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# International education and innovative approaches to university teaching

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## Introduction

This paper considers ways in which innovative approaches to university teaching may be able to be developed in the light of international education. It argues that international education is not only an important source of national income or an exotic dimension of the work of Australian universities. It is also a learning process with valuable implications for all Australian university students. In this paper we signal some possible implications of international education for the pedagogic practices of Australian universities. Without attempting to provide authoritative answers or to prescribe detailed outcomes, we offer practical examples of how experience of international education can lead to innovations in the Australian tertiary education system and suggest specific areas in which it would be valuable to undertake extensive research. Our goal is to make Australian university teachers more aware of the positive implications of international education for their teaching practices and approaches to the choice and design of curricula.

The Federal Government has recently announced new policies for international education, partly in response to failures in the area of English Language Colleges. The new emphasis is on the need for greater regulation of the industry, but also on a shift towards a wider interpretation of international education.<sup>1</sup> International education now includes agreements with overseas governments concerning curriculum content, standard setting and research, mobility of scholars in the Asia Pacific region (along the lines of the Erasmus Programme in Europe) and greater business links with Asia. The government is also moving towards international education inputs into the curricula of Australian universities as part of a strategy to integrate Australia more closely with the Asia-Pacific Region. International education also now means educating Australian students overseas. The aim is not only that they learn about their neighbours, but that they go to study in their countries. The University of New South Wales, for example, plans to have 10% of its domestic students studying overseas within ten years. It is likely that as the market for exporting Australian education becomes more competitive and less financially rewarding, the benefits of international education will be seen more and more in terms of benefits to Australian students. This is already the view taken by the University of Western Sydney (Nepean).

What would really internationalising Australian universities mean? One interpretation lays almost all the weight on the need to focus on the Asia-Pacific region and to Asianise the curricula in all faculties. This, however, assumes a regionalist reading of contemporary economic developments, and is not entirely consistent with the implication of the latest electronic media which, at least in some circumstances, tend to neutralise geography. A more careful analysis reveals an ambiguity in government policy statements between international education and global education. International education often seems to mean inter-national education. Global education implies portable education for activity in a globalising economy; it also involves notions such as training Australian students for global citizenship. Current government policy seems to be to pursue international education with an eye on global education as a longer term trend. What is

clear, however, is that Australian universities are acquiring considerable experience of international education, both in the sense of educating international students offshore, and in the sense of educating such students here. The University of Wollongong already has 12% international students from 45 countries.

Clearly there are tensions between the need to design programs which meet the requirements of one target country with a single dominant culture (e.g. courses for Korean managers) and are not portable, and the need for programs which can be offered to multiple culture cohorts. Hence Australian universities may need to develop a two track approach to changing our universities into international universities. One track would emphasise international education for international students from specific countries. The other track would emphasise planetary portable education. In practice, the two tracks are likely to influence each other's articulations. This means, we suggest, that any set of strategies for internationalising our universities will need to be flexible and polycentric.

In this paper we suggest that experience of international education has practical implications even in the short term for what we teach, how we teach, whom we teach, and when we teach. In the longer term, we suggest that Australian universities may need to move towards a pedagogy which is: (1) intercultural pervasional; (2) grid multi-referential; and (3) planetary portable, as opposed to monocultural, single grid referential, and localist.

Since we take a strong view of the importance of international education, it may be useful to begin with a non-controversial example. Many Australian universities now recognise the need to establish special support courses in English language for their international students. Such courses, once in place however, suggest wider applications. Indeed they often become models for similar courses for Australian students. Such a simple example prepares the reader for the less obvious suggestion that as we discover what international students need, we often find that these needs are those of many Australian students. Moreover, such discoveries may be relevant to the staff development needs of Australian university teaching staff. Specifically, they may highlight areas in which retraining and reskilling is called for.

We now turn to some more complex possible implications for innovative teaching practices. It is not suggested that Australians should change their teaching practices merely to please foreigners. We do argue, however, that taking account of the conflicting needs and expectations of international students exposes and problematises the monocultural assumptions of our allegedly multicultural society and the monocultural prejudices of our teaching practices in particular.

## Changing modes of delivery

In a globalising world university teaching practices need to change to allow more flexible modes of delivery, a need underlined by considerations of international benchmarks and overseas accreditation. Pressure to make such changes is likely to increase as Australia becomes more involved with the Asia-Pacific region, and more familiar with the need to take account of expectations of overseas student

groups and universities. Often such changes are dictated by common sense. For example: are lectures the best way to convey material to students whose spoken English is less than excellent? Or should we rely more on printed materials? Should we, as a matter of course, provide video tapes of lectures, especially since videos allow students to go through a lecture at their own pace and several times if necessary? If so, then there may be flow-ons for Australian students, not just international students, since many students passing through tertiary institutions now have limited English language skills which reduce their ability to benefit from more traditional modes of educational delivery. Moreover, the languages of delivery may need to change. Experience with international education suggests that more emphasis may need to be placed on international codes and iconographies in Australian educational delivery especially if, in the longer term, students have access to oral instruction in their language of greatest competence.

New technologies often make such changes more feasible. It is well established that international students can benefit from television delivered teaching and from other distance education modes such as printed course packages. Experience with both modes, however, suggest changes which could also improve the teaching of Australian students. For example, history teaching can be made much easier for international students if diagrams are used to display major historical and geographic data. Such diagrams are not single language dependent and can be adapted for television and video cassettes. Such diagrammatic history teaching could be developed for international students and then used to teach Australian students.<sup>2</sup> Other subject-specific problems brought to the surface in dealings with international students also suggest innovations in teaching practices relevant to the needs of Australian students.

Consider the example of the blackboard tutorial used in mathematical education.<sup>3</sup> The blackboard tutorial addresses the fact that many international students perform poorly in the traditional tutorial system because they try to avoid the loss of face involved in admitting that you cannot do something. The traditional university tutorial continues the 'watch the teacher' model of the traditional mathematics lecture. It does not address the need to learn mathematics by doing it or adequately assist students having problems. The traditional mathematics tutorial is often performed with the tutor standing in front of the room and setting the student problems to solve. When a student has a problem, he or she puts a hand up and asks for help. This traditional tutorial is ineffective as a way of helping weaker students since they frequently do not present for help.

To overcome the problem of students being unwilling to ask for help, the blackboard tutorial resorts to special mathematical tutorial rooms in which (1) all the walls have blackboards on them; and (2) there are no chairs or desks. As the students enter the tutorial room they are given a set of problems to work on at the blackboard. Students can work in pairs or groups, as they wish. They can also move around the room looking at what other students are doing and interact with each other. During the tutorial the tutor moves around the room providing assistance as required. In contrast to the traditional mathematics tutorial the work of all students is visible to the tutor and it is obvious when a student needs help. Ideally this means that shy students get as much help as more forward ones; there should also be as much help for female students as for male students. This example shows how international education can highlight learning problems in ways which lead to innovative teaching practices of benefit to all students.

## Group teaching

International education experience also suggests that group teaching needs to be taken more seriously. Most Australian university teachers were educated in cultures dominated by the Anglo-Saxon model of isolated individual learning. Experience with international education, however, suggests the need to consider both culture specific and cross-cultural styles of group teaching. For example, the syndicate method used by the Australian Management College, Mount Eliza, whereby students criticise each other's work, has proved exceptionally

successful with both Asian and Australian students, and also has now been successfully exported to Beijing. It illustrates how changing to cope with international students may lead to changing our teaching strategies with Australian students with positive results. These results, in turn, may affect the commercial viability of our offshore delivery of international education.

Related teaching innovations may be able to be suggested in disciplines as diverse as engineering, town planning, medicine and health care, architecture, law, and history. The details will differ with the discipline. Nonetheless, the common discovery may be that we can isolate the cultural sources of learning difficulties and change our delivery modes so that such cultural sources do not influence performance to the same extent.

## Generic skills

Experience with international education also bears upon the problem of how to teach generic skills, while attending to context-related knowledge. In a globalising environment generic skills such as criticising an argument or weighing evidence become even more important. On the other hand, context-free solutions (Moscow architecture all over Eastern Europe) may not be adequate. International education highlights this problem because international students characteristically want to relate the generic skills they are learning to contexts which their teachers know less well than they do. Learning to apply such skills to non-Australian examples widens the cultural range of Australian university leavers and may also lead to more flexible styles of analysis and so modify the pedagogic culture of Australian universities.

International education also suggests, however, that there are teaching contexts in which it may be important to make the generic skills more context free. Here innovations may be required that are directly relevant to the needs of Australian students. For example, there may need to be a renewed emphasis on teaching through questions (cf. the medieval interpretation of Aristotle's categories as a set of questions to be asked in trying to understand anything), because questions allow students with different home cultures to make culturally different responses to the same structural challenges. In so far as students identify different structural challenges when presented with the same questions, greater refinements in presentation will be required. In the longer term a more systematic response might be to reorganise curricula around a form of cognitional theory, despite the limitations of the existing models (Piaget, de Bono, Lonergan). But historically new levels of diversity will have to be dealt with before such sophisticated meta-method is available in an accessible form.

On the other hand, it would seem both prudent and practical at this point to research the ethnic backgrounds of all our students (40% of students at the University of Wollongong are from families in which English is not the language commonly spoken at home), and relate such research to inquiries into which students prefer which teaching and delivery styles. Given such research, new approaches to interactive learning suggest themselves. Interactive multimedia opens up the possibility of catering for different cognitive styles of different students. Advances in both mathematics teaching and Humanities teaching may be able to be made in this way. For example, many students brought up on television may be able to be assisted to master difficult literary texts if contemporary visual materials e.g. videos on contemporary art history are used. In effect, the student transfers the cognitive game learnt in a friendly medium to texts written in a more remote medium. But this assumes that an attempt has been made to determine which media are friendly for which students.

## Curricula

Changes to curricula can also be suggested in the light of international education. Here the issues are much wider than the need to modify export curricula to maximise sales to international markets. International education indicates that Australian university teachers need to address questions of (1) quality and (2) competency in terms of 'best international practice'. In the longer term pressure to produce

courses characterised by professionalism and quality as judged by international benchmarks is likely to promote a more comparative international academic culture among both staff and students. But, even in the short term, there are contexts in which international education may lead to new instances of 'best practice'.

Thus international experience helps to problematise inherited notions of ideal pedagogic order. It suggests that it is useful to alter the order of presentation of curricula for different audiences. For example, there may be advantages in teaching advanced axiomatic mathematics before more basic mathematics for some audiences, or in adopting teaching arrangements whereby lectures and tutorials do not cover the same material or proceed in traditional synchrony with each. This seems exceedingly obvious until we notice how most faculties in Australian universities employ the same models of ideal pedagogic order for all audiences. The exceptions (mathematics, philosophy) are interesting because they suggest that areas where students have cognitive difficulties with the material to be mastered may also be areas of relevant experimentation. In the same way we might ask: do the cognitive difficulties experienced by international students have implications for Australian students? Our hypothesis or proposal for a research program is yes.

International education also suggests the need to include more international examples in the curricula of many Australian degree programmes. In a globalising world Australian engineers arguably should be familiar with problems which occur in different parts of the world, not only in their own country. For example, they should learn how to build buildings in countries where the water table level is very high, or where a different variety of materials is available and not only how to build in their country of origin. Once again an apparently small change is more subversive than it seems because it implies that localist geography may need to cease to dominate our curricula. Instead, learning potential may need to dictate the choice of examples, with long-term consequences for the geographic and cultural knowledges of Australian students, whatever faculty they are enrolled in.

In so far as international education implies a new openness to cultural pluralism, Australian universities may need to move from single reference grid education to multi-reference grid education. Specifically, we may need to teach our courses differently so that students from diverse cultures can select their preferred language and culture paths through courses. Law students, for example, increasingly need to learn about legal systems other than their own. International students may prefer to opt for their home legal system for the purpose of case studies. Allowing them to do so may make it possible for Australian law students to work on materials from several legal systems even within the one course. This, in turn, could redirect legal education towards meta-analyses applicable across different legal systems, an approach at odds with the mental habits and training of those educated in the more inward looking common law tradition.

Clearly such considerations involve hard choices. The present push to educate for the Asia-Pacific region could be in tension with the push for planetary education. Both pushes, however, tend to undermine nationalist pressures to Australianise the content of all courses or attempts to privilege what is uniquely Australian. This, in turn, implies the need to confront the task of developing a distinctive, but post nationalist Australian identity or set of identities. Clearly it is important to remain sober in the face of premature celebrations of cultural diversity. Consistent with such a balanced perspective, international education can suggest new approaches to the problem of how to teach students who have acquired bad learning habits in their home culture institutions. For example, international experience suggests that learning programs can be developed to weaken original acculturation patterns and to instill new learning techniques not culturally favoured in the students' home culture. Thai students, for example, can be trained not to transfer the practices of a gift culture to more objectivistic Western learning contexts. Once again untraining techniques developed for international students may also be applicable to the untraining of Australian students.

## Teaching locations

The relevance of international education for where we teach has to do with both offshore delivery and staff exchanges and sabbaticals. Until recently Australian university teachers mainly visited English speaking academic locations. French Africa and the Luso-Hispanic world were less popular, and some English speaking countries such as the Philippines were distinctly neglected. Henceforth academic staff exchanges will hopefully acquire a more linguistically diverse character. Australian university staff will almost certainly visit Asia more, and Asians will come here in much greater numbers. International education can promote such changes directly by encouraging Australian university teachers to teach off shore. In so far as university teachers are exposed to foreign university locations in non-English speaking cultures and gain a greater sensitivity to cultural differentials and different cognitive styles, such sensitivity often flows back into their teaching of Australian students and their curricula design. For example, a teacher of comparative literature who visited Korea discovered that Korean artists needed to be included in the comparisons he was trying to make in his course for Australian students. Such changes may seem minor, but their effects are incremental.

## Communication skills

Experience with international education also highlights the need to give all Australian students testable English language communication skills, especially oral communication skills. Without entering into current debates about how much emphasis to place on Asian versus European languages, it is important to remember that many Asian students understand English but not the local language of 80% of their fellow Asians. It is also clear that people speak all over the planet to each other in English (Germans to Japanese, Chinese to Japanese, Arabs to Indonesians). This is not to argue against expert training in German, Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean or Indonesian. It is to make two points: (1) only English is currently globally portable; and (2) good English helps even when a student has a good knowledge of the local language since many of those she or he deals with in government and business will speak English excellently. Currently many Australian trade representatives create a poor impression in Asian countries because they do not seem to Asian observers to speak impressive English. To appreciate this point consider how a French businesswoman would appear in Africa if her French grammar was incorrect. Allowing for the fact that different types of English and different genres will be appropriate for different cohorts, all Australian students would benefit from better English language skills.

This holds even for students whose written English needs may be more modest. Experience with information technology and engineering students suggests that the need for greater oral communication skills is not confined to international students. Many Australian students in these areas currently communicate well with machines but not with people. Yet communication with people plays a major role in their subsequent careers, and will play a yet greater role if their subsequent careers take them to Asia. In the context of a globalising economy greater attention needs to be paid to communication and analytic skills for all students, especially oral communication skills. To this end, the introduction of debating as an integral feature of many undergraduate programs should be considered. Such training could be used to join together students from many cultures and faculties and to train students in skills helpful in negotiating cultural, language and disciplinary divides.

## Computer aided learning

International education also has implications for the use of computer aided learning. Computer-aided learning makes it possible to factor in cultural differences, especially differences in cognitive styles and learning paces, into modes of educational delivery. Students from rote learning cultures such as Taiwan and Japan, for example, can be programmed differently from students from more analytically oriented educational cultures. In the same way allowances can be made for students whose home culture favours teaching examples before

concepts or vice versa. Once again international education encourages innovations to deal with learning difficulties experienced by international students but these innovations may then be applied to the less manifest learning difficulties of Australian students.

## Assessment

International education could also lead to changes in the way we assess students. Here cultural psychological factors and language differences are crucial. Examinations may be counter-indicated for students from some cultures which over-emphasise rote learning, while in some areas essays may need to be written in the international students' best language. It is now standard practice in some European universities for students to write in English, French, Italian, German or Spanish as they prefer. In Australia it should be possible to allow the use of a language other than English in courses with strong cohorts from one Asian country e.g. Indonesia. Similarly, it is highly desirable for oral assessment to become more common in Australian universities, as it is in many European countries. And once again this change in pedagogy holds for Australian as well as international students. Likewise, the traditional emphasis on 'correct' i.e. standard English may have to be waived in favour of a much greater emphasis on argumentation, even if the language of presentation is non-standard, albeit discriminating and effective.

## Changing Australian university teachers

Problems encountered in teaching international students also have implications for training Australian university teachers. Indeed, they suggest there is need to train Australian university teachers to teach international students. At a bare minimum, Australian academics need to be taught to consider cultural differentials both when presenting information and when choosing modes of educational delivery. For example, the use of diagrams may be counter-indicated for some cultures, but preferential for others, an effect which may be magnified by gender roles since in many cultures girls express less enthusiasm for diagrams than boys. Such sensitivity to cultural differentials has implications for the ways we teach Australian students from non-Anglo Celtic backgrounds, whether from European or Asian backgrounds.

It is not enough for Australian academics to make multicultural gestures. They need to become more sensitive to hidden cultural factors which bear upon their educational practices. For example, practices which disadvantage students from cultures in which it is impolite to question the teacher or improper for a female student to be assertive. Hidden cultural differences also impact upon the use of colours in teaching. Red and black, for example, have very different meanings in African and Chinese cultures. Australian university teachers also need to become more sensitive to cultural factors that go to the context in which education occurs. For example, they need to become more sensitive to the food taboos of international students, to clothing styles which are immodest for specific audiences, to seating arrangements which are culturally offensive to particular cultures, and to timings of examinations or meetings which are culturally or religiously inappropriate (e.g. Ramadan) — and so on. Here again small changes involve larger principles. For example, Australian universities are only beginning to become aware of the need to provide toilet and ablution facilities for Islamic students who need to wash before prayer five times a day. The need for different toilets for students whose culture requires that they do not sit on the toilet seat may seem a luxury. In fact, however, it is indicative of how far we still have to go if we are to change the cultural milieu of Australian universities from one characterised by monocultural chauvinism to a university culture able to cope with growing intercultural pervasion as many different cultures appear within single geographic cultures.

International education also suggests that more Australian university teachers need to know major languages such as Chinese, Japanese, German, French and Russian. Indeed, steps could be taken to require university teachers to pass reading exams in one such language before confirmation of their appointment. Ideally it should become as odd for

Australian university teachers not to read at least one Asian language as it is for Asian university teachers not to read at least one European language.

## Changing Australian students' attitudes

There is a related need to change the attitudes of Australian university students. It is generally conceded that Australian students benefit from meeting international students both in class and outside class situations if they acquire a greater sense of cultural and religious diversity, and so become better equipped to deal with the heterogeneous world in which they will have to live. But Australian students do not always generalise what they have learnt from such experiences. They may become sensitised to Japanese or Chinese or Indonesian 'differences', but still not acquire portable skills of cultural adaptation. This suggests the need for more research into current Australian student attitudes, a suggestion reinforced by recent Japanese comments on the racism of Australians, and the design of training programs to change the attitudes of Australian university students away from racist and monocultural stereotyping. In the longer term there is a need for all Australian university students to become minimally planetary literate. This implies that there is a need to teach all Australian students basic geography: where the major countries of the world are, what languages their peoples speak etc. Likewise, a case can be made for making video courses on world history available to all students as a way of helping them to acquire basic planetary literacy. There are related implications for internationally sensitive value education, which should form an important part of courses in ethics in Australian universities. Here once again moving away from monocultural chauvinism is linked to reforming practices. For example, chaplaincy provision for the needs of non-Christian students is currently underdeveloped in Australian universities, despite gestural inclusions and the establishment of meditation spaces in some universities.

## Role modelling

International education also suggests the need for more culture-sensitive role modelling in Australian universities. Here problems encountered with the reticence of Indonesian and Malaysian students may lead to wider benefits. The challenge is not only to help such students to be more self-assertive, but to allow them to make this change without surrendering their ethnic or religious identities. If role modelling could be successfully developed for female Islamic international students, there could be significant feedbacks into role modelling for Australian female students.

## Postgraduate education

International education could also have implications for Australian postgraduate education. In so far as international students need more course work, their presence may favour a shift towards some US style PhDs and a greater use of course work for Australian students. Similarly, the supervision of postgraduate students may need to be modified in Australian universities to take account of cultural differences. For example, a male student may have problems with receiving directions from a female supervisor or certain ethnic combinations may be counter-indicated at particular times (e.g. Armenian, Azeris). Less obviously, international education may provide clues as to how to teach postgraduates to identify topics likely to yield significant research outcomes. In the context of international education the present intuitive way we identify research topics may need to give way to a more theory-informed approach which international students can be taught explicitly, without first needing to duplicate specifically Australian cultural data and culturally formed guesses. Paradoxically the challenges of international education suggest that pre-modern learning techniques may deserve re-examination. If Australian universities are to become multiversities and Australian university education is to become less mono-cultural and localist, the cross-cultural argumentation skills of traditional Judaism and Islam may have lessons for us.

In the longer term more will certainly be required than the current practice of offering international students geographically localist postgraduate education plus tender loving care, and other palliatives. Indeed, postgraduate education for both Australian and international students may need to be remodelled on a more explicit theoretical basis. Here it would be useful to research practices employed by medieval European universities and, more recently, by Buddhist universities.

## Conclusion

Our view that international education can facilitate teaching innovations of benefit to Australian students generally is not utopian. Obviously not every desirable change may be possible, let alone affordable.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless, many of the changes we have suggested are achievable in stages through specific small scale changes of style, manners and comportment. Such changes could be promoted within Australian universities as part of a new international academic ethos. Given that changes will be slow in some areas, but fast in others, each significant change that is achieved is likely to lead on to others. To argue this is not to subscribe to a facile cosmopolitanism which ignores the specificities of Australian geography and history. Nor is it to support a version of geographic Romanticism, least of all the version which talks about 'Asia' without knowing the exact histories of particular 'Asian' countries or the details of their current attempts to position themselves in the world economy.<sup>5</sup> It is to acknowledge that Australian university education will have to change if it is to cope with a complex, fast changing, but also challenging international environment.

## References

1. 'International Education in Australia through the 1990s'. Statement by the Hon. Kim Beazley, Minister for Employment, Education and Training, September 1992.
2. Wayne Hudson is the leader of a team working on the development of an intensive training course along these lines at Griffith University.
3. 'Board games for maths tutorials chalking up marks', *Campus Review Weekly*, 24-30 September, p.3.
4. Cf. W. Hudson, 'Educational Policy and Geographic Romanticism' in *Asian Studies Review*, vol.15, no.1, July 1991, pp.70-76.
5. AVCC 'Foundations for the "Clever Country"', March 1991, recommends 'that universities put more emphasis into improving teaching practices ...' (Recommendation 3).