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STRIDE

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Research

Winner of the Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2018

STRIDE: Social Transition Research into International Doctoral Experiences

Open University and University of Dundee

Research into the international student experience in the UK 2017-18

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STRIDE: Social Transition Research into International Doctoral Experiences
Open University and University of Dundee

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Left: Robert Hook
building at Open
University Campus in
Milton Keynes.

1. Introduction

The STRIDE (Social Transition Research into International Doctoral Experiences) project sought to understand the role of holistic social support networks in international postgraduate students' transition experiences across three key areas: 1) social communities with fellow doctoral students, 2) social connections with university staff members, and 3) social support networks outside of the university. These findings were compared cross-institutionally between The Open University and the University of Dundee to unpack the role of institutional contexts in students' experiences.

2. Rationale for research

Undergoing doctoral study, although rewarding and intellectually stimulating, can be an exceptionally demanding experience with unique academic, social, and life challenges (Tobbell, O'Donnell, & Zammit, 2010). Perhaps as a result, one recent study identified that half of doctoral students experienced psychological distress (Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). Similarly, doctoral students frequently experience social isolation or loneliness (Janta, Lugosi, & Brown, 2014), perhaps due to the independent nature of their work. These experiences are particularly poignant for international doctoral students, as they might simultaneously encounter social stressors related to living and learning in a new country (Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), which could exacerbate feelings of isolation (Gareis, 2012; Jindal-Snape & Rienties, 2016).

3. Research aims

This project, therefore, examined the social experiences of international doctoral students through three research questions:

- How do international doctoral students build social support networks within their university departments?
- What is the role of social networks outside of the university in supporting international doctoral students?
- In what ways can institutional support mechanisms enable successful transitions?

The project unpacked international doctoral students' social transitions, defined by the researchers as 'the ongoing experience or process that students undergo to adapt to the multifaceted changes in their social support networks as a result of doctoral study in the UK.'

4. Background information to the research

An in-depth comparison of students' social community development experiences was undertaken in this study by focussing on a single social sciences department at each of the two participating institutions.

Institution 1: At the time of data collection, this institution had 28 full-time PhD students (around two-thirds of whom were international students), who were all fully funded with a living stipend. As a stipulation of their funding, students were required to live within commutable distance of the institution and were expected to have regular attendance on campus. The department provided regular trainings and weekly research group meetings, which doctoral students were expected to attend. All students were provided with a desk, spread between three locations in the department's building.

Institution 2: This institution had 67 doctoral students: 20 full-time PhD (mostly international students) and 47 part-time PhD/professional doctoral (mostly domestic UK) students. Apart from international students, students were mostly self-funded or funded by their employer. For home students, there were no formal living or attendance requirements for study. The department held a monthly optional doctoral student seminar and other training was provided through the department and wider university for attendance at students' discretion. There was a room provided for full-time students, but some opted to work from home or elsewhere in the university.

In this study, there were strong differences in approaches towards doctoral study at each institution, which will be apparent in the results.

5. Research methodology

Four research methods were used in this study. All doctoral students in each department were invited to participate in one or multiple phases of the research. As the research considered the social community as a whole, domestic UK students were also invited to participate.

Longitudinal Reflective Diaries (31 participants). A longitudinal diary was utilised for six weeks, whereby participants were contacted once a week to fill out an online reflection about their social engagement with peers. These contributions were analysed using multi-level narrative analysis.

Social Network Analysis Surveys (28 participants). Social Network Analysis is a quantitative survey-based tool for mapping and visualising social relationships on a macro level.

Questionnaires were sent to doctoral students to mark who they were friends with and who they received social support from, both on and off campus.

Interviews (21 participants). In-depth interviews with doctoral students were conducted, focussing on three main areas: 1) social community development with fellow doctoral students, 2) social connections with staff, and 3) social support received outside of the university. These interviews were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis.

Student Vignettes (17 participants). The project hosted a public-facing blog, where doctoral students wrote personal narratives about their social transition experiences. These can be viewed at: https://strideresearch.wordpress.com/. These posts had over 3,000 reads from visitors in 67 countries.

Altogether, this mixed methods approach allowed for triangulation and cross-validation of findings from multiple perspectives, providing a well-rounded understanding of how international doctoral students experience social transitions.

6. Key research findings

6.1 Connecting with fellow doctoral students

Throughout this project, it was evident that social networks were invaluable sources of support for doctoral students at both institutions. In many instances, social support was key to 'surviving and thriving' during the doctoral experience.

> **"I had a really difficult supervision meeting and then I went out really frustrated and I wanted to quit the whole PhD…So I discussed that with my fellow students and I had some really positive feedback…They said to me this is normal, it happens all the time, you need to familiarise yourself with that. That was a really positive experience. They helped me overcome that barrier."**
> (Interview Participant 4, Institution 1, male, international student)

However, there were variations between students on the degree to which they felt part of a social community with peers, with several factors impacting experiences.

6.1.1 Regular attendance on campus

The nature of doctoral study in the UK is relatively independent; research students do not take classes and can often complete their work remotely. In this study, there was a wide spectrum of how often doctoral students were physically present on campus, ranging from every day to once every

month (or less). There were particular differences between Institution 1 (where regular attendance was expected) and Institution 2 (where there was no formal attendance requirement for home students), with students more frequently present in Institution 1.

Participants who more frequently worked in their department on campus (often in Institution 1) typically reflected more positively on their opportunities to participate in the doctoral community.

> **"If they're on campus a lot, then obviously they meet more people…For example, if we ask after work if anyone is up for a drink, then obviously just the people who are on the campus can attend that."**
> (Interview Participant 13, Institution 2, male, international student)

There were many factors that impacted students' abilities to visit campus (family or work commitments, preferences to study alone, physical distance, etc.) and when not physically present, there were fewer social opportunities.

6.1.2 Physical working spaces

Dedicated working spaces for doctoral students provided opportunities for social communication between peers from different countries, which was more immediately developed for those at Institution 1 (where PhD student rooms were more frequently used). Participants most easily formed social relationships with those who were within their immediate physical proximity, as 'small talk' during the working day supported relationship development.

> **"I personally find it a very sociable environment in our office…We can support each other in there, and talk a lot more…I think it's good to be all in together."**
> (Reflective Diary Participant 1, Institution 1, female, dual citizen)

Participants also reflected that separations between different physical working spaces led to artificial social barriers. For example, students in Institution 1 were assigned desks across several rooms around the building and participants more easily formed friendships with peers who were seated in their own room.

6.1.3 Students-only communication spaces

Participants at both institutions valued having communication spaces that were only accessible to students, as they provided a medium for supporting each other. These were frequently created through students' own initiative using social media tools. For example, doctoral students at Institution 1 had a 'students-only' private Facebook group and those at both institutions used WhatsApp groups.

"We also have this closed private PhD Facebook group. It's good to be there because you know it's just students and it's very supportive. If you have any questions, you just post it and, of course, it might take several hours or days, but someone is going to reply."
(Interview Participant 3, Institution 1, female, international student)

"Two PhD students I know are graduating next week so they've made an invite on WhatsApp for us to join them."
(Reflective Diary Participant 18, Institution 2, female, international student)

However, because these groups were student-maintained, there were often inequalities in who had access. For example, participants in Institution 1 held multiple WhatsApp groups for students from different study years and, as a result, they would often organise social events that were not advertised to their wider cohort of peers. At Institution 2, the WhatsApp group did not include all doctoral students and some students were unaware that it existed.

"I know there are WhatsApp groups with students but I know I'm not in a WhatsApp group. Like when I have discussions with others, they'll just say "Let's just WhatsApp each other" and then I'm thinking alright, okay [laughs]."
(Interview Participant 2, Institution 1, male, domestic student)

6.1.4   Leadership in the community
At both institutions, there were key doctoral students who served as leaders in their social communities, frequently organising social events and encouraging participation. Community leaders often acted as 'bridge-builders' between students from different backgrounds (that is, cultures, age groups, study cohorts, etc.) and were, therefore, central to developing a more inclusive community. Social community leaders tended to be international students or domestic students who were newly established in the local area; they typically had relatively few existing ties within physical proximity but placed high value on being part of a vibrant social community.

"I think there are certain individuals…that help bridge those connections. Those people, in particular, might initiate certain events or they're just kind of a hub where people go to and they're easier to connect to, so they kind of get other people to get together."
(Interview Participant 7, Institution 1, female, dual citizen)

Other doctoral students often relied on the initiative of these leaders to support their own social networking opportunities. However, it was frequently noted that this reliance meant there were inconsistencies in social opportunities, for instance when community leaders were busy or away from campus.

"Last week there was the graduation ceremony for some of our colleagues and we were supposed to have a nice gathering to celebrate them, but we didn't (until now). Maybe because nobody took the ownership or the initiative to create any event and also could be the lack of time."
(Reflective Diary Participant 15, Institution 2, female, international student)

"It depends on how busy the frequent social event organisers are. There's only a handful of people who often take initiative to organise social events, and if they are busy, then nothing's going to happen."
(Reflective Diary Participant 11, Institution 1, male, international student)

6.2 Connecting with staff members
Many participants described limited social interaction with staff members, particularly beyond their supervision team. Almost universally, it was felt that staff members were perhaps too 'busy' to make connections with doctoral students.

"I only see them during supervision. They're always so busy and I'm always so busy, so we don't find time. I never offered [to see them informally], I never tried to do this. I don't think they'd refuse if I offered this, but I know they are busy."
(Interview Participant 15, Institution 2, female, international student)

Participants who did have close relationships with staff tended to: 1) be frequently physically present in the department; 2) undertake research requiring them to network with a broader range of staff; 3) work on 'side projects' in addition to their doctoral research; and 4) be interested in remaining in academia after their studies.

6.2.1   Cultural differences in power distance
Many international students in this study, particularly those from outside the EU or North America, described cultural differences in power relationships between students and staff. For some international students, it was viewed as culturally inappropriate or uncomfortable to develop social relationships with staff.

'There's a big distance between academics and students in [home country] universities. You need to be polite and don't need to disturb. You can't even sit in the same table

and eat something, it's impolite because it's different hierarchies.'

(Interview Participant 4, Institution 1, male, international student)

6.2.2 Desire to develop more social relationships with staff

Despite these cultural differences, most participants recognised the value in developing more personal relationships with staff, and in particular with supervisors. In this way, doctoral students wanted staff members to recognise their lives outside of their studies and initiate friendly conversations.

"I'd like them to know I'm not only a student. I am a human being. I have perspectives about life. I have issues about life. I have different views about life, about everything here. About the system, the culture, the relations, about everything. This is what I am. Only a small part is a student."

(Interview Participant 14, Institution 2, male, international student)

6.3 Support from outside the university

Participants in this study consistently demonstrated that a wide social circle outside the university supported their doctoral experience. This is nicely summarised in Figure 1, whereby Vasudha Chaudhari visualised her support network for her blog contribution for this project.

Table 1 demonstrates those who were most commonly mentioned by doctoral students as social support networks. Participants also emphasised that different kinds of support were contributed by different people in their lives

Table 1: Different types of social support from connections outside the university

Person	Type of support
Partner	Emotional, financial, motivation, perspective, household help, proofreading, minor research tasks
Parents and family	Emotional, financial, motivation, perspective, motivation
Children	Emotional, motivation, perspective, household help
Friends who have experience with doctoral work	Emotional, academic
Friends without experience with doctoral work	Emotional, perspective, escape
Peers from their country or culture	Emotional, cultural adjustment, escape
Neighbours or housemates	Social adjustment, belonging

It was frequently noted that social ties outside of the university often had very little understanding of their doctoral process, but nonetheless offered invaluable emotional support.

"My family…if I said I had a job at a checkout at Aldi, they'd have more understanding of what that entails…. Honestly, they haven't got a clue. Nobody's been to university. If I said I'd landed on the moon, they'd have more idea."

(Interview Participant 11, Institution 1, female, dual citizen)

7. Conclusions and ideas for future research

This research has outlined the important and varied types of social support that international doctoral students experience during their studies. It has also highlighted that social transition experiences are

Figure 1: Doctoral student's visualisation of her social support network
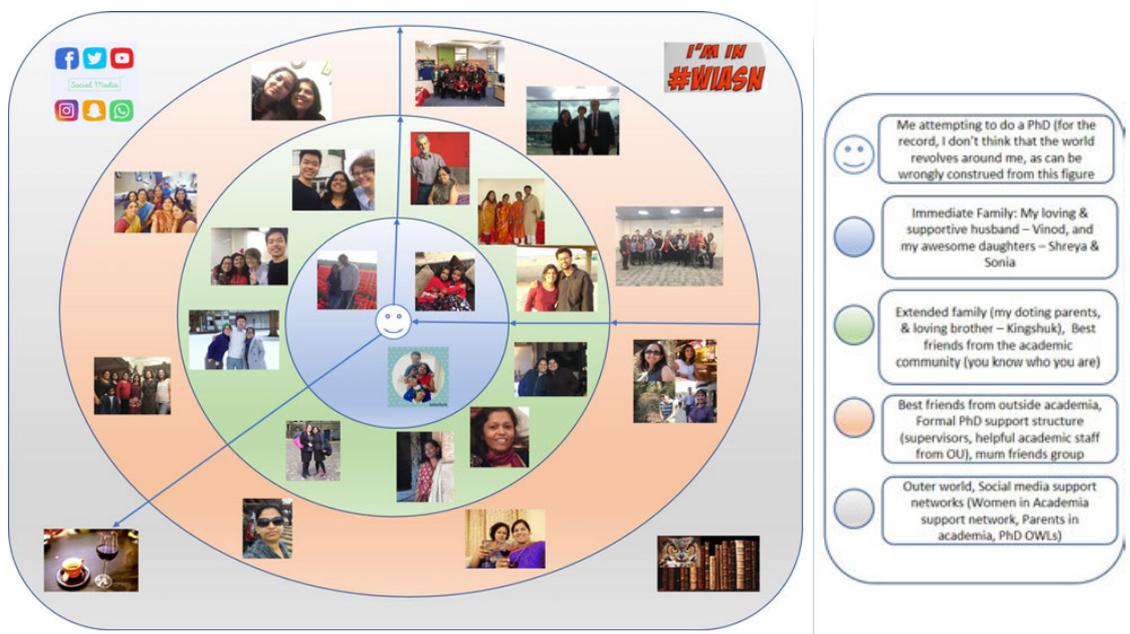
complex and multifaceted, with both institutional and personal circumstances influencing the degree to which students feel socially supported and part of a community.

In particular, the project has provided evidence for the need for universities to think purposefully and critically about the social support offered to doctoral students. As such, future research should build upon these findings by evaluating concrete and specific solutions or actions for supporting international doctoral students' social transitions.

8. Recommendations for practice

This project puts forward the following recommendations for supporting social community developments of international doctoral students:

1. Encourage doctoral students to regularly work within their department (where possible and appropriate).
2. Provide inclusive physical spaces for working and socialising between peers from different backgrounds.
3. Identify community leaders within the doctoral community and provide them with support (financial, access to resources, etc.) to develop regular, inclusive social opportunities with peers.
4. Support students-only communication spaces on social media and develop protocols for making them available to all doctoral students in the department.
5. Develop regular programming that explicitly focuses on social networking. Ensure that social events occur not just during welcome week, but are sustainable throughout the year and inclusive to students from all backgrounds.
6. Encourage staff attendance at seminars or events and build in opportunities for social exchange between staff and doctoral students.
7. For doctoral supervisors, share personal information about your own life and hobbies (as you feel comfortable) and build in time to ask students the same. Ask questions about students' social transitions and provide resources for students who are struggling to make connections.
8. Offer opportunities for doctoral students' wider social networks (families, partners, friends, etc.) to attend social events and include these networks in celebrations of their successes.

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10. Resources

STRIDE blog
https://strideresearch.wordpress.com/

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The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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