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Teaching and learning for international students: towards a transcultural approach

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Discourses of internationalisation in higher education often neglect one of the most effective sources of intercultural knowledge and understanding; the international students who increasingly inhabit university campuses around the world. International education is now big business in Anglophone universities such as in the UK and Australia, with 15% of students (United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs, 2010) and 21% of students (Australian International Education, 2010a) respectively being international students. However, benefits for nations and universities are at risk due to a range of teaching and learning issues that affect the learning experiences of international students and are problematic for both staff and students. This paper draws on research over the past two decades to discuss the nature of these issues and provides an overview of the three stages that can be discerned in universities’ responses to the influx of international students. This analysis points to a changing pattern of responses which are tied more closely to discourses of globalisation and internationalisation. It also shows that although many of the difficulties experienced by staff and students are well known, there is still much to be done to address curriculum, pedagogical and assessment practices. A necessary precursor to this work is the examination of underlying attitudes, values and systems that may give rise to difficulties for both staff and students. A new approach is needed that positions international students not as ‘problems’ to be solved but as ‘assets’ to internationalisation and the generation of new knowledge and new ways of working in the academy.

**Keywords:** internationalisation; international students; higher education; teaching and learning; Chinese learners; communities of practice; transculturalism

Introduction

British higher education, in common with other higher education systems around the world, has seen significant change over the past few years in terms of structures and policies as well as in the nature of the student cohort. Coupled with reforms arising from the Browne review of higher education in 2010, deep cuts to universities’ teaching budgets, radical increases in student fees and cuts announced to international student numbers as part of the government’s capping of immigration numbers, further and more fundamental change is imminent. These changes are likely to accelerate the challenges facing universities, and for teachers at the
forefront of these changes, causing pressures and tensions. This will require policy and structural reforms within UK universities already making efforts to respond to shifting national and international conditions such as through internationalisation strategies. However, the more fundamental reforms required at the level of curriculum and pedagogy that these shifts necessitate to not only deal with but also take advantage of these trends are seldom recognised by university hierarchies. The changes that teachers have seen at the ‘chalkface’ in the make-up of their students are profound, and need to be explored carefully and fully to ensure that students are receiving education that will prepare them for their future work and life, including the increasing numbers of international students choosing the UK as their study destination.

International education, here meaning where students study for a foreign degree or educational programme (either in a foreign country or within their own country), has become an export commodity worldwide, but especially in Anglophone countries such as the UK and Australia. In 2008, 3.3 million students were studying outside of their country of citizenship, almost double the number in 2000 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2010). Twenty percent of these were studying in the US and 15% in the UK (Universities UK International Unit, 2010) bringing an estimated £25 billion into the British economy, £2.9 billion directly from international students (The Economist, 5 August 2010). International students in Australia comprise 21% of the student population (Australian International Education, 2010a) and international education is Australia’s third largest export industry with earnings of $17.2 billion in 2008–2009 (Australian International Education, 2010b). Overall 15% of British university students are international students but they represent 43% of postgraduate students (United Kingdom Council for International Students [UKCISA], 2010) and comprise significant proportions of many UK universities’ student populations. In 2008/2009 the highest proportions of international students existed in the Russell Group universities including the London School of Economics (68%), Imperial College London (38%), University College London (34%), the University of Oxford (25%), and the University of Cambridge (24%) (UKCISA, 2010). In addition, there are large numbers of students undertaking British transnational education programmes (within their own country) and these numbers have recently overtaken the numbers of international students studying in Britain (British Council, 2011).

There has been much internationalisation activity in British universities to improve international student recruitment and to develop international partnerships. Alongside this, however, there have been only relatively modest moves towards the internationalisation of teaching and learning practices to take advantage of these flows of people and ideas and to put into practice universities’ internationalisation rhetoric. This then is an appropriate time to reflect on how universities have been responding to changed conditions and changing student cohorts, especially in the internationalisation arena, and to assess whether policies, structures and practices are fit for purpose; whether universities are well equipped to face future challenges and opportunities; and what precisely these might entail.

This paper aims to prompt debate about universities’ current responses to teaching and learning for international students and to explore future possibilities. It reviews universities’ curriculum and pedagogical responses to the increases in international students at UK universities over the past two decades and identifies distinct phases in internationalisation as they relate to teaching and learning. It points to possible future policies and strategies in the teaching and learning domain and in
academic cultures more generally, identifying the need for reflection on academics’ attitudes, values and practices. This paper casts a critical gaze at the attitudes that have accompanied these changes and questions whether new approaches are needed that move beyond the problematisation of international students to the opportunities that their presence can provide. It proposes a new approach that entails using the perspectives, knowledge and attitudes of international students as a resource for learning about other academic cultures and knowledge systems in respectful communities of practice. It concludes with a call for a transcultural approach that positions academic cultures as partners in the creation of new knowledge and practices amongst all stakeholders in higher education both in the UK and elsewhere.

This paper draws on the author’s qualitative and quantitative research on international students in the UK and Australia over the past two decades (Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Ryan, 1996, 2000, 2002; Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005; Ryan & Pomorina, 2010; Ryan & Viete, 2009) and first-hand experience of Chinese higher education spanning three decades, as well as sociocultural theories of teaching and learning, to describe and analyse historical and contemporary approaches to teaching and learning for international students and in particular for Chinese international students, the largest group of international students in both the UK and Australia. It also draws on data from two recent studies, the first of international students’ attitudes to their learning experiences at British universities, and the second on academics’ attitudes to scholarship and learning in Western and Confucian-heritage academic traditions, exploring similarities and differences as well as shifts within these systems.

**Changing contexts, changing teaching and learning**

International students now comprise significant proportions of UK university student populations and in some contexts can comprise a majority. Enrolment numbers are increasing and 2010 saw a 29% increase in international student applications (Universities UK International Unit, 2010). The international student market is a volatile one and is based on perceptions of quality of teaching and learning and value for money (British Council, 2010) as well as the general environment and the support services provided. There is increasing global competition for the international education market from countries in Europe offering programmes in English as well as from the US and more recently countries in the Asian region. The volatility of this market can be seen from the situation in Australia where enrolments of international students dropped significantly in 2009–2010 and caused financial difficulties for many universities. This drop was due to negative perceptions amongst international students arising from anti-immigration comments in the 2010 election campaign, attacks on international students, and the strengthening Australian dollar as a result of global economic forces (Babacan et al., 2009; Macready & Tucker, 2011; Universities UK International Unit, 2010; Wesley, 2009).

The British Government has in recent years invested millions of pounds through the Prime Minister’s Initiatives on international education (PMI 1 and 2) and these have been very successful in increasing international student enrolments and in raising the profile of international education. Severe government cuts to British universities announced in November 2010 may lead to an even stronger focus on international student recruitment. There has been speculation that the resultant large university fees increases in England are likely to encourage home and European
Union students to study elsewhere (Austrade, 2010) adding further pressures to British higher education.

The choice of the UK as the number one destination for international students (the US takes slightly more international students but more international students place the UK as their number one choice) is based on perceptions of quality. Surveys of international students such as those undertaken by iGraduate show that overall international students in the UK are satisfied with their university experiences. A closer look at their views on aspects of their teaching and learning experiences, however, tells a different story showing that there is no room for complacency in this area and that much work remains to be done. Analysis of 5 years’ statistics from the UK National Student Survey undertaken by the Teaching International Students (TIS) project (see www.heacademy.ac.uk/internationalstudents) for the period 2005–2009 and covering nearly one million local and international undergraduate students shows that international students are significantly less likely to rate their courses overall as very good compared with UK students (see Table 1 below).

As can be seen from these figures, international students are 4% less likely to be very satisfied with their teaching and learning experiences than home students and are more ambivalent about their course. Similar results were found for almost all of the other questions relating to the teaching and learning domain (Ryan & Pomorina, 2010). It could be argued that international students could be expected to be even more positive as they have generally made considerable efforts to embark on international study. Their high expectations could be a cause for their later disappointment.

Challenges exist therefore not only for universities at the level of income but also for international students in terms of their learning experiences and for those who work with them in teaching and learning environments. All students have their own ‘cultures’ and the changes arising from widening participation measures mean that students from more diverse backgrounds sit alongside often large numbers of international students in university classrooms and this in turn means that teaching and learning contexts are becoming more diverse and more complex. The impacts on the teaching and learning dynamic due to the presence of international students are undeniable; their presence provides challenges but it can also provide opportunities for intercultural communication and learning. How can academics take advantage of the internationalisation of the student cohort in ways that benefit international students, home students and staff? How can international students be used as a resource for the internationalisation of teaching and learning and so reify universities’

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<td>UK ( n = 876,483 )</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<td>International ( n = 81,966 )</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total ( n = 958,449 )</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>6.5</td>
<td>9.2</td>
<td>48.7</td>
<td>32.8</td>
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internationalisation rhetoric and the achievement of the ‘cosmopolitan’ ideal advocated by Papastephanou (2005) through ‘a more cosmopolitanically sensitive education’ (p. 533)? How can universities and academics open not just their ‘doors’, but also their ‘minds’ to the benefits of diverse academic traditions and perspectives?

New teaching and learning conditions call for new approaches to teaching and learning and assessment. The responses to the growing numbers of international students in countries such as the UK over the past two decades have been characterised by a spectrum of approaches, from ethnocentrism to interculturalism, which are reviewed below. What is required, however, is to move beyond both of these approaches, beyond ethnocentrism and the current laudable, though limited, attempts at intercultural approaches, towards more transcultural approaches. Transculturalism recognises that cultures are fluid and change through interactions with one another, and envisages the formation of new cultures through combining elements of different cultures. Murray (2010) defines transculturalism as ‘the results of contact between two or more different cultures’ which results in ‘a new, composite culture in which some existing cultural features are combined, while some are lost, and new features are generated’. Cucioletta (2002) sees transculturalism as ‘a recognition that modern societies are no longer monolithic … we are in an era where interculturality, transculturalism and the eventual prospect of identifying a cosmopolitan citizenship can become a reality’ (p. 2). Rizvi (2011) calls for ‘cosmopolitan learning’ that ‘seeks to develop a different perspective on knowing and interacting with others, within the changing context of the cultural exchanges produced by global flows and networks in transcultural collaborations’. As Rizvi (2010) argues, the processes of globalisation have ‘altered the social and political terrain within which universities now operate’ and are now transnational spaces ‘characterised by multiple ties and interactions linking people and interactions across borders and nation states’ (pp. 3–4). Cucioletta (2002) argues that transculturalism ‘is based on the breaking down of boundaries … [it] places the concept of culture at the center of a redefinition of the nation-state or even the disappearance of the nation state’ (pp. 8–9).

Transcultural approaches encompass the creation of culturally inclusive teaching and learning environments at the level of the classroom, in curriculum design and pedagogical approaches, through to epistemological plurality of the knowledge base. In short, universities need to take a new stance, one that moves beyond interactions between cultures with one culture positioned as more powerful and dominant, to a new stance which arises from mutual dialogue and respect amongst academic cultures and knowledge traditions and results in new learning, knowledge and practices. Universities need to not just engage in rhetoric about internationalisation but also to listen to others’ views of internationalisation; they need to not just be institutions of learning but learning institutions.

As a precursor to this new stance, however, it is necessary to examine the primary role of culture in shaping teaching and learning practices and the cultural basis and sustainability of current academic practices and traditions. Rizvi (2010, p. 8) points out that a university is not just a physical entity but is a ‘complex phenomenon given meaning through rules, myths, language and rituals [and is defined by] a set of social relations and cultural practices’. It is these social relations and cultural practices that shape teaching and learning practices. As Sussman (2000) states, ‘One’s culture imperceptibly forms a mental framework through which individuals define their ontology, motivate and select their behaviours, and judge and evaluate the actions of others’ (p. 356) and as Arenas (2009) argues, academics’
attitudes and background beliefs can negatively affect their teaching. Reflection on values and attitudes is a necessary foundation for the setting of future teaching and learning policies and structural frameworks for universities in this period of increased change and uncertainty. We need to question the ‘universalism’ of Western teaching and learning practices so that we can understand how to move beyond academic monoculturalism or interculturalism, and towards transnationalism. International students’ lecturers and supervisors need to recognise that they are also shaped by their social, cultural and academic traditions and that these are not universal.

Socio-cultural theories of learning help us to understand that learning is individually constructed, socially supported and culturally situated and mediated. The work of theorists such as Lave and Wenger (1991, 1999) highlight the importance of the social and cultural milieu of teaching and learning contexts and the ‘communities of practice’ that exist in teaching and learning environments through the co-construction of knowledge by teachers and learners (Freire, 1970). Educators now understand the importance of the social context for creating and supporting learning through strategies such as group work, cooperative and collaborative learning and peer and group discussion. The cultural ‘boundedness’ of such approaches, however, is hard to recognise especially for those who have never stepped out of their cultural ‘contact zone’ (Kenway & Bullen, 2003). Yet the accelerated presence of international students in our learning contexts provides precisely the foundation for this type of learning and reflection on cultural boundaries and their sustainability. Are we taking advantage of this opportunity for self-reflection and learning about the self through the ‘other’? Or is there still tacit or even overt resistance to the presence of foreigners in our midst? Evidence of such views can easily be found in blog posts responding to articles in the British press about international students, even in publications such as the Guardian and the Times Higher Education (see, for example, the blog posts in the Guardian of 16 September 2010 in response to an article by Dominic Scott, CEO of UKCISA about the benefits of international students to the UK, http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/sep/16/overseas-students-vital-education-not-drain. Some messages were so offensive that they were removed from the site. See also the blog posts in the Times Higher Education of 11 March 2010 in response to a story about the problems experienced by international students http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?sectioncode = 26&story-code = 410766&c = 1).

It is also necessary to consider whether our current teaching and learning is unidirectional. Singh (2009) identifies cross cultural ‘ignorance’ as being inherent in the internationalisation of education (p. 188), although he argues that this ‘ignorance’ can also act as an incentive for (two-way) learning. Is there an implicit cultural ‘ignorance’ or even arrogance at play that assumes it is foreigners who need to learn from ‘Western’ (or ‘British’) traditions? Is there an assumption that the attributes of Western education heralded as ideals, such as critical thinking and acknowledgement of sources, only exist in Western learning contexts and can only be manifested in particular ways? What might we be losing in such a narrow view of academic praxis? As MacKinnon and Manathunga (2003) argue, Western universities maintain Western templates of knowledge that value ‘Western ways of knowing and learning’ and ignore diverse cultural literacies especially in terms of what they assess and how they assess this. The ethnocentrism of existing academic approaches in Western academe has been criticised by theorists such as Singh (2009), Rizvi (2010) and Connell (2007). Appadurai (1996, 2001) argues that
national and cultural boundaries are becoming fuzzier and less permeable and the
notion of nation states is being replaced by international or transnational flows of
people, ideas, languages and media, in addition to the global movement of finance
and goods. Is a more global, ‘macro’ focus required so that (all) future graduates
are equipped to be able to successfully live and work in these more globalised con-
texts and conditions with global knowledge and skills?

Shifting the focus from the micro to the macro

In this section, the literature on international students over the past two decades is
reviewed to identify and analyse common themes and approaches and shifts within
these over time. This review shows that the focus of investigation and identifica-
tion of ‘problems’ experienced (or supposedly caused) by international students in
the teaching and learning domain has slowly shifted from the micro level – the stu-
dent – to the meso level – the teacher. This analysis provides a foundation for
identifying how to build on these previous phases and work in new, more creative
ways that are better suited to future conditions. This paper explores a further future
shift in focus – to the macro level – to the institution and the role of academic cul-
tures and academe itself. This entails recognition of the opportunities for learning
from international students and other academic cultures and traditions which are
explored later.

Despite well over a decade of the presence of large numbers of international stu-
dents on Anglophone university campuses, the existing literature on international
students, especially on Chinese students, at least until relatively recently, has often
illustrated negative attitudes towards international students and a ‘deficit’ approach
towards their capabilities. International students are described as passive, rote learn-
ers, lacking in critical thinking and independent learning skills and prone to plagia-
rism (Archer, 2007; Asmar, 2005; Grimshaw, 2007; Ryan, 2005; Ryan & Carroll,
2005; Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005). Further, much of the current literature on teaching
and learning for international students and on internationalisation more generally
fails to connect with academics and is often disconnected from the ‘real world’
dilemmas and challenges facing those dealing with the increasing numbers of inter-
national students and the consequences of this change to their work (Ryan 2000,
2005). Despite the rhetoric of internationalisation at university policy level, lecturers
continue to report the same kinds of difficulties and ‘pedagogical uncertainties’ with
teaching international students (TIS) that were reported over a decade ago (Singh
2009; Turner & Robson, 2008). These include how to encourage international stu-
dents to participate in class and interaction between them and home students, and
how to assess different knowledge and forms of expression (Carroll & Ryan, 2005).
If these difficulties remain unresolved, there is a risk of negative and even hostile
reactions from teaching staff which Papastephanou (2005) characterises as ‘antago-
nistic impulses cultivated by globalisation’ (p. 533). International students often
report negative and even hostile attitudes and comments by lecturers (Deumert,
Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2005; Marginson & Eijkman, 2007; Rizvi,
2010; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Many lecturers continue to see international students
as problematic and are unwilling (or are unconvinced of the need) to change and
adapt to new conditions and imperatives, seeing their role as simply educating stu-
dents in ‘our ways’ or ‘our values’. There remains much work to be done to ensure
that the rhetoric of internationalisation engages academics and is translated into
positive experiences for staff and students, both local and international, in ways that facilitate the two way flow of knowledge and understanding.

Internationally, the research field of teaching and learning for international students tends to be disparate and lacks a conceptual framework to underpin and transform research and practice. There is a paucity of evidence-based and theoretically-informed work and research continues to be small-scale, ‘scattered’ and a-theoretical (Huisman, 2010) and is fraught with ‘mixed messages’ (Caruana & Spurling, 2007). There is a pressing need for knowledge about cross cultural teaching so that this field of study can move beyond simple ‘problem identification’ towards more innovative and sustainable models of curriculum and pedagogy that are derived from, and are suited to, diverse cultural intellectual paradigms and traditions, and that embody critical and respectful approaches and a meta-awareness of cultural issues and their complexities.

Returning to the genesis of these approaches, from a decade and a half of research on teaching and learning for international students in the UK and Australia, it is possible to discern three distinct but overlapping phases in the responses by universities to teaching and learning for the accelerating numbers of international students during this period. These phases involve a shift from how to ‘fix’ the student, to later, how to ‘fix’ the teacher or the institution. Both of these approaches are outdated and inadequate in the contemporary contexts of global higher education and offer no sustainable or innovative way to move beyond the ‘deficit’ debates described above to create new approaches to teaching in cross cultural contexts. The current phase sees a broader focus on internationalisation of the curriculum but a general continuing neglect of teaching and learning issues.

In the first phase, from the early to the late 1990s, students were expected to adapt to the institution and there was a focus on how international students were lacking in certain (Western) academic skills. Publications during this period focused on how international students were different from local students and which particular skills they needed remediated. Such ‘advice’, however, can be seriously misleading and ill-informed (Ryan & Louie, 2007) and give inaccurate and outdated information about international students especially in rapidly changing contexts such as China and India, the major source countries of international students for most Anglophone universities. This earlier phase gave rise to a large number of one-off studies where lecturers wrote about their international students struggling in their first year of study, in most cases about Chinese students, and such studies can still be commonly found. Research by academics with intimate knowledge of Chinese learners (Clark & Gieve, 2006; Grimshaw, 2007; Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006; Louie, 2005; Ryan, 2010; Ryan, Kang, Mitchell, & Erickson, 2009; Ryan & Louie, 2007; Watkins & Biggs, 2001) are highly critical of these stereotyped and inaccurate representations of international students from China but these views continue to prevail. This literature and approach led to the proliferation of remedial programmes and the ‘front loading’ of international students (Ryan & Viete, 2009) that attend to the development of particular generic academic skills and foundation programmes by professionals in fields such as English for Academic Purposes. These approaches continue to typify universities’ responses (Asmar, 2005) and although they undeniably have benefits for students, they place the onus on students alone to change and adapt. Debates in these areas tend to remain the reserve of those outside academic disciplines and often fail to engage academics teaching in increasingly cross cultural contexts.
In the second phase, from around 2000 to recent times, as the numbers and proportion of international students accelerated, the research ‘gaze’ began to shift to the institution and its teaching and learning practices. This phase was characterised by a focus on how lecturers need to ‘accommodate’ international students and make their teaching and learning practices more explicit to give international students a greater chance of success in their new learning contexts. This was despite the fact that international students are, overall, as successful academically as their local counterparts. In this phase, there was recognition of the need to make explicit the ‘rules of the game’ to assist international students to learn how to play them (Carroll & Ryan, 2005). International students continue to report dissatisfaction with aspects of teaching and learning however (as can be seen from the UK NSS data) and lecturers teaching them continue to complain about the skills that international students lack (Singh, 2009).

In the third, current, phase universities’ internationalisation agendas have led to debates about ‘internationalisation of the curriculum’ (for both home and international students) and the broader ‘internationalisation’ of higher education. Universities are beginning to explore how they can better respond to their more diverse student populations (Robinson-Pant, 2009) but policy responses are still generally typified by the ‘augmentation’ of students’ learning experiences through the promotion of more ‘learning-orientated services’ and thus continue the onus on international students to adapt, rather than recognise the need for Western universities to adapt (Gu & Schweisfurth, 2006) and to transform mainstream teaching and learning practices for all students. ‘Internationalisation’ debates are largely located in the policy domain and generally ignore what Huisman (2010) calls the ‘cultural dynamics’ of teaching and learning and the potential for taking advantage of the flows of international students in positive and innovative ways. A new direction is needed that draws on internationalisation agendas and debates but transforms them into productive ways of working with international students (and international colleagues) in changed and changing learning contexts. Rather than regarding international students as a minority group within the classroom, they can become an integral part of the learning environment in broader and more inclusive ‘communities of practice’ and a source for mutual adaptation and learning for staff and (all) students. Very recently, a new kind of literature is emerging in the UK such as by Jones (2010), Montgomery (2010) and Turner and Robson (2008) which recognises the need for new directions in the internationalisation of higher education. These authors believe that university lecturers need to take the lead on these issues not just through the current focus on social integration of international students but also academic integration and beyond, to academic transformation. Other discourses and debates within the wider internationalisation agenda call for (all) graduates to become ‘global citizens’ or for a ‘cosmopolitan’ curriculum (Papastephanou, 2005). These contemporary discourses intersect with concerns for more globalised teaching and learning praxis and can also be marshalled to inform debates about curriculum and pedagogical policy and practice.

Limitations of current ‘internationalisation’ strategies: universalism and ethnocentric approaches

Turning now to the broader area of universities’ internationalisation policies, literature around internationalisation in higher education and ‘internationalisation of
the curriculum’ within Western academic contexts is often narrowly focused on the processes of internationalisation rather than its nature and purpose. The definition of internationalisation which is most commonly used in Western universities by Jane Knight, a key writer on internationalisation from the University of Toronto, focuses on the processes of internationalisation within institutions (although Knight herself argues that people have very different conceptualisations of internationalisation):

Internationalisation is the process of integrating an international, intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education. (Knight, 2004, p. 11)

In contrast, a Chinese definition of internationalisation by a leading education scholar in China Gu Mingyuan, states:

The internationalisation of education can be expressed in the exchange of culture and values, mutual understanding and a respect for difference … The internationalisation of education does not simply mean the integration of different national cultures or the suppression of one national culture by another culture. (Gu, 2001, p. 105)

The lack of clarity and fuzziness of the term ‘internationalisation’ and assumptions of its ‘universality’ (Nguyen, Elliott, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2009) point to a need for further debate and investigation as well as its uncoupling from a Western-centred positioning. As Edwards (2007) has observed, current debates about internationalisation of the curriculum are not advancing the field, and we are ‘still having the same conversation [about internationalisation] we were all having in the 1970s’ (p. 373). Literature in this field commonly assumes a Western dominance (or an ‘imperial gaze’) in common with much Western social science research which Connell (2007) has explored so powerfully in ‘Southern Theory’ (2007) in a critique of the Eurocentric nature of Western academe and its implicit assumed superiority, usually situated within an Anglophone context. Marginson (2010) argues that ‘equal cultural respect is hard to secure in Anglo-American countries in which systems are monocultural; there is usually an innate belief in Western superiority’. Similarly, Robinson-Pant (2009, p. 427) argues that academic research and publishing needs to be ‘democratised’ so that the inequalities between ‘Northern’ and ‘Southern’ academics are reduced. The latter definition of internationalisation above locates internationalisation not within a single (assumed Western) system, but rather conceptualises it as an endeavour between civilisations, cultures and values. Professor Gu comments on the undesirability of internationalisation as an academic imperialist endeavour and the ‘one way’ nature of the traffic. Similarly, Wang (2006) argues that the flow of ideas has remained unidirectional, from the West to the ‘rest’ while Huisman (2010) goes further, arguing that internationalisation has become a ‘synonym’ for the ‘export of the Anglo/American model’.

Contemporary discourses about internationalisation and other academic systems such as those in Confucian-heritage cultures often describe Western and Confucian paradigms of scholarship and learning in inaccurate and unhelpful binary terms and inhibit the potential for learning and understandings between cultures (Ryan & Louie, 2007). These ill-informed debates about supposed differences between cultures and individuals within them lead to lost opportunities for the mutual and respectful exchange of ideas (as Gu advocates) rather than the integration of knowledge from one culture into another. As Singh (2009) argues, Western teachers of
Chinese students have a ‘Western imagining of mainland Chinese people’ (p. 185) that is grounded in ‘ignorance’. Robertson (2010) believes that the West continues to look at China ‘through Western eyes’ and argues that we need a new conceptual ‘armoury’ to ‘extend our research horizons’ in what she describes as ‘phenomenally different’ higher education landscapes. Singh (2009) recognises the opportunities for two-way learning by calling for an ‘examination of China’s diverse heritage of intellectual disputation’ and traditions (p. 192). Lingard (2006) similarly calls for a ‘deparochialising’ of research education for international students and for recognition of the knowledge and agency of international students. Teaching and supervision practices often ignore the agency of international students (Rizvi, 2010; Robinson-Pant, 2009; Ryan & Viete, 2009; Sillitoe, Webb, & Zhang, 2005); international students do not just adapt, they are changed and in turn change others and the context around them and they are often not valued or recognised for the knowledge that they bring to Western academe (Rizvi, 2010; Ryan & Viete, 2009).

Many international ‘students’ are higher education professionals (Kenway & Bullen, 2003; Robinson-Pant, 2009; Ryan & Viete, 2009) and they are often undertaking international study with the aim of changing academic praxis within their own countries (Rizvi, 2010); their host universities can do the same and so achieve two-way learning. ‘This means bringing this intellectual capital to bear in the production and flow of research-based knowledge as much as the dialogic education of transnational educational researchers’ (Singh, 2009, p. 187).

A lack of knowledge amongst Western educators about different cultural intellectual and academic paradigms and teaching approaches, especially in non-Western and non-Anglophone contexts, is inhibiting the development of new more contemporary approaches to cross cultural teaching that draw on an international range of approaches. Research in the field of cross cultural communication is usually limited to theories such as Hofstede’s work on cultural ‘programming of the mind’ (Hofstede, 1991), which emphasises differences between cultures and encourages singular, essentialised views about whole cultural systems of practice. Hofstede’s work has been widely criticised but nevertheless continues to be used uncritically in higher education (Chung & Ingleby, 2011; Signorini, Wiesemes, & Murphy, 2009). Such debates ignore the changing contemporary contexts and realities in countries such as China, for example, which is undergoing vast and rapid change as well as the enormous diversity within these systems and amongst individuals within them (Guan & Meng, 2007; Jin & Cortazzi, 2006, 2011; Ryan, 2011a, 2011b; Ryan, Kang, Mitchell & Erickson, 2009; Ryan & Louie, 2007). Rather than focusing on supposed ‘differences’ between cultures, changing contexts and imperatives also call for recognition of similarities and the potential for common ground and learning.

**Towards transcultural curriculum and pedagogy**

Are universities ready for a transcultural approach? Is it possible to move beyond current tentative moves towards dialogue between academic systems, to a dialogue that envisions the creation of new epistemologies and praxis based on new, shared academic cultures and values? A first step is for teachers to examine their own attitudes, values and systems to explore ways that these may be informed and expanded by alternative approaches and traditions. In transcultural approaches, the experiences and perspectives of both cultural ‘insiders’ as well as cultural ‘outsiders’ and those who increasingly move between cultures (although to date this traffic
has mostly been one-way) can be drawn upon to re-examine values and perspectives. My own experiences as an international student in other Anglophone and non-Anglophone contexts have given me the ‘gift’ of what Bakhtin (1986, p. 7) calls the ‘surplus of seeing’. Outsiders are often able to see more clearly that which insiders cannot see, that which insiders in a culture consider natural and universal which in turn forces a rethinking of one’s own cultural knowledge, values and perspectives. All cultural systems and individuals within them can suffer from a lack of self-awareness and self-reflection, yet many educational theorists have long been aware of the crucial need for learning to begin with a critical re-appraisal of the self. As the Chinese Sage Confucius said over 2500 years ago it is impossible to understand others unless one first understands one’s self. Similarly, we need a critical stance in relation to our knowledge base and traditions. As Popper argued, the generation of new knowledge arises from the critical falsifying of the known. Without this critical stance of the self and our knowledge, we are destined to repeat the mistakes of the past and our knowledge risks stagnating or being overtaken by those in other systems eager in their quest for new knowledge and learning from the ‘other’.

Rather than being viewed as problematic, the large numbers of international students in the UK (and also international staff), as well as the rapidly increasing contacts between British and overseas universities such as in China, can provide an opportunity for the co-construction of new knowledge and more collaborative ways of working and thinking. From interviews conducted to date with expert scholars in Western and Chinese universities through a research study which is examining the views of senior scholars in three ‘Western’ (the UK, Australia and the US) and three ‘Confucian-heritage’ contexts (China, Hong Kong and Singapore), it is clear that scholars in different contexts do have both shared and different views on scholarship and learning. Participants were asked to define ‘good scholarship’ and ‘effective learning’, what they saw as the differences or similarities between Western and Confucian paradigms, and whether these are changing or should change. From the 26 interviews conducted so far, it is clear that there are diverse and competing discourses within universities in both systems and amongst individuals. As Wu (2002) found, there are different ‘micro’ climates between universities in the one country and between different discipline areas. These interview data also show that the negative assumptions about ‘Chinese learners’ are not based on the expectations and practices of educators within Chinese contexts. Rather than portraying polarised Western and Confucian understandings of the purposes of scholarship and learning, the following quote from a professor in the Humanities at a large university in the south of China demonstrates that views are in fact similar and that differences are more likely to occur in individuals’ approaches within both systems:

I think there are more commonalities between Western and CHC paradigms of scholarship and learning than differences. In other words, there are commonalities that good scholarship and effective learning share in both paradigms. An oft-cited belief in China is that the Western paradigm emphasises critical thinking whereas the CHC paradigm emphasises rote learning, memorization and breadth of knowledge. I believe that differences exist only amongst individual scholars whether they are Eastern or Western. (Professor Chang, Guangzhou)

The quote below from an Associate Professor of Linguistics at a university in Beijing belies claims that Chinese educators are only concerned with rote and
passive learning. She shares the concerns of her Western counterparts of the limitations of teaching large groups:

The key point of Confucian education philosophy is that differential teaching methods are required for different students. What Confucius said is that if there are 50 students, then you need to teach them using fifty different methods to cater for them. You should not use one method to teach all 50 students. The metaphor is clear. This is Confucian’s point. I think his view is very insightful. However, the value has been lost in modern education; China teachers have already forgotten Confucius’s words. What our teachers are doing is one method for fifty students, even for one hundred students. (Dr Jing, Beijing)

The following quote from an Associate Professor at a smaller regional university near Beijing illustrates a desire for cooperative and group learning as well as the valuing of different approaches to teaching and learning:

There is a tendency in scholarship in both Western countries and CHC countries, that is, international cooperation and group work is more and more emphasized in conducting research. That implies that people tend to accept different ideas and shows democracy in scholarship. (Dr Tao, Hebei)

Such research demonstrates not only what each system holds in common but the potential for mutual learning when stereotypes are critically examined and rejected, and the advantages for learning on both sides are identified. To date, although there is now much travel of scholars between these contexts, these ‘contacts’ have not been translated into shared new understandings of how different approaches can be used to develop new ways of working and generate new forms of knowledge about teaching in cross cultural contexts. These unprecedented opportunities for engagement can provide a platform for better understanding of different cultural traditions and values, knowledge and perspectives within the contemporary realities of complex and shifting world powers.

There are many areas where Western academics can learn from their Chinese counterparts. According to Grimshaw (2007, p. 302):

empirical studies reveal that, contrary to the Western stereotype, Chinese societies do value an exploratory and reflective approach to learning; that Chinese teachers do not rely exclusively upon the transmission mode of delivery; and that Chinese students can be seen to engage in autonomous, problem solving activities. Furthermore, they highlight a fundamental paradox: although Western educational research predicts that the skills and strategies encouraged within Chinese education should be counterproductive to learning, Chinese students clearly outperform their Western counterparts in certain areas.

In the first time that students from mainland China participated in the OECD PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) tests of 15 year olds’ literacy, numeracy and scientific skills in 2010, students in Shanghai topped the test results worldwide (Financial Times, 7 December 2010). Chinese students’ achievements in Mathematics have similarly been recognised as exemplary and Chinese Mathematics teaching methods are being studied by other countries (Seah, 2011). My own research into China’s education system and curriculum reform over the past 5 years (Ryan, 2011a, 2011b) shows other areas where much could be learnt from China by Western educators and students including better support for students by their
Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Western academics need to move beyond the problematisation of international students to see them as a source of internationalisation for universities. I have pointed to the need to examine the cultural origins of contemporary academic practices and the need to review them in changed and changing national and international contexts. These contexts are volatile and this uncertainty calls for dynamic and creative strategies and solutions and the re-examination of the suitability and sustainability of the knowledge, skills and attitudes of all participants in higher education.

The position of Anglophone universities as hosts to large numbers of international students and the multicultural and diverse nature of their local student populations provide ideal springboards for the development of world-leading paradigms and practices to inform cross cultural teaching. They also provide opportunities for teachers to learn and change, and adapt to changing contexts. Governments overseas, in the US, many European countries, and increasingly Asia, are investing heavily in higher education, and in particular in attracting international students. China is investing heavily in the internationalisation and rejuvenation of its higher education system with the aim of establishing itself as a world leader (Ryan, 2011a) with the President of Yale University Professor Richard Levin predicting that within 25 years Chinese universities will be amongst the best in the world (Guardian, 2 February 2010). To date, however, Anglophone universities have been content to limit their interactions with their international students to one-way transmission of knowledge, missing out on the very real possibilities of mutual learning for academics and students, both local and international. In truly internationalised and transcultural learning environments, everyone is ‘international’ and global knowledge and skills become available to all.

As can be seen from the work of scholars such as Turner, Robson, Jones and Montgomery in the UK and Connell, Singh and Lingard in Australia, the need for new knowledge paradigms and mindsets has been recognised. What is missing is the precise knowledge about what this might entail and how it can be put into practice in the teaching domain. The UK Higher Education Academy’s Teaching International Students (TIS) project is aimed at addressing this; the work of TIS provides the research evidence and the teaching and learning resources for the development of culturally inclusive teaching and learning communities of practice. Similarly international research collaborations between Western academics and postgraduate students from countries such as China provide insights into alternative paradigms and knowledge. Usually, however, such understandings are often only available to those who spend considerable periods of time working within other systems, and to date, this has mostly been one way, in the direction from countries such as China to the West.

International students and colleagues can help to reify the rhetoric of internationalisation, which to date has remained a somewhat contested and fuzzy term, and to
become assets in the learning of home students and staff. Experiences in Australia show us that there is no room for complacency. According to Marginson (2010), ‘global connectedness continues to grow . . . [but] [t]he issues arising will become larger’. Marginson calls for ‘equal cultural respect’ to counter the negative turn in Australia and to strengthen relations between cultures. As Australian universities had to respond to reductions in their budgets as the international student intake softened, this was a salutary warning for others, especially in the UK where government cuts will put pressure on universities to find alternative sources of funding. Universities cannot assume that international students will continue to come unless they work to ensure that these students receive teaching and learning experiences that are of high quality and are relevant to their future career trajectories. And equally, universities need to ensure that this source of cross cultural learning can work to the benefit of home students as well as those who teach them. Our young people are well positioned in the contemporary world to take advantage of cross cultural travel and interactions and universities need to provide the contexts and conditions that will allow them to take full advantage of these opportunities for learning and transformation.

As Martin Davidson, Chief Executive of the British Council, recently stated (Times Higher Education, 25 March 2010):

International students have more study options today than ever before, and in an internet-connected world, word quickly spreads when it appears that a university regards them as little more than ‘cash cows’. In today’s rapidly evolving marketplace, overseas governments will react against foreign universities that are clearly interested only in recruiting students from their country and giving nothing in return.

References


