of ‘Drehpunkt’ (pivotal/axial point) - particular places which, through their fixation in space, allow for flow and a multiplicity of relational forms (Beziehungsformen) that are continually rearranged through it. (Simmel, 1997)
Students’ narratives – being outside comfort zone, absence of familiar moorings, problematic transitions...

‘Here in semester one I did not know what to say in class...I didn’t want to look stupid but...at school I was head of the school parliament...and always had lots to say...’ (T1, female, Latvia)

‘...being taken away from...your coping mechanisms that you have at home...going to university, I know it’s a choice but it’s difficult enough with that, let alone a massive prize tag hanging over your head.’ (T2, female, South Africa)

‘Back home we are like united, community is one...but here is like a closed family...You don’t even know your neighbour, not talked to...it was really tough...I was confused asking myself...every day how this society works, how people think, why people...throw eggs...tell us to go back...When I came to college I started reading...to know how people function, how this society functions...’ (T5, female, Republic of Congo)
Incentives for being ‘resilient’, coping strategies, etc.

‘I’m gonna be the first person in my family to actually go to university...that’s what motivated me.’ (T4, female, Iran)

‘...when I was in Hungary I was a lot less confident...because I had my family around me...they were always there to help me [but] it doesn’t mean...that they are always going to be there...you develop a sort of ability to deal with things...you learn a lot more by observing other people.’ (T6, female, Hungary)

‘...my experience was how I expected it to be because I created the experience to be as I expected it to be, if that makes sense?...I ...created it myself by knowing what it was I wanted to do and then doing those things...’ (T13, male, UK)

‘...I treat every problem like a puzzle there that needs a solution and that’s really been the driving force...’ (T14, male, Pakistan)
Students’ understanding of ‘resilience’

‘we have a history of being resilient people, if we’re sad we sing, if we’re happy we sing, if we’re mourning we sing...we just keep looking to the positives no matter how dark it is...’ (T20, female, South Africa)

‘...resilience is something that you probably build up throughout your life, like depending on what life throws at you...build up this wall like, metaphorically, you just build up a wall, and it’s like maybe the wall’s got holes in it and you decide what you let come through that wall...’ (female, Scotland)

‘...ability to bounce back...just deal with whatever is thrown in your path...and learn from it...it depends on the person, what they’ve been through...who they’ve come in contact with...their family, their background...’ (T2, female, South Africa)
(Refound) moorings

“...because England reform me, let me say...I came here scrap. They rebuild me...I came here full of pressure inside me...because I grow up in conflict...Even maybe ten psychologists, they will not decide what is going on with this...I was wrong person, I became the right one, let me say......I was living in sadness so I am really glad to be here, to do this course in England.” (T21, male, Syria)

“I have become...a member of the Islamic society...and outside of that I have met with many Turkish people around, who are, you know, living here, second generation...third generation...have you know, regular visits and try to...define myself as a part of them in a way...Outside university I have had good relationships...Mainly Muslim communities or new Muslim communities...” (T10, male, Turkey)

‘...I was elected onto the activities and events committee for our halls of residence...I was on the council that organised social events, balls, outings etc. and liaised with the university and the union...I’ve done volunteering...I volunteer with a refugee and asylum seekers’ womens’ conservation club.’ (T2, female, South Africa)
Key Findings

- Biography as a (learned) ‘source’ of resilience; resilience as socially constructed rather than ‘inbuilt’ personal trait
- Universities/HEIs as significant and meaningful ‘moorings’ where identities are ‘ordered’, developed and (re-)assembled
- Subject areas and disciplines as meaningful sites to perform ‘resilience’ and negotiate previously experienced hardship and traumas
- Resilience performed within multiple, concurrent and conflicting spatio-temporal mobilities (semester timetables, family rhythms, school runs, commuting, immigration procedures, etc.)
- Significance of social and educational networks for developing resilience and finding moorings (tutors, friends, peers, existing migrant communities, student societies, community work, volunteering, etc.)
- Resilience and moorings key to the formation of ‘possible selves’ (Clegg, 2011)
HEIs as meaningful moorings through the practice of ‘academic hospitality’ (AH)?

• academic hospitality involves openness and reciprocity towards others by ways of sharing and receiving, and by developing a meaningful conversation particularly with existing knowledges and epistemologies that are perceived as ‘other’ or opposite to one’s own believes, ethics and values.

• “…awareness that, however initially strange, the perspective of the other could easily supplement and perhaps correct one’s own work or even transform one’s self-understanding.” (Bennett, 2000, p. 1)

• Forms and modalities of academic hospitality: material, virtual, epistemological, linguistic, touristic, critical, celebratory, communicative. (Barnett and Phipps, 2007)

• Institutional culture of AH and ‘ethics of encounter’


