‘Voices in the Air’: evaluations of the learning experiences of international postgraduates and their supervisors

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ABSTRACT Increased marketing of postgraduate programmes by ‘Western’ universities demands academic communication among scholars from divergent cultural backgrounds, though each may bring distinctive learning traditions and values. At the University of Adelaide an Integrated Bridging Programme (IBP) offers international postgraduates the opportunity to develop languages and skills for successful acculturation. Evaluations of this programme reveal that both postgraduates and their supervising staff often assume unquestioningly that only the newly-recruited foreign postgraduates need to change their academic goals and practices, especially in relation to critical thinking and to studying in a different postgraduate research culture.

This paper argues that in this commercial educational context, the challenge to learn is on both sides. Valid ‘transcultural’ education requires that the values of Western academic tradition be critiqued through the perceptions and experiences of international scholars. The role of bridging programmes like the IBP can be central to this process.

Epigram

So likewise ye, except ye utter by the tongue words easy to be understood, how shall it be known what is spoken? For ye shall speak into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of voices in the world, and none of them is without signification. Therefore if I know not the meaning of the voice, I shall be unto him that speaketh a barbarian, and he that speaketh shall be a barbarian unto me. (1 Corinthians, 14; 9–11.)

Speaking English is not only a matter of using it as a language but more than that. What I mean here, the language, in this case English, is not only a group of words that we say but it does convey meaning. To make it meaningful we use our mind. As a matter of fact, as a foreign speaker I still have difficulty thinking...
and behaving like native speakers do. I feel somewhat as though I have to change the way I think and act when I am using this language ... (Masters by research student, 1996, LJ2/47.)

I felt that they (the Oz) were more in need of integration activities than the visitors. In some study groups there was a feeling among the more competitive students that the internationals were holding things back, making things harder. This was not racism, I think, but a lack of appreciation of the cultural and learning difficulties faced. (Postgraduate course coordinator, 1997, MOS3/20.)

Introduction

Internationalising postgraduate education is a well established item on the agendas of Australian universities. The University of Adelaide, along with most others, actively promotes itself as welcoming international postgraduates through its internationalisation programme. However, over recent years there has been a noticeable shift in motivation for international recruitment from ‘implicit liberal values’ to regarding it as ‘a source of very necessary revenue’ (Harris & Jarrett, 1990, p. 76), even sought with ‘a sales pitch bordering on cultural arrogance’ (Woods & Woods, 1995, p. 212). Consequently, the outcomes of this push have most often been understood in terms of economic reports and journalism commenting on the education export dollar. The educational and ethical issues of internationalising postgraduate education are rarely considered, even in policy making. For example, the Commonwealth Government’s ‘West’ Report of 1998 (‘Review of Higher Education Financing and Policy’) (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999) still argues for better ‘knowledge and skills transfer mechanisms’ (p. 165); more revealing still, the recent ‘Green’ paper on Higher Education Research and Research Training (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999) describes research students as providing ‘a conduit for the dissemination and transfer of skill and knowledge from the university sector to the broader community’ (p. 31). Where this broader community is in Asia, Africa or the Middle East, issues of colonisation cannot be ignored.

In fact, to conceptualise the ‘training’ of international researchers as transferring skill and knowledge, raises a number of questions: primarily, how, if it is possible at all, might internationalisation and research ‘training’ be successfully promoted together and integrated with each other? Perhaps even more fundamentally, is academic assimilation a legitimate or even realistic goal of internationalising postgraduate education? It is apparent that, beyond the economic impact, targeted marketing of postgraduate programmes has considerably changed the research cultures of Australian universities. The influx of international postgraduates has meant that Australian academics must now enter into dialogues with international scholars from a wide variety of academic and cultural backgrounds. Many of these scholars may bring distinctive learning traditions and find our academic contexts quite different from their previous experiences in terms of expectations and academic requirements (Todd, 1997; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Kiley, 1998).

Where education is perceived to be a process of transfer from the skilled to the unskilled, naturally the dominant expectation is that necessary adjustments will be
made primarily by the incoming postgraduates, often with very little reciprocal adjustment within the Australian context. However, as Roberto Salvadori (1997) argues in his discussion on the difficulties of interculturalism, ‘education will only be valid ... when something changes in the culture of both’ (pp. 187–188). Salvadori defines successful interchange as ‘transculturalism’, the stage beyond interculturalism, in which a common culture is created which is different from the original cultures of both teachers and students. As he also points out, ‘the real barbarian is the one who calls others barbarians’ (p. 190). From this perspective, a central challenge of internationalising postgraduate education is for us to embrace the politics of difference which it generates in a way which moves us fruitfully towards culturally inclusive learning dialogues.

In 1993 the University of Adelaide advocated that its educational goals for all students should include ‘the systematic development of knowledge that is essential for skills in reasoning, judgement and communication’ (Quality in Teaching and Learning Report, 1993, p. 44). Because international postgraduates may have developed their knowledges in contexts which are invested with different academic values, the University implemented a semester-long Integrated Bridging Programme (IBP) for international postgraduates and their supervisors. A specific objective of this programme is ‘appropriate provision of access to the existing academic, linguistic and cultural conventions of postgraduate study in the relevant disciplines’ (Cargill, 1996). ‘Access’, rather than mastery, is a key term here. In this programme, postgraduates, with their supervisors, begin to explore the cultural relativity of the skills they bring, as distinct from those they need. They begin to apply their own ‘skills in reasoning, judgement and communication’ to the values embedded in their new learning environment in the light of their own accumulating experiences of different approaches to knowledge. In this context they are effectively moving towards Salvadori’s (1997) goal of transculturalism (p. 189) as the ground for their departmental studies.

Objectives of this Study

As coordinator and lecturer in the IBP, I am interested to evaluate the effectiveness of the program in meeting its educational goals. The IBP team has continued to collect feedback from participating students and staff. What has emerged from their responses, however, does much more than help to us to focus on our functional objectives. As Liz Todd (1997, p. 1) has pointed out, there is currently a ‘lack of literature looking in detail at postgraduate overseas students’ experiences of studying and into lecturer’s experiences of supervising and teaching overseas students.’ Our respondents’ comments offer us a rich source of understanding about the learning experiences of international scholars and their academic staff in Australia, as these experiences have been selected and constructed by the participants themselves at this point in the process of internationalising postgraduate education.

In this paper my aim is to follow a qualitative approach in order to highlight some of the views expressed by postgraduates and staff. Many previous evaluations of international and Asian students’ learning experiences have been basically empirical
and have primarily raised issues selected by the researchers (Christison & Krahnke, 1986; Chapman et al., 1988; Noble, 1989; Nesdale & Todd, 1993; Felix & Lawson, 1994; Mullins et al., 1995; Pearson & Beasley, 1996; Wilkinson et al., 1996; Alexander et al., 1998). These studies are illuminating but they do not make two important priorities which I capitalise on here. One is, as Noreen Garman (1994, p. 6) has suggested, the need to create academic space for the ‘heretofore unheard voices and positions in human inquiry’, in other words to generate discussion out of the voices of the participants themselves on the principle of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The work of Helen Fox (1994) in Listening to the World exemplifies this approach in this field. Another related benefit is, as Moore and Smith (1994, p. 92) have argued, a particular tenet of qualitative evaluation which is that ‘the ideas of individuals need to be taken seriously’. The challenge for teachers is then to ‘let the data speak for itself’ in order that ‘the unexpected and the serendipitous have the chance to emerge, illuminate and challenge’ (p. 82).

All the international postgraduates in the IBP over 1996 and 1997 were asked to respond to written evaluation questionnaires, which contained open-ended questions focusing on what the students found valuable about the programme they had been involved in, and what they could suggest we had omitted or not sufficiently emphasised. In some courses where it was particularly appropriate, students also regularly completed a learning journal in which they reflected in writing on the wider scope of their learning experiences. These sources of opinion were augmented in Semester 2 1997 by a further questionnaire, which was mailed to all 1996/7 IBP students and the departmental academics who had supervised them also asking them to consider, from their respective positions, any particular challenges postgraduates had encountered in their departmental contexts. Thus, all respondents participated in an evaluation of the Integrated Bridging Programme by reflecting on their personal experiences in relation to the perceived needs of international postgraduates at the University of Adelaide.

In this exploration I aim to capture significant claims, concerns and issues of participants from my own vantage point as a bridging course designer. I have chosen themes based on my role as that of ‘adequately portraying and understanding the constructions of informants’ (Hipps, 1993) to satisfy Guba and Lincoln’s (1989) criteria of trustworthiness and authenticity as measures of the quality of constructivist evaluation (see also Lincoln, 1990). I hope here to foreground the voices of international postgraduates and their supervisors, choosing their perceptions more for the striking or poignant expression of ideas than for the frequency with which they recur. My purpose is to explore the extent to which, in their reflections on students’ learning, both international postgraduates and their supervising staff bring unproblematised assumptions that it is only the newly-recruited foreign postgraduates who need to change their academic goals and practices. I also consider the role of intervention and bridging programs like the IBP in effecting Salvadori’s ‘transculturalism’ by creating a culture of learning in which students and lecturers learn from each other and problematise dominant ‘Western’ educational values and practices for students from other cultures.
The Voices of International Postgraduate Students

Thinking and Learning Styles

The international postgraduates who enrol in Australian universities are already highly educated students and professionals. Changing academic cultures is thus a multi-dimensional and challenging experience because it requires them to move continuously between at least two language and epistemological systems (Cadman, 1997). Significantly, the 1996/7 postgraduates who participated in the IBP evaluation focussed their own voices, unprompted, on changes experienced at epistemological, as well as social and interpersonal levels. They placed particular emphases on ‘critical thinking’, changing their research culture and, crucially, on their relationships with their supervising staff.

Emanating from the extensive work of John Biggs (Biggs, 1987, 1994, 1997; Volet et al., 1994; Renshaw & Volet, 1995), there has been much debate about the differences, real or over-emphasised, between the thinking and learning styles of students from ‘Confucian-heritage cultures’ (CHC) and so-called ‘Western’ academic backgrounds. While Ballard and others have strongly argued that the move from ‘reproductive’ to ‘critical’ thinking is a crucial one for international students (Ballard, 1987; Samuelowicz, 1987; Channell, 1990; Phillips, 1988; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Ballard, 1995), it has elsewhere been suggested that to assume a deficit because of a non-critical tradition in CHC cultures is inappropriate (Kember & Gow, 1991; Biggs, 1997; Chalmers & Volet, 1997) and furthermore, that to use a remediation model for addressing so-called ‘problems’ is a form of cultural imperialism (Birch, 1990; Benesch, 1993). It was, therefore, particularly significant for the IBP teaching team to learn from our well educated, mostly Asian, postgraduates and their supervisors about the challenges that these students were meeting, and to be able to understand from them how they interpreted their need to change their thinking style and its expression in the Australian academic context.

First of all it was particularly notable that respondents, staff as well as students, chose to identify changes in expected learning behaviours as a particular challenge. Students occasionally raised the issue quite casually, referring to themselves as ‘a student from a different system of learning’ (MOP1/22) [1] or ‘a non-native English speaker [who] didn’t learn these skills before’ (MOP1/29), or they explained ‘[I gained] new experience/knowledge on how the Australian academic culture works [which] is very important because I found some differences’ (MOP1/30) and ‘Traditional culture and academic background are also challenges for the international student’ (MOP3/17). Overall, it was strikingly apparent that these postgraduates interpreted the new expectations of learning as an extra challenge for them, one resulting from their difference from the mainstream.

Other respondents added even more emphasis by marking a particularly meaningful difference for them, such as independent study:

As a Masters student by research, the biggest challenge for me was to learn to work independently. Before I was used to more structured schemes. (MOP3/35);
Or specific tasks: Because international students are from a different cultural background, we have a different understanding of writing and of presentation. (SET1/19.)

Interestingly these postgraduates drew specific, recurring contrasts between their own backgrounds and the Western academy’s expectation that they should approach ideas and literature critically and analytically. They spontaneously interpreted this approach as different from their previous academic environments. Some students briefly valued the IBP’s emphasis on ‘critical thought’ (MOP1/12), or on ‘critical thinking and evaluation of written materials’ (MOP1/14). Others explicating in more detail the perceived need to be critical, and their personal hesitation in this area of learning is gently revealed in their comments: ‘[I valued] the critique. In [my] culture to criticise is not encouraged. (MOP1/3); [In the IBP] we were encouraged to be more critical and, I’d say bold, when reviewing papers’ (SET3/30), and ‘my own culture does not encourage me enough to express critical thoughts’ (MOP1/15). Thus, IBP postgraduates themselves clearly indicated their perceptions that change was required of them in their approach to academic thinking and working. Notably for us, this was usually without passing judgement on the process.

Furthermore, in individual students this demand to be constantly involved in a critical, evaluative process was seen to cause an emotional dislocation which we know to have interfered significantly with their academic progress in Australia. Internal conflict was sensitively explored by one student:

I still don’t know much about my area and you wanted us to discuss an issue related to that already. At any rate, a little about it seems to have filled me. My evidence then was lifted from my present professor’s lectures. I’m not sure if I’m on the right track. It’s not really easy to be critical of the works of others. This is contrary to what I’ve learned from my mother who was my first teacher. Nevertheless it was worthwhile to be trying. (LJ2/31.)

For me it seems clear that explaining Australian academic conventions is neither adequate nor appropriate to facilitate change at this level; time, practice and, above all, reciprocal learning development are required for postgraduate students and staff to come to terms with such deeply acknowledged challenges.

One way in which the IBP offers postgraduates this opportunity is through reflective learning journals. In these, they can enter a dialogue to expand on the ways in which they perceive their previous academic learning processes have differed from what is expected from them as postgraduates at the University of Adelaide. Again, developing a critical approach has figured notably as a particular challenge:

I have to study very hard to make my mind used to think critically and to decide my position in reading some articles or literature. To criticise and to judge the articles or literature are something new for me, because in my undergraduate study in [my home country] our study approaches were more passive, we became receivers of knowledge and we rarely argued about our subjects. (LJ1/3.)

One student focused on the differences in academic expectations:
Unlike in [my country], how you think is more important than what you know, in the Australian, or Western, academic culture, I feel. Accordingly the style of studying must be more positive in Australia. For example, in [my country], one or two materials can be enough when learning some issue because there is no need to be critical against what is written. On the other hand, in Australia, a few materials are insufficient because it is naive to accept what is written without being critical and it is necessary to compare several assertions. (LJ1/43)

Another reflected with great insight on the personal and social implications of developing a critical academic approach:

*Learning how to criticise is very interesting for me ... This kind of activity can also be applied in our daily life. The life which is not easy needs our voice to say no if no, and yes if yes. Having the ability to give argument about something is considered as a way of showing our existence. To let people know that we are here or there, and that we are what we are, should be implemented in our life. Of course, we often have the feeling of reluctance as our culture (Oriental culture) does not allow us to do so. But we have to keep trying to do that until we are confident enough. If not, we are dying with the buried thought in our mind and the hidden feeling in our heart.* (LJ2/35 author’s emphasis.)

The self-confident judgment shown in reflections like these which emanate from a holistic sense of the individual’s early experience, is a key feature of successful postgraduate study in Australia, as students themselves realise:

*In the past several months I have sort of been forced and urged to think and work in English. It is interesting that I have been able to think and speak more logically than ever before. By this statement I mean a more logical and critical way of thinking, speaking and working in English has developed in me. This is not to say that I cannot think, speak and work that way in my own language. The IBP classes and discussions have helped shape that ability.* (LJ2/6)

These excerpts underline the unique perspective on critical thinking which postgraduate students from overseas can bring to the Western academic context. Academics whose training has been located principally in a tradition which values critical thinking, and its expression above other forms of knowledge are likely to employ techniques and strategies based in that tradition without any comparative perspective. In other words, there is no critical appreciation of the value of critical thinking itself.

Recognising and facing the challenges of different attitudes to learning gives international postgraduates a special window on these issues in this context. For them, the process of critique is applied to the critical approach itself, with insight which derives from having viewed it from outside its intrinsic assumptions. In this process Salvadori’s (1997) goal of transculturalism, ‘the creation of a critical, comparative and systematic perspective of existing cultures’ (p. 189), is approached, in defiance of what he calls differential racism. Thus the integrity of international education is maintained.
Supervision in the New Research Culture

A number of the postgraduates in the IBP also raised the practical, social and epistemological challenges involved in sharing a new research culture which they could not immediately conceptualise and in which they knew they must be accepted. It has been established that postgraduate students need to be contributing members of their disciplines and this is especially crucial for the academic success of non-native speakers (Belcher, 1994; Todd, 1997). Our students expressed difficulties in this respect, perhaps locating their problems in their own lack of understanding or competence: ‘I have wandered around the site of the department, but I am too shy to talk to the staff positively without introduction’ (LJ1/39). An English-medium background student explained: ‘I initially had great difficulty working with lab technicians and suppliers as their work attitude and expectations seemed to be very different to what I had been used to in my home country’ (MOP2/18). It was also suggested that:

More information on each department could be provided in the IBP, like the strength of the department, administrative set-up etc. A ‘get-to-know-your-department’ tour may be organised … It has taken quite some time for me to get to know my way around in my department. (MOP2/5)

Another well documented key to successfully joining a discipline of study is to become respected as someone who has mastered the specific text practices which are needed for efficient reading and scholarly writing in a particular field (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993). Our own postgraduates mentioned how much they appreciated understanding the ‘framework or outline of what the study will look like’ (SET4/9) or the ‘academic writing thought process and structure of different kinds of scientific papers’ (PE4). One student took the further step of illuminating the link between their control of the departmental discourse and the way in which department members responded to it:

For me the most valuable experience from the IBP was about how to organise the presentations and science writing. Specially, about the order and the links between sentences, paragraphs and sub-topics. If you have a good order in your talk and also if you can make it quite easy to follow and understand, from my experience you will get the best feedback and surprisingly a lot of questions as well. (MOP1/21)

Occasionally, however, a student conveyed a clear sense that they did not feel that they had been successful in using the discourse of their discipline community and that this left them frustrated and excluded. In one case, the emphasis was specifically on writing:

in exams lecturers did not understand what I wanted to say. Although I wrote what the lecturers wanted, I couldn’t get the result I expected. This was because of my English, and because of the fact that I couldn’t express myself clearly. (MOP3/1)

Another focused on spoken presentation:
The IBP did not properly prepare me for seminar presentation particularly where in [my] Faculty I had to be assessed with … practitioners who were more skilled in the language as well as the presentation of their topic. (MOP2/6)

The unquestioned idea behind all these comments is that the students are the only ones who must find strategies for change, in order to avoid being reduced in their own eyes to ‘barbarian’ status in their departments.

An even greater concern expressed by IBP research students related to coming to terms with the research culture of the university. They located the IBP’s value for them in ‘the frank discussions of the expectations of a PhD student in the Australian environment’ (MOP1/19); ‘the academic culture in Australia, especially what is wanted for research by postgraduate students’ (SET1/24); ‘the content of the program [which] is very related to our needs in the research program’ (SET2/7). In some cases it even seemed as though some international research students found themselves in a complete vacuum with respect to how they were to go about defining directions for their research, and that the IBP was the lifeline they hung on to:

[The IBP] forced me to learn more about my subject, gave me an indication as to what is required for such writing tasks, made me aware of the fact that I have to write a literature review!! and gave me somewhere to start my research. (MOP1/32)

Or, as another said, through the IBP, ‘it becomes clearer now what to be doing for my research’ (MOP1/23). The relief in these comments is apparent.

Students in this evaluation paid spontaneous tribute to the commitment of their supervisors with comments like ‘From [my supervisor] I learned many things I have never even been aware of’ (LJ2/1) and ‘As my speaking and listening abilities are not very good … I am grateful for the people around me … especially my supervisor’ (LJ1/29). It seems that international postgraduates may recognise the challenge that they represent for supervision and appreciate the attention they receive. Some respondents, however, by their very choice of expression, perhaps not referring to their own situation at all, hesitantly revealed their insecurity about their developing relationships. On this issue they particularly pointed out the University’s responsibility to engage in change, if only in attitude: ‘Kind understanding and help from the staff in the University are necessary for the international student. The University should pay attention to building a good link between student and supervisor’ (MOP3/17). One example is particularly revealing through its generic expression, effectively avoiding reference to the individual’s personal experience while pointing to the university’s perceived role in dealing with specific situations:

If the IBP could be a platform to generally convey an important message to the students in the early weeks of research, about the ‘student-supervisor relationship’. International students being from different backgrounds may have varying expectations. Though they can quickly adapt to any situation … possible mechanisms to improve the relationship would probably help students to strike a balance between ‘what his expectations, aspirations’ are and what could be feasible in different situations. (MOP2/23)
International postgraduates may be extremely reluctant to discuss their supervision uncertainties or problems for fear of compromising their academic or departmental status (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Some may be willing to identify difficulties but again locate these firmly within themselves, as with one student who pointed out, ‘The particular challenge I have faced is how to deal with the relationships with supervisors, which are affected by the culture of overseas students’ (MOP3/13). Another was much more specific about the differences in the supervision expectations of different cultures:

*I hope the IBP will give more attention to help the students understand the expectations of their department and their supervisors, because the educational system, teaching methods and styles are very different. My [home country] supervisor always told me what to do and how to do it, and it was impolite to disobey him, but the situation is different here. So, it is very difficult for me to get used to it.* (MOP2/28)

Occasionally, research students chose to use the IBP evaluation as a context for opening out a situation which, through their own eyes, revealed a disturbing picture though again without any expectation of institutional redress. Apparently throw-off lines included: ‘[my supervisor] probably has a biased view that I am hopeless’ (LJ1/16) and ‘[The IBP] helped me overcome my fear of speaking in front of my very exacting supervisor (who forgot to attend my talk anyway)’ (MOP1/32). One particularly illuminating entry shows a sincere attempt to think reflectively through on-going problematic situations, and it highlights the challenge met by some international postgraduates when they face the need to become intellectually independent in the research relationship:

*I have met three supervisors within two years in Australia. One of my supervisors, he seems to be a professionally trained person with lots of experience. However, I only learnt by practising at the beginning of my study without clearly understanding. I had few chances to discuss with him which resulted in unresolved problems. This point led me to think, and be confused with the way that I should walk. So since I have met the second supervisor, I thought discussion would be the best way to cope with problems. Unfortunately, so many different opinions between us could not be solved. Discussion is not a good way for me—that was what I learned from him. Presently, I discovered something which perhaps will be a good way to step out. I am learning to be myself, stand on my own feet and learn to be independent. I met the third supervisor without expectations, only with some discussion and some questions. Am I an independent student? How can I be? I am learning.* (LJ2/51)

Here, we see the full implications of the miscommunication and ‘talking into the air’ described by St Paul in the epigram (p. 1), yet this student did not consider trying to address these situations in any institutional context. Another student constructed a particularly negative situation but again gave no suggestion of how the problem might be helped:

*What I face is supervisor problems. My supervisor ... is just not up to standard, and there is no other supervisor available. As a result I have to have an external...*
supervisor which makes things (eg progress) very slow. I think the Uni should investigate this matter. When I received the scholarship, it was on the presumption that there would be a qualified supervisor allotted to me. (MOP3/27)

In cases like this, the extent of the challenge experienced by both supervisors and students seems to demand a specific institutional forum in which issues can be opened up, addressed and resolved through change at many levels, to maximise opportunities for mutual respect and to minimise chances for negative attitudes to solidify.

**Voices of Supervising Staff**

From our particular positions as IBP lecturers working closely with postgraduates and their faculty staff, we must conclude that the new agendas in our universities make it very difficult for faculty academics to prioritise concerns about their international postgraduates and to dedicate time to addressing them. Despite the almost routine triumphs and joys of so many of our students and their supervisors, we also have accumulating personal knowledge of on-going problems which cannot claim the space and focus they need in order to be appropriately addressed. We can only assume an iceberg of issues for supervisors of international students across the university, the dimensions and substance of which, at present, we only guess at. In responses to our mailout supervisors identified specific issues which were similar to those raised by the postgraduates themselves, such as the need for development of a critical approach to published material, as well as confidence in independent exploration of research directions. In addition, staff recognised the importance of students’ anxiety as contributory to their level of success in making the transition between cultures of study.

**The Affective Dimension**

The voices of those supervisors and postgraduate coordinators who took the time to write to us demonstrate an extraordinary degree of sincerity, and reflective commitment in relation to the rewards and demands of supervising international postgraduates (we received one valuable response airmail from the other side of the world). There were noteworthy examples of appreciation of the linguistic and cultural demands on these postgraduates, and sympathetic accounts of their struggles: ‘My student … has found it very difficult to cope with set readings, class discussions and written assignments’ (MOS3/4) or ‘we had a student who struggled with the culture and the language … Ultimately he was one of our best students!’ (MOS2/11). Many of the staff identified, as the postgraduates themselves did, the significance of students’ anxiety or confidence levels as a key factor in the success of the early part of their candidature. Staff recognised, some most enthusiastically, the efficacy of the IBP as a transitional arena for addressing these issues: ‘not least, greatly improving the general self-confidence of international students’ (MOS1/10) and ‘the students … appeared much more confident and competent about using the library, etc.’ (MOS1/2). One respondent
wrote: ‘Several international students have gained tremendous confidence in speaking to colleagues after coming out of the IBP. Not sure what you do, but it’s working!’ (MOS1/15).

Also related to anxiety and confidence, staff recognised the need for newly arrived students from other cultures to be assisted to set up friendship and academic networks to help their adjustment to the new working environment. Several commented on the importance of the relationships that students made with each other in the IBP, many of which continue beyond the program (one student wrote, ‘We still keep closely in touch with students in the IBP group and encourage each other in both studying and living’ [MOP1/17]). By staff the IBP was described as ‘a very good venue for new students to share experiences and make new friends’ (MOS1/1), or as benefiting a student through the ‘networking and establishment of potential support mechanisms’ (MOS1/12).

Critical Thinking

It was again especially significant that critical thinking was seen as a necessary focus for international postgraduates. As Channell (1990) has also noted, staff associated the developing expertise of international students with their participation in those departmental activities which require critical interaction. In some cases, staff focused on what they believed the students needed, as in ‘There may be some connection to country of origin in learning how to think critically. Therefore critical evaluation of papers is important’ (MOS1/11) or in ‘Student attitude toward learning and scientific inquiry is the most important factor’ (MOS1/15). One respondent was quite specific in noting what they clearly saw as a deficit:

Students desperately need to ask questions during seminars and other oral presentations. This forces students to listen, synthesise, identify areas they don’t understand and then formulate questions in English. Many of our overseas students sit quietly through seminars and say nothing. (MOS2/18)

Others reflected a valuable development in their students as a result of the IBP: ‘[The students] were surprised and delighted to know that rather than agree with them, they should challenge and critique the professor’s/lecturer’s remarks, and they did!’ (MOS1/2 author’s emphasis); ‘My student’s … writing and critical skills have improved markedly. He has learned the importance of reading scientific articles with a critical eye and not just accepting the printed word as fact’ (MOS1/18).

Thus, the experiences of the staff and postgraduates who participated in the IBP evaluation seem to fly in the face of recent suggestions that ‘it is not that some cultures are critical and others are not’ (Todd, 1997, p. 10). Rather they lend support to the view that ‘critical thinking may well be in the nature of a social practice, discoverable if not clearly self-evident only to those brought up in the cultural milieu in which it operates’ (Atkinson, 1997, p. 89). Supervisors as well as their students suggest that researchers new to the ‘Western’ academic culture may need to focus particularly on developing critical and analytical skills both in speech and writing. For lecturers in the IBP, the emphasis needs to be on how we facilitate
that focus. We believe we must also comfortably turn our critical gaze upon the cultural context of the critical skills we are emphasising, and in doing so seek the insights of our own students as experienced scholars.

The Research Culture

Again as in the students’ responses, academic staff expressed the importance of postgraduates’ ability to meet the specific expectations of their discipline’s research culture. Approaches to English language research in any field may carry completely different conventions from other countries’ research environments, and tribute was paid by staff to the IBP in bridging these worlds: ‘I believe that the greatest benefit of this scheme is to provide a gradual introduction to our research culture so that the students were in top gear as soon as they started their research, i.e. registered for a higher degree’ (MOS1/3). The necessary extension beyond language teaching was recognised: ‘The program does not simply teach spoken and written English. It introduces the students to a number of different skills for research, some of which are new to those from different cultural backgrounds’ (MOS1/9). One respondent pointed ironically to the mere humanity of staff members and the challenge for international postgraduates in ‘learning that supervisors are not gods’ (MOS1/11).

Supervisors also commented perceptively on the possible early difficulties of their students in conceptualising the research process: The ‘IBP allows the students to have some early structure in their course … It also allows them to focus on their thesis proposal hence giving them early confidence in what they are setting out to achieve’ (MOS1/8). Occasionally, a student of special significance was mentioned who ‘came with faulty perceptions of postgrad work in this University … and was not equipped, we eventually found out, to undertake research in the area chosen’ (MOS1/13), and again the role of the IBP in facilitating the student’s entry into the discipline’s culture was valued: ‘In all this the IBP was extremely valuable, it gave a series of short-term goals, of “purpose”, without which I doubt that [the student] could have carried on’ (MOS1/13).

Student achievement was sometimes a chosen focus and several supervisors paid particular tribute to overseas scholars with whom they were working: ‘In the case of my student we are dealing with an exceptional individual’ (MOS1/4); ‘my student was very bright and did very well in the end’ (MOS3/9); ‘[the student] has been an excellent student and is working very well’ (MOS3/10). The mutual respect suggested in relationships like these is immediately felt as the positive face of internationalisation working through the university.

Conclusions

There is a great temptation in the western academic world to characterise other academic traditions as being, in St Paul’s terms, ‘without signification’. Reflections expressed in the IBP evaluation suggest to us that to be truly effective, intercultural education at its deepest level needs to involve us in facilitating Salvadori’s (1997, p. 189) development from interculturalism to transculturalism. The challenge to change is on both sides. International postgraduates and their supervising staff have
identified that the benefits possible when the receiving culture takes a holistic approach to students’ development, particularly with respect to pursuing a critical approach to academic inquiry and to negotiating the discipline-specific research culture. The main lesson I believe we can learn is the particular value of perspectives which are shaped by more than one academic tradition. As integral to our new agenda, we can, as Nixon and Ranson (1997, p. 202) argue, work for professionalism within a ‘new’ management of education, ‘to move forward on the basis of shared values and understandings that are not bought at the cost of social [or academic] exclusion’ (my parentheses). We need to invest, intellectually as well as financially, in creating contexts of reciprocal dialogue for international postgraduate education.

The challenge for the IBP is clearly to remain relevant and active in addressing students’ specific and pragmatic needs. Perhaps more importantly, however, language and learning lecturers must work consciously to provide a learning environment of critical inquiry in which no vested interests intervene between students’ established academic values and those of the receiving discipline. In this way the politically privileged ‘one-way flow of prescriptivist knowledge’ (Pennycook, 1989, p. 596) produced in our academic institutions may be eddied a little. Furthermore students’ appreciation of this reciprocal learning approach is unhesitant: ‘The program has really played its role as a “bridge”: we would have fallen into an unknown world unless we attended this program … Thank you IBP’ (MOP2/3); ‘The coverage has been so much against a simple name: IBP’ (MOP2/6). Staff also have used strong terms to express the special role which the IBP plays: ‘IBP helps enormously: this department supports it strongly’ (MOS3/18); ‘I think the IBP is excellent and must be maintained’ (MOS3/7); ‘the program is to my mind superb’ (MOS2/9).

However, in the face of the economic rationalism that is our necessary context, I think language and discipline lecturers must continue to take stock of what exactly is involved in internationalising postgraduate education. There are still too many unexplored areas of vulnerability. Old commitments to the transfer of knowledge (Sheehy, 1995) need to be refashioned. Globalisation and the spread of English language academic cultures demand that we should be proactive in creating trans-cultural spaces for the exchange, for the reshaping, of knowledges, in our own heads no less than in university degree programmes. Further exploration of the reflective experiences of international postgraduates may offer us opportunities to avoid losing international scholars’ voices ‘into the air’, and to develop new critical appreciation of the variety of knowledges in the world:

Besides the difference in facilities, the most significant differences are actually the way of learning (I could be wrong). I am not good enough to explain the difference but I, as the one who has experienced studying in different cultures, can feel the differences. I am not saying that this is good and that is bad because I think that each culture has its own characteristics of studying and learning. We cannot make a claim that this is better than the other. I think what we should do is, if we study in a culture which is different from ours, we have to learn a lot and become adjusted. And so do they who are from a different culture, when they study in ours. (LJ2/41)
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NOTE

[1] Staff and student responses have been categorised and coded for identification only. In the case of students from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE), I have made only very minor adjustments to grammar or vocabulary where appropriate to preserve the integrity of the meaning. I have also removed all references to gender, department or country of origin to secure participants’ anonymity.

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