Shanton Chang – Catherine Gomes (ed.): Digital Experiences of International Students - Challenging Assumptions and Rethinking Engagement
(London: Routledge. 2020. 228 p.)

Internationalization has been a rapidly emerging term, with a wide variety of interpretations mainly used for defining the development paths of higher education since the second half of the 20th century. With the changing face of the whole higher education sector shifting towards becoming an international market providing global scale services for learners, internationalization has become one of the key factors in quality management, assessment and rankings, despite the frequent criticism that often labels internationalization as neo-liberal, Anglophone, or even post-colonial in orientation.

Regardless of the disputes around the term itself, internationalization is undeniably among the key strategic points of today's universities. With the emergence of globalization, employers and students both seek education that provides them with the necessary skills and competences required by a global labor market, no matter where their degrees are issued.

As universities now have to compete in a global market, it is natural that they have to constantly adapt to the surrounding trends and phenomena of their environments; and undeniably this applies to the emergence of digitization, a phenomenon forcibly accelerated by the COVID-19 crisis since 2020. In the past two decades, the number of students participating in higher education mobility has been on the rise continuously. By 2018, a total of 5.6 million university students were or had been studying abroad (OECD 2020). In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic seemed to have put a sudden halt to academic mobility as well. However, after the first shock of the crisis, it is now clear that international mobility will remain an integral part of university life, may it be of a physical, virtual or blended/hybrid kind.

The series *Internationalization in Higher Education*, edited by Elspeth Jones, Emerita Professor of the Internationalization of Higher Education, Leeds Beckett University (UK), deals with the various aspects and approaches related to the complex idea of internationalization at universities worldwide. Compiled before the COVID crisis, but finished at the dawn of the new era, *Digital Experiences of International Students* brings forward a special perspective – expressed clearly in the title. Nevertheless, with the forced transition to digital education worldwide just around the time of its publication, a different narrative is highlighted: something that would have been quite interesting before has now become of vital importance for all stakeholders related to the area of higher education.

Written by authors mainly active in Australian and U.S. higher education, the book holds an explicit geographical bias; however, this does not mean that the European reader could not benefit from the findings. On the contrary, the practical examples and case studies provide a strong proof of the fact that although higher

education systems worldwide may have significant differences at organizational and operational level, there are fundamental similarities as well, especially when it comes to the increasing number of international students in higher education; the digital experience of students in a sojourn or the strategic digital evolution of the higher education sector.

The book itself consist of three main sections, focusing on the international student experience, the digitalized curriculum and the strategies higher education institutions use in their digital engagements with international students, moving from the student perspective towards the classroom and arriving at universities, connected by the online world. Each of the sections contains several thematic chapters written by well-known experts of the various topics.

Section 1: *The international student experience* focuses on the international student itself and their offline and online experience whilst on a sojourn in a foreign country.

Chapter 1: *The digital information ecology of international students - Understanding the complexity of communication*, by Chang et al. provides a mostly theoretic introduction of the idea of information ecology, and how this is affected by international mobility. Starting from the students' personal stance as well as where, how and why they use their own information resources, hands-off examples are presented to illustrate the concept of information ecology. When it comes to international mobility, an additional factor needs to be taken into account: where, how and why universities communicate information that they assume is needed for their international students. Ideally, these two components should have an intersection, where the communication is successful; but to

reach this point, both the students and the universities should make an effort, and more importantly, should aim for understanding each other. Given the very nature of international mobility, most of the information is made available online, but the key question is whether the information provided (by universities) and sought (by students) can be found in the right place.

Chapter 2: *Digital environments and the aspirations of international students* by Wong draws upon qualitative research applying ethnographic methods among 36 Asian international students in Melbourne, Australia, as part of a larger PhD dissertation research on digital media and aspirational well-being among international students in Melbourne (Wong 2017).

In the opening section, the reader is acquainted with the theoretical background of the complex relations between culture and the different types of aspirations for a better life and better self, and how globalization paves the way to an increased capacity to aspire. Education, and especially culturally or socially triggered international education plays a key role in fulfilling aspirations both for a better life and for a better self; the chapter therefore explores the aspirations of international students through the three lenses of education, migration, and maturation, and how the digital media can intersect with aspirations to find a better life or build a better self.

When it comes to international student mobility, social connections, their maintenance and management are even more important than ever. Chapter 3: *Social media and social adjustment - An international student perspective* by Seo et al. explores the interplay of social media, support, and adjustment, with focus on students on a sojourn at U.S. universities. The reader is given a thorough overview of

the recent literature on the topic of social media use among tertiary students, and how social media is affecting the sojourn experience. The theoretical introduction is followed by showcasing the findings of an empirical research on the use of social media among international students in the United States and how their social media use might be associated with their perceived social support and adjustments. While the study and its results reflect the state of play of international students at U.S. universities, the research methods might be adapted to different higher education environments, and the results could serve as an important starting point for developing and implementing initiatives to support the social and emotional adjustment of international students in their new home countries.

As discussed in the first chapters of the book, there is a plethora of various motives, aspirations and challenges behind long-term international education mobility. However, due to the relative temporariness of any sojourn, special emphasis should be put on what happens after relocation by the end of the study abroad period. Chapter 4: *Information behaviours of returned international students - Case study of Saudi Arabian female students* by Binsahl et al. focuses on the topic from a viewpoint of a rather specific demographic group, namely Saudi Arabian female students who had completed their studies in Australia. Although the distinctive cultural, political and social aspects of these students represent a unique segment of international students, the research methods and findings again offer the possibility of adaptation to in other countries and target groups to set up supporting mechanisms to mitigate the effects of reverse culture shock.

Section 2: *International students and the digitalized curriculum* aims at exploring the ways in which the digital environment has shaped the curriculum, with special regards to three aspects of virtual mobility, blended learning, and transnational education.

Chapter 5: *Engaging students through virtual mobility -A systematic mapping review by* Bedenlier and Marín dwells into the question of how university students can be engaged in virtual learning. After a thorough overview of the relevant literature on the concept of student engagement, the authors aim to explore how the effectiveness of student engagement can be increased in virtual education programs. The findings of the research – including the overwhelming presence of synchronous and direct communication methods in virtual teaching and learning – are especially relevant and timely during and after the forced transition to almost exclusively online education. As a conclusion of their research, the authors find: "it seems worthwhile to further investigate to what extent students actually feel more mobile in and due to a digital, international learning environment." (p. 100) – a question that is definitely worth considering in today's post-pandemic universities.

Regardless of the ongoing changes in the way universities teach and students learn, it is clear that higher education institutions are still places where people from all walks of life meet on an everyday basis. Independent of whether these encounters take place on campuses or in online learning environments, one thing definitely remains – a 'place' where people and cultures will meet. Chapter 6: *Cultural learning preferences, blended learning, and the internationalization of curriculum* by McPhee explores the various ways in which blended learning enables universities to

address the fundamental consideration of cultural learning preferences. The chapter focuses on the description of a case study, a research carried out among Chinese students at UBC, Canada. Based on the findings of the study, the author emphasizes the need for a paradigm shift in the way we approach teaching and learning, stepping beyond the traditional approach when teaching content is delivered in a top-down manner. Instead – especially when the students originate from a wide variety of cultural and linguistic background – a bottom-up constructivist approach can bring forward several advantages. This is especially true in the case of blended learning systems that enable instructors to design more interactive-based – rather than transmissive-based –pedagogical practices.

Another case study is in the focus of Chapter 7: *Utilizing LINE as a tool for a U.S.-Japan transnational education course* by Nonaka and Phan. The authors demonstrate how the digital world and available tools such as social media platforms and direct communication apps (like the LINE communication app explored in the study) can be engaged with to enhance the overall teaching and learning experiences of educators and students involved in the internationalization of higher education, whilst also shedding light on some of the challenges that may occur in multinational and multilingual learning groups.

After looking into the theory, practices and case studies related to students, the third section of the book: *Strategies higher education institutions use in their digital engagements with international students* aims to shed light on some of the aspects of how universities as organizations try to answer the challenges put forward by the rapid digitalization of the global education

market. While universities in general have already started using multiple platforms and strategies to recruit international students, in most cases they still have to recognize that students from different countries and cultures respond to different approaches, and that universities' strategies also need to be effectively translated to service provision once students are in-country.

Chapter 8: *Connected transitioning communities for international students via social media* by Hughes focuses on the transition processes which international students have to deal with during their sojourn. After a thorough review of the current literature written on the key elements of the rather complex topic, with equal emphasis on international students, transitioning, social media, and connected learning, the readers are presented with a guiding framework for a holistic approach, which draws upon the affordances of social media to support international student transition.

After introducing a complex theoretical framework that emphasizes the holistic approach that is required from universities, Chapter 9: *Creating an online orientation course – The journey to internationalizing the campus* by Mohamed et. al explains a practical case study of how online tools can be combined with face-to-face orientation initiatives in order to connect with students even months before their arrival to their selected universities, thus creating the opportunity for stronger affiliation with the institution, which can in turn foster students' sense of belonging and a stronger communication cycle between international students and their hosts.

With the closing chapter – again – emphasizing the importance of constant communication with international students, and the key role of online tools in this

communication, we arrive back to our starting point: that the key for a successful international student experience in today's digitalized world depends just as much on the successful online communication of the universities as on the face-to-face experiences of the students.

In the foreword of the book, the series editor states: "*Digital Experiences of International Students* goes into production at a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the digital world to take a primary position in all aspects of higher education and for all stakeholders. The crucial importance of social media, video conferencing and online teaching, learning, and assessment in the current situation has been brought into sharp relief, with little time to prepare for such an extraordinary upheaval to existing practice. The book is thus both timely and important since we do not yet know the real impact or duration of the present crisis or indeed whether similar situations will arise in the future. It will both inform future research in the field and shed light on some vexing contemporary questions which may help to show the way forward" (p. xviii). Since the publication of the volume, it is even clearer than before that although face-to-face classes are starting to open up again, higher education – and especially international mobility – has not only survived the sudden crisis, but could emerge stronger than ever, exploiting the benefits of both the online and offline worlds.

Literature:

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