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THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

**International Graduate Coursework
Students and the Urgency of Adapting to
New Learning Strategies**

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INTERNATIONAL GRADUATE COURSEWORK STUDENTS AND THE URGENCY OF ADAPTING TO NEW LEARNING STRATEGIES¹

ABSTRACT – International graduate students enrolled in coursework degrees are under enormous pressure from the moment they come on course. They usually have only 1-2 years to complete their courses. There is greater pressure on their language skills in the context of reading and writing. They often have gaps in their knowledge and the higher levels of theoretical, philosophical or methodological content in their readings can be particularly difficult for them. There are also other pressures. Time constraints do not permit the more leisurely acquisition of new learning strategies allowed research students. This paper discusses the particular difficulties encountered by coursework students and their urgent need of help. It also examines the different contexts in which they can be helped and proposes methods for assisting them in those contexts.

The recent IDP National Conference on International Education focused on the barriers to the development and vitality of international education from Australian and Global perspectives. One of the barriers singled out for special mention was the low perception of the quality of Australian education overseas.

Just what is meant by quality is of course generating much debate, though one may begin by thinking of quality in terms of those loosely defined generic skills, attributes and values set out in the Higher Education Council's draft paper on *The Quality of Higher Education* (1992). These cover

... such skills or 'qualities' as critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, problem-solving, logical and independent thought and effective communication; personal attributes such as intellectual rigour, a willingness to work in a cooperative manner with others, creativity and imagination; and values such as ethical practice, integrity, and tolerance. (p. 15)

In the perspective of international postgraduate students, quality might well be reduced to developing the skills and knowledge that will ensure capture of what is, in most cases, a high cost degree. To succeed in this capture they will surely need to acquire some of the skills listed above, particularly 'critical thinking', and to become the autonomous learners and researchers implied by this list.

In my experience, international students are mostly prepared to work very hard to ensure they do get their degrees. With graduate coursework degrees (such as the Graduate Diploma or

Masters Coursework), however, hard work may not be enough. Of course there is never a guarantee of anyone being awarded a degree but if these students work hard, and still fail in their aims they are unlikely to be good ambassadors of Australian higher education when they return to their home countries; they have risked much yet failed to get the degree or perhaps the level of degree desired. Conversely, successful returnees will surely contribute to lifting the profile ahead of our higher education system. My comments here assume that the users of graduate education do hold preconceptions of what quality is just as their future employers in academe, government, industry and business do.

Why the focus on graduate 'coursework' students?

International students currently make up 25% of the graduate student population at the Australian National University (ANU). There was a total of 503 international students on course as at 31/3/92: 41% of these were doing coursework degrees (193) or coursework and research degrees (15).

It is apparent from these figures, which would seem to reflect trends generally; that a significantly high proportion of international graduate students are undertaking coursework degrees. Given the continuing growth in the overall number of graduate students taking coursework degrees in Australian universities, we might reasonably expect a parallel growth in the international student population. Despite the high percentage of international graduate students taking coursework, this group appears not to have received the attention in the literature given students doing research degrees. Yet their situations and needs are not the same.

In the discussion to follow, I shall be drawing on my work as Graduate Students Adviser in the Study Skills Centre at ANU. I am particularly concerned in this paper with certain reading and writing difficulties of international coursework students from the Arts and Social Sciences mainly, but also from some Sciences such as Forestry and Geography. Of course not all international students find it difficult to make the academic transition to an Australian tertiary environment. Whether or not there will be difficulties depends on previous educational background. It is also true that students experience varying degrees of difficulty; some make the adjustments fairly quickly but for many it is more of an effort. In the main, the students I work with come from different Asian countries (eg Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia) and some from the Pacific region, but I have also seen students from Europe and the USA having academic difficulties because of cultural differences in educational practices.

Range of difficulties

1) Time pressure: graduate coursework students usually have only one year to complete their course (Graduate Diploma) or 15-18 months, sometimes two years (Masters Coursework). This means that the international students have time constraints that do not allow for a more leisurely acquisition of skills in making the transition to a new learning environment. And there are high pressure spots in the context of this transition, some of which are pointed out below.

2) A number of these students hope to take out a Masters Coursework degree. But they are initially enrolled in a Graduate Diploma to monitor their suitability or have a proviso placed on them (as do Australian students) that they cannot continue with the Masters unless they maintain a high grade point average throughout the first year's work. This grade may vary across disciplines, tending to be in the high credit-distinction range. Consequently, students have to do well on their papers and in their exams right from the very beginning. That is they cannot afford to wait until submission of their first set of assignments to find they have problems, that they are not producing the *right* sort writing, which usually means too that they are not doing the right sort of reading.

3) These students often have to work at more sophisticated and demanding levels of enquiry than their undergraduate counterparts. They are, for example, likely to have higher levels of theoretical, philosophical or methodological content in their readings and writing which puts a great strain on their language capacity. I have noticed that in the more heavily theoretical sections of an essay there are usually more linguistic, grammatical and expression errors and, most likely, more structural problems as well.

4) They often have to read beyond an already extensive reading program to fill gaps in their knowledge. They may find that their undergraduate education at home has not prepared them adequately for the level of knowledge expected of graduate work here, that is they have not read extensively enough in their field. Datuk Haji Azmi Junid, director of teacher education for Malaysia's education ministry, has commented on the need for 'training to bridge the gap between students' background knowledge and the course proper' (*Australian Campus Review Weekly*, p.4). Some care needs to be taken, however, in assuming that this is in fact the problem.

One student I saw remarked: 'My supervisor keeps telling me to do more reading, that I don't

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read these'. He felt overburdened and bewildered. After some discussion, it was evident that he had read widely and that he had a sound knowledge of the relevant literature. The problem was with his approach. He could explain well what the various theories were about but he had no capacity to critically evaluate them. Here was an obvious mismatch of knowledges due to different reading practices which are culture bound.

If we move away from the idea of knowledge as a totalising concept and think rather of knowledges as cultural constructs then students from different cultures *are* seen to possess different knowledges. To put this another way, the learning strategies or conventions of enquiry, such as methods of investigation or the ways in which data are processed and written up, are not peripheral but integral to what knowledge actually is. Not only do these differences in practice exist among disciplines but within disciplines across cultures.

It does not always help to think of there simply being a gap in a student's background knowledge because no amount of extra reading will finally close that gap. Such students as the one above need some instruction on how to re-read material in the style of the new academic culture to which they have come, bearing in mind that reading styles complement writing practices. Learning how to read and write differently is essential in making that transition from the reproductive to the analytical/speculative modes of producing knowledge so fully adumbrated and carefully discussed by Ballard and Clanchy in *Teaching Students from Overseas* (1991).

5) It may be too that the international students who come on course are moving across disciplines. For example, a BEc moving into International Relations at a graduate level will find there are different writing and learning skills requirements. Such a student may have had little undergraduate experience in setting up and developing a thesis or in producing rigorous, sustained argument for assignments and exam papers that have essay-type questions.

6) For many of these students there is also the added pressure of holding senior government and academic positions at home. Such students feel the stress of having to do well. A student who came to see me was in tears, very distressed at getting a low distinction in a subject that she teaches at senior lecturer level in her own country. She felt she had brought great shame on her department which was paying her fees and she was also concerned about how her department might view this 'failure' as she put it. A cursory reading of her semester papers showed that these were overly descriptive, had little critical analysis in them and insufficient argument. It did not soothe her to be told that her failure was less a

Other students have talked about somewhat different problems, one mentioning that he would be expected to be the English expert when he returned to his government department. This worried him greatly not only because his English was not perfect (which it was not) but because he did not feel confident about doing 'the different sorts of English writing.' Another said that his supervisor (again a government department) at home would be expecting him to take on more of a role in policy making when he returned. Although he was enjoying his course here, he found it hard and was just scraping through; he did not feel that he had learnt as much as would be expected of him. He, like so many others, emphasised time: so much to learn and do in so short a time.

7) There are of course too personal and financial pressures. These students are often in an age bracket where they have left behind husbands, wives, children. It is likely too that their course fees have been paid by their places of employment at home or by their extended families. They feel a heavy responsibility to justify this faith in their ability and the money and hope invested in them by others.

It may be that other students have some of these pressures too but they are unlikely to have all of them. To sum up, international graduate coursework students are under enormous pressure from the moment they come on course.

Proposed methods of assistance

The point then is what can be done to minimise this pressure? Before taking up this question we might pause to reconsider the definition of quality given that Australian universities are, to a lesser or greater degree, multicultural and international campuses.

Quality is not only a matter of an expanded disciplinary knowledge, or of acquiring generic skills or attributes and values esteemed in our academic culture, some of which may not be appropriate for students returning to a different culture. A constituent of quality is the capacity to acknowledge and respond to the varied academic needs of different student groups in our universities. Within the grouping 'Graduate coursework students' there will be Australian students (NESBs and ESBs) and international students. All have to compete academically on an equal basis yet it is clear that not all are equally advantaged. We cannot expect international students returning to their home countries to praise the quality of Australian education if their experience of our tertiary culture has been one of perceived disadvantages. The issue here is not equity of access but equity of chance once students are

Certain individual academics, departments and university services are already trying to ensure greater educational equity for their international graduate coursework students. What this amounts to is more of a two-way exchange: support, guidance and assistance for these students as they themselves work towards developing the competencies needed for success in a new academic environment. The following discussion looks at the different levels on which help can be given.

Predeparture sessions

Junid's comment below applies not only to the Malaysian students he is clearly thinking of but to students from other cultures as well:

Coming from quite a different learning environment, it would be a tremendous help if universities, prior to the students commencing their higher education course, introduce and guide them in the new learning styles and techniques and in the correct and proper methods of answering questions. (*Australian Campus Review Weekly*, p.4)

I am not convinced that it is best to tackle these problems 'prior' to students commencing their graduate courses because instruction and guidance on these matters is likely to be more effective if it takes place in a disciplinary context or at least with some knowledge of different disciplinary practices, and at a time when the students themselves have come to recognise they need help. Still, providing students with some general information in predeparture sessions on the type of academic adjustments they are likely to have to make would be useful. Graduate students who have returned from study in Australian universities could be most helpful here.²

Orientation programs

At ANU some schools and departments have special orientation sessions for international students, particularly where there are large numbers of these students, and special sessions are run for AIDAB students. As well, the Graduate School has an orientation program for all graduate students in late February and again mid-year. One of the sessions on the program involves speakers from the various educational support services (eg Study Skills Centre,

² Mr Alan Smith, Director of Education for the European Cultural Foundation, pointed out in a conversation I had with him at the IDP conference that his organisation had been using returning students (and

Counselling, Computer Services; providing information on what they do and how they can help students.

In 1993 there will be an extended academic session in which international students (both coursework and research) will be asked to talk to students about academic difficulties they have encountered and how they have tried to overcome them. I will also talk with them about my work with international students and we hope to enlist the aid of one or two sympathetic academics. Again, I do not think we can go too deep in these sessions. The international students are in a new environment; they have lost all their familiar landmarks; and they have a variety of concerns at this time, not the least of which is finding accommodation. Not until they settle down to their academic work are they likely to give academic matters their full attention.

The main value of these sessions, as I see it, is to introduce or reinforce the idea that different cultures have different educational practices, to say something about what these differences mean, and to suggest that they may need to develop new learning styles as well as new reading and writing practices. It is important to let international students know that any difficulties they encounter in this regard are not due to intellectual deficiencies but are a matter of culture. International students can easily fall prey to believing wrongly they are stupid, which is very demoralising and can be a serious block to academic progress.

Faculty staff

Individual lecturers and tutors can also assist this group of graduate students. Recognising that staff can be very overworked, I have tried to tailor suggestions here to take account of this. The following are just some of the ways the transition might be made easier:

- Σ Students need exercises **to help develop critical skills** as soon as they come on course. These might take the form of keeping on hand two or three sets of short articles (two articles in each set) in which scholars in the field take a different position on the same subject matter. Attached might be a brief list of instructions saying a) how the articles are to be read; b) what precisely they are to look at when comparing and contrasting the two; and c) why they are to do it this way. Students could be asked to write up their findings in a page giving reasons for their conclusions and some feedback could be given. The same set of articles could be used for all international students and recycled from year to year because

- Σ Another way to help students gain the disciplinary skills of a new academic culture is to **model the processes of research** in lectures or tutorials, while drawing attention to the fact that this is being done deliberately. This might take the form: 'If I were investigating this topic (or question), this is how I would go about it...' It is important for lecturers to explain to students at each step what they are doing and why they are doing it. Students can also learn about these processes and writing structures from their readings if they are advised not to focus solely on content.
- Σ Lectures or tutorials are also an appropriate forum for assisting international students to become more autonomous researchers. Students may need help in recognising 1) that content is not just a matter of memorising and reproducing *facts* and 2) that it is futile trying to discern from their lecturers what the *right* answers are. Such help might take the form of **drawing attention to the issues and debates** that are important in a subject area, noting why they are important, and pointing out that students will need to access the different points of view for themselves.
- Σ **Specialist dictionaries** can be a useful resource to begin filling gaps in knowledge, though many students seem not to know about them. These can be used by students to familiarise themselves with the meanings of the terms, concepts and phrases used in their disciplines. Or they can be used to gain an initial grip on a body of theory and its development over time, including the main figures who featured in that development. One could be kept in the departmental library for reference.
- Σ If we are to aim for more equity, then the grading of papers of international graduate students who come from different educational cultures might need to be reconsidered. Some allowance could be made for the fact that these students do have to adapt to a new educational environment. This could take the form of **weighted assessment** in the coursework component, allowing for gradual improvement.
- Σ Some care needs to be taken with the **language used in comments on returned assignments** if these are to be helpful. Meaning is as much in the culture as in the word. This is apparent with a word like *argument* which is descriptive of a certain

is not helpful unless the student understands what is meant by these terms in an academic context.

- Σ International students may not be familiar with the types of **examinations** common in the Australian academic culture. They can be helped by some discussion of exam formats, appropriate strategies for preparation and the writing up of papers, particularly those with essay-type questions on them. As well, they find it helpful to know what lecturers look for when they mark exam papers.
- Σ Students are more likely to feel comfortable about using **academic support services** if their lecturers and tutors support and encourage this usage as some do. Many students make full use of our centre. Others we have seen are furtive about coming here, worried that their lecturers will find out and think they are not able to manage and that this will somehow work against them. Some, I am sure, do not come for the same reason.
- Σ It is not a good idea to slot students into **existing honours courses** in which they are inevitably disadvantaged. The reasons for this are, I think, self-evident. Honours students are among our top students and they have already had three years to hone their academic skills unlike the newly-arrived international students. If graduate students are put in such courses they then need special guidance and assistance in making the transition to the new learning environment. They also need to have their progress monitored closely.

Further suggestions can be drawn from Ballard and Clanchy's discussion of ways for lecturers to help international students in classroom situations (see in particular pp. 34-7; pp. 39-43).

Learning Skills Advisory Centres

Different universities have different ways of helping their international students. Here I would like to say something about what we in our centre at ANU are doing to help these students. While I have said nothing about second language problems so far, this is not because I do not think these an important consideration. Rather it has been my intention to focus elsewhere. It can be easy to misconstrue problems arising from unfamiliarity with appropriate reading and writing strategies as English language problems.

English language (or perhaps I should say Australian English) on many levels of usage. But these problems are not just a matter of limited vocabulary and poor knowledge of grammar. Even students with a sufficiently high standard of English can have problems with the pace of lectures, for example, or the Australian accent and penchant for colloquialisms, general academic terminology, the nature of the discourse used in tutorials and lectures or the usage of English in specific disciplinary contexts.

The centre has an international students' adviser who specialises in helping students with their language problems. There is also a University English Language Program (UELP) which is run through the Study Skills Centre. This program has courses for all international students (undergraduate and graduate) designed to help them develop their speaking and listening, reading and writing skills. A new writing course was set up this year specifically for international graduate students taking coursework degrees in the Arts. This course consists of eight weekly seminars (1.5 hrs pw) that cover such topics as types of discourse, the nature of academic argument, thesis establishment and development, evidence and argument, structure, focus, the role of definition, referencing and so forth.

The end objective is to help students produce competent academic essays. If they can do this they have a sound base for the thesis writing to come. The students come from different disciplines so we work with texts from these different disciplines and use a variety of texts such as reports, articles and international graduate student essays that I have collected, anything they are working on including their own topics. As with other courses in the UELP program, this course was well attended in both semesters. Students were generally positive about the course and found it helpful though, in each semester, there were one or two students who found it difficult to keep up.

Much of our time in the centre is spent on individual consultations. Students come with a variety of academic problems and they can return as often as they choose. Few students are exempt from 'the pains and problems of trying to write' attributed by Estelle Phillips to graduates and academics alike (pp.58-9). For the international students, these 'pains and problems' are compounded by working in an alien academic culture. Because of the nature of our service, it is possible to work closely with them on their written texts, which often evidence multiple problems, not just language problems. The whole thrust of our work with the graduate coursework students from overseas is to assist them in mastering the generic skills and conventions of the Australian academic culture.

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