

International student transition: Focusing on researching international pedagogy for educational sustainability

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The internationalisation of higher education has brought new dimensions of inquiry into cross-cultural aspects of pedagogy and practice. From the student learning perspective, a smooth transition into new and foreign learning environments is believed to determine academic success. However, the international academic transition period can be challenging for many students. Problems have been reported in the areas of poor decoding of English language and critical thinking skills; failure to participate in collaborative learning modes (e.g. group discussions); and difficulties communicating effectively in social settings. Refuting arguments have been provided by those seeking to break down ill-formed correlations between cultural anomalies and cognitive deficit.

This paper takes the premise that sustainable forms of pedagogy in international contexts hinge on researching the language, culture and discourse intersection in academic learning communities during student transition. It will examine international students' cross-cultural learning experiences as attributed to internal and external factors. The paper discusses international students' interpretations of those intercultural communicative subtleties that are manifest in academic discourse and that may be overlooked by the academic community. The paper concludes by providing some implications for sustaining teaching and learning in international contexts.

[Key words: transition education, international pedagogy, quality assurance]

Introduction

Since its inception on the Western academic horizon, the internationalisation of higher education has become a fast growing industry in English speaking countries. While the expanse of this now economically lucrative market has meant real opportunities in real terms for countless international students, researchers in the comparative and international education fields have drawn attention to its effects on both educational policy and practice (e.g. Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005). Critical views on *internationalisation* as a profit making, neo-liberalist and highly globalised endeavour have been actively debated in the literature (Singh, Kenway, & Apple, 2005). Much of the current critical debate derives from concerns for the

sustainability of international education, both in terms of its global market driven asymmetries as well as the assurance of quality in pedagogy and practice.

The ensuing research and scholarly publications addressing international education have in the main focused on the marketisation, funding and mobility perspectives in excess of issues concerning quality of educational delivery and its reflexive counterpart, student learning and achievement. This paper is a contribution into the latter and less published area (for an overview see Harman, 2005) and takes as its central focus the international student experience of learning in 'foreign' host institutions. The student perspective then is here put under scrutiny for its potential in informing effective pedagogy in and for international contexts (Hellstén & Reid, forthcoming).

This paper takes the premise that sustainable forms of pedagogy in international contexts are contingent upon increasing an awareness of the student experience and achievement perspectives Hellstén, forthcoming). This assertion is grounded in a deeper epistemological interest in advancing the academic profession by studying variables that affect learning: a direction, which in its crudest sense, is constitutive of pedagogic enquiry (e.g. Schön, 1983). It is from this philosophical underpinning that this research makes salient the student experiences of pedagogy and practice, in as much as this stance fittingly advocates against the maintenance of false assumptions about student welfare, learning and achievement. For example, current literature provides evidence for stereotypical and prejudice based observations in documenting pedagogy in international learning contexts (Biggs, 2001; Leask, forthcoming).

In many publications, international students have been the subject of concern in learning areas ranging from poor language and literacy skills to their perceived inability to decode cultural disciplinary 'know-how' (Biggs, 2001; Doherty & Singh, 2005). The danger in studies that place emphasis on the deficit model regarding learning and adjustment among international students (Lillis, 2001), belies in a schematic grouping which conceptually unifies *international students* into one homogenous category. Such unifying of individuality in turn lends itself well in defence of conservative and ill-formed assumptions about cultural distinction. According to the now well known studies conducted by Biggs (for example 1999; 2001), this process resembles an assimilationist approach to intercultural teaching. It legitimates the targeting of the schematic category 'international' to encompass various challenges inherent even in the host education system, such as lack of culturally inclusive teaching values.

The assimilationist approach assumes correlations between cultural maladjustment and cognitive deficit especially among so called 'Asian' international students (Biggs, 1999) studying in 'the west'. Biggs argues against stereotypical beliefs about 'Asian' learning modes (Confucian) as being detrimental to academic achievement. He has contradicted such controversies by referring to the lack of clear empirical evidence in support of claims that so called 'Asian' learning styles (surface and rote learning etc) are counteractive for learning in 'western' learning systems (Watkins,

Regmi & Astilla, 1991). He argues that such claims are contraindicative of the data that places 'Asian' students in the top five percent of university courses generally (Biggs, 2001).

Digby (2004) identifies the social reconstructionist typology as a powerful approach in advocating critical awareness. He claims that it is manifest through a close investigation of academic power and discrimination and as an agency for social change. A series of critical studies have investigated the disciplinary frames and dominant reasoning and pragmatic discourses that govern academic thinking in some institutions hosting international students (Doherty & Singh, 2005; Mackinnon & Manathunga, 2003; Egege & Kutieleh, 2004; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005; Tsolidis, 2001); Vandermensbrugghe, 2004). In such studies, examples that verify the ways in which the academic discourse offered to international students in 'western' higher education institutions covertly impose sanctioned forms of conservative and oftentimes romanticised western and cultural academic conventions. The Western discourse legitimates the established forms of learning as more meaningful than those offered by *foreign visitors* to the academy (see for example Doherty & Singh, 2005).

One of the persistent assertions raised in relation to international student learning are their alleged lack of critical cognitive resources especially among so called 'Asian' international students studying in English speaking countries. In a contentious opinion piece, Vandermensbrugghe (2004) reverses the criticism pointed at international students in Australia who are lumbered with attributes such as deficits in critical intellectual abilities. The article argues that there is in fact confusion about what constitutes 'critical' within the Western academic discourse and scholarly conduct. It highlights that Western concepts of 'critical thinking' are vaguely substantiated as valid, and are grounded in Marxian philosophy from an ideological point of view. Historically, this approach was developed in the Marxian fashion to challenge existing political epistemologies and power structures in the West (see also Digby, 2005).

Vandermensbrugghe (2004) argues that an expectation of critical thinking skills from international as well as 'domestic' undergraduate students falls short of its practical implications. Not only would critical thinking by definition require deep knowledge of subject matter but also contextual confidence in debating and individualistic argumentation skills, which neither local let alone international first year university students are able to master. The article aptly pinpoints that the protean 'critical thinking' debate is nothing but 'stereotypification' of non-Western international students (for supporting research see Doherty & Singh, 2005) and a form of Anglo-Saxonisation in English speaking universities.

A response to the various debates surrounding the host university's positioning itself in relation to internationalisation, warrants systematic and aligned effort from the academic community. In Australia, internationalisation has now penetrated most higher education teaching areas, an expansion which in some enclaves of academia invokes notions of what Giroux (1994) has labelled 'insurgent multiculturalism'

(cited in Digby, 2005). In other words, the sustainability of hosting international education is argued by Leask (2001) as hinging on a united effort. A charge against the currently prevailing complacency that transfers the responsibility of the 'international' on someone other than the self is urgently needed, according to Leask (1999). Hence, a unified approach prioritising the quality in international education would place Australia in a unique global position for offering solutions in sustaining teaching and learning on the international market.

The adopting of accountability is closely linked with the quality teaching and learning paradigm made possible through for example, reflective teaching practice (Schön, 1983). Reflection as effective pedagogic practice encompasses more than mere reminiscence on the successes of immediate teaching activities. It seems that few scholars engage in the variety of self-reflection that confronts deeper personal values and ideologies. These may underpin for example, complex pedagogical issues around diversity, multiculturalism, pluralism and equal opportunity in relation to international education. It is this precise lack of self-reflective examination of ethical professional considerations that leads to the many false assumptions evident in educational policy and practice in higher education today. One such observational gap lies in the lack of knowledge about the international student body and its potential resources for sustaining education. McInnis (2001) identifies this as deriving from a lack of consultation with the students themselves about matters that most poignantly affect their learning and achievement. Herein rests an opportunity for shifting the collective academic perspective in search for renewed appreciation of resources available from international students in host universities.

Transition Experiences as the Foundation for Subsequent Learning

The efficacy of first year transition experience to university study has received reliable evidence in support of its benefits to subsequent learning and achievements (best summarised in Krause, Hartley, James, McInnis, 2005; Kift & Nelson, 2005 and others). In 2002, Hellstén applied research findings on first year university transition to the context of international education. Subsequent research (Andrade, 2006; Baker & Hawkins, 2006; Handa & Fallon, 2006; Hellstén, 2005) collectively offered support to the observation that in the international context the transition period is a function of students' more or less successful affiliations with the academic host community of learners and teachers.

The implications for sustaining quality in the international study transition phase requires stakes more challenging than the currently documented interactions, perceptions and behaviour in the international teaching and learning community. While some purposeful work has emerged in the student support areas, it is merely related to resourcing social activities in the guise of transition. A more substantial effort is required in advocating inter-cultural organisational change by offering critical exploration of taken for granted cultural, interactive and discursive assumptions present in the accomplishment of international teaching and learning today (but see Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005).

International students undergoing transition are by imposition of their resettlement, in many cases confronted with the basic requirements of functioning in a new language, society and learning culture. They have limited cognitive and perhaps even rational preparedness for the decoding of new schemes of unfamiliar information, including notions embedded in hidden pedagogical expectations (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004). Hence, in the international education context any guess work about the 'hidden meanings' of the host curriculum, its legacies and sanctioned practices must assume subsequent place to basic survival in the new country.

Hellstén's studies in international student transition (e.g. Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005) demonstrate that while generally, the transition into new learning environments follows a gradual immersion into both conceptual and structural features of study; the jolt with which international students enter their new academic environments is staggering. In reality, many international students find themselves in host university lecture theatres barely hours after their initial arrival at international airport terminals (Hellstén, 2002). As a consequence, students may simply find the entire resettlement experience too overwhelming to be able to afford themselves awareness of the contextual subtleties with which mainstream students decipher what counts as legitimate academic success. Against such circumstantial backdrops, international students' bewilderment, while well warranted is seldom anticipated or indeed appreciated by the host teaching community. Yet, it is this period of transition that is of most interest to educators both for its formative as well as adaptive academic purposes.

The current research interest into transition experiences of international students stem from a concern for socio-cultural and pragmatic features that occur in the context of cross-cultural communication. For example, simple but perceptive errors in tone of speech, eye contact and body language can have dire consequences for the types of interactive options available for academics and students. Research supports that such interactive irregularities are what constitute many of the problems experienced in the context of teaching international students (Baker & Hawkins, 2006; Handa & Fallon, 2006; Hellstén, 2005; Watkins, Regmi & Astilla, 1991).

Methodology

The research examples referred to in this paper, form part of ongoing funded research investigating international student transition in comparative cross-cultural analytic perspectives. The data presented in this paper derives from international students enrolled at undergraduate and postgraduate levels and across discipline areas and in Australian and overseas universities. Both genders and different ages are represented in the sample.

The participating students were interviewed for up to one hour on the topic of transition related to the initial six to twelve month time period after arrival in their host country. The interviews addressed issues such as adjusting to the new cultural and geographic learning sites, language and communication, pragmatics issues (e.g. asking for assistance, and participating in learning communities), perceived attitudes

and behaviour of staff and fellow students, study strategies and experiences, personal aspirations and career plans as well as questions pertaining to cultural and ethnic identities.

The questions focused on the students' individual perceptions about the pedagogy and practices surrounding international students in and around the university milieu. While students were free to decline comments on particular issues of their choice, the flow of open ended discussion was relaxed and students seemed at ease with the setting of the interview. Students gave extensive elaborations and anecdotes on some issues. More importantly, many of the students seemed to value the opportunity of communicating about their circumstances and significant events embedded in their transition experiences.

The interview transcripts were subjected to a critical interpretive analysis of 'talk as interaction' (Freebody, 2003). The analysis resulted in sampling the transcripts for main features of talk which were representative, in a universal sense, of the content of the overall interview corpus. To do this, the data consists of statements that provide evidence for the ways in which actions, events and experiences are perceived, described and attributed to causal factors by the interviewees (for a closer description of method, see Hester & Eglin, 1997). The ways in which the experience is *talks into being* thus validates and constructs the experience as real for the international students interviewed. The truth value (Freebody, 2003; Jayyusi, 1988) of the statements therefore lies in the perceived nature in the recounting of the reported events.

Attributions

The inquiry of ethnomethodology (see e.g. Hester & Eglin, 1997) holds that one of the 'sense making mechanisms' of the human mind is to attribute the unfolding of personal events to internal and external factors. Such attributions allow for the 'sense making' processes to remain stable, and thus avoid disharmony and confusion, which if left unbalanced, may lead to feelings of confusion and anxiety in the individual.

One consistent theme in the research in international student transition experiences over the course of several years has been the tendency for international students to attribute their experiences to internal and external causal and other factors. Among the main internal attributions emerging from interviews is the 'emotive risk taking' in factors perceived as being at stake in launching the international study career in a foreign location. Table 1 lists some examples that are representative of the types of comments attributing emotion to the initial shock of arriving in a foreign place to undertake higher degree study.

In the most general sense the above excerpts provide evidence about the high emotional investment in arriving in a foreign country to study. The emotions expressed by students in the context of reflecting on their initial time can be summarised as: '*fear*', '*loneliness*', '*loss*', '*shock*'.

Table 1. Attributing Emotions to Experiences

Attribution	Excerpt
Emotion	<p>“Um, but the first two days when I got here, I was like, -Oh my gosh! That’s not what I was, you know, thinking it was going to be. I thought it was going to be a lot more colourful and all these grey buildings standing in front of me... I thought -oh gees, this is going to be harder than I thought it would” (Kim)</p> <p>“I remember my first three days in Australia, I felt really lost and really alone. I was alone in my bedroom and was, “my God I am 17 thousand kilometres from France”, I felt really lost and I didn’t want to go out of my bedroom. And concerning my studies, yeah, I felt worried ...” (Joelle)</p> <p>“Yeah, it is hard when you go to a new country. Yes, when you come by yourself the first time.</p> <p>R: Do you feel welcome here (at Uni)?</p> <p>I: -Yes, but I feel like no one cares. Like I can come on out and no one will ask me if I went or, like I wasn’t there, so yeah.... So, yeah, if I don’t go, people will notice that (in France). But here if I don’t come no one will notice, no one will care also” (Pierre)</p>

Occasions where students are subjected to implicit interactive and discursive messages and false assumptions are ascribed further emotional attributions. Therefore, perceptions of access to academic staff are in some cases emotionally internalised. Table 2 illustrates some typical comments.

Table 2. Internalised and Emotional Attributions Related to Perceptions

Attribution	Excerpt
Emotive	<p>You feel lost at the beginning, didn’t know how, what to do in all your free time. You’re supposed to read, but you’re quite lost. I think for someone who doesn’t know the system, it will be difficult.</p> <p>In other words, I’m calling for something that’s collegial. Where you have other people who are suffering like you are and you want to share experiences and in your small successes.</p> <p>(The teachers don’t seem like, yeah, they said they’re there and you can get hold of my by telephone what not, ... (later) but yet when you try it out, you approach them, they’re just like “- where’ve you been”, you know.) I feel like stupid and you know like, why did I even ask that question for, you know.</p> <p>Like, I feel like, ah, ... afraid if I ask question. Doesn’t it make me sound silly or...?</p>

The battle of cultural survival in a new environment is evident in the above interview excerpts, respectively. There is an acknowledgement of the immersive nature of the initial transition experience (i.e. Table 1) and the sense of urgency in knowing the new ‘system’. Students also reported on their yearning to share the sense of disorientation with likeminded others (Table 2, excerpt 2), the first point of call of which, albeit ironically is the academic teaching community (excerpt 3).

Overall, the data confirms that students react to the hidden assumptions and culturally ambiguous discursive messages (see Table 2) by attribution to significant emotions. In the academic staff/student discourse an overriding emotive reaction is attributed to feeling *stupid* and *silly, as well as* reconciling *small successes* (as opposed to sizeable ones) and *suffering* during the transition period. The emotive descriptions evident in such conversational moments are clearly negative and provide inferences of creating uncertainty in the transition period. The outcome of the internal and external attributions convincingly yield the inference that the international transition experience leaves significant room for improvement, some of which by implication, rests on the shoulders of the host educational providers (see Leask, 1999). Implications for such have been substantiated in recent literature as imposed by increased academic workloads and working conditions (see e.g. Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005).

This addresses the central issue in the current critical exploration of implicit curriculum assumptions and hidden institutional discourses leading to a student belief, that in the process of struggling to survive the transition in foreign tertiary environments, the students are somehow at fault. The overwhelming evidence in our interview data demonstrates that the international transition experience is constructed as a pathway that is linguistically, pragmatically and culturally awkward, vague, perplexing and in the least disorienting. Furthermore, it is a site where student communication is construed as defunct and in many cases unrelated to what counts as legitimate practice (see also Doherty & Singh, 2005). The provision of support is interpreted as doubtful and unreceptive and a site where the newly arrived international student finds little comfort and help at hand.

Interestingly, the interviews yielded little evidence in lack of ability among international student interviewees in the decoding of covert and unspoken institutional discourses. Rather, the data findings suggest that students hold ample cognitive resources in 'reading the hidden meanings' of a new system at speed (e.g. Prescott & Hellstén, 2005). However, the interpretation of data suggests that students hold less than adequate *competence* in mastering such mental guess work in the early stages of their international transition. The awareness of a lack of pragmatic cultural competence in institutional discourses was evident in most cases.

The psychological effects of personal attributions are well acknowledged. Attribution theory confirms that individuals attribute success and failure to internal and external factors (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002). This leads to broader motivational factors - which in turn are known to affect learning outcomes. When internal attributions are negative, as in the above examples, they may invoke further negative associations to academic self-esteem, self-confidence and personal integrity (ibid.). Indeed this area warrants further research, especially in investigations seeking correlations between international transition experiences, academic motivation, resilience and subsequent educational achievement.

The current results indicate that in some cases there seemed to be a negative affect on self-esteem, particularly in instances where adverse situations during the

international transition period were attributed to factors perceived as internal to the student. The perception among international student interviewees was that any overseas academic success arrives at high risk to intrinsic qualities. While confirmation of any long term psychological effects of the international transition period would call for further research involving clinical trials, it is arguably the case by merit of the current research, that the international transition period is experienced as generally cumbersome.

Some Implications

The current results are in strong support of previous research (Doherty & Singh, 2005; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005) investigating various anomalies in discursive and culturally embedded dealings involving international students (Mackinnon & Manathunga, 2003; Egege & Kutieleh, 2004). It seems then that the 'system' hosting international student transition has to some extent failed, at least in its inter-cultural and applied pedagogical provisions. While this may not appear entirely unexpected, it is of great concern to scholars who find themselves committed (Leask, 1999) to international education and ethical professional standards.

The consideration of implications of the current discussion can be viewed at two levels. At the broader societal level, the implications for developing quality assurance of international study transition carries potential for sustaining educational provision as well as its international market forces. This aspect is significant with respect to the ongoing internationalisation of higher education, of which the Bologna Process (European Commission, 1999) in Europe is but one persuasive example. The aligning of higher education provisions and transparencies across national borders ratified in the Bologna Declaration holds ever increasing capacity for student mobility across continents and national borders. The outcome of this is evident across European nations, where institutional restructuring in higher education is well underway. The predictable consequence of the expansion will affect providers across global continents such as Australia and USA. The consensus is that international student numbers will continue to rise as ideas about professional trajectories continue to appear globally transferable.

The second and related level of implications thus involves the *intrinsic value* arising from the broader globalised developments which directly affect teachers and learners in their daily dealings with international education (Leask, forthcoming). The value placed on international education, has here been shown to be available for scrutiny through transition encounters. This warrants concerted effort in securing the delivery of effective pedagogy from the very commencement of the international study endeavour. There is still too much complacency surrounding the effects of transition on academic learning and achievement, especially in international contexts.

Some measures in providing quality assurance into teaching and learning during the transition period can be drawn from principles of reflective and ethical professional practice (Hellstén, 2005). Teaching and professional conduct need to be made

explicit and allow for deeper pedagogical discussion (Schön, 1983) about implicit discursive practices. The communication about cultural practices and hidden expectations must form part of effective international pedagogies in practice. Thus, dialogue about specific teaching philosophies and underlying social and epistemological ideologies which are transferable into classroom conduct and which are substantiated by a peer supported process are yet to be manifest in most academic communities. Leask (1999) has fittingly argued that the accountability for international education is in Australia regrettably placed with elements external to the self. International education as an 'entity' then, receives little attention in those functional strategic initiatives that would raise and sustain its status.

Kift and Nelson (2005) among others have argued that there still exists too much fear among first year students in transition to university study. Here is an analogy applicable to the context of international student transition and their teaching community. It is reflected in the seeming reluctance to improve pedagogy for international learning contexts in some cases. The apprehension manifests in the kinds of socially unsustainable discourses that have been exemplified herein and elsewhere (Mackinnon & Manathunga, 2003; Egege & Kutieleh, 2004; Vandermensbrugge, 2004) in relation to international contexts of pedagogy and practice. An acceptance of personal academic responsibility for international students would perhaps make redundant the accomplishment of negative attributions among those international students surveyed in this, and earlier studies (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005). Hence, in aspiring to sustain international pedagogy, the fundamental ambition for the university community of educators arguably remains that which is inspired by principles of effective pedagogy and professional excellence.

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