International Students Negotiating Higher Education
Silvia Sovic and Margo Blythman (Eds.)
Routledge (2013)
Review by John Beaumont Kerridge

It would appear that the origins of this text grew from a development of discussions that began just prior to 2006. This shows in the substance of the papers included. The book is divided into four parts – policy, teaching & learning, language and the counterbalance of home students abroad. The audience is intended to be Higher Education professionals, managers and academics both in the UK and internationally. In these respects, the book is well placed. The offerings of each of the contributing papers are well thought out and robust. There is a significant variety of research methods, as well as a wide range of issues which are addressed. It must be remembered also, however, discussing such a topic as international students and their experiences is going to be difficult when the debate of the basic concept, ‘...Is a student a customer?’ in UK Higher Education has not been concluded.

Key issues are considered from a variety of perspectives. For example, the effect of culture shock for international students upon arrival at a Higher Education institution is considered from the viewpoint of their loss of their home country citizenship along with the rights and protections this affords. The regulatory frameworks of immigration can negate the feeling of freedom in terms of intellectual pursuit, a condition unlikely to affect a UK home student. This brings into contrast the ethical issues of care at a very subtle level which are the responsibility of all service agencies within a Higher Education institution. UK university management is questioned, raising the issue that the concept of internationalisation is not clearly defined and as such developed policies do not take account of the differences that will arise at a level of the student experience. This is both from the management of an institution as well as curriculum engagement.

The papers providing the investigations into the teaching & learning aspects bring into focus even more the cultural differences of international students with both their peers and tutors. Examples are provided where, at a grassroots level, informal segregation is permitted to occur within group work i.e. students being allowed to self-select group membership. On one level this disadvantages international students since they do not mix with other UK-based students, and also deprives them of one major objective of studying in the UK, that is to study with other UK students. The concept of Cosmopolitan learning is appropriately raised in this text and well discussed. It is however an evolving topic, so will no doubt feature in future investigations.

The issue of ‘Western-style education’ is questioned in terms of the student perspective when comparing teaching and learning approaches. Whilst this issue is not new, investigations provide a helpful understanding of the effect upon international students. For example, students feeling uncomfortable when asking questions of tutors, having no set
text book, relatively long assignments and the continuing challenge of what is meant by ‘critical evaluation’. What is helpful are the discussions which outline the process international students go through from their first arrival to completion of the course. Either directly or indirectly, evaluations evidence early stress levels, in contrast to those who are successful, exit with higher levels of confidence. Certainly the pedagogic approaches discussed allow the reader to realise much more is needed regarding engagement of student learning in addition to guidance. The balance of tutor intervention is critical in terms of providing an appropriate interactive environment. Student experiences are presented that show a good understanding is needed of an international student need to develop, both on a personal and academic level, and what can happen when the policy, design, or tutor activity are not appropriate or fit for purpose.

Two papers are offered with respect to the issues of language and international students. They present a useful insight into issues that are often overlooked. For example, the different meaning of words from their dictionary definition. The spectre of English for academic purposes is raised and the difficulties this presents. The discussion certainly offers consideration of a change that is needed for student support for this crucial area. This section could have probably benefited from more contributions, particularly for example of the importance of English for academic purposes since this has such a wide impact across so many subjects.

The final counterbalancing section on home students abroad gives a variety of experiences from the very positive to the very negative. This is a useful contrast to this very complex area, and helpful insights for those who are assisting students wanting to study overseas.

Overall this text raises some very useful discussions on internationalisation, offering some challenging views. If these were to be taken into the decision-making forums of Higher Education institutes, it could probably result in the improvement of the holistic experience for all students.