TEACHING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS: WHAT HAS CULTURE GOT TO DO WITH IT?

Dr Gavin B Sanderson, PhD, University of South Australia

ABSTRACT

This paper provides an insight into the nexus of theory and practice of teaching international students in higher education. It is drawn from a larger investigation which examined the teaching practices of Australian lecturers in a department that is recognised for its leading practice in teaching international students. Aspects of their teaching practice were examined against theory advanced by John Biggs in which there are three distinct levels of teaching; Levels 1 and 2 being deficit models and Level 3, which holds that the ethnicities of students are largely irrelevant for good teaching to occur, being the only empirically and ethically justifiable approach. This paper reports on the responses of the lecturers to four questions pitched at Level 2 teaching; a deficit model. Their responses were generally indicative of Level 3 teaching approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Whilst issues relating to the quality of higher education, national higher education policy, and international students have increasingly become the focus of research into the internationalisation of Australian higher education, there has been less investigation into the experiences of Australian lecturers who work in an environment that is more diverse in terms of culture, language, and educational backgrounds of students than ever before. Harman (2005), in a critical review of the Australian literature on internationalisation and higher education, noted that despite some studies having been carried out at the institutional level on innovation in internationalising curricula, “there is almost a complete absence of material on the active involvement of academics in internationalization, their perceptions of other cultures and people, the value they place on internationalization and their competence in speaking and reading other languages than English” (p. 131). Lee’s (2005) view that “the phenomenon of internationalisation of [Australian] higher education has remained largely un-researched (sic) in terms of either curriculum or pedagogy” (p. 42) supports Harman’s (2005) claim. This paper is a positive response to both observations.

In a bid to know what ‘leading practice’ in teaching international students might look like (and, therefore, to acquire an insight into the role that students’ cultures play in teaching in such an environment), this paper reports on part of an in-depth case study on a small allied health department that is recognised for its good work in teaching international students. Whilst the investigation in its entirety (see Sanderson 2006) is more far-reaching than what can be reported here, this paper draws out the responses of lecturers when faced with four normative statements¹ that lend themselves Biggs’s (2003) Level 2 teaching; a deficit model that tries to accommodate the teaching and learning preferences of international students from a cultural point of view. The thinking behind this research approach is that leading practice, in the Biggsian sense, should be qualitatively different from Level 2 teaching and the lecturers’ interview responses should reflect this. Note that for the purposes of this paper, culture is interpreted broadly as “the social construction, articulation and reception of meaning” (Held, McGrew, Goldblatt, & Perraton, 1999, p. 328).

¹ The normative statements are taken from the Profile of the Ideal Lecturer for Teaching in the International Classroom, an educational model with hyperglobalist tendencies that originates from Western Europe (see Teekens, n.d.).
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR THIS PAPER

Biggs’s (2003) theory on three levels of teaching in relation to teaching international students is the reference point for this paper. Level 1 is teaching as assimilating, Level 2 is teaching as accommodating, and Level 3 is teaching as educating. At Level 1, students have to assimilate into the ways things are done in the host institution. The lecturer focuses on what the students are and stereotypes are a convenient way of interpreting their behaviour. For example, the views that students from some cultures and countries are rote learners, do not think critically, are passive and do not communicate in class, do not respond to progressive Western teaching methods, focus excessively on assessment, do not understand what plagiarism is, form ethnic enclaves, do not adjust to Australian academe easily, and consider lecturers to be god-like (Biggs, 2003, pp. 125-131). Biggs (2003) suggests that whilst some of these stereotypes are supported by evidence, others are also features of local students and others still “are simply wrong” (p. 125). Level 1 teaching, according to Biggs (2003), is the crudest of the teaching approaches and is a deficit model of education because it focuses on students’ lack of knowledge and skills to work successfully in, for example, the Australian tertiary setting. Learning problems in Level 1 teaching are seen as student problems and are not attributed to teaching methods. Further, the teaching is non-reflective.

Rather than focusing on what students are, Level 2 teaching is instead concerned with what the lecturer does by accommodating to the cultural and educational contexts of the students’ home countries. For example, when teaching international students they may choose to drop a “humorous interpersonal style” (Biggs, 2003, pp. 132-133) or modify their body language because it might be perceived to be inappropriate for some international students. Level 2 teaching “means adapting one’s teaching towards meeting the preferred ways of ISs (international students)” (Biggs, 2003, p. 132). This resonates with the idea of grid multi-referential curricula which, according to Hudson and Morris (2003), is polycentric and international/global in its outlook (p. 66). A radical example of this is international students being taught and assessed in their preferred (including home) language by dual-language Australian lecturers whose pedagogy caters for the student’s “cognitive styles” (Hudson & Morris, 2003, p. 68).

Biggs (2003) is a strong critic of radical grid multi-reference education and says it is “impractical (and) quite absurd” (p. 138). Ballard and Clanchy (1997), too, comment that it is “not feasible nor desirable to alter your whole course structure” (p. 27) to accommodate international students who, themselves, are not homogenous. This is a particularly salient point. Biggs (2003), however, accepts that minor multi-reference grid accommodations can be made for international students. Even so, he viewed teaching strategies like speaking slowly, avoiding colloquialisms, and providing as much visual back-up to lectures as possible as “useful management tips but not about teaching itself” (Biggs, 2003, p. 133). Level 2 teaching as accommodating is a deficit model of education because the lecturer cannot possibly master the knowledge and skills (including culture-specific knowledge) required to meet the needs of international students in the ways they are used to having their needs met (Biggs, 2003, p. 133). Any problem with student learning in an education setting that is driven by Level 2 teaching is blamed on the inadequacies of the lecturer.

Whilst Biggs (2003) says that Level 1 and Level 2 teaching “cannot be justified empirically or in principle” (p. 138), he holds that Level 3 teaching as educating is inclusive because it focuses on what students do, rather than on what students are or what the lecturer does. Level 3 teaching is the most desirable form of teaching and it rests on the following propositions:
1. Persistent teaching problems lie not in the student but in the teaching.
2. In our teaching, we should focus on the similarities between students rather than on differences. Differences obviously exist, but to focus on them is counterproductive.
3. Accordingly, allowing for the needs of special groups, such as ISs (international students), is best done within the whole teaching system. (Biggs, 2003, pp. 138-139)

Biggs (2003) labels Level 3 teaching as “learning in context” (p. 136) and is directed at helping students develop the necessary cognitive processes to meet the learning objectives of their studies. It is based on the universality of the learning process. Further, Level 3 teaching is predicated on the ethnicity of international students as being “beside the point” (Biggs, 2003, p. 134). As long as there is constructive alignment between the elements of (valid) curricula (for example, learning objectives, assessment, and teaching and learning arrangements), Level 3 teaching can occur regardless of in which country and in which cultural context the teaching takes place. It would not matter if the teaching is directed towards local or international students in local or international settings (for example, in Australia or Taiwan, Zimbabwe or Kazakhstan). If the curricula facilitate deep learning outcomes and are supportive of the needs of individual students then the cultural diversity in the classroom is not an educational concern. Such a view (albeit somewhat narrow, it might be argued) effectively makes the notion of internationalised teaching practice (curriculum process, that is) largely redundant. Put simply, good teaching will engage all students and help them learn what is worth learning. It obliges lecturers to know something about their students and the support they need to meet the requirements of their studies. It relies less on lecturers knowing about students’ cultures than it does on them being acutely aware of how they are progressing in their studies and what assistance they might need to meet the related learning objectives.

Biggs’s (2003) overall argument is supported by research which concluded that the main study-related difficulties reported by local and international university students in Australia were related to poor teaching, a mismatch between student and staff expectations, lack of access to staff, and heavy workloads (Mullins, as cited in Biggs, 2003, p. 137). For Biggs (2003), these findings indicate that the fundamental difficulties faced by international students are essentially the same as those faced by Australian students as they make the transition to study at the tertiary level. He does, however, concede that the extent of the challenges is likely to be greater for international students and that language is a big issue for ‘English as an Additional Language’ (EAL) students. Nevertheless, in Biggs’s (2003) view, good teaching will assist students to adapt and adjust to the demands of the local teaching and learning environment. For Biggs (2003), the key word is transition as students move from one learning environment into another (and it is just as relevant to local students as it is to international students).

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND METHOD**

A purposive sampling exercise based on the following criteria was used to locate a teaching department that had a number of characteristics which lent themselves to representing leading practice in teaching international students. The department had to satisfy the following criteria:

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> Whilst Biggs (2003) does not define ‘ethnicity’ (or ‘culture’), he talks of people from “African, Middle Eastern or Far Eastern countries” (p. 121). He also mentions “Anglo-Celtic students” (p. 121) and “students from Confucian heritage cultures” (p. 125). Biggs (2003) also identifies countries with these descriptors. For example, students from the Far East come from China, Japan, and Korea (p. 128). The sense in which Biggs (2003) uses ‘culture’ is ‘the way things are done here’ (wherever that may be).
• Significant experience with international students from a diversity of cultural, language, and educational backgrounds;
• Ability to demonstrate that it had developed particular initiatives or strategies in relation to the learning needs of its international students;
• Staff have undertaken some form of education or teaching-related studies;
• Staff have engaged in professional development activities in relation to teaching in general and teaching international students in particular;
• Staff have engaged with their experience with international students in a scholarly way, for example, by giving seminar and conference presentations, and publishing in journals;
• Peer-recognised as an example of leading practice in teaching international students by parties external to the department itself.

On the basis of the criteria listed above, an allied health department was identified as a site for the case study and access was negotiated between the researcher and the head of the department. There were seven full-time teaching staff in the department. All were female and were registered allied health practitioners and six were available (and volunteered) to participate in the study. The department taught an undergraduate bachelor degree and a postgraduate coursework master degree. It had an enrolment of approximately 50 international students in a population of 100 students in total spread across both academic programs. Although the majority of the international students came from Singapore, Malaysia, and Hong Kong, there were also students from other Asian countries, as well as Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The research project, which had obtained ethics clearance, used a phenomenographic approach to generate data from multiple, in-depth interviews which were carried out between late 2003 and early 2005. Whilst the larger research project fielded over 60 discrete statements to the lecturers, this paper reports on the following four to provide an idea of how the lecturers viewed different perspectives in relation to their teaching practice:

Statement 1: The lecturer should be open to suggestions with regard to the use of language. *(Language perspective)*

Statement 2: The lecturer must be aware of the role that body language plays in communicating a message, but not use it in an extreme manner, such as making exaggerated movements to support spoken language. *(Body language perspective)*

Statement 3: The lecturer should try to make adjustments for cultural differences within the groups, while at the same time respecting these differences. They include the differences between his or her own culture and those of other group members. *(Culture perspective)*

Statement 4: The lecturer should assess student performance with due respect for different academic cultures. (For example, in some traditions it is very impolite to answer a question directly. The lecturer must learn to expect a long introduction before the correct answer is given). *(Assessment perspective)*

**RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

Statement 1: The lecturer should be open to suggestions with regard to the use of language. *(Language perspective)*

Although the lecturers made it clear that all students had to meet the language-related requirements that are expected in all forms of assessment, they did indicate that there was some flexibility around this. Bronwyn ³ showed “a little flexibility” with written work. She referred to a departmental guideline that said, “It has got to be

³ Pseudonyms are used in place of the lecturers’ real names.
readable and it should be like a good Australian student’s work.” She also said, “But you do make some allowances if you can understand the meaning. So we correct some but we don’t correct all of it.” If the piece of work had many mistakes or was not able to be understood, Bronwyn said that the student would be referred to the university’s Study Skills Department for “help with spelling and grammar” before resubmitting the paper. Another lecturer, Samantha, said that whilst assessment criteria were not negotiable, there was some flexibility with regard to assessment processes that took into account the English language proficiency of EAL students:

All students have to perform the same assessments and their competencies are measured against the same assessments and the same criteria. We don’t make dispensations for proficiency, but in another way I think there is a real understanding about that, and therefore, patience around our interactions with students. I think when students go out on practicum, the placement educators and the clinical tutors pace their learning more slowly for international students in order to take into account the gap in proficiency in English.

Samantha indicated that the department provided students with guidelines for written work that made content and presentation expectations very clear. Although most of the marks for any given piece of work reflected students’ capacities to get their ideas across in relation to the question or task, a small percentage of marks was also given for presentation in terms of grammar and spelling. Further, if the grammar and spelling was poor, Samantha would give the students feedback on the mistakes. Because the allied health profession was so reliant on written and spoken communication, Samantha said the department had high expectations of its students in terms of English language competence. Having said this, she commented that lecturers in the department were probably more sympathetic to EAL international students’ English proficiency and were possibly less strict in deducting marks for less than exemplary use of English: “It is the area of grey in assessment. I think consciously or unconsciously we would mark an international student differently to an Australian student in that little five or ten per cent. That’s the area we will give them grace or some leeway with an expectation they’re not at the same standard. But not in terms of the content of what they’re saying.” For spoken assessment, Samantha said that she applied the same principles as written work. There had to be a reasonable level of clarity and the ideas had to be easily understood.

Ruth stated that written and verbal work that mimicked “a workplace task” would require “English to be at an acceptable standard. This is because the qualification is an Australian standard and I strongly believe that English that is acceptable at a professional level is part of the package.” She was more flexible with the use of English for “a different sort of assessment task where our aims might be different, for example, more knowledge-based.” Ruth was also “reasonably flexible” with the use of English in written and verbal non-assessment tasks but she had “to be able to understand and follow it.” With regard to general conversation, Ruth was “very flexible although this sort of conversation gives you an overall impression of that person’s language ability.”

Given that Larissa’s work entailed practical aspects of clinical placement, she did not formally assess students’ written work. She did, however, check students’ medical case notes to ensure that they could be understood by others. Although she was open to some inconsistencies in grammar, she said that the notes “had to be clearly understandable.” With regard to students’ spoken English during clinical assessment, Larissa said, “There can be some flexibility, which depends upon the patient’s understanding and tolerance. For example, some may become frustrated with the difficulty in understanding the student and intervention is required.” Larissa said she was “very flexible” with students’ use of English for non-assessment dialogue, for example, in general conversation.

To help maintain anonymity, this is not the real name of the department.
Dahlia expected a high level of English language proficiency with written assessment. She said if students missed out the odd ‘a’ or ‘the’ or got the tense wrong or mixed up singulars and plurals, she would point this out. Dahlia, like Ruth, stated that the students were being prepared to meet the requirements of the Australian health system and “if they’re writing materials for clients, it projects a certain image if there are a lot of errors in it. Mind you, there are a lot of Australians out there who wouldn’t be able to pick them up (laugh).” Most of the written English for non-assessment tasks were drafts of soon-to-be-assessed work and Dahlia said she saw this as “an opportunity to point out their English and I would just actually - if it was just odd mistakes I’d correct them. If it was consistently throughout the document I might make an overall comment about checking plurals or checking the tenses.” Dahlia was sometimes involved in oral assessment. She said that whilst she probably would not mark down a student for the odd English language transgression, for example, expressing the singular as plural, if the student’s level of English was below what she expected she would express this to them after the presentation. Dahlia was flexible with spoken English and acknowledged the “richness of different language.” She said the accents and ‘different English’, such as Indian English, was a rich contribution to dialogue.

In Ursula’s view, written work submitted for assessment had to be clearly understood in terms of its meaning and message. She said, “I would certainly not fail them on the basis of poor written English. However, I would probably not give a distinction or high distinction.” Ursula referred to assessment criteria that existed in the department which guided lecturers to allocate between 10 and 15 per cent of the maximum possible marks on the basis of the presentation and format of a piece of written work. Where necessary, Ursula said she would provide international and Australian students with feedback on English language presentation. For non-assessment written work, Ursula’s main concern was that she could understand the message without having to spend an unreasonable amount of time working it out. For spoken assessment, students’ communication had to be clearly and easily understood to her as the assessor and, where appropriate, by the client or patient as well. For non-assessment spoken communication, Ursula commented that she was completely flexible and that understanding each other was the important thing.

Statement 1 summary

Whilst there was some flexibility for international (and Australian) students in terms of written and spoken English in assessment tasks, it is clear that assessment criteria are strictly non-negotiable. For written work, a departmental guideline led lecturers to allocate a percentage of marks to grammar and spelling. For assessable oral tasks (e.g. clinical interviews), students had to make themselves clearly understood and demonstrate that they could clearly understand what was said by patients. Minor grammatical discrepancies were acceptable in oral assessment as long as mutual understanding was a feature of the student-patient interactions. All lecturers were flexible in terms of written and spoken English for non-assessment tasks. The main requirement was mutual understanding. How is Statement 1 supported by the interview data? Whilst assessment criteria are not negotiable, the lecturers exhibit some flexibility about the use of language in written and spoken assessment and non-assessment tasks for all students. Overall, however, the scope for being open to suggestions with regard to the use of language is quite limited.

Statement 2: The lecturer must be aware of the role that body language plays in communicating a message, but not use it in an extreme manner, such as making exaggerated movements to support spoken language. (Body language perspective)

The first part of Statement 2 is critical for it can provide an insight into the lecturers’ understanding of the role of body language in their communication with students. The
second part of Statement 2 was not examined. It is a skills-related requirement which perhaps reflects the belief of the creators of the statement (see Teekens n.d.) that conservative body language is somehow universally more acceptable than exaggerated body language. No evidence was provided for this.

The lecturers were asked if they understood or reflected on how body language might be interpreted by international students in the classroom. Dahlia said, “For myself, no. To be frank, honest, no.” She felt that she projected herself in a fairly open manner in terms of body language and said that “I’ve never had anybody come and watch me and say yea or nay on that, or comment on that.” The researcher put the example to Dahlia of an Australian lecturer sitting on the table and dangling their legs and asked her if she had thought of the reaction this might evoke for some international students:

Well, I haven’t thought that it could be, say, offensive. I guess I just conduct myself in a way that I think should be appropriate for whomever. I mean I might sit on a desk, and I have sat on a desk. I would sit with my knees together and would I sit up straight, and I just do that so I am not standing all the time. Just as a bum prop really.

From Dahlia’s comment, there is an impression that ‘what you see is what you get’ in terms of the way she presents in the academic setting. Further, the presence of international students does not seem to have been a catalyst for her to reflect on cultural issues related to non-verbal communication. It is important to note, however, that Dahlia’s disposition is not one of arrogance or one which is dismissive or unsupportive of international students.

When Ruth was asked if she considered the role of body language in the classroom, she responded, “Not hugely. A little. I remember an international student once years ago, telling me that in her culture it was very rude to sit on a table, whereas I do that all the time. You know, if there is a table out the front and I am walking and I sort of just rest my bottom on it.” Ruth also commented on the body language of the international students in terms of eye contact. She said that some make eye contact whilst others do not: “I wouldn’t say that there is a trend overall with international students anymore, I think there is a mix the same as there is with Australian students.” This response avoids stereotyping students.

Larissa’s response to Statement 2 was, “Yes, I am aware and try to be sensitive to this particularly when talking individually with a student from another culture.” Samantha thought that body language played “a very large part in communication” and indicated that in some cultures “things like eye contact is not highly prized. Yeah, you know, I guess touch would be of concern in some cultures.” Samantha said that she was aware of these things “probably at a fairly unconscious level. I’m not very self-conscious about body language while I’m teaching.” She used body language to project enthusiasm and wanted her students to pick up on her excitement about what was being taught.

Ursula said, “Sure, yes, I think so”, when asked if she understood the role of body language in the classroom. She said she changed her body language depending upon whether she was giving a lecture or a tutorial. In the lecture, Ursula moved around. “I don’t just sort of stand in one place.” In the tutorial, she tried to “make eye contact and face students, and I certainly try not to turn my back on the class - those kinds of things.” When it was put to her that some international students might be surprised to see lecturers lean against or sit on desks, Ursula made a particularly important comment on authenticity and teaching:

But is that a problem? I guess my view is I need to be authentic. I need to be me, and I need to be culturally sensitive. But I don’t think it’s appropriate for me to consciously try and change my basic personal style, because other
peoples' response to that will be very variable and there's no doubt that for some students in the class that would prefer a more casual style and find someone who’s more casual more approachable and other students will have the opposite reaction. So I think that you have to be yourself. You have to be authentic, because I think people pick up on that pretty quickly, if you're not.

Ursula's stand-out comment is expressed in a more sophisticated way than Dahlia's ‘what you see is what you get' statement. The thinking of these two lecturers in this area is different from the multi-reference grid curricula undercurrent of trying to be 'everything to everyone'. Ursula’s comment that she had to be 'herself' and 'culturally sensitive' is indicative of the sort of self-assessment that could sustain a grounded cosmopolitan outlook. It is a particularly refined appraisal of (her)Self in an environment characterised by cultural, language, and educational diversity.

Bronwyn agreed that she was aware of the role of body language and this was “learnt from observing others giving talks and seminars. Also some university teaching skills seminars.” Bronwyn said that there were “cultural issues” involved in the interpretation of body language and she gave some examples from the classroom: “Making eye contact or not. Not being too familiar. Encouraging questions during the lectures may succeed if the body language does not discourage students. This is particularly an issue for some Asian students used to formal lecturers.” The sort of body language Bronwyn used to encourage students was “pausing sufficiently when asking for questions” so that there were gaps for students to respond. Whilst this might be classified by many as a skill related to verbal delivery, Bronwyn conflated both verbal and physical cues to construct the pause: “The body language is also saying that here is a chance to interrupt and ask what you do not understand, here is some time to think, reflect and digest about what we are talking about.” The pause in speaking was accompanied by “stepping forward a little, smiling encouraging, extending an arm and nodding to gesture ‘Yes, that is good question’ or point. Keep going’.”

Statement 2 summary

Only the first part of Statement 2 was examined. Bronwyn is the only lecturer who has had some training in this area. Other lecturers vary in the degree to which they note the role of body language in their teaching. For example, Dahlia said she has not given this any thought. Ruth expresses “a little” familiarity with this. Ruth, Samantha, and Bronwyn provided examples of body language in the classroom when they indicated that some international students might not like eye contact from the lecturer. Overall, the data indicate that the lecturers use ‘normal’ body language that is associated with teaching in the Australian tertiary setting. Ursula’s stand-out comment about having to be culturally sensitive yet remain authentic to herself is particularly noteworthy for it demonstrates an appreciation of cultural difference whilst operating from a grounded sense of Self. How is Statement 2 supported by the interview data? Most lecturers are aware of the role of body language in their teaching but they do not change their ‘personal’ or ‘normal’ body language because of the presence of international students.

Statement 3: The lecturer should try to make adjustments for cultural differences within the groups, while at the same time respecting these differences. They include the differences between his or her own culture and those of other group members. (Culture perspective)

Ursula responded to Statement 3 by saying that “in some respects the within-individual differences can be as big as the between-cultural differences.” She thought it was important to focus on the person rather than cultural stereotypes. This is a strong statement about inclusive and student-centred teaching practice. Bronwyn’s response to Statement 3 was that although she tried to make adjustments for cultural differences in the classroom, she did “not apologise for the fact that international
students will have to make bigger adjustments than the local students.” She saw this adjustment as “a very beneficial part of the experience of being an international student. The ability to be flexible and fit into a new culture is a great skill for life.” Bronwyn had the same sort of expectations of her own children when they went on university exchange programs. Reflecting on her daughter’s forthcoming year in Denmark, she said, “I embrace the effort and challenges they will have to make and expect they will have a hard year, but very rewarding if they work hard.” She said she did not expect international students to unlearn their own culture because they were studying in Australia. Bronwyn observed, “International students do not lose their identity just because they have to change their perceptions, reactions and learning style.”

In response to Statement 3, Dahlia said she was happy to spend more time with international students when there were content or practice issues with a strong cultural component which made it “more difficult for them perhaps to get understanding.” Dahlia’s view was that until she knew students well, it was difficult to tell whether they were either “too shy or they don’t know or they’re just being lazy” when they did not make any attempt to contribute in class. This observation demonstrates that she is aware that, for example, a quiet student might indicate one of a number of dispositions and not simply conform to some cultural stereotype.

Larissa was open to making adjustments for cultural differences, while at the same time respecting such differences. The researcher gave the example of someone putting a hand up in class when they wanted to speak in a tutorial. Larissa responded, “If someone were to do that, that’s fine.” The researcher continued, “Or if they stood up to ask you a question.” Larissa said, “I probably wouldn’t think about. I think I’d probably make adjustments for that. I mean, we work fairly hard on trying to get all of the students to interact, particularly when we are working in small groups and you do have to make much more openings for some of the international students to interact.” Ruth said she would accept this behaviour on the basis that the student wanted to be involved and participate. Another adjustment Ruth spoke about was the department’s policy of providing early assessment with low weighting and significant feedback. This, she suggested, was “so students get used to the style of what we’re doing. Because the last thing we want is to have an assignment worth thirty per cent, that three-quarters of the way through the semester, that they stuff up because they don’t know how to do assignments.” Ruth believed that this initiative would benefit all students in the class.

Samantha was asked if there was any way she made adjustments for cultural difference within the student group. She responded that whilst her classes “tended to rely on very high degrees of participation I don’t push the international students to participate if they don’t want to.” Samantha’s strategy if students were reluctant to participate was to “find ways to really encourage them to participate and applaud them when they do and really make participation much more a norm. And so, sort of, in friendly kind of way, I hope, nudge them to participate but never appear to be irritated or upset if they don’t.” In a particularly striking way, Samantha explained how she catered for student differences within the broader, non-negotiable assessment criteria of the academic programs:

The assessments are the measures of students, you know, demonstrating their competence and their acquisition of knowledge and the skills and so forth and that is non-negotiable. So those are the hoops that we insist that they pass and if they don’t pass they go back and re-do it. But what I find is I have a lot of scope to negotiate is the process by which they learn. So the assessment is non-negotiable but if there can be as wide a scope in the process of learning to embrace the different needs of students, then I hope that, you know, I guess I’m making an assumption that if the process is wide
enough to be inclusive of them and then they will be able to achieve these milestones.

Samantha’s response is a stand-out comment that portrays a student-centred approach to teaching and learning. It recognises the non-negotiable assessment requirements but then provides scope for individual differences between students to work towards achieving the goals of the academic program.

**Statement 3 summary**

Overall, the data suggest that the lecturers respect for cultural difference. Rather than making adjustments for this in the academic environment, however, their prime focus was on helping all students meet the objectives of their academic programs. In this sense, whilst the lecturers respected cultural difference, the issue of culture is actually secondary to the issue of supporting the international students to adjust to the teaching and learning framework in the department. Related to this, Bronwyn noted that international students had to make bigger adjustments than Australian students but that the extended skill set this produced was very beneficial to them. The data also show that lecturers like Ursula, Larissa, Ruth, and Samantha were happy for international students to ‘be themselves’ as long as they made a commitment to participate in the educative process and progress towards the desired outcomes of their academic programs. How is Statement 3 supported by the interview data? *The lecturers respect cultural difference but rather than making adjustments for this in the academic environment, their prime focus is on helping international students meet the learning outcomes related to the teaching and learning framework in the department.*

**Statement 4: The lecturer should assess student performance with due respect for different academic cultures. (For example, in some traditions it is very impolite to answer a question directly. The lecturer must learn to expect a long introduction before the correct answer is given). (Assessment focus)*

Bronwyn’s response to Statement 4 was, “I think probably not. But then I think we probably would make no apologies for not having the same academic culture, given that the students have chosen to come here.” She thought the assessment criteria were there for a specific reason: “I think it is a necessary requirement. It’s a communication skill that’s going to be worthwhile. So the assessment criteria should keep that fairly level for them.” When Dahlia was asked if she assessed student performance with a respect for different academic cultures given that people may not be used to what is expected in the Australian setting, she replied, “Well, I guess it would only be in terms of perhaps their use of language, so I would accept sort of minor grammatical errors, you know like, occasionally a single plural, you know, the a’s and the the’s missing. I mean the student still probably would not get a high distinction with those, which I wouldn’t perhaps accept from an Australian student. I would see that as sloppy.” Dahlia referred to “standards of the degree” in that the international students were “taking an Australian degree so they have to meet the standards.” In terms of meeting such standards, Dahlia said, “I mean, I would help them get there, more than happy to give them feedback. Comprehensive feedback.”

Larissa’s comment on Statement 4 was, “That is a bit difficult. I’m thinking of the clinical placement because I’m involved in its assessment. Because one needs to meet certain competencies, that’s hard to do. We can to some extent take account of the particular student for some of the competencies. But others you can’t, because they do need to achieve those things.” Here, again, is the strong message that all students must satisfy the assessment criteria. Whilst the assessment does not demand that international students abandon their own culture in order to pass, developing certain behaviours, for example analytical and critical thinking, showing initiative, and communicating is expected. For Dahlia, for example, this meant correct spelling and, presumably, grammar. For Larissa, this meant that the clinical
competencies had to be demonstrated. Success in these areas is heavily dependent on the international student’s language ability in terms of speaking and listening and their capacity to understand the contexts of the Australian (mostly Anglo-Celtic) social and health framework.

When Ruth was asked if she assessed student performance with a respect for different academic cultures, she replied, “It’s a hard one. I try not to, is my basic position on it, I think, because it is an Australian course and so therefore needing to have them well and truly reach the Australian standard we are aiming for.” Although Ruth followed the policy of marking a piece of work “blind”, that is, without identifying the work with the particular student, she said, “Without a doubt you can pick whether you’ve got an international student in front of you or not, because of the language, etcetera, that they use.” Ruth said sometimes this meant she could identify students “who we know are really, really struggling, particularly sponsored students, not because they’re sponsored, but often because they sometimes come from poorer backgrounds.” She continued, “It’s hard to not bring that prior knowledge into it. You know how hard they’re working, and I think subconsciously, what I do then is tend to look at the progress in their work rather than the actual.. what their work is. But having said that, the bottom line is we have got a standard, and it needs to meet that standard.” Again, Ruth referred to the non-negotiable aspects of assessment in the department:

There is a huge emphasis in our assessment process and application of knowledge and the core skills that we value like critical thinking and independent learners, and that sort of thing. A lot of our assessment would be geared away from what many international students are probably used to.

When Samantha was asked if she assessed student performance with a respect for different academic cultures, she responded, “Possibly no, I think. Insofar as we assess students to our standards and that’s it, full stop. We don’t have a flexible way of assessing students that embraces their different learning traditions and different styles of instruction.” With regard to academic pieces of work, she thought that “there’s very little scope to be flexible and interpret international perspectives.” Ursula concurred with Samantha’s thinking: “The short answer would be no, because for every piece of assessment we have standard assessment criteria developed for that piece of work which the students all have before undertaking the work.” Ursula referred to a “grading grid that tells the students what a distinction for that criteria looks like, and we would use that for all students as a standard.” However, she did say, “We’re fairly flexible about deadlines, provided the students contact us. So we will pretty much give an extension to anybody who asks.” The observations from Samantha and Ursula on Statement 4 are consistent with the reports of the other lecturers.

Statement 4 summary

The unequivocal message from the data is that students have to satisfy the assessment criteria and show that they had developed the professional competencies that were demanded by the Australian standard for the allied health profession. Whilst this did not mean that the international students had to abandon their cultural values in the process, they, like all students in the class, had to demonstrate, for example, that they could show initiative and be critical thinkers, independent learners, and were capable of high-level communication with peers, patients and clients, as well as professionals from other allied health and medical disciplines. How is Statement 4 supported by the interview data? The lecturers are happy for the students to ‘be themselves’. The overriding concern, however, is for the learning outcomes that have been set for their academic programs to be met, regardless of students’ culture- and personality-related behaviour.
Conclusion

This paper asked the question of what culture has to do with teaching international students. Whilst the scope of what is reported here is limited, the interview data clearly demonstrate that Other cultures do not drive teaching practice in the department. In other words, the teaching practice does not reflect a Level 2, or grid multi-reference, approach to teaching. Despite this, there is evidence that the lecturers do appreciate and respect international students in terms of their culture and what they bring into the classroom as individuals. Whilst being sympathetic to the challenges that international students face in relation to having to adapt or adjust to the teaching and learning framework in the allied health department, the lecturers deal with culture informally in the classroom rather than what would be found in a Level 2 teaching environment. Their major focus is to help all students meet the educational objectives of their academic programs. This is an inclusive approach.

The research findings are generally aligned with Biggs’s (2003) work which holds that good teaching ultimately relies on the universality of the learning process in which the ethnicity of students is largely irrelevant. This is not the same as devaluing or being dismissive of students’ cultures. In such a student-centred teaching and learning environment, international students are each unique in terms of their cultural, linguistic and educational backgrounds, just as all students have unique personal characteristics. This diversity is recognised and appreciated but the overarching concern of the lecturers is how to assist each student to develop the skills to satisfy the requirements of their studies. Succinctly, this is the foundation of teaching practice in the allied health department and it allows both the lecturers and the students to be themselves whilst each striving for their own goals.

References


