

ALL IN THE SAME BOAT:  
A comparison of intercultural interaction between home students and international students in two  
universities

Bachelor's Thesis  
Riikka Pystynen

University of Jyväskylä  
Department of Languages  
English  
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Tiivistelmä – Abstract	
<p>Tutkielman tarkoituksena on selvittää kansainvälisten opiskelijoiden kokemuksia kansainvälisestä kanssakäymisestä paikallisten opiskelijoiden kanssa. Tutkielman on aikomus tarkastella, onko eri kulttuureissa opiskelevilla kansainvälisillä opiskelijoilla samankaltaisia kokemuksia ja näkemyksiä paikallisista opiskelijoista. Aiemmissä tutkimuksissa on käynyt ilmi, että vaikka kansainvälisten opiskelijoiden kokemukset vaihtokaudesta tai tutkinnon suorittamisesta ulkomailla ovat olleet pääasiassa positiivisia, varsinkin kanssakäymisessä paikallisten opiskelijoiden kanssa on edelleen parantamisen varaa, sillä kansainväliset opiskelijat kokevat paikalliset opiskelijat vaikeasti lähestyttäviksi ja varautuneiksi. Epäonnistunut kansainvälinen kanssakäyminen vaikuttaa kansainvälisten opiskelijoiden vaihtokokemukseen usein negatiivisesti. Tätä tutkitaan ja vertaillaan tutkielmassa kahden yliopiston välillä Suomessa ja Isossa-Britanniassa.</p> <p>Tutkielman kohderyhmänä olivat kansainväliset opiskelijat – sekä vaihto-opiskelijat että ulkomaalaiset koko tutkinnon suorittajat – Jyväskylän yliopistossa ja Chesterin yliopistossa. Molempien tutkimusyliopistojen kansainvälisiä opiskelijoita pyydettiin sähköpostitse osallistumaan tutkielmaan täyttämällä webkysely talvella 2012. Vastauksista kävi ilmi, että kansainvälisten opiskelijoiden kokemukset eri kulttuureissa olivat pitkälti samankaltaisia. Kansainväliset opiskelijat kokivat paikalliset opiskelijat passiivisiksi ja kanssakäymisen heidän kanssaan pinnalliseksi, vaikka he muuten käyttäytyivätkin ystävällisesti ja avuliaasti kansainvälisiä opiskelijoita kohtaan. Kansainväliset opiskelijat kuitenkin pitivät ystävyysuhteita paikallisten opiskelijoiden kanssa arvokkaina ja pyrkivät aktiivisesti kontaktiin heidän kanssaan. Lisäksi kohdekulttuuriin soveltuvalla kielitaidolla todettiin olevan suuri merkitys kansainvälisen kanssakäymisen onnistumiselle. Tutkielmaan vastanneet opiskelijat myös ehdottivat toimia kansainvälisen kanssakäynnin edistämiseksi.</p>	
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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Numerous students around the world make the decision to move abroad after their secondary education and study a full university degree in another country. These students often aim to stay in their new home country once they graduate and they thus ease their descent to the host culture by studying there, or students simply wish to gain international study and work experience that is often appreciated by employers. If a university student is not willing to make such a big commitment but is yet interested in experiencing what living and studying in another country is like, universities all over the world cooperate and offer exchange placements for their students, ranging from a few months up to a full academic year, during which a student studies at a foreign university. An exchange period is also an excellent opportunity to improve one's language skills and broaden one's perspective of the world and foreign cultures. International experience is valued in the modern labour market which encourages students to study abroad.

The experiences abroad of these *international students* have been much researched in order to see how the students experience their time abroad. Among others, Montgomery (2010) and Merrick (2004) have investigated the experiences of international students in the UK, while equivalent studies have been performed in Finland for instance by Koivisto (2009) and Garam (2001 & 2003). Previous studies have shown such periods to be mostly satisfactory in students' opinion; however, there are some problems faced by international students that are repeated study after study. One such issue is the limited contact with *home students*, that is, students born and living in the host culture and studying at the host university. International students feel that home students are difficult to get to know since they do not make the initiative to acquaint themselves with international students. Moreover, when international students approach home students, they seem reserved and the interest in multicultural friendships is mainly unilateral. International students have reported that this lack of *intercultural interaction* with home students affects their exchange experience negatively, as it hinders their process of settling into the host culture, as well as constricts their circles of friends. The issues that international students face with acquainting home students do not have simple, unequivocal solutions because the possible reasons behind unsuccessful intercultural interaction are manifold. It is the purpose of the present study to research these reasons of unsuccessful intercultural interaction and how international students see the home students at two universities: the University of Chester in the United Kingdom and the University of Jyväskylä in Finland. The present study also seeks to find out to what extent the student experience is similar in two different host cultures.

## **2 INTERNATIONALISATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

In the past 20 years, study periods abroad have become increasingly popular in higher education due to easy-access exchange programmes like Erasmus, but internationalisation is not a new phenomenon in education. Bruch and Barty (1998, as cited in Montgomery 2010: 3) mention wandering scholars, who for centuries travelled from one country to another in order to extend their learning. When contemporary students make the decision to go study abroad, there are several parties involved in the process. It is the student who is willing to personally encounter a new culture and people alongside with presumably a foreign language, but internationalisation always involves “international and local elements” (Montgomery 2010: 4). The university staff at both ends of the exchange must be willing to cooperate, and it is required that both the students and staff of a university hold hospitable perceptions and attitudes of internationalisation in order for it to succeed. However, previous studies have discovered that there still are shortcomings in the intercultural interaction between university staff and international students, as well home students and international students.

### **2.1 International students’ experiences in Britain and Finland**

Previous studies have shown that international students mainly form friendships with other international students. Merrick (2004: 25) reports of his findings of over half of the international students studying in the UK describing their groups of friends consisting of only other international students or of students of their own nationality. 32% of the respondents had a mixture of UK home students and international students as their friends, and a remarkably small minority of 7% had mainly UK students in their groups of friends. Similar experiences of international students having difficulties in forming friendships with home students have been recorded in the majority of studies on student exchanges. Moreover, Merrick (2004: 68) found that 43% of the respondents experienced UK students to be hard to get to know, although 60% agreed that once acquainted, they were also friendly. In comparison, international students mix even less with Finnish home students than with those in the UK. According to Garam (2001: 25), 89% of international students in Finland integrated well with other international students, but less than a half of them, 40% of the respondents, could say the same about integrating with Finnish home students. Indeed, 30% of the respondents said they had integrated poorly with home students.

The lack of contact with home students is a concern for the majority of international students even before their arrival (Merrick 2004: 25). The phenomenon of international students having trouble getting acquainted with home students is a global issue that should be defeated as little contact with local people was also seen as one of the biggest disappointments of the study period, as Garam (2003: 28) points out. Moreover, expectations and preconceptions which international students have about the difficulty of interacting with home students could negatively influence their interactions once they arrive at university (Montgomery 2010: 26). The anticipated difficulties are likely to hinder students from trying hard enough to get to know each other across cultures, even when the misconceptions could be proven wrong once acquainted.

## **2.2 The role of language in forming intercultural relationships**

Language, culture and identity strongly correlate with each other and are inseparable (Montgomery 2010: 36). It can be argued that language is at the centre of our interaction with others and the basis of our communication, and therefore plays a crucial role in the experiences of international students. Students' use of language is likely to influence the way they were perceived by others (Sysoyev 2002, as cited in Montgomery 2010: 36). Moreover, Montgomery (2010: 85) found that students who had poor language skills required more effort in order to be befriended with. This was due to a language barrier, which caused feelings of anxiety at the prospect of being misunderstood on both sides. Thus, other students felt discouraged to retain contact with those students with poor language abilities. Furthermore, Montgomery (2010: 85) reports of Harrison and Peacock's (2007) study about home students feeling that talking to international students required too much effort and "mindfulness." In addition, one of Montgomery's respondents, who was an international student, argued that his friends were on the same level of English with him and could therefore understand each other better than UK home students would. It can thus be argued that language is sometimes seen as an obstacle from both international students' and home students' point of view when making friends.

Language opens new possibilities and outlooks to the world for students. Montgomery (2010: 38) argues that proficiency in more than one language results in more diverse cultural awareness and tolerance towards otherness. Therefore, international students, who often have had to learn another language before moving to a new culture, have already developed a better understanding of cultural awareness because of their language learning. As a result, their outlook towards other cultures is

different from those of UK home students who may not have learned any foreign language proficiently and may not therefore have had much contact with foreign cultures.

### **2.3 Internationalisation, culture and social groups**

A possible reason for difficulties in internationalisation between home students and international students is misperceptions of other cultures and cultural prejudice. Montgomery (2010: 8) suggests that the sometimes stereotypical perceptions that students hold of other cultures can affect their interaction with each other and the way they interpret each other. According to Byram and Fleming (1998, as cited in Montgomery 2010: 37), communicative competence includes intercultural competence; that is, in order to develop language skills, the significance of cultural knowledge and cross-cultural understanding must be emphasised as well. Montgomery (2010: 8) then argues that while culture is knowledge, it is also a “cognitive model” of perceiving and interpreting the world. Culture is, therefore, “a means of framing both propositional (‘know-that’ types of statements) and procedural (‘know-how’ statements) knowledge of that which surrounds us.” The birth of any cultural stereotypes through students’ ways of interpreting their social worlds may influence their interaction with any particular student groups. For instance, Montgomery’s (2010: 89) respondents’ perceptions of British home students included seeing them as reserved and lacking enthusiasm and effort to make contact. Interestingly, similar notions were made of international students by home students, who thought international students were shy, introverted and difficult to get to know, even when no specific interests, names or actual countries of origin were known (Harrison and Peacock 2007, as cited in Montgomery 2010: 84). Therefore, stereotypes and prejudice that are not based on any factual knowledge can interfere in intercultural interaction to the extent that home students and international students do not form friendships with each other.

It is not only international students who might struggle at forming friendships. Montgomery (2010: 82) stresses that home students are also constricted by their own social groups and feel isolated at university. Feelings of rejections and alienation are also experienced by other social groups within home students, similar to the experiences of international students. Montgomery therefore suggests this to be a possible underlying factor in the lack of contact between the two student groups. Indeed, Montgomery (2010: 79) reports of friendships between international and home students being more superficial and peripheral in contrast to those formed between international students. In addition, she argues (2010: 94) that the relationships international students form are often strong. This is due

to the fact that international students share a common, powerful experience of having left home and entered a new culture. Therefore, international students often form a common bond that is “inclusive to those who share it but ... exclusive to those who do not”. It can thus be argued that it is easier for international students to form friendships among each other because they share such a strong bond (Montgomery 2010: 96).

#### **2.4 Integration of international and home students**

In order to improve the integration of international and home students, a common piece of advice from previous international students for any future ones was to be persistent in getting acquainted with home students, despite initial difficulties and feelings of rejection or disinterest. Moreover, several previous studies urge institutions to pay more attention to introducing home and international students to each other, as there are numerous factors complicating intercultural interaction. According to Garam (2003: 28), international students mostly attend courses that are designed for international students, and therefore are not in much contact with home students on campus. In addition, international students often spend their leisure time with other international students, and also live at separated locations from home students. Montgomery (2010: 84) talks of “different centres of gravity in the social lives and motivations of international and home students,” meaning that the priorities of the two student groups may differ. All these issues further complicate the intercultural interaction as there seems to be a lack of common ground between international and home students. However, Merrick (2004: 67) found that participating in any activities on campus improved international students’ chances of having UK friends. Therefore, international students should be advised to participate in more activities offered by the university, as this is the expected route for home students to make friends, rather than class contact.

Both home students and international students should meet as individuals first, as members of their culture second. Merrick (2004: 71) emphasises the importance of allowing international students to preserve their cultural identity and values without compromising, but instead they should be assisted in overcoming the obstacles of getting acquainted with British students as individuals and forming intercultural friendships. Moreover, he stresses the fact that British students should be encouraged to develop the cross-cultural awareness and knowledge of other countries, rather than base their opinion on stereotypical presumptions. Universities act as a “world in microcosm” and are an excellent environment for building an awareness of a global citizen, which Merrick (2004:

71) points out to be a benefit in future employment as well.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

The goal of the present study is to compare the perceptions and experiences of intercultural interaction of the international students at two universities. International students at the University of Jyväskylä and their experiences of the Finnish home students will be compared with the international students at the University of Chester and their experiences of the British home students. As Pöntinen (2004: 44) points out, a comparative perspective is needed in order to discover whether the phenomena are shared mutually between societies, different cultures and thus the two universities, and to discover if any theories can be drawn from any discovered consistencies or differences in the university students' opinions and actions. Therefore, the present study also seeks to find out if there are any similarities, differences or consistencies in the experiences of international students and their acquaintances with the local culture and people. The study seeks to further confirm earlier results which show that interacting with home students is seen as difficult by international students. Respondents are also given the chance to suggest why it is so.

As the focus of the present study will be on comparing the experiences at the two universities in two countries and not among international students as individuals or cultural groups, the respondents' age, sex, nationality or home culture will not be taken into account when analysing the data. The home students' nationality and culture, assumed to be Finnish or British, are taken into consideration when looking at and comparing the easiness of getting to know home students. Both exchange students and full degree students who have some other country of origin than Finland and the United Kingdom, are taken into account in the survey. In the present study, both exchange students and full degree students will be included in the term *international students*.

The data was collected during the academic year 2011–2012 by requesting international students at the two universities to answer an online questionnaire (see Appendix 1) in which a qualitative research method was combined with a quantitative one. The combination of the two was chosen since, as Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009: 74) suggest, surveys are a useful method when testing the hypotheses set for the study, and the data can be easily quantified and analysed. Moreover, Jokivuori and Hietala (2007: 11) argue that it is possible to verify qualitative connections between

phenomena by using quantitative methods. Therefore, the analysis was completed according to the principles of descriptive analysis. For this purpose, the questionnaire mostly consisted of multiple choice questions on the Likert scale, in which respondents rated each statement asked in the survey with a number, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), according to their own experience. In addition, there were some open-ended questions in order to give the respondents a chance to describe their experiences in more detail and expand on aspects that could not be answered in scaled multiple choice questions. According to Hirsjärvi and Hurme (2000: 48), this is a good method when the respondents' personal interpretations and the meanings they have created of the research topic have a significant role in the analysis. When quoting respondents, their comments will be left unaltered, unless there is a typing error that changes the meaning of the word or the sentence.

The pilot study and the study itself were conducted by using the web-based survey programme MrInterview and the results were analysed with PASW Statistics 18 with SPSS for Windows. For the pilot, three volunteers participated by answering the questionnaire. The results of the pilot correlated with the hypotheses assumed beforehand and could therefore be included in the study. Altogether, the survey gained 161 respondents, 50 from the University of Chester and 111 from the University of Jyväskylä. All the respondents have been given their identifiers to protect their anonymity, with either a C for Chester or J for Jyväskylä followed by their respondent numbers. The identifiers will be used with the respondent quotes for recognition. Due to the scope of the present study, not all questions asked in the questionnaire could be analysed, but the analysis was focused on the most important notions that arose from the answers.

#### **4 FRIENDLY, BUT NOT TRUE FRIENDS**

In the present study, only a very small percentage was disappointed with their study period abroad, despite any difficulties they reported to have experienced with home students or otherwise. Only 1.8% of the Jyväskylä respondents were very disappointed, while there were none in Chester, and only 4.5% and 2% respectively were somewhat disappointed. In general, international students in Chester were more satisfied with their stay in the country than those in Jyväskylä, with 90% of the Chester respondents being somewhat or strongly satisfied, in comparison to Jyväskylä's 82.9%. This correlates with the results regarding respondents' proficiency in the language of interaction (assumed to be mostly English at both universities), as Chester respondents scored themselves

higher. Furthermore, it correlates with the fact that both respondent groups considered the language barrier to be one of the biggest obstacles in intercultural interaction, as mentioned above. Therefore, better language skills are one of the factors that can result in a better exchange experience altogether, as international students will find communication with home students easier.

#### **4.1 Language**

Respondents were asked about their proficiency in the language of interaction which was mostly assumed to be English at both universities, although it is possible respondents also considered other languages of interaction in their answers, such as Finnish. The mean of the answers for the two universities combined was 4.11 on the scale of 1–5: very poor–very good. When evaluating themselves, the respondents from the University of Chester had a somewhat higher average of 4.40, in comparison to the University of Jyväskylä's respondents' mean of 3.98. Moreover, it was clear from the survey results that the Jyväskylä respondents found their language skills to affect their ability to communicate with others more than those in Chester did: 60% of the Chester respondents felt that their language skills did *not* affect them, while over half of Jyväskylä's international students, 50.4%, thought that this factor did. This major difference in the international students' experiences could be due to the fact that although English is the most common language of use for international students at the University of Jyväskylä, as it often is the language of studies and socialisation for them, the mother tongue of the inhabitants of Finland is Finnish. Therefore, if considering Finnish as a language of interaction as well, international students may have seen their presumably poor skills at Finnish to be a hindrance in getting to know native speakers of Finnish, that is, home students, despite the possibility of taking lessons in the Finnish language once they were in Jyväskylä. In Chester, on the other hand, English was mostly the only language international students needed when arriving in the country, as it is the mother tongue of home students as well as the administrative language of the university. Therefore, language skills did not pose such difficulties for international students when interacting with other students in Chester as they did in Jyväskylä.

International students do not mind conversing in a foreign language although it is a common stumbling block in intercultural interaction. Over three fifths strongly agreed with the statement that interacting with people who have different mother tongues from their own does not bother them. Moreover, one fifth of all respondents somewhat agreed with this. However, it is interesting that

while international students claim not to mind interacting with people with different mother tongues than their own – that is, with people from other countries – one of the reasons cited most to hinder intercultural interaction between international and home students was the language barrier. One respondent from Jyväskylä commented on the issue thus:

- (1) Home students feel the necessity to speak [sic] perfect English while most of international people are [t]here to improve their English without fear of making mistakes while they speak. (J39)

It would seem that Finnish home students, perhaps unaccustomed to conversing in a foreign language, may be embarrassed by their lack of proficiency, while international students do not feel discouraged by any mistakes in their language use because they have a purpose and a motive to continue using and practising the language. Many international students have made the decision to go abroad at least partly on the basis of wanting to improve their language skills, and are therefore perhaps not afraid of the mistakes they might make in a foreign language. Nevertheless, when interacting with home students, many international students reported problems either to one or both of the parties because of communicating in a foreign language. In addition, a Jyväskylä respondent said that s/he felt that other international students had worse proficiencies in English than s/he did, and therefore the respondent felt that s/he could not practise his/her English with other international students. Moreover, respondents shared similar feelings about why home students do not contact international students:

- (2) [Home students] [t]end to find it difficult to hear many of [the international students] when they speak english and so they tend to say 'pardon' several times. (C21)
- (3) Some also avoid making contact because its [sic] difficult sometimes to follow what the international student is saying because of how the english is spoken by the international student. (C30)

Finally, incidents of having trouble with the foreign language from international students' point of view were also mentioned. A respondent in Chester complained how home students, that is, native English speakers

- (4) don't bother to slow their speaking to international student's [sic] which makes communicating difficult sometimes. (C18)

Therefore it would seem that the possibility and fear of being misunderstood is present on both sides, and sometimes completely disables the chance of communication.

## 4.2 Contact with home students

The present study found international students to be more multicultural than previous studies have discovered. When asked to describe their circle of friends, a significant majority of 75.2% of all respondents reported to have both home students and other international students as their friends, a phenomenon which Montgomery (2010: 21) described as a multicultural circle of friends. The result was similar at both universities: 76.6% of the University of Jyväskylä's international students chose the option of having a multicultural group of friends, while the percentage for the University of Chester was 72. This result contradicts drastically Merrick's (2004) UK study in which only 32% of the respondents had both UK home students and international students in the circle of friends. While having only home students as friends was clearly the smallest respondent group with a shared percentage of 1.9, it is a remarkable finding that only 23% of all the respondents reported to have other international students only in their group of friends. However, it must be noted that the study did not define *friendship* or inquire about the depth of these relationships; therefore, the result is subjective to every respondent's personal experience of the definition of *friendship*. Nevertheless, the results question the topicality of the findings in previous studies, as the results of the present study argue that a significant number of contemporary international students form friendships with home students despite the assumed difficulties.

Despite reporting to have home students in their circles of friends, respondents were interested in knowing more home students. Altogether, 72% of the respondents at the University of Chester either somewhat or strongly agreed with the statement, in comparison to 66.6% of the University of Jyväskylä respondents. However, international students found it difficult to get to know home students altogether. When presented with the statement of it being easy to get to know home students, 46% of Chester respondents and 47.7% of Jyväskylä respondents disagreed – almost half of both of the respondent groups. Moreover, the Chester respondents reported more indifference from home students when discussing the reasons for home students not to get to know international students, while the students in Jyväskylä thought it had more to do with shyness and the difficulty of making the first move, something that is thought to be very stereotypical of Finns. However, a large number from both respondent universities said that home students' reluctance to get to know international students is because of their previous, already established friends and routines at university and in personal life. Unlike international students, home students do not necessarily need more friends and do not actively look for them. In addition, for exchange students, the short stay in the country was considered an issue that could be off-putting for home students, as forming lasting

friendships was not thought to be worth the effort. In comparison, a Chester respondent comments on becoming acquainted with fellow international students as follows:

- (5) The international students are very easy to interact with because you're all in the same boat to start with so it's easier to make friends with them because they don't really know what's going on either. (C29)

It could be concluded that one stumbling block for home students and international students to become acquainted is their different focal points in their student lives. As supported by Montgomery's (2010: 96) theory, international students share the powerful experience of moving to a new culture with certain social and educational targets in mind, while home students may have different "centres of gravity" (Montgomery 2010: 84) in regards to these matters. Based on these findings, it could be argued that although home students make the initiative towards international students and the majority of the respondents had positive experiences of interacting with home students, for instance by home students acting friendly and helpful towards international students, either the acquaintance never deepens into a friendship or it takes a long time to bond. Therefore, friendships with home students might be seen as distant and arduous and home students as difficult to get to know.

In comparison to previous studies, the respondents of the present study seemed more positive about their experience with home students. 62% of the Chester respondents did not find interacting with home students difficult, while the percentage for the Jyväskylä respondents was 50.4%. Although it would seem that international students in the UK find it easier to approach and communicate with home students, the percentage for international students in Finland is still remarkably high, when compared to previous studies and the expected findings based on them. Therefore, it is also interesting that it was found that Finnish home students made the initiative of getting to know international students more than British home students. When asked about this, 22.5% of the Jyväskylä respondents had not made the initiative themselves, in comparison to Chester's only 8%. While 66% of the Chester respondents had had to make the initiative, the percentage was 51.3% with Jyväskylä. Finally, when asked if the respondents felt that home students were interested in getting to know international students, the distribution between the options was rather even. Only 4.3% strongly agreed that home students did not have any interest in international students and otherwise the opinion was more ambiguous. Thus, it could be argued that despite previously reported difficulties in intercultural interaction, international students appreciate the fact that home

students nevertheless show an interest towards them at some level. In addition, it could be assumed that international students are already familiar with the phenomenon of difficulty of getting to know home students before they arrive, accept it and are not upset because of it and focus on those friendships that they can form instead. On the other hand, any successful friendships with home students are likely to be regarded as even more valuable due to the difficulty of establishing them.

### 4.3 Home students as seen by international students

International students in different host universities share fairly similar views on home students. When the students were asked to finish the sentence "as an international student, I think home students are..." (see Figure 1 below) with three adjectives from a given list of 12, the results between the two universities were very similar. The four most chosen adjectives by the respondents at both Chester and Jyväskylä were in an ascending order *welcoming*, *helpful*, *reserved* and *friendly*. In addition, the fifth most common adjective for the Chester respondents was *difficult to approach* and for the Jyväskylä respondents *shy*. The other adjectives, *easy to approach*, *racist*, *quiet*, *prejudiced*, *extroverted* or *introverted*, were not chosen as much. The results are somewhat in a conflict with themselves: while international students think that home students are friendly, helpful and welcoming towards international students, they are also still reserved, shy and difficult to approach. This, however, correlates with other findings of the present study: even though home students are generally considered to be friendly when approached, they are also seen as passive and the encounters with them seldom lead to deeper friendships. A respondent in Jyväskylä commented on the home students' passiveness:

- (6) [I]t is not a problem to have a small talk and ask for help, they will always interact smiling, but it doesn't go deeper, it always stays as a surface contact with Finns. Maybe it is their distance or maybe they need much more time than others to make friend[s]. So far for more than a year, I don't have Finnish friends, I know some, but nothing more. (J66)

If the international student is, however, keen on getting to know local people, they will have to put more effort into the acquaintance, as another respondent reports:

- (7) Because Finns are so shy, it has caused me to become even more extroverted than I am in order to ge[t] to know them. (J46)

Apart from simply wanting to improve their language skills, international students have other motives for wanting to know more home students; not getting to know local people was noted to

add stress and impede the process of settling into a new culture. When satisfactory intercultural interaction had taken place, respondents reported it to affect their "mental balance" positively. It can be concluded that contact with home students matters greatly to international students.

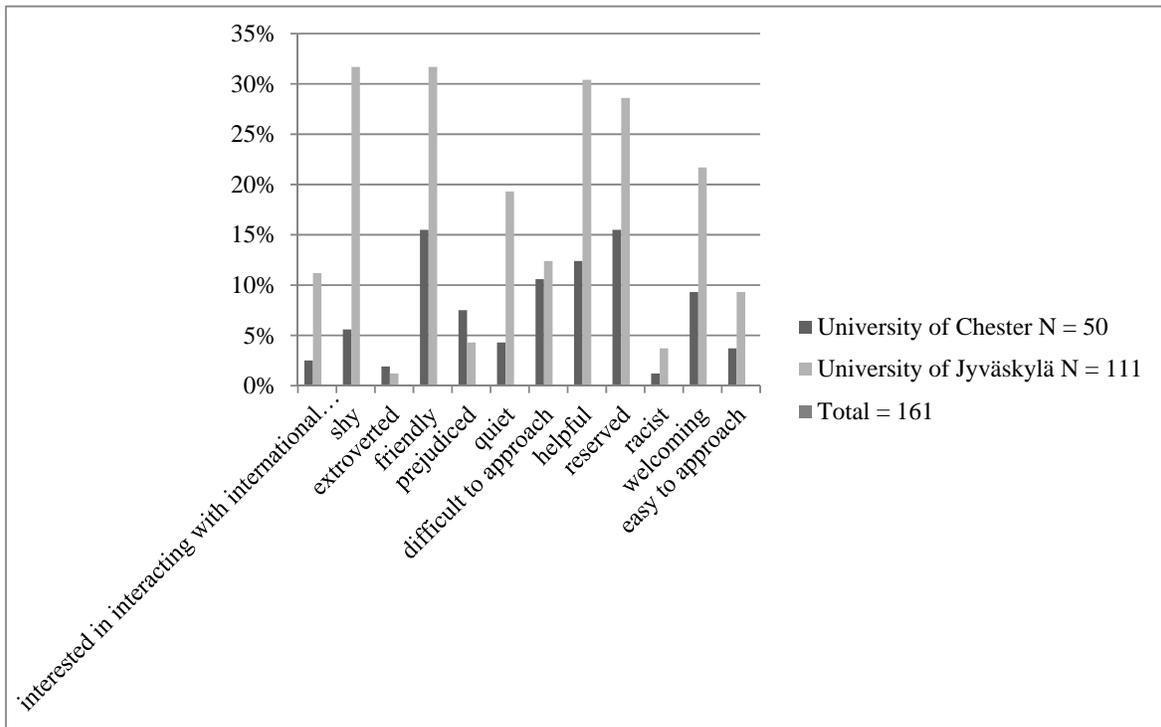


Figure 1. "I think home students are..."

It is notable in the results shown in Figure 1 that international students do not see home students to be interested in interacting with international students. Nevertheless, the respondents were asked what they thought were the reasons for home students to be interested in getting to know international students. Both the Jyväskylä and Chester respondents mentioned the possibility for home students to form future networks by getting acquainted with international students. Learning to know people from different cultures was seen as a chance for home students to gain perspective for future work in the ever more global world. Moreover, the Chester respondents thought that home students contacted international students in the hopes of gaining travelling opportunities for the future and having friends to visit around world. Related to this, the Jyväskylä students felt that home students were interested in international students because of the "exoticism" they presented. This also shows how Finland still is a more homogenous culture than the United Kingdom, and people with different nationalities are seen as rare and exotic. Jyväskylä home students were also seen as wanting to improve their cultural awareness. With the Chester students this aspect was not

mentioned except for only language students, who were thought to be interested in foreign cultures because their studies required it. In addition, the efficacy of education was only mentioned with Finnish home students. The Jyväskylä respondents felt that it was due to the Finnish education system that had taught home students to be more open-minded towards and interested in other cultures in comparison to their other international experiences. It could be argued that international students in both respondent universities believe that home students make friends with international students when it is possible to benefit from the friendship somehow, as well as Finnish home students also due to curiosity towards other cultures.

#### **4.4 Suggestions for improved intercultural interaction**

Some respondents gave advice regarding a better mutual communication between home and international students. One suggestion was an allocated home student, when each international student would be assigned their personal student tutor. A voluntary programme of similar purposes is already running at the University of Jyväskylä under the name of Buddy Programme, whose goal is to bring international and home students together by informally organising small groups of students with the same interests, who can then meet according to their own interests and schedule as they see appropriate. In addition, a Chester respondent felt that intercultural interaction was not encouraged except for the first few weeks of university, during the induction period, and felt that the university should take more responsibility over the internationalisation process. However, another Chester respondent pointed out that international students and home students had separate induction weeks, which made getting to know home students more difficult because of the separated venues during the crucial first few weeks. Furthermore, more common activities, classes and parties were called for as settings for international students to get together. A Chester respondent commented on the matter as follows:

- (8) I have found it difficult to interact and develop friendships with people in my courses. I have made a lot more friends outside of the academic setting. ... I was very intimidated by it at first because I felt a little lost in my classes and didn't know any students with whom I could discuss it. (C25)

As home students often have already established friendships with other students before international students arrive and participate in classes, leisure activities would seem an appropriate and fresh environment for creating new or extending circles of friends while dealing with mutual interests. This finding is supported by for instance Garam (2003: 28), who found that international students and home students mostly attend separate classes.

It is interesting how several respondents from both universities felt that there were no suitable places organised for international students to meet home students. However, both the University of Chester and the University of Jyväskylä have several student societies and leisure activities ranging from drama to sports that are open to all students and could be used as a venue for forming new intercultural friendships. It can thus be questioned whether students are informed well enough of the existence of such activities, or whether it is emphasised that they are a decent platform for intercultural encounters. Moreover, the universities' and their international offices' responsibility and participation in the matter have been demanded in several previous studies. For instance, Koivisto (2009: 104) recommends employing a person responsible for integration of international students at higher education institutions. Furthermore, students' voice needs to be heard more in planning international activities for students, for instance through student associations. As the issue arises yet again in research, it would seem that sufficient actions to improve internationalisation and international students' experience have not been yet taken.

## **5 CONCLUSION**

It was a significant finding that the respondents at both the University of Jyväskylä and University of Chester considered their groups of friends to be multicultural in contrast to previous studies. The respondents at Jyväskylä and Chester had very similar views on their home students respectively. Both respondent groups found home students to be friendly, and yet difficult to approach. This correlates with other findings of the present study: even though home students are generally considered to be friendly when approached, they are also seen as passive and the encounters with them seldom lead to a deeper friendship. In addition, the answers received from international students responding from the University of Chester, UK and the University of Jyväskylä, Finland, did not in general differ from one another drastically, but the experiences these students had had were generally shared despite of having moved into different host cultures with different mother tongues. Therefore, it can be concluded that the experience of going on exchange or doing a degree abroad is quite a universal phenomenon, with its negative and positive aspects, yet with some small variables.

International students' language skills have an impact on their exchange experience. Chester respondents clearly felt more confident about their language skills. The language barrier was a bigger issue in Jyväskylä which could be due to the fact that international students had to deal with

Finnish to some extent as well as with the most common language of interaction, English. The Jyväskylä respondents reported of Finnish home students being afraid of language errors and therefore shy to converse in English, which made bonding and forming intercultural friendships more difficult altogether. The Chester respondents would not be faced with such an issue. Although most respondents did not mind interacting with people who have different mother tongues from their own, home students' views on the issue were not covered in the present study, and therefore it is unclear how they regard speaking in foreign languages in reality. It could be assumed that the root of the problem lies within home students and their attitudes towards foreign languages or people from other cultures, since the respondent international students reported to be open-minded about foreign languages and cultures presented in their groups of friends.

When asked about reasons for home students not to get to know international students, the Chester respondents reported more indifference from home students, while the students in Jyväskylä mentioned shyness and the difficulty of taking the initiative in relationships. Nevertheless, what the majority of both respondent groups seemed to be unanimous about was the fact that home students do not feel such a need to make friends with international students because they have already established friendships and routines at university and in personal life, especially since not all international students intend to stay in the country of exchange after graduating. Therefore, although friendships between home and international students are bonded, to take the initiative to establish them is still considered difficult. Nevertheless, despite respondents reported home students to be difficult to get to know and relationships with them more difficult to form than with other international students, those multicultural relationships might be all the more rewarding for international students because of the difficulty of establishing them, as a Jyväskylä respondent put it:

- (9) Every interaction is successful whether it is positive or negative ... at least we learn something from it. (J76)

Friendships with home students were seen as valuable for international students, as through them international students could acquaint themselves better with the host culture, and each relationship and interaction would teach international students something new.

A notable defect in the study is the fact that although plenty of research has been done on the experiences of international students, there still seems to be a lack of accompanying theory which

leads to the background literature being limited on that part. In addition, within the scope of the present study, all questions could not be included in the analysis and it had to be limited to the most important findings. Moreover, another defect of the present study was that the term *friendship*, which was used in the questionnaire, was not defined. As it is a very personal experience, it can be understood in numerous ways and depths. Furthermore, the study did not compare the depths of friendships between international and multicultural friendships, that is, friendships among international students in comparison to friendships between international and home students. Therefore, it cannot be concluded whether the multicultural friendships reported in the present study were long-lasting or “superficial and peripheral,” as Montgomery (2010: 79) reports most multicultural friendships to be.

As for suggestions for further studies, more research needs to be done on internationalisation from the point of view of home students. In this way, the point of view of both sides involved in student internationalisation could be taken into account, and it would give more insight on what could be done better or differently. Moreover, it would explore the phenomenon of internationalisation at home, *kotikansainvälistyminen* in Finnish, and to what extent home students take advantage of the possibility of gaining international experience and creating international connections at their home university. Secondly, it would be important to study the university administrations’ views on internationalisation. Previous studies in this field have disregarded the point of view of the staff working with international students and at student welfare, although it could be useful to study how the staff alleviates the acquaintance process between home and international students and what measures have been taken to improve it. Thirdly, another interesting perspective into the international student experience would be to study whether the length of the study period abroad, that is, between full degree students and exchange students with short exchange periods, has any effect on how well international students acquaint home students. This seems relevant for further studies since in the present study, the respondents claimed that home students are not interested in acquainting them because they are staying in the country only for a short period of time, and going through much effort in order to make new friends was believed to seem futile to home students. In conclusion, the field of internationalisation still offers a vast variety of topics for further research that can assist in creating a more complete understanding of the international student experience.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1. Questionnaire

I would like you to help me by answering the following questions concerning your experiences as an international student. The survey is conducted for a Bachelor's thesis by Riikka Pystynen at the University of Jyväskylä, under the supervision of Tuula Hirvonen. The goal of the study is to better understand how international students experience intercultural interaction, and what factors affect its success or failure, and with what consequences, and how the experience could be further improved. The study will question international students at the University of Chester, UK and the University of Jyväskylä, Finland and then compare the findings.

The contents of this survey are absolutely confidential. Information identifying the respondent will not be disclosed under any circumstances. In case you have any questions about your privacy or the study itself, don't hesitate to contact us at riikka.pystynen@jyu.fi. You may also inquire about the results from the address given above.

This is not a test so there are no right or wrong answers. We are interested in your personal opinion only. Please give us your answers sincerely, as only this will guarantee the success of the study. At the beginning of each section, you will be given specific instructions for the task.

Filling out the survey will only take you 5–10 minutes and your participation is most appreciated. Thank you very much for your help.

#### Question 1

Which is your exchange university?

University of Chester

University of Jyväskylä

#### Question 2

Please choose the most suitable option.

	poor	satisfactory	average	good	very good
How would you describe your proficiency in the language of interaction at the exchange university?	<input type="checkbox"/>				

## Question 3

Please choose the best alternative. How would you describe your circle of friends?

N.B: Home students are those students who originate from the country of your exchange destination.

- I have both international students and home students as my friends.
- I have only international students as my friends.
- I have only home students as my friends.

## Question 4

In the following section there are some statements. Please rate each statement from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," according to your personal experience. You can only choose one of the options for each statement. Please read the statements carefully and don't leave out any of them.

N.B: Home students are those students who originate from the country of your exchange destination.

	strongly disagree	somewhat disagree	neither agree nor disagree	somewhat agree	strongly agree
Interacting with other international students is effortless to me.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I am not interested in making friends with home students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I have had to make the initiative in order to get to know home students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Home students are not interested in international students.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
I see interacting with home students difficult.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

International students are treated unequally to home students.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I am disappointed with my exchange period.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I am satisfied with my stay in the country.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Home students treat international students as their equals.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I think getting to know home students is important.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Home students show an interest towards me and my background.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Home students are easy to get to know.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I prefer to socialise with people from my home country.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
I see interacting with other international students difficult.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Home students have made the initiative of getting to know me.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

I would like to know more home students.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
Interacting with people who have different mother tongues than me does not bother me.	<input type="checkbox"/>				
My language skills affect my ability to communicate with others.	<input type="checkbox"/>				

## Question 5

Here you have some statements to be finished according to how you feel about the statement. Please don't leave out any statements.

N.B: Consider both home students and other international students here.

Please finish the following sentence with three (3) most suitable options. "I see interacting with people from other cultures as..."

- enriching
- uninteresting
- exciting
- interesting
- tiresome
- difficult
- a burden
- easy
- stressful
- unpleasant
- unimportant
- educative
- valuable
- important

## Question 6

Please finish the following sentence with three (3) most suitable options. "As an international student, I think home students are..."

- easy to approach
- interested in interacting with international students welcoming
- helpful
- reserved
- friendly
- prejudiced
- quiet
- racist
- extroverted
- shy
- welcoming
- difficult to approach

## Question 7

What effect has successful/unsuccessful intercultural interaction had on your study period abroad?



## Question 8

What do you think are the reasons for home students to either make contact with international students, or decide not to make friends with them?



## Question 9

Anything else you would like to say about your experiences of your exchange period, or intercultural interaction with home students, or other international students?

