Disconnected pedagogies: Experiences of international students in higher education

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Discourses of widening participation and inclusion in higher education run parallel to aggressive marketing to recruit international students. While institutions are increasingly reliant on fee-paying students, many institutional, pedagogical and curriculum practices remain largely unaltered by the significant changes in the number of international students in higher education classrooms. International students bring rich and varied prior experiences of learning – only to find that many capabilities and attitudes that wrought success at home are undervalued, and even risky, in the Australian context which seems to be predicated on uniformity rather than diversity. This paper reports on a local study of the prior learning experiences of first year undergraduate and postgraduate students from the Indian subcontinent. It shows that, for many, there is a mismatch between their home country academic practices and capabilities, and their experience of what is valued and rewarded in their first year of study. Further, the study illustrates the personal dislocation felt by many of these previously successful students and reminds us that proficiency in English language alone is insufficient for tertiary success.

Keywords: international students, pedagogy, academic literacies, prior learning.

1. Introduction

In recent years there has been considerable work carried out in Australia on the educational backgrounds of domestic students entering higher education (see Devlin, 2013) in the belief that prior educational experiences affect student success and consequently should inform decisions about teaching and learning. Given that different educational backgrounds can have profound effects on the retention and progression of students *within* a national education system, (for example those from low SES backgrounds or regional students), how much greater might the impact be for students from the diverse educational backgrounds that comprise the international student population?

The growth in international student mobility has been accompanied by a burgeoning literature in the fields of internationalisation and the geographies of education, yet relatively few studies have

considered the implications of this mobility for pedagogical practices in the receiving countries (Madge, Raghuram, & Noxolo, 2014). One possible reason for this dearth may be the fast through-put enterprise of contemporary higher education; another might be the lack of data on, and an understanding of, the effects of prior educational experiences on academic success. The result may be that international students are treated as an homogenous group often most recognisable by their differences in language and academic behaviour compared to Western academic English language speaking, 'traditional' students. Because of these differences, these students are readily defined by the 'deficit' qualities they bring to the higher educational setting (Ryan, 2011).

Thus, although it might be expected that the perceived differences associated with international students might bring about a differentiated, more internationalised and inclusive curriculum; following Song (2014), we argue instead, neo-liberal discourses of managerialism, accountability and uniformity have contributed to a homogenising of curricula and pedagogy. One possible outcome of excessive standardisation across diverse cohorts and geographic space is the offering of minimalist but uniform educational practices and support; a symptom that might may go unnoticed if students with the 'right' social capital continue to prosper. Pedagogies that embrace different ways of being and knowing require a new way of thinking about internationalisation; one that requires institutions and lecturers to understand and respond to the prior educational experience of their students.

In a global context, increasingly financially constrained higher education institutions are dependent on the international student market to boost their financial viability and thus there has been a proliferation of English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) within pathway colleges (Marginson, 2015). These colleges are now likely to be integrated into the business planning of higher education (HE) institutions. Students who attend pathway or ELICOS programs are usually admitted to university with an 'equivalent' final score that demonstrates a level of English language proficiency. In addition, attendance at these courses is likely to acquaint students with some aspects of western academic and disciplinary cultures (Benzie, 2015; Floyd, 2015). Yet, in Australia in 2014, 53% of the 83,848 international students who commenced university study did so without prior study in the Australian education sector and only 27% completed an ELICOS course immediately before commencing (Australian Dept. of Education, Research Paper 2014/1). Among those most likely to enrol directly into Australian higher education from their home country in recent years are students from India (69% in 2014) and Nepal (63.5% in 2014).

The Indian sub-continent is a relatively new niche market for recruiting students. The Australian Government Education Market (2015) describes India and Nepal as major sources of international students for Australia (with 11,684 and 6,380 student enrolments respectively), and with Pakistan (3,762 students), Sri Lanka (3,423 students) and Bangladesh (3,339 students) contributing an increasing source of students. Many students from these countries meet minimum entry levels in English language proficiency and can enter Australia with an IELTS[1] or equivalent entry score rather than going through the preparation provided by an Australian ELICOS program.

The potential impact of prior educational experience on student achievement has been widely acknowledged in the higher education teaching and learning literature. Prosser and Trigwell's (1999) highly influential model identified links between the prior experiences of students and learning outcomes and promoted the role that teachers play in integrating the diversity of ways their students could perceive and act in the learning contexts. From a sociological perspective, Bourdieu (1990) has identified the importance of cultural capital and habitus – the knowledge and experiences that are transmitted to children from their families and that may or may not be consistent with the habitus of the university. More than a decade ago, Thomas (2002) employed the concept of habitus to exhort universities to change their institutional habitus in order to provide a higher education culture that was more inclusive of diverse family and educational backgrounds,

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[1] IELTS (the International English Language Testing System) is one of the major English proficiency tests globally.

particularly for the new wave of students from low SES backgrounds. Thomas (2002) linked students' prior experiences with their success, observing that if students felt that their social and cultural practices and existing knowledge were not valued, then they would be more likely to withdraw from their studies. In a similar vein, Hyland (2013, p. 55) has observed that the trusted writing habits of students who speak English as an additional language may "no longer be valued as legitimate for making meaning" in higher education contexts.

There has now been a long history of literature that warns against the tendency to view prior educational experiences in a deficit frame (Ninnes, Aitchison, & Kalos, 1999; Smit, 2012) and there are certainly many pitfalls for those trying to raise awareness of issues faced by international students. An early, influential study by Ballard and Clanchy (1997) focused on the experiences of international students upon arrival, pinpointing mismatches in learning styles as a source of difficulty. Tran (2011), however, is cautious about attributing the challenges faced by students solely to variations in culturally constructed knowledge, and joins a chorus of voices that have challenged superficial, stereotypical depictions of students' prior learning experiences. Yet, academic cultural traditions surely do inform the rules and practices that shape the behaviours of teachers and learners. Underscoring the link between culture and habitus, Sussman (as cited in Ryan, 2011, p. 635) notes that for both staff and students, "one's culture imperceptibly forms a mental framework through which individuals define their ontology, motivate and select their behaviours and judge and evaluate the actions of others". It follows that merely attaining a level of linguistic competence (as reflected in an English language score) does not provide sufficient access to the ways of knowing in a different cultural context. Knowledge production through writing, for example, requires a contextualized understanding of how knowledge is constructed and debated, in addition to a level of linguistic competence (Wingate & Tribble, 2012).

There are many reasons why institutions should be concerned with the quality of education offered to international students. Yet, public discourses appear to have been focused on deficiencies in the students themselves; inadequate English language proficiency, declining standards and preoccupation with residency rather than study (Birrell, 2006), and, more recently, as actively engaging in plagiarism to pass their courses (Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 2015). In a context of ever-diminishing resources and frequent destabilising restructures, academic language and learning developers risk being conscripted as the foot soldiers in essentially remedial campaigns, tasked with ensuring that 'underprepared' students do not pose reputational risk to universities.

At the same time policy frameworks are being implemented to regulate the international student industry and ameliorate public concerns about standards. The Higher Education Standards Framework requires that students will have "equivalent opportunities for successful transition and progression through their course of study, irrespective of their educational background, entry pathway,…" (Department of Education and Training, 2014, p. 8). Similarly, the Good Practice Principles for English Language Proficiency for International students (DEEWR, 2009) requires institutions to ensure that the pathways approved for admission are sufficient for students to participate effectively in their studies. The Australian Qualification Framework levels 7-10, mandates that students will graduate from undergraduate and postgraduate courses with communication skills ranging from well-developed to advanced (Australian Qualifications Council, 2013). These regulations may pose a challenge to institutional practices that seek only to offer an 'equivalent' teaching experience to students admitted with diverse prior educational experiences.

It was within this marketised and regulated HE context that our concern with student progression led us to undertake a small-scale investigation of the experiences of international students from the Indian sub-continent.

2. The study

This study sought to investigate the prior educational experiences of international students studying in our university – a relative newcomer to the international student market in Sydney – and to investigate the degree of congruence between their past experiences and their capacity to meet the demands of their current study. Ethics clearance was received from the institution that funded the research project where the study was conducted. This paper reports on a smaller subset of

twelve students from the Indian subcontinent including Nepal ($N = 5$), India ($N = 4$) and Bangladesh ($N = 3$). All students were studying in a School of Business, seven at undergraduate level and five at Masters level. Each of the students completed a survey and participated in an individual or pair interview, in addition selected unit outlines from their degree programs were analysed.

The surveys collected information about parental educational attainment and occupations, student experiences regarding their home educational institutions including how well resourced they were, student–teacher relationships, teaching, learning and assessment methods, the 'life of a student', and English language usage and admission procedures. Follow up interviews explored these concerns in more detail by eliciting comparisons between former and current (Australian) learning experiences. Interviews were 40–60 minutes each, were transcribed verbatim and analysed using a constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to search for common themes. Each interview transcript was analysed separately and then the whole set of interviews were analysed together to identify and group individual themes into larger clusters under higher-level descriptive categories. During this process a number of review meetings were held between the researchers to compare individual interpretations of the transcripts, to confirm coding decisions and mitigate against bias.

In addition, to ascertain the academic demands of their study, eleven unit (subject) outlines from the undergraduate and postgraduate business courses were examined and a list of academic literacies requirements was compiled. Again, analysis and interpretation was undertaken individually and collectively by the research team to minimize bias and error.

2.1. Survey results: Student demographics and backgrounds

The students ranged in age from 17 to 28 and had completed either high school or an undergraduate degree in their home country. They all spoke English as an additional language and with one exception had been learning English in their home education system for more than eight years. Three of the students spoke some English at home while the other students spoke only their first language at home. The students had scored an IELTS 6 or 6.5 or equivalent in order to undertake their studies in Australia and had not needed to attend an English language college in Australia. Only half of students came from families where one parent had a degree qualification. Eight of the students described their previous schooling as well-resourced and the best school in the area while four described their school as average in the area.

2.2. Interview results: Student experiences

Five main themes emerged from the interview data. Three of these themes related specifically to academic literacies; assessment practices, academic writing and academic reading. An additional theme comparing life as a student in their home countries and in the new Australian HE context arose numerous times, especially as students sought to explain the difficulty in transition and in meeting the many new expectations. A final theme gleaned from the data related to student strengths.

Academic literacy: Assessment

With the exception of two postgraduate students, the dominant mode of assessment in their prior education institution was through summative examinations, occasionally supplemented by regular teacher-directed classroom tests. These students had little experience of continuous assessment or of take home written assessment tasks. Typical comments included:

> *Here we don't know what to do in our assignments.* (PG)

> *Here, when I find things on the internet, I can't match with assignment questions.* (UG)

> *The assignments [at my previous university] were to learn from the chapter.* (UG)

> *I thought my English was satisfactory but now I know not enough [to do assignment tasks].* (UG)

In contrast, two of the postgraduate students had attended institutions modeled on western education, had previously completed a small number of research-based assessment tasks and in general were much more familiar with the Australian assessment regime.

Academic literacy: Reading

Most students concurred that in their previous educational contexts much less reading was required and the purpose of reading was to memorise information in preparation for a test. The required reading for school students came from textbooks and teacher handouts, while for those doing undergraduate studies in their home county; the internet was becoming an important source of information. Only two of the five postgraduate students had used scholarly journal articles prior to arrival in Australia. The remaining three postgraduate students together with the undergraduate students had some familiarity with accessing general information sources using 'Google' searches. All the students reported struggling with the high quantity of reading required in their Australian courses agreeing that there is an expectation in Australia that much more time would be spent on reading than in their home countries. A representative comment was, "Before [in the home country] one chapter over two or three classes. Now several chapters covered in one class." In general, students seemed to have few resources for coping with this workload and they identified particular difficulties with research and reading practices and skills. For example, they told us they struggled to understand disciplinary vocabulary, to search using key words, and to identify the relevance of information for particular assignments.

Academic literacy: Writing

It is unsurprising then, given the emphasis on examinations common amongst these students, that they had relatively little experience of independent, extended writing. Where students had written essays, these were described as short, "maybe 500 words" and descriptive, for example, "you could just write everything you knew [on a topic]". Another student claimed that high marks could be achieved by answers that provided "correct" information. Some students had either not heard of plagiarism before their arrival in Australia or were unfamiliar with the range of practices that could constitute plagiarism in their current situation. One postgraduate student said that the hardest thing for her was never having referenced prior to commencing her postgraduate program in Australia. In her undergraduate degree in her home country, some research was required, but "you could just write the ideas down without referencing". This student was finding it particularly challenging to learn to use citation language such as reporting verbs. Another student undertaking an undergraduate degree conceded that referencing was a problem because "it takes too long to find where something comes from" and another postgraduate student said that in her home country, "for referencing we just had to paste links [from Google] at the ends of assignments". It is little wonder that most of the students in the study expressed frustration at their limited repertoire of such writing-related capabilities as paraphrasing, synthesis, argument, use of signposting devices and citation practices.

Interestingly, the two postgraduate students who had attended the best schools/universities in their area and who had one or both parents with university qualifications claimed different prior educational experiences to the other students. They said that their undergraduate learning experiences of take-home assignments and western style, academic writing and integrity conventions were not so dissimilar to their current Australian experiences, and that this factor had made their transition less stressful.

Student strengths

Interviews showed that there were a number of areas where prior educational experiences were viewed as contributing positively to the students' current situations. All the students in the study reported that there was a high familial regard for the value of education which they shared and that gave them purpose in their studies. In addition, they described themselves as being experienced in performing well in examinations and of having expertise in memorising and recall. With the exception of two students, most felt that success in their previous education system had required the ability to understand and recall complex concepts and that they had developed good

strategies in this area. Many of the students had formed strong communities of practice with their peers in Australia and there was a culture of working together as fellow travellers. Finally, a number of students demonstrated high levels of resilience and persistence especially when describing their commitment to education despite setbacks and hardship. For example, when asked what advice they would give to family members about to study in Australia, most students put a positive spin on their difficulties; "hard work and you will succeed", "time management is the key". Most students also spoke positively about learning experiences in Australian classrooms, especially about opportunities for dialogue and argument and of the different, less formal relationship with teachers.

The stress of balancing study and financial pressures

All of the students in the study reported that their life in their home country was less complicated and less stressful. This quote by one student sums up the reported experiences of all the students in the study: "[at home] we did not have to work, no part-time job, I never cooked. The student's life was to study."

Most students referred to the support of family as both a psychological benefit, "I was never alone", as well as a buffer against the demands of independent living. Some students felt ill-equipped to perform housekeeping tasks, particularly cooking, and even those (women) who were familiar with the tasks felt there was little time to juggle all the responsibilities. One mature age, female student said, "Here no time: Everyone running not walking."

Three students were dismayed that their Australian institution was less well-resourced than their home institutions. They were referring to infrastructure such as campus grounds and clubs and sporting facilities – and most particularly to the more limited availability of their tutors to offer assistance outside class. This observation may speak to cultural differences regarding teachers' roles and responsibilities and to student experiences of the relatively common practice in their home countries of teachers earning additional money from private tutoring outside formal classes. It also may be a reflection of the high level of casualisation of the academic workforce in Australia, as well as other more common differences in the level of support between high school and tertiary education.

2.3. Analysis of Unit Outlines

Unit outlines (that is course subject documentation) contain information about the unit including unit learning outcomes, assessment tasks and assessment timelines. Each thirteen-week unit that constitutes a subject in a degree program has a unit outline available from the beginning of each semester. In order to better understand the academic literacies expected of students, the team analysed eleven unit outlines selected from the undergraduate and postgraduate courses. The criteria for the selection of units were that the units should be those offered to students in their first semester of study and include mainly written rather than numerical assessment tasks.

In these units, approximately 60% and 80% of the total marks came from extended written tasks that required independent research; 30%–50% of the total marks were derived from exams; and between 10%–20% of marks came from online quizzes, group presentations or participation marks. In one core, first year, first semester, undergraduate unit, students were required to write a field visit report of 750 words, a research essay of 2,500 words, a case study of 2,000 words and an exam. A detailed investigation of the assessment criteria for this unit revealed that each of the four assessment tasks required substantially different skills and knowledge, including for example, application of different, specific genres and text structures; each with diverse expectations regarding an appropriate balance of practice and theory and of personal reflection, tentativeness and objectivity.

3. Discussion and implications

This section draws on the survey, interview and textual data to illuminate key points from the findings that resonate with the literature. In the discussion we also draw on a combined experience of over 60 years in the sector. It is with some reluctance that we employ terms such as "unfamiliar"

and "inexperienced" as we are cognizant of the caution that a focus on international students can be accompanied by a "metaphor of absence (lacking the knowledge, failing in the classroom…)" as identified by Madge et al. (2015, p. 684). Certainly we wish to distance ourselves from deficit discourses or remedial approaches and we reject the assumption, that by virtue of acceptance into an Australian university, students automatically already have the necessary academic skills, knowledges and practices for successful completion of their Australian qualification.

A major finding of this study was that most students were unfamiliar with continuous assessment protocols and practices. Further, there were few opportunities in Australia in their disciplinary course work for them to develop the abilities required to complete extended, research-based assessment tasks. Students who had no prior experience of take-home assignments demonstrated poor time management skills leading to overload and stress. Students clearly indicated that they were overburdened by the quantity of expected reading and that this was compounded by inefficient reading skills and difficulties in identifying and evaluating relevant sources. Without regular access to their teacher as tutor, student failure to progress assignments was unmonitored resulting in last minute, frenetic situations in which deadlines were not met and failure loomed.

The academic literacies that challenged these students go beyond simply learning to how to read, write and pass assignments; they are marked by a lived disjuncture between what has been learned for success as a student in a former context and the requirements to succeed in the new environment. The potential for this disjuncture to be lessened through participation in ELICOS programs is not an option for these direct entry students. Hathaway (2015, p. 506) has argued that domestic students in the UK could benefit from the kind of focused induction that is available to international students enrolled in English for Academic Purposes courses, suggesting that even for domestic students there is often a dissonance between the "expectations of teaching staff and the repertoires of novice students". Even though ELICOS courses have been criticised for simulating western curricula and for being formulaic rather than authentic (Doherty & Singh, 2005), many ELICOS pre-entry pathway courses do explicitly cover the academic skills required for major tertiary assessment genres (Dyson, 2014). However, the students in this study, along with other international students from the Indian subcontinent, have not attended such programs and their lack of familiarity with western academic practices often comes as a surprise to disciplinary teachers. Wingate (2015) reminds us that we should not assume English language proficiency alone will guarantee familiarity with western academic discourse. While we would agree that most students new to university require discipline-specific academic literacies instruction, it is our contention that the students in this study required additional, explicit instruction and scaffolding in order to circumvent the long and expensive process, described by Wingate (2015), of learning through tacit socialisation in the academic world.

One important implication arising from this study concerns how institutions may best approach academic integrity issues. The students in this study, overloaded with so many new expectations and combined with a lack of time management and researching skills, frequently struggled to fully appreciate institutional instructions and imperatives in relation to plagiarism. When students are familiar with learning in environments where reproduction, in the form of rote learning and cut and paste, is rewarded, even the most dire warnings are unlikely to deliver the intended outcomes. Institutional anti-plagiarism policies and practices and compliance-driven warnings can be counter-productive, inhibiting the development of academic writing for students whose primary educational practices and experiences of academic success do not match those of the new context. Certainly the students in this study, while scared of plagiarising, were at a loss as to how to avoid it.

Some current institutional approaches designed to safeguard academic integrity may do little to advance the development of academic writing. For example, the benefits of student support that is ad hoc and under-resourced and that stands apart from the curriculum and from long term, embedded literacy development, may be marginal – despite the very best efforts of the ALL personnel in such smaller institutions. One of the postgraduate students in our study noted that the kind of technical instruction provided in referencing guides or workshops was inadequate when what was required was a greater command of the language of reporting and synthesis: "I can do research but how to portray [integrate] the references in the assignment?" These difficulties are

not new. Wingate (2006) has previously noted that procedural information on how 'to do' citation fails to explain how to read, understand and select information or how to use references to construct an argument. A number of students in our study also reported difficulties with paraphrasing; a critical academic writing skill that is rarely explicitly taught in higher education classrooms. Davis (2013) notes that for international students, the instruction to "use your own words" is often hampered by a lack of familiarity and confidence with the necessary disciplinary specific-vocabulary. Many students have a keen awareness that their language proficiency and confidence is such that using their own words is very likely to invite negative comment in lecturer feedback – for rarely can the largely sessional, disciplinary faculty member devote time to rewarding the novice student experimenting with a developing her own voice. There are numerous examples of sound, embedded academic literacies development work making a difference to student progression (as this Journal will attest), but the requirements for change go beyond the purview of academic literacies advisors alone.

In response to the findings from this study, we would contend that universities may be failing to capitalise on the strengths that international students bring to the classroom. Unfortunately, some of the qualities nominated as strengths by the students in our study, might not always be valued in the new environment. Students who memorise passages from the textbook and other sources for the exam might be at risk of producing writing that is 'too proficient' when measured against previous writing. Might this be interpreted as cheating? Similarly, the fine line between working collaboratively, peer support and collusion can be difficult to measure for novice students and can attract penalties for plagiarism.

It must also be asked, at what point does the persistence to continue with studies, despite repeated failure, turn into a disproportionate financial loss for the student and their family as we heard tell of in our interviews? Some of the students in our study seemed caught in a lose-lose situation, working long hours to pay the additional tuition fees resulting from failures and, in doing so, increasing their chances of repeated failures. These students seemed at a loss to explain the difference in performance between their previous and current education, especially when their English language proficiency test had judged them fit for admission into an Australian degree program. One student in the study reported failing six out of eight units but said, "I had glorious results [in my home country] …" For at least one student, a relatively poor performance meant that he had become estranged from parents who placed an enormous value on educational achievement. In this case, high parental expectations resulted in anxiety and insomnia leading to further poor performances. Instead of being able to capitalise on their strengths, many of the students in this study were experiencing significant detrimental personal costs; a seemingly inconvenient truth for institutions competing for students in the global education market.

4. Conclusion

This study reiterates the influence of prior educational experience on the academic progress of international students. It illustrates too, that despite the rhetoric for addressing difference through inclusive and internationalised curricula, this particular higher educational context continues to operate on normalised assumptions that students already have the necessary academic, research and information literacy skills. As well, the current degree structure, curriculum and dominant modes of assessment presume strong time management skills, local knowledge and the ability to access appropriate support. It is possible that current pressures, related to the massification of the sector, mean that overworked teaching staff and course designers do not have the scope, time and support to accommodate diverse student needs. Further, this state of affairs is perhaps an inevitable consequence of institutional attempts to reign in teaching costs by reducing course duration, employing a highly casualised workforce, and failing to invest in appropriate student and teacher support and development.

Although the findings that international students may be disadvantaged because of the nature of their prior educational experiences cannot necessarily be generalized beyond the scope of this small study, the results of this study are telling. Our assertion is relatively simple: if students have not encountered certain types of academic literacies and assignment types in their prior educational experience, then explicit, embedded, disciplinary teaching will be needed to develop these

capabilities. Assessment tasks that are cognizant of students' prior educational experiences and that are appropriately scaffolded and aligned within a whole of course design approach are more likely to culminate in positive student outcomes (Biggs & Tang, 2011; Janssen & Rowen, 2016). Alongside support for students and truly inclusive curricula and assessment design, academic and literacy development support for teaching staff is a key component for change. With the continuing and growing reliance of the sector on global markets, and the tendency for the managerial discourses of standardisation and efficiency to eclipse the differentiation required in responsive curricula and pedagogy, we would argue that a renewed focus on the unique backgrounds of international students is both timely and obligatory.

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