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Why International Students are at Greater Risk of Failure

An Inconvenient Truth

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Abstract: This paper considers the reasons for the comparatively negative progression rates for international students in the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Sydney over the past five years in light of data from the MASUS (measuring academic skills of university students) diagnostic language test, the Student at Risk program run in the Faculty over the past three years and the seventeen years experience of the author working in the area of language and learning in Australian universities. The results show that although language is a major factor, other factors ranging from government policy to time management have a marked effect on the relationship between academic standards and the culturally diverse university.

Keywords: Language and Learning, Students at Risk

Introduction

AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES HAVE been admitting students from backgrounds other than English since the 1950s and 1960s with the advent of the Colombo Plan. Since then more and more students from a non-English speaking background (NESB) have come to Australia for their tertiary education because of the positive reputation of Australian universities, and more recently because of the relationship created by the Australian Government between permanent residency and Australian academic qualifications. This paper considers the issues raised by large numbers of international NESB students at Australian universities by investigating the situation in the Faculty of Economics and Business at the University of Sydney in regards to the student profile, data on language diagnostic tests for both undergraduate and postgraduate students, data on students at risk of failure, efforts made by the Faculty to address international student progression rates and the immigration policy of the present Australian Government.

Student Profile – Faculty of Economic and Business

The University of Sydney is considered to be one of the leading universities in the southern hemisphere and is often counted amongst the top fifty universities in the world. Because of this reputation and other factors discussed below, its Faculty of Economics and Business has seen a steady rise in the numbers of international students enrolling in its degree programs over recent years. Table 1 below shows the significance of this rise in terms of student numbers.

Table 1: Faculty of Economics and Business International Student Load 1999-2004

Year	International student load (EFTSU)	% of Faculty's total student load	% of University's total international student load
1999	829	17	28
2000	1118	23	31
2001	1482	29	34
2002	2123	35	39
2003	3055	42	43
2004	3279	44	43

It can be seen from Table 1 above that the international student profile in the Faculty of Economics and Business is changed markedly over the past few years to reflect more the percentages of international students seen in historically more internationally focussed universities in Australia such as the University of New South Wales and Monash University.

Moreover, this rise in international student numbers in the Faculty has been most marked in postgraduate (PG) coursework degree programs as can be gauged from a 2003 snapshot of the comparative percentages given in Table 2 below of the percentage of international to local students in the various types of Faculty programs.

Table 2: Percentage of International to Local Students (2003)

	Int'l	Total	% Intl
Undergraduate	1384	4769	29%
Research	20	108	19%
Postgraduate Coursework	753	1045	72%
Other Postgraduate	210	448	47%
Total	2367	6370	37%

The reasons for the marked interest shown by international students in the Faculty's postgraduate course work programs will be discussed more fully in the secrion entitled issues but suffice to say here it is strongly related to the Australian Government's immigration policy.

To have some understanding of the range of countries from which the Faculty draws its international student body, Table 4 below lists the main countries of origin of undergraduate international students. This list is fairly indicative of the weighting of country of origin of the international students in the Faculty, with China having by far the largest number of students.

Table 4: International Undergraduate Students by Country (as at 21 February 2003)

Total = 910	
Countries with ≥ 10 students enrolled:	
China	324
Malaysia	104
Singapore	100
Hong Kong	90
Indonesia	62
Korea South	38
United Kingdom	22
Vietnam	19
Norway	16
India	15
Taiwan	13
Russia	10
Thailand	10

Table 4 above indicates that there are large numbers of international students in the Faculty who probably have not studied in an English speaking environment before and are certainly from an NESB, such as the students from China Indonesia and South Korea. However, this does not show the full extent of NESB students in the Faculty. Australia is very much a multicultural nation and the local student profile is indicative of the variety of the backgrounds of the people of the country. Table 5 below gives some indication of the language background of the local students where it can be seen that a good twenty four percent of the local students are to varying degrees of a NESB. Such students, dubbed ANESB (Australian non-English speaking background) by Bartlett and Chanock (2003), are not the subject of this paper but this percentage should shed extra light on the following discussion.

Table 5: Country of Birth of Local Students in Bachelor of Commerce 2003

Total number of students = 1165
Students born in Australia = 753
Students born in countries with languages other than English as the official state language = 274 (i.e. 24% of total)

MASUS Test

In 1993, the Learning Centre at the University of Sydney was commissioned by the Academic Board to design a diagnostic instrument to measure students' academic writing. MASUS (the Measurement of Academic Skills of University Students) was developed and funded in response to the University's concern that despite high TERs (Tertiary Entrance Ranks), students were failing to achieve satisfactory progress through their degree program because of poor literacy skills. MASUS requires students write a short essay or other genre (e.g. report) based on some disciplinary content. One of the hallmarks of the MASUS process is that it does not test students' content knowledge typically; the content that students are required to write about is covered prior to the test being undertaken and students are given clear instructions about exactly what is required of them in terms of genre and performance criteria. It assesses the student's ability to write about a given body of knowledge in a reasoned and critical way, together with their ability use the language resources appropriate for the required task. Their writing is rated from 4 (excellent) to 1 (inadequate) on each of 4 main criteria: information processing, use of appropriate academic English, grammatical correctness, and structure and development of the text. (Bonanno and Jones, 1997). Students are considered to need some form of help in these areas if they are rated at the level of 1 or 2.

The MASUS test provides a literacy profile of the student cohort, identifies students at risk, provides a starting point from which to integrate the teaching of academic literacy into units of study, gives early formative feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of individual student responses and gives students information on the characteristics of academic writing that are valued in a specific discipline.

Since 1993 MASUS has been used in the University of Sydney with a number of departments, with over 7,000 students (mainly first years) participating. It has also been adapted for use in other universities in Australia and in the United Kingdom. It has been shown to be both a very valid and very reliable language diagnostic instrument.

The commencing undergraduate accounting unit of study, Accounting 1A (ACCT1001), was one of the first units of study to employ the MASUS in 1993, and since then the Faculty has used MASUS in both ACCT1001 and CLAW1001 (Commercial Transactions, the commencing commercial law undergraduate unit of study). CLAW1001 first used MASUS in 1995. Thus, a great deal of data has been accumulated on the academic language ability of our undergraduate cohort.

The last time the MASUS test was done in ACCT1001 and CLAW1001 was 2004. Table 6 below summarises the results of the students needing some form or remediation with their academic writing.

Table 6: Number of Undergraduate Students Identified as Unsatisfactory by the MASUS Diagnostic in 2004

	ACCT1001	CLAW1001
number of students	1063	563
Students identified unsatisfactory	281	158
Percentage unsatisfactory	26%	28%

It can be seen from Table 6 that approximately one quarter of the undergraduate students in the Faculty were considered to have unsatisfactory academic English language skills. Previous MASUS tests show that this percentage is slightly on the rise but still quite typical of the undergraduate cohort's English language ability. What is also typical is the fact that approximately eighty percent of the students found to be were international students (Ahmed and Paton, 2004).

As noted above, MASUS has been used in the Faculty at the undergraduate level since 1993. However, it was not until 2006 that MASUS was used to test the academic English language skills of the postgraduate cohort. Again an accounting unit of study, ACCT6001 Intermediate Financial Report-

ing, was chosen for the pilot. This time, however, it was not a commencing unit of study, but a unit undertaken by students who generally already had at least one semester of study in the Faculty. Table 7 below summarises the need for English language remediation in ACCT6001 (Bonnano and English, 2006).

Table 7: Number of Postgraduate Students Identified as Unsatisfactory by the MASUS Diagnostic in 2006

ACCT6001
Total number of students = 278
Number of students Identified as unsatisfactory = 246
Percentage unsatisfactory= 88%

It can be seen from the above table that eighty eight percent of a class of 278 needed some form of academic English language help. This shows that the language situation in the postgraduate coursework units is much more negative than in the undergraduate courses. However, if the language background of these 278 students is considered this situation is understandable. Only seventeen of these students had English as their first language and a full 239 of the students had some dialect of Chinese as their first language. Clearly the Faculty's postgraduate coursework programs have become popular with students from China.

Students at Risk

Since 2002, the Faculty has run a 'student at risk' program to attempt to identify students who are failing sufficiently early for some positive intervention. In this process, students at risk of failure are defined as those in their first semester of study in the Faculty who had failed 50% or more of their enrolled Semester 1 units of study. They are identified via a Student System report with the major selection parameter being grades of F (Fail) or AF (Absent Fail) in 50% or more of their enrolled Semester 1 Units of Study. Students who are identified as being 'at risk' are then contacted and advised of the various programs and services within the University community that might help them progress more successfully with their studies (Beatson, 2003).

The data on students at risk give a valuable insight into the comparative lack of progression of international students in the Faculty. In the pilot program in 2002, of the 410 students identified as at risk 211 were international fee-paying students (51.46%) and 199 were local HECS students (48.54%) (Beatson, 2003). Similar statistics can be seen from both the 2004 and 2006 data on undergraduate at risk students, which show that in 2004 106 local students (41% of total at risk) and 152 international students (59% of total at risk) were at risk, and in 2006 155 local (50%) and 151 international students (50%) were at risk. Thus, there does seem to be some fluctuation in comparative progression rates between international and local students but the constant is that international students are progressing more slowly than local students.

'Problems' with International Students – Other Data

The problems with international students in the Faculty of Economics and Business postgraduate courses have been particularly documented by academics in the discipline of Finance, perhaps because of its greater difficulty in the postgraduate program where econometrics and economics are co-requisites rather than pre-requisites as in the undergraduate program. I received the email below from a Finance lecturer in the middle of Semester 2 2003:

> "I am concerned with the level of cheating in exams in Master of Commerce classes. I have observed it my colleagues have observed it and students have told me about it across all the Master of Commerce classes I have been involved in. Is there something that can be done about this ex ante rather than ex post? Some of it is quite blatant and on the basis of hearsay appears to be more common amongst the non resident students." (Paton, 2004: 5)

Discussion with core postgraduate program lecturers from other disciplines confirmed this lecturer's concerns, and with the agreement of the postgraduate Associate Dean I addressed all of the core postgraduate units on the University's policy on academic honesty.

In Semester 1 2004, I received an email on the problems with international students from the Chair of Discipline of Finance with the concerns of the lecturer forwarded. These two emails are set out below:

> "I am forwarding the following email because it is a cause of serious concern to me and to the staff involved in teaching the course. It is not

only (lecturer's name) who has experienced the problem, and on the basis of discussion with other staff members teaching this course, if anything she has understated the problem. Let us be clear that individual students had to be assisted by the lecturers to complete a task as basic as putting their names on the answer sheets and even then some had difficulty completing that simple task. I want to prepare the ground in advance as I anticipate that failure rates in (Postgraduate finance unit of study) may be high as a consequence of these difficulties." (Chair of Discipline)

"I am writing to express my concern about the English standard of many of our Master of Commerce students. Last week we held an in class test. During this process it became very clear that quite a number of the students had such poor English that they did not understand our instructions about filling in the answer sheet. When speaking individually to a number of students to help them this problem became even more apparent. I wonder how these students can be expected to learn the material we are teaching and to pass the course when they even can't understand the instructions on how to complete the answer sheet? I'm not sure what we can do to address this situation. We have advised the students that they can attend the Learning Centre if they have difficulties, but obviously it is difficult to ensure that those with the biggest problems do this. Any suggestions that you have would be appreciated." (Postgraduate finance lecturer) (Paton, 2004: 5)

It should be noted that this lecturer was nominated for and went very close to being awarded a Faculty Teaching Prize for 2002. The lecturer was nominated by a number of international students who commented on the lecturer's caring attitude.

A further instance of problems associated with the large influx of international students was seen with the very high failure rate in ACCT1002 in Summer School 2003. In previous years failure rates in Faculty units of study in Summer School were either equal to or much less than those in the normal semesters varying from 5-20%. However, the failure rate in ACCT1002 was 35%. One of the two lecturers for the unit had taught it for the two years previously with low failure rates in each year and has a very good record as a teacher in that he has been nominated by many students for the Faculty Teaching prize over the last two years especially by international NESB students due to his inclusive style. Thus, I am convinced the problems lay more with the student body in the unit than with the teaching methodology. As the Deputy Academic Director of the Summer School at the time, I requested reasons for the high failure rate from the lecturers involved and the following points were forwarded to me. Particular attention should be paid to the second point. International students previously had comprised between 30 and 50% of Summer School classes:

"The failure rate is really 35%, as the other 7% did not turn up to the final exam and hence cannot pass the course;

The student cohort appeared to consist of approximately 95% international students who had difficulty providing answers in the exams to questions that required a discussion/interpretation of the material presented. We would be happy to provide copies of the exam scripts that show the types of answers we received;

The failure rate reflected the poor attendance at lectures and many students had problems with arriving on time for both lectures and the exam. I have also had similar experience in prior years. We feel many students still have the attitude that as the University is on vacation they can take things easy;

We marked the majority of both the mid-session and final exam and we wanted to ensure students only passed where they exhibited sufficient knowledge to be able to cope with further study in Accounting;

We do not believe that the level of difficulty of the exam was any different to that set in previous sessions;

Some students enrol in more than one Summer School unit (at this and other Universities). We do not believe they show the level of commitment required to complete satisfactorily more than one course especially given the intense nature of Summer School teaching;

This Summer School was improved by offering students small group tutorials in addition to lectures. We found many students needed to change their tutorial due to work obligations. We suspect that many students cannot cope with both working and studying over Summer.

Students did not make use of the ability to seek help with the content of the Course. Our consultation times were rarely used even just before the exams when we offered additional times. We also made available to students a Blackboard Discussion Board and this was used sparingly." (Paton, 2004: 6-7).

A final set of data which indicates the Australian University system's failure of international students is set out in Table 8 below. This shows that the great majority of international students achieve either a failure, pass or credit for their university studies. Compared to local students, international students have much fewer high achievers as indicated by

percentages of high distinctions and distinctions. This would seem to be due to lack of academic English but this will be discussed in the issues section below. It should be noted that although the following table of results is for all Summer School students, some 59% of these undertook units of study in the Faculty of Economics and Business (Sait, 2003).

Table 8: Comparison of Local and International Students within Grades in the University of Sydney Summer School 2003

Local/Int	Grade Loc/Int	Count	% of total		
International	HD International	61	31%	3.2%	of 1926 International registrations received grade of HD
Local	HD Local	137	69%	7.5%	of 1831 Local registrations received grade of HD
International	D International	220	39%	11.4%	of 1926 International registrations received grade of D
Local	D Local	345	61%	18.8%	of 1831 Local registrations received grade of D
International	CR International	458	49%	23.8%	of 1926 International registrations received grade of CR
Local	CR Local	483	51%	26.3%	of 1831 Local registrations received grade of CR
International	P International	801	57%	41.6%	of 1926 International registrations received grade of P
Local	P Local	607	43%	33.2%	of 1831 Local registrations received grade of P
International	PCON International	1	7%	0.1%	of 1926 International registrations received grade of PCON
Local	PCON Local	14	93%	0.8%	of 1831 Local registrations received grade of PCON
International	F International	225	62%	11.7%	of 1926 International registrations received grade of F
Local	F Local	136	38%	7.4%	of 1831 Local registrations received grade of F
International	AF International	29	45%	1.5%	of 1926 International registrations received grade of AF
Local	AF Local	35	55%	1.9%	of 1831 Local registrations received grade of AF
International	INC International	18	39%	0.9%	of 1926 International registrations received grade of INC
Local	INC Local	28	61%	1.5%	of 1831 Local registrations received grade of INC

Office for Learning and Teaching

To cope with the comparatively negative situation with international students described above a meeting in April 2002 of the Pro Vice Chancellor (Teaching and Learning), Pro Vice Chancellor (College of Humanities and Social Sciences), and the Dean, Associate Dean (undergraduate) and Associate Dean (postgraduate) of the Faculty of Economics and Business decided to establish a Centre for Teaching and Learning in the Faculty, later to be known as the Office for Learning and Teaching (OLTEB). The original brief of the Office was especially to help NESB students with their language issues.

However, just after this decision was made the Faculty embarked upon a campaign to gain accreditation with major business school accreditation agencies in the United States of America and Europe, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) respectively. For this campaign to be successful, the Faculty executive saw an urgent need for the Faculty to improve its eLearning systems. As a consequence, a Director with a background in eLearning was employed to head the office and thus eLearning has been the major thrust of both student and academic support. Besides the Director, the Office presently employs: a project officer with two administrative staff, an eLearning academic with three administrative staff, a peer assisted learning and peer mentoring group consisting of one academic with three administrative staff, an academic teaching adviser, and an academic

language & learning adviser. Needless to say, the Faculty was able to gain accreditation with AACSB and EQUIS. However, even with a staff of fourteen, the Office still only employs one staff member to aid NESB students with their academic language.

Even with this criticism it should be pointed out that there have been some very positive outcomes from the creation of this office. For example, the advent of OLTEB has seen a slight improvement in progression rates of all types of student across the board. Nevertheless, in terms of the issues discussed below, I would argue that this method of student support is typical of the Australian university community when faced with the challenges of a large cohort of international NESB students. There is a tendency to pour resources into comparatively easy issues but shy away from what such students need most: enhancement of academic English language skills, especially at the sentence level.

Issues

The issues related to international students are manifold. Perhaps the most discussed, particularly in relation to East and Southeast Asian students in Australia, is cultural difference. Academics such as Ballard and Clanchy (1997) have pointed to the need to imbue international students from Asia studying in Australia with the discourse of critical analysis in English. Other researchers such as Kutieleh and Egege (2003) have gone so far as to argue that critical thinking is specifically Western and thus transition programs in Australia for international Asian students need to incorporate critical thinking into first year programs without taking either an assimilationist or a deficit approach. This is similar to the arguments of Atkinson (1997) and Fox (1994) that critical thinking is incompatible with Asian cultural attitudes. Such reasoning, however, smacks of the cultural chauvinism of the various colonial powers of the nineteenth century in their quest to fulfill the 'white man's burden'. All cultures have a history of critical thinking. It is how humanity survives as a species. An indication of the continuum of critical thinking across all human cultures can be seen in the development of freestyle swimming. In Europe from the 17th century, breaststroke was known as the 'scientific' method of swimming. This name was discarded in the late nineteenth century when a Solomon Islander came to Sydney in Australia to teach the locals what became known as the Australian crawl, later to be called freestyle (Colwin, 2002).

In terms of East Asian culture, it can be argued that the give and take of ideas due to critical thinking has been a continuum across Eurasia, starting at the latest with Marco Polo. East Asian cultures have long history of critical thought. (Paton, 2005; Volet, 1999), and it is not widely known that two of the renowned early modern philosophers of science, Leibnitz and Spinoza, both used traditional Chinese thought as part of their conception of science. Moreover Francis Bacon saw modern civilisation as being based on gunpowder, paper money and the compass, not realising at the time that each of these had been invented and had been in use in China for several hundred years (Hobson, 2004).

Another important issue with NESB international students is the argument that English language is only one of the many factors that need to be considered. For example, Robertson *et al.* (2000) argue that besides language, the cultural, social and administrative aspects of the international student experience are crucial factors in international student success. This is borne out by evidence from our S@R survey which indicates that 'time management' is as major a factor in failure as is language. For international students, reading between the lines, however, time management in this case seems to be the difficulty of balancing a full time university degree with the full time work needed to pay for such a degree, especially those students who come from less monetarily well endowed countries such as China. Nevertheless, I would still argue that English language competence is the fundamental issue for success at Australian universities, especially at the sentence level, because of the 'fineness of meaning' necessary to academic discourse in whatever language.

This last point above is very much related to the next important issue in relationship to international students at universities in Australia, the perceived role of universities in society. It would seem that most government and employer groups consider the main role of universities in Australia to be that of 'finishing schools', i.e. places to hone young people for the professional work force. However, from the perspective of history and philosophy of science, universities were originally established to be institutions to both hold and 'add to the knowledge' of the world. I would argue that this is still their major role. University is the major institution in society that enables its scholars to strive to understand the world as objectively as possible through the use of critical thinking. Moreover, from the academic perspective, the major aim of university coursework education is to imbue students with the tools for such objective understanding in whatever field they choose to study and with the idea that knowledge is a continuum. Those who see universities as finishing schools, however, generally think of knowledge as being a fixed commodity that can be used to churn out various professionals for the workforce.

This commoditisation of university study is particularly relevant to the issue of international students. In Australia at the moment tertiary education seems

to be perceived by the Government as an immigration commodity. With the Independent Overseas Student visa (subclass 880) the Australian Government has set up a system whereby students can gain permanent residency if they study in a professional area that the Government has chosen to be useful to the society. These occupation areas are known as the Skilled Occupation List, which entails the following occupations: accountant, architect, chiropractor, computing professional, dentist, engineer, interpreter, solicitor, medical practitioner, registered nurse, occupational therapist, optometrist, pharmacist, physiotherapist, psychologist, surveyor, radiographer, teacher, vet, and welfare worker. The relationship to university study requires the student to have 'completed an Australian Masters or Honours degree (at least upper second class level) at an Australian educational institution while physically present in Australia and prior to completing the Masters or Honours degree, you were awarded an Australian bachelor degree as a result of at least one year full-time study while physically present in Australia and the total period of full-time study in Australia was at least two (2) years (two (2) academic years).' (Australian Department of Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, 2006). On the surface, such tying of specific professional study to immigration seems laudatory but the negative consequences far outweigh any positive outcomes from this attempt at social engineering.

The first negative consequence of this immigration policy is what I call the 'accountancy problem'. It should be noted that an international student studying accountancy only takes four years (three years in an undergraduate degree and one year in a postgraduate degree) to achieve qualification for permanent residency. Many of the other occupations listed in the Skilled Occupation List require a longer commitment to study and those that do not, such as teaching or nursing, are generally not perceived by international students to be sufficiently financially lucrative to warrant the substantial financial outlays necessary for overseas tertiary study. Thus, an accountancy degree has become the most popular method for international students to obtain permanent residency in Australia. Moreover, the popularity of accounting has given a great boost to the power in the university system of faculties of business and commerce throughout Australia because the funds that these faculties are gaining from their international students are becoming to a large extent the basis of university funding.

Again from the perspective of history and philosophy of science, this shift towards business schools being the power base of universities could have very negative consequences in the long term. Academic funding based on the market could see the value of knowledge being equated with private monetary profit. Thus, what is the most meaningful or useful over the long term could be replaced by a search for ideas that turn a short term profit. This 'logic of short term advantage' has been shown by Elvin (2004) in his study of the environmental history of China to have a disastrous effect on humanity over the long term. Nevertheless, the Australian Government policy has faculties of science floundering due to lack of funding whereas faculties of business flourish. For instance, the Faculty of Economics and Business at Sydney has been so successful in recent years because of international student numbers that in 2005 four new professors of accounting were employed boost the Faculty's academic standing whereas there is not one professor of history and philosophy of science in all of Australia. This is clearly indicative that faculties with accounting as one of their disciplines are given undue academic weight.

A further negative impact on tying accounting to immigration is the negative effect that this can have on student motivation and subsequent academic success. Many international; students are studying accountancy at university to gain permanent residency when they actually would rather be studying some other subject with a consequent negative effect on their ability to pass. Anecdotal evidence for this comes from my experience running the 'Student at Risk' program in the Faculty over the past four years. One poignant example is that of a young Singaporean undergraduate student who came to see me at the beginning of this year. She was a good credit-to-distinction-average student, majoring in marketing. Her parents, however, had insisted that she change her major to accounting so as to enhance her chances of obtaining permanent residency. She, therefore, undertook two accounting units of study in the University Summer School to catch up on her accounting major. Unfortunately, she failed both units miserably and came to see me at the beginning of semester one in tears because of her distaste for accounting. I advised her to return to marketing as a major and she has thrived studying in an area that is more suited to her talents and interests. This case study is indicative of the problems encountered when extrinsic motivational factors are at odds with those of an intrinsic nature. This is especially a problem when students are attempting edge of knowledge discourse in another language than their own and in an area of study in which they have little interest. Even though the distant prospect of permanent residency sparks some catalyst to study, the lack of interest in the subject matter can block the motivation to undertake the considerable amount of effort needed for NESB international students to survive in a rigorous university course.

I would of course, however, be remiss if I did not mention as an issue the extremely positive effect that a large diverse international student body has on any university. Each culture has added to the knowledge of the world and a great diversity of cultures at a university make it very difficult for students to fall into the mono-cultural chauvinism that was endemic to powerful cultures in the nineteenth century and which led to the catastrophic world wars of the twentieth century. Studying edge of knowledge discourse with students of many cultures immediately gives student an understanding of the extent of the cultural basis of knowledge in a very practical way. The present system, however, even though it is attracting a large number of international students, does not seem to be having the desired effect in relation to cultural diversity if the example of the Pilot Postgraduate MASUS diagnostic is taken into account. Merely considering the language background of the cohort of 278 students is a good indication that something is remiss. The mother tongue of seventeen of the students was English, seven of the students Korean, four of the students Arabic, two of the students Indonesian, two Thai, two Vietnamese, one Japanese, but two hundred and thirty nine of the students had some form of Chinese as their native language. I would argue that even though almost twenty percent of the World's population speaks some form of Chinese, these student numbers indicate almost a mono-cultural Chinese educational environment.

Another issue that should be considered in relation to NESB international students studying in Australia is the ethics of either failing students due to lack of English skills upon having allowed them to enrol with low levels of English and/or passing students who have not understood the 'fineness of meaning' necessary for edge of knowledge discourse in any language. The Summer School statistics outlined previously indicate that international students are not achieving as well as their local counterparts, in fact are failing much more readily, seemingly because of lack of the requisite English language skills. The similarity in comparative progression rates between locals and internationals in the Faculty's post graduate programs, however, indicates either that postgraduate international students do not have the same study problems due to language as their undergraduate counterparts or that the criteria used for assessment are different for the postgraduate students. I would argue that the latter is the case and that the Faculty is passing students who do not have sufficient language skills for edge of knowledge discourse. The case study below adds credence to my argument.

At the end of this semester, two postgraduate international students were sent to me for counselling about plagiarism and advice on academic discourse in English. Both were female students, one from Northeast China and the other from Southwest China. Both had been in Australia for approximately two years, and both were in the last semester of a one and a half year Master of Commerce degree majoring in accounting. That semester, they both took a comparatively linguistically demanding unit of study elective option for interest. Surprisingly, according to the students, they were confronted in this unit with their first solo writing assignment of their degree, all their previous units of study had group assessment tasks, and so they had no previous opportunity to test their academic English literacy skills. The linguistically demanding unit of study chosen had two compulsory essay assignments as part of its assessment criteria. Both students were found to have 'referencing problems' in for their first essay and were allowed to resubmit and given 50% for their attempt. Both still had not learnt sufficient academic English discourse for the second essay. They were both found to have used blatant plagiarism and ended up failing the unit. I would argue that neither student was equipped with sufficient knowledge of academic English to complete the assessment tasks, but the essay is a powerful learning tool, and to discard such a form of assessment as seemingly the students' previous units of study had done, is to demean the quality of education provided.

This leads to the question of what Australian universities are trying to achieve with their international student programs. There is a paper by Olsen *et al.* (2005) presently being circulated around the university system, which claims to have undertaken research into progression rates for 338,445 students in 22 universities in Australia. The paper finds that there is no significant difference in progression rates between local and international students. However, close inspection of this paper reveals that it is perhaps more an exercise in propaganda than any serious attempt at educational research. It appears that the paper was in no way peer reviewed before publication and there is very little evidence of a sound social science methodology. As a University medal winning social science research student stated when forwarding the paper to me for comment, 'It is obviously deficient as a study for a number of reasons: (I thought the analysis was frankly one dimensional and the whole thing could have been thrown together in a few days), but I thought you might like to see it anyway. I certainly wouldn't be awarding first class honours' (personal correspondence, November, 2006). Moreover, the academic credentials and the motivation of the major author are somewhat questionable. It seems that Olsen's highest academic qualification is that of a bachelor degree majoring in philosophy; not that there is anything wrong with

a degree in philosophy, it is just that it does not necessarily equate with an ability to do social science research. Moreover, Olsen does not seem to be attached to any Australian university but instead runs a consultancy out of Hong Kong known as Strategy Policy and Research in Education Limited. One is left to wonder how he obtained his data particularly when one has had experience of the difficulty of trying to obtain reliable data on such matters from within an Australian university.

Besides this seeming misinformation to lull those not at the coal face of university education into a false sense of security, it is necessary to question the motivation of those setting the international student agenda. I have coined the term, cultural chauvinism, in previous papers (see Paton 2004 and Paton 2005) to describe the mindset that other cultures than those stemming from Europe are in some way inferior. The present use of international NESB students to help fund Australian tertiary education smacks somewhat of such misguided thinking in that the quality of the educational outcome seems to be taking second place to the business aspect of full fee paying students without regard for the long term consequences both for the individual students and for the society as a whole.

Conclusion

To conclude, as a passionate supporter of the ability of 'southern' culture to add to the knowledge of the world, I argue strongly using the evidence above that the Australian tertiary education system certainly has gone nowhere near solving the problems of different languages outlined in the biblical story of the Tower of Babel. Moreover, sticking our heads in the sand and trying to wish the problem away will not solve such problems. The language issues posed by both local and international NESB students have to be addressed, especially at sentence level. I stress the sentence level because from my experience teaching academic discourse in Australian universities since 1990, I consider that academic 'genre' just cannot be done well without sufficient 'micro'- level skills, i.e. academic sentence level grammar and vocabulary skills. I add vocabulary because research by Loewen and Ellis (2005) at the University of Auckland has shown that the academic achievement of NESB undergraduate students is greatly enhanced by knowledge of Nation's 2,000 Word List and the University Word List. This focus on grammar and vocabulary should, of course, be linked to the discourse of the students' chosen field of study, and not be extraneous to it, to contextualise the language learning process.

The necessary consequence of such a renewed focus on language would require not only a great increase in funding for academic language programs but also a much greater recognition, both financial and academic, of the positive role that academic 'language teachers' have in the education of the great majority of our international students. I say this in a context where, because of the lack of funding, there is a decreasing number of academic language and learning staff being employed in universities and the academic status of those staff remaining is under threat at a number of Australian academic institutions. This is particularly poignant when one considers that the data in this paper comes from a comparatively financially endowed faculty in one of Australia's leading universities.

I further argue from the issues discussed above that Australian Government policy should not tie specific university courses to immigration. Such a policy can only have negative consequences on the Australian knowledge base in the future. A more considered program would be to tie immigration to academic ability, no matter what the degree at a quality university, such that an international student with a high distinction average would have the greatest chance of permanent residency whether their major be Classical Greek or Marketing. The cut off for immigration purposes could be a credit average.

The final conclusion is that the Australian Government and Australian universities should stop using the 'logic of short term advantage' as the basis of tertiary education policy. Elvin (2004) has argued persuasively, using the example of China, that humanity negates the environment and consequently itself by concentrating on winning over the short term. This seems to be the basis of the present Australian tertiary education policy and there could be dire consequences if we continue on this path.

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