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Supporting international students in UK Higher Education: key issues, and recommendations for further research

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Introduction

The aim of this review is to give as full a picture as possible of the issues which affect international students on taught courses in the UK.¹ By 'international students' I mean all students who are domiciled outside the UK, including EU students, who are often treated differently in the literature.

Because one of the criticisms of existing research is that it lacks insight into the political, economic and organisational context (Pelletier 2003), this review begins with an overview of UK HE policies over the past 3 decades which have impacted on the way institutions perceive and deal with international students. The second section outlines non-academic issues which may affect international students' academic performance, well-being, and satisfaction with their experience of UK HE. The third and main section of the review deals with the academic challenges which face international students. Finally, I make some recommendations for future research.

This review is accompanied by a small-scale survey of international students at the University of Wolverhampton, and references to this are made in the footnotes where appropriate. Owing to limitations of space and time, I have chosen to focus primarily on UK-based studies. We are however far behind our New World counterparts regarding pedagogical research into international student affairs.²

UK policy issues affecting international students

Before the 1980s, international students studied in the UK free of charge "as a form of colonial or postcolonial aid and encouragement of trade" (Leonard and Morley 2003). In 1979, full-cost tuition fees for students from 'specified' countries were introduced, with the effect of immediately reducing the numbers of students coming to the UK, and angering the governments of countries which had traditionally sent their students to the UK for higher education. At the same time, successive cuts in UK Government funding for HE throughout the 1980s forced institutions to diversify their income streams... This period therefore saw the beginning of active promotion of UK universities overseas – for example, the British Council's Education Counselling Service established in 1984 (Alexander 2005).

Only after imposition of full-cost fees did the setting up of international offices and overseas student support systems become common. Makepeace and Baxter (1990) suggest that these were motivated as much by financial and publicity interests as by

¹ Some of these issues also affect international research students, but to deal with the specific needs of research students would take a whole book – see for example Okorochoa (1997).

² A more complete – and international – bibliography is available on the WOLF topic 'Supporting International Students.'

educational considerations. The discourse of colonialism began to give way to terms such as 'responsible recruitment' and 'after-sales service' (Pelletier 2003).

There is no doubt that revenue from international students has become increasingly important to UK HEIs. In 2005, Universities UK introduced its international strategy with the claim that "Higher education contributed around £4 billion annually to the UK's export earnings through research activities, transnational activities and international students" (UUK 2005:1). This dependence on income from international students is not without risk. Global political, economic and social factors all impact significantly on students' ability to study overseas, and on their choice of destination, with the result that the international education market is highly volatile. Recent UK growth estimates have been proved over-optimistic (Sastry 2006).

Apart from the revenue brought in by their tuition fees and other spending, international students in many institutions allow courses to remain viable which would otherwise close due to lack of students. (Alexander, 2005) According to Sastry (2006), this leads to *less* investment in specific support for international students, including staff development, "because the returns on these investments will be limited."

Given the economic importance of international students to UK HEIs, it is hardly surprising that the question of income generation features highly in policy justifications. The Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education I (1999-2005) and II (2006-11) both focus primarily on marketing and student recruitment, although the PMI II (launched in May this year) has as one of its four aims "Ensuring the quality of the student experience" (British Council 2006). Unfortunately the performance indicator for this aspect of the PMI – "Achieve demonstrable improvements to student satisfaction ratings in the UK" – appears to bear out Pelletier's criticism of UK HE as a box-ticking "audit culture concerned with performance indicators and massification" (2003:20): whether the PMI will support any concrete improvements to the international student experience remains to be seen.

Although recent policy documents pay lip service to the geopolitical, cultural and educational benefits of international activities in HE, the economic advantages of student recruitment remain at the forefront.³ No evidence is given to support claims that increasing the international student body is of benefit to HEIs in other ways.

This focus on income generation is reflected in the UK body of research into international student affairs. Most research is marketing-oriented, and aimed at improving the satisfaction of international students "with a view to attracting more of them" (Pelletier 2003:7). Since EU students do not pay full cost tuition fees, they receive less scrutiny.⁴ Before April 2006, research into international student affairs received little attention from Government-funded bodies such as the Higher Education Academy (Pelletier 2003).⁵ Unpublished research forming MA/MSc and PhD theses is not disseminated widely enough and does not inform UK policy, while those who work

³ See for example UUK 2005.

⁴ See for example Allen and Higgins 1994:2. Although the authors recommend that EU students form the basis of a separate research project, I have found no evidence that any took place.

⁵ In Spring 2006, the Higher Education Academy commissioned a literature review on the Internationalisation of Higher Education in the UK, and called for case studies on internationalisation of the curriculum and support for international students.

most closely with international students in UK HE are not expected to carry out research or supported in doing so, with the result that studies tend to be small-scale and limited in scope, vision and theoretical underpinning. (Leonard and Morley 2003).

A new buzz word in policy documents is ‘internationalisation.’ This concept recognises that an HEI’s international strategy should consist not only of attracting international students to the UK, but also in sending UK students overseas, developing truly international curricula and teaching/delivery methods, helping UK domiciled students to become internationally capable etc. UKCOSA (2003a, 2004a) has for some time been lobbying policy makers to address these issues; the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education has now taken them on board (Koutsantoni 2006), and the Higher Education Academy has commissioned studies on the topic. However it remains to be seen how UK HEIs will implement the process, how it will be funded, and whether the concept of internationalisation is more than mere window-dressing for profit-oriented student recruitment activities.

Criticisms of the Government’s approach to international students are sharp and wide-ranging, but focus primarily on the “lack of integrated policy on international students in the UK” (Leonard and Morley 2003:2; Kingston and Forland 2004). This stems in part from the visa issue. In 2002, UKCOSA complained that: “processing times and quality of service at the Immigration and Nationality Directorate [...] undermines the efforts of the Government, the British Council and UK institutions in attracting students to the UK.” The problem was exacerbated in 2004 by the Home Office’s arbitrary decision to raise visa renewal charges, sending out “contradictory messages about the UK’s official welcome of international students” (UKCOSA 2004a). Another thorny issue is that of employment. The chance to gain relevant UK work experience both during and after their studies is seen by many international students as an integral part of their UK education, irrespective of the financial benefits.⁶ The PMI I and various speeches by Chancellor Gordon Brown on his international visits raised potential students’ expectations, which were subsequently shattered on the rocks of work permit applications, “confusing wording in passport stamps and entry clearance vignettes” (UKCOSA 2002), and the NI number Catch 22.⁷

UKCOSA has also criticised the UK Government for its lack of awareness of “the international dimension in higher education” (2003a). As 12% of all students in English HEIs, international students are “significant stakeholders” (UKCOSA 2003b): their needs should be borne in mind when allocating funds for research or staff development. Regarding HE quality assurance, the “absence of centrally collected data on drop-out rates and employment after graduation”, compared with the rigorous systems which are in place for UK domiciled students, make it hard to assess the quality and value of UK HE for international students (UKCOSA 2003a).

UK HE policy makers face several challenges with regard to the increasingly competitive international student market. While UK HEIs desperately need to supplement their incomes with revenues from international student tuition fees, international students are becoming more discerning, complaining that “there are too

⁶ “That’s what’s lacking in the course – there’s so much theory, but no chance to see how it works in practice.” (Nigerian postgraduate)

⁷ International students cannot be allocated an NI number without proof of employment, but many employers are reluctant to hire an international student who does not have an NI number.

many foreign students in the University to study in the UK way” (Peters 2005:5). The UK’s reputation for quality, which is its main selling point when compared with the lower tuition fees and more favourable immigration policies of its competitors, is being eroded by rising staff-student ratios, high levels of UK student debt (which may cause many postgraduate courses to close), and low levels of pay for academic staff (UKCOSA 2003a). It is worth asking how measures to improve the international student experience will be funded, given that international student issues are sidelined by the UK policy-making bodies, and that the revenue from international student tuition fees is being diverted by UK HEIs to offset the shortfall in Government funding for the sector.

Social and personal issues affecting international students

The challenges of living in a foreign culture – “racial discrimination, language problems, accommodation difficulties, separation reactions, dietary restrictions, financial stress, loneliness etc.” are compounded for many international students by “problems of late-adolescents/young adults asserting their emotional and intellectual independence” (Furnham 1997:14). Most if not all international students will at some point face a degree of culture shock, exhibiting itself in feelings of “powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, self and social estrangement, and social isolation” (Furnham 1997:16). Little research has been carried out into this or the various practical issues which affect international students: most of what we know is to be found in the wide-ranging surveys such as those carried out in 1994 (Allen and Higgins, Heist) and 2004 (UKCOSA). According to both studies, the two non-academic issues which cause most stress to international students are: finance and friendships.⁸

As Ryan points out (2000:66), many international students will have borrowed heavily from friends and relatives in order to afford their UK studies; their overseas education represents a huge investment by family/community, and they are expected to repay the investment on their return. This places students under huge pressure to achieve academically, and do what they can to reduce the burden on their family by living frugally and seeking part-time work. Financial constraints deter many students from joining in campus activities, with the result that they are less likely to make UK friends (UKCOSA 2004b). The need to work part-time, as with many home students, reduces the time available for study, which may have academic consequences.⁹

Of the students surveyed by UKCOSA in 2004, over 70% were self-funding. It is hardly surprising then that they were very cost-conscious. “64% of EU respondents and 47% of non-EU respondents said they were satisfied with the value for money of their

⁸ The difficulty of seeking paid employment during and after study emerged as an issue in the UKCOSA report but, because no published research exists on this issue, it is not included in this section of the literature review.

⁹ I have not been able to find any research on the effects of financial pressure on academic success, but there is bound to be a correlation. Eight of the ten students interviewed for the survey said they had chosen not to work, or restricted their working hours, in order to minimise the impact on their studies: “Don’t think you can come here and work. If you try to combine work and study, you won’t succeed in your study.” (Cameroonian student) Two colleagues interviewed said they knew of students whose academic performance was suffering due to their part-time jobs.

course.”¹⁰ The survey also picked up that many non-EU respondents did not understand why their tuition fee was so much higher than that of UK students, leading to feelings of unfairness and being exploited.¹¹ 45% were dissatisfied with the cost of accommodation in the UK, with a higher level of dissatisfaction among students living in university-managed properties, to which they are tied by restrictive contracts and penalties (Maundeni 2001:272).¹² The low level of satisfaction with value for money should signal a warning to UK HEIs, since many non-EU students are coming to see themselves as ‘cash cows’ (UKCOSA 2004b:49); Chinese students in particular are choosing other study destinations or remaining at home, since falling graduate salaries in China promise a poor return on the investment in overseas education.

Linked to the value for money question is the issue of overall satisfaction with the UK study experience, and there are clear indications that this is related to positive contact with British people (Eller et al 2005:10). “International students with UK friends were more likely to be satisfied overall with their stay in the UK: 93% compared to 86%.” (UKCOSA 2004b:12) This being the case, it is cause for concern that “59% of students (70% of taught postgraduates) said most of their friendships were with co-nationals and other international students” as opposed to UK students, and that “only 15% of Chinese students said they had UK friends” (ibid).

Given the tendency of British living abroad to cluster together in expatriate communities,¹³ one might ask why we should expect a higher level of integration from international students in the UK. Co-national peer networks can provide many benefits, such as practical help; information on survival skills; shared cultural values and identity; emotional and spiritual support (Maundeni 2001). Many universities are trying to foster these benefits through the institution of co-national buddy programmes and national societies (Koutsantoni 2006). For speakers of English as a foreign language, monolingual friendship groups provide a relief from the daily struggle for expression. But there are disadvantages too: spending too much time with co-nationals makes it difficult for foreign language speakers to improve their English, and monocultural peer groups can cause “discrimination, domination, gossip” (Maundeni 2001:253), exerting pressure to conform and punishing members who seek friendships outside the group.¹⁴

According to UKCOSA, “42% of students who did not consider that they had any UK friends, nevertheless said that they did not prefer mixing with their co-nationals; i.e. the lack of integration was not a conscious choice.” (2004b:68) Several reasons have been suggested for why international students find it hard to interact with their host community:

¹⁰ Nine out of ten students interviewed were satisfied with the value for money of their tuition fee.

Caution is advisable in interpreting this statistic: in the UW survey, participants were interviewed whereas the UKCOSA survey was conducted anonymously online; and the UW international student tuition fee is lower than average for the UK!

¹¹ The same is true of the UW survey respondents. All ten interviewees had no idea that UK/EU tuition costs were subsidised by the respective governments through taxation.

¹² 3% of international students surveyed in Sept 2005 thought UW Halls were too expensive. Six of the ten interviewees had chosen to live off-campus, and one who was living in Halls was very dissatisfied with the value for money of her accommodation.

¹³ Observation based on my (limited) experience of living in Morocco (2 years) and China (ten years, on and off).

¹⁴ Several Chinese students over the years have told me how they have been ostracised or criticised by Chinese peers for making friends with ‘Western’ students.

- UK people – in particular students – are perceived as unfriendly (Allen and Higgins 1994; Ledwith and Seymour 2001).
- “UK students are friendly when you get to know them” (UKCOSA 2004b), but international students have to make the effort to initiate the relationship (Allen and Higgins 1994).
- UK students feel overwhelmed and ‘threatened’ (UKCOSA 2004b) by the large numbers of international students on campus (Ledwith and Seymour 2001).
- Over-recruitment of international students (or under-recruitment of home students!), especially on business/computing and postgraduate courses, means there are few UK classmates for international students to befriend (Peters 2005).
- Accommodation policies in some institutions ghettoise international students (Allen and Higgins 1994).
- International students who enter directly into the second or third year of a programme may find that UK students’ friendships are already formed (Ledwith and Seymour 2001).
- UK students appear more comfortable working with ‘culturally close’ groups such as other Europeans; this may explain why so few Chinese students had UK friends (UKCOSA 2004b).
- International students may not know the social mechanics of approaching and initiating contact with UK people (Eller and Abrams 2004). They may not realise that UK students tend to make friends through social activities, hobbies, sports etc. rather than through classroom contact (UKCOSA 2004b).
- Language is also a significant factor: in the UKCOSA survey, two thirds of native English-speaking international students had UK friends, “compared to 36% of speakers of English as a second language, and 29% of those for whom it is a foreign language.” (ibid)

The most frequent response to the Heist survey question in 1994 on how to improve the quality of the experience for international students was “more integration of international and home students” (Allen and Higgins 1994). UKCOSA have flagged this as a key issue in efforts to improve the international student experience, and it is now being included on UK HEI internationalisation agendas (Koutsantoni 2006).

Educational issues affecting international students

There is no doubt that many of our international students come from a very different academic environment from that of UK higher education. So too do UK students progressing to first year university from school or FE college; however, it should be remembered that many international students enter directly into the second or final year of an undergraduate degree, or come straight onto a postgraduate course, without the benefit of the Year 1 training/transition period. Their prior experience of learning colours their attitudes and behaviour at university in ways which are sometimes seen as unacceptable or problematic by their teachers. Their struggle to adapt to the new environment brings with it a set of challenges which can broadly be labelled as ‘academic culture shock.’

Some potential causes of academic culture shock which HE staff should bear in mind are:

- The expected roles and relationship of teacher and student. Some students come from a high power distance culture, where the teacher is seen as the purveyor of all knowledge: an unquestionable authority figure. Students from this kind of background may have difficulties adjusting to an autonomous learning model, whereby they are expected to teach themselves or to learn from their peers. Students may come from an institution where staff are always on hand to help or answer questions: such students may perceive their UK teachers as unsupportive and unavailable.
- Classroom interaction. Schools in some countries have class sizes of 60 or above: in such circumstances, pupils are not encouraged to participate in group discussion or raise questions in class. This classroom etiquette persists at university, and students from such countries may be perceived (unfairly) by their UK teachers and peers as 'passive' when in fact they are – by their own cultural standards - being polite.
- Learning resources. It is common in many countries, even in higher education, for students to rely on only one or two sources of information, be it the teacher or the course textbook.¹⁵ Students from such backgrounds may be bewildered by the range of resources at a UK university, and not know where to begin when faced with extensive module reading lists. Students from some countries/regions will have had limited access to IT resources: they will need extra help with information literacy skills, and a degree of leniency regarding submission of word-processed assignments.¹⁶
- Learning styles and outcomes. In many countries, academic programmes are more rigid: students have no choice about their degree course or modules, and spend twenty hours or more a week in class. Such students may need more advice about module options, and may experience difficulty organising their study time when they have only twelve hours a week class contact in the UK. In education systems which emphasise the memorisation and reproduction of knowledge, students may not have been encouraged to develop critical or analytical skills. This does not mean that they are incapable of critical or analytical thinking (Nichols 2003), merely that they are not accustomed to doing this in the context of a university assignment, and will need extra and explicit guidance into how to fulfil assessment requirements/tasks.
- Assessment. In many countries, the main form of assessment is the end-of-year exam. International students may be unfamiliar with tasks such as assessed oral presentations, groupwork, long essays and reports, and may not even realise to what extent these contribute to the overall module grade. In some countries, university grades are set much higher: Ryan (2000) comments on how students from America and Australia (for example) may be disappointed by receiving marks in the 60-70% range when they would normally score 80-90% in their home country. To avoid loss of confidence, grading systems need to be made explicit to international students before marks are released from their first assignment.
- Linked to assessment, learning styles and resources is the question of academic writing conventions. Different languages have different discourse patterns, and what may be seen as highly appropriate in one language would be deemed 'waffling' or irrelevance in the UK (De Vita 2000; Peters 2005; Ryan 2000). Even different cultures sharing the same language – for example the USA and Britain - may have different expectations as to what constitutes a good essay.¹⁷ This makes it difficult for international students at first to achieve the grades and feedback they expect; and

¹⁵ "In Cameroon, the lecturer gives *everything* to the students. We sometimes don't even have to buy books."

¹⁶ Two of the five West African survey participants said they had struggled to catch up with the University's IT requirements.

¹⁷ Jackie Pieterick (SHLSS), personal communication, 20/04/05.

lecturers may fall into the trap of believing their students academically lacking when in fact cultural issues are at stake.

One important aspect of academic writing is the Western academy's view of intellectual property and referencing conventions. These may be totally unfamiliar to students from some countries, laying them open to accusations of plagiarism (see below for a fuller discussion of this issue).

All the above areas of difference undoubtedly cause a greater or lesser degree of difficulty to international students; very little is known, however, as to what extent they influence academic success. According to Ryan (2000:63), "Pass and completion rates tend to be higher for courses that are specifically designed for international students, but considerably lower for students in mainstream courses."¹⁸ De Vita (2002) warns against lumping international students together in an academic deficit category, saying that while international students on average achieve lower grades, there is a wider range of ability among the international cohort than among their UK peers. Ledwith and Seymour (2001) suggest that there is a link between academic success and understanding of assessment requirements, and that students who have been in the UK for longer have a better understanding of the requirements, and a better chance of success.

Almost no published research has been undertaken on the academic success rates of international students. It is possible that HEIs are coy about admitting the extent of non-completion, failures and withdrawals by international students, given the impact this might have on their reputation and, consequently, student recruitment. The only study I can find is that conducted by Makepeace and Baxter (1990). Analysing data on enrolments, withdrawals and failure on all courses on which there were international students in 15 UK polytechnics, the authors concluded that "Overseas students in their first year of study in higher education in the polytechnic sector do not generally do as well as their UK counterparts."¹⁹ A questionnaire to academic staff on the 153 failure cases revealed that language problems were considered the most common cause of academic failure, followed by poor attendance and motivation. In my opinion these conclusions are limited because the researchers did not seek the students' views on the reasons for their failure – as we will see from Errey's research (below), students and their teachers may have widely divergent views.

There is broad agreement in the literature that students with a lower level of English language also struggle academically (Allen and Higgins 1994) and are less likely to feel that their grades reflect their ability (Ledwith and Seymour 2001). They are also less likely to engage positively with British culture and people (Eller et al 2004) or to recommend their UK HEI to friends and family in their home country (Allen and Higgins 1994), indicating that they have a less satisfactory experience overall. Even where institutions are stringent about imposing English language entrance requirements, the test imposed as a benchmark may not indicate students' academic language competence, for example the ability "to engage in postgraduate level discussion and debate" (Cathcart et al 2005:31). More research needs to be done as to the usefulness of standard English language tests (e.g. IELTS, TOEFL) compared with pre-sessional EAP programmes or in-sessional EAP support.

¹⁸ No evidence is given for this assertion.

¹⁹ SITS data for 2002/3, 2003/4 and 2004/5 show that 'overseas' (i.e. non-EU) students achieve lower grades than their UK peers at the University of Wolverhampton.

One academic setting where low English levels prove problematic is the lecture theatre. Listening to a foreign language for long periods of time causes fatigue, and the task of understanding lectures can be made even more difficult by the lecturer's regional accent, speed of delivery and use of idioms and colloquialisms (de Vita 2000). Not only speakers of English as a foreign language are affected: "students who are fluent in Indian, Nigerian or US English, for example, find themselves struggling with cultural references, jokes, examples taken from local contexts as well as historical perspectives" (Peters 2005:2). Littlemore (2001) has undertaken some particularly original research on a group of Bangladeshi civil servants which shows that students who understand the literal meanings of words used in a metaphor may not understand its connotation in the UK context, leading them to misinterpret the lecturer's stance on the topic under discussion.

Lack of oral fluency in English can affect students' participation in tutorials, seminars and assessed groupwork. The inability to express their ideas, especially in an area where they may be considered expert, can be especially frustrating and humiliating for older postgraduate students (Peters 2005). Many students report how, in a seminar, they wish to say something but find that the discussion has moved on to a new topic while they are struggling to formulate their contribution (Ryan 2000). Unfortunately this lack of fluency in English is often confused by British students (and teachers!) with lack of academic ability or knowledge, with the result that British students can be unwilling to work with non-native English speakers in group assessments (Ledwith and Seymour 2001; Tomlinson and Egan 2002; Cathcart et al 2005).²⁰

Issues surrounding assessed multicultural groupwork have received significant attention in the last decade: particularly from researchers in HEI Business Schools,²¹ reflecting perhaps the high concentration of international students on Business programmes, or the high proportion of group assessments used in these programmes. Assessed groupwork where all students receive the same mark is reportedly unpopular with both British and international students who feel that grades thus received do not reflect their individual ability or contribution (Ledwith and Seymour 2001). Having culturally mixed groups complicates matters, with neither British nor international students wanting to work with international students: the British students because they feel the low English level and different knowledge base of the international students will pull down their group mark; the international students because they wish to interact with British students, whose grasp of English and local knowledge will improve their group mark (Cathcart et al 2005).

Research undertaken at Oxford Brookes University shows that British students' predilection for working in monocultural groups is based on a false assumption. Using regression analysis with group work marks and a composite measure of individual ability, de Vita's study of 304 students working in 54 culturally mixed groups shows that "the group work mark is more likely to reflect the ability of the most able group member [...] assessed multicultural group work has, on average, a positive rather than

²⁰ This was borne out in the survey by colleagues from SAS, SCIT and SHLSS, but refuted by colleagues from SoH and SLS. Students interviewed did not feel UK students were discriminating against them, though some of the EFL speakers said they had difficulty communicating with their group-mates.

²¹ For example Oxford Brookes University (de Vita; Ledwith and Seymour); University of North London (Tomlinson and Egan); Sunderland University (Cathcart et al).

negative effect on the individual mark of all students.”²² Feedback from staff assessing group work was that monocultural groups had a less satisfactory output: “Good teamwork, but narrow perspective” (Ledwith and Seymour 2001). Ledwith and Seymour show that, although the ‘norming’ process takes longer in a multicultural group, such groups often work better in the long term. Unfortunately, time constraints on assignments, and a modular degree system which means that students may never work with each other again, mean that culturally diverse groups may not have time to norm, leading in many cases to the reinforcing and perpetuation of negative cultural stereotypes. This issue is significant not only because of the hurt and dissatisfaction caused to international students, but also the missed opportunity for intercultural skills development for home students, and should be addressed as part of any HEI’s internationalisation strategy.

Racial and cultural stereotyping/discrimination is a serious issue but one which has received little coverage in the literature: possibly because it is a sensitive topic, or possibly because – according to Pelletier (2003) – there is no theoretical framework for evaluating institutional racism in HE. Writers who mention it concur that staff should be on their guard against lumping all ‘international students’ together, as their needs and backgrounds vary tremendously (Pelletier 2003). Ryan (2000:17) points out that overstating the differences in education backgrounds of UK and international students (as I have done at the beginning of this section!) “can lead to [international] students’ skills and abilities being underestimated, and their learning being unfairly viewed as ‘problematic’.” Kingston and Forland (2004) warn against research based on stereotypical assumptions about students’ native culture, citing studies of Chinese students in the UK which draw on theories of Confucian-heritage culture that may be out of date in modern China.²³

While writers agree that staff should be on their guard against stereotyping of international students, there is no agreement as to whether, or to what extent, international students are subject to racism in their academic and their daily life. Both the Heist survey of 1994 and the UKCOSA survey of 2004 report a wide range of responses: from students who felt that British people are cold and hostile towards those of other nationalities, to students who had expected to be discriminated against on account of their colour or religion, and were pleasantly surprised to find themselves in a culturally diverse and tolerant society. Only Maundeni (2001:270) tackles the issue of academic racism, but not in any detail:

A few students in the study [...] reported that they experienced discrimination from some of their lecturers just because they were black. Kate, aged 28, revealed how, on several occasions, one of her biology professors expressed a negative attitude and disbelief about the high marks she scored in the tests.

Other students felt that “some lecturers just assign grades on the basis of ones colour” and that the grades they received did not reflect their ability. It is very difficult to know how to deal with such claims. In my experience, students who complain of academic racism are unwilling to follow it up through the University’s Equal Opportunities framework, partly because they do not wish to cause trouble (for themselves and

²² de Vita (2002). For ethical reasons, de Vita was not able to use mono-cultural British control groups in this study.

²³ See Nichols (2003) for a deliciously provocative deconstruction of the rhetoric of cultural difference in Australian HE.

others); partly because they are afraid that to do so will affect their future grades. On the other hand, it is very easy for international students to assume racism when there may be an innocent or even benign explanation.²⁴ Training in cross-cultural awareness is necessary so that both staff and students may become aware of how their actions and words can be subject to misinterpretation.

One area which is particularly susceptible to cultural stereotyping, and which has generated heated debate in recent years, is that of international students and plagiarism. As with most research concerning international students and academic culture, the earlier work in this area has been conducted outside the UK.²⁵ The subject is contentious because it involves assumptions about cultural mores concerning ownership of ideas, leading some writers to question the “ideological arrogance” of imposing Western academic discourse on the rest of the world (Scollon 1994). There is also intense discussion as to what extent institutions should be lenient with students for whom English is a foreign language, and concern about the Equal Opportunities dilemma: UK students plagiarise too, but cases by non-native English speakers are more easily detected because they do not have the linguistic skills to mask their ‘crime’ (Errey 2002).

Errey’s research (2002) is interesting because it uncovers a disparity in staff and students’ views about the causes of plagiarism. Whereas academic staff tended to attribute international students’ plagiarism to cultural factors, students did not; instead they cited the main causes as writing under time pressure, not knowing the difference between common knowledge and attributable ideas, and not knowing how much or how often to cite. While staff considered that students were failing to reference correctly because they had difficulty mastering the mechanics of citation, students felt that their main challenge lay in language difficulties and the problem of finding an appropriate ‘voice.’

Schmitt (2005) also touches on this concept of ‘voice’, explaining that while native English-speaking undergraduates may have a vocabulary of around 40,000 words, an undergraduate for whom English is a foreign language may have 10,000 or less. This makes it difficult for students to paraphrase, or to observe the subtleties with which native speakers define their critical stance on the topic under discussion. Schmitt points out that, far from expecting UK students or scholars to express themselves in creative or idiosyncratic language, we measure their status within the academic community partly in terms of their ability to manipulate the shared, formulaic stock phrases which are the currency of their academic discipline. Plagiarism, including ‘patching’ and ‘plagiphrasing’, can thus be seen as essential to the process of academic language acquisition.

Hayes and Introna (forthcoming) develop this theme further, suggesting that ‘patchwriting’ could be used to teach academic writing skills. Hayes and Introna’s study is significant because their survey – of 126 students on two MSc programmes –

²⁴ For example, one student interviewed in the survey felt that her tutor discriminated against Chinese students by always scheduling their tutorials at the end of the day, when they were tired. A colleague in the same School suggests that the tutor had probably learned from previous experience that Chinese students needed longer tutorials than their British peers: scheduling them at the end of the day therefore allowed them the luxury of running over time without inconveniencing other tutees.

²⁵ See for example Scollon (1994); Pennycook (1996); Robinson and Lai (1999).

includes 25 British students, and shows that in many ways the attitudes and behaviours of UK and international students (categorised as 'Asian', 'Chinese' and 'Greek') to plagiarism are the same.²⁶ This indicates that, while there may be specific reasons why international students plagiarise, it would not do to overstate them.²⁷

While I do not wish to promote a deficit view of international students, it is clear that many may need extra academic support to help them bridge the gap between the academic culture and language of their home country and those of the UK. Most if not all UK HEIs now provide this type of support in the form of specialist academic counsellors, pre-sessional and in-session language/study skills courses and drop-in sessions, in addition to the academic support and personal tutor systems available to all students. Interestingly, studies have found that international students prefer to seek advice from their co-national peers than through institutional channels (Allen and Higgins 1994; Ledwith and Seymour 2001).²⁸ Worryingly, the most needy students make least recourse to language and study skills support (Kingston and Forland 2004), especially where these are optional and non-credit-bearing. "Although all of the students were offered free English language classes, many were reluctant to take them, believing that to do so would leave them even less time to study." (Cathcart et al 2005:32)²⁹. Lack of time is also cited as a reason why students do not attend pre-sessional study/research skills courses, even when these are free of charge.

That being the case, it is imperative that institutions review their curricula to make them more accessible to international students, and build language or study skills training into programmes in such a way that they benefit the maximum number of students. Such changes should benefit UK students as well, by clarifying procedures and enhancing their skills. Institutions also need to seriously question the international relevance of their curricula. Peters (2005), in her study of 25 international students on Business Masters and pre-Masters programmes, found that two thirds of her respondents felt that "the content and teaching on their courses represented a particularly UK or Western approach" but that what they learned would be relevant in their future lives. Eight out of 25, however, thought that the course content was "mainly relevant to UK/European/Western students." This is worrying, because according to Sastry (2006), future demand for UK education from current major source countries will depend on the perceived returns on investment. If potential students perceive a UK qualification to be irrelevant to their future career enhancement and earning prospects, they will go elsewhere for their higher education.

Internationalising the curriculum involves several aspects, as documented in Ryan (2000:57-64) and Koutsantoni (2006). These include:

- Evaluating course content: is it entirely UK- or Eurocentric?

²⁶For example, 56% of both Chinese and UK students admitted occasionally copying whole sentences word for word in their assignments without citing the source; 60% of Chinese and 63% of British judged this to be not cheating or trivial cheating.

²⁷ However, HEFCE has recognised the specific needs of international students with regard to this issue by funding the Student Diversity and Academic Writing Project (January 2005 – December 2007): for further details see <http://www.lums.lancs.ac.uk/Departments/owt/Research/sdaw/>.

²⁸ One of the ten students interviewed said she would seek academic advice from her friends rather than from academic staff; another said she would seek help on personal matters from her friends rather than from University support services. Both were Chinese.

²⁹ This has also been the experience of UW colleagues running non-credit-bearing language/study skills support classes in SCIT and WBS.

- Including international perspectives
- Utilising international case studies and examples
- Referring to international scholarship in lectures and on course reading lists
- Establishing international collaborative projects involving students
- Drawing on international expertise, both that of permanent staff and visiting lecturers
- Making diversity and internationalisation a positive asset of the course
- Using international students as a resource in developing international perspectives, teaching materials and expertise
- Following 'plain English' principles in course materials such as Award/Module Guides, and providing glossaries of academic terms where necessary
- Being explicit about course requirements
- Avoiding culturally offensive case studies, examples or texts
- Scrutinising assessments: are they fair to international students? Where assumption of local knowledge or use of culturally sensitive material may disadvantage international students, is this essential to the learning outcomes of the course, or could they be substituted with more internationally appropriate questions/tasks?
- Involving an international dimension in course feedback.
- Evaluating the academic success of international students relative to home students on the same course.

It is important to note that the majority of students surveyed by Peters (2005) felt that it was incumbent on them to adapt to the UK "way": they had chosen to study in the UK because they wanted a different education experience from that provided in their home country, and did not expect lecturers to alter teaching methods on their account.³⁰ At the same time, African students participating in Peters' survey felt that "their backgrounds were not sufficiently taken into consideration" (p.3) and that they expected lecturers to have a better appreciation of their prior knowledge, and of the circumstances of their countries. Maundeni (2001:270) bears this out:

"Almost all the things we are taught about and those we discuss are British. Some are not even relevant to my country nor are they relevant to my work at home. But what frustrates me more is that when I try to share with the class my experiences, the lecturer does not show interest. (Eddy, aged 32)"³¹.

This suggests that cultural arrogance and notions of colonial supremacy live on, despite the UK HE sector's growing dependence on international students for its economic survival.

In this section I have reviewed some of the educational issues which affect international students, namely: academic roles and relationships; classroom interaction; learning resources; learning styles and outcomes; assessment; academic writing conventions; language; multicultural groupwork; stereotyping and discrimination; academic support mechanisms; and curriculum design. There is not space within the context of this essay to outline possible strategies for dealing with these issues. Probably the best current UK publication which addresses all of them is Ryan (2000), followed closely by Carroll and Ryan (eds. 2005). Both take as their basis the need for staff in HEIs to develop their

³⁰ "What I learn here is an extra to what I already know from my home country." (Cameroonian student)

³¹ All ten of the survey participants felt what they were learning at UW would be useful for their future career. They agreed that some UK staff but few students showed an interest in their country and culture.

cross-cultural awareness, and secondly to make explicit to international students all the myriad requirements that will influence their success in UK Higher Education.

Recommendations for further research

For me, conducting this review has raised more questions than it has answered, and opened up fascinating new avenues of enquiry. To list but a few:

- **Academic success:** how do international students perform compared with UK-domiciled students? Are there any correlations between academic grades and country of origin, English level on entry, or length of time in the UK? Do many international students withdraw; at what point in their studies and for what reasons? Do staff and students attribute success and failure to different causes? Are pass and completion rates higher on courses designed for international students?
- **Study skills:** at what point in a student's programme should these be taught for maximum impact? How can they be offered to direct entrants at level 3? Can critical and analytical thinking be taught in a generic way, or is it best embedded in the academic discipline? If so, how? What are our current models for study skills support and how effective are they? What is the best way of introducing IT skills to students who may never have used a computer before?
- **Language:** how does English language level on entry map against academic performance? Do students who have undertaken an academic language (EAP) and study skills foundation programme perform differently from those who enter directly onto their degree courses? To what extent do lecturers use colloquial and idiomatic language when teaching, and does this cause significant problems for international students? What models of good practice do we have for language awareness training for academic staff? Can we develop one?
- **Curriculum:** are our curricula relevant to our international students? How do we know? What are our international alumni doing now and how do they rate the value of their education at UW, in terms of value for money, career enhancement and personal development?
- **Assessment:** are our assessments fair to international students; i.e. do the tasks and criteria allow them to display their true ability? Are students penalised due to poor command of English? To what extent do our assignments and exam questions assume local knowledge that disadvantages international students? Is our use of case studies and examples culturally appropriate?
- **Managing cultural diversity:** how do UK and international students at this University interact? How do they feel about assessed multicultural groupwork? What models of good practice do we have for managing cultural diversity in the classroom and in assessed groupwork? What new models can we develop? How can/do we help international students to interact positively with the local community? What evidence is there to show that international students benefit the life of a university other than in financial terms?
- **Perspectives:** is there a way of researching international students which focuses on their strengths rather than their areas of need? To what extent do international students' perspectives change over time? To what extent do their impressions/needs differ from those of first-year UK students?

There is a tendency in the literature to problematise international students, despite the evidence that most of them enjoy their time in the UK and feel it to have been of benefit. One reason for this may be that university staff are constantly striving to improve their service to students (including those from overseas), and therefore perceive any problem as a challenge to be explored and addressed. It is my hope that as we co-operate in research and innovations to improve the experience of international students at this University, we will never forget how much they have achieved, and how much they have to offer.

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