Meeting new challenges in multicultural provisions for international students: implications for first year university transition engagements

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Abstract
Universities have traditionally maintained a central role in promoting international relations, increased solidarity and intercultural understanding. The essential part of this movement has been implemented through the internationalization of higher education (Ninnes & Hellstén, 2005). The rapid growth of a new form of international education has in the past 20 years made dramatic impact both on furthering intercultural academic exchanges and on its adherent economic prosperity (Altbach & Knight, 2007), especially in English speaking countries. The Australian higher education sector has been greatly sustained by internationalization which today contributes significantly to the overall funding of universities. Internationalization of higher education is one of the most successful recent enterprises in Australia and constitutes a major national export industry.

The global development of international education has been delineated in at least two ways by leading scholars in the field (e.g. Altbach & Knight, 2007; Adams,
In a recent article, Adams (2007) distinguishes between two general models in global internationalization processes within which he depicts the Australian as an ‘export approach’ against a more ‘traditional model’ applied in Europe and some parts of Asia. By this Adams means that Australia has developed a commercial service operation of international education delivery that is both market driven and which integrates government initiated public-private business partnerships.

The decades of economic prosperity brought about by the national market-driven approach to creating international infrastructure in Australian universities has involved major implications for academics and students alike. While on the one hand, the enterprise has enabled pursuits of a rather exotic cultural kind for those academics who yearn to undertake work in faraway foreign contexts, its binary effect demarcated by the ever increasing numbers of ‘foreign’ students on local shores has been marred by teaching challenges and has imposed new initiatives in pedagogy and practice for academics teaching in culturally and linguistically diverse contexts (Hellstén & Reid, forthcoming). The critical change in demographic and cultural make-up of traditionally homogenous student cohorts has introduced new pedagogic confrontations for the academic community, respectively.

The ensuing teaching and learning arena dealing with incoming international student issues has gained much deserved research attention in Australia and the English speaking world in the recent decades of the international higher education enterprise. The academic community is consequently searching for innovation in effective and sustainable pedagogies for diverse and multicultural settings that will equally enhance learning opportunities for all students, regardless of ethnic and cultural backgrounds. The pursuit has caused an alteration in educational ethics and values and has brought into question existing conventional assumptions about scholarship and knowledge building in the academy. International students across the global disciplinary spectrum have been the target of much debate about failed methodologies leading to low academic attainment as well as discontent in the academic teaching community.

While the recent research attention has been welcomed, it is fair to state that the global network of scholars who are committed to the sustainability of international
education, are increasingly at a loss on considerations involving quality assurance of multicultural pedagogy and practice including high quality curriculum delivery and assessment that are sustainable in culturally sensitive ways. There exist to date, very few empirically noteworthy research studies (but see Harman, 2005; Hellstén & Reid, forthcoming) that investigate in any reliable configuration, the pedagogic effects of ‘international learning’ as influenced by various international variables and as reported essentially from a cross-cultural learning perspective.

From the student learning perspective then, a seamless transition between the home and host learning environments is believed to determine academic success. However, the international academic transition period can be challenging for many ‘foreign’ students. Problems have been observed in the areas of poor English language and critical thinking skills; failure to participate in collaborative learning modes (e.g. group discussions); and difficulties communicating effectively in group seminar settings. A contrary argument is provided by those seeking to break down implicit correlations between cultural maladjustment and cognitive deficit. Disciplinary frames and dominant reasoning and pragmatic discourses that govern academic thinking in some host institutions have been under systematic scrutiny (Harman, 2005).

This paper makes the assertion that sustainable forms of pedagogy in international contexts hinge on researching the language, culture and discourse intersection in academic learning communities during the university transition period that spans the first twelve months of study in the (foreign) host country and institution.

It is argued that challenges in multicultural provisions for international students hinge on a critical appraisal of culturally sensitive teaching methods, followed by effective implementation and modification of teaching strategies that are not merely limited to the context of teaching international students, but are of equal benefit to students from all backgrounds. It is essential in internationally applied pedagogy, that inter-cultural practices involve critical perspective taking, self-critique and assessment of personal teaching methods (including philosophies). The consensus is that multicultural teaching and pedagogy in international contexts involves a critical examination of the discourses and actions that together constitute the nature of the
international student transition as beneficial for sustaining the pedagogy and the quality for inter-cultural relations, harmony and understanding. In the search for new challenges and emerging roles for human and social development, any change in the international education field, must begin with the initiative of the host academic community, rather than the incoming student population.

This paper will showcase ways in which international students’ cross-cultural learning experiences are constructed in contextual, pragmatic and socio-culturally contested paradigms. The presentation will showcase data on international students’ perceptive considerations and pertinent interpretations of those inter-cultural communicative subtleties that are manifest in academic discourse and which may be overlooked by the local host academic community. The paper concludes by providing examples that yield implications for teaching and learning in international contexts by drawing on recent comparative data from European and Australian educational contexts.

Introduction
Intercultural understanding is currently a catalyst of social development within the higher education field. Perhaps in no other global enterprise is the call for international harmony more present than in the higher education sector. This notion has historical significance, since the university is traditionally an international establishment, superfluous to notions of discrimination on the basis of language, culture or skin colour (Marginson, 2005). Rather, the striving for knowledge building and intellectual exchange has at least ideologically bypassed any ill intent between scholars across national borders. International education is located in the midst of the global higher education transitions, and is marketed under the guise of fostering universal values for the common good of global ‘knowledge construction’. This paper addresses issues related to internationalization as a function of the increased student and academic mobility enabled by globalisation in the 21st century. It draws particular attention to the different cultural conceptions imposed upon teaching and learning efficacy and applied in international contexts which are affected by the rapid changes of the new era. The
paper affords particular focus on the international student perspective as a tool for informing quality assurance in transnational higher education encounters.

The context of internationalization of higher education

The past 20 years has seen a rapid growth of international education which has made a dramatic impact both on furthering intercultural academic exchanges and on its related economic incentives (Altbach & Knight, 2007), especially in English speaking countries. Globalization has enabled educational mobility in tremendous proportions for students and academics alike. The global trend in international education movements is from the ‘south’ to the ‘north’ (Altbach & Knight, 2007), with the latter reaping the most benefit in servicing nations striving for upward social and economic mobility. On the other hand, the impact of this reconceptualisation of the trans-national higher education horizon in the wake of the Bologna Accord in Europe has implications for immense cross-border mobility. The regulation of the higher education structure across 45 European nations means opportunities for ever increasing proportions that will affect the European higher education labour market as well as the clientele at its receiving end.

According to Marginson (2007), Australia is in an interesting intermediate global position between what Altbach and Knight (2007) term the ‘north’ and the ‘south’. As a English language provider of international education, the Australian higher education sector has been greatly sustained by internationalization which today contributes significantly to the overall funding of the nation’s higher education industry. Internationalization of higher education is seen as one of the most successful recent enterprises in Australia with an estimated growth of 71% in the next 20 years (IDP Australia, 2007). Adams (2007) claims that the successful delivery is due to a unique commercial service approach which differs from ‘traditional’ higher education models (e.g. those in Europe). The projected expansion is attributed to a market driven export model using an integrated government initiated public-private business partnership (Adams, 2007). He explains that the decentralised government policy of 1986, mandated universities to establish independent financial infrastructures whilst being directed to charging fees from students without permanent national residency status (p.
While this entrepreneurially original policy can be argued as having been beneficial for keeping Australia in the global market, Marginson (2007) claims that the imbalanced movement of international students between borders is not nationally beneficial. Australia receives proportionately larger numbers of international students than it sends to overseas study destinations, resulting in a national ‘brain drain’ and decline in knowledge production.

In light of the current national discrepancies and contestations of the Australian higher education climate and its approach to globalization, its implications in the realm of teaching and learning touch on notions of effective pedagogy that are aligned globally with the rapidly changing educational climate. The Australian rhetoric around educational sustainability and knowledge building resonates with advocacy for a global education agenda in shaping citizens equipped for the 21st century. However, these global developments are currently reflected in the government’s welcome initiatives such as the ‘Education Revolution’ (Prime Minister of Australia, 2008). National congresses such as the imminent ‘Australia 2020 Summit’ (Australian Government, 2008) is another incentive which aims to address strategies for the nation’s future from within 10 critical areas of development.

The debate is informing of an alteration in educational ethics and values and has brought into question existing conventional assumptions about scholarship and knowledge building in the academy. Well meaning academics teaching larger and larger international cohorts are beginning to question the efficacy of their practices. International students are finding epistemological discord between their prior overseas learning contexts and the highly alienating and un-legitimising epistemologies thrust upon them by their host institutions (Doherty & Singh, 2005). International students across the global disciplinary spectrum have been the target of much debate about failed methodologies leading to low academic attainment as well as discontent in the academic teaching community.

While the recent research attention has been welcomed, it is fair to state that the global network of scholars who are committed to the sustainability of international education, are increasingly at a loss on considerations involving quality assurance of multicultural pedagogy and practice including high quality curriculum delivery and
assessment that are sustainable in culturally sensitive ways. There exist to date, very few empirically noteworthy research studies (but see Harman, 2005; Hellstén & Reid, 2008) that investigate in any reliable configuration, the pedagogic effects of ‘international learning’ as influenced by various international variables and as reported essentially from a cross-cultural learning perspective.

From the ‘effective learning’ perspective, a seamless transition between the home and host learning environments is believed to determine academic success. However, a number of recent studies have concertedly reported on the difficulties encountered by many ‘foreign’ students (e.g. Doherty & Singh, 2005; Egege & Kutieleh, 2004; Handa & Fallon, 2006; Mackinnon & Manathunga, 2003; Snow-Andrade, 2006). Problems have been observed in the areas of academic language and critical thinking skills; failure to participate in collaborative learning modes (e.g. group discussions); and difficulties communicating effectively in group seminar settings. A contrary argument is provided by those seeking to break down implicit correlations between cultural ill adjustment and cognitive deficit. Disciplinary frames and dominant reasoning and pragmatic discourses that govern academic thinking in some host institutions have been under systematic scrutiny (Harman, 2005).

It is argued that challenges in holistic multicultural provisions for international education hinges on a critical appraisal of culturally sensitive teaching methods, followed by effective implementation and modification of teaching strategies and conditions that are not merely limited to the context of teaching international students, but are of equal benefit to students from all backgrounds. It is essential in internationally applied pedagogy, that inter-cultural practices involve critical perspective taking, self-critique and assessment of personal teaching methods (including their aligned epistemologies).

The consensus is that multicultural teaching and pedagogy in international contexts (Hellstén & Reid, 2008) involves a critical examination of the discourses and actions that together constitute the enactment of international student learning and teaching. This is equally beneficial for sustaining the pedagogies and the qualities for
fostering inter-cultural relations, harmony and understanding that is so sorely sought after in the current environment of global change and unrest.

**International pedagogies for a global society**

The research field exploring efficacy in international teaching and learning is still relatively immature. Issues that define quality delivery in international contexts are complex, and none which are justifiably addressed in linear terms. Research suggests that the academic community is as much at a conceptual loss when it comes to the pedagogical implications of this vast growing industry as are the vast numbers of international students in current cross-border transitions (Hellstén & Reid, 2008). The increase in trans-national educational quantity has had adverse affects on the delivery of quality, resonating in a challenge for reconceptualising the notion of global knowledge transfer through effective learning. However, as the recent research on international student experiences reveals, quantity does not warrant for the delivery of goods at the other end of the production line. Anecdotes of unrealistically lengthy international student overseas candidatures abound in which three year undergraduate programs extend beyond the years intended and budgeted for, and which subsequently lead to the monitoring of student progress and outcomes by the administrative factions of the industry.

At this educational delivery line, too much blame has been placed on the shoulders of international students in debating educational efficacy and quality curriculum. A move away from the causal stereotypical claims made about international students’ poor academic aptitude and academic failure has now been accomplished. This outcome is substantiated by the due attention afforded those studies that have bravely shifted the observational paradigms from international student failures to observations of the system which they are subjected to (see e.g. Singh, 2002).

Most foreign visitors in host institutions are well aware of the social functions and hidden sanctions of the systems they are entering into (Asmar, 2004; Hellstén, 2007; Krahe, Abraham, Felber, Helbig, 2005). International students are aware of the contextual assumptions within which their learning takes place. Students are still being culturally positioned in categories of ignorance, cultural outsiders and social
nonconformists by their host systems as in the following examples made by international students from European and Australian nations:

“So, I just want to make sure that I’m going to do things in the right way, you know, like not being blamed because I didn’t use the right method or something like that and well this is, well, I’m obliged to ask the teacher for this (information).” (Spanish student in Australia)

“... it’s much more impersonal. .... yeah, there’s no opportunity (at Australian University name) to get involved from ... not involved ... to have a relationship with other people.” (French student in Australia)

“I think like my lecturer don’t even know who I am, you know what I mean, it’s quite impersonal here (in Australian University). I mean if you have trouble you can always go and ask, I think they would be there to answer and to try to help us, but otherwise they just don’t know you.” (German student in Australia)

“Maybe with the supervisors ‘cause I don’t really feel their presence. Like I know I have to go and talk to them, to their office but sometimes you have to wait for a long while, and when you call they are always busy or your emails would take them maybe a few days to answer back and yeah,... just because you’re not the only one and so they have to manage all the international students. I think we need some more supervisors maybe, I think. (Australian student in Germany)

“I also didn’t really like the way that they had done the marking structure, I didn’t think it was very good. It was all based on group work and it was, there was no way that you had your own sort of individual input but it was all group work basically. Umm so, I, I found it difficult to, to understand where he (lecturer) was coming from too. There was just a bit of a disconnect there...

But the French students, I found they were, they, first of all they would sometimes go into French and talk a lot there and I would have no idea what they were saying; and second of all they decided to do the group
work on the French company that all the reports were in French. So I couldn’t really do a lot. It was challenging.” (Australian student in France)

The above commentary by international students derives from data in ongoing funded research (Hellstén) investigating international pedagogies in practice (see Hellstén & Reid, 2008). The research systematically provides consistent evidence of the international academic experience in host nations across the globe. International students are facing challenges through lack of cultural integration, and their hosting academics remain distanced and unavailable especially throughout the crucial initial months of study transition.

While further research is warranted to establish empirically rigorous data of comparative nature, the research to date suggests that after 20 years of impressive development in the international education enterprise, the academic communityconcertedly seem lacking of an interactive pedagogic framework, which would, in Knight and de Wit’s (1995) words “articulate the reality of interdependence among nations” (p. 13) by forming multiculturally enriching educational opportunities across trans-national borders.

**Some implications for the future**

In considering the broader implications of some ‘missed opportunities’ for global intercultural knowledge production and sustainable exchange across nations, the development of sound educational principles and international pedagogies seems both timely and relevant. Well meaning educators around the globe will concur that knowledge transfer is a people-driven quality that requires human agency. Human agency is generated mainly through interaction where the latter combined with intersubjectivity (in a Vygotskian sense) is a labour intensive endeavour requiring capacity for self-critique, self regulation, and most of all the skills of reflective educational practice.

In the international education context, quality student outcomes (Leask (2001) therefore require quality teachers who, over and above their passion for teaching
embody the virtues of reflective and honest self-discovery, as advocated by Schön (1983) many decades ago. Such global knowledge building and knowledge sharing may hinge on human variables that are both time consuming (an effect of interaction) and complex to implement. Thus, the reconfiguration and ensuing quality assurance of international education evokes intrinsic values utilised in and by those learning communities that are directly affected by their outcomes (Hellstén, 2007). Such intrinsic values are accomplished in the mundane daily dealings of international students and their teachers and are powerful indicators of the resulting academic successes and failures.

Perhaps the incentives for social development for the sustainability of internationalization of higher education derive from professional conduct that is explicit about intercultural values and their underlying philosophies and epistemologies. Such incentives would allow for deeper pedagogical discussion Schön (1983) about implicit interactive practices, revealing of some hidden assumptions, and communication about cross-culturally salient expectations in the academy.

Observations from international teaching floors give emotive evidence for a notion of fear existing among incoming international students, and perhaps their teachers, of disturbing the ‘awkwardness’ produced by undisclosed cultural assumptions. The apprehension manifests in the types of socially unsustainable academic discourses that have been revealed in this paper. Leask (2001) has argued for the need of the (global) academic community to take responsibility for the quality of teaching and learning in international settings, which may invoke a fear reducing mechanism on the teaching floor. While this would be a too simplified solution to the complex issues contained within the broader internationalization agenda, at least it offers value for deliberation. Opening up the momentum for furthering intellectual dialogue on international teaching and learning methodologies and their incumbent epistemologies, philosophies and applications provide further means towards the meeting of new challenges of a multi-cultural 21st century.
Bibliography


