This is the published version:


Available from Deakin Research Online:

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30037049

Reproduced with the kind permission of the copyright owner.

Copyright: 2006, University of Technology Sydney
THE INTERNATIONAL CONSTRUCTION STUDENT: A MISSED OPPORTUNITY?

Tricia McLaughlin and Anthony Mills
RMIT University

ABSTRACT
Australian universities now have a more diverse undergraduate student population in construction degrees than at any other time in their history. The linguistic, ethnic and indigenous diversity of the Australian university student population has never been richer and this is reflected in construction classrooms. Wider participation rates of domestic students combined with the internationalisation and globalisation of higher education has resulted in a student population of identifiable sub-groups that were significantly under-represented or not represented at all in previous decades. This changing student cohort and the inherent pressures and challenges arising from this changing population is the subject of considerable discussion within the Australian tertiary sector. The extent to which Australian universities and the construction degree educators have responded to these pressures is under scrutiny. This paper argues that the climate, culture and curriculum of higher education within construction schools in Australia has not reflected this diversity and that rather than accommodate and embrace the effects of internationalisation Australian university construction schools may have missed a vital opportunity to be part of a global learning network.

KEYWORDS
Construction management, curriculum, international students, higher education.

INTRODUCTION
In 1988 there were 13,000 international undergraduate students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions. Almost two decades later that figure has risen to almost 300,000 students (Australian Government, AEI, 2005). These students earn the nation up to $6 billion a year in fees and other expenditure (Marginson, 2005). International students currently represent 20% of all enrolled students in Australia. In spite of recent downturns in demand for particular courses, the overall trend over the
past two decades has been spectacular. Over the previous two decades growth has been in double digit demand, reaching a peak of 15% a year in the early 1990’s (Marginson, 2005). Data from Australian government sources indicates that continuing steady growth has been achieved in the international education market across all sectors, noting that growth in higher education enrolments continued in 2005, at around 8.3%, although commencements growth was only 0.8% in the same year (Australian Government, AEI, 2005).

As Pollock (2005) notes, “international commencements in March 2004 numbered 82,962 students whilst in March 2005, this figure had risen to 85,968 students. Essentially 3,000 more students came to Australia in this period” (p. 12). This increase has occurred in a period during which the Australian dollar has strengthened, European universities have marketed more aggressively in the South-East Asian market and several source countries have expanded their own higher education capacity. In spite of all this, the international student market in Australian universities has grown at four per cent over the past twelve months (Pollock, 2005).

Education is Australia’s third largest services export and the biggest knowledge industry. There is no longer any doubt that higher education in Australia is a global commodity with existing and potential customers. The flow-on effects to the general Australian economy of the international student market; the cultural and information exchanges; the improved international relations, and, at the micro level, the business networking opportunities for construction students make the international student market an attractive long term export industry.

Like all industries, the market is subject to cyclical downturns such as the 1997 Asian economic crisis, global unrest and competition but the long term picture is rosy. Recent studies indicate that the global demand for higher education will rise from 97 million students in 2000 to 263 million students in 2025 (Pollock, 2005). With much of this demand emanating from nations such as China and India, Australian university construction schools are excellently placed geographically to reap significant benefits. Yet geographic proximity is only one piece of the global higher education puzzle. Macroeconomic factors such as open labour markets, economic stability and a culturally diverse and outward looking society are all additional pieces of the puzzle.
More recently security has been a significant predictor of the international student market (Marginson, 2005). However the ultimate decision will still be predominantly academic value-for-money – what is the quality of the teaching and research in construction education in exchange for the time and money?

Singh (2002) notes that the more universities tailor their offerings to foreign students, the more attractive they become; and the more students hop between countries, the more their choices count. Marginson (2005) also highlights a major quality differential in international education – what he refers to as “the remaking of curriculum and pedagogy as an encounter with cultural difference” (p. 10). To attract and retain international students the Australian university construction schools must provide an educational experience where every student feels at ease with global cultural diversity and the teaching and research capacity needs to echo and benefit from this comfortable relationship.

Kalantzis and Cope (2002) summarise this message most succinctly:

> In the case of education export, we need to sell the benefits of having Asian (international) students, not just as we restructure our economy and improve employment prospects in the education sector, but the benefits of a thoroughly internationalist education for all Australian students (p. 15).

Yet, as this paper argues, the diversity created by the global student market is largely ignored within Australian universities and construction schools. If the key to attracting and embracing international students in a meaningful long-term relationship is the remaking of curriculum and pedagogy as an enrichment of cultural difference, then as the following discussion indicates, Australian university construction schools are at risk.

There are specific educational practices, structures and values in the university construction curriculum that prevent the recognition, celebration and enrichment of diversity. This paper examines a number of these specific practices and structures in some depth, using as a template the curriculum and learning culture of one university construction school, RMIT University, Melbourne.
THE CONSTRUCTION CURRICULUM

The construction management curriculum at RMIT University is developed and managed in a similar manner to most other Australian universities. It is overseen by a number of internal and external bodies. There are a number of key external groups providing regular review and advice. These groups consist of the accrediting bodies and organisations that provide professional affiliations for construction graduates. These organisations undertake regular, extensive reviews of curriculum content and course delivery and provide industry advice and input. Alongside these organisations are course advisory committees of industry practitioners which also provide on-going advice and input. Internal curriculum controls are provided by teaching and learning support units, course development committees and regular course renewal and procedure monitoring groups. The construction management curriculum at RMIT University is similar to that offered in other Australian universities and subject to similar rigours and evaluation. Consequently Australian university construction schools deliver a generic product – an education of curriculum sameness. The very rigours that ensure the curriculum is relevant to local industry creates a culturally-bereft curriculum with no recognition of the intercultural dimensions of the actual student population. Battersby (2002) argues that Australian universities are “uniquely placed to shape global society by fostering critical engagement with issues of cultural difference, inequality and forms of social, political and economic injustice” (p. 152). Yet Australian university construction schools are more concerned with the attraction and retention of greater numbers of fee-paying international students based upon the commercial imperative of reduced government funding, than with the opportunity to create a framework of heightened global awareness. There is little evidence in the RMIT construction curriculum documentation that this global awareness has been addressed adequately. Existing courses provide education for the “here and now problems” of the local construction industry. One example may be found in how housing technology is studied. Materials and technologies taught reflect local standards, products, culture and legislation. Construction products, technologies, cultural dimensions or standards peculiar to Australian conditions, markets and culture are explored with little attention given to housing construction in other countries, especially those housing large numbers of the world’s population.
The Australian government’s higher education agenda recommends that Australian universities demonstrate their responsiveness to the education market in order to compete for government funding (Nelson, 2005). There is a grave danger that this competition will produce an even greater incentive to maintain the status quo of curriculum offerings in university construction schools. In the chase for the dwindling public education dollar matters of internationalism of the curriculum and global good governance lose out. Kalantzis and Cope (2002) argue that the internationalisation of higher education is a critical element within a broader framework, but one that allows universities to assume an intellectual leadership role. They argue that culture is the “negotiated interplay of differences” (p. 18) and within this interplay, common understandings can be developed. These common understandings can contribute to the resolution of problems and dilemmas not previously encountered. Promoting the diversity of the student cohort allows this interplay to occur. It is critical that university construction schools review curriculum offerings to match the diversity of the student cohort and in recognition of the requirements of construction based on the needs of a global market to promote such interplay. Singh (2002) notes that the opportunity to enable students to engage in differing, local life-worlds through student-to-student interaction and through the exploration of culturally different learning styles is currently lost in the stigmatising of non-domestic students as backward, uncreative, uncritical or rote learners: learners who are here for the “bit of paper.”

The “generic product” offered by Australian university construction schools has traditionally been acceptable, even highly sought after, in an international market place that thrived upon geographic proximity, cheaper comparable fees, pent-up demand and a view of education as a knowledge-transmission model. Most recently the “generic product” has become a “cash cow” model which has contributed to making the product even more generic, even more culturally bereft. This development of a factory-like, outcome-assured commercial service becomes self-perpetuating; as the diversity of the international student population increases, so the imperative to produce an acceptable product that is utility-based and outcomes-oriented increases. What decreases is the imperative to address issues of global need and issues of a global construction environment. With the globalisation of education capital the pressure upon Australian university construction schools to attract and
retain this capital is immense – curriculum offerings that question and challenge the fundamental premises upon which the construction curriculum is based are not commercially viable – the safest courses are those that steer clear of challenging agendas, those that deliver a “safe” generic product that does not overtly challenge fundamental beliefs and does not enter into any debate about global construction environments. One example from the RMIT curriculum is the failure to address building processes and conduct used in international countries. Building processes that exploit third world resources, land or labour are simply not addressed and placed in the too-hard basket. Processes such as planning, bribery or local payments for materials and land is seen as a social science or ethics issue that has no place in the construction curriculum. Even questions of shelter as a basic human right are not readily evident. Yet these are the very questions that are at the heart of global challenges in construction. This will eventually become a problem for Australian university construction schools. As economic factors such as cheaper fee structures disappear and the cost of university study in Australia more closely matches other non-Australian universities; the prevalence of on-line and off-campus study decreases the advantage of geographic proximity; and the South-East Asian nations develop a university infrastructure of their own, the quality of the Australian university construction product will become vital in the decision making of potential students. Construction programmes that have failed to address the needs of international students and their construction environments will lose out to institutions that actively promote international programmes.

THE CONSTRUCTION CURRICULUM ORGANISATION.

The organisation of the RMIT construction programme creates a climate of curriculum isolation. It is a structure Graff (2003) calls the mixed message curriculum; he states:

If we deliberately tried to create a system that favoured the few and kept the majority on the periphery, we could hardly do better than the mixed message curriculum (p. 28).

The curriculum for many international construction university students is so isolated and bereft of points of connection that students quickly learn that intellectual inquiry
is not something one internalises and make part of one’s identity, but something
determined by the whims of the various lecturers in the course. International students
often resort to the familiar practice of giving their lecturers what they “want,” even if
this is in conflict with what they know to be true learning. The curriculum then, is
not a coherent intellectual world with defined conventions and practices that are
clearly understandable by all, but an endless series of lecturers’ preferences that must
be conformed to, or at the very least, “psyched out.” These practices and conventions
change from subject to subject within the construction programme. Whilst some
academic staff want the student population to recall and give back information
without interpretation or judgement, others want complete expression of the students’
own ideas. Graff (2003) calls this the “volleyball effect.” He notes that academic
intellectual culture should be a conversation rather than an inventory of facts, ideas
and methods. Most international students experience the construction curriculum not
as a connected conversation but as a disconnected series of courses that convey wildly
mixed messages (Cohen, McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993). Within this structure
construction learning at RMIT becomes course and lecturer specific, and application
to the wider world and its global challenges is lost.

Without the ability to connect their learning, international construction students are
denied the creativity to develop multiple ways of thinking and working, and most
importantly, problem-solving. Kalantzis and Cope (2002) summarise this connection:

Learning is a matter of transformation. Students don’t go to university to
stay the same: rather they go to make themselves into new people (p. 29).

Such “mixed message” curriculum isolates international construction students and
lecturers, further entrenching the gap between both groups (Richter, 1994).

The mixed-message curriculum is also evident in the way new construction courses
and subjects are introduced. Most new courses are assimilated by simply being added
to the aggregate. Graff (2003) notes that this “conveniently avoids conflicts and
dispenses with the need to rethink the curriculum as a whole” (p. 74). Whenever a
threatening innovation appears, such as environmental sustainability or OHS, it is
assimilated by adding a new lecturer or new programme, appeasing both existing staff
and innovators by providing each with a portion of the curricular turf and insulation
from each other’s material. Attempts to integrate such topics into the total curriculum are little more than lip service. The irony is that the isolation of the mixed-message curriculum defeats one of the very purposes of higher education: to expose students to a progressively comprehensible debate of opposing positions and processes.

For Australian universities to capitalise on the diversity and richness of the international student market there needs to be a re-examination of the current construction curriculum.

THE ACADEMIC CONSTRUCTION CLIMATE.

Academic discourse is the jargon and specialised terms and the manner in which problems are phrased. Construction assignments used in the construction management programme at RMIT University ask international students to cultivate problems. The presumption is that this is the best way to understand material. The starting point of most assignments and essays required is a discourse convention based upon posing a problem out of the topic. This discourse is based upon a cultural interpretation of what constitutes a problem. For many international construction students, international or domestic, the problems are unknown. As Graff (2003) notes, unless they are problems of the first kind – earning a living, preventing pollution and disease or eliminating poverty and homelessness– they are unlikely to be understood by the international student cohort to be problems. For many international students the evident issue is the solution of such problems through higher education. Yet many of the problems posed by academics and based upon academic curriculum, lack this evident issue of solution as they concern the meaning of words, Australian construction concepts or local texts and Australian building conventions. Unless Australian university construction schools adopt a more flexible approach to what constitutes academic discourse, they are likely to lose out in the international education capital market.

LEARNING AND THE CONSTRUCTION CURRICULUM.

Finally there is some evidence that Australian university staff have an inaccurate understanding of how international students learn and the influence of prior learning and cultural differences in learning (Ramburuth, 2002). Research studies into cross-
cultural approaches to learning cite a tendency to rely on generalisations and anecdotal evidence (Marton, Dall’Alba and Tse 1993; Kimber and Gow, 1991). Australian universities, despite the increasing number of international student enrolments, have failed to accurately accommodate differences in learning orientations. Gatfield and Gatfield (1994) for example, highlight the perception amongst Australian higher education staff that Asian students are “relentless rote learners, surface learners, syllabus dependent, passive and lacking in initiative, not expressive of opinions, and lacking in independence” (p. 3). This perception often masks any problems international students may have with assessment tasks or problem-solving exercises. Although specific research into Australian construction schools is lacking in this area, it would be naive to presume that construction academics are quarantined from such perceptions. Australian university academics have come to rely upon generalisations about how international students learn and the perceived deficiencies in this type of learning (Ramburuth, 2002). Until there is an honest assessment of the perceptions of international construction students as learners, and in-depth efforts to address these perceptions, the position of international students in Australian construction schools will remain fragile.

CONCLUSION
To date Australian university construction schools have capitalised on external factors as drawcards – the “cheapness” of their construction degrees by comparison to the U.K. or U.S.A.; the perceived safety of their campuses; the proximity to Asia (and home); the friendly non-discriminatory climate off-campus; the high ‘western’ quality and accreditation of the construction qualification; and the established international student networks on most Australian campuses. But the focus is shifting. As external factors change, the focus will shift towards internal factors such as curriculum, quality of teaching and research standards.

In the past international construction students have selected Australian institutions on the basis of both their quality of teaching and research. It is likely this may not continue. The availability of more full-fee places and a performance-based research funding model will enable Australian universities to compete for the most able international students. As Marginson (2005) notes, “for the Australian sandstone universities their institutional status will be a more important source of discretionary
resources than global business acumen” (p. 11). But even with attractive scholarships and collaborative research opportunities there is no guarantee that the international construction students will come. Given that capital and globalisation will allow the best students to search the world for the best deal, Australian construction schools may be backing themselves into a losing corner. And, as this paper has argued, the barriers to diversity may act not only as a deterrent to the most able students but also to the high volume international enrolments focussing upon bargain degrees. A great deal of curriculum review and research must be undertaken to address these barriers.

To attract high calibre international construction students Australian universities have to provide a vastly different educational experience than what appears to be currently on offer. Australian university construction schools need to embrace global cultural diversity in all their teaching and research capacity. There needs to be significant research into curriculum design within our construction schools that focuses upon incorporating such diversity and developing opportunities for cultural awareness. At present the balance is still in Australia’s favour but the curriculum, climate and cultural issues highlighted in this paper may just tip that balance. The resulting ramifications will impact not only on Australian university construction schools, but on the very future of Australia as a global education entity.

REFERENCES


Learner: Cultural, Psychological and Contextual Influences (pp. 29-41). Hong Kong: CERC and ACER.


