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REAL OR IMAGINED WOMEN? STAFF REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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**Abstract**

In Australia’s globalising universities many support and teaching staff now work with international women postgraduate students. But are they aware of the issues facing these women, and is their understanding of them adequate? Indeed, how do they represent them? In this paper we draw on a small-scale pilot study involving key university personnel. We argue that the ways in which such staff represent this group of students is problematic. Focusing primarily on academic issues and on the literature on learning style, we analyse these staff members’ representations of international women postgraduate students from a postcolonial perspective. We explore the extent to which such representations, and the learning styles literature which reflects and informs them, are what Edward Said calls Orientalist. In so doing, we point to both the constitution of the international woman student as postcolonial female subject and show how
this situates her in relation to the prevalent learning styles discourse. Further we argue that such representations of the students differ in crucial ways from the students’ self-representations, suggesting that in certain subtle ways such staff members are engaging with ‘imagined’ rather than ‘real’ women.
REAL OR IMAGINED WOMEN? STAFF REPRESENTATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL WOMEN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

Introduction

How do the university support and teaching staff who work with international women postgraduate students understand and represent them and their needs? We provide tentative answers to this question, informed by a small pilot research project designed to identify issues affecting the experiences of international women postgraduate students and the staff who work with them. Although our answers are only tentative, they nonetheless raise some issues of concern and point to matters that merit further empirical and conceptual inquiry. Here, we focus primarily on staff representations of academic issues, specifically the role of so-called Oriental and Western learning styles. Indeed, we critically engage this recurrent theme in the literature on learning styles. Our analysis is informed by a postcolonial perspective and by some of the recent literature on postgraduate pedagogies.

Background

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1 Our title has been suggested by the themes and title of Rajeswari Sunder Rajan’s (1993) Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism, London and New York, Routledge.
2 The pilot research project was conducted by Jane Kenway. The study was funded by Australian Research Council Small Grant. Jane Kenway and Elizabeth Bullen conducted the subsequent analysis and conceptual development. The university in which this study was undertaken is a multi-campus university and has a considerable international postgraduate student cohort.
Contemporary universities in Australia and elsewhere are currently reinventing themselves as global educational service providers (Currie & Newsome, 1998; Kenway & Langmead, 2002). Education has become an important export industry – in 2000, it ranked as Australia’s tenth largest export market. With a value of A$3.72 billion, it rated ahead of wool (Table D.4, Australian Exports of Goods and Services 2000, AVCC, 2001, p. 4). As the table (AVCC, 2001, p. 2) below indicates, the growth in the education export market has involved an increasing flow of international students, including postgraduates.

Table D.1 Overseas Student Enrolments by Broad Level of Course, 1988–2000 (selected years)

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Higher degree – research</td>
<td>2,703</td>
<td>3,086</td>
<td>4,072</td>
<td>4,050</td>
<td>4,052</td>
<td>4,068</td>
<td>4,335</td>
<td>4,450</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Higher degree – coursework</td>
<td>1,015</td>
<td>2,172</td>
<td>4,106</td>
<td>7,230</td>
<td>9,587</td>
<td>12,034</td>
<td>15,689</td>
<td>20,254</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other postgraduate (a)</td>
<td>1,273</td>
<td>1,636</td>
<td>1,967</td>
<td>2,872</td>
<td>3,219</td>
<td>3,038</td>
<td>3,386</td>
<td>4,481</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor (b)</td>
<td>12,363</td>
<td>21,543</td>
<td>29,012</td>
<td>37,559</td>
<td>44,421</td>
<td>50,980</td>
<td>57,123</td>
<td>63,194</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other undergraduate</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>286</td>
<td>434</td>
<td>407</td>
<td>523</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enabling courses (c)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-award courses</td>
<td>422</td>
<td>574</td>
<td>1,045</td>
<td>1,183</td>
<td>1,431</td>
<td>1,629</td>
<td>2,171</td>
<td>2,705</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>18,207</td>
<td>29,630</td>
<td>40,494</td>
<td>53,188</td>
<td>62,996</td>
<td>72,183</td>
<td>83,111</td>
<td>95,607</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most recent data show that international students comprise 12.6 per cent of tertiary students in Australia compared with an OECD country average of 4.8 per cent (Table D.3, International Comparison 1998, AVCC, 2001, p. 3). Of these students, women make up 48.5 per cent of the international student population.
This move to export education and import students has led to the creation of offshore campuses, physical and virtual, and the ‘internationalisation’ of higher education curricula. It has also placed new emphasis on the provision of support staff, programs and infrastructure for the expanding international student cohort. Various international student services and staff positions including liaison officers and study skills advisors, have been expressly created to meet the needs of these students. Such developments are happening at a rapid rate, but often without an adequate research or evaluation base. Although policies of internationalisation are claimed to promote intercultural understanding and skills, according to Todd and Nesdale (1997), these benefits have been slow in coming. While programs are in place to offer support to students, questions remain about the expertise of the members of staff who are expected to facilitate the development of intercultural understanding and skills within the university.

So, too, do questions about the particular challenges which face postgraduate research students. Given the solitary nature of their undertaking, it is not surprising that student-driven research (National Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia, 1995, p. 22) has called for greater attention to be paid to the particular needs of postgraduate international students. In fact, it is only relatively recently that research attending to international students has turned to the specific issues facing postgraduate students (see, for instance, Cadman, 2000; Ingleton & Cadman, 2002; Todd, 1997; Ryan & Zuber-Skerrit,
Even now, however, the issues facing international women postgraduates remain relatively under-researched.

This article has been written as a companion piece to an earlier one investigating the self-representations of international women postgraduate students (Kenway & Bullen, forthcoming). There we attend particularly to the social and cultural contexts of intercultural study to consider intersections between the students’ representation of themselves as women and the way they see themselves represented by their host cultures. Here we focus on the way international women postgraduates are represented by key university staff and how this might be mediated by the discourse around learning styles. Both papers draw on data from a small pilot research project exploring the experiences of international women postgraduate students and the staff who work with them.

The purpose of this pilot project was to raise issues and generate questions for further research rather than to provide definitive answers. Accordingly, the interviews conducted were small in number—a cohort of ten women students and of twelve staff. Female and male staff members were represented equally among the staff. All were significantly involved with international students, working in a range of academic, administrative and support services. They included an overseas program director and administrator, staff involved in international and domestic student support, residential programs, international
office and postgraduate association, as well as supervisors and lecturers. The extent of their personal and professional knowledge of the students’ cultures and countries of origin varied widely. Two of interviewees had experience as ESL teachers and several of the academic staff had taught offshore. This gave them a particular insight into some of the complexities of the cultural and pedagogical adjustments the international student experience entails, though not necessarily the transition from undergraduate coursework to postgraduate research. The contact of other staff, however, was contextualised entirely within the frame of the women’s status as ‘international’ students and thus, already attributed with a range of general qualities and needs. Although we are aware of international students taking up positions in the various support services for international students, all of our interviewees were white, Western, middle class professionals.³

The student cohort consisted of women from the Asia-Pacific region. Their average age was 35 years and they came from a range of professional backgrounds. Although more than half had studied outside of their home country previously, only two had done so in an English-speaking country. Staff and students attended individual, semi-structured interviews where they were invited to comment on academic, cultural, race and gender issues, as well as

³ Although we do wish to homogenise our staff cohort, we cannot be more specific about staff identities for reasons of preserving anonymity.
those of teaching and learning, and their impact on the experiences of international women postgraduates.

A particular aim of the pilot study was to develop a sense of the ways in which international women postgraduates regard, ‘represent’ and ‘live’ their international educational experiences. The concept of representation is ‘useful’, according to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (1993, p. 9),

Precisely because and to the extent that it can serve a mediating function between two positions, neither foundationalist (privileging ‘reality’) nor superstructural (privileging ‘culture’), not denying the category of the real, or essentializing it as some pre-given metaphysical ground for representation.

As she goes on to point out,

Our understanding of the problems of ‘real’ women cannot lie outside the ‘imagined’ constructs in and through which ‘women’ emerge as subjects. Negotiating with these mediations and simulacra we seek to arrive at an understanding of the issues at stake. (Rajan, 1993, p.10)
This leads us to ask, do the ways in which university personnel represent international women postgraduates as women and as learners reflect constructs that facilitate or limit their engagement with them and, thereby, the educational support they provide?

To answer this question, we examine certain intersections between staff understandings of the educational issues facing international women postgraduate students suggested by our pilot study and the literature on intercultural and postgraduate pedagogies. While staff identify many of the same issues as the students, their representations of the women as postgraduate students differ in crucial ways from the students’ own self-representations. This is of consequence not only in terms of how universities address the issues and problems of intercultural education, but also in terms of what issues and problems are identified, ignored and created. Focusing on the issues of epistemological traditions and relations of power between teacher and learner, we offer an analysis contextualised by the learning styles literature, and informed by postcolonial theory and a feminist perspective. Edward Said’s (1978) theorisation of Orientalism offers us an entry point for a critique of this

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4 Only one version of postcolonialism among many, the subject of much criticism (see, for instance, Dirlik 1994 & 1996), the account of the colonial encounter in Orientalism is by its author’s own admission one-sided (Said 1993). Nevertheless, in its recognition of the role of discourse in the construction of colonial relations, the Orientalist thesis is salient to this current discussion. According to Gandhi’s (1998) evaluation, Orientalism pertains not only to the eighteenth-century scholarship Said examines in his book but, any discourse that mediates ‘Western attempts to
literature which, we suggest, reflects and informs some university staff understandings of international women as students. As Said (1978, p. 94) points out, certain ‘texts’ authorized by ‘academics, institutions, and governments ... can create not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe’. We begin, however, by exploring the ways in which university staff members’ representations of international women postgraduate students are framed in terms of gender. In other words, we examine the constitution of the international woman student as postcolonial female subject before turning to question of how this situates her in relation to the learning styles discourse.

**Staff awareness of gender issues**

Do university staff representations of international women as postgraduate students, and staff understanding of the issues they face in their intercultural social and study lives, reveal an awareness of gender issues? Indeed, are there issues of gender at stake here and do they matter? Notwithstanding several notable exceptions among our interviewees, it would appear that this awareness is limited and problematic. Certainly, responses to interview questions relating explicitly to gender suggest that this is an aspect of the intercultural education experience that few members of staff have actively interrogated.

In this first instance, a number of staff that felt comfortable commenting on “know” or directly engage with the non-Western’ (p. 76), a category into which the learning
issues relating to international students in general, felt they could not do so in relation to women international students in particular. Indeed, one interviewee suggested issues facing women international students are virtually the same as those affecting men. All are affected by the stress of dislocation and by access and equity issues surrounding housing and money. An exception was made of students who are single mothers but, even then, this interviewee was more conscious of the difficulties facing wives of postgraduates. The interviewee remarked that with very limited English skills, the wives are often isolated and unable to work. Such a view mirrors a tendency in the literature on international students to normalise students as male and to assign the woman the role of Other (see, for example, Ashamalla, 1994; de Verthelyi, 1995). A further tendency in the research on international students ‘to see gender issues as supplementary questions to be tackled only when the general work has been done’ (Wright, 1997, p. 94) was echoed in the comment of another staff member. This interviewee observed that limited contact with individual international students leaves little time to attend to gender matters. As he acknowledged, this does not mean that those issues do not exist.

However, acknowledging the existence of such issues is not the same as identifying problems, let alone understanding them. We found that even among those who revealed a greater awareness of gender, few were able to identify styles discourse clearly falls.
issues specific to the experience of international women postgraduate students. Those who saw international women students as being disadvantaged understood this disadvantage as relative to male international and/or Australian women peers. For instance, whereas women are likely to travel alone or with children, male students tend to bring their whole family. Consequently, women students are seen to lack the same support as male students. This, however, is not necessarily a problem specific to postgraduate women. Thus, it would appear that the recognition that there are gender issues involved in the experience of international postgraduate women students is underpinned by so-called Western paradigms of gender identity and gender equity and, as a result, largely ignores issues of racial and cultural identity. It is ironic, therefore, that staff awareness of gender issues became far more apparent once they were invited to comment on cultural matters. While this may suggest a more holistic understanding of the complexity of identity and an acknowledgment of difference, we suggest that it signified the constitution of the postcolonial female subject and marks her as Other.

In the context of culture, staff members were able to identify many problems and inadequacies in current provision of teaching of, and services for, international students in the globalised university. They were particularly aware of the need for staff development in relation to cultural awareness. Many admitted they have little knowledge of students’ background culture beyond what they had learnt
from individual students and the assumptions of their own culture. There was a certain anxiety about this, which did not, however, prevent a tendency to generalise from their knowledge of former students and/or to stereotype students on the basis of preconceptions about particular cultures, races and ethnicities. Certain of these preconceptions about culture prove to be intimately bound up with assumptions about gender and race.

Australia’s international higher education interests are firmly fixed in the Asia Pacific. In 1999, 84.4 per cent of overseas students came from the region (Australian Education International, 2000). This focus is likely to continue into the new century, although Australia is now looking more intently at opportunities in Europe, North and South America (Department of Education Training and Youth Affairs, 2001). In 2000, the top ten source countries of international students included Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, South Korea, China, Thailand and Japan. This strong regional profile is also reflected in the composition of our student cohort, which compromised three students from Laos; two each from China and Thailand; and one each from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. While this regional homogeneity underpins some common educational issues for international students in general, for instance, around language, it also promotes a tendency towards homogenisation of cultures and, perforce, essentialist constructions of the women themselves. As Pettman (1996, p. 72) points out, such ‘big categories’
disguise ‘class, cultural, age, sexuality, political and other differences’ between women. In our study, this homogenisation also produced some interesting contradictions in the representation of international women postgraduates.

It was commonly assumed among the staff members we interviewed that South and South-East Asian cultures in particular are oppressive to women. Women are perceived as suffering low status and as being inferior to men. This created some unexpected paradoxes in regard to gendered cultural identities, not least the opinion that male students will have greater difficulty in making the transition from a traditional ‘patriarchal’ culture to the more liberal, ‘feminised’ West. Other views supported the literature that tends to suggest that adaptation is more difficult for women because of inappropriate or incompatible social or cultural mores (Leonard, 1998; MacKinnon, 1995; Wright, 1997). One interviewee, for instance, commenting on the difficulties of older, married women postgraduates, described them as ‘de facto widows’. This interviewee referred to ‘taboos’ that limit the social mobility of married women. Yet, a further staff member reported that students often felt no need of programs designed to increase gender awareness, and were resentful of those that implied they did. Indeed, this interviewee said that women from the Asia-Pacific region often see themselves as enjoying greater gender equity than women in the West. If certain university staff seemed generally aware of this standpoint, they did not appear to
have actual knowledge of women’s roles and status in the students’ home cultures. This was a point also raised by the members of the student cohort.

In fact, essentialist accounts of identity — accounts that create monolithic categories of women from diverse cultures, classes, religions and ethnicities — were contradicted by the actual student profile. University staff members liaising with international women postgraduate students in a variety of capacities noted that these students are frequently more highly qualified than local students. Indeed, they are aware that these women often hold senior positions in the professions at home. As indicated above, the average age of the cohort in our pilot project was approximately 35-years-old and included women who had advanced to high positions in their profession, including two associate professors. The director of an Australian international students’ program described them as being ‘invariably capable, fairly serious, middle class women who tend to be fairly assertive’. They were described as ‘mature women who hold positions of status and who are often highly Westernised’. Representations such as this conflict with representations of Asian women as submissive or oppressed and, indeed, the students we interviewed actively resist such images. Yet, Asian women postgraduates are often classified in this way by the university staff members that were part of our inquiries. At the same time as staff typically describe them as highly motivated and committed students who take very seriously the imperative to complete their postgraduate qualifications as
efficiently and as competently as possible, they also frequently see them as passive learners, uncritical and unassertive. It is this contradiction that has prompted us to ask whether this construct pertains to these students as ‘real’ or ‘imagined’ women and we do so by problematising some of the literature on learning styles.

**Problematising learning styles**

A growing body of research literature has accompanied growth in the international higher education market and the internationalisation of doctoral programs. This literature has tended to focus on what Nichols and Najar (2000) describe as the ‘three kinds of transition issues’ international students confront: ‘language issues, cultural issues and pedagogic issues’ which, they add, ‘overlap and interact with each other in complex ways’. It has also tended to focus on the alleged differences between so-called Western and Oriental education settings and learning styles, drawing upon, among other things, management literature on transnational trade. Ethnopsychological profiling of national characteristics (Hofstede1980; Hofstede & Bond, 1988) has been particularly influential in regard to the cultural characterisation of so-called Confucian-heritage cultures. Teaching styles arising from this tradition have been described as being ‘didactic and trainer-centred’ (Kirkbridge & Tang, 1992).
Research such as this has led some to argue that the learning styles in Asian universities produce students who are content-centred, ‘passive’ learners, non-participants, and who have difficulty making knowledge claims (for instance, Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; 1988; 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987; Williams & Mills, 1995). ‘Asian students’ have been described as rote-learners (Samuelowicz, 1987) and are frequently accused of plagiarism (see Pennycook, 1994). Others again (Chan, 1999), point to assumptions about Chinese students’, for example, ‘lack of abstract thinking, constraints on behaviour caused by face, the over-emphasis on concrete examples, lack of creativity, and the need to compromise in group situations’ (p. 294). Our staff interview data echoes such views. According to one academic, within the epistemological tradition of the East, ‘you are merely a reproducer of set knowledge … a knowledge [that] is learning what is in a book and regurgitating it’. Such understandings reproduce what McConaghy (1998, p. 345) has referred to as the neo-colonial practice of ‘culturalism’, that is, the privileging of culture — and cultural difference — as its ‘primary analytical tool’.

More recent literature, however, suggests these descriptions of ‘Asian students’ are superficial and fail to recognise the value of different styles of learning, for example, the use of memorization as an aid to understanding (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Kelly & Ha, 1998; Purdie, 1995). We should remind ourselves that it is only relatively recently that ‘memorising has fallen into disrepute’ in Western education systems (Watkins, 2000) and that a memorised knowledge base does
not preclude high level synthesis and integration of that knowledge (Baumgart & Halse, 1999). Others (see, for example, Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Cadman, 2000) have questioned the appropriateness of assuming ‘a deficit because of a non-critical tradition in CHC [Confucian-heritage cultures, i.e. Japan, China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and Korea’]. However, even this approach is problematic to the degree that, on the one hand, it tends towards a homogenisation of Asian cultures and heritages and, on the other, often overlooks the impact of colonialism on curriculum and pedagogy in the Asia-Pacific. As Jayaweera (1997, p. 245) explains, while many Asian countries which were colonised by ‘Western imperial powers regained their independence in the mid-twentieth century’, ‘others such as Japan adopted Western development models, or like Thailand and Nepal, were affected by the spill-over of colonial influences from neighbouring countries’. The very notion of CHC learning styles assumes that, as Rizvi puts it, ‘cultures are hermetically sealed off from one another’ (1997, p. 22) and ignores the more recent impact of global media and information and communications technology on intercultural understanding and awareness.

The postcolonial perspective we adopt here leads to a further set of understandings by asking how foreignness is put to work in the learning styles discourse and about the implications in terms of power relations between national and international staff and students. The way in which so-called Oriental learning styles have been constructed in much of the literature positions
them as Other to the Western critical tradition. Drawing on Edward Said’s
discussions of Orientalism, Rizvi (1997) points to the ‘racist assumptions of
educational superiority’ that are evident in the binary thinking—them/us and
East/West oppositions—which informs debate about learning styles. According
to Said himself,

> When one starts using categories like Oriental and Western as both the
starting and the end points of analysis, research, public policy ... the result
is usually to polarize the distinction — the Oriental becomes more
Oriental, the Westerner more Western — and limit the human encounter
between cultures, traditions, and societies. (1978, p. 45–6)

This polarization is evident in the learning styles discourse in the way in which
the Western learning style is constructed as a critical tradition and the Oriental as
non-critical.

One of the outcomes of this polarization is the reproduction of old stereotypes of
the ‘unenlightened’ East. To the extent that the learning style literature begins to
reproduce such stereotypes, it becomes a discourse. As Gandhi (1998, p. 77)
reminds us, ‘Discourses are ... heavily policed cognitive systems which control
and delimit both the mode and the means of representation in a given society’.
These stereotypical representations work to situate difference in a binary, and
ultimately hierarchical, relationship. Loomba’s (1998, p. 47) exposition of Orientalism sets out the distinction thus:

If colonised people are irrational, Europeans are rational; if the former are barbaric, sensual, and lazy, Europe is civilisation itself, with its sexual appetites under control and its dominant ethic that of hard work; if the Orient is static, Europe can be seen as developing and marching ahead; the Orient has to be feminine so that Europe can be masculine.

We can, of course, identify much in the literature on international students that contradicts this. Indeed, as Homi Bhaba (1986) and other critics of Said have argued, the negative Orientalist stereotype is not, as the Orientalist thesis implies, a uniform or stable category (Gandhi, 1998, p. 78). Bhaba describes racial and cultural stereotyping as

not only the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text of projection and introjection, metaphoric and metonymic strategies, displacement, guilt, aggressivity; the masking and splitting of ‘official’ and fantasmic knowledge. (1986, p. 169)
Our own data points to this complexity, a reciprocity in the intercultural exchange. In Kenway & Bullen (forthcoming) we identify instances in which otherwise negative stereotypes were strategically appropriated and adapted by the students themselves for the purposes of affirming identity and solidarity.

Nevertheless, at the same time as international women postgraduate students are distinguished by their work ethic, the very definition of CHC or Oriental learning styles as non-critical seems to imply less intellectual rigour than the Western model. Furthermore, as indicated above, assumptions continue to be made about the characteristics of the students’ home cultures, often reinforced by the media and popular culture, which cannot be easily transcended. The representation of the Asia-Pacific region as Third World or as consisting of undeveloped countries suggests that they are underdeveloped, dependent and ‘less than’. The representation of women from the Asia-Pacific as ‘Third World women’ is a further dimension of this. We suggest that such understandings of Oriental ‘Otherness’ impact on the way university staff perceive and understand the issues facing international women postgraduate students, both as students and as women.

According to Loomba (1998, p.47), ‘the Orient has to be feminine so that Europe can be masculine’. If this is so, then the Otherness of women students from the Asia-Pacific studying in Australia is twofold. They are both the colonial Other
and the feminine Other. One consequence of colonial stereotyping is the infantilisation of international students in general and of international women students in particular. As the feminine Other, the international women postgraduate is at risk of being infantilised because she is a women—research suggests that the challenges women postgraduates in general face in completing their doctoral studies are related to gender, not academic preparation (Beeler, 1993). Indeed, it has been argued that they are related to the Western, rational, ‘masculinist’ character of the academy (Heinrich, 2000; Johnson et al, 2000). As colonial Other, she is at risk of being regarded as the ‘Third World’ woman and, thus, as the ‘victim par excellence’, a ‘casualty of both imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies’ (Gandhi, 1998, p. 83).

The stereotype of the Third World woman is a category which elides race, class, religion, culture, ethnicity and sexuality. Pettman (1996, p. 183) cautions against ‘any easy reproduction of first-world/third-world difference, and especially against reproducing “third-world woman” as passive victim’ when she makes the point that while not all Third World women live in rural villages, are poor or exploited. It is certainly the case that the participants in our pilot did not consider themselves victims yet, against ample evidence to the contrary, the Third World woman continues to be constructed in this way. Contradictions within staff representations of international women students and discrepancies between those of the staff and the students themselves, therefore, raise the question, are
these real or imagined women? And, we may well ask, how are we to understand the stake staff have in constructing these women in this way?

As Loomba (1998, p. 47) explains, the binary opposition between the East and the West is vital to the way in which the West understands itself. Controlling the way in which the Orient is constructed is a way of controlling the way in which the West constructs itself. Not surprisingly, therefore, the reduction of the Other into a passive object of government is one of the main theses of Edward Said’s Orientalism. It is unlikely that the reduction of international women postgraduate students into passive objects of government is the conscious objective of university staff. But as one member of staff admitted, international students are ‘hard work’ and working with them is just as likely to invoke a sense of inadequacy as achievement. University staff are inadequately trained or not trained at all in intercultural awareness or pedagogy. Infantilisation can act to avert or address a sense of uncertainty or incompetence. It is a way of ‘managing’, if not controlling, a problem. Significantly, one member of staff we interviewed believed infantilisation to be a practice of international women students themselves, rather than something imposed on them by staff. That is, the students position themselves as inferior to academic staff. This is, as we have argued of the learning styles discourse, a deficit construction of difference or Otherness. Because it also contradicts staff representations of women as strong, independent professional women, we suggest that such representations of
international women students are the consequence of inadvertently viewing them and the issues they face through an Orientalist lens. Let us look now at alternative view, working from the perspective of a ‘real’ woman student.

**Problematising teaching styles**

On face value, student perceptions of the difficulties of adjusting to the demands of postgraduate study in an Australian university reiterate many of the recurrent themes in the learning style literature and the problems identified by university staff. The students interviewed identified significant differences between the academic system at home and abroad. These related to knowledge production, participation in the intellectual life of the university, and the student and supervisor relationship. A student from the Philippines went so far as to describe her experience of it as ‘academic shock’. The following is an account of some of the problems she faced.

The student explained that she was not used to studying alone, with no group to discuss ideas with or to confirm that she was on-track with her thoughts. She was unsure of what direction to take, so asked her supervisor who directed her to certain theorists of whom she has never heard. The idea was that she familiarise herself with different schools of thought—in particular, critical theory. She found critical theory new and different. Whilst she was pleased that this has added to her knowledge and she was free to choose what to read or study, this
was difficult because of its solitary nature. Her supervisor told her to
‘problematize’, but she did not know what this meant. The Language and Study
Adviser she consulted was not able to help her much with this problem. She
understood problematizing to mean she should question everything, take
nothing as given. But she was not sure if that is what her supervisor meant. This
contrasted, she said, with the Philippine way of learning which was to question
and then provide a solution. She came from learning environments in which
‘lecturers tell everything in detail’; in which students ‘get help directly’, rather
than work things out by themselves; students ‘show more respect for their
seniors’; and students are ‘used to reproducing knowledge and not analysis’. All
students wanted more time from their supervisors and teachers.

However, it cannot be assumed that these difficulties are indicative of
fundamental differences in approaches to education in different countries. Some
may be a function of the postgraduate experience, which is almost by definition
more individualised and solitary and usually involves less hierarchical
relationships between student and teacher/supervisor. Equally, it is difficult to
separate out system differences from students’ difficulties in reading, writing,
listening to and speaking English in the more advanced academic settings and
genres (Lewthwaite, 1996, p. 177) upon which membership of the postgraduate
academic community depends. Students have to reinvent themselves for this
particular membership and unless they are able to do so they will remain
educational outsiders. So, this is not just a matter of what it means to study and live in a second language, but of changing the forms of language and, thus, the identity necessary to a new ‘academic’ belonging.

This is not a distinction that either staff or students automatically make. Students may easily conflate or mistake differences between undergraduate and postgraduate study with differences between learning traditions. Likewise, student demeanour that staff may attribute to opposing learning and teaching styles may, in fact, be a reflection of other, more complex causes relating to the students’ ‘outsider’ status. Something of this complexity is suggested in Singh’s and Dooley’s (1996) discussion of the experiences of Asian Australian women enrolled in the Faculty of Education at an Australian university. They argue that racial and ethnically inclusive discourses may in fact suppress and, so, deny ‘unequal power relations’ (1996, p. 147) between minority and majority groups. They also identify an inherent ambivalence in social relations between dominant and subordinate groups. One student in our study, for instance, told of how, in spite of repeated offers to assist staff with research, no one took her up on her offer. However, this ambivalence is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in the differences both staff and students perceive to be at work in the student supervisor relationship.
Both the academic staff and students in our study drew comparisons between the ‘more tolerant and open’ approach that typifies postgraduate study and the student/supervisor relationship in Australian universities and the more ‘formal’ relationship between teacher and student to which the women students had been accustomed. They tended to regard professors and teachers as ‘the authority’ who could ‘confirm what you say is right’. As in the case of the Filipina student described above, a number of students expressed a wish for more guidance from their supervisors. This, in turn, was taken as evidence reinforcing the infantilised image of Asian postgraduates constructed by some staff. Others, however, showed insight into the complex interplay of hierarchy, respect and ‘face’ in certain Asian cultures and into the way in which this translates into expectations that academic staff be authority figures and authoritative sources of knowledge. According to the staff member who raised these points, deference is always due to age: ‘You would never make a comment which would make an older person lose face regardless of their gender’. Nevertheless, it is surely ingenuous to think that there is no relation of power between student and supervisor, or that value judgements are not implicit in the construction of the Western academy as inclusive, egalitarian and progressive and the Oriental as hierarchical and, by implication, regressive. Nor, indeed, that the burden of difference is the students’ to rectify. Difference here becomes a basis of exclusion, a basis for what Johnson et al., in a somewhat different context and in a somewhat different sense, describe as the ‘pedagogy of indifference’ (2000, p. 136).
In its original context, the ‘pedagogy of indifference’ refers to those pedagogic practices of postgraduate supervision which, ‘marked by neglect, abandonment and indifference’, produce the ‘independent, autonomous scholar’ (Johnson, *et al.*, 2000, p. 136). The authors make the point that the production of the independent scholar, and the complex relations of power and desire between student and supervisor that produce it, have been traditionally the province of a normatively masculine elite. They go on to cite Yeatman’s (1998, p. 23) view, which we reproduce here, of the inadequacy of such an approach to

The demands of a situation where many supervisees are barely socialised into the demands and rigours of an academic scholarly and research culture. It is especially inadequate to the needs of many new PhD aspirants who, by historical–cultural positioning, have not been invited to imagine themselves as subjects of genius. These include all those who are marginalised by the dominant academic scholarly culture: women, and men or women who come from the non-dominant class, ethnic or race positions.

Traditional PhD supervision pedagogies are not only deeply problematic in the context of mass higher education as Yeatman indicates, but also in the context of the international student market contemporary universities are seeking to attract.
It is also deeply problematic for international women postgraduate students like those in our study, not only because the episteme informing the notion of the independent scholar is both ‘profoundly masculine’ and rooted in Western rationalist philosophy, but also because it assumes the ‘always–already’ scholar. By this it is meant that the student is ‘capable of independent scholarship from the beginning of their candidature’ (Johnson et al., 2000, p. 141). Clearly, international students commence their candidature no better or worse equipped than domestic students. However, the question we ask is, are international students’ need and desire for ‘guidance’, their ‘deference’, their ‘lack of assertiveness’, a reflection of cultural difference, or what happens when this ‘difference’ meets the ‘pedagogy of indifference’?

In fact, like many non-traditional domestic postgraduate students, it is assumed that most international students succeed in spite of the ‘pedagogy of indifference’. Indeed, they often out-perform local peers (see, for example, Espenshade & Rodriguez, 1997 for US figures) They succeed in spite of the deficit picture that the learning styles discourse promulgates and which staff working with them are apt to reproduce in their representation of them. Ultimately, their success is understood to depend on them assimilating Western learning styles. Goli Rezai-Rashti (1995, p. 90–2) observes that the implication that international students must adapt to a Western way of life is based on a racist and sexist ideology of colonisation. While the women students we interviewed did not
regard themselves as being coerced in this way, the expectation that students will adapt to Western cultural and educational contexts implies that a reciprocal understanding and valuing of Oriental cultures and contexts is unnecessary. As certain members of staff point out, this comes at the price of a lack of awareness of the contribution made by international students to domestic academic culture. These staff members argue that opportunities need to be created for knowledge to be shared and that this process needs to be reciprocal while others remarked on the value of alternative perspectives. How might this be achieved?

It is not possible to speculate here on the practical measures which universities and university staff might take in achieving some of these goals. However, we can begin by reconceptualising the globalizing university as a new intercultural space. We can do this by envisioning what we have elsewhere termed the global university ‘contact zone’ (Kenway & Bullen, forthcoming). Contact zones are social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination – like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today. (Pratt, 1992, p. 4)

Clearly, a contact zone perspective is not ahistorical or depoliticised. It is not necessarily a comfortable space to occupy. Within that space, Pratt argues, a
process of negotiation takes place. This she refers to as transculturation, the reciprocal exchange of influences, of modes of representation and self-representation, and of cultural practices. Salvadori (1997) uses similar terminology in his discussion of interculturalism, which he says is a stage on the way to achieving transculturalism as a goal of multicultural education. He argues that

> Education will only be valid when both parties to the relationship – teacher and pupil – are involved in the same way and at the same level, and when they transform each other. Something changes in the culture of both. This is not a painless operation. (Salvadori, 1997, p. 187)

This also demands that the university itself change to accommodate difference, to solve the problems it had not anticipated. It demands the ‘negotiation of difference’ (McConaghy, 1998) rather than the ascription of difference if it is to meet the needs of real rather than imagined international women postgraduate students.

**Conclusion**

Those of the university staff in our pilot study who work with international women postgraduates are not unaware of the issues which face these students in their academic and social lives. However, the ways in which such staff represent
these women do not ‘lie outside the “imagined” constructs in and through which “women” emerge as subjects’ (Rajan, 1993, p. 10). We have suggested that much in the learning styles literature encourages staff to construct international women students as postcolonial female subjects. That this is the case is not altogether surprising, given Australia’s inscription within the colonial legacies of the West. The concept of Orientalism has been used in this article to interrogate staff representations of international women students and the ways in which this intersects with the learning styles literature. The emphasis on difference in the learning style discourse, we have suggested, constructs a deficit picture of international students which, in the case of postgraduates, risks becoming self-fulfilling when combined with the pedagogy of indifference. This is, we contend, a systemic problem – a problem that also raises questions about the massive increase in higher degrees by coursework relative to research degrees indicated in the table above – rather than one of the individuals we interviewed or of individuals more widely. We nevertheless believe that an examination of staff representations provides an opportunity for those working in higher education to reflect, not only on how they construct international women postgraduates, but also on why they understand them in particular ways. It is a step towards meeting our international students in the contact zone of the globalising university.
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