

Shifting identity of an international student



**ASSIGN
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Over the last two decades the immigration for study by long-term migrants grew from 40, 000 in 1990's to 192, 000 in 2015 (Population Briefing International student migration What do the statistics tell us? January 2016). This paper aims to examine the reasons behind the students' decision to immigrate for higher education, the challenges and issues they might encounter, as well as how having to live far away from home, in a different country, facing a whole new culture and new mentalities ultimately shapes their own personality.

Immigration provides the immigrant with a new start in life and more growth opportunities than were previously available. The reasons behind this decision are complex, and differ from student to student, but what all of them have in common is the idea of a brighter future, of more opportunities and the chance to a better life than they would have in their country of origin. As it emerges from my interview, the participant's decision to move to England was taken based mostly on the fact that the level of education in universities in England is higher than the one in her country of origin, Egypt, offering a broader diversity of courses and more career options and opportunities. Also, other factors that counted for this decision were the political affairs in Egypt, the revolution, and the fact that her country was not very stable at that moment in time.

But apart from its benefits, there are many complex challenges associated with immigration, most of them regarding the assimilation into life in the host country. Migrants, almost by definition, move with the future in mind, but their journeys inevitably involve taking their past with them. Immigration is not only about changing countries, but also about shifting identities,

known as the phenomenon of hybrid identity formation. They develop their personal identity as they face conflicting ethnic, personal and national identity options. They deal with both host and origin social constructs, contradicting expectations, traditions and norms during the process of individual identity formation. This phenomenon can be observed in the respondent's answers as well. She identifies with some ideals of the British culture, but she feels that she does not belong here. She finds British people too free and uncensored in their thoughts and actions and sometimes even offensive. There is also a great discrepancy between the way in which women are treated. While in England girls are allowed to dress as they want, smoke, attend parties, or walk alone at night feeling safe, and without being judge, in Egypt people have clear, strict standards when it comes to girls' clothing and behaviour, and if these are not respected people would stare and judge. Moreover, she faced a significant contrast regarding people's religious beliefs and practices, as well as the level of religiosity. This affected her life on many levels. Things considered very bad, or even sin in her culture, are seen as normal in England and more, people would consider her weird and treat her differently if she would not take part in those activities or behave as they do. This is why she feels a constant pressure from the contradicting expectations people from the two countries she now belongs to have from her. Thus, migrant students can usually experience alienation of the culture of origin and the loss of meaning concerning traditional values and norms, or they might feel an exclusion from the host majority society.

The shift in migrant students' personalities and formation of a dual identity can be observed as well very clearly in the evolution of their home

friendships in contrast with the new relationships built in the host country. While they adapt to the new environment, their attitude and views inevitably change and so, their home friends will start facing difficulties in understanding their new ideas and acts. Meanwhile, their new friends from the host country will never be able to fully comprehend their distinctive character, as they do not understand the international students' past, including the mentality and culture in which they were born and raised. This is further supported by the persistent finding in the research on international education that for many international students, a major disappointment is their failure to establish meaningful local friendships. Therefore, the migrants start developing feelings of alienation and isolation because neither friends can relate to them completely. As my interviewee admitted, she cannot be entirely honest with either of her friends because there are things only the ones from here would understand, and other things only the ones from Egypt would.

However, the crucial characteristic, defining people with hybrid identities is the fact, that "home" is neither represented by their country of origin, nor by their host country. The migrant rather feels affiliated to both places, with both cultures, phenomenon called by sociologists 'bilocalism'. The international students develop familial affiliations, relationships, cultural and material roots in two countries; they identify themselves with two place at the same time. The German-Turkish poet Zehra Çarık depicts this fact by using the metaphor of a bridge: the two ends of it symbolize two different cultures. People presenting hybrid identities walk on this bridge freely, from one culture to another. At some points of life one culture might be dominant,

later on the other one. Nevertheless, essential for hybrid identities is the permanent presence of both cultures, no matter to which extent. This idea is further supported by Glick Schiller and her colleagues, who argue that nowadays migrants' lives "cut across national boundaries and bring two societies into a single social field". As my respondent admitted, she often faces contradictory feelings regarding her migration in England. On the one side, she misses home and everything that is related to it, feeling that she does not really belong in UK, but on the other side, there are things in her host country that she got attached to, that make her happy and without which she would not imagine her life now.

Many international students might face difficulties in accommodating to the new environment and more importantly in trying to be academically successful in this new environment. However, studies have shown that they are conspicuously better motivated, focused and more aware of the benefits of higher education because they know the sacrifices they had to make in order to get where they are and the struggles they faced in adapting in the host country, so they appreciate more what they have and try to give their best in order to make these efforts worth it. These findings are consistent with my interview research. The respondent declared that she often feels unaccomplished and pressured to work hard and be persistent until she achieves what she wants because she had to leave everything behind in order to come here, and does not want these sacrifices to be in vain. But sometimes she is not as motivated to study and work as she usually is, or as she thinks she should be because she feels isolated, alone, away from home and family, further developing a guilty conscience during these moments.

Moreover, migrants can usually experience alienation of the culture of origin and the loss of meaning concerning traditional values and norms, or they might feel an exclusion from the host majority society. From my interviewee's experience, she considers that in general British people are colder and more interested in sticking together, than getting to know the international students. Moreover, she does not really like the life here as she considers that moving to UK does not help her accomplish what she really wants. She feels pressured by her identity to learn more about her culture and not being able to do so here bothers her. She could not say if she would change her decision to come to England if she could go back in time. What makes her happy here is what she studies and the friendships she has built so far and she is aware of the fact that she would not be able to continue her studies somewhere else, or leave her friends behind.