HE educators teaching international students: questions of purpose, participation and the need for reflection

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Introduction
Internationalisation of higher education is big business, and universities in Australia have become part of this process along with educational institutions in many other English-speaking countries offering a western-style education (Guruz, 2008). Yet, despite the growth of this phenomenon and the accompanying body of literature informing its development, challenges remain. This paper presents a framework for investigating some implications for educators and their practices when international students come to study in an English-language university in Australia. It discusses the challenges to socially just educational provision in light of the changing purposes of tertiary education and the different expectations and aims of participant groups. There are four main stakeholder groups involved in developing and sustaining international education collaborations – governments, institutions, educators and students; however the focus here is on educators and some of the difficulties they face in creating mutually beneficial connections within the educational environment, with their students, and for their practices.

The challenges that accompany internationalisation of the student body and curriculum have wide relevance. While not all countries pursue or experience internationalisation of education in the same way, there are some commonalities identified in the literature that can be explored positively together, although the eventual outcomes and approaches to them may differ. While pedagogical and language concerns in the international classroom are addressed in the literature, these are documented from the student perspective (Bailey, 2006, Peters, 2005, Ramos, 2010); what are less known are the challenges faced by the educator in responding to these named issues, including the broader cultural differences that operate within them.

The Australian context
The perceived status of a western-style education and degree, along with a more mobile student population, has attracted many students from countries where English is not the first language, to study in Australia. While the majority of these students come from mainland China and India, a large number of other, mostly Asian, countries are also represented (Guruz, 2008).
Given Australia's claim of being 'the world’s most diverse multicultural society' (Victorian Multicultural Commission 2009), welcoming international students into the educational system seems a natural consequence of such diversity. This phenomenon is actually not a new one, however, having begun in 1950 with the Colombo Plan and its aim of encouraging development across the Asian region. Since then, an active student recruitment programme in place for over two decades has seen some universities becoming quite financially dependent on the business of educating these students.

While there are some common aims amongst the various stakeholders, Marginson (2006) notes that the priorities informing their positions differ markedly, creating potential conflict on a number of levels. He explains that ‘doggedly persistent differences' (2006, p.2) exist between education systems and individual institutions, a situation that can equally be applied to educators and the students they teach (see for example (Ramos, 2010, Bartram, 2007, Peters, 2005).

Differences in purpose and aim amongst the participant groups impact on the structures and the effectiveness of these international connections. They impact too, on the confidence of educators to do their work well. More obvious student needs, such as those relating to language differences, are well understood by educators; less so are the implications to student-teacher relationships of cultural, social and personal levels of loneliness (Sawir et al., 2007), or Rizvi's (2010) even broader contextual framework of pedagogy, cultures, knowledges and expectations.

Points of difference in these international exchanges can be complex, yet educators are expected to respond to this complexity of student needs, while already operating within an – at times – unsupportive environment shaped through policy decisions. They must also contend with institutional expectations of successful participation and completion of their students.

Educators in the Faculty of Law and Management at La Trobe University in Victoria currently work with substantial numbers of international students. Of the 6000 undergraduate and 2000 postgraduate students 35% are international – from forty different countries – and comprise 72% of the university’s international student population.

In my role as Academic Language and Learning lecturer working with both students and staff in this faculty I identified a high level of confusion and frustration amongst teaching staff: one young female lecturer related feeling overwhelmed when, in her first lecture, she found herself looking into ‘a sea of almost completely non-Anglo student faces’. This educator has a keen sense of cultural differences and of student equity, yet wondered how she would be able to address the expectations and needs of all her students, given her students' non-western educational backgrounds.
Students’ English language fluency is a major area of contention. Students currently are admitted with an IELTS (International English Language Testing System) score of 6.5 or 7.0; this is classed as Competent to Good, and is an average of the reading, writing, speaking and listening scores. The result is that many students may read capably in English, but write at a much lower level than is acceptable for academic work. Students may also have a good level of aural communication in Standard English, but some teaching staff, too, come from countries other than Australia so that students are exposed to English spoken with many different accents, including Australian, Kenyan, Iraqi and Scottish.

Many students come from Mainland China to complete their final undergraduate year here after studying in their own country at an affiliated college where only Standard English is spoken and little is taught about western style-educational practices. These educational cultural differences are evident, with Chinese students tending to congregate in peer groups, their preferred learning style (and probably also a strategy that lessens their linguistic and social isolation). Educators are baffled when students claim never to have written an essay using citations – these not required in certain educational cultures – or to have presented orally to an audience. Attitudes of staff to such differences vary, with responses ranging from accommodation: ‘well I do try to allow for their language needs’ to complete frustration: ‘these Asians...they all sit together in a corner. They just don't say anything - not in English, anyway’.

Most educators that I speak with do care about their students, want them to succeed in their studies, and want to teach them effectively. Many, it seems, are unsure of how to do so. My impression has been that much of the process of internationalisation of education has happened to the teaching staff. They have been offered little preparation and support to enable them to accommodate these student characteristics, which can be very different to those of domestic Anglo-Australian students.

As part of my work to develop staff capabilities, I explored ways in which these educators could develop a reflective approach towards addressing their concerns, in order to re-shape their practices in a way that would accommodate the changing environment and satisfy their own professional needs as well as those of their students.

**Educators’ perceptions - a small research project**

This section describes a two-part research project of which the first part involving collecting data from a questionnaire disseminated to teaching staff. I formulated a set of questions that emerged from my work-related and less formal discussions with teaching staff, and that I felt responded to the challenges that seemed to be present in their current work environment:

- How do educators re-shape or adjust their practices in response to changing student demographics?
• How can educators offer an educational experience that responds to international students’ desire for a western-style education, yet at the same time address quite pronounced cultural differences within the classroom?

• How do they respond to/contribute to policy and institutional demands on them to participate in these international collaborations?

From these questions, the questionnaire was constructed and distributed to twenty-two teaching staff within the Faculty. (The questionnaire format was selected due to known time constraints of educators during teaching periods; this format would facilitate quick and easy completion and therefore I hoped to obtain a reasonable response).

I wanted to know what teaching staff thought about teaching international students, and how effective the former felt they were in their teaching. For example, were they clear about their purpose in teaching international students? Did they know what their institution’s expectations were? In addition I aimed to introduce the concept of fairness. I already knew that some educators felt that institutional and government policy decisions were impacting unfairly on them – did they think about the student perspective? If so, what were their thoughts?

Finally I felt it would be important for them to consider some consequences and implications of what they had identified. This reflective aspect is an important one, as it introduces the notion that participants first of all need to engage with their experiences before they can begin to make sense of them (Boud, 2001). Reflection is about understanding what is happening or has happened, and taking charge of the experience and feelings that accompany it. For Boud (2001) it means returning to experience, that is, remembering ‘how it was experienced at the time’; recognising the feelings that accompanied the experience; and re-evaluating that experience, and involves:

relating new information to that which is already known, seeking relationships between old and new ideas, determining the authenticity for ourselves of the ideas and feelings that have resulted, and making the resulting knowledge one’s own (Boud, 2001, p.14)

From the questionnaire data I identified the four following problematic areas; these were rated significant by more than 50% of the seventeen eventual respondents.

• lack of common purpose - feeling isolated, they were acting alone;
• lack of support - no acknowledgment of the difficulties by senior administration;
• lack of clarity of aims - not sure what they were doing, feeling their way, just surviving;
• lack of understanding - this was about not being able to identify the problems, or not knowing what to do about them.
Identification of the issues formed the first part of the research project, and the findings will subsequently be used to design Cultural Development in Practice workshops for staff.

**Educators’ concerns: What are we doing, and why are we doing it?**
Although the sample is small, there is enough data to be useful for discussion and to subsequently develop the next stage of the research. While participants’ observations and opinions of their practices, and of international students, vary, there are clearly a number of issues shared across the teaching staff. The responses confirmed the existence of some concerns that I had identified in my work with staff; I had not been aware, however, of the unanimity of position regarding some problems, nor of how keenly felt, by some, the sense of isolation.

**Findings from the questionnaire**
There is a perception that what happens in the 'classroom' is not well understood at higher administrative levels, while the policies that drive the internationalisation of education are often assumed to be just about making money. When institutional and pedagogical aims are at odds, such as staff here have asserted, the result is that simplistic assumptions about teaching are made by administrators, resulting in educators receiving little in the way of support to develop new pedagogical approaches that acknowledge cultural differences.

In this faculty at least, it appears that the demographic change in the student population has far outpaced any opportunity educators have had to come to terms with this, or to undertake professional development aimed at cultural awareness. There are varying degrees of understanding, amongst these teaching staff, of the problems and of how to address them. A sense of feeling lost and disempowered is evident. The consequence of these changes is that educators feel baffled; that they ‘don’t know what [they’re] doing’, and frequently interpret culturally unfamiliar students’ responses to mean that these students are ‘not very bright’ or ‘lacking motivation’.

Most staff members have identified that they often feel isolated from their peers (in the context of their teaching work), and that they are struggling through ‘unknown territory’ on their own. Many felt that these impositions were unfair, both to themselves, and (for a lesser number) to their students as well.

From these responses, I have identified that a clear sense of purpose, participation and reflection are missing. Educators working with international students need to – and have a right to – understand both the purposes of internationalisation (those of governments and their own institution) and their role in the processes. Given that some educators working in higher education have had internationalisation thrust upon them, how do they start to come to terms with what they are being expected to do?
Clearly strategies are needed that will enable educators to increase their understanding of the issues confronting them, and also how they might respond in ways that are beneficial to them and to their students. A process of developing ownership is needed – educators must take back ownership of their practice. Educators should be participating in developing their practices to respond to changing demands, practices that will address their needs as professionals as well as the needs of their students.

**Planning the workshops**

Informed by the results from the questionnaire, notions of purpose, participation and reflection will shape the design of the workshops currently being developed. Content will focus on exploring educators’ perspectives on, and their responses to, cultural differences they face in their work. Activities will be based on developing aspects of a reflective practice through journaling, and strengthening peer engagement and support through group activities including sharing of culturally appropriate teaching strategies.

I decided, in constructing these workshops, to address only what seemed possible to achieve. Educators are only one group participating in the processes of internationalisation of education, and are thus constrained by both institutional demands and their own sense of responsibility towards students. And yet it is important for educators to take ownership of both the problems they face and the solutions they adopt. Once they have identified their own major areas of concern, they can reflect on these difficulties, sharing them with their peers. This process of reflection on action (Schön 1983) through relating and re-evaluating these experiences, is a first step towards developing a more reflective stance and building awareness, focus and confidence.

One effective way to facilitate reflection is through journal writing, which, according to Boud (2001, p.12), has ‘a significant role to play’ in shaping a reflective practice that engages practitioners as active participants. Journal writing will be introduced in the workshops, where journalling activities will be constructed around the following questions:

- what are we aiming to achieve?
- are we doing it well?
- is what we are doing fair and equitable?
- what kind of connections are we making?

This set of reflective questions, focusing on educators' perceptions about the purpose of their work with international students, will be used to encourage them to reflect on their own understandings about their teaching practices. Educators can use these reflections as a way of locating and clarifying their position in the growing but still contentious process of internationalising education provision.
Educators have an important role to play in creating sound, equitable, enduring international connections, but how do they do this if they feel as disempowered as my findings suggest? To overcome their sense of isolation and frustration, educators need first to clarify their own aims and purpose when they engage in teaching international students, and ask themselves: 'what are we doing, and why are we doing it?'

Knowing their own needs, and subsequently understanding better the needs of their students, they could more enthusiastically approach the broader issues of policy and institutional aims confident that their needs may at least be acknowledged, if not fully addressed.

Conclusion
Responding to the requirements of policy, individual institutions and to students, educators can find themselves doubting their capacity to deliver equitable and socially just education. This paper describes an Australian higher education setting in which educators struggle with the necessary changes to practice required to meet the needs of international students, as well as institutional demands and broader policy expectations. It suggests a starting point from which educators can confidently begin to reshape their educational practices to provide relevant and informative learning in the internationalised higher education environment.

A small research project confirmed that educators in one faculty feel frustrated and isolated, but above all confused; they misunderstand or are unsure about how to respond to the challenges they feel have been thrust upon them. Enabling educators to make sense of what they are doing - and why - through activities that develop reflective practices will go some way to giving back a sense of purpose to their work and to their role in the internationalisation process.

What is suggested here is only one small step towards addressing the differences in purpose amongst educators, students, institutions and policy-makers in relation to the internationalisation of education. Perceived differences about the purposes of this phenomenon remain, and yet these perceptions and their implications must be addressed if all stakeholders – educators, students, policy makers and higher education institutions – are to be satisfied.

It is not, however, the role of educators to teach policy makers and institutional administrators how to do their jobs. Nevertheless, developing reflective practices in relation to the international students we teach will go a long way towards facilitating constructive and influential participation in the debates around the internationalisation of education. When educators are confident about their role and have a clear sense of purpose, that is, what they are doing and why they are doing it, they are better equipped to critique and debate those policy and institutional directives that impact on them and their ability to practice.
Socially just and equitable pedagogical practices are what educators want to provide. The educators’ responsibility - and what most would like to be able to do - is participate in developing the international learning environment to provide socially just and equitable learning opportunities to all students. International students must of course continue to make explicit their cultural, learning and social needs, for researchers and educators are generally keen to understand better their point of view. What remains is for those concerned with recruitment and constructing policy to become similarly reflective.

References


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