Chapter 4
The Accessibility of Global Mobility for Disabled Students

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Abstract As the Western world continues to grapple with the political consequences of Brexit and the rise of right-wing, anti-globalisation politicians such as Donald Trump, creating extreme ideologies that threaten to limit individual and collective freedoms of people to study across borders, there has never been a more urgent time for Western universities to consider how they shape the experience of international students. Especially for disabled international students, the opportunity to spend an extended time residing and studying a wide range of courses in a different country is a valuable life experience. Yet, in the current political and social climate, students who have a greater set of disability or impairment-related needs but have access to limited support are generally overlooked in the university sector, more than they are in auspicious times. This chapter examined and documented the intersectional experiences of a group of 30 disabled international students in British universities. The focus of the project was the interaction of disabled international students' multiple identities, addressing questions such as which barriers are encountered by disabled international students' based on one of their single identities, and which other obstacles are grounded in the multiplicity of their identities. The research demonstrated that disabled international students face many of the same barriers as their disabled domestic peers and non-disabled international counterparts as well as some unique difficulties specific to disabled international students. The chapter will specifically focus on social experiences of this group of students in their university environment.

Keywords Disabled international students · University social activities · Intersectionality · Barriers · Inclusion

Introduction

Set against the background of increasingly negative and dehumanising public dialogue on immigration (Philo, Briant, & Donald, 2013), instead of making international students feel welcomed guests of higher education (HE) system, they are

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U. Gaulee et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Education Across Borders*,
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-15-2399-1_4

often made to feel different and suspect. In this hostile policy environment, international students may internalise policy narratives, which construct them as 'not good enough', establishing a binary category which opposes 'the brightest and the best' against undesirable, risky immigrants unworthy of access to the UK's social resources such as accommodation, healthcare and travel infrastructure (Lomer, 2018). Being considered a legitimate immigrant, it is expected to 'contribute' to society, and not simply drain public resources.

The political context around migration continues to present uncertainties in the area of internationalisation within the Western HE sector in general. Ideally, internationalisation is understood as the integration of international and intercultural dimensions into a range of research and pedagogical projects effectively leading onto an expanded range of international activities for students and academic staff between universities and other educational institutions (Robson, 2011). It is viewed as a means for maintaining global relevance, through both teaching and research, and it has, in fact, become one of the critical objectives for most universities worldwide.

Despite this, restrictive British immigration policies signal a message that international students are not welcome, that national borders are barriers and walls, making access and mobility for all international students difficult. There have been reductions in demand for undergraduate study following the referendum vote, with applications from EU students for entry in 2017 falling by 7% compared with the previous year (UCAS, 2017). The general UK migration policy, as the political manifesto of the Conservative government, has been to drastically cut overall net migration by the tightening of immigration regulations (Lomer, 2018). Following the Brexit vote, in 2016, then the Home Secretary Amber Rudd suggested that student visa numbers could be further restricted (Rudd, 2016). These hostile views towards international students are reflected not just in restrictions on their number, they are also mirrored in highly negative media and public discourses on immigration. Regulatory changes similarly convey national hostility towards international students, triggering fear of discrimination, racism, and limited opportunities to integrate in the host society.

The presence of international graduates in host countries is considered to be only a notable economic advantage. Even as the world becomes more connected and countries more interdependent, nations are not exchanging educational opportunities for one another's citizens, nor their educational institutions are driven by a desire to contribute to broader global goals of education. Universities increasingly approach internationalisation as business opportunity, a considerable source of income (Graf, 2009) with high financial incentives, which may be promoted to fulfil the desire for precious revenue, whilst raising their attractiveness for 'the brightest and the best' students. But economic incentives evidently trump social and humanistic goals, especially because public institutions receive dwindling financial support from public funds.

In relation to internationalisation ideals, disabled and other minority student groups face the brunt of inauspicious political times. The Western HE sector today is largely interested in attracting financially able students who have minimum support needs. Thus, the dangers of blind spots regarding disabled international students are being created or magnified by certain aspects of today's political climates in

major destinations of international education, as well as the emerging economies of international education that mirrors the lack of humane concerns in that climate.

Although documentation on the specific barriers experienced by disabled international students in British universities is limited, my doctoral research indicated that disabled international students face many of the same barriers as their disabled and international counterparts as well as some unique difficulties specific to their own group. This is set against a background of the HE sector, which is largely interested in attracting financially able students who have minimum support needs.

The term 'disability' is defined here through the social model lens. 'Disability' is considered to stem from the categorisation of disabled people in relation to dominant social and cultural 'ablest' norms, as well as environmental barriers. The concepts 'impairment' and 'disability' are differentiated by recognising that the former term is interpreted as a biological experience, whereas the latter is defined as societal discrimination and prejudice related to a larger injustice issue (Holden & Beresford, 2002). Routed in the individual medical interpretation of disability, British disability scholars argue the phrase 'students/people with disabilities' denies the political or disability identity, which has emerged from the 'Disabled People's Movement' similar to 'Black' and 'Gay' political identities (Barnes, 1992). When used in this context, the term 'disability' refers to a student's medical condition rather than the disabling educational system and/or society at large, confusing the crucial distinction between disability and impairment. Having used the social model epistemology throughout the chapter, I will deploy the language and terminology related to this perspective on disability when discussing the challenges that the international HE system may pose for disabled international students.

For most students, disabled or non-disabled, international or domestic, transition to university life can be a vital move towards forming an independent personal and social identity. That said, compared with their non-disabled counterparts, disabled students have a much more complex nexus of social relations to manage during this transition period. This stage is significantly more important for disabled international students who often have to deal with additional uncertainties regarding an inaccessible new cultural and academic environment.

For disabled students generally, the information and application packs received pre-enrolment may not necessarily be in their preferred format, which inevitably will have an adverse effect on their choice of university and course of study (Madriaga, Hanson, Heaton, & Kay, 2010). The inaccessibility of written material as a major barrier may persist through university life, where information on specific support services, lecture handouts, and exam papers are concerned. International students also face a range of practical challenges, including provision of appropriate information provision (Pringle, Fischbacher, & Williams, 2008). In addition to experiencing these common barriers in accessing general information, the accessibility of specific information and advice on travel and life abroad for disabled international students, and the opportunities for this specific group to participate socially are scarce (Soorenian, 2013).

Most international students experience a degree of culture shock. They are often confronted with problems related to settling in, different forms of communication,

different pedagogical processes, and different relationships with their surrounding community. Disabled international students not only experience this type of differences, but often experience cultural variation in understanding 'disability', the level and type of disability-support required and provided, and physical and informational accessibility, which can significantly affect a successful study period (Conway & McDow, 2010).

For students who require high levels of support in their home country, additional financial and personal burdens associated with this support can make the transition even more difficult (McLean, Heagney, & Gardner, 2003). These students may initially feel they must cope on their own without assistance, thus choosing not to disclose the details of their impairments. It must be noted that in the British context, there are no specific governmental grants available for disabled international students' support needs, who are only allowed to remain in the UK on the condition that they make no recourse to public funds, including such welfare benefits as Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA) (Soorenian, 2013). Disabled domestic students receive DSA to pay for equipment: specialist hardware/software and specialist furniture; non-medical helpers: sign language interpreters or mobility enablers; and general items or services (Directgov, 2018). This type of discrepancies present in current policy and practice, arguably contributes to the creation of additional barriers and the problematisation of disabled students' participation in globalised HE. It is, therefore, important to concentrate on practices and structures that ensure participation for a diverse array of students to achieve quality experience and satisfaction. The rest of this chapter will focus on disabled international students' social life.

This discussion is informed by the findings of a project conducted for my Ph.D. research. Based on my first-hand experience of being a disabled international student in British universities, I conducted a qualitative study with 30 disabled international students in the UK. The difficulties participants faced in their HE settings based on their multiple identities of 'disabled', 'international' and often 'mature' and 'postgraduate' students were thus examined.

Method

I used a snowballing method through networking and chain referral techniques in a several national educational organisations to recruit participants. Thirty mature participants with a range of impairments in 11 British universities were recruited. Three of the participants were from Africa, four from Asia, six from the far-East, six others from North America, and 11 from Europe.

To begin with, I used the collective data generation strategy of a focus group with five participants to stimulate and refine topics for the semi-structured interviews. The practical and explorative data collection strategy of semi-structured interviews (three telephone, 12 face-to-face, and 15 email interviews) was chosen because of the

investigative nature of the study. Participants shared their stories about a range of academic and non-academic experiences associated with being a disabled international student in their universities.

During the transcription and analyses of interviews, I deployed pseudonyms to ensure anonymity throughout. To avoid invention or misinterpretation of interviewees' accounts, participants were asked to read the transcripts through and make any changes, additions or exclusions, as they saw fit. I then read the transcripts several times and coded them based on lists of themes and categories, derived from reading previous research findings and reflecting on theory. Data was matched with each theme carefully and double-checked to ensure accuracy.

Analysing disabled international participants' experiences evidenced that their disability-related concerns were often amplified due to various linguistic and cultural needs. The data showed that at times participants experienced discriminatory treatments on the grounds of their single identities of disabled, international, and mature students. They often experienced difficulties due to the intersection of these identities. Yet, isolating a single contributory cause for their marginalisation was difficult, since their disadvantages were seemingly so simultaneous, intertwined and intersectional. By using participants' interview extracts related to their social life, a complex interaction of multiple identities will be explained next, how being 'disabled' and 'international' student, sometimes in isolation, and other times in combination disadvantaged them in a university social setting, which is created often without their needs in mind.

Friends and Acquaintances

The availability of a social network with both staff and students to support individual students is an important factor in their physical and psychological wellbeing, challenging negative effects of stress on health (Jones & Bright, 2001). Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, and Ramia (2008) advocate for the creation and sustaining of interpersonal relationships with peers and academic staff through opportunities to socialise in the new culture and allowing international students to rewrite their own cultural map as a beneficial means to combat loneliness. Away from their familiar surroundings and support structures, usually provided by their family and community, friendships are especially significant for all international students, but more so for disabled international students.

However, King (undated) discusses how non-disabled students' attitudes towards their disabled peers can potentially impinge on developing personal and social relationships, specifically with the opposite sex. Whereas integration into the academic sphere may be dealt with, participating in social activities presents more complications, due to variables such as disability-related support needs, inaccessibility of social venues, and interpersonal issues.

Participants talked about the friendships they had formed with both disabled and non-disabled students, and the benefits gained from such relationships. Friends were

an essential support network, assisting participants with specific disability-related needs as well as more general issues. Five participants talked fondly about their closest friends and the everlasting friendships they had made during their studies in the UK. Linda identified the common grounds between her international classmates: 'I liked the fact that it was culturally diverse, in that sense, I got a feeling from classmates, there was some level of sympathy, and empathy that we were all in the same boat to some degree, more or less'.

Even though participants had friends with a range of nationalities, they talked about their limited opportunities to make friends with British students. They felt that if they wanted to get to know British students, they were obliged to take responsibility for making the friendships work. Graham (2012) reports that international students have difficulty socialising, especially with local students, which can lead to isolation, contributing to such mental health issues as depression. On this subject, according to Equality Challenge Unit (ECU, 2012), for fear of 'getting it wrong' and being seen as prejudiced or insensitive, British students are said to find it difficult to discuss matters of ethnicity, religion or cultural differences with their international peers. This was also reflected in the important theme that emerged from Harrison and Peacock's study (2009), showing lack of interaction and integration between international and UK student populations, which can have a negative effect on international students' experiences, inhibiting the possibility of cross-cultural learning and interaction, and therefore undermines the potential benefits associated with living and studying on a multi-cultural campus. Especially focusing on today's global political environment and shifting socioeconomic dynamics, participants considered connections with local communities as yet another means of overcoming loneliness and establishing more stable social networks in order to assist them with learning the local culture and customs.

'Peer Support' as a means of receiving encouragement and guidance from other disabled people has afforded disabled people the necessary empowerment to combat negative social attitudes towards their group as well as developing their self-belief and has been recognised as one of disabled people's 'Seven Needs' (Hasler, 2003). When interacting with disabled peers, participants felt a sense of cultural belonging, which enabled them to face their disabling university environment. Vasey (2004) considers one aspect of disability culture to be the shared skills and common interests that disabled people develop in order to live well and communicate with others. Reflecting on this, Ned was able to share the commonalities of disability with his disabled international friends, whilst exploring some cultural differences.

When interacting with their non-disabled peers during the limited opportunities available, participants felt the dynamics at work were nevertheless complex and contradictory. Generally, the non-disabled world holds various paternalistic attitudes towards disabled people, which at best encompass feelings of shame and pity, and at worst include objectification and resentment (Charlton, 1998). Mary experienced this range of attitudes, including being treated as 'pitiable' and pathetic, yet inspirational but sometimes she felt being resented. Alice observed that non-disabled students were uncertain how to interact with her: 'At first, there was some awkwardness… for example, walking down the street and them feeling uncomfortable with the reality

that, as part of its function, my white cane touched things. They thought that when the cane detected an obstacle, that was the same as me "running into it"'.

Barnes (1992: 12) highlights non-disabled people's voyeuristic attitude as 'lewd fascination'. This was demonstrated in Domenic's experience, where he talked about the feeling that non-disabled students were fascinated by his impairments. Five other participants had mixed views on their interactions with non-disabled students, including thoughts of being a burden on the one hand, and as having superhuman, almost magical abilities, on the other, a point discussed by Barnes (1992: 12).

Joseph was affected by different set of attitudes from his non-disabled coursemates, he explained: 'Rather from a distance. Not keen on making contact. Literally keeping distance and not sitting next to you or keeping small talk very restricted'. Other participants with visual impairments were explicitly dissatisfied with these relationships, tentatively suggesting that it was easier for non-disabled students to relate to and befriend students with mobility difficulties than those with other impairments who may have different barriers to overcome. A similar finding was evident in Lee's (2011: unpaged) study, indicating that perhaps treating someone who is as similar as possible to non-disabled people is 'easier or less imaginative than treating someone in relation to their differences'.

Leisure and Social Activities

On a larger scale, the role of leisure in disabled people's lives is the 'essential part of a satisfying life and a primary pathway to love and intimacy in the most meaningful way' (Howard & Young, 2002: 114). Despite this, as a consequence of access, attitudinal, economic, environmental and social barriers, disabled people's ability to participate in recreational pursuits, establishing social contacts and relationships is also severely restricted (Murray, 2004). Here I will document participants' social experiences, including the possibility of their involvement in the university International Student Office (ISO) and Student Union (SU) activities, and the accessibility of the student events, participating in which is central to students' personal and social development.

International Student Office (ISO)

The general role of the ISOs in UK universities is to provide specialist immigration advice along with welcome and orientation support specific to international students' needs (ISO, 2018). Overall 24 of my research participants used the ISO, with most visiting the service mid-way through their stay. The reasons for their visits included seeking advice on immigration issues and obtaining general information about the city. Iris described how the ISO helped her to call the police, when her purse was stolen, as she did not feel confident speaking in English on the phone.

Six participants (one Asian, two European, and three North American) thought the ISO staff were unhelpful. Complaints revolved around the failure to provide specific

advice and support during their stay. Carol (North American) thought the support for international postgraduates was poor and the ISO in her university was mostly equipped to support undergraduate students.

Four participants took part in the social activities organised by this office. Whilst Carol did not approve the way, she was talked down to instructed what time to be back for the bus on a day trip, Norman was satisfied with his visit to the ISO: 'I contacted the ISO to attend a trip to another city that they had organised. Also, I visit the ISO nearly every week for an event. It's a social gathering for international students'.

Nonetheless, as several participants explained, provision of opportunities and the possibility to seize them did not always equate. Two participants with visual impairments did not find the ISO buildings accessible. Due to its complicated layout, Ed mentioned that he needed to be accompanied by a support worker to the building. As Murray (2002: 28) explains the presence of a support worker not only inhibits friendships but also on occasions can cause resentment. Furthermore, the lack of accessible toilets and lifts was a key barrier for students with mobility impairments. Although Tina (wheelchair-user) was happy with the old-fashioned lift installed outside the ISO, she felt awkward ringing the bell for assistance with the lift every time she needed to visit the ISO, which helps to explain why Tina did not visit the ISO on a frequent basis compared with other venues like the SU, discussed next.

Student Union (SU)

The SU organises events and activities, helps students and gives them the opportunity to get involved by volunteering. Similar opportunities include becoming a member of different teams such as the Student Advice and Support Team, or students can set up and run various clubs and societies (SUs, 2018). Twenty-three participants mentioned visiting the SU more than once throughout their university life for shopping, participating in societies, bars and clubs, and obtaining information and advice from the Welfare Centre. When talking about the range of activities in SU, Patrick had a satisfactory experience, he discussed the extent of his involvement: 'The SU is fantastic, it really is good. I volunteered in green action. I did student television—'film society', and then I did the odd thing, like caving, which I wouldn't otherwise have been able to do. I went to theatre productions'.

Yet, similar to ISO, access barriers were also present in the SU. Six participants were critical of the access levels to their SU, which restricted their involvement even in the Disabled Students societies. Murray (2004: 22) describes similar disadvantages: '… environmental obstacles range from outright prevention to the kind of "second-class" access that ensures not only lower levels of enjoyment but also, yet again, reduced opportunity to relate to other… people…' Due to accessibility issues, Kate (with a mobility impairment) was unable to socialise in the SU. She therefore had to modify her social life so that her social activities revolved around venues in a nearby town, outside her university city. This meant that she missed out on participating in university organised activities. Whilst three participants with mobility impairments

complained about narrow and broken lifts, three participants with visual impairments discussed how they were unable to visit their SU independently due to complicated operating lift systems, and fast-moving revolving/heavy doors.

As also identified by Sachs and Schreuer (2011), for six participants (five with physical impairments, and one with a visual impairment), time and energy levels were significant barriers to social life. For these reasons, balancing social life and study was problematic; some had to focus on the studies alone. Lack of disability awareness was another key barrier identified by some participants, five of them discussed the need for the SU staff to receive disability awareness training.

Participants' additional dissatisfaction with the levels of their involvement in the SUs related to their other non-traditional status as 'international', 'mature' and in two cases, 'research postgraduate' students. No gender-related barriers in their social activities were identified. From an international student's perspective, Janet felt that her university SU promoted the binge drinking culture, which she was not part of. Instead she spent most of her time in the coffee shops, studying and socialising. Participants were of the opinion that British students' penchant for the pubs and clubs as the basis for socialisation was not necessarily of interest to many international students. They thought this particular cultural difference made integration and socialisation with local students more difficult.

For these reasons, international students feel that SUs do not provide for their needs and are largely interested in accommodating the traditional, white, undergraduate domestic students' needs (NUS, 2008). Seven mature participants (two African, two Asian, one European, and two North American) felt that for cultural and age-related reasons, they did not belong to the student life and therefore did not wish to get involved in the SU. It appeared that when social activities are focused at younger participants, mature students are deterred from getting involved. For Jenny maturity resulted in stronger study ethics and less social focus.

Though postgraduate students have more flexibility and a degree of control over their time and work (Thomas, 2003), Alice and Angela referred to their general social experiences as isolated. Lack of opportunities to socialise meant that they were invariably relying on random meetings, which was not an ideal way of striking up friendships. This, Angela felt, partly stemmed from the self-directed nature of her Ph.D. studies, and partly because of not having opportunities to be introduced to the other research students when in England.

Given the high cost of living in the UK, lack of funds for socialising, left participants like Iris, Olivia and Patrick, unable to engage in social activities. The significance of this was more than the immediate effects of missing out on 'good times' (Murray, 2004: 21). To have opportunities to build close relationships with other students appeared to be more important for participants like Tanji: 'Due to isolation and no one to take me out, I have started to lead a very lonely life'.

Although participants' social marginalisation discussed thus far appears to be mainly based on their single identity as 'disabled', 'international' or 'mature' students, had they in fact been able to partake in social life, these opportunities may have presented additional barriers based on their other identities. Conversely, participants like Margaret, Ned and Toney's double marginalisation in, or by, their social life is

more relevant here, because this is caused by the confluence of their 'disabled' and 'international' identities.

For Margaret, not only were the physical structures of some social venues inaccessible, but also as an 'international' student, she could not relate to most cultural activities prevalent in her university environment such as the clubbing culture. If either of these barriers were removed, it is unclear whether or not Margaret would have felt more comfortable in facing the next set of barriers. Similarly, communicating in English in a social context was more difficult for Ned due to the unpredictability of topics discussed, and also the excessive usage of slang amongst the student population. This was an additional barrier for Ned, who already faced physical access issues in entering the social venues in SU with his wheelchair.

In today's Western sociopolitical environment, whilst being responsible for their specific cultural adjustment and coping, and acculturation process generally, international university students can encounter discrimination, prejudice and exclusion from the mainstream host society. For Toney, the additional layer of being an 'international' student reinforced the attitudinal-related difficulties he faced as a 'disabled' student in a social context.

Social life is quite bad actually, because if you are a disabled student, it is always hard anyway. But then if they see that you are an international disabled student, they shy off even a lot more, thinking probably you are different.

Being a student entails more than attending lectures and meeting deadlines. With a chance to meet a wide range of students, university life is an ideal opportunity to partake in a wide range of social and cultural activities. Disabled people's access and involvement in leisure have been long considered as one of the main ways of developing acceptance and inclusion in society (Devine & Lashua, 2002). Yet, all the general barriers (e.g. the design, accessibility, layout and location of social facilities) discussed in this chapter reinforced and added to the participants' feelings of social isolation caused by their 'disabled' status. Most dissatisfactions related to barriers in receiving appropriate advice, physical access and staff attitudinal issues present in their ISOs and SUs. Whereas these problems can be generalised to all 'disabled' and 'international' students, six participants experienced unique difficulties, only concerning 'disabled international' students. The cultural and linguistic exclusionary practices in Sus based on the current specific sociopolitical timeframe, as well as difficulties including participants' hesitancy to speak in English, constrained their efforts to be sociable, despite overcoming physical access and attitudinal barriers.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed a range of barriers to disabled international students' social life based on the multiplicity of their identities that an internationalised HE can present. In principle, the study experience abroad should not be seen as a challenging one but as an explorative journey to learn and grow personally, culturally and socially. Considering the significance of social interaction for all students, but specifically

more so for disabled international students, in the current politically hostile environment, there is an urgent need for HE and disability policy makers and practitioners to work towards ensuring that policy and practice on social spaces provided by the internationalised HE ensures accessibility and inclusivity for disabled students.

Universities may, for example, consider providing accessible, inclusive and culturally sensitive social spaces to which a wide range of students, with diverse needs are welcomed and encouraged to be involved in activities that suit their interests, needs and backgrounds. The sports and leisure facilities must similarly be accessible. The ISOs need to provide support and advice for a range of international students including English speaking, postgraduates and/or disabled students. The SUs have to ensure that disabled and international students' needs are better represented, through relevant sabbatical officers, within SU and associations. UK students should also be given opportunities to develop their awareness of diversity issues and understanding of different cultures.

These steps can challenge the irrelevant, discriminatory and exclusionary features of current policy and practice, and bring us closer to promoting advocacy for international social mobility in HE. The effects of improving disabled international students' physical and cultural accessibility needs have direct ramifications for a diverse array of students with a range of minority backgrounds who would benefit from inclusive internationalised practices in education. When students with diverse backgrounds and learning styles interact with 'traditional' students, valuable skills and experiences can be developed and morally driven international education discourses created and reinforced. Ultimately it is in this context that communities are given space to enrich themselves by understanding, respecting and celebrating each other's differences, which is key to our fragmented world.

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