

**Indigenous, Pre-undergraduate and International Students at Central  
Queensland University, Australia: Three Cases of the Dynamic Tension Between  
Diversity and Commonality**

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**Abstract**

While diversity and commonality are not necessarily contradictory aspirations in relation to contemporary teaching in higher education, they exist potentially in a state of dynamic tension, fostered by market-based and government-induced policies that strive to have the largest and widest possible client or customer base while reducing costs by standardising delivery and assessment.

This paper explores this dynamic tension between diversity and commonality through three empirical cases of different types of students at Central Queensland University in Australia: Indigenous, pre-undergraduate and international students. The paper presents an analytical synthesis of the particular teaching strategies developed by academic staff working with students in each case: experiential learning, transformative learning and culturally situated pedagogy. The authors argue that these strategies constitute a potentially effective means of helping to resolve the dynamic

tension between, and of unravelling the Gordian knot linking, diversity and commonality in Australian contemporary higher education.

## **Introduction**

There are at least two possible ways of conceptualising the relationship between diversity and commonality in contemporary higher education, depending on the meanings ascribed to the two terms. One way is to interpret the terms respectively as ‘difference’ and ‘sameness’ and hence to conceive of them as logical opposites and therefore of having no connection with each other. This would be the view, for example, if ‘commonality’ represented the meritocratic argument that universities reflect the pinnacle of cultural achievement and that ‘diversity’ is achieved a lowering of the standards of quality on which that pinnacle rests. The other way is to think of the terms as mutually dependent, each relying on the other for its meaning and in combination both being necessary components of a greater whole. This would characterise a position that sees the quality of university provision as depending in equivalent measure on certain commonly accepted standards of teaching and learning being accessible to broadly diverse groups of learners, with the rigour of the standards and the vitality of the diverse learners equally necessary to the sector’s survival and sustainability in delivering mass and universal higher education (Trow, 2006).

The authors incline more to the second than to the first view. At the same time, they contend that the contemporary landscape of Australian higher education fosters an antagonistic rather than a complementary relationship between diversity and commonality, positioning them in a relationship of dynamic tension. This is because that landscape is heavily influenced by the discourses of neoliberalism, marketisation, economic rationalism and corporate managerialism (Danaher, Gale & Erben, 2000; Marginson, 1997; Marginson & Considine, 2000; Pusey, 1991; Saunders, 2002; Tourish, 2000; Wallerstein, 1999). While these discourses are complex and contain differentiated strands of thinking, in combination they conceptualise universities as

businesses and students as clients or consumers seeking knowledge in the form of commodified packages or products that the universities provide. The application of these discourses through government policies of funding and accountability, and thus through university strategic and management plans, emphasises efficiency, cost reduction and mass production of materials – large student numbers completing a relatively small set of standardised courses with the lowest possible level of lecturer interaction.

This application of these dominant discourses aligns easily with a reductionist and homogenised approach to commonality, where sameness and standardisation are highly prized, and is dramatically disconnected from notions of diversity, where the focus is on celebrating multiplicity and fostering difference. This dynamic tension between commonality and diversity is revealed in ongoing debates around such ‘hot topics’ in Australian contemporary universities as academic integrity, generic skills, graduate attributes and information literacy. It is manifested particularly strongly in the teaching and learning of variously marginalised or minority groups who fall outside a homogenised view of university students and who are often positioned ‘off the radar’ in relation to a narrow and reductionist approach to commonality. In short, the diversity of and within these groups renders them problematic with regard to the commonality of a neoliberal and marketised system of higher education.

This paper examines three such groups from a single Australian university: Indigenous, pre-undergraduate and international students at Central Queensland University (CQU), a regional university with campuses in metropolitan and international centres. The groups have been selected on the following basis:

- They represent different and particular dimensions of ‘diversity’.

- They challenge and contest taken-for-granted and often unquestioned assumptions about ‘commonality’.
- They have been the focus of empirical, published research by academics who have been involved in teaching them.
- They have given rise to the application of specific pedagogical strategies: experiential learning, transformative learning and culturally situated pedagogy.

Presenting an analytical synthesis of this empirical research into each case, the authors argue that these pedagogical strategies constitute powerful counternarratives to the metanarrative of neoliberal and marketised universities and that in doing so they provide a potentially effective means of helping to resolve the dynamic tension between, and of unravelling the Gordian knot linking, diversity and commonality in Australian contemporary higher education.

### **A Profile of Central Queensland University**

CQU began life in 1967 as the Queensland Institute of Technology (Capricornia), changing its name in 1971 to the Capricornia Institute of Advanced Education (Central Queensland University, 2006c, n.p.). It continued with this title and campuses hundreds of kilometres apart in the Central Queensland region, initially in Rockhampton and subsequently in Gladstone, Mackay, Bundaberg and Emerald, until the end of the 1980s, during part of which time it was designated by the Commonwealth Government as one of eight nationally recognised distance education centres (in addition to continuing to provide undergraduate diplomas and degrees to face-to-face students in Rockhampton). As part of the abolition of the binary system dividing Australian higher education into universities and institutes of advanced

education initiated by the then Commonwealth Minister for Employment, Education and Training, John Dawkins, the institution became the University College of Central Queensland in 1990, the University of Central Queensland in 1992 and Central Queensland University in 1994, with the capacity to award postgraduate diplomas and degrees, including doctorates.

A feeling among some senior administrators of CQU from the mid 1990s onwards that the combination of face-to-face students in Central Queensland and distance education students from around Australia and overseas was insufficient to sustain student numbers in the medium and long term led to the institution's entry into the international education market. This centred on the establishment of centres in Singapore, Dubai, Hong Kong and Shanghai and, most controversially, the development of a joint venture partnership with Campus Group Holdings, a private company, to set up campuses only for international students in the Australian metropolitan cities of Sydney, Melbourne and Brisbane, the Queensland city of the Gold Coast and Fiji (Central Queensland University, 2006c, n.p.). In recognition of its prominent role in international education, CQU won the IDP Australian exporter of the year award for education in 2002 and the National Exporter of the Year (Education) award in 2005.

CQU has therefore combined a national and international reputation for excellence in teaching and learning in face-to-face, distance, online and international contexts with a certain ambivalence about its constituency and hence its identity, encapsulated in the perception that it is an Australian regional university with metropolitan and international centres – or, as the current statement of the institution's vision has it, in the aspiration that “Central Queensland University will be a teaching and research

university of distinction in borderless professional and adult learning” (Central Queensland University, 2006d, n.p.).

What this necessarily selective profile of CQU exhibits is the longstanding and continuing dynamic tension between diversity and commonality underpinning policy-making and strategic planning throughout the institution’s existence. On the one hand, the diversity of CQU’s student population – face-to-face domestic students in Central Queensland, distance and online domestic students throughout Australia and overseas, international students in the largest population centres in the three eastern states on the Australian mainland taught through the joint venture partnership with Campus Group Holdings, international students in the Asia Pacific region taught by locally resident contract staff members of CQU – is seen by many as simultaneously crucial to the institution’s survival and sustainability and vital to discharging its responsibilities to regional, distance and international education. On the other hand, that same diversity is perceived by others as reflecting an ongoing ambiguity and uncertainty about CQU’s core constituency and hence its identity and as calling into question the coherence and quality assumed to cluster around notions of commonality. As the following sections of the paper demonstrate, this same dynamic tension between diversity and commonality is evident in the three groups of students selected for analysis.

### **Indigenous Students and Experiential Learning**

Without doubt Indigenous Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people) constitute the most disadvantaged and least privileged section of the Australian population. At the most recent national census in 2001, they were estimated as numbering 458,500 people or 2.4% of the total population (Australian Bureau of



Statistics, 2004, n.p.). In the same year, 18% of Indigenous Australians and 41% of non-Indigenous Australians were likely to complete Year 12 (the final year of secondary schooling); Indigenous Australians were more likely to attend Technical and Further Education colleges and less likely to attend universities than non-Indigenous Australians; and among people aged between 18 and 24 years 5% of Indigenous Australians and 23% of non-Indigenous Australians were likely to attend universities. Also in 2001, among people aged 15 years and over 42% of Indigenous people and 59% of non-Indigenous people were likely to be in employment and 20% of Indigenous people and 7% of non-Indigenous people in the labour force were likely to be unemployed. Indigenous Australians also have a significantly lower life expectancy than non-Indigenous Australians and recent media attention has focused on claims of sexual and other abuse against women and children in some Indigenous settlements in remote Australia.

Nulloo Yumbah is CQU's Indigenous Learning, Spirituality and Research Centre (Central Queensland University, 2006e, n.p.), with its main centre on the Rockhampton campus and with smaller centres on the Bundaberg and Mackay campuses. A consistent theme promoted by the current director William Oates is that Nulloo Yumbah must help its students to be equipped to discharge the responsibilities of "custodians...to look after the interests of creaturely existence in localised places and spaces..." (Nulloo Yumbah, n.d., p. 3).

A major vehicle for that equipping is the Tertiary Entry Program (TEP), designed as a pre-undergraduate qualification to enable students who would otherwise not be eligible and who are 19 years of age or older to gain university entrance (Central Queensland University, 2006b, n.p.). TEP consists of eight courses completed over two terms of 26 weeks full-time or equivalent part-time and is available face-to-face

in Rockhampton and Bundaberg and in the external delivery mode. The five compulsory courses include Culture and Learning, Independent Learning, two computer courses and Academic Communication; students also select three elective courses from among law, mathematics, politics, science and writing.

For several years Laurel Hunt has been the coordinator of TEP at CQU. Hunt has also developed, and researched through semi-structured individual and group interviews and published (Hunt, 2004-2005, in press) about, a strong experiential dimension of the program, influenced by her own prior teaching experiences in a number of countries and settings and her conviction that experiential learning is an empowering counternarrative to the educational marginalisation that most TEP students have encountered in their schooling. Moreover, Hunt contends that experiential learning is particularly well suited to working with Indigenous students, although she believes that as ‘good pedagogy’ experiential learning has a wider applicability to all groups of learners.

Hunt (2004-2005) cites the definition of experiential learning by Weil and McGill (1989):

...the process whereby people, individually and in association with others, engage in direct encounter and then *purposefully* reflect upon, validate, transform, give personal meaning to and seek to integrate their different ways of knowing. Experiential *learning* therefore enables the discovery of possibilities that may not be evident from direct experience alone. (p. 248; *emphasis in original*)

It follows from a focus on this powerful combination of “direct encounter” and “*purpose[ful]* reflect[ion] upon” that encounter that TEP:

...begins with the students telling their personal stories, which they then link with group history and social and political processes. As they do this, there is the

potential for their own experience to be validated and for their understandings of the world and their role in society to be transformed as they see alternative narratives. As a group, they widen one another's horizons by sharing their knowledge and experience and so discover new ways of knowing and new possibilities for themselves and the group. This also uncovers the social and cultural aspects of life that may be neglected in educational settings. Experiential learning allows this to happen while nurturing critical thought and analysis. (Hunt, 2004-2005, pp. 41-42)

There are several aspects of Hunt's pedagogical approach worth noting here. One is a deep respect for, and consequent valuing of, each student's lived prior and current experience on its own terms, not simply as a precursor to university studies. Another is that that prior and current experience is the foundation for ongoing learning and consequently of "new ways of knowing and new possibilities for themselves and the group" – that is, the best way of validating existing experience is to link it with new and continuing learning. Yet another is the importance of attending to the non-cognitive and non-theoretical forms of knowledge, both "the social and cultural aspects of life" and the spiritual domain of engaging with the world (Hunt, 2004). Finally, the reference to "nurturing critical thought and analysis" evokes the point that experiential learning in this context is tied to a politicised understanding of the relative positioning of Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing and that such criticality is indispensable to TEP graduates being able to apply critical thinking and analytical skills to both their own knowledge claims and those of the wider Australian and global communities.

The authors of this paper interpret the TEP students' experiential learning, mediated through Hunt's teaching and research, as a powerful celebration of their

crucial contribution to the diversity of both CQU and Australia. Equally or perhaps even more significantly, this enactment of experiential learning represents a taming, if not a subversion and transformation, of the drive towards commonality represented by generic skills and graduate attributes. For example, Hunt's strategy for circumventing the potential paradox of using experiential learning in a university system predicated on the statement of predetermined learning outcomes is both pedagogically appropriate and experientially authentic: "While there is an outline for each course [in TEP], it gives merely the general direction that the course will take. Because TEP genuinely values people's experiences and knowledge, the course is different for each group of students" (in press, n.p.). At the same time, program outcomes include helping to equip graduating students for academic achievement in subsequent undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications.

More broadly, the authors see the TEP instantiation of the broader field of scholarship pertaining to experiential learning (Bamber & Tett, 2000; Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993) as an effective engagement with the dynamic tension between diversity and commonality in relation to Indigenous Australian students at CQU. Certainly the success of this engagement is not guaranteed or necessarily permanent. On the other hand, it demonstrates what is possible in terms of aligning diversity and commonality rather than positioning them as mutually exclusive when students, academic and support staff members and external stakeholders are able to work together to achieve some empowering and enduring outcomes.

### **Pre-undergraduate Students and Transformative Learning**

2006 marked the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the Skills for Tertiary Education Preparatory Studies (STEPS) program at CQU. Like TEP, STEPS is a pre-

undergraduate preparatory program designed for students aged 19 years or over who would otherwise not be eligible for university entrance (Division of Teaching and Learning Services, 2006, n.p.). The program is offered in a 12-week accelerated or a 24-week extended or ‘flex’ mode, with the former face-to-face and the latter face-to-face or external. The accelerated program consists of four compulsory courses – Language and Learning, Transition Mathematics 1, Computing for Academic Assignment Writing and Tertiary Preparation Skills – and the extended and ‘flex’ programs offer the same courses spread over two academic terms. STEPS is available in different combinations of modes at all five Central Queensland campuses of CQU: Rockhampton, Bundaberg, Emerald, Gladstone and Mackay.

STEPS has been the subject of ongoing qualitative and quantitative research (including semi-structured individual interviews and focus groups), focusing on several elements of the program’s pedagogy and the students’ learning styles and outcomes. That research has been widely published in academic journals, edited books and conference proceedings (see for example Coombes & Danaher, 2006a, 2006b; Danaher, Willans, Forbes-Smith & Strahm, 2006; Simpson, 2004; Willans, McIntosh, Seary & Simpson, in press). The program has been widely acclaimed, with Jenny Simpson, the leading developer of the course Language and Learning, receiving a Citation for Outstanding Contribution to Student Learning awarded in 2006 by the Australian Carrick Institute for Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (Central Queensland University, 2006a, n.p.).

Much of the research and publishing associated with STEPS has focused on the course Language and Learning, which Jenny Simpson and her colleagues have conceptualised as a vehicle for a pedagogical approach known broadly as ‘transformative learning’. Derived from principles of adult learning and perspective

transformation and notions such as learning styles and human archetypes, the course has deployed strategies as varied as the author's chair, circles of concern and the Hero's Journey to present to students a framework by which they can transform their understandings of themselves, their communities, their nation and their planet. Like the TEP students, many STEPS students found their schooling experiences negative and destructive and bring with them into the program the self-perception of 'failed learner'; at its core, the transformation in their learning is from that view to one of themselves and one another as capable of succeeding in the university environment. This shift in thinking certainly conforms with Cranton's (2002, p. 64) definition of transformative learning:

[A]n individual becomes aware of holding a limiting or distorted view. If the individual critically examines this view, opens herself to alternatives, and consequently changes the way she sees things, she has transformed some part of how she makes meaning out of the world. (cited in Coombes & Danaher, 2006b, p. 762)

Coombes and Danaher (2006b) provided a useful summary of the types of strategies used in Language and Learning to promote this kind of transformative learning:

There are many ways whereby self-awareness can be engendered in a learning situation. As students become familiar with the notion of individual learning styles, they become aware of the ways in which they can learn best. There are many opportunities in the STEPS program for shared learning where teachers and students connect with one another in discussion, discourse and debate. In guiding their students towards critical self-reflection, inevitably teachers find themselves involved in the same process as they seek to engage in, and encourage students'

engagement in, the process of transformative learning. As students gain increased awareness of themselves and the academic *milieu*, as mature individuals they are more likely than mainstream students to question and challenge the *status quo*. (p. 762)

Or in the words of three STEPS graduates reflecting on their own transformed learning:

Jane: By coming to STEPS I've answered the call of what can I give back.

Brad: The Call to Adventure is getting past this uncomfortable feeling world to knowing there is potential in you and not wasting it. I think these steps will help me to unlock that potential. When I've reached my potential I'll know I've conquered something in my life. You're never free until you've reached your potential.

Jonathan: To be an adult learner is putting yourself on a journey of chaotic proportions. The prize is worth the chaos and fear....If students are shown this model and are honest with themselves about the learning journey they are about to undertake, the Hero's Journey will be the sword to remove the fear and let them seize the day. (Simpson, 2004, p. 73)

As with TEP, STEPS is explicitly learner-centred and focused on the lifeworlds and lived experience of its students. Also like TEP, STEPS positions those lifeworlds and that lived experience as the starting point of and the vehicle for pedagogical change and development in understanding and awareness of self and others. Inevitably the scale and scope of the transformed learning varies from student to student; what is a transformation in thinking for one student is a minor adjustment for another. Yet the program's consistently low attrition rates and the high proportion of graduates from the program who go onto undergraduate and in some cases

postgraduate degrees at CQU and other universities demonstrate the success of STEPS in generating productive and in many situations significant change in and empowerment of its students.

Again as with TEP's utilisation of experiential learning, the authors assert that STEPS's facilitation of transformative learning has a broader importance beyond the program. This importance lies in the program's and the pedagogy's celebration and promotion of the diversity of the STEPS student body; transformative learning would not be possible unless that diversity were acknowledged and valued. Furthermore, at least some of the academics who teach and research with STEPS students argue that the success of STEPS in celebrating and promoting the students' diversity is made possible by the program's position outside the faculties: "...it is STEPS' marginal status within CQU that is a key to its distinctive approach in which the values of pastoral care and critical self-reflection are fostered" (Coombes & Danaher, 2006b, p. 764).

For the authors, this link between valuing student diversity and having a relatively "marginal status" highlights the role and effectiveness of STEPS in contributing to the commonality of CQU students through quality pedagogy, not by being prey to the strategies of standardisation and surveillance to which the faculties are perhaps more prone. Thus the program's particular enactment of the broader field of transformative learning (Cranton, 1997; Mezirow, 2000) equips STEPS students, academics and managers to negotiate a pathway between diversity and commonality at CQU that is generally enabling and sustaining for both the program and the institution.

### **International Students and Culturally Situated Pedagogy**



As was noted above, international students represent a significant proportion of CQU's student body. Their diversity and numbers are crucial to the institution's continued success, yet they also constitute a challenge to its commonality: international students account for the greatest amount of concern in relation to academic and information literacy and to academic integrity, most often seen in cases of alleged plagiarism. The latter encapsulate the contradiction and the dynamic tension attending CQU's international students: the university is dependent on the multiple ways of knowing that they reflect, yet is also required to adhere to a culturally homogeneous set of practices around communicating such knowledge.

Several CQU academic staff members from different disciplines and faculties have published empirical research about teaching international students. Alcock and Alcock (in press) reported on a successful approach to modelling rather than teaching generic skills (which they divided into "hard" or employability and "soft" or personal and behavioural skills) with their postgraduate business students. In doing so, they drew on principles of experiential learning and the facilitation of cross-cultural awareness. Also teaching in the business discipline, Windeknecht (2004) deployed the concept of multiliteracies to underpin her interrogation of the effectiveness of online group assessment in promoting shared understanding between Australian and international students in an undergraduate course. Danaher (under review) likewise used the multiliteracies framework to reflect on the challenges and opportunities attendant on teaching an undergraduate communications course to Australian and international students and in the process on seeking to contribute to fashioning a global citizenry. Priest (2006) identified transformative learning and dialogic teaching as key strategies to be mobilised in fulfilling the Internet's potential role in bringing

together regional and international students in ways that will align the local and the global in a mutually dependent and responsive relationship.

While these academics have identified a variety of concepts and strategies to enhance the teaching of international students at CQU, the authors have synthesised their approaches into what can be called a ‘culturally situated pedagogy’. Such a pedagogy highlights and celebrates the centrality of culture in framing students’ engagements with and understandings of the world, while recognising the specificity and locatedness of each student’s cultural positioning as learner, citizen, community member and so on. This approach resonates with current theorising of culture, globalisation and language (see for example Apple, Kenway & Singh, 2005; Singh, Kell & Pandian, 2002) and is consistent with CQU’s opportunity and responsibility to create a new and more fluid and nuanced appreciation of culturally based ways of knowing – one’s own and others’.

While not identifying culturally situated pedagogy explicitly, each of the CQU academics cited in this section of the paper has advocated a view of teaching and learning with international students that has a crucial cultural dimension. Alcock and Alcock (in press) stated that the conventional teaching paradigm in business was inappropriate because it is:

...framed for an ethnic culture drawn from that culture’s character and profile, whereas the intended recipient of learning is a heterogeneous market that includes a combination of national and international students who have often had limited exposure to the teaching pedagogy. (n.p.)

They argued that a more appropriate pedagogy was one centred on cultural diversity, experience, integration and sensitivity. Windeknecht (2004) interpreted cultural diversity in terms of the contrasts between individualistic and group behaviours and

between active and passive learning roles, and contended that multiliteracies provided a useful framework for facilitating intercultural communication and understanding in an online teaching and learning environment. Danaher (under review) cited a definition of cultural literacy by Schirato and Yell (2000, p. 190) – “a knowledge of meaning systems combined with an ability to negotiate those systems within different cultural contexts” – and ideas of cultural sense, sensitivity and sensibility as potentially powerful resources in what he saw as the overdue and urgent task of helping to develop global citizens “who are instilled with an interest in sustaining cultural difference and in resisting pressures of homogenisation” (n.p.). Finally, Priest (2006) wrote of the complexity associated with regional and international students’ respective and shared experiences of and engagements with cultural heterogeneity and homogenisation, and she cautioned that “...in order to make such interventions, multiculturalism needs to be something students have a lived experience of, rather than something that is taught through a kind of ‘shopping mall’ approach to different cultures...” (n.p.).

These multiple strands of a culturally situated pedagogy situated in a broader field of scholarship (Murphy & Ivinson, 2003) constitute elements in an alternative and potentially more enabling approach to teaching international students at CQU. More generally, such a pedagogy has considerable merit in helping to resolve the dynamic tension between diversity and commonality in relation to such students. From this perspective, the marketised and commercial view of international students (symbolised by the joint venture partnership between CQU and Campus Group Holdings that covers the teaching of most international students at the university) that focuses on a standardised delivery and assessment model is resisted and possibly

transformed by a pedagogical approach that is much more attentive to and respectful of their difference.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has presented three cases of groups of learners who in varied respects deviate from the 'norm' of middle class domestic students whose image frames understandings of commonality in relation to Australian higher education. The first two groups – Indigenous Australians studying TEP and pre-undergraduates studying STEPS – would not be likely to attend university if those programs did not exist, and the international students would be likely to attend different universities from CQU if the joint venture partnership with Campus Group Holdings had not been brokered. That is, those programs and that partnership have been crucial to challenging the aforementioned commonality with the diversity reflected in these three groups of learners.

The paper also outlined three distinctive pedagogies – experiential learning, transformative learning and culturally situated pedagogy – and the authors contended that those pedagogies, themselves constituting a broad heterogeneity of approach to teaching and learning, were generally successful in celebrating and valuing the students' diversity while contributing to the elements of commonality that are inevitable and inescapable in Australian contemporary universities: academic literacy and integrity, course profiles, generic skills and graduate attributes. The argument presented here was that the three pedagogies provide a successful means of negotiating and as far as possible unravelling the Gordian knot of the dynamic tension between diversity and commonality that is endemic in those universities.

The broader significance of this argument is reflected in the fact that many of the CQU academics whose research has been cited here have made the point that one or other of these three pedagogies is really about ‘good teaching’. Thus all students can benefit from a combination of experiential learning, transformative learning and culturally situated pedagogy – and many other successful pedagogical approaches as well. This suggests that the dynamic tension between diversity and commonality might actually be part of a wider struggle – difference versus sameness, heterogeneity versus homogeneity, opening up versus closing down dialogue, understanding and respect versus incomprehension and derision towards otherness – that besets the contemporary world. If so, these and other pedagogies are likely to have a more extensive reach and a larger currency than might presently be imagined.

### **Acknowledgments**

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