**Successes and Stresses: A Case Study on Relations between International Higher Degree Students in Australia and their Universities.**

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**Abstract**

The paper examines the situation of postgraduate international students studying in Australia, mostly at doctoral level; a group widely seen as sought-after by Australian universities and employers, though also exposed to difficulties in aspects like learning culture, language and temporary employment. The investigation follows a novel path, as an exercise in practice-led research on issues involved in Higher Degree supervision. It is in fact an exercise within an advanced program of professional development for HD research supervisors. It begins by deploying a journalistic method, to obtain and present information. This has entailed the publishing of two feature articles about the lives of scholars for *Subtropic*, a campus based online magazine in Brisbane, www.subtropic.com.au. The next step is a review of a set of supervisions, citing issues raised in individual cases. Parallels can be seen between the two information-getting, and analytical processes, with scope for contradictions. An exegetical statement deals with supervisory issues that have been exposed, and implications for learning, with recommendations for developing the quality of the experience of these students.

**Introduction and method**

The premise of this inquiry is that International Higher Degree Research (HDR) Students will experience their study in Australia, in ways different to their Australian counterparts, and that these differences might impede progress with their work, if not noted and provided for.

The approach of the inquiry is in two parts. In the first, it is practice-led. Topical issues to do with university research, and the substantial place occupied in it by International Students (ISS), were made the subject of two journalistic articles. These were published in a campus based media outlet, *Subtropic*, in Brisbane, and should be viewed in conjunction with reading this report; *see* Duffield L (2011). They are reproduced here as Appendix 1 and Appendix 2, and are posted on line: http://www.subtropic.com.au, (19.7.11). The second part of this inquiry is also based on professional practice, in that it is a review of the HDR projects of seven students, conducted from the perspective of the supervisor, to identify salient issues in those supervisions, most notably problems affecting the conduct of the students' research.

**Forms of inquiry**

**Journalism in the context of academic research.** The practice of journalism is a recognised form of research, for example in category 1903 of the 2010 Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) process, where creative works represented 60% of the collection, mostly as portfolios of writing, in much the same way as may occur in other Disciplines with an eclectic "bag" of offerings, e.g. Architecture (Knight, 2011). These were classed as Non-traditional Research Outcomes (NTRO), providing a place for creatively conceived, contemporary journalistic writing.

This writer has previously explained the phenomenon (Duffield, 2009), notably as a vehicle for practice led research (Gray and Malins, 2004; Gray, 1996), with key characteristics of journalism, especially a concentration on verification of key facts, heavy emphasis on clear and accessible expression in the report, and time as a core factor - the work will be to do with very recent developments. Appropriate to that, usual methods are observation, search and review of prime documents, and the interview. It will conform with orthodox requirements for research publications: "Journalistic work prepared and put forward as academic research must observe standard protocols -- for development of research objectives, preparation for data collection and collating, conduct of field work, relations with informants, and management of data obtained. (Duffield, 2009)." The tools of such research frequently are tools of new media: the *Online Journalism Review* (2009) hosts an interchange for debate on new developments in the online field; use of applied research techniques, like opinion polls, in daily reporting is common in the digital period, referred to initially as "precision journalism" (Meyer, 2001); journalistic writing to enrich and explain information available on line is "annotative reporting" (Ray, 2006: 60-63). As a qualitative research methodology, journalistic forms comply with Filstead's (1970:2) notion of "first-hand involvement in the social world".

Among the products of research by journalists, non-fictional books are among the most recognised. Torney-Parlicki (in Curthoys and Schultz, 1999: 250-1) classes journalist authors as intellectual leaders in colonial Australian society, and later as leading controversialists and historians, *viz* CEW Bean, Denis Warner and Wilfred Burchett. Ricketson (2010:68) cites the argument of Cary (1986), describing "book-length" journalism as part of a corpus, a generic bundle of investigative and publishing acts, taking in such diverse elements as daily press reports, television documentaries, or journals of opinion. It occupies a large sector in the publishing field: "Scholars of literary journalism, literary non-fiction and creative non-fiction have understood the extent to which such journalism is practised at book length …" (Ricketson, 2010). It will have six "core elements": like daily journalism it is about actual events and people living in the world, and concerns the issues of the day; it is extensively researched; a narrative approach is adopted; a range of authorial voices can be employed by the different writers in this field, able to be far more individualistic than with standardised daily media; it will explore the underlying meaning of an event or issue; and with the focus on events, people and issues that stand out from the daily crush of news coverage, it will have additional impact (Ricketson, 2010:70).

**Investigation through review and reflection on supervisory practices, in HDR research.** The second part of this report on research is informed by pedagogical studies focused on inquiry generated through the practice of supervision of research scholars. It includes work specifically on managing postgraduate research supervision, including the experience of international students, towards resolving "difficulties and complexities involved in supervision relationships" (Manathunga, 2005). Some of this is prepared as handbooks for supervisor education and training (Gray, 1996; Hill, 2008), providing a comprehensive register of student strengths and difficulties, and identifying the importance of issues of communication, cross cultural difference, and language, to the outcome of work.

Apart from this agenda setting, Wang and Li (2008), on thesis writing, produced some guiding concepts on the issues of language, and inter-cultural influences, which will emerge in the present study. They reviewed a limited range of available studies, and produced new information from extended interviews with 11 students. They determined that difficulties with language are usually surmountable, as "all participants gradually developed confidence in their late candidature". Students rather emphasised the influence of their own cultural and educational backgrounds: "The general problems with international students are not only with English; they lie beyond the linguistic problems and are associated with the larger cultural contexts of the students' previous educational experiences and their impact on the development of academic writing skills … All participants mentioned the influences of their cultural background on the thesis writing process." There was an observation that with language difficulty, supervisors would focus on the language rather than overall structure or content of the work.

**Practice-led inquiry**. Assistance with the actual process of making and then using journalistic products, and the process also of reviewing supervisions, was provided by Gray (1996), defining and describing inquiry through practice -- based on experience in art and design. Research for higher degrees is seen as "the best mechanism to raise awareness of critical and contextual issues of practice, analyse and interpret ideas, and develop new cultural strategies (Gray, 1996:8)." This will be through research taking the form of an extension of the practitioner's methods. "What we are trying to do is integrate and synthesis the best aspects of each into a critical dialogue ... Practice led research is simultaneously generative and reflective" (10); the practitioner is sometimes observer, sometimes self-observer. Many *methods* are available, be they within the immediate Discipline field, (e.g., in art and design, ranging through concept mapping, diagrams; flow charts and story boards; multimedia presentations; modeling, simulations, and visual and textual glossaries and archives), or borrowed, as from social science, (e.g. case studies, participant-observation, interviews, or multidimensional analysis.)

**Journalistic inquiry**

The inquiry so far has demonstrated how information on the points of difference, between International Students and others, might be found and explained through a journalistic approach. The writer is a member of the "professional" academic Discipline of Journalism, where HDR supervisors will have a practitioner background in journalism.

Various arguments have been provided here as to how journalistic approaches to discovery and management of knowledge are applicable in academic research.

The two feature articles written in connection with the present study display two main journalistic methods, of passive review of published documents (e.g. enrolment, scholarship statistics provided by universities), and face-to-face interviewing, most usually with individuals able to speak on topics with authority, *viz* two university managers in the International field, and International Students discussing their own situation.

That journalistic exercise established that HDR students in Australia are an elite, who are in demand, broadly well catered for, whose situation is not considered particularly difficult, not by themselves nor anybody else. It established the existence of certain problems however, distinguishing these students from others in the advanced research field: (a) awareness of drawbacks in having to work in English; (b) concerns over not being employed as university tutors, where they felt they had a lot to offer and also a need to make a start on teaching experience, to help commence their anticipated academic careers; (c) marginal problems with ethnocentric behaviour and expressions of racism in the background to their social relations in Australia.

**Review of student projects**

The second approach to be followed in this investigation into the situation of the International Student cohort, is to obtain information through conducting supervisions; to construct a method from engaging with the students in study. The act of supervision of students is an immersion approach, in the familiar situation where a student at intervals will put forward a concept to be understood, assessed and explained. Circumstances affecting the students' conditions of work, and sometimes impeding the research, will become apparent to the parties to the work, and these can be discovered, understood and inventoried, through such processes as: (a) regular discussion of progress and ideas for development of the student's project; (b) enactment of supervisors' duties related to a student's enrolment, e.g. to approve leave applications; (c) reflection on, and comparison of supervisory experience with different students over time, to identify significant common factors in their experience.

In the present case the approach taken has been, to consult first the outcome of the inquiry made for the two journalistic articles about the experience of HDR students from overseas; then to adopt a "problem and problem solving" approach to analysing the situation  of a set of actual students the researcher has dealt with as a supervisor or mentor. This entailed re-reading and reconsidering the students' documentation of their research projects – the thesis documents, students' media products in cases of practice-led work, and exegeses, together with assessors' reports. It extended to making a review of notes kept from the supervisory process, such as diaries, or university memoranda related to management of supervisions. The proprietary software system used for co-managing meetings between supervisor and student, PORTIA, where it was employed

provided a useful record of progress of individual cases and issues encountered during the journey.

**Profiles of the scholars and their projects**

Case notes are provided on a group of seven students encountered by the researcher between 2000 and 2009. Several supervisions have been conducted by this researcher with other students, including some that involved contacts and research conducted overseas, with consequent experience in intercultural communication. Such background assists with assembling an agenda of the relevant concerns, when examining the experience of International Students. Five of the actual seven taking part in the study have their immediate family histories outside of Australia, and all carried out projects on international or cross-border topics. Two are Australians who carried out their research field work, affiliated with a university overseas. Each of the students agreed to the review being made. It was made conditional on their seeing the final report, with the option of removing any part concerning themselves, and of proposing changes. While the identity of the participants is not confidential and they may be recognisable, at least among their acquaintances and work colleagues, names are not used, most particularly to keep the predominant focus on the subject-matter, the set of problems that emerge from the record. A round of fresh person-to-person interviews would have been helpful, but this was precluded by time constraints, and the fact that the group members are dispersed over Brisbane and Melbourne, and two countries overseas.

**Student A** … A male student, from Asia / South Asia, MA Research completed 2000, who made a study of the implementation of online media technologies in Australia and Singapore, using cases of two leading newspapers. The researcher did not supervise this student but was called on to read and confer with him on drafts of his report, and in other ways to assist as a mentor, becoming familiar with the project. The researcher was also in a department head role at the time and assisted the student with enrolment matters, and a successful Permanent Residency application.

**Student B** … A female student from Europe; MA Research completed 2001. This was practice-led research in broadcasting, based on interviews with expatriates, during field work in Malaysia and Singapore, completed with an exegesis. The researcher was Principal Supervisor.

**Student C** … A female student from Europe; PhD completed in 2009. This thesis examined Europe-wide broadcasting and regulatory issues, proposing new models for structures and programming. It included a discussion of language and cultural issues. The researcher was Associate Supervisor.

**Student D** … A male student, and Australian citizen, of Middle East background; PhD completed 2010. The project was a study of the use of language, in translation, for transmitting news across cultural divides. An Arab satellite television service in the Middle East region was used as a case study. The student had excellent command of Arabic and English languages, and examined the policy options for the broadcasters,

outcomes in terms of the content of services, and debates that arose over broadcasting practices. The researcher was Associate Supervisor.

**Student E** … A male student, and long term Permanent resident of Australia, of Asia / South Asia background; PhD completed 2010. The student drew on professional background and expertise in journalism, to review issues for mass media, including cases of extreme trauma, during social and military conflict. The work included a central case study on use of "new" media as a tool for maintaining community solidarity, and as part of the arsenal for conducting war. The researcher was Associate Supervisor.

**Student F** … A female student, Australian, PhD completed 2011. This is a case of an Australian as International Student, in the sense of conducting field work for their research abroad. The project involved conducting surveys and extended interviews in Papua New Guinea (PNG) villages, on the subject of the introduction of mobile telephone services. The student was hosted by a PNG university. The researcher was Principal Supervisor.

**Student G** … A male student, Australian, Journalism Honours 1.1 completed 2009. This case is included to provide another Australian in the study, working as an International Student, again conducting field work for their research abroad. The student carried out a practice-led project, working as a correspondent in Papua New Guinea for two weeks, for campus based media outlets in Australia. He conducted a community of practice exercise with members of his reporting team, on their experience of working in an intercultural setting. The student was hosted by a PNG university. The researcher was Principal Supervisor.

**Observations on the research, and study and life experience of the subjects**

**Student A**, with the study of online newspapers using and producing online services, had to adjust some expectations coloured by widespread views of the two countries, Australia and Singapore, and their information cultures. The initial frame of expectation was that government-directed introduction of digitised information and communication technology in Singapore, with a cable roll-out to virtually every household and school, would provide a more propitious climate for business use of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), including the launch of online newspaper services. The Australian model, relying on government encouragement of comparatively unplanned and unfunded ICT development by businesses and universities, and hampered by the tyranny of distance, would provide rather less fertile ground. In the event the case studies showed that media companies in the two countries did the same thing in the same time frame, the Australian newspaper starting a little earlier.

A second look at the Australian situation showed the value of the developed human resources of the country, notably the Australians' tradition of being early-adopters of new technology, and "open arms" approach of all institutions towards new ICT, the country finding itself rated 12th globally in use of the technology in the Information Society Index for 1998. The scholar imparted that prior knowledge of the Singapore situation, and

incomplete knowledge of the Australian situation, at the commencement of the study, had interfered with his early efforts to draw comparisons. His notional hypothesis, that the Singapore company would be better served by its ICT environment, had to be revised. This was a problem of scholarship not difficult to resolve; it also had significant aspects of cultural understanding.

**Student B**, making radio documentaries with expatriate Australians and Germans, in South-east Asia, on their inter-cultural experiences, and their use of media, obtained good cooperation and communicative responses from institutions and individuals throughout the study. An aspect of the supervision was the need to engage an external assessor competent in German, to review and report on the German language broadcasts in the portfolio. Australian academics are largely monolingual despite steady change in the situation through staff recruitment abroad, so accommodating work done in a language other than English will always make an additional impost on supervisory resources and ingenuity. A reviewer with suitable university and media background was found locally; another alternative would have been to send the work to a German university. The work involved in organising the outside assessment, and the fee for service were a marginal additional cost to the university.

The student encountered a visa problem at the end of the project which was indicative of serious difficulties that can arise for International Students, in the category of immigration regulations. Whereas PhD students like their Australian counterparts are allocated three years to do their programs, they come under additional pressure to complete early, with much less lee-way for extensions, because of the complicating factor of the visa. It is a saying in Higher Degree supervision that domestic students get four years and International Students get three. In the MA case under study here, the student's production schedule, involving travel and then studio time on return, was viable and interesting, but ambitious for an inexperienced operator, meaning it was set to over-run by some three months. An extension of the student's visa depended on continuing enrolment; that enrolment could not be extended, except by renewal for an extra semester, with a large fees impost. Intervention by the supervisor resulted in the university issuing a note that the student was being classified, *pro tem*, "student under assessment". Using this, and deploying some ingenuity, the student individually approached the immigration service, several times, resulting in the visa being extended. The work was completed and assessed without undue delay.

**Student C**, studying multicultural mass media in Europe and Australia, also encountered a serious difficulty with visas. In this case a "spouse" visa was being used instead of a specific student visa. The student had initially enrolled and held a student visa, but was in a long-term relationship with her Australian partner, so the couple chose to switch to a 'spouse' visa; for an easy transition to permanent residency, after the completion of the degree. Towards the end of the PhD study, the relationship ceased, and as the project was ending, the student was faced with demands from the immigration authority that she might need to leave Australia. Completion of the PhD thesis was on time but running to the limit of three years, while some revisions recommended by the Final Seminar panel were being done. The student was offered a Lectureship with an Australian university,

but could obtain neither a revived student visa nor general working visa on-shore, regardless of sponsorship by either university, (and regardless of holding an Endeavour Research Fellowship granted to highly qualified international postgraduate students).

In fact, the existence of the spousal visa precluded the student from applying for any other visa from within Australia. The process required also a second IELTS language test, which was passed at an absurdly high level of competency, and travel to New Zealand to make an off-shore application for a work visa. After re-entering the country and starting work the scholar, now on the 457 working visa obtained off-shore, was required to again apply off-shore for a skilled migration visa, which meant further complications. (In such cases a bridging visa might be made available; but it was not offered in this case). It was possible to remain in Australia only through holding a 457 visa; a skilled migration application was permitted, but required over three to four years waiting time. It was only after the scholar successfully obtained a new three-year lecturing position that she was able to get Permanent Residence status. The experience with the visa mostly affected the completion of the PhD at a very strategic time for the success of that project.

Another aspect of this PhD project, of interest in the discussion on International HDR supervisions, was that the particular work was structured in such a way that it required successive rewrites of chapters. The Principal Supervisor would remark that the essential intellectual work of that research had been the refining and reworking of the actual topic, in the process of putting the revised chapters in place. It was complex; relating the study of translation, and of policy on media in Europe, to experiments in broadcasting, and the development of an argument on how these might be applied as models for future broadcasting services. While the English language employed was most advanced, it was composed by a speaker of non English speaking background (NESB), and so, as might be reasonably expected, demanded extra time to interpret it and assist with the re-write. This case supports another saying among supervisors, that in Australia, where general academic work is done only in English, supervising ISS who are NESB speakers can take more time, even for students with advanced English skills.

**Student D**, demonstrated high mastery of the linguistic issues involved in the study, and strong explanatory ability, but under supervision had to manage a problem with the presentation of their discourse. The work, on contemporary Arabic television news, involved examining translations between Arabic and English used by the broadcasters, against a background of political and social developments making news of the day, and also affecting the running of the television services. In the words of the scholar, taken from the dissertation:

> "This research examined the causative relationship between translation and news making … It explored the social semiotics of Arabic television and projected socio-cultural impacts of translation-mediated news … on the Arab viewers. This is a multi-layered research problem of how translation operates at two different yet interwoven levels: translation proper, that is the rendition of discourse from one language into another at the text level, and translation as a broader process of

interpretation of social behavior that is driven by linguistic and cultural forms of another medium resulting in new social signs generated from source meaning reproduced as target meaning, bound to be different in many respects."

In the outcome this work led the scholar to identify distortions in news coverage with presumed extreme effects, and significantly for the present discussion, the discourse making the thesis became polemical in style and tone. Concerted work by the scholar and supervisors established that the arguments being made were broadly sustainable but had to be rendered in orthodox academic English. In effect the scholar had to engage in working through yet another phase of translation, from one set of expressed meanings, to another, while maintaining the essential evidence and arguments. This was a success; in style the work is clearly put, in tone it is orthodox; it was accepted by assessors for award of the degree. The point remaining is that with International HDR projects, cultural and linguistic factors can greatly extend the task.

**Student E** is in the category of Journalism research, where practitioners are engaged in a sense-making exercise, following a professional involvement in major events, often involving trauma. The scholar, who had covered a long civil war, deployed advanced writing ability to press together historical background material from library sources in the country in question, and interviews he had recorded with observers and protagonists in the conflict – initially as a journalist, later specifically for the thesis, as a scholar. The gathering process had been fraught. At least four of the interviewees were later killed in the fighting, one in an air raid on the location where the interview had taken place some months before.

The initial draft document assembled by the scholar was organised and differentiated but enormous in length, over 140000 words. The obvious method for supervisors to deploy in such a case was to rough-edit the material, questioning the scholar during the process about ways to further prioritise the contents. A decision by the scholar, to remove one aspect of his narrative and treatment of the crisis, leaving it for separate publishing, resolved the problem of the extended word count. It would be difficult to argue that English usage was the main problem, rather it was the baffling complexity of the historical events and the associated gruesome warfare. However it was again a case of the advanced use of English, where the speaker would be notionally classified as NESB, and under pressure it provided thickets of distended sentences and expressions that required query. For the present study, it can be observed once again that with International HDR projects, managing language issues will be difficult for scholars and will demand much of supervisors' time. Secondly, where ISS tend to undertake international topics, issues of trauma may have to be faced.

**Student F** provided a model exercise in inter-cultural studies, having worked already in the area under study within PNG for three years, having studied inter-cultural relations, and having acquired good command of the language - *tok pisin*; all suitable for directly interviewing or administering survey questionnaires to local people while living for a week or more in their village. Yet the field work was almost disrupted by events that can be guarded against but not adequately predicted: in this case a sudden tropical illness that

required evacuation of the scholar to hospital in Australia, and on a return visit, exposure to an outbreak of street violence in the university town, with again, early departure. This instance is recorded in the present study as it adds to the list of experiences to be encountered with research conducted across borders -- though such levels of trauma are definitely not a routine concern in the case of supervision of ISS in Australia. As Australian university authorities are acutely sensitive to occupational health and safety concerns with overseas research; once supervisors and scholars work though the difficult process of obtaining permission to conduct research overseas, they will normally have excellent back-up, e.g. provision for training and insurance support.

**Student G** produced a research report on much lower-level trauma as a theme of adjusting to journalistic work in a new cultural setting, in his case moving from practice in Australia, to PNG. The observation study was backed by a pooling of experience with nine colleagues with whom he was working, in a research process called "community of practice". While the student-journalist group had been provided with briefing materials and seminars, the final report was set in terms of dealing with unexpected difficulties. It ranged from coping with the sudden absence of rapid Internet and telephone support, to impacts of the torrid weather, limits on movement due to security concerns, and encountering unaccustomed social mores and cultural practices when seeking interviews. Positive experiences included a cultural phenomenon of general openness with information, a rich field of story opportunities and joys of working in the "old way" without the Internet. Again, the case demonstrates a reality for international and intercultural projects such as this practice-led work, that additional resources will be required for preparation and protection of scholars in the field.

**Summary of issues identified through the review of seven cases**

The review of cases recalls matters specific to the "international" nature of the research, by way of the students concerned being ISS in Australia, and / or having cross-border research topics and data gathering operations. Themes have been derived from this treatment of the histories of seven supervisions, which may arise from the body and content of the research, (such as a need to take inter-cultural factors into account, in order to properly gather or understand the data), or which may be more external to the research, while impinging on it, (such as visa requirements).

These are set out in tabular form, *see* Table 1.

| Student | Statement of theme | Name of theme |
|---|---|---|
| A | Forming expectations about economic and social relations in countries under study, can require cultural learning, and adjustment | Cultural learning |
| B | LOTE (Languages other than English) require special attention and deployment of resources in Australia | Providing for work done in LOTE |
| | Visa requirements can impinge on success or quality of projects | Accommodating, assisting with visa requirements for ISS |
| C | ESL students writing advanced English require support | ESL and English writing |
| | Visa requirements can impinge on success or quality of projects | Accommodating, assisting with visa requirements for ISS |
| D | Forming expectations about economic and social relations in countries under study, can require cultural learning, and adjustment – including knowledge of Australian mores, academic practices | Cultural learning, for ISS in Australia |
| E | ESL students writing advanced English require support | ESL and English writing |
| F | Forming expectations about economic and social relations in countries under study, can require cultural learning, and adjustment | Cultural learning |
| | International projects can expose researchers to low level trauma, serious trauma, (for ISS in Australia, for Australians on projects overseas) | High or low level trauma |
| G | Forming expectations about economic and social relations in countries under study, can require cultural learning, and adjustment | Cultural learning |
| | International projects can expose researchers to low level trauma, serious trauma, (for ISS in Australia, for Australians on projects overseas) | High or low level trauma |

Table 1

**Bringing together factors identified through two operations**

For the present work, two methods of inquiry have been used, to identify salient issues affecting the life conditions and academic work of ISS in Australia. In the first, a journalistic method was adopted, entailing a review of publicly available information and interviewing of informed participants or observers, in the ISS / HDR field. The resultant documents, two published feature articles, are journalistic in the sense that they focus on high-recognition main points, deploy language and other devices to advantage in order to help establish main points with a reader, are relatively brief and short for the range of propositions covered, depend transparently on the word of informed sources, and have limited pretensions where it comes to making final conclusions on a topic. On the last point, the journalistic work establishes the issues in a definitive way, e.g. by using access to authoritative named sources, and given the economy of space, it may then leave those issues unresolved – for another "edition". Three main themes emerged: problems with language; difficulty with university employment; some difficulty with inter-cultural relations or racism in the general community. In the second method of inquiry, the researcher has reviewed seven supervisions as case studies. These produced five themes for attention: The need for cultural learning, for any international project, and for ISS adjusting to social mores of Australia; problems working in a LOTE in Australia; problems for ISS or NESB writers using advanced English; visa requirements impinging on projects; high or low level trauma when working on projects abroad, and in the same way stress for ISS in Australia. This method of inquiry has proved more intimate than the journalistic approach, in that, while the information is open to see, it is reported from learning and teaching situations in which there was no initial purpose of publishing information about the scholars' experience. That absence of pressure to expatiate in public, together with more space available for the present research report than the two feature articles, appears to have helped to draw out a more detailed and coherent set of findings.

Put together the inquiries enable us to make a firm statement about the situation of ISS doing higher degree research in Australia. As a first premise, the situation is one of opportunity, though with problems to be confronted, and solutions to be found. A need will arise for ISS to make **adjustments to cultural differences**, whether because of inter-cultural aspects of their research topic, likely in many cases; or as part of the business of living and working, making an adjustment to the host society. Such adjustment may involve getting insight into a research issue shared across two cultures, through to recreational learning of a different way of life, through to negative factors, like enduring confusion and isolation in a strange social setting. As a separate and related issue, **trauma** has special characteristics and remedies, and may be encountered during field-work abroad, or living in a foreign place, e.g. experiencing a war, or the limited but persistent racism or ethnic intolerance reported on by students in Australia. **Visa requirements** are a distinct and ongoing life issue that may limit or threaten the success or otherwise of projects. **Language** issues arise in most discussions of the situation of

ISS, be it: working in a LOTE in Australia's monolingual academic setting, or tasks confronting even the highest-skilled speakers of ESL, when working and writing in advanced English. **Employment of HDR graduates** by universities may be affected by language shortcomings, at least in the perception of university departments engaging sessional staff, but other causal factors of under-employment would need to be identified.

## Conclusions and recommendations

These matters can be dealt with pragmatically. Great efforts are made, ranging from settling-in programs for ISS, to well-resourced accident and trauma insurance, to Faculty payments for proof reading of thesis documents in English. Where there is broad agreement that a problem exists, where it is defined, well-examined and familiar, solutions should be still more likely to be attempted. A first recommendation in this case is that further exposure and discussion must be fruitful, whether as "maintenance" for excellent concepts and research-support actions organised by universities, or as exposure of fresh understandings and concerns. Topics suitable for study: (a) cultural learning associated with doing research in Australia, and generally when researching international topics; (b) trauma support for ISS; (c) the fair operation, or otherwise of student visa programs for research in Australia; (d) the extent of embracing and accommodating of LOTE in Australian general scholarship; (e) standards of English language competency and support for scholars using English as a second language; (f) levels of employment of ISS graduates or scholars by universities in academic roles. Higher Degree International Students are high achievers and highly valued, but the quality of their experience and their work can be affected by negative circumstances, which it should be possible to mitigate in intensity.

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*Appendix 1*

Subtropic, QUT, Brisbane.  http://subtropic.com.au/2011/03/22/how-
%E2%80%9Cinternational%E2%80%9D-are-our-campuses/, (3.8.11).

How "international" are our campuses?

Tuesday, March 22, 2011, 6:13 pm | Reported by Lee Duffield

Moving to a new country to follow a vocation, and begin a new life, will be exhilarating
and also daunting.

The high-flyers from more than 50 countries coming to Australian universities to study
for a doctorate, and begin a career in research, are contributing to a national project here
that's at times struggling to expand.

Taken together with overseas students in high schools, colleges and Bachelor degree
courses in the universities, they are  - as is well-known -  part of a huge industry.

They are also a key part of the drive towards a smart economy for the future, keeping
Australia competitive in technology and discovery.

The students though have their own struggles, mixed in with the benefits they find in this
country.

Among  those worries is a concern that something extra might be done by Australian
universities, and academics, to become more international in their own culture.

They're being called on also for a better effort to bring International  Students into the
system, by giving them more of a  share of training and preparation as researchers and
lecturers  – such as the national policy calls for.

It's true that the government is committing more, to get the students to come.

The number of standard scholarship and living allowances paid to higher degree students -approximately $40000 a year, including the fees- is set to double in the current five years leading to 2012.

About 2500 start each year on the scholarship, called the Australian Postgraduate Research Award, set to rise to 3500.

The same amount is being offered, through a second set of packages, most often with the Australian government coming up with $20000 a year for fees, and outside sponsors, including sponsors in the students' home countries, providing the living allowances.

It is common to find International Students in Australian universities making up nearly one-third of scholars doing higher-degree research.

Not that the students themselves spend their waking hours mulling over the problems of nation-building in Australia.

A NEW KIND OF COUNTRY

The first problem for them has been to find the right research project; obtain enough financial support, and then deal with the vagaries of a new kind of country and culture.

"I introduce students to the Australian way of life. I might show a film … You see the Australian students playing a lot of sports, and drinking beer, and then I show a picture of someone looking through a microscope, and then the Australians become serious … They work hard and will stay back and do long hours", says Prof. Acram Taji, at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane.

As the university's Director of International Graduate Research, the Professor says her overseas research students are an elite pool, standing up well when compared with Australian counterparts in tests.

That's unsurprising given the competition the students have survived to get where they are, and major efforts being made by people like herself worldwide to get them to choose a destination such as QUT.

"We spend a lot of time and energy on this", says Prof. Taji.

"Our international profile is important; they can say, what kind of global university is it, if you don't have international research students?"

As for the competition, the Australian university sector has made sudden gains over 10 to 15 years, building up numbers of International Students, after going for a long time with relatively few.

"Australia was not such a world high performer, and then all of a sudden it had such a high income, something like $18-billion dollars a year, and a very large industry formed around International Students; so other countries, like the United Kingdom or the United States, have seen this, and the competition has now increased."

SHOCK OF ARRIVAL, LANGUAGE AND LIFESTYLE

What kind of experiences do these sought-after high-flyers go through in getting their PhDs in Australia?

From the shock of arrival, to problems with language that might worsen instead of getting easier, as the research project demands more; to tough chances looking for a part-time job to make the living allowance go further, especially if it is a university teaching job that's wanted; to perennial visa problems; the unpreparedness of many academics, in different Faculties, to cope with international students, or for that matter to deal with overseas cultures; even to some racial cat-calling off-campus; International Students are in the way of calling their experiences "a challenge".

So says Linda Watterson, (Linda Hong Bin Watterson), who came to Australia in the mid-1990s as one of Beijing's new entrepreneurs on the way up.

Adopting a come-and-go lifestyle between the two countries, she took up higher-degree study in Australia in 2006, and gives an overview of the feelings of fellow students arriving and finding their way.

"It's a serious change in lifestyle; for example, for Chinese students they miss the streets with many shops; you don't just go to the supermarket…", she says.

Yet most are well prepared: "They don't really stress out as they are highly capable people; they do well as far as I can see."

Ms Watterson's business in partnership with her husband was importing Australian mining equipment into Australia; she admits to doing well with that, and has been studying to build on what she learned with a PhD – a study of entrepreneurship in China, in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT.

Listing problems and plaints; like many others she puts command of English language high on the list, commenting that she has one friend who is "fully capable", another who came good after two or three years, one other who "might be in trouble", with most fitting into a general, improving pattern: "For some their English is not good enough but … they are smart, and half-way through they pick up."

A few academics who supervise these students will know both languages or at least know how to slow down when talking, easing the problem.

JOB PROBLEMS

Other worries, to Linda Watterson, include job problems.

Picking up casual work in a shop or restaurant, where the pay can make for an "easier life", is a problem, although the university itself does help out with work on campus.

There is also, however, a bigger problem, where advanced level students want to do some teaching of younger students.

It is important to prospective academics to get such experience, as an entry in the resume for an academic post — especially in a country where official policy is to boost up its higher education and research by recruiting talent from overseas.

"I have heard in some Faculties it is different; we were never offered teaching work; only "English" students got this, or some Europeans.

"Language should in a couple of years get to a state where you can maybe do some teaching .

"The university is not very good at giving the students jobs like a research assistant's job", she says.

Moving on; do students encounter racism?

Not so much, to this seasoned observer.

A friend was spat at by a passer-by, sometimes students are told to "go back where they came from", but it is little enough for them to "just ignore"

EASY PLACE, EASY PEOPLE TO KNOW

Bonnie Liu, (Lui Rui – Bonnie), also from Beijing, graduating with her doctoral degree in 2011, has much the same story, three and a half years after coming to Australia to continue studies based around independent television production in her home country .

"Here the whole world is accessible, and the pattern of life is pretty good", she says.

"As a pretty independent person I found it easy to fit into life here, the people are easy to know and the multicultural environment is good."

The hard part would be at the start, when most students are looking for help; and there were one or two incidents, mostly brushed aside, like trouble with a bus driver over handling change, leading the students concerned to make a complaint.

"I could not say if it was a race thing; it is really for individuals; I know some people get trouble, others do not", says Bonnie Liu.

Getting ahead at the university seems more of an issue, with again the International Students' complaint about a chance to build up expertise on the teaching side:
"We can't get enough jobs … like I could not get many tutorials to teach. Most of my friends in the United States as PhD students got more teaching to do straight away."

As for being a student here and then a graduate from Australia; students generally receive good benefits, and  at the end the degrees have good standing — an advantage if working in  China and other places.

"I am pretty happy with that", she says.

THREE YEARS ON THE BEACH?

Doing a PhD in Australia, the biggest thing you have to explain in Germany is if you are going to lie on a beach for three years", says Falk Hartig, half way through a PhD at QUT, a German journalist now studying overseas cultural policies of China.
Like Bonnie Liu he has discovered an Australian degree has good value.

It will sound more "international" than the thousands of "Doctor" credentials being earned back home, and he found Australia  was also a better location to do Asian studies than Europe, where there was less choice in his field.

Speaking and working in English was not a great problem, where "you realise your level".

More of a problem was the high level of rents, difficult for students without good scholarship support, along with exchange rate movements that mean a more expensive Australian dollar.

Falk Hartig says he has no experience of racial trouble apart from hearing of late-night incidents where overseas students might be under some threat in the city; at times he's had "feeling" of unease where drunks were around, and has decided there could be problems for young non-Australian women out after dark.

Yet that should not deny one prime attraction of the country when choices are being made:

"The image is relaxed. You can have a good life… It is more relaxed than the United States or England."

He endorses the concerns of others about access to teaching experience needed for an academic career.

"After three years without a teaching record for getting a job afterwards , there will be no job, so people  will just leave the country."

PLUSES AND MINUSES

University managers know the list of positives and negatives well.

We are not internationalising our home-grown academics by and large", says Sharon Tickle, the acting  International Director at QUT.

She points out that aside from spending very limited time working abroad or learning languages, academics even when taking short-term trips for conferences will concentrate on Europe of the United States, not farther afield — culturally or otherwise.

While opportunities for cross-cultural training courses are taken up by staff, says Acram Taji, "there are academics who have done their degrees, and post-doctoral work at the same university, and then applied for a lectureship at the same university …"

Academics recruited from a non-Australian, and non-English speaking background can be a balance against that, and give the university access to different angles on learning and life.

University teachers in their turn have their trials with students coming out of a different culture, especially with language; most estimate they need to put in twice as much time, in intensive supervision, with non-English speakers – time not recognised or compensated for by their employers.

That extra work, Ms Tickle will admit,  is "a challenge for the supervisors."

HELPING, AND HIGH MAINTENANCE

Prof. Taji  lists a pro-active set of measures to assist students who are, she says, both valuable resources and "high maintenance".

Strict English language standards are applied, she avers, denying that research students are being "let through" with weak language skills, though it is said to happen at the lower levels — post-secondary or undergraduate courses.

She says the university gives incentives to Faculty administrators to contribute to payment for editing of students' final work, to polish the language.

Other aid is organised, from student buddy systems to pastoral care in case of personal crisis.

A special problem for the International Students is that they need a new visa if extending their three-year study period; Australian students can go to four years, if needed, without such trouble.

On jobs, the Professor agrees that the off-campus casual jobs market can be tough on overseas students because of the play of cultural nuances and language, though many jobs are organised within the university itself.

Neither of the executives approached here could rate trouble with racism as a lead problem for International Students.

Sharon Tickle, returned from a visit to India where part of the task was to talk through the late-night bad experiences of students in recent years, mostly in Melbourne, said International Student organisations had been asked, and had reported few immediate concerns.

Acram Taji could recall complaints being registered, though ultimately being accepted by all parties involved as due to "misunderstandings", not racialist attacks on students.

"We do offer very comprehensive training to educate International Students on Australian culture, and vice versa", she says.

"But we have not had problems with students coming in to complain that there are people who are racists."

Higher education as investment for Australia, and its universities, is a life commitment for the thousands of rather young people  – most in their twenties – who check out the country as the place to make their first main contribution to knowledge, and change their name to "doctor".

Talking to most brings out a simple theme: it will have its difficulties, but for persons of talent the place and its people have much to offer, and both parties look to be finding ways to make the investment turn out well.

The writer: Lee Duffield was for many years a journalist, editor and overseas correspondent with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. He teaches and carries out research in Journalism at QUT. A Europe specialist, he is the publisher of EUAustralia Online.

You can follow any responses to this entry through the RSS 2.0 feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.

**Appendix 2**

*Subtropic*, QUT, Brisbane. http://subtropic.com.au/2011/03/22/universities-battle-for-the-top-brains/

Universities: Battle for the top brains

Tuesday, March 22, 2011, 7:02 pm | Reported by Lee Duffield

POWERHOUSE PERFORMANCES

The Brisbane-based university that's just made a surprise entry into Australia's top ten for research, QUT, is facing a tough scramble to stay there – thanks to uncertainties of the global economy.

Its new battle is to get the best research students, the high achievers that universities world-wide compete for, and will set aside big budgets to bring into the fold.
"These students are the power house of research activity", says Prof. Acram Taji, the Director of International Graduate Research.

She stresses the point that International Students are at the centre of the battle; Australian-grown talent alone has not been enough, and will not be to fill the growing demand for brain power and talent.

Six hundred of the university's 1900 higher-degree research students already are International.

"The intention is to increase the number of higher degree research students… to 2500. Why? Because that adds to our research intensity. One of the indicators is how many higher degree research students you have.

"In this criterion, we have scored 3.9%, whereas the Australian National University (ANU) scored 14.1% (meaning over 14% of their students are research students). Melbourne  is 8.9%.

"The Vice Chancellor says I want this 4% to increase to 6% by 2015 or 2016.

"Higher degree research students are the ones who produce the quality papers; they help you to complete your research", she says; adding too that while funded on scholarships, they come cheaper than ready-credentialled research associates or post-doctoral Fellows.

MONEY AND RESOURCES

Money and resources are at the core of this story of producing hard results in the search for knowledge, getting recognition for it, and building it up further.

The "top ten" for research are decided on from a very detailed audit of activities of the universities, carried out by the ARC, Australian Research Council, under a process it calls ERA – Excellence in Research for Australia.

It is meant as a descriptive treatment of what the universities do, not a competitive ratings system; but tell that for a hard chuckle, to the executives, researchers and administrators who work zealously to get together their best outcomes and fit them to the exacting criteria.

Getting into the top ten is king status, positioning the leaders to attract more of the same – best funding, best researchers, best research students from around the world.

This time as expected, in the rankings announced on 31.1.11, the "Group of Eight" dominated the field: the eight (including the ANU and Melbourne University), being the oldest universities and therefore the best endowered with investment funds and gifts.

Then comes QUT now, the Queensland University of Technology, pushing into the last-available seat at top table — just behind the only other "outsider", Sydney's well-established Macquarie University.

"We have leap-frogged many of the other universities to be number ten", says Acram Taji.

With 40 000 students QUT is hardly a minnow but as a product of the amalgamations of tertiary colleges in the 1990s, to form universities, it drives hard to make its mark.

A VERY AMBITIOUS UNIVERSITY

"It is a very ambitious university", says Sharon Tickle, Acting Executive Director of International and Development, a division of the university contributing heavily to the ongoing campaign to bring in talent for the research effort.

She recounts the current struggle, recruiting students in a broad field of studies heavy with opportunities for research: the new creative industries, engineering, health, information technology, bio-technology, or science the long-term achiever.

Signing up students in other countries to undertake research doctorates can involve acts of diplomacy, like dealing with a central scholarships body in China that selects quality students through a very competitive process; doing business with agencies in India where there is no state funding body, or negotiating one-by-one with governments in the Middle East, able to give ample direct assistance to their citizens.

Yet the task is still more specialised, to make an exact fit between the program in Australia and the interest of students in a particular job of research – "the right kind of students for the right program".

"PhD students go to quality, so it is a fight for quality", says Sharon Tickle.

"The challenge of the educational target set for QUT is difficult where the whole world is going for the same students … We are struggling in the competition."

It was felt as a pity that the strong outcome for QUT, getting placed in the "ten", came just as competition for top research students around the world, one of the key ingredients of success, became much tougher – thanks especially to the uncertainties of the global economy.

COUNTING THE SET-BACKS

What kind of extra difficulties have to be faced on top of proving that the research being done is of high quality, prestigious, worth joining in with?

Set-backs can come in multiples:

 The Global Financial Crisis of 2008, its effects just coming through now, as before that many families overseas already had money saved up for education abroad, for 2009-10.

        Bad economic impacts of natural disasters, whether in student "home" countries, or with the floods and cyclones in Australia, affecting everything from part-time jobs to available houses or rents – and the reputation of the country as a place to live.

   Possible residue from claims of "racist" attacks on students, mostly in Melbourne.

   The currently strong Australian dollar, up by as much as 17-60% against major currencies, over the past year – reflecting the resistance of the Australian economy to recession, but undercutting much outside trade.

Government revision of visa entitlements restricting the range of studies from which students can obtain continuing visas to work in  Australia, notably in skills areas like hairdressing.

Those problems come out hardest in the big and popular market for education in Australia at the lower level of schools and colleges, and  undergraduate university degrees.

Enrolments from overseas have crashed in universities around the country, costing them heavily in fees because students in those courses pay their own way.

In any survey, more than 50% of International Students express some intention to stay on and live in Australia after completing their studies; so changes in entry policy (like a tightening on visas for Indian students in 2010, eased to a degree this year) affect attendance.
The troubles are being felt even at the higher level, among the sought-after research higher degree students looking to do a doctorate.

QUT as 2011 got under way experienced a check in its confident march to greater things; and in the struggle against competition talked about by Sharon Tickle, figures for new Doctor of Philosophy students were sluggish.

By the first week of February acceptances of places offered to prospective scholars overseas, for the first semester of 2011, were down by 10 to 16% against the same time a year ago.

For the second semester, starting in July, an unofficial figure of 65%, so far, was being mentioned.

Among overseas students at that level there were 34 new commencements for 2011, against 45 in 2010; though the base stayed fairly solid, their total numbers enrolled having grown from 415 in 2009 to 453 last year.

Worrying for administrators of the program, tracking of the acceptance of offers of places by the university shows that it has not been keeping up with the usual rate – a further falling-off could happen.

GIVING NO GROUND

Not that the "very ambitious" university in the number ten slot will be giving any ground.

All universities being much in the same boat, QUT is shoring up its position by putting up funds for new student scholarships.

This year it has 75 students on full scholarships (a waiver of fees at $19-25000 p.a., funded by the federal government or the university itself, plus living allowance of over

$18 000 p.a.); it also provides a waiver of fees to another 300 students, who can obtain living allowances elsewhere – such as International Students supported by organisations in their home countries.

It is expanding that support to increase the fee-waivers by 15% each year, up to 2015, capped at 500.

The reason for the concentration of effort gets back to the drive to be in the top bracket of research, and fulfil a general goal.

Ms Tickle: "It's to provide solutions-based research on an international scale; researching global problems and real-world solutions, and with some discovery research; that is still what we do."

The QUT Vice Chancellor, Prof. Peter Coaldrake, formerly the Public Sector Commissioner in Queensland, has declared for the managed approach, concentrated on the ARC indicators for getting recognition.

Says Prof. Taji: "We have a visionary Vice Chancellor who has lofty aspirations for our research ranking; he wants to see QUT's research productivity (quality and quantity) above some of the Go8 universities."