

Speaking of Research

South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership Podcast

Series 1 – Episode 9 – Isaac Thornton

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SPEAKERS

Isaac Thornton, Catherine McDonald

Catherine McDonald 00:03

Hello and welcome to Speaking of Research, a podcast from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. I'm Catherine McDonald, and in this first series of our podcast, we're talking about impact and how researchers can achieve it. We're recording at the amazing Cumberland Lodge, and we're speaking to doctoral researchers about their research, who might benefit from it, and how they hope it will make a difference. In this episode, I'm joined by Isaac Thornton from the University of Brighton, who's researching social exclusion and resilience among international students. Isaac tell us a bit more about that.

Isaac Thornton 00:40

Sure. Yeah, so, I mean, there are over 600,000 international students in the UK, so students who come to study at British universities from abroad. You know, they've become an integral part of how our universities are run, financially, if nothing else. But also, they bring all sorts of other benefits to British universities and British society. And also studying in the UK, they bring a lot of benefits back home, to themselves, to their home communities, to their home countries. Or they stay in they work, and they fill various labour shortages, help us to sort of tackle global challenges. And, you know, international education exchanges are a really important part of you know, how we tackle these global issues, like, like climate change, like, you know, financial crises, like demographic aging, all of this stuff, right? It's really important. What I talk about in my own research is crossing the disciplines of social policy and psychology, the ways in which international students face social exclusion in the UK, so they sort of lack equal participation in British life, basically. And I look at how this is made worse by or, you know, caused by the social policy context for international students. So, I look at visa policy, housing policy, restrictions to work rights, high costs, you know, the health surcharge, etc, paying a lot of money in international student fees. I look at how this serves to effectively exclude international students from the UK. But a little bit more positively, I also talk about resilience, right. So, I talk about how international students navigate their way through these challenges in order to achieve whatever it is that they want to

achieve. And yeah, I think about resilience very much, often resilience is talked about in a very sort of narrow individual sort of toughness way, is talked about as an individual trait. And I try to focus on resilience as more of a sort of socially embedded process, sort of social thing, right? So, people rely on others, they rely on communities, they take part in university societies. They draw on financial support from funding institutions, but also their families and all of this stuff. So, they engage in sort of communities and social resources in order to adapt to the challenges they face. And so, I talk about that a lot in my research as well.

Catherine McDonald 02:53

And what motivated you to look into this for your PhD?

Isaac Thornton 02:57

Sure. So, I studied in the Netherlands for a couple of years, I did an exchange first, and I went back for my Masters, and I had a fantastic time when I was there. You know, I really saw the benefits of a really dynamic international university environment. I was in Maastricht in the south of the Netherlands, and I became very involved in international student support when I was there, and sort of international student community. Yeah, I loved it, but I also saw that it can be perfectly challenging experience. I returned to the UK. I worked for a few years in research, and I started to think about doing a PhD, and it was sort of the first topic that occurred to me to do when I was thinking about writing a PhD proposal, I became, you know, even more aware of how, you know, integral international students are to our universities here, and again, to society in general, and how they get a bit of a raw deal in lots of ways. And so I felt like it was a topic that could really do with a bit more exploration. And I felt that I had a bit of an inside perspective in it. But also, I was aware that my experiences, you know, English speaking as white, as British studying as an EU student in the EU at the time would be very different to other people's experiences as international students. And I kind of wanted to delve into that and highlight that.

Catherine McDonald 04:15

So tell us about your research methods that you're using in your PhD. What methodology have you chosen?

Isaac Thornton 04:21

Sure, so I'm, I'm a sort of strong believer that the methods should fit the questions, and so I have a few different questions that I'm answering, and I use a few different methods. So, first of all, to sort of look into the policy context, I use what's called a rapid review. So, I looked at what researchers, you know, already found about the sort of social policy context for international students in the UK and what that might mean for exclusion. So, a sort of rapid review of policy literature, basically academic literature on policy. I also wanted to understand international students experiences of resilience, right? So, I to focus on lived experiences, I used a qualitative method, so I used what's called photo elicitation interviews, or photo interviews, if you like. So, I asked a diverse group of international students to share pictures that represented their experiences in the UK. And this included, you know, not just photographs that they'd taken, but images they found online, memes. It included drawings, paintings, that sort of thing, you know, and I gave them some prompts so that they could sort of think about, you know, what pictures they might want to bring. But then we discussed these in interviews, and we spoke about this, and I

found that really interesting. And I analysed the transcripts of that using what's called reflexive thematic analysis, so trying to identify themes and what people said. Finally, I to unpick some of the sort of mechanisms of resilience, I ran a survey, a longitudinal survey, so I had a group of international students complete an online survey at two different time points, quantified to that data and analysed that using moderation and mediation analysis. So basically, trying to figure out, what is the relationship between experiences of exclusion resilience, measured in this sort of social way, and student outcomes, so stuff like wellbeing, academic adjustment, life satisfaction, to sort of unpick some of those mechanisms. So, the idea is that using these three different methods, I can get a broader picture and a deeper picture of your international student experience.

Catherine McDonald 06:17

You've touched on this, but what new insights do you hope your PhD will provide? And obviously the follow on question from that is, who it will benefit? Who would you like to see those insights benefit?

Isaac Thornton 06:30

Yeah. So I mean, I'm in my third year now, so I've got some sort of findings out of it at this point, right? So, I think one of the sort of novel insights from it is really giving an account of the way in which the policy context is set up in such a way that basically allows universities to, and, you know, our country, to extract value out of international students without fully including them in UK society. And the way that, you know, policy is really designed in such a way that that happens. I think this is one of the key sort of takeaways. And then I think the second takeaway is really highlighting the social nature of resilience for international students. So, some of this qualitative work really revealed that international students draw on communities, they're active in creating communities that they take part in, you know, of all different forms, this might be national communities, cultural, religious communities, but also activities that they like, you know, caving society, their sports club, their salsa dancing group, right? That these communities are a really important way in which students support each other and are supported. But also, that socioeconomic resources become incredibly important, the funding bodies, etc, become really important to how students are adapting. So, the other is that international student resilience is a really socially embedded process, and that really needs to be understood. And we can't just be expecting students to deal with, you know, the challenges that they face alone. The third, the third sort of finding from some of the quantities of work I've done with the survey is that resilience seems to act as a mediator. And by that, I mean, it seems that social exclusion might harm international students by reducing their resilience. So, this idea that students might be excluded, this makes them less sort of socially resilient, which leads to or might potentially lead to, and you need to be very cautious when making claims about causality, but that might subsequently lead to students having worse wellbeing, feeling that they can do less well with their studies, etc. So, sort of answer the second part of your question about, you know, impact, I think the good thing about doing research in a sort of university context, about the university context, is that you're a lot closer to the people that might be interested in your research and benefit from it. So, I think, you know, I think the findings have relevance to, you know, universities themselves. I think policy makers, students themselves, right? University support services, etc, and in terms of how I go about making sure that has an impact. I mean, I've published papers. I've published one paper so far, and I hope to publish some more out of my research. Obviously, I've presented a few different academic conferences at this point internationally, so one in Nashville, one in Glasgow, one in Belfast, and a couple in Brighton to sort of share my results with the

academic community. But I've also been engaged in conversations with sort of student support team at Brighton to sort of talk about, especially some of the qualitative findings that I've had and how universities can form a better idea of how international students are supporting each other socially. And I've also been lucky to have some conversations with some senior figures in further education colleges. So, for example, I had a really good chat with someone from a college which delivers pre sessional programs to international students, so gives them a sort of primer before they start their degree in the UK and talk to them a bit about resilience and about the different kinds of areas of life and processes by which international students show resilience, builds resilience. And yeah, I try to keep busy, so I'm. Also going to be going to Australia. Later in the year, I'll be going to Sydney and meeting with some academics who are doing research with international students in Sydney to sort of share some share some learning, share some insights, and gain some insights from how international student policy is handled in Australia as well, and how we might build on that. And going forward, I'd like to do much more as well interacting directly with international students themselves, so potentially building sort of a toolkit interventions that might help institutions to help international students support each other. It does seem to be that community and student supporting students seems to be a really important factor.

Catherine McDonald 10:38

Absolutely. Well, we wish you all the best with your research as it goes on. Isaac, thank you for speaking to us today, and thanks to you for listening to this episode of Speaking of Research from the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership. To find out more, please visit southcoastdtp.ac.uk. Don't forget to subscribe wherever you get your podcast to access earlier and forthcoming episodes. This was a Research Podcast production.