



Elliot, D. L., Baumfield, V., Reid, K. and Makara, K. A. (2016) Hidden treasure: successful international doctoral students who found and harnessed the hidden curriculum. *Oxford Review of Education*, 42(6), pp. 733-748. (doi:[10.1080/03054985.2016.1229664](https://doi.org/10.1080/03054985.2016.1229664))

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/118586/>

Deposited on: 21 April 2016

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

Hidden treasure: Successful international doctoral students who found and harnessed the hidden curriculum

Abstract

This paper draws from an institutionally-funded phenomenological study of international PhD students' academic acculturation, which focuses on the distinctive strengths, challenges and hidden opportunities facing this cohort within the context of their transition from one academic culture to another. The first section introduces the theoretical base employed in the study and is then followed by exploring the conceptualisations of the hidden curriculum and its associated concepts: 'the third space' and 'darkness in higher education'.

Drawing upon our study findings, the second section illustrates practical exemplars of finding and harnessing the hidden curriculum. Without discounting the wide range of formal and informal institutional support provision designed to facilitate international PhD students' acculturation to a new academic setting, our study findings strongly endorse that students themselves have a crucial role to play in their complex transitional journey. Our study also offers a unique insight, i.e. if found, the hidden curriculum, is an effective tool not only for international PhD students' coping and survival but even more importantly, in thriving in new societal and academic contexts.

Keywords

International students, doctoral studies, academic acculturation model, the hidden curriculum, a sense of agency

Introduction

Whereas research on international students or study sojourners' patterns of adaptation had begun to generate more attention shortly after the 1950s (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2001), the term 'internationalisation' arose in the late twentieth century (Jones, 2015, p. ix). Since then, internationalisation has steadily been revolutionising Higher Education Institutions' (HEI) and informing key priorities, strategies, agendas and investment in conformity with the increasing global interconnections that affect worldwide environments and economies (Jones, 2013; Leask, 2015). This explains the reasoning behind the contested multiple dimensions of internationalisation resulting in public advocacy for 'institutions to adjust and define the concept for their own purposes' (Jones, 2015, p. ix). Knight's (2003, p. 2) broad definition of HEI internationalisation, i.e. 'the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education' might have previously been adequate. However, with the increasing complexity of internationalisation partnerships models, e.g. transnational education, distance e-learning courses, regional hubs, dual or joint degree programmes, and/or internationalisation at home, among others (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2011; Leask, 2015), such a definition no longer embraces internationalisation comprehensively. Instead, it is argued that a new definition is needed to integrate the international, global and intercultural elements into

the curriculum content, assessment strategies and outcomes, teaching methods and support provisions tailored to a particular programme (Leask, 2009, 2015). Predictably, the emphasis of such curricular development will lean towards the internationalisation of the formal curriculum, to the exclusion of the notions of the informal and the hidden curriculum, leaving the latter the least explored. This ostensible gap tends to be more pertinent when we consider the research-based doctoral studies in the United Kingdom, Europe, Australia and New Zealand *inter alia*; with some exceptions, they are often characterised by lack of formal curricula (Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Walsh, 2010).

Against this backdrop, we shall aim to elucidate in this paper the distinctive role, nature and contribution of the hidden curriculum, not only to international PhD students' narratives of coping and surviving, but also, and more importantly, how it can be a crucial factor to their thriving in a 'foreign' learning environment. In so doing, we start by revisiting the attraction and the academic, cultural and physical-related challenges routinely encountered by students who pursue their PhD study in a 'foreign' context by using an academic acculturation model based upon Urie Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1994; 2005; Elliot et al., in press) as an underpinning theory. We then proceed to clarify the distinctions (and at times, overlap) surrounding the formal, informal, and the hidden curriculum, leading to a discussion of its nuanced and associated conceptualisations. Practical exemplars of harnessing the hidden curriculum following subsequent analysis of research data obtained from post-doctoral academics who critically reflected on their international PhD experiences (Elliot et al., in press) aim to complement the review. Our paper ends with a call for a

concerted effort among HEIs, supervisors, support staff members and particularly, international PhD students themselves, to recognise the existence of the hidden curriculum, advocate ways of finding it and once found, utilise it as they navigate a complex transitional journey and in turn, experience an enriching, supportive, enjoyable and successful doctoral journey.

What is distinctive about international doctoral education?

A research-based PhD – a painstaking pursuit of highly specialised scholarship on a chosen topic for a minimum of three years, conventionally under the guidance of two or three supervisors – is bound to be an intense, daunting and challenging journey. The high expectations characterising a PhD can be overwhelming, yet serve to entice and stimulate a deep-rooted interest among prospective students. Being accepted into a PhD programme conveys (justly or unjustly) prestige and intellectual superiority arising from proofs of exceptional achievements, impressive letters of recommendation and perhaps, a promising research proposal – often used as criteria for acceptance. Despite the contested view on what is deemed ‘original’, the notion of making an original contribution to knowledge has its own attraction for its inherent intellectual prestige (Petre & Rugg, 2010; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Trafford & Leshem, 2009). Needless to say, this development of academic expertise is metaphorically viewed as a ladder to an academic career, a ticket to an academic position or entrance to an ever increasingly competitive global market or even a leadership role in society (Brodin, 2014; Gardner & Mendoza, 2010; Odena & Burgess, 2015). McAlpine and Amundsen (2009, pp. 122-123) stress the emergence of two ‘unexpected’

but affirming findings arising from their doctoral journey research, i.e. the development of a 'collective identity' and the 'pleasurable aspect' arising from students' contributions to the academic community. The PhD undertaking is seen a mechanism for enriching themselves as well as the community with their developing expert knowledge and experience (Austin, 2010; McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Finally, the intensity, dedication, and rigour embodied in constant PhD study for a minimum of three years until its culmination via an oral defense or *viva voce* afford the luxury of an academic pursuit, involving precious time and resources, for a research topic that might not be possible, otherwise. Taken together, a PhD has a lot to offer to academic-orientated students who are willing to take up this challenge.

These attractions for undertaking a PhD are also likely to appeal to international students. On top of that, gaining distinct employability skills with a global currency, e.g. intercultural competence, global citizenship skills, and other transferable skills that can only be obtained via firsthand international educational experience (Jones, 2013), has added value. International education is viewed as a principal means for encouraging, facilitating, developing and rewarding intercultural interaction within and outwith educational settings (Leask, 2015). The widely accepted educational, cultural, economic, political and wider societal implications that international study delivers to students and their families and to HEIs from both sending and receiving countries (Jones, 2013; Knight, 2013), implicitly but strongly endorses learning internationally. Notwithstanding some negative opinions painting this student cohort as 'cash cows' for many English-speaking universities (www.bbc.co.uk; www.cnbc.com;

McAlpine & Norton, 2006] and reported negative experiences, e.g. perception of 'otherness', awkwardness and difficulties rarely openly discussed (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Pifer & Baker, 2014), the prevailing appeal and value attached to international education seem to outweigh such perceptions. This claim is supported by the large number of Asian learners (i.e. Chinese, Indian and South Korean), for example, who account for the largest proportion of international student mobility, i.e. 53%, on a global scale (OECD, 2013); this applies to other learners who continue to cross borders for their education.

Equally, the quest for high quality scholarly research comes at a very high price. Harding-DeKam, Hamilton, and Loyd (2012) describe the irony often facing incoming doctoral students. While entering into the graduate school process 'with established knowledge in the field, conceptions about research, and scholarly dispositions', they are likewise haunted by feelings of lost professional identity, incompetence and doubt about their capacity and suitability for the programme (p. 7). Similarly, there are those who suffer from 'the impostor phenomenon' despite being high achievers; they struggle with self-doubt manifesting itself through anxiety and depression (e.g. see <http://www.apa.org/gradpsych/2013/11/fraud.aspx>). The time and resource-intensive nature of a PhD for developing and deepening expert knowledge and research skills can require a degree of solitary confinement for most of the PhD study (Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Phillips & Pugh, 2010; Walsh, 2010). Frustration also sets in when students misperceive that a PhD is a mere continuation of an undergraduate or master's education. Far from it, the customarily isolated route towards becoming an independent scholar implies moving away from regular

interactive learning and collaborative activities with structured classes and routine assessments; this mandates considerably enhanced autonomous learning and self-reliance. Comparatively, those who transition from professional employment to doctoral studies report a loss of professional identity and 'belonging' when joining the doctoral programme, even doubting their competence despite previous experience of success (Harding-DeKam et al., 2012). Finally, what makes a PhD journey generally challenging is that this demanding endeavour is often marked by ambiguous encounters and unanticipated challenges (Brydon & Fleming, 2011; Gardner, 2007). Mismatched expectations between students and their supervisors (or institutions) concerning what a PhD entails can change into disappointment, frustration and confusion, at times leading to students' disengagement and failure to complete (Austin, 2010; Ulriksen, 2009).

Concurrently, students who opt to pursue doctoral education in a foreign setting inevitably face an extra layer of complexity integral to the sojourn. As if the PhD enterprise itself is not complex enough, international students whose background, academic orientation, culture, food, language, norms, practices, religion and values, and conceivably, even weather, can be confronted with a blend of amusing, puzzling, exciting, annoying and challenging experiences (Elliot et al., in press). This whole gamut of experience is attributed to the temporary nature of the academic experience of international doctoral students (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008), which is particularly pertinent in the discussion of the strengths, challenges and hidden opportunities that characterise doctoral learning in a 'foreign' setting. In so doing, we will turn to an

acculturation model drawn from a reputable psychosocial developmental theory to elucidate the underlying complexity of a study sojourn.

An academic acculturation model

The basic premise of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological system framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994, 2005) is that a full appreciation of human development warrants recognition of the different contexts influencing a person's overall development. The theory suggests that each individual's unique development is shaped by a layered system in which the person stands at the very core, and for which a *matryoshka* or Russian nested doll is a fitting metaphor. The *microsystem* is the layer in which direct interactions between the child/individual and one's closest environment occur, e.g. family, school, peers (and latterly, workplace); the interactions that ensue among these immediate components, e.g. family-school links, referred to as the *mesosystem*, are nonetheless considered significant attributes in one's development. *Exosystem* is the next layer in the systemic structure exemplifying external contexts in which the individual's immediate settings influence one's development, e.g. community, parents' social network and workplace. Strictly, *exosystem* is deemed outside the individual's periphery but significant changes within this system may still result in radical changes affecting the person's growth and development. At the outermost layer lies the *macrosystem*, representing social knowledge and cultural context passed on through societal norms, customs, traditions, and lifestyles, through the prevailing belief, economic and political systems. The *macrosystem*, being embedded in each of the other systems, exerts a great

influence on the person's development, notably leading to acquisition of national identity – 'a societal blueprint' (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 40). A final system that interconnects with the *micro-*, *meso-*, *exo-*, and *macrosystems* – referred to as the *chronosystem* – encompasses the 'personal and historical' time dimension by taking into account major life events as part of a person's wider development, e.g. changing family structure, employment, wars and conflicts (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. xxii). Despite the theoretical recognition of different contexts shaping a person's growth and development, Bronfenbrenner (2005) nonetheless values the prominent role of the person's biology, genetic aspects and sense of agency when interacting within one's multilevel ecological systems, highlighted by the addition of the term 'bio' to the bio-ecological framework. Together, 'the relations between an active individual and his or her active and multilevel ecology constitute the driving force of human development' (Bronfenbrenner, 2005, p. xix). This bio-ecological framework underpins, and is therefore, critical to understanding a proposed academic acculturation model (see Figure 1).

[Figure 1 about here.]

Elliot et al. (in press) explain that part and parcel of a student sojourn involves embarking on a complex change, in particular, a re-orientation of the ecological system from old to new – starting from the innermost *microsystem* through to *mesosystem*, *exosystem*, and the *macrosystem* following the 'disruption' instigated by the sojourn, as the sojourner joins another ecological system. The sojourn arguably serves as the catalyst for the co-existence of the two invisible, yet powerful ecological systems.

The sojourn instigates disruption at all levels, as the sojourner becomes part of another ecological system, severely affecting the person's principal sources of support, for example, previously sustained relationships with significant others (microsystem, mesosystem). Likewise, the person's sense of identity achieved through relations with the macrosystem (e.g. national and cultural values, religious and political affiliation) and displayed through social behavior (Bronfenbrenner, 1994) is somewhat disturbed. (Elliot et al., in press, pp. 17-18)

What this model proposes is that studying in a foreign setting, albeit temporarily, entails much more than mere exposure to 'new' pedagogical styles, interacting with a 'different' group of learners, and studying in a 'foreign' environment. Instead, a study sojourn tends to be characterised by three aspects: a) a first-hand experience of two co-existing multilevel ecological systems; b) a decontextualisation process whereby the alternative 'norm' from the new ecological system facilitates deep reflection on what always was the 'norm' in the old ecological system; and c) new opportunities and challenges for learning, growth and development. Therefore, while it is expected that international students' primary concern should be with gradual adjustment to a new pedagogical experience, successfully achieving this is arguably contingent upon students' 'effective management and re-negotiation of old and new ecological systems' (Elliot et al., in press, p. 4) sustained by constant reflection. The model helps elucidate the inherently confusing, puzzling and amusing incidents typically facing student sojourners. Parallel to the model presented, Hodkinson's (2005) recognition of the cultural and relational aspects of learning led to a

proposition that the development of a learning concept is based on a much wider context than what takes place inside the classroom.

Each of us has lives outside our current site of learning. We had lives before it, we have lives in other contexts alongside education, and most of us will have lives after we have left that particular place of learning. (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 112)

Taken together, the academic acculturation model gives a more comprehensive overview of the sojourn's implications for international students in general, but in this paper, our emphasis will be on doctoral students, who arguably experience co-existing ecological systems for a relatively longer period compared to other student sojourners. We strongly suggest that the interactions between the old and the new systems are potentially significant sites for learning. Further contemplation of the model's implications suggests a scrutiny of the explicit and implicit roles of the formal, informal and the hidden curriculum, to which we will now turn, in an attempt to examine core elements affecting student sojourners' transition, adjustment and successful completion.

What is the hidden curriculum?

It is widely recognised that human learning is situated within a much broader spectrum of learning, encompassing both formal and informal settings, where the latter enriches and complements the former. Generally speaking, 'curriculum' or 'curriculum proper' embraces a holistic view of educational experiences, both

intentional and unintentional (Martin, 1994; Wear & Skillicorn, 2009, p. 457). Employing a lifelong perspective, Schugurensky's (2000) proposed comprehensive definitions of formal, informal and non-formal education offer helpful clarifications. *Formal education* takes place in a learning institution using an organised curriculum with a set of intended learning goals and outcomes and a certificate upon completion. By contrast, *non-formal education* refers to organised programmes offered outwith a learning institution; they are often on a short term and voluntary basis, e.g. driving lessons, painting courses. What distinguishes *informal learning* from the others is that it represents the type of learning that occurs outside either the formal or non-formal curricula and are generally characterised by 'self-directed' (or proactive pursuit), 'incidental' (or unintentional endeavor), and 'tacit' learning leading to internalisation of values, attitudes, behaviours, and skills resulting from socialisation with other people. Schugurensky stresses that during informal learning, learners tend not to have 'a priori intention' of acquiring these values, behaviours and skills, yet evidence of learning does surface following the experience (Schugurensky, 2000, pp. 3-5). Seemingly, it is the informal tacit learning through socialisation that closely matches other descriptions ascribed to the *hidden curriculum* (see Harding-DeKam et al., 2012; Leask & Carroll, 2011; Martin, 1976). Yet, it is worth stressing that such a positive view of the hidden curriculum is in sharp contrast with its original conception in the book 'Life in Classrooms' by Philip Jackson (1968) where the hidden curriculum entails negative connotations; it pertains to non-academic aspects of learning or more specifically, trivial classroom events, which collectively form the unwanted class routine and elements of the learning environment. It lurks behind the official curriculum and is presented with a

strong, derogatory or disapproving tone, hence the need to avoid, conquer, abolish or 'master' it (see also Martin, 1994).

...school might really be called a preparation for life, but not in the usual sense in which educators employ that slogan. ...the crowds, the praise and the power that combine to give a distinctive flavor to classroom life collectively form a hidden curriculum which each student (and teacher) must master if [they are to] make [their] way satisfactorily through the school. (Jackson, 1968, p. 33)

Eraut's (2007) conception of learning from other people is relevant to our discussion. Eraut posits that whereas universities' primary concern is with 'codified knowledge' through published knowledge in books and journals, there also exists knowledge that is 'uncodified', e.g. cultural knowledge; despite oversight of the latter, people conventionally acquire it through participation in social activities (Eraut, 2007, p. 405). Whereas the codified knowledge pertains to the formal curriculum, uncodified knowledge refers to the informal aspect of the curriculum. It is contended that although people are often unaware how informal 'uncodified' knowledge can inform 'personal knowledge', the latter, has its strong tacit component permeating beliefs and behaviour, common knowledge, and practical skills among others (Eraut, 2007, p. 406). Arguably, this scaffolds individuals' capacity for further learning – formally or otherwise. In bridging the idea of internationalisation and the university curriculum context, Leask (2015, pp. 8-9) proposes the following definitions for the formal, informal and the hidden elements of the curriculum in order to clarify their distinct as

well as overlapping functions. In so doing, Leask (2015) also argues the interconnection and interactivity among these three curricular components that ultimately define students' 'total student experience'.

1. Formal curriculum is characterised by 'the syllabus as well as the orderly, planned schedule of experiences and activities that students must undertake as part of their degree program'.
2. Informal curriculum denotes 'the various support services and additional activities and options organized by the university that are not assessed and don't form part of the formal curriculum, although they may support learning within it'.
3. Hidden curriculum is about 'the various unintended, implicit and hidden messages sent to students – messages we may not be even aware we are sending'.

Leask and Carroll (2011, p. 652) add that hidden curricula are commonly regarded as part of the informal learning experience, specifically personal 'experiences in cross-cultural encounters', and are frequently made known through 'reflection' or 'vicarious learning', i.e. observation of other learners' success or failure during the learning process. In our discussion of the experiential journey of international doctoral students, the definitions offered by Harding-DeKam et al. (2012, p. 6) are pertinent. These definitions have the doctoral curriculum at their core, where conservatively, the focus is on the student-supervisor relationship rather than on a formal curriculum structure.

Through the official doctoral curriculum, [doctoral supervisors] advise students about completing course work, meeting deadlines, and completing official paperwork. They also intervene with academic issues if needed. ...

The unofficial, or hidden curriculum covers the values, attitudes, beliefs and patterns of behavior learners absorb without the conscious knowledge of the teacher or learner (Martin, 1976).

Coming from diverse theoretical standpoints, the various definitions presented highlight differing constituents of the curriculum in its various manifestations, postulating differing influences on learners' personal, educational and societal developments and capacity for scaffolding learning (Leask, 2015; Peeters et al., 2014). This is particularly germane given the assertion that the international doctoral students' journey of academic acculturation goes beyond the academic dimension, and is strongly interconnected with the personal and societal elements of learning (Elliot et al., in press; Odena & Burgess, 2015). Taken together, greater insight into not only the formal but also the informal, unofficial or hidden curriculum is arguably significant since not only do these curricula together 'shape the lived experience of all students' but 'they simultaneously define students' present learning and develop the skills, knowledge, and attitudes needed to create further opportunities for them and others' (Leask, 2015, p. 9). What is common from these definitions is the unintentionality and the often concealed learning process that transpire within the hidden curriculum. Although it is acknowledged that the hidden curriculum is fashioned by default through both the formal and informal curricula (Leask, 2009, 2015; Martin, 1994); there is also a proposition that the hidden curriculum is typically

generated via informal and inadvertent learning and interactions (Harding-DeKam et al., 2012; Leask & Carroll, 2011; Peeters et al., 2014; Schugurensky, 2000); the latter proposition is the definition that we adopted for our study.

Both the obscure and imprecise nature added to the initial negative connotations initially attached to the hidden curriculum are likely culprits for why this subject has remained marginalised, especially in higher education. Instead, greater attention was given to the formal curriculum, i.e. curricular development and reforms, while overlooking the opportunities acquired informally from what constitutes an immense part of students' learning (Leask, 2015; Martin, 1994; Peeters et al., 2014; Schugurensky, 2000). Presently, insights into personal, educational or societal benefits, conveyed through informal hidden contexts, are largely unnoticed and are therefore easily missed and wasted, unless they are accidentally found and their utility recognised. Appreciating this untapped potential of the hidden curriculum, there are calls from the literature to make the informal hidden learning contexts more discernible, and therefore afford learners to capitalise on its benefits (Martin, 1994).

Associated conceptualisations of the hidden curriculum

The Third Space

Existing literature, particularly in literacy, international and doctoral education, refers to some concepts that appear highly relevant in the discussion of the hidden curriculum. Bhabha's (1994) conception of the Third Space originally serves to denote a metaphorical space in which differing cultures meet, e.g. the

classroom where home and school cultures practically converge. The notion has evolved and its meaning continues to be altered. For example in literacy, the Third Space comprises 'both vertical and horizontal forms of learning', i.e. the learning processes within and outwith the formal learning environments that lead to an enriched interaction characterised by a range of language and embodied practices (Gutierrez, 2008, p. 149). Citing Gutierrez et al. (1995), in McAlpine and Amundsen's (2009, p. 122) research on doctoral students, they elaborate that Third Spaces are channels aimed at bringing people together who might have a 'collective shared motive', and thus, leading to participation or working together in activities.

In comparison, Skerrett's (2010) conceptualisation of the Third Space is in connection to the space that is not associated with family, education or work related activities but a space for relaxation and recreation that simultaneously serves to engage learners and predictably, scaffold their learning. The most recent evolution of the Third Space describes the space as 'the informal spaces that foster personal learning, enjoyment and development through friendships, social activities and wider support networks'; this description includes 'neutral' spaces that assist one's pursuit of personal interests (Elliot et al., in press). Notably, the informality, unintentionality and often concealed learning processes (Harding-DeKam et al., 2012; Peeters et al., 2014; Schugurensky, 2000), even the invisibility of some of the aspects of the Third Space (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2009) are a reminiscent of our earlier discussion of the hidden curriculum, and are therefore worth revisiting when discussing the notion of the hidden curriculum.

Darkness in higher education

Similarly, the literature, particularly within doctoral education speaks about the concept of 'darkness', which despite the term used, is 'not contrary to light', and it is, in fact, void of any negative connotation (Bengtson, forthcoming; Bengtson & Barnett, in press). Instead, this 'darkness' in higher education refers to the 'educational phenomena caught in a blind angle within institutionalised educational practice – a concept that seeks to give meaning to the aspects of higher education caught in the interstices between the formal-informal divide'; they are driven by the students' own initiatives and creative approaches to learning and are integral to how they use their private time, away from their studies (Bengtson, forthcoming, p. 17). When translated into the doctoral education context, the notion of 'educational darkness' epitomises the utility of the potential offered by the learning processes that are customarily overlooked and ignored due to being situated outside what is regarded as the educational boundaries of doctoral education (Bengtson, forthcoming, pp. 17-18). This concept of darkness advocates that the formalised procedures within doctoral education, e.g. discipline-related seminars and methods workshops, are merely elements of the entire journey and that there are numerous resources upon which doctoral students can draw during their journey, beyond their supervisors' support (McAlpine & McKinnon, 2013). As a case in point, Brodin (2014) alludes to doctoral students' act of socialising that contributes to their learning of critical and creative thinking – both of which are considered core competencies and attributes expected for dissertation work and for later career (Durette, Fournier, & Lafon, 2014; Manathunga, Pitt, & Critchley, 2009).

In a related book 'The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research', set in the British context, Petre and Rugg (2010) attempted to address problems commonly facing doctoral students by exploring and employing tacit knowledge in the broadest sense of the word. Conventionally, many of these problems are expected to be dealt with informally; this perhaps explains why these 'problem' scenarios and development of relevant knowledge and skills are not included in the university's programme for doctoral students. What this book strongly suggests is that practically, learning sources come in different shapes and sizes and therefore 'students' sense of agency in pragmatic action' is indeed a crucial starting point in supporting their own development as PhD scholars (see also Brodin, 2014, p. 2). Learning sources and informants include academic and non-academic people in a formal or an informal environment with whom intentional or unintentional interactions occur, and are considered valuable resources as doctoral students acquire tacit knowledge and learn the 'tricks of the trade' (Phillips & Pugh, 2010, p. 47). However, as a result of being overwhelmed by related concurrent concerns, e.g. scholarship deadlines, financial pressure, family and relationship commitments, doctoral students can easily miss out on both the interactions and their benefits. A possible underlying alternative or extreme motive behind this held by some could be the 'quasi-romantic, maybe even masochistic, ideals about hardship and individuality [being] the driving forces of good scholarship' (Bengtson, forthcoming). Yet, as Petre and Rugg (2010) endorse, contrary to generally accepted wisdom, isolating oneself is not the way to complete a doctoral study. Phillips and Pugh (2010, p. 48) concur by reiterating that researchers who opt to tread the lonely path not only encounter

more difficulties, but also reduce the chance of success. These arguments strongly highlight the necessity for each doctoral student to engage in atypical or creative development of scholarly knowledge and research skills, although not necessarily always through the conventional route (Brodin, 2014). This then prompts doctoral students to express willingness to face the uncertainty that the 'darkness' may involve (Bengtson, forthcoming; Bengtson & Barnett, in press).

Finding the hidden curriculum in the context of international doctoral education

Looking from a new angle, existing data from our own phenomenological research concerning the 14 post-doctoral non-British academics' introspection on their study sojourn during their doctoral education as they pursued different disciplines (Elliot et al., in press) will be employed to exemplify how crucial learning occurred via the hidden curriculum. Inadvertent learning overlaps but also intersects as participants negotiate previous and current experiences situated within the broader systems (micro-, meso, exo-, and macrosystems) from old and new ecological systems. In this connection, Martin (1994) posits that the hidden curriculum for each learner shares two characteristics. It: a) is non-identical, due to their association to specific setting and time; and b) perpetually changes as settings change.

Notably, during research conversations, when participants describe what they consider personal, non-academic learning incidents, they say rather apologetically 'it doesn't have to do with academia really. It's just personal

experiences' (Helena); 'nothing to do with university' (Nadine); or 'but that wasn't really my experience of the university institution. The two are linked ... I still find it difficult to differentiate the two' (Nigel). These remarks subtly convey some uncertainty over the educational benefits of the experience, while highlighting its significance to their academic acculturation journey. This need not be seen as contradictory but what it demonstrates is that arguably, what is regarded as learning can flexibly be situated in any of the systems within the multilevel contexts and from either one of the two distinctive, sometimes conflicting ecological systems. Moreover, the strong interconnection between the personal, societal and academic elements during transition is strongly conveyed (Elliot et al., in press).

At the *microsystem* level, despite the assistance of technological advancements in easing loneliness, the sojourn predictably involves a radical loss of the individual's main social support from one's significant others. The previous comfort zone comprising familiar and sympathetic people, has been replaced with an initially empty microsystem. Whereas a number of sojourners tend to cling to individuals from their old microsystem (Leask & Carroll, 2011), about seven participants highlighted that the sojourn is, in fact, an opportunity to find and nurture new relationships. Newfound friends in the host country start to occupy their new *microsystem* and *mesosystem*, leading to new activities. Friends from old and new ecosystems become sources of personal and psychological strength, as in Nadine's case.

When I have friends visiting ... I show them around the city and tell them all that I know of the city; that ... makes me feel like [a local] because you know the history ... I've just been really lucky to find a group of people that I really feel at home with ... a really diverse group of friends ... that's something that you really can't engineer ... it would have been very easy for me to ... stick to a group ... and speak [my language] ... I could just do that [but] I don't ... it's important to be open to all sorts [of people] ... it would be ... a wasted opportunity not to expand my experience [by interacting] with people who are different from me.

Like Nadine, Piers acknowledges that informally learning about new cultures positively contributed to developing new relationships which then helped provide security in his new *microsystem*: 'I found myself having to learn about ... other cultures ... and in a way that was a good education ... it was helping me to learn a lot about geography and cultures and food.'

In terms of interaction with the larger community, i.e. the exosystem, Oliver commented on the constant impression of being somewhere else, that is 'not home', which leads to feelings of otherness, lack of authenticity and attachment (Pifer & Baker, 2014). His constant need to move from place to place left him deprived of 'social attachments'. In his words '...it was difficult to feel that you are authentic ... because I was always aware [that] it's not home, it's someone else's context, someone else's life....'. Yet, this led to his remarkable realisation that the same experience proportionately offers 'positive and negative possibilities': 'The world is your oyster, you can go anywhere, you are a member of any community you put yourself into so long as you go with an open mind, going to learn and

engage with people'. In Kelly's case, the church community served as a substitute for the initially poor quality of her new exosystem, which assisted building a sense of belonging: 'the first weekend I was here, I came to the university chaplaincy and the people there were really very welcoming, so from the start, I thought I had a group with whom I can engage'.

The *macrosystem* level showcases the differing and at times conflicting cultural differences and societal customs from participants' old and new ecological systems, especially where contrasting oriental and western, collectivist and individualist practices are evident. These societal challenges caused fundamental difficulties to the sojourners. Whereas there are areas where old and new ecological differences are reconcilable, this proved not to be the case for some specific situations, e.g. those for whom 'partying and getting drunk' is not part of their lifestyle. Arguably, it is at the *macrosystem* level, where informal learning from the hidden curriculum tends to be more advantageous. In the discussion of differing cultures, both societal and academic cultures (institutional and disciplinary) are considered. The majority of our participants shared how their pursuit of personal interest eventually led to engagement in non-educational activities, e.g. joining the university chapel choir, playing at sports clubs, and actively participating in an international church enabled them to meet friends and eventually become part of a social community. Below are two accounts illustrating how the hidden curriculum experienced by the participants during their doctoral experience became an integral element not only when coping with the transitional and academic-related challenges brought by the sojourn but also in their successful doctoral completion.

In the middle of the second year of my PhD, I was feeling just really kind of enclosed in. ... I had friends [in the department], but you just felt that that was the only thing I was doing at all times ... It was starting to feel really quite lonely ... I was working in a library at night ... so I never saw anyone and I only knew fellow students ... I was walking home passed an Amnesty International bookshop ... and I just suddenly wondered: 'Maybe I should volunteer there.' ... I ended up volunteering there for two years... It was a kind of place to stop feeling insane ... I got to talk to people who would ... just tell me what they were interested in and I'd help them find [it] ... the people I worked with were all just truly interesting people.... They ranged 18 to 90 ... there was some great stories and just a completely different outlook on every single day ... I usually worked ... about eight hours a week, but sometimes more than that if I ... felt like I needed ... to be somewhere else interacting with people, not having to think about my dissertation, just feeling pretty good. (Ella)

This is my home pub. I may have spent more time sitting in the pub than the actual flat I was living in ... almost every day after work, I went to the Whey Pat Tavern and had a couple of pints ... [and] I got to know some of the local people, not people in academia or students, but some [locals] were always there and they accepted me as part of their regular members of the pub, so that was a very heartwarming place for me. ...we don't have any promises or appointments, but if I go there somebody is there and we then have a bit of a chat. ... those local people are pretty senior ... one of them is like my [own] father ... he treated me as his son ... if I struggled with something ... I ... sought help from him (Oscar).

Behind a successful doctoral journey, neither the 'consistent solid work' produced by each of these successful doctoral students, nor the informal, relaxed and personal relationships with the supervisors, nor the academic assistance extended by staff members need be underestimated. Likewise, genuine recognition of the hidden opportunities that the sojourn offers contributed to a much enriched and more satisfying doctoral experience for our participants. As they themselves immensely benefited from the type of curriculum that exists outwith the formal academic support systems, some started openly advocating pursuit of the hidden curriculum as a meaningful part of an international doctoral journey. It is noteworthy that these claimed benefits are not limited to offsetting the social and academic loneliness entailed by undertaking a PhD in foreign context. These activities not only served as channels of relaxation and recreation that engaged learners but also scaffolded their learning through immersing themselves in the new ecological system via the hidden curriculum route. Following their interests was critical (Martin, 1994) for participants' creative use of the hidden curriculum or the third space or the darkness, which then strategically served multiple purposes, e.g. gaining intercultural competence through interactions with local people, improving their cultural knowledge, or acquiring a deeper appreciation of how various systems operate in the new setting. In Oscar's case, he was initially concerned about his ability to speak and understand English. His regular social interactions with the locals not only generated meaningful relationships and offered a supportive bond, they also offered opportunities for improving his command of English. These educational components of the hidden curriculum can apply to many student

sojourners for whom increased understanding of jokes and idioms enhances their confidence and encourages them to express their thoughts. Additionally, entering into friendly arguments and debates is likely to facilitate the development of critical thinking, which is at the 'heart' of the doctoral process (Lee, 2008, p. 273). This supports Martin's (1994) contention: 'But while hidden curriculum is not necessarily tied to schools and schooling, it is always and everywhere tied to learning' (p. 155).

Discussion and conclusions

An international education is a theoretically complex journey that is nonetheless filled with excitement and challenges, but also opportunities. In critically examining the international doctoral journey, the academic acculturation model, i.e. an extension of Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1994, 2005) bio-ecological systems theory, serves as a useful framework for understanding various potential sites of learning resulting from changed settings and 'cross-cultural encounters' involved in study sojourns (Leask & Carroll, 2011; Martin, 1994). Despite previous undesirable connotations associated with the hidden curriculum (Jackson, 1968), we argue throughout this paper the crucial role of learning within the hidden curriculum, which can potentially go beyond doctoral students' coping capabilities brought about by the transitional challenges during the sojourn. We would strongly argue that, as in the case of our successful participants, the opportunities from the hidden curriculum enabled them to thrive in their new environments.

There is no question about the value of academic support from the HEIs for student sojourners through provision of strategic learning approaches, tailored study programmes, and university-led interventions and activities. Additionally, in recognising that ‘much learning at university occurs in the informal curriculum, outside formal learning environments’, Leask and Carroll (2011, p. 651) further propose that formal and informal curricula be aligned to complement and support formal learning experiences, enabling HEIs to offer ‘a total student experience’ (Leask, 2015, p. 9). This strongly suggests that a collaborative effort among HEIs, supervisors, support staff members and international PhD students to recognise and promote the unacknowledged value of the hidden curriculum can make a qualitative difference to the international PhD students’ experiences. Eraut (2007) also noted elsewhere that informal and implicit learning is beyond and much broader than merely socialising with others. It is critical then that through a concerted effort among HEIs and their staff members, spaces are created to assist doctoral students to recognise, discover and harness the type(s) of hidden curriculum that can benefit them most.

Within a study sojourn, it is recognised that invisible learning opportunities abound in each of the systems. Martin (1994, p. 156), however, also cautioned that the learning focus can either be ‘significant’ or ‘trivial’, ‘worthwhile’ or ‘worthless’. Since the informal hidden curriculum is situated outside the academic domain, it then falls within the student’s personal control to search for and seize the opportunity to harness the hidden curriculum’s beneficial elements; this is aligned to the sense of agency advocated in the bio-ecological

systems theory. Martin (1994 p. 158) asserts that 'a hidden curriculum is not something one just finds; one must go hunting for it'. Discovering and utilising the hidden curriculum then become 'a very empowering exercise' (Peeters et al., 2014, p. 189) because of the advantages that additional learning can bring. We then propose that in harnessing the power of the hidden curriculum, the key lies in student sojourners' proactive socialisation and attention to the resources available within the new learning environment. Arguably, the same principle applies to both the formal and informal curriculum. However, unlike the formal curriculum, informal hidden learning should be guided by a pursuit of genuine interest to encourage the kind of learning that is significant, relaxed, motivating and enjoyable. Finding this 'hidden treasure' is argued to be a vital step towards international PhD students thriving in new societal and academic contexts.

References

- Austin, A. E. (2010). Foreword, in: S. K. Garner & P. Mendoza (Eds) *On Becoming a Scholar: Socialization and Development in Doctoral Education*. Sterling, Stylus Publishing, LLC, xi-xvii.
- Bengtsen, S. (forthcoming). Darkness within doctoral education. Doctoral students' creative learning approaches through the PhD, in: C. Zhou (Ed), *Handbook of Research on Creative Problem-Solving Skill Development in Higher Education*, IGI Global.
- Bengtsen, S., & Barnett, R. (in press). Confronting the Dark Side of Higher Education. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London, Routledge.
- Brodin, E. M. (2014). Critical and creative thinking nexus: learning experiences of doctoral students. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-19.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The Ecology of Human Development: Experiments by Nature and Design*. Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1994). Ecological models of human development *International Encyclopedia of Education* (2nd edn., Vol. 3, pp. 1643-1647). Oxford, England, Elsevier Sciences, Ltd. (Reprinted from: Readings on the development of children).
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (Ed) (2005). *Making Human Being Human: Biological Perspectives on Human Development*. Thousand Oaks, California, Sage Publications, Inc.
- Brydon, K., & Fleming, J. (2011). The Journey Around My PhD: Pitfalls, Insights and Diamonds. *Social Work Education*, 30(8), 995-1011.

- Durette, B., Fournier, M., & Lafon, M. (2014). The core competencies of PhDs. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-16.
- Elliot, D. L., Reid, K., & Baumfield, V. (in press). Beyond the amusement, puzzlement and challenges: An enquiry into international students' academic acculturation. *Studies in Higher Education*.
- Elliot, D. L., Baumfield, V., & Reid, K. (in press). Searching for 'a third space': a creative pathway towards international PhD students' academic acculturation. *Higher Education Research & Development*.
- Eraut, M. (2007). Learning from other people in the workplace. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(4), 403-422.
- Gardner, S. (2007). "I Heard it through the Grapevine": Doctoral Student Socialization in Chemistry and History. *Higher Education*, 54(5), 723-740.
- Garner, S. K. & Mendoza, P. (Eds)(2010). *On Becoming a Scholar: Socialization and Development in Doctoral Education*. Sterling, Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- Gu, Q., & Schweisfurth, M. (2011). Rethinking university internationalisation: towards transformative change. *Teachers & Teaching*, 17(6), 611-617.
- Gutierrez, K. D. (2008). Developing a Sociocritical Literacy in the Third Space. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 43(2), 148-164.
- Harding-DeKam, J. L., Hamilton, B., & Loyd, S. (2012). The Hidden Curriculum of Doctoral Advising. *NACADA Journal*, 32(2), 5-16.
- Hodkinson, P. (2005). Learning as cultural and relational: moving past some troubling dualisms. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 35(1), 107-119.
- Jackson, P. (1968). *Life in Classrooms*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc.

- Jones, E. (2013). Internationalization and employability: the role of intercultural experiences in the development of transferable skills. *Public Money & Management*, 33(2), 95-104.
- Jones, E. (2015). Foreword, in: B. Leask (Ed) *Internationalizing the Curriculum*. Oxford, Routledge, ix-xi.
- Knight, J. (2003). Updated Definition of Internationalization. *International Higher Education* (33), 2-3.
- Knight, J. (2013). The changing landscape of higher education internationalisation – for better or worse? *Perspectives: Policy & Practice in Higher Education*, 17(3), 84-90.
- Leask, B. (2009). Using Formal and Informal Curricula to Improve Interactions between Home and International Students. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(2), 205-221.
- Leask, B. (2015). *Internationalizing the Curriculum*. Oxford, Routledge.
- Leask, B., & Carroll, J. (2011). Moving beyond 'wishing and hoping': internationalisation and student experiences of inclusion and engagement. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 30(5), 647-659.
- Lee, A. (2008). How are doctoral students supervised? Concepts of doctoral research supervision. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(3), 267-281.
- Manathunga, C., Pitt, R., & Critchley, C. (2009). Graduate attribute development and employment outcomes: tracking PhD graduates. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 34(1), 91-103.
- Martin, J. R. (1994). What Should We Do with a Hidden Curriculum When We Find One? *Changing the Educational Landscape: Philosophy, Women and Curriculum*. New York, Routledge, 154-169.

- McAlpine, L., & Amundsen, C. (2009). Identity and agency: pleasures and collegiality among the challenges of the doctoral journey. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 31(2), 109-125.
- McAlpine, L., & McKinnon, M. (2013). Supervision – the most variable of variables: student perspectives. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 35(3), 265-280.
- McAlpine, L., & Norton, J. (2006). Reframing our approach to doctoral programs: an integrative framework for action and research. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 25(1), 3-17.
- Odena, O., & Burgess, H. (2015). How doctoral students and graduates describe facilitating experiences and strategies for their thesis writing learning process: a qualitative approach. *Studies in Higher Education*, 1-19.
- OECD. (2013). How is international student mobility shaping up? *Education Indicators in Focus*.
- Peeters, J., Backer, F., Buffel, T., Kindekens, A., Struyven, K., Zhu, C., & Lombaerts, K. (2014). Adult Learners' Informal Learning Experiences in Formal Education Setting. *Journal of Adult Development*, 21(3), 181-192.
- Petre, M., & Rugg, G. (2010). *The Unwritten Rules of PhD Research* (2nd edn.) Berkshire, Open University Press.
- Phillips, E. M., & Pugh, D. S. (2010). *How To Get a PhD: A handbook for students and their supervisors* (5th edn.) Berkshire, Open University Press.
- Pifer, M. J., & Baker, V. L. (2014). "It Could Be Just Because I'm Different": Otherness and Its Outcomes in Doctoral Education. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 7(1), 14-30.

- Schugurensky, D. (2000). *The Forms of Informal Learning: Towards a Conceptualization of the Field*. WALL Working Paper No. 19. Toronto, University of Ontario.
- Skerrett, A. (2010). Lolita, Facebook, and the Third Space of Literacy Teacher Education. *Educational Studies*, 46(1), 67-84.
- Trafford, V., & Leshem, S. (2009). Doctorateness as a threshold concept. *Innovations in Education & Teaching International*, 46(3), 305-316.
- Ulriksen, L. (2009). The implied student. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34(5), 517-532.
- Walsh, E. (2010). A model of research group microclimate: environmental and cultural factors affecting the experiences of overseas research students in the UK. *Studies in Higher Education*, 35(5), 545-560.
- Ward, C., Bochner, S., & Furnham, A. (2001). *The Psychology of Culture Shock* (2nd edn.) East Sussex, Routledge.
- Wear, D., & Skillicorn, J. (2009). Hidden in plain sight: the formal, informal, and hidden curricula of a psychiatry clerkship. *Acad Med*, 84(4), 451-458.
- Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K., & Todman, J. (2008). Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(1), 63-75.

Figure 1. An academic acculturation model based on Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological theory.

