

International Students and the Contemporary Globalizing World - Coming to Terms

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Abstract

The current contemporary global context presents a fundamentally different sort of challenge, one that is multiple, dislocated, provisional and ever-changing with shifting reference points of identification. There is also a growing understanding that the neoliberal version of the contemporary world, particularly as reflected in educational agendas, privileges if not imposes, particular strategies for curriculum, instruction, evaluation and services, and in particular international student services.

This paper is a reflection of the work by three practitioners engaged in the area of international students' services. The construction and analysis of this reflection is located within the frameworks of globalisation and culture, suggesting that this process of situating can also help to shed new light on how we might approach questions of international student support and engagement in this contemporary world. This article also suggests that when individuals from particularly Third-World backgrounds enter the discursive spaces of mainstream Western academic contexts; they enter a 'field of preoccupations' where a variety of concerns about identity, representation and diversity are already in place and being played out. These concerns work to shape these individuals' entrance and influence what is expected of them.

This article is presented as the first of a series of three working papers. This first paper reflects upon the current contemporary world we now occupy as university service providers, and asks whether international student services incorporates, particularly frameworks of globalisation, culture and preoccupations within its operating processes. The second paper will discuss the range of support services we deliver, the changing demographics of international students and the relevance of these support services. The third and final paper will argue for a framework of services and international student engagement that is able to live awkwardly but also constructively, facilitating an enduring and reciprocal relationship of mutual learning.

Key words: international students, culture, globalisation, preoccupations.

For who among us, after all – white or nonwhite, Western or not – is not always caught precisely in the space between ‘inherited traditions’ and ‘modernization projects’? And where else, how else, do ‘cultural interpretations’ come from – ‘theirs’ or ‘ours’, local or global, resistant or complicit, as the case may be – other than the space between the two, and with the ensemble of materials they provide (or, indeed from the lack of space, the sometimes desperate need for new conceptual and material resources).

(Pfeil, 1994, pp. 222-223)

Introduction

This paper grew out of our discussions and growing interest in understanding the many questions that have arisen in our collective ten years of work as international students, international student advisers and now as researchers in the areas of culture, globalisation and identity. Our work within the last decade is located within a large urban university in Australia. Our lives have revolved around the many places we too have lived and worked, as well as studied and grown up in. These experiences of amazing opportunities, privileges, new learning and influences, as well as difficult challenges have constantly reaffirmed for us the importance that we live in a world in which as Ang (2001, p. 3) states “where we no longer have the secure capacity to draw the line between us and them, between the different and the same, here and there, and indeed, between Asia and the West”. It is a world which Ang (ibid, p.3) remarks is much like what Geertz, (1988, p.148) has characterized as a “gradual spectrum of mixed-up differences. This is a globalized world in which people quite different from one another in interest, outlook, wealth and power are contained in a world where, tumbled as they are into endless connection, it is also increasingly difficult to get out of each other’s way”.

Working with international student services over the last few years has constantly reaffirmed for us how imperative the need is to educate ourselves about the contemporary world, of particular locations, global processes and linkages between the global and the local – forcing us to ask new questions and to rethink critically about our place and our work in it. One of the observations of this article is that a ‘view’ of the world is never ‘objective’, by always located and informed by particular social and professional positions and historical moments and their respective agendas and one’s own position or status quo in that (Nadarajah, 2005, in print). We also draw on the work of Narayan (1997)¹ who states that when individuals from Third World backgrounds enter the discursive spaces of mainstream Western academic contexts, they enter a ‘field of preoccupations’ where a variety of concerns about inclusion, diversity and multiculturalism are already in place and being played out. These concerns also become Preoccupations in another sense, when they construct roles that function as locations. These locations work to shape our entrance, influence what is expected of us, and give us a place that often puts us in our place.

Thus, to locate this article, we have to locate myself and the origins of the experiences in this article on the discourses and lived experiences of working with international students, skirting the boundaries of working both within a university and the several different cultural communities that these students engaged with. The institution within which we were working, as well as the educational policy environment is changing rapidly, reflective of the vast educational changes that were taking place within contemporary Australian policies and society. We have called these influences and experiences *a priori* considerations.

¹ Narayan (1997, p. 121) uses the term “Third World subjects” broadly to refer to individuals from Third-World countries temporarily or permanently living or working in Western contexts whose communities, achievements and culture have not been regarded as part of “mainstream Western culture”. She states that individuals from these categories are positioned in interesting ways in “projects designed to make the curriculum more responsive to achievements that have been marginal to the pedagogical gaze of mainstream western culture - a position that accounts for their being assigned these very roles.

Only by coming to terms with my own past, my own background, and seeing that in the context of the world at large, have I begun to find my true voice and to understand that, since it is my own voice, that no pre-cut niche exists for it; that part of the work to be done is making a place, with others, where my work and our voices, can stand clear of the background voices and voice our concerns as part of a larger song.

(J.E. Wilson in hooks,² 1994, p. 185)

A Priori Considerations

As an Malawian-born, Tanzanian childhood, Russian-educated educational administrator now living and working in Australia, David ubiquitously fits into the category of a multiple migrant intellectual, having undergone a series of cross-cultural translation as he has moved from one place to another, from one regime of culture to another. Gary has grown up and lived in Malaysia, and then continued higher education and now working in Australia, and in his role as international student and student leader, holds the tensions between sensibilities and choices shaped in one culture and negotiated in another. As a Malaysian-born, Indian, USA and Australia-educated educational administrator and now researcher working and living in Australia, Yaso assumes several different but interconnected roles, particularly the complexity of having to negotiate simultaneously the space between mainstream Western academic concerns and her own intellectual and geographical/spatial dislocation.

In a way, we too as we wrote this paper, were negotiating through different form of cultural lives and interpretations, coming from backgrounds as diverse as tribal/traditional Africa to societies that are have rapidly integrated into global networks of production, exchange such as Malaysia and India. This provided stimulating conversations and insights, but also reminded us sharply of the dangers and limitations of trying to define oneself intellectually, politically and culturally. While there is virtue in locating oneself as speaker and thinker, of the complex experiences and perceptions that have fuelled our perspectives and responses, there is also the danger that we can so easily also become the purveyors of our own narrow space. Our views can easily be misinterpreted as one more incarnation of a colonized consciousness, the views of privileged 'Third World individuals'³ seeking to enter a privileged discourse based on our social and intellectual space of the in-between, and too, of the west and the non-west.

In this, we alert the readers to the fact that the spirit of the multiple migrant intellectuals, negotiating the in-between spaces intervenes throughout this article - and is in fact, is also the very space from within which this article was written. In such, as a way, we hope this is a pragmatic response, using the best of such a space of in-between to analyse this complicated entanglement, because it is embodied in our life trajectories. Nadarajah (2003) defines reflection as *thinking about an experience with the intention of deciding what it means, how it can be explained and what the meaning and explanations might imply for the future*. This is adopted from the work of Hermes (1995). In this way, it is possible to construct a study which accounts for its own framework, its methodology and reflects on changes and

² hooks (1994, pp. 184-185) Here hooks is quoting Jane Ellen Wilson from a section of *Strangers in Paradise* entitled *Balancing Class Location*.

NB. The name 'hooks' uses the lower case as the preferred and standard style of the author herself.

³ Nadarajah (2003) contends that there are several debates surrounding the definition and meaning of the term "Third World". Baur (1981) suggests that the term is the creation of foreign aid and is a product of "Western guilt". It is used in this study not only as a mental construct or abstract notion, but also as a concrete notion to denote Asian, African and Latin American countries that are marked by their poverty, lack of bargaining strength in the international political economy, and subordinate position in the international hierarchy of countries. This however, does not deny the diversity that exists within each country, but there is a commonality defining 'a world of their own' that can be contracted against the more developed countries. Pattanayak and Allan, (1999) observe that this conception of the third world is not just economic, but also historical, social and cultural (Pattanayak and Allan, 1999).

developments in the reflective research process (Hermes, 1995). However, where practitioners/researchers attempt to put themselves in the picture through which certain aspects of cultural or social processes can be elaborated, it is important to make a distinction between the diverse interpretations of the individual.

Theories of the subject challenge the notion of the unified and centred 'individual' as author of social practice, made up of discursive practices which constitute the very subjectivity (Gray, 2003). Therefore, we are aware of both the opportunities and the limitations that our own subjectivities are made up of our positions in and encounters with particular discourses which we bring to this first article. If we reflect, therefore, on our subjectivities (and identities) in process and in relation to that which we are describing, as Gray (2003, pp. 75-76 in Nadarajah 2003) observes, "at the very least, as the product of historical, social and cultural discourses, then it is possible to go beyond the 'subjective' when using our own (and others' experience, if available) in our explorations of cultural processes". Thus, reflection turns back on oneself, being thoughtful about what is experienced and making sense of one's thoughts, feelings and actions.

International Education and Globalization

An increasing number of tertiary students now undertake their education in a country other than their country of citizenship. In economic terms, international education is very important to Australia, providing 13 per cent of the revenues of higher education institutions (DEST, 2004) and injecting \$5 billion into the national economy in 2003 including student expenditures on transport, accommodation, food and other living expenses (Nelson, 2003).

The Australian government allocates much funding to Australian universities where budgets are augmented by the fees of international students. "In 2001, the Government invested more than AUD\$5.8 billion in higher education alone. In October 2003, the Australian Minister for Education, Science and Training, the Honourable Dr Brendan Nelson, said, "Australia is a leader in international education, making it relevant to the changing global environment and sharing expertise with regional economies" (IDP Education Australia, 2004). International students have been of financial benefit to universities and the economies of the six Australian states and two territories. In Victoria, the *International Students in Victorian Universities 2002* report from the Victorian Auditor-General's office states that Monash University, RMIT University and the University of Melbourne have made effective use of international student programs in order to offset reduced levels of government operational funding per student (Victorian Auditor-General's Report, 2004).

Australian higher education institutions have become more aware of their international competitors in the context of the globalization of education, and decisions made are no longer restricted to national contexts. Marginson (2000) suggests that higher education in Australia, as in most developed and many developing countries, is constantly being systematized in the context of the local, the national and the global. Marginson (2000) further argues that competition in the education sector on an international level has changed the relationship between university students and alumni. As Currie and Newson (1998) argue, it is important to distinguish between globalization as a process that has indeed made communication more compressed and instantaneous and encouraged global language and terminologies as different from a globalization that combines market ideology with a corresponding material set of practices drawn from a world of economics and business.

There is also a growing understanding that the neoliberal version of the contemporary world, particularly as reflected in educational agendas, privileges if not imposes, particular strategies for curriculum, instruction, evaluation and services. This neo-liberal economic rationality of a globalizing capitalism continues to reframe the restructure of higher education, where changing practices are commensurate with government policies. Therefore, the place of a university as a space where a global community can reflect and explore itself critically is at stake, and more often than not, at odds. The presence of a growing number of international students, bearing the heavy and complex positions of consumer, student and university income generator, further compounds these scenarios.

The changes now experienced also come partly from increasing exposure to cultural diversity through the influences of international news and media, information and communication technologies and consumer products as well as greater mobility. As one university administrator and globalisation theorist has noted, “The global context is defined by a language that highlights cultural aspects of economic relations, and the need to develop products that are responsive to local needs, values and traditions” (Rizvi, 2001, p.4). The impact of globalisation is partly determined by institutional responses, which should mirror local, national and regional conditions and contexts. These institutions can either reproduce or resist the global in day-to-day life and should always respond actively, and not passively, and on a foundation of their context.

Rizvi adds, “With increasing global flows in communication and movement, we are now all influenced by globalisation, which, as we have noted above, can be characterized as a process of transformation in which various practices are increasingly geared to operating in international surroundings, under internal market conditions and with an international professional orientation” (Rizvi, 2001, p.5). The education industry is no different. Information technology is inexorably transforming the higher education industry worldwide. Online learning and teaching and study abroad programs are some examples. A growing number of students travel across national borders for their education, while university staff members travel more and international collaborations are mushrooming as the whole facet of global communications thickens.

Reflections - A Brief Narrative

This paper is the beginning of a discussion and narrative of our work in international student services. It is a reflective journey aiming to describe and better understand the complex contemporary global workplace, and the way it has influenced the development of the services we provide to our international students. The discussions and reflections are located within the frameworks of globalization, culture and the international student programs.

We developed a methodological framework incorporating reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983) so that we did not simplify the complex interactive space created by the meeting of three locations – the local, the global and the institution and the need to live in and with the tensions created by these perspectives. Therefore, an important aspect of this reflective approach was, therefore, its ability to hold this multiplicity and complexity without reducing these or setting their meanings in simple ways.

How does globalisation alter the context of meaning construction? How does it affect people’s sense of identity, the experience of place and of the self in relation to a locally situated life? How do international students cope with the complexities within which different groups of students from many different countries (who had hitherto very little to do with each other) get together to talk, discuss, persuade and negotiate amongst themselves? How do they negotiate with the wider university community whilst interacting with changes in socio-economic and cultural structures at local and global levels? Yet, through all this they try to hold tenuously to a sense of their own cultural identity. Interactions and shared lived experiences with these students constantly reminded us of the multiplex identity from within which we too viewed and responded to the world.

During 1993 around 2,600 international students studied at RMIT University at Melbourne. 75 of these were allocated at Coburg campus including those sponsored by the Australian government through AIDAB (Australian International Development Assistance Bureau). Yaso was the International Student Adviser and Manager of the International Students Centre (ISC) and David was the International Student Adviser at the Coburg campus of the ISC. As the student list expanded, we were able to organise various activities on campus such as BBQs and cultural events supported by RMIT Union and student services at the northern campuses. Importantly, a Multi-Cultural Centre was opened allowing for international, local and staff to network. Core student activities were then directed towards the centre area.

Throughout this phase, support from staff and other areas within the University were generous. Student organisations and clubs were initiated and established, enabling some of the international students to share their ideas and responses to the educational and support services that the University was providing. 1994 onwards saw a drastic increase in the number of international student enrolments, with a corresponding increase in the provision of a diversity of new services such as student centres, Muslim prayer rooms and cultural and sports activities. While this was a time of growth for the international education program and the rush to provide a range of services, we also had an underlying concern that the emerging multiple, complex and also conflicting effects of globalisation on educational policy and policy formation, and in particular, the provision of international education services was not adequately understood, let alone discussed critically in our workplaces or outside.

At a deeper level, something was happening in the areas of economics, politics and culture that were also fundamentally altering the terrains of private and public life. The interactions with our students from over 35 different countries constantly reminded us of how people are now deeply engaged in a struggle win 'power' over their own work, values and perspectives as a response to globalization. It was a way of thinking, speaking and acting that was both consciously and unconsciously responding to changes in their socio-economic and cultural structures in their own countries and in their new country as sojourners.

Gary joined us as an international student in 1997. Energetic and hard working, he soon became the Publicity Officer and then, a year after, the President of the RMIT Association of International Students. This was also the time of intense debate in the country. There has emerged in Australian society a politics of resentment, best exemplified in the phenomenon of Pauline Hanson and One Nation⁴. The impact of this political turn in Australian history had a tremendous impact on the international student program, and many students suffered the consequences of mixed reactions and responses. We were all involved in the intense debates that ensued from all this - racism, Australian cultural position in Asia, international student life, and student voice. At the same time, there were many responses, both informal and formal to these debates. The National International Student Advisors Network (ISANA) and the RMIT International Student Advisors network (ISAN) provided important places for new responses and changes to university and government policies.

And in a way, nothing much has changed. These debates are still ongoing. Our responses have deepened or not altered at all. But what has changed is the context within which these debates now take place. This current contemporary global context presents a fundamentally different sort of challenge, one that is multiple, dislocated, provisional and ever-changing with shifting reference points of identification. There is also a growing understanding that the neoliberal version of the contemporary world, privileges if not imposes particular strategies for curriculum, instruction, evaluation and services, and in particular international student services.

⁴ On August 2, 1995, Hanson joined the Liberal Party and was preselected to contest the seat of Oxley. Labor's Les Scott lost the seat to Hanson in 1996 federal election, but by then Hanson was an independent, having been dropped from the Liberals during the campaign for injudicious and "inflammatory and insensitive" remarks about Aborigines. Hanson roared back into the headlines after her September 10, 1996, maiden speech that called for Australia to abolish the policy of multiculturalism, withdraw from the United Nations, abandon all foreign aid and reintroduce national service. In April 1997 Hanson, businessman David Ettridge and Manly scuba diver David Oldfield came together to establish Pauline Hanson's One Nation party. While Hanson was unable to survive an electoral redistribution by standing in a neighbouring seat of Blair in the 1998 election, her right-wing populism resounded throughout Queensland and the party picked up a Senate seat and 11 state seats. Soon, however, the amateurism of the One Nation MPs and amid squabbles and stupidities, the Queensland parliamentary party imploded into a rabble of independents, resignations and legal threats and was routed in the 2001 state election.

Student numbers have increased manifold from 1993. We now have close to 9,000 international students onshore at RMIT University. International services are mainstreamed, and also case-managed through specific areas of student services. Gary is now an International Student Adviser, managing the services that he once was an active participant in. David continues in his role as an International Student Adviser, whilst Yaso is now a researcher within an Institute in the University. But the questions remain pertinent? What and how have we, and are we as international student service providers and researchers in international education and globalisation responded and are responding in this age of intense globalization?

Conclusion

For every discussion that anxiously predicts the loss of 'local' patterns and behaviour, a counter discussion argues that globalization actually works to reconfigure diversity, thereby intensifying localism, nationalism and regional identity. We are not saying that we all experience the world as cultural cosmopolitans, or much less that a 'global culture' is emerging. But we are suggesting that the 'global' increasingly exists as a cultural horizon within which we (to a varying degree) frame our existence and work. Culture is a dominant variable that influences the way people organize, think, reason, solve problems, develop values and beliefs, and relate to insiders and outsiders. Global processes are understood then as specific cultural, and economic events made meaningful only at those 'positions' where they are accessed and interpreted.

Discussions of globalisation often take 'culture' to mean something rather different, eliding it with the globalizing communications and media technologies via which cultural representations are transmitted. How precisely should we think of culture as a concept and an entity in relation to globalisation?

The principle that culture is 'ordinary' makes what I am calling questions of existential significance matters that every human being routinely addresses in their everyday practices and experiences. Culture for my purposes refers to all mundane practices that directly contribute to people's ongoing life-narratives', the stories by which we, chronically interpret our existence in what Heidegger calls the 'throwness' of the human condition.

Tomlinson (1999, pp.17-18)

Globalisation is of course not a wholly new phenomenon, although its current phase does appear different from its earlier form at least in one important aspect. This era of globalisation, in particular, does not, as Pieterse and Parekh (1995, p.14) state "have a single centre or a state-orchestrated character". Bauman (1998) adds that contemporary cultural shifts are transforming social landscapes in a variety of uneven and chaotic ways. New sociological spaces and processes are emerging as the global begins to negotiate with the nation-state as a contesting framework for social life and meaning.

The influence of globalization on universities, and the emergence of dominant socio-cultural forces of our time; the age of migration, the rise of postcolonial and indigenous peoples and the emergence of a range of so-called minorities emphasise the fact that there appears to be no way back to a static or homogenous local/global culture and politics. Multi-ethnic, multi-racial and multi-national (including fundamental) groups are becoming a dominant characteristic of public institutions and places across the world.

Work, particularly within international student services will involve working with complicated and often contradictory issues of identity, difference, social justice and citizenship as key premises for reference, engagement, and understanding in working both within and outside the university. The idea of multiple identities that people must negotiate within their habitus is continuously shifting and changing, never fully locating oneself once and for all in a particular identity. So it requires a space where we could work productively, with concepts of identity and subjectivity to help teachers, researchers, schools, and community members to bring together competing histories, cultures and languages and forms of knowledge without threatening to dissolving one or another.

Presenters:

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Experience and background built around organisational development, cross-cultural learning, and international student issues. Strong interest in cross-cultural communication, international community development, student leadership and has continuously contributed to the development of the RMIT International programs for the past 8 years. Gary was also the Past President of the RMIT Association of International Students (RAIS).

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Experience and background around international student issues, community development, advocacy and support within the broader field of international education. Knowledge and experience of sponsored student programmes, international development and community partnerships. Keen interest in developing strategies to encourage students to take ownership of their own initiated programmes and activities.

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Knowledge and experience in developing community engagement processes, distinguishing difference and diversity, and working across knowledge sets within Australia and internationally. Keen interest and research background in globalisation and leadership and connecting the local and global society.

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