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Student satisfaction, teacher internships, and the case for a critical approach to international education

Julie Matthews
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

Meredith Lawley
University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

In recent times distinctions between the economic and political imperatives of international education and its cultural and educational aspects have become conveniently aligned. This alignment is troubling because it allows the pursuit of profit to fit neatly and without apparent controversy into the pursuit of more lofty political cultural and educational goals. Measures of student satisfaction with international education do little to challenge this comfortable affiliation. Indeed, they appear to reinforce the view that international education as currently pursued is travelling well and yielding maximum profits and benefits for all. The discussion in this article is based on the results of a pilot study that examined international student satisfaction with a teacher education internship program in Australia. Our findings showed that students were satisfied with their international education experience and that the internship / work integrated learning experience enhanced their satisfaction. Importantly however, our pre-departure study showed that students expected study abroad to make a difference to their lives even before they left home. The study led us to consider the meaning of student satisfaction and whether assessments of satisfaction might simply confirm what students already expect. If this is the case, it is not altogether clear what student satisfaction with international education means or measures.

Keywords: student satisfaction, international education, teacher education internship, work integrated learning.

Introduction

Globally, there has been an unprecedented growth in international education over the past decade, making it an increasingly important and complex force in higher education (Knight, 2006). Of higher education institutions polled in the International Association of Universities (IAU, 2005) survey, 73% regarded internationalisation to
be a high priority predominantly due to increased competitiveness. Importantly, the highest ranking benefit of internationalisation was not – as one might expect – related to the economic benefits of increased revenue generation, but the educational benefits of increased international knowledge and intercultural skills for staff and students (Knight, 2006). It seems that higher education institutions retain academic goals for international education in full cognisance of the pressure to commercialise, with market forces playing a secondary role.

Turning to Australia, international education is the third largest export revenue earner, and contrary to the global focus on educational benefits as the key driver of internationalisation, an economic imperative clearly resides at the core of Australian universities’ interest in internationalisation. Starved of government funding for decades, the hotbed of activity comprising internationalisation and international education is primarily driven by cash-strapped higher education institutions (Haigh, 2008; Clyne, Marginson, & Woock, 2001). Internationalisation in Australia provides a model par excellence of ‘trade creep’ (Haigh, 2008). It operates to a commercial imperative producing and selling products for clients and is shaped by entrepreneurs and marketers rather than faculty (Clyne et al., 2001). Internationalisation has introduced ‘new systems of competition and demonstrable performance’ driven by the fundamental mission to advance university prestige and competitiveness (Marginson & Considine, 2000). Educational dimensions of internationalisation are subordinated to the ‘mission, marketing and strategic development of the institution’ (Marginson & Considine, 2000, p. 5), and pave the way towards the competitive market-based paradigm that dominates the Australian higher education system.

The terms ‘international education’ and ‘internationalisation’ are often used interchangeably. ‘International education’ has disciplinary and curricula associations and has incorporated with fields and activities such as comparative education, foreign policy studies, area and regional studies, international development studies and development education, peace education, international exchange programs, global education and international business education (Gutek, 1993, cited in Sylvester, 2005). In the United States, ‘international education’ is imbued with liberal connotations associated with educational processes that foster international characteristics such as open-mindedness, second language competency, tolerance and respect (Chan & Dimmock, 2008). As noted above, in Australia international education has strong human capital connotations and is predominantly associated with the enrolment of full-fee paying overseas students, as well as attendant institutional, curricula and pedagogical changes. The term ‘internationalisation’ came to prominence in the education sector in the 1980s to refer to the institutional activities of cross border programs, services, exchange and technical cooperation. It is commonly used to refer to broader strategic directions which seek to integrate
‘international intercultural or global dimension into the purpose, functions or delivery of post-secondary education’ (Knight, 2003, p. 2).

The distinction between economic and political rationale, and cultural and educational rationale charted by de Witt (1995) have in recent times become conveniently aligned such that the contradictions between economic imperatives and educational goals are rarely debated. Current measures of student satisfaction with international education commonly used in higher education institutions often reinforce this comfortable affiliation. International education in Australia is deemed to successfully yield maximum profits and benefits all round; for global and national economies, individual students, educational institutions and their management operations.

If international education is to achieve more than the production of satisfied clients, it must be shaped by educational values rather than commercial imperatives; by critical approaches committed to internationalisation as a force for transformative change and the provision of solutions to pressing global problems. We challenge the idea that international education should be responsive to student demand and national or global economic dictates, and argue that to shape international education as such effectively reproduces the global economic status quo and pre-existing inequalities. Our goal is to underline the possibility of international education as a means of creating something different rather than simply offering more of the same.

To explore this goal we begin by discussing the capture of international education to the economic rationale, before reviewing current approaches to measuring student’s satisfaction and the relationship of these measures to the goals of international education. The paper then discusses the results of a pilot study that examined international student satisfaction with a teacher education internship in Australia from both the perspective of the educational enrichment provided as well as the future possible economic benefits. In this study we found that students were satisfied with their international education experience, but also that their internship or work integrated learning (WIL) experience enhanced their satisfaction both personally and professionally. In Australia, WIL is the ‘umbrella term used for a range of approaches and strategies that integrate theory with the practice of work within a purposefully designed curriculum’ (The WIL Report, 2008 p. v) and refers among other things to placements, internships, practicum and work experience. Few studies in Australia or elsewhere have explored what WIL means for international education.

Of significance was the fact that our pre-departure study showed that students expected study abroad to make a difference to their lives before they left home. In other words, their motivation to study overseas was not primarily driven by professional or economic motives; moreover the satisfaction they felt with international education was related to community interactions rather than enhanced professional or personal skills. The study led us to consider the meaning of measures
of student satisfaction and whether they simply confirm what students already expect. If this is the case it is not altogether clear what student satisfaction with international education means or measures. The paper closes by identifying the limits of ‘measures’ of student satisfaction and arguing for an approach to international education driven by educational imperatives rather than accountability measures.

The capture of international education to economic rationale

Over the past decade educational approaches to international education have been increasingly coopted to economic rationale. International education is a global industry, and national and individual demands fuel its expansion. Its success in Australia coincides with the enlargement of a mobile workforce; the attraction and affordability of English language education; the Australian climate, and Australia’s political stability, security and tolerance (Marginson, 2003).

Globally, some two million international students are self-funded and there is growing demand for international education from countries like India, China and Africa. In the next decade international dimensions of the higher education sector are predicted to continue if not surpass the unprecedented growth of this decade (Knight, 2006). In higher education internationalisation has become the buzzword of university mission statements and strategic plans and is fundamentally concerned with the global mobility of institutions, people and knowledge (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). While international education and internationalisation are undoubtedly important in the eyes of educators and administrators, this does not mean that they are pursued for the same reasons. Profits are an important driver in Australia and the United Kingdom where government cuts to funding public education have pressed many institutions into international ventures. In the United States international education has shifted from social and academic rationales to align more closely with political concerns about national security tolerance, peace, global understanding, and parochialism (Meiras, 2004).

In Australia international education emerged in the 1960s as an adjunct to development aid and a potential force for modernisation. During this time study abroad, the international exchange of students and teachers, and educational, technical and institution building in developing nations were driven by humanist conviction that international education would facilitate tolerance, open-mindedness and reduce ethnocentrism. In the 1970s this commitment deepened to encompass social justice dimensions and international understanding, cooperation, and peace. By the 1990s, neo-liberal ideologies brought entrepreneurial and human capital perspectives to the fore and internationalisation was seen more in terms of preparing
an ‘internationally sophisticated manpower who would more effectively serve the political, economic and social needs of the country and the world’ (Sylvester, 2005). In the early 2000s, the crude instrumentalism of Australia’s previous human capital approaches were tempered by humanist arguments. For instance, in 2002 the Australian government discussion paper Striving for Quality noted that international student enrolments alone were no measure of internationalisation (DEST, 2002); and that internationalisation was a fundamental element of Australia’s social, intellectual and cultural enrichment as well as its economic and strategic engagement. International education came to include the development of international curricula, domestic study abroad, strategic alliances with international partners and exposure to other cultures and perspectives. The goal of internationalisation was to prepare Australian students for effective participation in a global economy as ‘global citizens’ able to live, work, travel, communicate and participate in local and global affairs (Robertson, 2000, p. 82, cited DEST, 2002). This goal was reiterated in a ministerial statement on internationalisation, education and training which stressed benefits to all students by providing access to new ideas, experiences, friends and networks; new social and cultural perspectives; strengthening tolerance, multiculturalism and democracy; and developing skills and competencies necessary for individual employment in the global workforce (Nelson, 2003).

The educational aspirations of internationalisation have thus been captured by neoliberalism to become a means of pursuing human capital development and making Australia more successful in the competitive global economy. Even notions of citizenship, democracy and justice have been corralled by a neoliberal rationale which takes it that globalisation equals neoliberal capitalism to comprise an overarching macro social and economic force to which international education is obliged to respond. Altbach and Knight (2007, p. 290) refer to globalisation as the ‘economic, political and societal forces driving twenty first century higher education towards greater international involvement’. We want at this point to emphasise that globalisation is not synonymous with internationalisation despite the fact that university internationalisation is often rationalised in terms of assumed macroeconomic imperatives.

A great many discussions of globalisation in education are concerned with human capital requirements. Universities have become more internationally active through staff and student mobility, the organisation of research, management and curricula, and the trade in international education (Mok, 2007). However, there is little evidence to show that international education is a straightforward effect of globalisation or indeed that it has the capacity to achieve national or global economic objectives. To assume this is to downplay the importance of nation-states as well as the activities of educational institutions themselves. Indeed, Kehm and Teichler’s (2007) examination of internationalisation activities in higher education indicates that
competitive globalisation has not yet replaced cooperative internationalisation. We want to underline our view that the directions of internationalisation should not be left to the purported macroeconomic forces of global capitalism but to academic principles and values. Indeed, studies of organisational culture support this view and indicate that sustained success is driven by beliefs, visions and values and not responses to market forces, resources or competition (Hayden, Levy, & Thompson, 2007).

In brief, we have highlighted the uncomfortable alignment between academic and economic imperatives in international education at the institutional level. We now turn to the student perspective. What counts as positive international outcomes for students in an era where for some it represents a force for educational enrichment while for others it offers a vehicle for economic advancement? What do international students actually expect to gain personally and professionally from their experience? Are students driven by educational goals or economic motivations or a combination of both?

**Student satisfaction**

Routine international student satisfaction surveys are intended to inform recruitment processes rather than courses and programs. However, student satisfaction surveys can be conflated with measures of educational outcomes, and are conducted in the absence of measures focused on structured learning activities that allow students to reflect on their overseas experience. Student satisfaction surveys have thus not assessed how students extend and apply their knowledge. Program and course feedback routinely conducted by lecturers rarely capture comments and concerns specific to international students. A study of international education survey instruments used at 20 top American universities found that 95% focused on assessments of student satisfaction (Durrant & Dorisu, 2007). A third of the survey instruments assessed personal development, 15% measured intercultural proficiency, and less than 10% were interested in career-oriented outcomes. Factors constraining the kinds of survey instruments used included expertise available to design a study; time and budgets; and staff interest in descriptive and inferential results.

In terms of published research, contemporary studies are mainly concerned with intercultural proficiency. Cushner and Mahon (2002) for instance examined the personal and professional benefits of overseas study. Fifty returnee student teachers were asked what circumstances from their overseas experienced influenced them; what they learned about themselves and others; how they differed from other teachers and what they thought other teacher education students could learn from their experience (Cushner & Mahon, 2002). In addition seven respondents completed journals before, during and after their experience. The student teachers reported that
they gained increased cultural awareness and professional development in terms of global mindedness. They became accepting of difference and more understanding their US-centrism: ‘I learned that the United States is not the centre of the universe. I learned what it is like to be an outsider, to not understanding what other around me take for granted’ (Cushner & Mahon, 2002, p. 53). The study concluded that international education is important to prepare new teachers to be able to engage with global diversity and improve their understanding of students from diverse cultural backgrounds. Because many current US teachers lack intercultural experience and understanding of global affairs, it was argued that the internship experience develops orientations and cultural understanding which can only be gained through long term personal interaction with people from diverse cultural backgrounds (Cushner & Mahon, 2002).

Likewise, a study of the views of 26 returnee US study abroad students showed that negotiations of national American identity while they were away, enabled them to think critically about identity, patriotism and world geopolitics on their return (Dolby, 2007). International education served to facilitate critical and culturally inclusive understandings of nation, power and identity. It gave the students the opportunity to understand themselves as ‘American’ (Dolby, 2005) as much as understand other cultures. However, misplaced nationalism and a strong sense of American national identity (Dolby, 2004) can prevent US students from reaping the full benefits of study aboard experiences.

Few studies examined the long term impact of international education on international relations or in relation to student expectations, and few provided detailed accounts of the relationship between student satisfaction and WIL activities. An exception to this was Janes (2008) who found that the work placement course undertaken by undergraduate American students in Britain, facilitated in and out of class interactions and activities which enhanced students’ cultural knowledge enabling them to move beyond stereotypes and generalisations to understand the unique diversity of the country. Noting that deep levels of self-reflection, understanding and learning were achieved by students on the course, Janes recommended assignments such as a learning journal and portfolios to assist students to notice and evaluate the sources of their learning. Other studies have pointed to the need to involve study abroad students in structured learning activities that allow them to reflect on, and make the most of their overseas experience (Absalom & Vadura, 2006). Indeed the temptation to remain in the company of other Americans while overseas may well be due to the absence of structured learning activities which teach students how to learn about new cultures and themselves (Van de Berg, 2007).

While we might anticipate that increased community engagement is both educationally generative and personally satisfying, we know little about how it further
facilitates global or world-mindedness to advance the goals of social justice and international cooperation. On this latter point, a 2005 Australian study explored the views of 28 first year students enrolled in the School of International Studies. The research showed that students had more holistic, dynamic and integrated view of internationalisation than the task-based knowledge/skills approach of the curriculum. Student views went beyond concerns with the processes of knowing and acting in relation to international content, or the application of new knowledge and skills, to considering opportunities for interactions which contributed to social transformation and change.

In America, study abroad for the purposes of cultural enrichment dates back to nineteenth century Grand Tours that took the elite to Europe (Van de Berg, 2007). Support for study abroad continues to laud the benefits of psychological personal transformation and language learning (Dolby, 2005) as well as promoting cross cultural understanding (Dolby, 2004). However, Dolby (2005) observed a mismatch between official interest and research into the career and economic benefit of international education and the way it has been promoted to students through an emphasis on its academic and personal benefits. Government interest in study abroad is as much about advancing international power and defending national interest as remedying 'widespread cross-cultural misunderstanding, prejudice, global ignorance, and failed international policy' (Zemach-Bersin, 2007, p. 17):

Study abroad has thus emerged as a political solution to the challenges of the globalized world, expected to buttress America’s position of global power and defend homeland security by producing a new generation of globally competent Americans. (Zemach-Bersin, 2007, p. 18)

Although US universities promote study abroad on the grounds that it expands students’ worldview, global awareness and global workplace competence, only 3% of students in undergraduate programs currently go overseas. The plan to increase this to one million students annually (Dolby, 2007) may require more considered curricula and pedagogical orientations since the cohort may not necessarily be positively inclined to intercultural experiences. Interventionist strategies may be necessary, but current research indicates that tertiary educators make few if any curricula and pedagogical changes to accommodate international students and often miss out on the opportunity to bring international perspectives into their classroom (Ward, 2006). International education currently relies on physical mobility and immersion overseas to trigger experiential learning (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). Academic interventions at home (and overseas) could provide critical tools necessary for students to engage, participate, dialogue, reflect and act on social issues and problems.
There are several reasons why it might be timely to consider creative ways that internationalisation can be expanded into a wider gamut of university teaching and learning activities (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). First, study abroad, intercultural contact and community engagement are no guarantee that ethnocentrism, racism nationalism and parochialism will give way to positive perceptions of cultural difference and relative understandings of self and national identity. If aspirations to global imperialism and domination are unwittingly replicated in US government study abroad rationale (Zemach-Bersin, 2007) then there is little reason to suppose that the study abroad experience will automatically shift strong nationalist sentiments. Second, many students have already travelled overseas or lived interculturally in their everyday lives (Kehm & Teichler, 2007). These issues highlight the need to reconsider how higher education might offer systematic and structured approaches to internationalisation which surpass and enhance traditional and everyday forms of experiential learning. Finally, being overseas may simply confirm the eye opening, life changes that many international students anticipate. If students are already predisposed to travelling overseas then their overseas experience may just reinforce pre-existing intercultural orientations and international mindedness. This certainly appeared to be the case in the study reported in this article.

The study

In 2004, responding to identified internationalisation objectives and strategies, the University of the Sunshine Coast (USC) actively pursued the development of an international student teacher education program. The course was based on the idea that local and international inter-sectoral connectedness, not separation, was a critical factor in developing a successful program and collaboration was to be the focus. The proposition was that program capacity would be more successful and sustainable, in the longer term, through local and international cross-sector collaboration, than could otherwise be achieved by one agency or partner. Formal articulation arrangements were established to enable students to move between education sectors, as well as to recognise and credit study already undertaken in related areas.

The program commenced in 2005 with three partners: the State University of New York, Cortland Campus (SUNY), Education Queensland (EQ), and the University of the Sunshine Coast. Its focus was quality teaching and learning, designed to offer a comprehensive and distinctive student teaching experience, to meet the needs of New York students who wished to become teachers in the primary, middle, or senior phases of learning. The program consisted of two related experiences, enabling direct engagement with Queensland state schools on the Sunshine Coast. This was achieved, first, by combining study in USC’s school entry preparatory course entitled An Experiential Introduction to Australian Education, along with another course delivered intensively over 6-weeks; and second, by a
subsequent eight week student teaching session. Initially, the student cohort comprised eight students placed in three local schools. In 2008, the program involved 18 students from four State University of New York campuses and eight school teaching sites within the Sunshine Coast North District Schools. Of note, participating students were charged full fees with all three partners receiving some economic benefit of varying degrees, that is, while the program was educationally driven, economic imperatives were also present.

In 2008, a pilot project was initiated to investigate the experience of international students undertaking the program. The study comprised a cohort of 18 students aged between 20 and 22, of whom seven students were male and 11 were female. Nine students had not travelled internationally before their study period in Australia and four had limited international travel experience. The qualitative methodological approach adopted sought to identify students’ expectations of study abroad (pre-departure survey) and the local experiences they valued (post experience). Questions in the pre-departure survey investigated how much interaction students expected outside the university environment both personally and professionally and what impact they thought this interaction would have personally and professionally, in both the short and long-term. The post experience survey was administered immediately prior to the students’ returning home and sought to gauge the extent to which students’ actual experience differed from their initial expectations. Students were also asked to keep a journal recording their activities and interactions of significance over the duration of their stay.

We found high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the course. Students were clearly delighted with their Australian experience, their internship and USC. However, it appeared to us that their satisfaction was largely related to the WIL experience and community engagement and less so to their university-based study. Student journals chronicled involvement in an enormous range of community and professional activities all of which generated interactions of emotional intensity; these included school visits and their practicum work, and trips to pubs, cafes, sporting events and churches, as well as flights, buses and long car drives to tourist destinations, and to other cities. Respondents were interacting with local students, local school teachers/mentors, local Australians, local university students, international university students, and other American university students. Expectations and experiences within the teaching context were generally met, or were rated higher in respect of personal growth as a teacher and teaching skills. Likewise, expectations in terms of personal growth, social skills, and relationships were met or exceeded on all criteria for all respondents, as were improved ability to interact with people professionally and socially. Of the potential benefits of the placement experience, increased employability was ranked highest; others included travel experience in Australia and making new contacts and friends. In brief, students
reported both short and long term educational benefits as well as potential longer term economic benefits.

It is not surprising that high levels of satisfaction bear some relation to high levels of community interaction. Previous studies emphasised that international student dissatisfaction was an effect of their limited engagement with local students. This has long been a cause for concern in the literature and has generally been explained in terms of hostility, insensitivity, or indifference on the part of local students and ineffective university structures and curricula on the part of universities (Nesdale & Todd, 1993; Smart, Violet, & Ang, 2000; Ward, 2006). In another recent study of Asian students, a cohort comprising 4.6% of international students worldwide, found that they desired more opportunities to participate in local community activities; language difficulty was their main problem (Zhang & Brunton, 2007).

Conclusion

Our discussion has highlighted the problematic convergence of economic and political imperatives with cultural and educational ones. Returning to our initial goal of exploring the possibility of international education as a means of creating something different rather than simply offering more of the same, our study found that while WIL experiences certainly resulted in increased levels of student satisfaction, both personally and professionally, the broader educational implications of their experience were less clear. As stated earlier there is a paucity of empirical research investigating the nature of international students’ experience of WIL in terms of expectations, experience and long-term personal and professional impact. While international education programs might make use of teacher internships, extracurricular trips and excursions, apart from enhancing satisfaction, pedagogical benefits are not well researched or understood. Furthermore, our pre departure surveys indicated that students choosing overseas teaching internships were already committed to the idea that travelling overseas would make a difference to their lives. If students are already predisposed to the experience international education has to offer, then it may be that the study abroad experience simply reinforces this expectation and confirms the eye opening, life changes that they already expect. Finally, the students regarded their internships as offering them a competitive edge in the workplace and the chance to travel. If teacher internships simply encourage students to centre on professional advancement and personal satisfaction, do they miss the opportunity to advance outcomes and values such as interculturalism, international collaboration and cooperation? Put bluntly, do international teacher
internships produce satisfied international students at the expense of better educated teachers?

Longstanding internationalisation traditions have sought to facilitate intercultural proficiency and cross-cultural perspectives through study abroad, foreign language instruction and sponsorship of foreign students to host campuses. However, if international education is to make a difference on this count it must not only address the educational dilemmas detailed above but also its own operational model. It is still the case that ‘internationalism’ remains predominantly limited to transactions between developed nations. In 2002, 70% of all international students in higher education were enrolled in just five countries; the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany, Australia and France (Naidoo, 2006).

If we want international education to be a public good of benefit to all, rather than a private commodity of benefit to individual consumers, we need to clearly distinguish economic and political imperatives from cultural and educational ones. We argue here that contemporary enterprise approaches to international education have lost sight of cultural and educational goals, and the critical potential of international education. The idea that learning should facilitate social change and address inequality and injustice appears to resonate with many students who also want ethical relevance and knowledge for transformative action (Silver, 2009). In interrogating measures of student satisfaction we want to suggest that satisfied clients may not be entirely antithetical to a critical approach. We highlight the need for a renewed focus on the educational drivers of education and a consequent revision of measures of student satisfaction to focus on educational outcomes rather than simple measures of satisfaction more designed to facilitate economic imperatives.

References


