Framing a research project to explore the experiences of international staff in an Australian university

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Abstract

Overlapping concepts of globalisation and internationalisation are now firmly interwoven into the institutional fabric of universities, both here and abroad. Australian universities now enrol a significant number of international students and employ increasing numbers of international staff as academic teachers and researchers. Much has been written about the experiences of international students, particularly as they relate to their transition and adaptation to universities in Australia. However, there is less corresponding research about the experiences of international academic employees in Australian universities. This paper reviews existing and associated literature, including research that explores the experience of international students or transnational professionals. It uses this literature to establish the parameters of a research project to examine the experience of international academic staff at the University of Southern Queensland (USQ). Specific issues of transnational identity, academic cultures, cultural literacy and a sense of belonging will be examined.

Keywords

Academic cultures, cultural literacy, globalisation, international academic staff, internationalisation, sense of belonging, transnational identity

INTRODUCTION

Australian universities operate more and more within a globalised context, with increasingly international student cohorts, and a progressively more international staff profile. This is a logical outcome of knowledge becoming a globalised commodity. In line with Castells' (1996) arguments about 'the network society', universities are 'naturally' knowledge institutions so they increasingly compete for staff in a global context, rather than being confined to national borders. This remains the case: but the competition has become even more intense in the past fourteen years. Whilst there has been a considerable amount of higher education research about the experiences of international students, little has been written about international academic staff, despite one notable recent exception (Saltmarsh & Swirski 2010) which will be supported by one forthcoming (Maadad & Melkoumian 2010).

The aim of this paper is to establish the parameters of a research project to investigate the experiences of international staff at the University of Southern Queensland. Because there appears to be little existing literature about the experiences and needs of international staff outside of Saltmarsh and Swirski, and because (as the Bradley Report suggests) institutional desires to attract more overseas students mean that institutions need to keep more overseas staff to meet the expected shortfall in home-grown academics, this paper will initially reference the work of Geert Hofstede. It will then proceed to a discussion on related literature in the areas of management and business communication, the international student experience, the experience of international pre-service teachers, and any literature directly related to the international staff experience. Those professional development programmes that exist for international staff within Australian universities focus on the development of language and communication skills. However, as the literature reviewed indicates, other key factors of any research framework for investigating the experience of international academic staff at the University of Southern Queensland should include: the possible mismatch of expectations between international, academic staff and those of their Australian institution; barriers to professional success and participation generated by cultural and linguistic differences; a lack of institutional support for new international academic staff; a devaluing of the contributions of international staff by their peers and their students; and a sense of exclusion rather than belonging. We argue that answers to these questions should inform any truly equitable professional development programme for international, academic staff.

THE HIGHER EDUCATION CONTEXT

The Bradley Report (2008:24) on Higher Education found that '[I]n 2006, 40.5 per cent of Australian academic staff had a country of birth other than Australia, compared with 25.7 per cent of the total workforce and 23.9 per cent of the total Australian population'. Hugo (2008, in Bradley et al. 2008:22) noted that 'universities are among the highest users' of temporary business migration visas, which allow recipients to work in Australia for up to four years. This trend may well be exacerbated by the existence of an increasingly ageing workforce, with more staff aged 45 years or older (Bradley et al. 2008): a trend that is the same for all OECD countries (Hugo, in Bradley et al. 2008).

Within a global context where universities may be competing for international staff there have been calls for Australian universities to prioritise improvement of academic working conditions. Coates, Dobson, Edwards, Friedman, Goedegebuure and Meek (2007: 30, 31) argue that 'radical change is needed in the institutional climate within which academics operate'; at an Australian level, they claim, the priority is not so much increased salaries but 'more hands on deck' - there needs to be a significant cultural change by institutional employers. However, at this point in time it seems that there have been few institutional changes to accommodate the needs of international staff. In other words, there may be a 'disconnect' between the recruitment of international staff and potential changes needed to create an environment that would allow them to thrive. In the meantime, international staff employed by Australian institutions may be being denied the opportunity to function at their professional best, as equals among equals.

Indeed, Saltmarsh and Swirski (2010: 295) indicate significant institutional shortfalls in meeting both the professional and personal needs of incoming international staff. In particular, Saltmarsh and Swirski were motivated to conduct their study because there is:

> insufficient empirical data about the experiences of international academics to make effective comparisons across cultural or linguistic groups, opening the way for further research that maps the specificities of transitional issues among and between groups on a much larger scale. Little is understood about the impact of such transitions on personal, family and professional lives and about their longer-term

implications for the sustainability of the international academic workforce (2010:299)

The last line is particularly relevant. Studies such as this and Maadad and Melkoumian's (2010) present research on experiences of international staff have taken place in the context of the aforementioned rising shortage of academic staff and predicted international competition to employ talented professionals. Such competition goes hand-in-hand with increasing competition in the overseas student market. While the numbers of students engaging in postgraduate studies is predicted to continue to decline, the numbers of students studying overseas is set to increase, placing further pressure on institutions to attract and retain good teachers (Access Economics, in Bradley et al. 2008). Australian institutions will compete more for students: recent figures show that 44 per cent of Central Queensland University's students, for example, are from overseas (Bradley et al. 2008: 92). Overall, 15 per cent of Australian university revenue comes from overseas students. Universities must continue to attract and retain international staff to teach increased numbers of both international and domestic students. However, the student experience at any level will be enhanced when all academic staff feel professionally and personally rewarded by working in a context where they are supported and respected by the institution, their peers, and by the students themselves.

FRAMING THE PROJECT

The work of Geert Hofstede serves as an anchor point for our framework because it emphasises the importance of both language *and culture* for the success of the student-teacher relationship. This is a relationship that lies at the heart of higher education, and at the heart of professional practice for academic staff. Hofstede (1986:303) argues that 'as teacher/student interaction is such an archetypal human phenomenon, and so deeply rooted in the culture of a society, *cross-cultural* learning situations are fundamentally problematic for both parties'. Based on his research, Hofstede (1986:307-308) proposed four dimensions of cultural variation (the 4 D Model): individualism/collectivism; power distance; uncertainty avoidance; and masculinity.

Individualism/collectivism refers to how much importance is given to the individual relative to the community in a given society. Power distance defines the extent to which individuals in a society accept inequalities of power between individuals. This potentially has very large implications for the student-

teacher relationship, as well as for wider relationships of international staff within the university context, many of which are based on certain assumptions about institutional hierarchies of power. Uncertainty avoidance describes the extent to which individuals in a society tolerate unstructured, unpredictable or unclear situations. Again, this works potentially on different levels. For example, for 'local' students, it may be expressed in the form of avoidance of (or negative responses to) teachers with 'foreign' accents, while for international staff it may result in avoidance of everyday situations that are unfamiliar to them, which may lead to isolation in a social sense. The masculine dimension (which infers its opposite, femininity) describes the extent of the distinction between masculine and feminine roles and characteristics within a given culture. These dimensions were based on Hofstede's (1986:306) research about employees within one multinational business, which had a presence in 40 different countries.

In management literature, the work of Hofstede has been used to analyse interpersonal dynamics based on cultures within corporate teams (see Iles 1995; Matveev & Milter 2004; Sriussadaporn 2006). Much of this literature focuses on the overlapping issues of communication and cultural competence and the potential for miscommunication and misunderstandings between employees of different cultural backgrounds to damage important negotiations, block project outcomes and reduce productivity overall. Specifically, it focuses on the need for the professional development of business employees and managers to enable them to navigate the sometimes complex intercultural communication contexts they face as part of routine work within increasingly internationalised corporations. Whilst the focus on intercultural communication within business literature has raised concerns about the potential for negative stereotyping of some cultures, most agree that some sensitivity to differences in culture and values, and the way these affect employee expectations and practices, is valuable for employees working overseas, or with international colleagues at home (Sriussadaporn 2006:331).

One Australian study that focuses instead on the experiences of migrants in Australian workplaces is that of Mak (1998). Mak's study focused on the experiences of Hong Kong Chinese migrant supervisors in the Australian workplace. She notes that because of the British influence many Hong Kong migrant employees speak fluent English and have British qualifications. However, Mak's findings suggested that there were various workplace differences experienced by study participants, including a higher tolerance of individual expression, a smaller power distance between employees and supervisors, a more relaxed work ethic, and a more collaborative, participatory communication style between employees (Mak 1998:113). The value of intercultural communication for employees is echoed in business education literature (Arthur 2002; Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson 2003; Cheney 2001; Woods & Barker 2003). However, with the exception of Mak the emphasis is on the needs of local or future local employees who are working overseas

This might explain why the focus in these kinds of studies is explicitly on the functional elements of cultural competence, with a direct and tangible measurable component of increasing or decreasing business success. These functional elements are also those that lend themselves to discreet professional development modules that will train local employees to manage their 'deficiencies', including the potential for cultural insensitivity, whilst abroad. The specificity of the cultural competence model used here may fall short of addressing the potential needs of academic migrants. However, it can also be argued that cultural identity, cultural practices and, by extension, cross-cultural communication are much more complex. These complexities, combined with the issue of power, which arguably lies at the core of cross-cultural communication (Foucault 1980), may require universities to go beyond a competency model that places the responsibility for 'fitting in' squarely at the feet of international staff members.

The cultural competency model has also been applied to the student context in higher education, both in Australia and elsewhere. The first arena of application is that of business graduates. Within the Australian context, the need for intercultural skill development for Australian business students was established by the then Federal Government's Karpin Report (Woods & Barker 2003). The importance of intercultural skills for business graduates is also echoed in American literature (see Cheney 2001). So great has been the emphasis on developing intercultural skills of business graduates, that 'intercultural business communication' is now a distinct field of study within Business studies (Bargiela-Chiappini & Nickerson 2003:3). Here, though, as with higher education literature generally, the focus is on students rather than graduate employees of universities themselves.

Within Australian higher education, as in other English speaking nations, student-focused literature has also focused on the experience of

visiting international students at Australian universities. Despite the fact that Hofstede himself applied his 4 D model to both students and teachers, most higher education research to date has focussed on the effects of cultural difference on international students' transition to western universities, their expectations of what it is to be a good student, and what it means to engage in appropriate modes of learning (Hofstede 1986; Vandermensbrugghe 2004; Ryan & Viete 2009; Owens 2008). The linguistic ability of international students has also been a focus of some researchers, because of the potentially negative effect that inadequate language skills have on their learning (Briguglio 2000).

In terms of examining some of the cultural challenges faced by international students Hofstede's individualist/collectivist and power distance dimensions have been more frequently applied (Owens 2008:74). Researchers have particularly focused on the mismatch between expectations of students from collectivist, high power distance cultures, such as China or Taiwan and lecturers from individualist, lower power distance countries such as Australia (Watkins & Biggs 2001). For example, the attentive silence of the collectivist, high power distance student signals respect in their home country but may be interpreted as disinterestedness or disengagement by an Australian teacher (Owens 2008:74). This research also incorporates observations about the roles culture and tradition play in shaping *how* students learn. One example is the now increasingly discredited claim that many Asian or Confucian Heritage Culture (CHC) students favour rote learning over higher order forms of thinking, such as critical thinking (Green 2007; Owens 2008; Watkins & Biggs 2001; Kelly & Ha 1998). Within debates about the experiences of international students pressure is applied to both students and Australian academic staff to adapt their practice. Yet this often occurs at the level of teaching practice and the student-teacher relationship, rather than at the institutional level.

One stream of higher education literature that may more directly address some issues faced by international academic staff in English-speaking universities focusses on the experiences of international pre-service teachers during their school placements (Cruickshank 2010; Pailliotet 1997; Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell 2009). Issues for pre-service teachers identified by such studies include language difficulties, including choosing the right language to manage student behaviour, accents, and the effect of cultural differences on educational approaches (Spooner-Lane et al. 2009:84). One pre-service teacher reflects here on the cultural differences they observed:

> In my country, students tend to be more disciplined: straight backs. They don't call out in class. The thing in China or even in Asia, teachers don't really consider about the students' opinions; they don't like to be challenged by students. You are the boss, basically. There is only one correct answer and the teacher has the correct answer, so we have to follow the teacher (Spooner-Lane et al. 2009:84).

Other issues for pre-service teachers in these studies included the expectations of teacher and faculty supervisors, as reflected in this pre-service teachers' comment:

> It's a language problem, a communication problem, a connection problem [...] I think it comes from where I come from [...] I'm really quiet [...] They read that as a lack of interest or understanding [...] I was always taught to respect teachers – not speak up (Pailliotet 1997:675).

In each case, a combination of difficulties with language and mismatched expectations about what it means to learn and to teach impacted negatively on pre-service teachers' performance, and how they were rated by others for that performance (Cruickshank 2010; Pailliotet 1997; Spooner-Lane et al. 2009).

There are two studies that have directly addressed the general experiences of international, academic staff in Australian universities (Madaad & Melkoumian 2010; Saltmarsh & Swirski 2010). Saltmarsh and Swirski explored the transitional experiences of twelve international academic staff at a regional university in New South Wales. To this end, the authors conducted interviews with international staff and documented their feelings about their experiences of confronting and adapting to Australian cultures, spoken and written language differences, different ways of teaching, and expectations of them as fellow professionals. For example, the authors showed institutional induction failures, where knowledge of computer systems was either assumed or not addressed, and induction did not encompass immigrant needs such as introducing them to Australian banking, support systems and community networks (Saltmarsh & Swirsksi 2010:295). As with the experiences of student teachers above, these outside-work matters apparently were made more salient by the challenge of swift adjustment to new work systems as employers assumed some parallel knowledge: 'I didn't

realise', one respondent remarked, 'prior to coming here how different the higher education system actually is' (Saltmarsh & Swirsksi 2010:296).

A second type of research directly related to the experiences of international, academic professionals in the workplace is focussed on the effect of a lecturer's language on student evaluation ratings (Ogier 2005). Ogier's (2010:486) findings that English as Second Language (ESL) teachers' lectures were rated lower by students indicates that some international academic staff may require support to improve their communication skills. A preliminary survey of professional development programmes in Australian Universities designed for international, NESB staff shows the small number of existing professional development programs that do focus on language and communication. The University of Adelaide has developed a professional development program called 'Spoken language strategies for staff from non-English speaking backgrounds'. This program is also available at other tertiary institutions, and is also promoted by the University of South Australia to its staff. The other available program we found was at the University of New South Wales (UNSW): the 'Workplace English Program'.

While it is undoubtedly important, we would question an exclusive focus on developing academic language and language proficiency. The literature reviewed for this paper indicates a need for broader cultural competencies to ensure the professional success, if not inclusion, of international staff. Saltmarsh and Swirski's (2010) findings would argue that the focus on language is inadequate – yet it remains important for academic staff to develop levels of language proficiency that enable them to clearly communicate their ideas. Several websites maintained by students at several universities in Australia and overseas show regular student complaints about communication difficulties with lecturers who are not native speakers of the dominant language in the country in which they work; postings emphasise that students dislike barriers to learning over which they have little or no control.

International lecturers share student concerns. Anecdotal feedback from international teaching staff at USQ indicates that lecturers would rather students be able to focus on their learning instead of deciphering the language itself. Because of their concern, international lecturers of one faculty at USQ have requested the help of specialised staff to develop a program, which is designed to address what they perceive to be their English language and cultural literacy shortcomings. This action highlights the dual literacy issues, highlighted by the literature reviewed so far, which they have identified as barriers to their professional success. However, a sole focus on the development of these literacies may detract attention from the skills and knowledge international staff bring to their Australian workplace, and from which their colleagues and students could benefit. Such programs may again place the onus of adaptation on the lecturers, and may not reflect the way in which staff in different faculties experience their work. We need to measure the extent and impacts of such issues across an institution, while at the same time identifying whether they are experienced differently according to academic rank and discipline, ethnicity, religion, nationality and gender. Saltmarsh and Swirski's research (2010) was limited to a survey of twelve individuals. An institution with as many international staff as USQ offers the opportunity for a wider survey that encompasses more variables.

The project will therefore investigate international, academic employee experiences of working at a regional university that employs a large number of international academic staff. A broad focus of the research will be whether there is any general misalignment between the expectations of the University and its international staff. One question directly related to the literature reviewed here might examine potential barriers to the inclusion of international staff generated by particular linguistic and cultural differences. Another question might focus on the level and type of support provided to new international academic staff by the University. Additional questions that stem from identified gaps in the literature reviewed here could address whether international staff members perceive that they are valued, both professionally and socially and whether they share a sense of belonging.

CONCLUSION

Answers to research questions raised by the literature reviewed here should inform future research and any language or cultural development activities aimed at building stronger professional profiles. Such programs will undoubtedly aim to achieve the important objective of minimising the potential negative impact of cultural and language differences among NESB staff, while maximising respect for the necessary and diverse skills brought to Australian universities by lecturers from non-English speaking backgrounds. In shifting the onus for cultural and linguistic skills acquisition to the professional development activities of an institution, they should also relieve NESB staff of the pressure of being the

sole agents of their own change while enhancing their feelings of being on an equitable footing professionally, and thus able to achieve their personal and professional goals in their new work settings.

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