

INTERCULTURAL INTERACTIONS IN A NEW ZEALAND UNIVERSITY: PAKEHA AND ASIAN PERSPECTIVES

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade New Zealand higher education has undergone drastic shifts in its social, ethnic and cultural landscapes. Arguably, the increased presence of Asian students in New Zealand universities has added value not only to the local economy but also the social and cultural development of domestic students (Stevens, 2005). However, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest otherwise (Dominion, 9 August 1995, "Racist views on Asian settlers", p.8). The sudden influx of Asian students has led to the proliferation of what Spoonley et al (2005) termed as "small world" networks. While New Zealand students begin to feel outnumbered by the growing number of Asian students, the latter continue to be found wanting in their interaction with domestic students (Ward & Masgoret, 2005). Against this backdrop the paper aims to explicate some of the socio-cultural factors influencing intercultural interactions in a New Zealand university through the perspectives of both Pakeha and Asian international students.

ISSUES AND PROBLEMS

During the post-war period, international education exchange was adopted by the West as a vehicle to help rebuild war-torn and less developed countries. New Zealand, like other Western nations, expressed her commitment to Third World development via the "Colombo Plan" in the early 1950s. This scholarship scheme attracted many elite students from Southeast Asia. By the late 1960s and 1970s, the number of overseas students grew progressively which prompted New Zealand government and educators to recognise the importance of international students' presence to broaden the worldview of local students. Despite the realisation, the official ideology around international student policy was still subsumed under the notion of foreign aid (Tarling, 2004, p.49). The reform in Education Act in 1989 clearly reflected the government's position in favouring the sale of places in universities (Tarling, 2004, p.83). By 1990s, New Zealand universities like Australia and United Kingdom had become increasingly dependent on full-fee paying international students for discretionary revenue (De Vita & Case, 2003; Hawley, 2002; Marginson, 2002). Academic capitalism thus became the driving force behind feverish recruitment of international students into New Zealand higher education.

In addition to that, an unprecedented rise in the number of Asian international students plus the "new wave" of Asian immigrants had made Asian people more visible in Auckland which proliferated the growth of what Spoonley et al (2005) termed as "small world" networks. This had produced some unwanted social consequences such as heightened xenophobia and target racism (Kan, 2002; Misa, 2002). Moreover with language barriers, cultural differences and racial discrimination, some of the newcomers found difficulty in getting to know the local people (Beaver & Bhat, 2002; Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Butcher et al, 2002; Mills, 1997; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Unfortunately, their inability to assimilate or integrate into 'Kiwi' culture was perceived negatively by some New Zealanders. Many Asian immigrants and international students were not prepared for such a reaction. Their problems were compounded by the fact there was little or no assistance from the government or local institutions to assist with their acculturation.

Undeniably, the diverse make up of the student body in New Zealand universities today provides an ideal setting for students and staff to interact cross-culturally and acquire socio-cultural

competency skills. However, plausible as it may sound, the rhetoric that “international students as a learning resource” is but a supposition rather than facts grounded in research (Bowry, 2002, p.27). Most researchers (De Vita & Case, 2003; Fenwick, 1987) concur that international students remain an “unrealised potential” in many Western higher learning communities and New Zealand is no different from the others. The marketisation discourse within international education is indeed problematic as profitability rather than internationalisation now dominates institutional agenda in relation to international education (De Vita & Case, 2003; Welch, 2002; Marginson, 2002; Fenwick 1987).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Most discourses in the last decade have centred on the relationship between market theory and international education. Policymakers and entrepreneurs view the reforms in higher education in positive terms (Berg, 2005; *The Economist*, 2005) while educators, social researchers and other stakeholders question the integrity of an international education policy which is informed and driven predominantly by economics (De Vita & Case, 2003; Fenwick, 1987; Welch, 2002; Yang, 2002). The question emerging from the debates is whether genuine “internationalisation” or economic “globalisation” (Welch, 2002) is actually taking place in Western higher education. Welch (2002, p.438) argues that a prime indicator of the genuine internationalisation of the universities is seen in the “mutuality and reciprocal cultural relations within university internationalisation activities”. One example of this is the effort to integrate international and local students and other non-commercial activities within the institutions. By contrast, economic globalisation of education is more concerned with the commercialisation of international programs and activities (Welch, 2002, p.439).

Welch’s question about the genuine internationalisation of the antipodean universities is notably shared by De Vita and Case (2003, p.384) who argue that international marketisation of higher education in the UK, in effect, “militates against a type of internationalisation that would make *British+ university culture more multicultural, more open to the other and more conducive to the development of a critical stance vis-à-vis [our] own cultural conditioning and national prejudice”. Academic communities throughout the Western world remain polarised over their understanding of what it means to become “internationalised” (De Vita & Case, 2003, p.386). The literature also highlights concerns about the ad hoc nature and disjointed approach towards internationalisation of the universities. Various studies advocate the need to reform academic curricula, teaching practices and delivery of student services so as to encourage across-the-board internationalisation of higher education in the Western institutions. Some social researchers (De Vita & Case, 2003; Hansen, 2002) argue that personal connections are a vital aspect of intercultural learning and a key to unlocking classroom knowledge on international education, thus making the concept of internationalisation less abstract.

Several studies on friendship patterns between domestic and overseas students in some Western universities reveal that language barriers, perceived or real cultural differences, the lack of confidence and intercultural relational skills are obstacles that prevent international students from having satisfactory and meaningful contact with host students (Arthur, 2004; Barker et al, 1991; Beaver & Bhat, 2002; Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Heggins & Jackson, 2003; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). Whereas apathy or indifference, racial/ethnic stereotypes, xenophobia and racism are the main blockages which inhibit host students from initiating contact with people from ethnically or culturally diverse backgrounds (Baldwin et al, 2000; Spencer-Rodgers, 2001; Ward, 2001). Researchers in the field of psychology (Barker et al, 1991; Bochner & Furnham, 1985; Chen, 1993; Hechanova-Alampay et al, 2002; Hsu, et al, 2001; Leung, 2001) underscore the critical link between friendships with host students and the cultural, emotional psychological well-being of sojourning

students. Most of the studies correlate the academic success rate of international students with the positive relationships they enjoy with host nationals. However, not many international students have had positive experiences with the host students, as Ward (2001) reveals in her literature review on the impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions. Her overall findings suggest that domestic students are largely uninterested in initiating contact with their international peers despite the desire of the latter for more cross-national interaction (Ward 2001, p.3). The paucity of intercultural contact among tertiary students has provided an impetus for some researchers (Klak & Martin, 2003; Lin & Yi, 1997; Nesdale & Todd, 1993, 2000; Sachdev, 1997; Taylor, 1994; Volet & Tan-Quigley, 1999) to begin exploring and assessing effective intervention strategies to actively facilitate cross-cultural contact in an international academic environment. To sum up, there are very few studies that seek to explicate the sociological phenomenon surrounding intercultural interaction within the Western higher education communities. The aim of this study is to contribute to the existing body of literature by examining the sociological factors which influence individual's desire to seek cross-cultural connection. This will be looked at from both the domestic and international students' perspectives.

METHODOLOGY

Using a qualitative method of inquiry, the study aims to derive understanding from research participants' own experiences in seeking friendship acquaintance with someone from different cultural backgrounds. This is in the hope of identifying factors that enhance or hinder interaction between Pakeha and Asian students in New Zealand higher education. Focus groups and one-on-one interviews were used to collect data as both the approaches offered strong incentives for direct personal engagement with the research participants. It also gave opportunity to clarify or elaborate on answers as well as to prompt/probe for more information where prior responses were inadequate.

a. Research Participants

9 Pakeha students¹ and 12 Asian international students from five different nationalities² participated in the research. All of them bar one were undergraduate students. The majority were enrolled in Business School. Pakeha students were recruited randomly from a religious club in the university whereas the Asian participants mostly belonged to a support group for Asian students in the Business School. The latter were all from non-English speaking background (NESB) but grew up in different environment. Some were raised in a multi-racial setting while others were mono-ethnic in orientation. The average age range of the participants was 19 to 22 year old. Interestingly, most of the Asian students had lived in New Zealand or another country for a lengthy period of time but only one Pakeha student had ever lived outside of New Zealand. However, the rest of the domestic cohort had had some forms of contact with people from other cultures/ethnicities prior to entering university.

b. Data Collection

Focus groups and one-on-one interviews were used for data collection. The first focus group comprised mainly Pakeha students, the second international students from Indonesia, Malaysia and

¹ The study has focussed on Pakeha students as a domestic category for two reasons. Firstly, they constitute the largest group of domestic students in most of New Zealand public tertiary institutions (Ministry of Education, 2004)¹ Secondly, the literature (Arthur, 2004; Furnham, 1997; Hayes & Lin, 1994; Leung, 2001) mainly points to the fact that international students have difficulties mostly relating to European students from the receiving countries.

² The Asian international students were from The People's Republic of China (PRC), South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines.

the Philippines, and the final group was made up of entirely of PRC students. Using Krueger's (1998) "topic guide" approach, the research participants were encouraged to talk about their individual experiences in making friends across culture. As most of the participants already knew each other, they were open and candid in their responses to the questions posed by the facilitator. Subsequent to the focus groups, one-on-one interviews were conducted on separate occasions with different sets of participants using the similar question guide and questioning technique. Both the focus group and individual interview sessions were taped with consent from all participants and the audio tapes were then transcribed verbatim.

c. Limitations

Due to the size and nature of the research sample, as well as the geographical focal point for the study, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the findings in this study. As the current research is solely focussed on Pakeha students' interaction with Asians, the views of other domestic students are not represented here.³ Similarly, the Asian international students' perspectives and experiences here are not necessarily representative of all other Asian students studying in New Zealand. Moreover, it has been pointed out that recruiting research participants from a certain religious club can skew the results of our study. However, data seems to suggest that religious affiliation may have some influence though on the individuals' motivation to interact with people whom they do not normally associate with. It does not however eliminate or challenge racial stereotypes held by the individuals. Last but not least, the study is confined only to Auckland which has the largest Asian international student population and immigrants within the country. Hence, the overall findings do not necessarily reflect what is happening in tertiary campuses across the country. I therefore caution against making generalisations based on the outcome of this study.

DATA ANALYSIS

Research participants were asked to comment on the following:

- a. frequency and nature of their contact with member of the other cultural/ethnic group
- b. attitudes and expectations of cross-cultural friendship
- c. benefits of developing intercultural friendships
- d. underlying racial perceptions or stereotypes about members of the other cultural/ethnic group
- e. institutional interventions

Results from the interviews and focus groups were grouped under five categories, namely, "interest and motivation", "attitudes and expectations", "benefits of intercultural interaction", "perceptions and stereotypes" and "institutional intervention".

a. Interest and Motivation

Research evidence underscores no lack of opportunity for interaction between Pakeha and Asian students. The problem is one of motivation. Pakeha students appear to be reluctant to initiate contact with "strangers". They deny that they are prejudiced against Asians and argue that their ambivalence is linked to the fact that many Auckland-born students do not need friendship with overseas students to enhance their wellbeing. They have families and friends in the local communities which they can comfortably rely on. They also attribute their lack of interest to

³ There are two-fold reasons for focussing solely on Pakeha students. Firstly, they are by the far the largest group in the domestic student category. Secondly, previous research by Ward & Masgoret (2004) has underlined that international students experience greater difficulties in getting to know Pakeha than Maori, Pacific or Asian peoples.

befriend Asians to the proliferation of ethnic enclaves. They believe the problem is further compounded by the spatial layout of the campus, which according to some, hinders interpersonal connection. The Asian cohort underlines cultural differences, personality issues and the lack of common interests as hindrance factors. Whilst they recognise that language barrier can be overcome with time, their preference for a group-centred approach in friendship building goes against the individualistic tendency of their western counterparts. These international students also highlight study as their priority since their parents have made huge financial investments to enable them to study overseas. Hence, socialising becomes secondary in the light of mounting pressures to succeed academically. In sum, their interest and motivation to pursue meaningful intercultural interaction are constrained by social circumstances, cultural expectations, academic pressures and environmental factors.

b. Attitudes and Expectations

Pakeha students claim it is difficult for them to think of themselves as “hosts” to their international peers especially when they are gradually outnumbered by Asian students. Many of them begin to feel like “relative strangers” in the own society (Pohl, 1999). This younger generation of New Zealanders also expect the visitors to take initiative to get to know them rather than the other way round. As many of them have never lived outside their own culture, they are unable to empathise with the sojourners’ struggles. They perceive Asian students as being cliquish and dislike the fact that they stay within their ethnic enclaves rather than integrate into host communities. Contrary to their understanding, many Asian students quest for deeper friendship experience with New Zealanders but are forced to turn to co-ethnics for support because they find interaction with Pakeha students difficult and superficial. While they do not expect the host students to initiate contact all the time, they do emphasise the need for mutuality which reflects the reciprocal nature of Asian friendship value (Jao, 1998; Ward & Masgoret, 2004).

c. Benefits of intercultural interaction

On a positive note, most research participants acknowledge the benefits that come with exposure to people of other cultures. Apart from increasing cultural awareness and expanding their worldviews, they agree that interacting with people from different cultures let them experience a sense of solidarity as human beings (Yang, 2002). Pakeha students maintain that interaction with people of other cultures help reinforce their cultural identity (Hansen, 2002) and at the same time make them less judgmental of people who are racially different. Asian students, on the other hand, claim that friendship with host students helps facilitate cross-cultural adjustment, improve their English and gives them a sense of self-validation in a foreign environment (Arthur, 2004). It is also a form of capital accumulation for academic and career advancement for those who are transnationalists at heart (Ong, 1999).

d. Perceptions and Stereotypes

The media portrayal of “Asian invasion” has to some extent affected the way Pakeha students perceive Asian international students. Negative stereotyping of Asians has not only hindered domestic students from mixing freely with their Asian counterparts, it has also led to some degree of “target-based” racism (Baldwin et al, 2000). It needs to be said at this juncture that the incidence of racial discrimination on campus is fewer compared to what Asian students experience in the local communities. On the other hand, Asian students in general tend to think that Pakeha students attach little significance to university education because most of them do not rely on parental support financially. Unlike the Asians, there is little or no pressure on Pakeha students to excel academically and they can therefore afford to spend more time socialising or pursuing other interests. While some Asian students are envious of Pakeha’s independence and freedom, most are

not drawn to the Pakeha way of socialising through drinking and partying. This explains in part why there is little mixing and mingling between the two groups.

e. Institutional Intervention

There is consensus however among the research participants that the University has done little to promote intercultural interactions. Some maintain that the university policies reflect a segregationist stance which tends to separate international and domestic students. One example quoted is the accommodation policy within the Halls of residence. While they all endorse the idea of university-sponsored events to help promote positive acceptance of cultural differences in an ethnically diverse academic community, they also emphasise the need for students to assume personal responsibility for the outcomes of intercultural friendships on campus. As Klak & Martin (2003) rightly point out that large scale cultural events alone do not produce "intercultural global citizens". If there were to be genuine endorsement of cultural diversity by the university, active intervention at every level of the institution is necessary to propel cross-cultural understanding and foster intercultural interaction.

DISCUSSION

Motivation seems to be the key issue affecting the level of intercultural interaction among students in New Zealand higher education. The degree of motivation is predominantly influenced by where the students come from and how they view cross-cultural friendships. Pakeha students who called Auckland home have less of a need to bond with people outside their own community since they have immediate access to family and friendship networks. Furthermore, many domestic students who have never lived away from home or outside their own communities have difficulty identifying with the sojourners' deprivation of social and emotional support. Bennett's (1993, p.46) theorises intercultural sensitivity as a form of "phenomenological knowledge" which cannot be acquired by studying a particular culture but by experiencing the phenomenon itself. This explains in part the apathy or indifference of Pakeha students as perceived by many international students.

Cultural differences also come into play when one looks at motivation for cross-cultural connections. Coming from a collectivist culture, Asian students generally prefer a group-centred approach in friendship building (Tuan-MacLean, 1996). In contrast, Pakeha students veer towards individual interaction and expression between friends. The different expectations and attitudes toward friendship building have had significant ramifications on the frequency of contact with each other. That said, the difference in culture is less of an issue for Southeast Asian students who seem to thrive in a multicultural environment. This is unlike North Asians (which include PRC and Korean students) and Pakeha who tend to be more mono-cultural in orientation and therefore experience greater difficulty relating cross-culturally. Also with language problem most Korean and Mainland Chinese students find it harder to engage in meaningful conversations with native English speaking students.

The rigorous demands of academic life and campus environment have also undermined the students' desire to pursue interpersonal connections, in particular cross-cultural friendships. The findings suggest that Pakeha students in general are more proactive in creating opportunities of friendships for themselves whereas Asian students who are conscious of parental expectations placed upon them to succeed academically are often reluctant to join in any student clubs or extra curricular activities (Bowry, 2002). Moreover, Jones (2003, p.74) discovers that many Asian students see friendship with Pakeha students "as a means to an end rather than as having value in themselves". Invariably, their motive for meaningful engagement with host students is linked either to their need for self-validation in a foreign environment (Arthur, 2004), academic success (Ward 2001; Zimmermann, 1995) or capital accumulation (Putnam, 2000; Ong, 1999). Hence, they tend to

confine their interaction with Pakeha students within classrooms only and turn to co-ethnics or co-nationals to meet their social need (Ward, 2001).

The study is inconclusive in terms of how the presence of Asian international students adds value to Pakeha's learning experience (Bowry, 2002; Holmes & Bird, 2004). However, the research reiterates the fact that New Zealanders in general believe that race relations have worsened in the wake of the "new wave" of immigrants from non-European source countries. Williams (1998) argues that as New Zealand immigration policies are increasingly shaped by capitalist need and competitiveness of the global economy, racism and xenophobia also escalates. It is evident too from the Pakeha students' responses that New Zealand mass media plays a crucial role in reinforcing their negative stereotype of Asian people (Spoonley & Trlin, 2004; Stirling, 2003). Nonetheless there is consensus among the research participants that the opportunities they have had to interact with people from other cultures help challenge ethnocentrism and racial stereotypes they previously held about the 'other' (Klak & Martin, 2004; Thomas, 1996). It gives Pakeha students a new sense of appreciation of the heterogeneous nature of Asian communities. As for the latter, interaction with local students enhances their cultural induction and exposes them to new ways of learning (Ng, 1985). For both Pakeha and Asian international students, the benefits of intercultural interactions on campus also extend to their future participation in the global work force (Arthur, 2004; De Vita & Case, 2003; Zimmermann, 1995).

Finally, the results of this study is consistent with other research which suggest that most universities invest very little or no resources at all to the effort of promoting intercultural exchange on campus, despite paying lip service to its importance within international education (De Vita & Case, 2003; Welch, 2002; Bowry, 2002; Fenwick, 1987). International students are viewed more "as an economic resource rather than a learning resource" (Bowry, 2002, p.27). If there is any cultural engagement it tends to be unidirectional (Smart et al, 2000). International students are encouraged to learn about the host culture but not vice versa. The unidirectional approach has inevitably reinforced complacency among local students in terms of initiating cross-cultural friendship. There is no doubt that institutional intervention plays a critical role in promoting and facilitating intercultural interactions on campus (Arthur, 2004; Butcher et al, 2002; Nesdale & Todd, 1993; Smart et al, 2000). However, both the domestic and international cohorts have different ideas on how it should be done. Pakeha students see large scale university-sponsored events as effective medium to promote cultural awareness and generate more inter-ethnic interest among students. Asian students show less interest in campus-wide cultural activities because of time consciousness as well as the belief that university-sponsored events do not necessarily lead to greater engagement with and acceptance of cultural differences (Klak & Martin, 2003). They maintain that fostering a supportive campus environment is the essence for cultivating "intercultural global citizens". This includes the way in which university shapes their policies around international and domestic students' issues, spatial and environmental factors, activities and programmes that encourage deliberate mixing of host and overseas students (Abe et al, 1998). In sum, the important aspect of personal connection "involves real tasks, emotional and intellectual participation." (De Vita & Case, 2003; Hansen 2002)

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the cultivation of any friendship requires both parties to share something in common be it similar or complementary experiences, mutual interests or same life aspirations. This is even more pertinent in cross-cultural friendship whereby differences in culture and other societal factors interplay with each other and influences one's perception of the 'other'. It is naïve to think that intercultural interaction or learning will simply happen by putting a culturally diverse group of people together in the same environment. The current research shows that it is not the case. Pakeha

and Asian students have co-existed in the same university without having to interact with one another. This will continue to be so unless the University actively intervenes and seeks to establish a culture that endorses genuine intercultural exchange and engagement among students and staff, bearing in mind however that students themselves must also assume personal responsibility for making the connection cross-culturally to happen.

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