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# 16

## RE-CONCEPTUALISING MULTIPLE AND MULTI-DIMENSIONAL TRANSITIONS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND SIGNIFICANT OTHERS

*Divya Jindal-Snape*

### Introduction

This chapter focuses on research related to international students' transitions as existing research is beset with serious limitations. For instance, transitions research regarding international students conceptualises their transitions as primarily linear and uni-dimensional. The linearity and stage-based conceptualisations of transitions prevalent in the literature, such as an assumption that *all* international students sequentially go through four phases of honeymoon, crisis, recovery and adjustment, have been challenged (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). This linearity is likely to be due to researchers seeing international students as a homogeneous group (Section 2; Hellstén, 2007; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016) and not undertaking longitudinal studies with very little unpacking of unique transitions of individuals and the interaction of these transitions with those of significant others, for example, family members, peers and communities that they inhabit in home and host nations (Jindal-Snape, 2016). Without a holistic understanding of the complexity, dynamic, multiple and multi-dimensional nature of transitions, we are operating in silos and unable to see the complete picture. Any research that is based on such narrow conceptualisations runs the risk of the data not being robust enough to inform future research, policy or practice.

Most transitions research, including those involving international students, uses a negative discourse (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021; Chapter 7). It considers international students' transitions using a deficit model that conceptualises international students as vulnerable and passive with no agency or self-determination (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016). This is highly problematic, especially as this is based on previous research about international migrants

who were not students (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Zhou et al., 2008) and viewed their adaptation in a uni-directional manner without considering that transitions are better understood as mutual adaptation involving international students, their host/home communities and universities. These aspects will be considered in the following sections with a discussion of how research should be developed differently.

## **Critical considerations**

### ***Conceptualisation of transitions***

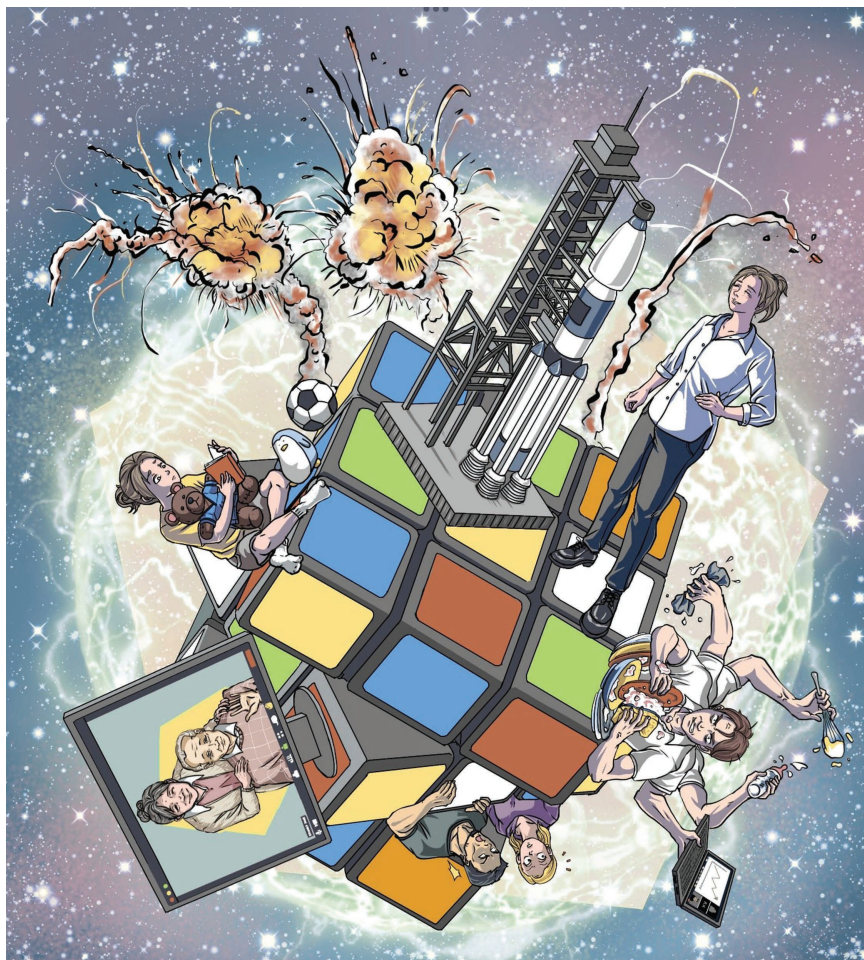
As noted with transitions literature elsewhere (Jindal-Snape, 2023; Jindal-Snape et al., 2021) and in higher education research (O'Donnell et al., 2016), few studies define and/or theorise what the authors mean by 'transitions'. It is even rarer to find any transitions literature that considers what transitions mean to the research participants. This is problematic as there is evidence in the literature of a lack of shared understanding of what transitions mean (Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019; see also Ecclestone et al., 2010 for various conceptualisations). If the key terms of a study are not clearly defined or operationalised, it casts doubt on its robustness as it is possible that there is a mismatch in the conceptualisation of the researcher/author, participants and readers. Further, it has important implications for research designs, study findings and their interpretation, and implications for future research, policy and practice. Therefore, it is important that transitions researchers review different conceptualisations of transitions; decide and clearly express how it is operationalised in their study; and collect data about different participants' conceptualisations.

I define transitions (in plural, see later) as an ongoing process of psychological, social, cultural, spatial and educational adaptations due to changes in contexts (e.g., home, work), interpersonal relationships (e.g., with staff, family) and/or (multiple) identities (e.g., university student, parent, professional; see also Tobbell et al., 2010 and Section 3). These transitions can be simultaneously exciting and worrying for an individual and others in their lives and can require ongoing support (Jindal-Snape, 2016, 2018, 2023). It is important to point out here that I conceptualise transitions not as 'change' but as 'adaptation' to that change. Further, when people suggest that international students did not experience transitions as they did not move to the host country due to the pandemic, it is important to note that the normative or expected change not happening in itself would necessitate adaptation to that change in their expectations and reality, along with some other transitions that might be triggered from potential changes in perceived identities, for example, becoming a distance learner. To be able to understand these transitions fully, I will consider my Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory next.

### ***Conceptualising multiple and multi-dimensional transitions***

Research suggests that every individual experiences multiple transitions simultaneously. In the case of international students, these can be triggered due to changes related to experiences of being in a new country, new national and organisational culture, different educational system, leaving (or bringing) family and friends, forming new relationships, differences in pedagogical/andragogical approaches, etc. (Jindal-Snape & Ingram, 2013; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Zhou et al., 2008). Therefore, they will experience ongoing multiple educational and life transitions at the same time. Some of these are likely to be positive, whereas others might be negative, or both, at the same time; most importantly the transitions experiences will change over time. Previous research tends to focus on one type of educational transition (e.g., adapting to different language or academic skills; O'Donnell et al., 2016) rather than considering the multiple educational *and* life transitions an international student might experience. Further, as the questions asked by researchers focus on a particular transition, international students might not have the opportunity to reflect on, or talk about, other transitions that might be more significant to them, especially at that time. This provides a fragmented picture of what are complex multiple transitions; it is not possible to see how multiple transitions might be interacting and how they might support (or not) the individual when some transitions are going well and others are problematic. For example, an international student could be experiencing a negative educational transition alongside positive social and relationship transitions. Jindal-Snape and Ingram (2013) suggest that, if stronger, these positive transitions experiences can act as a buffer for the negative experiences, and vice versa.

Similarly, international students are not the only ones experiencing transitions. Their transitions will trigger transitions of significant others, such as their family, friends, staff, and/or community members. Consider the case of a British student moving to Japan with their spouse and children. The international student will experience multiple transitions, but their transitions will have a domino effect on their family's transitions too. The spouse might have been a professional in their home country, but became a dependent in Japan, and will have to navigate everyday life in a language and culture they might not be familiar with or prepared for, leading to multiple transitions. Similarly, the children might have transitions due to a change in school system, pedagogical approach, language and cultural expectations of a child. It is also important to consider the transitions significant others, such as family, friends and, in the case of professionals, coworkers in the home country, might experience (see Figure 16.1). The academics, peers and the university and local communities in the host nation will also experience transitions related to the international student's transitions. For instance, academics might experience professional transitions as they change their andragogical approaches,



**FIGURE 16.1** Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions Theory.

*Source:* Copyright Divya Jindal-Snape; Art Clio Ding; Rubik's Cube® used by permission of Rubik's Brand Ltd. [www.rubiks.com](http://www.rubiks.com)

curriculum and assessment (Zhou et al., 2008). Further, these transitions, and any other unrelated transitions, of significant others will trigger transitions for the international student.

Therefore, Jindal-Snape's (2016) Multiple and Multi-dimensional Transitions (MMT) theory proposes that each individual experiences concurrent multiple transitions and that their transitions can trigger transitions for significant others, highlighting the multi-dimensional nature of transitions. Conversely, significant others will be experiencing their own transitions and these transitions will trigger and/or have an impact on that individual's transitions. These transitions are dynamic and are not taking place in a vacuum but in

an environment that is constantly changing. The environment, for instance, might change due to visa regulations, pandemic, local- and national-level policies and the positive or negative narratives in the media about international students and other migrants. The dynamic environment will not only trigger transitions, it might also determine whether the transitions are positive or negative as well as whether the environment will facilitate or hinder their transitions. International students will have multiple types of transitions in every context they are situated in every day, and this will change over time.

To understand MMT better, it can be visualised using Rubik's cube as a metaphor (see Figure 16.1). If each individual and significant others in their ecosystem are seen as one colour in a Rubik's cube, we can visualise six individuals and their significant others as well as their mutual interactions. As with a Rubik's cube, when one slight change on one side/colour leads to changes for other sides/colours, one person's transitions would lead to transitions for all those in the connected ecosystems. Figure 16.1 shows the ecosystem of an international student (female on the right), with resultant transitions of their significant others, such as the spouse taking on multiple roles and identities (e.g., that of a professional, main parent, homemaker) and their parents' transitions being triggered due to the distance and limited time to converse online with them due to the student's multiple transitions.

It is important to also be mindful that the international student will not be at the centre of each ecosystem we consider them to occupy; their advisor of studies is likely to be at the centre of another ecosystem (and connected to multiple ecosystems on the fringes) which will imply that the ripple effect will be felt across multiple connected ecosystems.

Therefore, instead of international students' transitions being uni-dimensional, they are multi-dimensional and need to be considered as such in any research that is undertaken. Further, it is important that researchers are mindful of the ever-changing home and host contexts and environments, rather than considering them to be fixed for every international student who is from a particular country or going to a particular country.

### *Discourse*

Most of the transitions research literature, irrespective of the type of transitions and who is experiencing it, portrays it as a negative experience which is disruptive and stressful (Jindal-Snape et al., 2021; Chapter 7). This is also the case with the research literature about international students' transitions despite an acknowledgement that international students are able to study their chosen discipline in the university of their choice, and develop their social and academic skills. Further, in most cases, the international student status is a marker of having been successful in getting prestigious and competitive scholarships (Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). Therefore, a negative discourse is problematic, and it might feed into negative stereotypes of their transitions. This



aligns with Richardson and Sun's (2016) argument that the prevalent stereotypes of international students (whether related to academic, ethnic or national culture) can cause barriers to mutual adaptation (see also Chapter 4). Also, it most likely does not take into account the multiple transitions and different experiences of every international student. Therefore, it is important that the discourse is balanced, and researchers investigate both positive and negative transitions experiences (e.g., see Jindal-Snape & Cantali, 2019).

### *Longitudinal and multi-perspective studies*

As mentioned earlier, the conceptualisation and operationalisation of key terms will have an impact on the research design. When we conceptualise transitions as ongoing processes of adaptation, it becomes apparent that the research requires a longitudinal design. Most transitions researchers collect data just before and after the move to the new educational institution or country, capturing the immediate perceptions and experiences without considering their adaptation over time. Some studies report that they undertook a longitudinal design; however, as their conceptualisation of transitions is around a one-off event, data are collected before and after the move (e.g., mention of data collection twice 21 weeks apart at, what authors have termed as, 'pre-transition' and 'post-transition'; Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008), without considering the ongoing adaptations over the years. For instance, a review of healthcare literature between 1994 and 2004 also showed that of the 23 studies exploring transitions, only one had used a longitudinal design (Kralik et al., 2006). Even longitudinal research like Jindal-Snape and Cantali's (2019) is limited as data were collected at four fixed time points determined by the school year structure. Ideally, data collection should be ongoing with the participants deciding when to provide data such as through longitudinal diaries, whether written or audio recorded (see Glazzard et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2017, 2020). The longitudinal diaries allowed participants to reflect on changes in their own conceptualisations of transitions over time; instead of describing them as change and one-off-event, they started to speak about their transitions as complex, dynamic, multiple and multi-dimensional (Jindal-Snape, 2023).

Further, if conceptualising transitions according to the MMT theory, it becomes crucial that we ask international students not only about their transitions but also those of significant others, as well as any interactions between their transitions. Similarly, it is important that data are collected from an international student and their significant others to understand their unique and holistic transitions. Therefore, multiple participants' perspectives need to be captured to understand one person's transitions experiences, possibly better undertaken through a case-study design to capture holistic transitions. It is also crucial that we do not assume who their significant others are; they should be asked to nominate them, for instance at the first interview. This design was found to be effective in other contexts where young adults were asked to nominate

their significant others, which provided a holistic and complete picture of transitions that would otherwise have been lost (Jindal-Snape et al., 2019).

### Reflection questions

- What is my conceptualisation of transitions? Have I explicitly operationalised it before deciding on my research questions and research design?
- What does the language I'm using about transitions assume about students' experiences?
- What transitions theory/ies am I using and why? Does it/they underpin my research design, analysis and interpretation? What are the limitations of this/these theory/ies?
- During the review of international students' transitions literature, what discourse am I drawn to, and why?
- Whom do I need to collect data from to understand international students' holistic transitions? Who will decide whom to collect data from – the participants or me?
- How can I design a longitudinal study that is able to capture multiple transitions over time? What data collection methods should I use to collect data that can capture these transitions in a non-linear manner?
- Do my selected methodology and data collection methods allow for unique and diverse views to emerge? How will I ensure that I don't privilege some views over others?

### Practical suggestions for researchers

**Align your research design with the conceptualisation of the key concept/s.** As I consider transitions to be an ongoing process, it is important that I use a longitudinal research design that captures international students' expectations before moving and reality after they have moved, as well as their excitement and concerns related to their move to a different country, educational system, language (both academic and everyday life), cultural differences, etc. Therefore, data have to be collected not only as they move into higher education but also across higher education followed by their return to their country. Similarly, consider what your key concepts are, and which research design is the most relevant based on that.

**Align your research design with the theorisation of the key concept/s.** It is important to be mindful of the theory/ies underpinning your study. For instance, my theorisation of transitions is that transitions are multiple, multi-dimensional and interact with those of significant others (MMT Theory). Therefore, my research design includes data collection from students about their complex and holistic transitions experiences, in multiple contexts, alongside the multiple transitions experiences of their significant others. Data collection involves specific questions about mutual transitions experiences and any



impact on, or of, significant others' transitions. Consider being explicit about your theorisation before designing your study.

**Consider critical discourse analysis to provide the context for your study.** Understanding the context in which international students enter or live in the host nation might provide valuable insights into what conscious and unconscious messages the dynamic environment might be giving them about the host nation's, university's and society's willingness to engage in any meaningful mutual adaptation. However, literature based on discourse analysis of national/university policies, curriculum and/or media about international students is limited and might be a useful first step before undertaking further research.

### Example in practice

**Book chapter:** Jindal-Snape (2023)

**Chapter focus:** This chapter focuses on the conceptualisation and theorisation of transitions across a range of educational and life transitions.

**Chapter strengths:** It unpacks an underdeveloped area of transitions research, namely conceptualisation and theorisation of transitions, and provides examples of multiple studies through which these have been developed and examined. It highlights the need for constant critique of existing theories in the researcher's own context, their applicability and need for development, including that of new theory/ies based on their study.

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