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## What can the University of Melbourne do to enhance the quality of international experience?

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### 1. Introduction: Why is internationalisation important?

Thank you. Despite those kind words, I feel a fraud on this platform. Consider the range of languages spoken by my colleagues. Peter is a distinguished historian of France. Tony lived in Indonesia for years. Sophie is bi-lingual in English and Greek. It is delightful to work with such able colleagues. All I can bring to this multilingual feast is English language research and scholarship. I remain convinced, though, of the power of scholarship. I have been working on a book on international students based on an ARC Discovery project, and it is close to completion. During the last three months I have trawled through the large literature on intercultural relations in international education and I will draw on some of that here.

Today's Summit is devoted to the question of what we can do to enhance the quality of international experience. It is a vitally important question. Let me offer three reasons.

1) The first is the *global transformation reason*. Globalization is a central fact of higher education and the global knowledge economy is becoming the 'A game' in human affairs. Research intensive universities are becoming a single world system. All visible to each other. Global position - in university rankings, as a powerhouse of research and knowledge, and as an attractor of good students and staff - is vital to us at the University of Melbourne and more generally is vital to Australian higher education. PhD students and good researchers are mobile on a world-wide basis. The international degree market is growing at twice the rate of domestic students in the OECD countries. It is essential that we draw global talent to us. So we need to be stellar in both global research rankings, and the global degree market. Our position in research rankings feeds into our credibility with international students. And unlike many research universities abroad, we need the income from international students to sustain our role as a research-intensive university. The two are interdependent.

2) The second reason follows from this and is the *bread and butter reason*. Education exports now supply \$12.5 billion each year to Australia in fees and other spending by onshore students. The Australian government wants to keep those export revenues flowing and has organized funding and incentives in higher education to ensure this. International students are vital to the University in a most basic economic sense. Fee-based programs in one

Faculty alone, Economics and Commerce, provide a quarter of total revenue. These fee underpins services, facilities and teaching not just of international students but all students

The slide indicates that two years ago in 2006 Melbourne was one of seven Australian universities enrolling more than 10,000 international students. When onshore enrolments alone are taken into account – onshore enrolments that involve the most central internationalization experience and create the greatest revenues – Melbourne was third. My understanding is that we have now gone past Central Queensland and Monash. We have the largest onshore enrolment in Australia. In that sense we are Australia's leading international university.

The global market in cross-border degrees is growing but also becoming more competitive. In the past Australia and Melbourne have gained market edge through superior marketing and servicing, But other countries will become better in these functions. How do we continue to do well (not just in maintaining and increasing numbers but maintaining and improving the flow of high quality international students)? That's not the only question we must consider. But the answer to all questions must be consistent with strengthening the financial bottom line.

My answer to that question – how can we strengthen our market position – is that we can improve quality in three domains. Domain A is international student welfare, where there are gaps and problems. Domain B is the educational experience of international students. Domain C is the common experience of internationalisation, for both local and international students. I want to talk mostly about Domain B though later discussion will extend into Domain C.

3) That brings me to the third reason why internationalisation is important, the *educational reason*. If Melbourne is Australia's international university, what do we mean by this?

In one respect, student numbers, Australian universities are very internationalised. In other respects, curricula, teaching and learning, they have not changed in the last two decades as much as we might have expected. The main innovations have been on the general staff side, in relation to services and recruitment. Academic staff, too, have become very much better at the administration of international education – better in managing large populations of unevenly prepared learners from a variety of backgrounds, within the established learning systems. But essentially we have been holding the line. The need to source surplus revenues has restricted our capacity to innovate pedagogically. The dominant tasks have been manage and survive.

But precisely because teaching and learning have not yet changed fundamentally in line with the potentials of this more global era, there is scope here for development. I believe that over the next couple of decades, the institutions and nations that introduce successful educational innovations of quality are going to move to the cutting edge of globalization in higher education, and potentially secure a significant advantage in the global market. And inevitably, this to some extent will involve joining to our established Anglo-American traditions in university education, a closer engagement with other traditions and especially those of East and Southeast Asia. I do not think we need to replace our tradition with another. What I am talking about here is a broadening of what we do that enriches our existing strengths.

For the remainder of the time I will talk about the educational aspects. The next section will address myths about international students that are an obstacle to more effective strategies.

The following section will put forward an alternative approach to imagining international education, and understanding international students, before the conclusion.

## 2. Myths about international students

So first, myths about international students

1) You will recall, those who were around in 1977, that the Sex Pistols had No Future. Well *Myth Number 1 is that international students have no past*. We rightly focus on the problem of local students in making the transition from school to university. Yet remarkably, we give little or no thought to the more difficult transition that is undergone by most international students. Most of the time we know little or nothing about the educational systems, learning modes and habits, teacher-student relations and beliefs about learning that have shaped them.

2) *Myth Number 2 is that the agency of international students is weak*. That they are stressed, dependent, educationally near helpless and lost souls conflicted in identity. On the contrary. Most international students are robust. It takes strength, courage and stamina to complete a tertiary program in a foreign culture and linguistic environment away from family and familiar supports. And to deal with discrimination, which two years ago was found to affect 21 per cent of international students at Melbourne, or incidents of exclusion which affected 30 per cent.

3) *Myth Number 3 is that international students are split between 'old' and 'new' identity*. Li and Gasser note that most students maintain a robust sense of original identity, but this is (a) unrelated to whether they form successful intercultural relationships, and (b) often associated with the acquisition of a new identity in the country of education, along side the 'heritage' self. The evidence suggests that international students welcome this broadening of themselves, and that they want to acquire an Australian education, the English language and parts of the local lifestyle without abandoning their old life or values that are important to them.

4) *Myth Number 4 is that international students do not want to mix with locals*. The research evidence confirms our day-to-day observations, that most international students and most local students tend to 'clump' with people of same cultural background, much or most of the time. However, in relation to international students, the research shows that this profound separation or de facto segregation of the populations is a continuing frustration, which reduces the value of the international education experience, especially by retarding the acquisition of English. At the same time, same-culture networks in themselves are not the problem. While some researchers go into empirical studies with the assumption that there must be a trade-off between same-culture networks and networking with locals, and that same-culture networking probably inhibits integration and adaptation, the research repeatedly find that there is *no necessary conflict*, the two kinds of networks play different roles for international students, both are part of the optimal international student experience, and same culture networks and the maintenance of heritage identity are consistent with adjustment and success.

5) *Myth Number 5 is that the closer the cultural fit between international student and country of education, the more successful the international student would be*. This is an insidious myth, surprisingly widely shared in both the research literature and the practice of education, that would lead us to prefer students from Western backgrounds. It is insidious because it is true that learning issues and problems vary by cultural background, and it appears common sense to assume that people learn more easily when they are partly familiar with the material.

The fallacy is two-fold. First, people do not learn solely by pattern recognition, by proximate transfer from the already familiar, as in learning a language closely related to their own. They also learn through the imaginative appropriation of the new or Other. This is more intellectually demanding but it is integral not only to international education but to learning unfamiliar disciplines in the university context. Again and again, when people need to make those imaginative leaps they do so. The second fallacy is the fallacy of Hofstede, cultural essentialism – the belief that national cultures are fixed and are so integral to our personalities that they forever shape everything we do. Culture and identity are more flexible than that, and other characteristics apart from culture come into play. For example for international students, as Kashima and Loh demonstrate, it helps to have a low need for cognitive closure, to be a person who tolerates openness and risk taking, ambiguity and multiple affiliations or identity. But even these personality characteristics can be acquired during international education.

6) *Myth Number 6 is about the Asian learner.* You are familiar with this stereotype – the notion that despite the vast differences between Asian nations and sub-nations, ‘Asian students’ from in Hofstede’s terms ‘collectivist’ rather than ‘individualist’ societies are less effective in learning because they have been raised on a diet of rote learning, surface learning and authoritarian teacher-student relations, and lack analytical and critical perspectives. Studies by Ly Trahn, Simone Volet and Peter Ninnes and colleagues provide decisive empirical refutation of the stereotype. They show that there is some substance in the point about the weakness of critical perspectives, as Ninnes demonstrates in the case of India, the stereotype is based on misunderstandings about repetition in learning, failure to grasp that different Asian students learn in different ways, and confusion of Western forms of individualism with agency per se. International students can have strong agency, strong learning personality, without adopting the full set of Western individualist values. Yang and colleagues demonstrate in Canada that students from China have stronger ‘independent self-construals’ than Canadian students, and also stronger ‘interdependent self-construals’. And that sense, they are both more individual (I won’t say individualist) *and* more collective.

7) *Myth Number 7 is that international students are lowering the standard of English in universities.* All of the research evidence suggests that international students would like to raise the standard of English; that the acquisition of English language competence is one of the main objectives of students from EFL and ESL backgrounds; and that as Yang and colleagues show, communicative competence is essential to their expression of agency.

8) *Myth Number 8 is that international education is a process in which international students learn to adjust to our educational and cultural requirements, as if we the locals are fixed and they the visitors do all the changing.* No. International education is – or should be - a *mutual* process of adjustment, in which international students and educating institution continually learn from each other and adjust to each other’s requirements.

### **3. International education as self-formation**

I now want to sketch an alternative, non-mythical conception of international education.

*Cultures* are mobile and changeable. They are shaped and reproduced by powerful traditions, but they are also in an endless process of remaking, more so now than at any previous time in history. Cultures are the property of people, people are not the property of cultures or imprisoned by cultures. This is especially true of people who move to a new country.

We can understand *identity* as what we understand ourselves or others to be. We can understand *agency* as the sum of our capacity to act. The most useful way to understand international students is that like all of us, they are self-determining human agents making their own path-way through education and life. Others may influence their values and their decisions. But in the end each individual student is in charge of this project, this project of making herself or himself, making a future, and in the process remaking an identity. Strangers in a strange land, but a land in which they change themselves, by their own efforts, with help.

All those in international education and intercultural relations know that cross-border students are making choices. However in this field some see international education primarily as a process of other-formation, some see it primarily as a process of *self-formation*. If the starting premise is other-formation then international students are seen as primarily determined by the requirements, institutions and personnel of the host country. The students are seen as less than fully competent, their old lives are largely irrelevant, their identities are conflicted and their wills are temporarily subverted. In contrast, if the starting point is *self-formation*, the assumption adopted in this chapter, the students are primarily seen as shaping their own journey and identity, and constructing and interpreting cultures for themselves.

International students are people who have changed their geographic and/or cultural/linguistic circumstances to change themselves and their potentials. Motives for international education take many forms –the individual desire for change and achievement; the obligations of family; status acquisition, upward social mobility or relative advantage; acquiring human capital, building a career or accumulating wealth, cultural or intellectual development. Very often several motivations are operating simultaneously. But all entail self-formation. An emphasis on international students as active agents leads to different kinds of observations, findings and learning and welfare strategies, than those derived by positioning the students in a stress and coping framework. This is not to say that there is no need for pastoral care, it is to say profound dependency should not be seen as the primary condition. The notion of self-formation helps us to grasp how difficult is the process, how deep is the investment, how long and risky is the journey, and often how admirable and magnificent is the final destination, the achievement.

If we understand international students as right-bearing individuals in charge of their own futures, that does not mean that they all conform to the canons of Western individualism in the sense of John Locke and Adam Smith, or that there is no such thing as collectivist culture, or every international student separates church and state in the moment they get off the plane. International students have agency but this can take many different forms. Constructions of individuality are always culturally and socially nested.

Projects of self-formation via international education are works of self-creation, of the imagination. Students fashion themselves using the identity resources they bring to the country of education and those available in the new country, as well as via continuing cross-border association and media. Identity is configured by coordinating more than one identity/culture set. This process of coordination is managed using two sets of tools. These tools for managing identity are often alluded to in the literature on international students, across both the studies in psychology and those in sociology/social theory, though various names are used to refer to them. We can think of them as multiplicity and hybridity. I will discuss each briefly.

*Multiplicity:* The first set of tools of self-formation are multiplicity. Theories of globalization suggest that international students are bearers of not just multiple affiliations but plural and changing identities. Like all of us, an international student is more than one person and lives more than one kind of life. Frequently the fault line between different selves, different networks and behaviours, is determined by language of use. The fault line is also chronological – between the old persona and the new. Here the prior or ‘heritage’ culture undergoes continuous interpolation and reinterpretation by the international student in the new setting. Lee and Koro-Ljungberg argue that both old and new cultures are always in play. ‘Cultural maintenance and adaptation do not represent opposing forces that influence cultural identities. They construct a bi-cultural position which can be labeled as acculturation’.

*Hybridity:* The second set of tools of self-formation are hybridity. The international student continually synthesizes different cultural and relational elements into a novel combination. Rizvi describes ‘hybridity, with its connotations of mixture and fusion, as ‘a space in which we must learn to manage cultural uncertainties’. The notion of hybridity suggests that instead of closed identities in confrontation with an ‘Other’, ‘Other-ness is a potential resource’ *within* the self. Open-ness to others and to different identities is an important part of the experience

Both hybridity and multiplicity contribute to identity. Each set of tools can be described with a distinct metaphor. Multiplicity is associated with dividing or differentiating. Hybridity is associated with integrating, suturing, combining or recombining. Both are additive though in different ways. The student with multiple identities in the sense of heterogenous roles, and languages, also carries common elements from role to role. There is always partial integration. Unless a capacity for hybridity is exercised then multiple identity is likely to be experienced as fragmentation and/or internal conflict, contradiction. The distinction between the tools of multiplicity and hybridity is not absolute and there is a constant exchange between them.

In sum, identity management is a series of creative acts where the international student draws ideas and examples from memory, from the surrounding cultural environment, from teachers, from friends, from family and from other associations, and uses techniques of multiplicity and hybridity to fashion these elements into the self. Here the scope for creativity is increased when there is rich interaction between the international student and host country nationals. Correspondingly separation, segregation, stereotyping, discrimination and abuse limit the scope for identity formation. Discrimination increases identity conflict not identity suturing.

How does the international student do all this? The deployment of these tools of self-formation – whether only partly conscious, or conscious and highly reflexive - rests on another element. That is the active, shaping, coordinating *self will* that manages potential tensions between roles, navigates different groups and sites; propels the agent into active social relations and choices; and at its most reflexive deliberately sets out to remake the self.

Recent research has increasingly focused on the active agency of international students. To name some, work by Kettle, Asmar, Ward and colleagues, Yoo and colleagues, Chirkov and colleagues, Savicki and colleagues, Matsumoto and colleagues, Li and Gasser on cross-cultural self-efficacy, Perrucci and Hu, Yang and colleagues with their suggestive notions of self-construals and self-ways. Several of these studies highlight the junction between active, effective international agency, and the communicative competence of international students in English. The two elements, agency and language, reinforce each other.

#### 4. Some implications

In conclusion let me draw some broad implications for the way we might develop teaching and learning in international education in the future.

- Two interdependent elements key to the international student experience are (1) supporting and building in international students individual *agency*, the confidence to act and to intervene and to make decisions on their own behalf; and (2) building *communicative competence* in English in both academic and non-academic settings.
- We need to focus closely what international students themselves want to achieve from the experience and where possible to tailor our work to meet those needs.
- The more that we understand about the educational and cultural backgrounds of international students, preferably by engagement in the educational systems from which students come, their schools and tertiary institutions – the better we can assist.
- We can use international students as a positive pedagogical resource in the classroom – not simply as a set of problems waiting to be solved. We can use international students to lead, they can open new cultural vistas, we can value their stories.

The larger frontier ahead of us is to remake the relations between international students and local students. All the research suggests that this is a persistent problem in all the English speaking nations. With some exceptions, local students in Australia are relatively disengaged from international students, and see no need to move to a more internationalized curriculum. Simone Volet in Perth set up a set of shared work groups involving local and international student teams. She found that stereotypes broke down, and the experience was academically successful for all. But at the conclusion neither group showed any greater interest in working with the other. The well entrenched dynamics of separation and segregation are hard to shift. It might need a transformation of the curriculum almost on the scale of an internationalized Melbourne Model Mark 2, to persuade local students to deeply change orientation. Though many of you have found that some progress can be made on a more modest scale.

Finally, in the longer term the University will need to hire more staff who can speak Chinese national language, Indonesian and Bahasa Melyu, Arabic and so on. We will need to build our bilingual and multilingual capacity on staff so as to utilize bilingual capacity in preparation, ongoing student support and interaction outside the classroom. We will need more staff like my colleagues here. Let me hand you over to them, and thank you for listening!