



Intercultural Exchanges in Internationalization of University; Study-Abroad Doctoral Students' Lived Experiences in Iran

Zahra Niknam¹

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Extended Abstract

The present article describes and interprets the experiences of study-abroad doctoral students studying in Iran. The theoretical backgrounds behind the issue relate to "academic exchanges" and "doctoral studies" as important subdivisions of internationalization of higher education. Academic exchanges are not merely epistemic, but mainly cultural and social. Doctoral studies are also a relatively new field of study in higher education, which has grown dramatically with the massification of higher education in recent years. In order to understand the doctoral students' lived experiences, ethnography as methodology and research method has been used. The informants included eleven PhD students in both gender, from Afghanistan, Lebanon and India in different disciplines and universities who studied in Iran in 2018. MC Alpine and Norton (2012) conceptual schema has been used to understand the overall student experiences as a heuristic, and integrative framework of nested contexts. Students' lived experiences with the consideration of societal/supra-societal, institutional and departmental/disciplinary contexts are studied. The framework allows recognizing the layers and complexities of study-abroad doctoral students' experiences and integrating factors that influencing the outcomes across the contexts. The research findings were categorized in nine categories and they were described and interpreted subsequently. Finally, suggestions for future research and action are presented.

Keywords: internationalization of universities, doctoral studies, study-abroad students' experiences in Iran, higher education in Iran

1. Assistant Professor of Curriculum Studies, Faculty of Psychology and Education, Kharazmi University, Tehran, Iran.

✉ niknam@khu.ac.ir



INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the number of foreign students studying in Iran, especially PhD students, has been growing. The presence of these students is in line with the internationalization policies of higher education in Iran. Academic exchanges have significant political, economic, social, and cultural dimensions in communication between countries, governments and institutions. Academic exchanges are considered a policy in internationalization of higher education.

This paper deals with the experiences of study-abroad doctoral students, their academic lives and social relations in Iran. Mc Alpine and Norton's (2006) schema, as a heuristic and integrative conceptual framework, is used to map the contexts in which students' experiences are emerging. This framework consists of three nested contexts: a. departmental/disciplinary, b. Institutional and c. Social and international contexts.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study is to explore and describe the lived experiences of study-abroad students, enrolled doctoral programs at Iranian universities in order to understand how they lived and studied in Iran.

METHODOLOGY

Ethnography (Spradley & McCurdy, 2007) was used as a research method. The data was gathered from eleven PhD students, in both genders who studied in Iran in 2018. Informants were from Afghanistan, Lebanon and India in different disciplines and universities. As a university teacher I have been dealing with foreign students at Kharazmi University. Snowball techniques were used for access to other samples of the research. Data was gathered by participant observations, focus group and semi-structured interviews, telegram chats and voice messages. Data analysis was done by thick description and interpretation of students' lived experiences.

RESULT

Nine main categories were identified in our informants' talks. These categories are summarized as follows: 1. "Iranians get friends with others quickly", 2. Iranians complain as follows: "we have been denied our rights because of you!" 3. Students confusion and inadequate administrative bureaucracy, 4. "Familiarize us about Iran!" foreign students' demands 5. Lack of certain amenities needed by these students, 6. Disrespect / discrimination and unfair treatments, toward foreign

students 7. “Why choosing Iran? Couldn’t you find a better place? ”, Iranian asks these students, 8. Too much content orientation in education and lack of supervision on professors in their classes 9. Inappropriate educational and organizational rules in universities.

CONCLUSION

In this research, the first category, “Iranians get friends with others quickly”, shows the students’ experiences in their interactions with classmates, professors, other departments members and ordinary people. The hospitality and the openness of Iranians towards the “other” make foreign students stay in Iran and have somewhat enjoyable experiences. This is in contrast to researches that have been done in developed countries (Gibbs et al., 2015 and Vakila et al., 2014), about international students’ isolation, marginalization and social exclusion. Foreign students of this study have had a lot of opportunity to work collaboratively with college students and pleasant conversations with ordinary people. This cultural feature of Iran has made up for part of the difficulties of learning Persian language for the students and deficiencies and institutional weaknesses in Iran's higher education.

According to categories No. 2 and 3, somewhat 5, our people feel wonder when faced with an international doctoral student. Why “a foreign doctoral student in Iran” is so strange for many of our people? The response is in the relationship between the “Iranians” and “foreigners” and “science”. In the collective mindset of Iranians, this belief prevails, that “science” equals with the objective and instrumental aspects, and not with subjective and epistemic dimensions of science. This attitude has a historical background in the establishment of the “Dar al-Fonoun” (house of technic) and not the “Daralmäarefat” (house of knowledge) in 19 century. Some scholars have addressed the issue with topics such as traditional perception of science in Iran or Iranian scientific world view (Vahdat, 2006, Mansouri, 2007, Niknam et al., 2012). They discussed the obstacles to institutionalization of science in Iran.

So one can understand the reason why people ask “Why choosing Iran? Couldn’t you find a better place?” Some people in Iran think we have received science always from the “others” from abroad and whenever the relationship between Iran and the “other” become reversed, people feel wonder.

My research Findings reveals Afghan students had friendship and acceptance in



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our country. Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the establishment of a complete bond between Afghan identity and nationality leads to the heightening of stereotypes that can be seen in discrimination and disrespect that some of these students have experienced or have observed against their fellow countrymen.

In other identified categories of the research, institutional culture of the university and educational policy of higher education and national culture of Iran was not completely matched.

NOVELTY

This study has revealed certain aspects of the international students' experiences while they undertake their doctoral program in different disciplines in Iran. In sum, it can be said that international students have certain positive and negative experiences in all three departmental/disciplinary, institutional and societal/international contexts in Iran.

Values, norms and interests in these three contexts are in some degree discrepant with each other. So international students feel confusion and as a result the situation leads to difficulties and displeasure for the international students in Iran.

Despite the fact that the experiences of these students did not seem to be negative in general, it does not seem that these students were able to completely establish intercultural dialogue and integrate with Iranian culture in their experiences. So, these students will not be cultural ambassadors for the future relations between Iran and their home countries.

Our higher education should pay more attention to the cultural and social dimensions of higher education in addition to the epistemological and cognitive aspects of internationalization.

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