

Chapter 11

Using Social Identity Mapping to Explore the Experience of Transitioning International Students

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores, through rich interviews with international postgraduate students, their experiences of higher education transition as they enter and move through their studies. The authors use a social identity mapping activity developed for personal tutoring that visually surfaces the social nature of these transitional changes focusing upon how their identity is constructed and developed. Through using semi structured conversations, the activity aimed to surface aspects of their identity which are otherwise difficult to access. Strong evidence was found for the need to support international students in a variety of ways. These included support to manage expected and unexpected changes in who they are becoming, to manage changes in their stressors, and to develop reflective and reflexive awareness.

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INTRODUCTION

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) engage with a diverse group of international students with a commensurate range of academic, social and cultural needs. Inclusive, efficient and effective support systems need to be established and maintained across a student's experience of higher education (HE). Academics and professional staff engaged with personal tutoring systems can, depending upon the model employed, act with academic, social and personal support priorities to help sustain engagement and develop resilience within students (Walker, 2020). Thus, while the intention of personal tutoring is to be inclusive, approaches vary depending upon institutional, faculty and/or departmental priorities and it is perhaps no surprise that effective implementation then remains a challenge when variations of personal tutoring systems may exist within an institution (Brown & Thomas, 2022; Walker, 2022).

Aiming to provide some consistency across these different systems, the authors developed a visual approach to support the transition of international students into and through HE by exploring and applying ideas from the current discussions of social identity mapping (SIM) and identity change (SIMIC) (Cruwys et al., 2016; Ng et al., 2018). A pilot of this approach has been presented (Pownall & Raby, 2022) which found that SIM could be beneficial as a tool used in one-to-one tutorials. The objective in this chapter is to progress that work and explore how SIM, through rich discussions with students, can identify and support their transitional needs as they progress through their studies. The work aligns with the idea that it is necessary to understand who the students are, particularly when influenced by the process of cultural adjustment (Philips & Szczepanska, 2021).

BACKGROUND

The Activity of Social Identity Mapping

The SIM activity is presented in the form of an Excel workbook, in which students identify between seven and 20 groups or individuals they feel are significant. Figure 1 identifies what may be defined as a group or individual, such as parents, siblings, employers and so forth. Further guidance is provided in the 'Student Guide to using SIM', available via the University website (details are given later). Students rank each group or individual by time, how they feel about the group (that group's importance, helpfulness and the amount of time engaged) as well as the group's capacity to support their studies. The students define their idea of time and other measurements individually (this is not a comparative tool). Students then consider pairs of groups and decide on a scale of 0-2 how much both these groups together influence engagement with their studies (for example, 2 is a collectively significant influence). When students have inputted all the data, the workbook produces an interactive visual map of their group memberships (their 'social identity map'). Students can click on each group (also referred to as a 'node') to see the strength of influence of that group and its links to other groups as shown in Figure 1.

The SIM materials are all available on Lincoln's Academy of Learning and Teaching (LALT) website of the University of Lincoln. They are available at:

***The LALT portal** (<https://lalt.lincoln.ac.uk/development-pathways/developing-intercultural-awareness/sim/>). This material includes guides on how to use SIM for both tutors and students.*

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