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International students in transnational mobility: intercultural connectedness with domestic and international peers, institutions and the wider community

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International students' connectedness with their peers, institutions and the broader community significantly affects their learning and wellbeing. It is important to understand their multiple desires for intercultural connectedness in order to nurture it. This paper analyses the motives and nature of international students' intercultural connectedness. It is based on a study that includes more than 150 interviews and fieldwork with international students and staff from 25 vocational education colleges in Australia. Drawing on Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory as a conceptual framework, the study found international students' motivation to engage in intercultural connectedness is linked to not only their desire for respect and recognition for intellectual, cultural and linguistic capacities and diversities but also for employment aspirations. The research shows various dimensions in which intercultural engagement is seen to encompass not only empathy, sociability and equity but also employability. The findings suggest meaningful interaction is essentially bound to reciprocal learning.

Keywords: international students; international education; student mobility; student engagement; intercultural interaction

Introduction

International student mobility has become a notable feature of tertiary education over the last 20 years. The development of intercultural, cosmopolitan or social capital is often among the key factors that motivate students to engage in cross-border education. At the same time, fostering global competence for home students is also often cited to be the priority of universities, especially in Anglo-European (Europe and North America, Australia and New Zealand) countries. Both international and domestic graduates often find themselves in interconnected and intercultural contexts when they participate in the workforce. Therefore intercultural competence is an increasingly important indicator of graduate employability. Yet previous research

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suggests that the engagement between international and domestic students, which has great potential to contribute to enhancing intercultural competence for all students, is still minimal and far from satisfactory (Arkoudis et al. 2013; Cotton, George, and Joyner 2013; Leask 2009).

This paper is derived from a four-year research project funded by the Australian Research Council that includes more than 150 interviews with international students and staff as well as fieldwork in dual sector universities and vocational education and training (VET) colleges in three states of Australia. Unlike the higher education (HE) sector, the structural context in many VET institutes appears to preclude the condition for contact between international and domestic students as classrooms are often segregated. Given the nature of most VET programmes, there are some important differences between the domestic and international cohorts. In the case of domestic students, most are already employed in the vocation that they are studying before enrolment, and in most cases domestic students are employed as apprentices. Therefore it is common for domestic students to attend colleges on a part-time or block release basis. In contrast, international students are expected to study full-time as part of their visa requirement. In some private colleges in Australia, their entire study body consists of international students only (Tran 2013b) as their main market is international students. Despite some good initiatives to facilitate the connectedness between international and domestic students in many VET institutes, these structural conditions inhibit the interaction between international and domestic and the opportunity for all students to develop intercultural competence. Even though there are currently 149,785 international student enrolments in VET (AEI 2015) and VET ranks second, behind HE, in terms of the volume of international students, to date there has been little research on the engagement of this cohort. This paper responds to this original and critical gap in the literature by exploring the connectedness with the host communities of this important but often neglected group of international students.

In order to understand the nature of international student connectedness and create a condition to nurture it, it is important to understand the motives underpinning it. The experiences of international students in the research show that at the centre of their desire for meaningful intercultural engagement is a complex fluid interconnection of language, culture and identity. The motives for international students in this study to engage in intercultural interactions at colleges and in the local community closely relate to their desire for respect and recognition for individual, intellectual, cultural and linguistic capacities and diversities. Notably, this paper echoes the literature that sees intercultural engagement as encompassing empathy, sensitivity, sociability and equity but importantly shows how international students' aspiration for intercultural engagement is interconnected with the issue of employability.

The findings of this research show that the factors that preclude meaningful connectedness exist on two levels: first in some cases, international students are not provided with favourable conditions for engagement; second, interaction happens but at a surface level and there is little meaningful engagement so that reciprocal learning for those involved can happen. This indicates that in addition to providing the conditions for interaction, meaningful connections and engagement need to be nurtured. International students' meaningful engagement is reciprocal and moves beyond the opportunity to interact with domestic and other international peers to the possibility of contributing and sharing knowledge that can enhance mutual learning and intercultural development for all.

The term 'international students' is used in this article to refer to students who are pursuing a qualification in an Australian institution but are not citizens or permanent residents of Australia. In using the term 'international student', we are not essentialising them as a homogenous entity.

International students and intercultural relations

Intercultural relations are defined as the new cultural dimensions and perspectives emerging when an individual engages in a different culture (Ozbay 1993). This is a broad concept that appears to be intimately linked to inter-group tensions and harmony. Through transnational mobility international students experience a learning journey through which they can increase their awareness of cultural diversity and of different modes of learning, living and behaviour, appropriate their understandings and possibly reposition themselves. International students also have the potential to contribute to this interactive intercultural process and enrich their host communities through their own personal resources and diversity. Much of the literature, however, appears to position international students' adaptation to intercultural process as *coping* rather than *mediating* or *negotiating* experience. International students' adaptive *coping* processes tend to be discussed predominantly in relation with their self-perceived negative feelings or others' stereotyped assumptions of their ways of being (Ozbay 1993; Redmond 2000; Yoo, Matsumoto, and LeRoux 2006). That is, a dominant stream of literature tends to indicate that international students are portrayed or self-position as being unfit and with a need to draw on various coping strategies to conform to 'standards' in intercultural processes. However, their capability and potential to exercise personal agency and mediate or negotiate different intercultural dimensions embedded in the complex interchange web seems to be overlooked.

Research has found evidence about the relationship between the interaction between international and domestic students and their sense of belonging and their academic success (Glass and Westmont 2014). The impact of such intercultural interactions is not only on enriching their intercultural

experience but can be extended to future educational and occupational decisions (Jon 2013). The engagement of international and domestic students and intercultural interactions has been assumed to be shaped by a variety of factors such as cultural knowledge and awareness, language ability, patterns of behaviour (e.g. language, customs and communication styles), communication skills, cognitive ability and personal attitudes (tolerance for ambiguity and so on) (Redmond 2000; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002). In particular, much research highlights that language aspects tend to create major difficulties for international students in intercultural interactions in English-medium institutions and host countries (Lacina 2002; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002; Wakimoto 2007). According to Lacina (2002), international students' accents and use of different expressions interfere with their intergroup communication and socialisation in the new environment in US universities. In addition, the range of vocabularies, the use of slang by the host communities and cultural variations in verbal and non-verbal communication patterns are regarded as inhibiting factors facing international students in intercultural interactions. As a result, several authors tend to indicate that these language challenges associated with cultural barriers may lead to international students' negative self-perceived feelings such as being awkward, stressed and anxious in intercultural communication (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002).

On the other hand, other research points to domestic students' unwillingness to work in intercultural groups (Cotton, George, and Joyner 2013) and their lack of motivation to engage with international students as important obstacles to the interaction of both groups. In particular, a US study finds that US nationals' negative attitudes and a lack of cultural sensitivity have been cited by international students as the most prevalent barriers for effective intercultural communication (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002). Some other studies maintain that members of the dominant group of native speakers of English may develop adverse emotional responses in intercultural encounters with international students who do not speak English as a native language (Cotton, George, and Joyner 2013; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002; Wiseman and Koester 1993). For example, a survey of 154 students enrolled in two big US universities shows that many American students reported feeling uncomfortable, impatient and frustrated when encountering communication difficulties with international students on campus (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002). In addition, a common discourse exists portraying international students as 'outsiders' who possess different values, norms and patterns of behaviours, which may lead to miscommunication with domestic students and staff. Once international students self-position and are positioned in such deficit ways, they become vulnerable to withdrawal, social isolation, prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behaviours, which have detrimental effects on their wellbeing and safety in the host communities.

Yet, an emerging body of literature points to home students' awareness of the positive benefits of engaging in mixed-nationality group work (Haines and Bos 2012; Montgomery 2009; Trahar and Hyland 2011). Based on focus groups with domestic and international students and staff at a UK University, Trahar and Hyland's (2011, 626–30) research found that some domestic students feel positive and 'personally rewarded' in cross-cultural group work as this offers the condition to build new friendships and enhance intercultural capabilities. In a similar vein, Haines and Bos (2012) research into an international classroom in a Dutch University indicated that Dutch students recognise the value of working with culturally diverse students as increasing their intercultural contact and knowledge of differences, which helps them grow personally and professionally. But these benefits might not come automatically when international and domestic students are placed together in group work. Therefore careful planning and instruction are needed to create and nurture the conditions for both groups to recognise and capitalise on these benefits for their academic and personal development.

Blumer's symbolic interactionist theory as an analytical framework

This paper utilises Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism theory as an analytical framework to interpret international students' aspirations for intercultural engagement. This framework posits people as members of their social networks, who develop their identities through interactions with others around them such as parents, siblings, teachers, administrators, classmates and members of diverse communities within and beyond the institutional environment. There are three assumptions that underpin Blumer's symbolic interactionism. First, individuals act towards things, including each other, on the basis of meanings they attach to these things. Second, these meanings are derived from social interactions with others. That is, the meanings are social creations formed *in* and *through* activities of people as they interact, and derived by the individual from that interaction. Third, these meanings are managed and transformed through an interpretive process that people use to make sense of and mediate the things that they encounter. Blumer views human beings as agents with capacity to develop symbolic use of language to create and communicate meanings that produce shared meanings and a common response in interaction with others.

The tenet of these assumptions is that meanings play their part in action through the process of self-interaction between the 'mind' and the 'self', where the mind is a result of an exchange of social acts. Drawing on the work of Mead (1934), who laid the foundations of symbolic interactionism, and other empirical research on international students along this theoretical orientation, such as Grimshaw and Sears (2008), Gu, Schweisfurth and Day (2010) and Pham and Saltmarsh (2013), the tradition sees social interactions

as being central to the formation of the Self, and explains that individuals develop their sense of 'self' in interpreting and reacting to the feelings and expectations of those they interact with.

The most important idea of symbolic interactionism is that individuals and the social contexts in which they locate themselves are inseparable. Meanings change depending on the context for the individual and their world is best understood through their interpretation of reality in the social contexts. The emphasis of research through the lens of symbolic interactions is upon the nature of individuals and their social interactions, and recognition that reciprocal interaction influences behaviour and characters of people and society. Informed by this theoretical underpinning, our analysis of interview data focuses on investigating the meanings of a situation from the perspectives of the individual or groups of individuals.

We orient our data analysis in three dimensions. First, how international students interpret meanings of intercultural engagements and act in a VET college environment. We are interested in listening to what international students know about their world as a VET student in Australian colleges and what they believe to be important in relation to intercultural engagement. We are concerned with the point of view of the student in situations of interaction with other students, international and domestic, lecturers and administrators and wider community. Second, we unpack the processes of international student interactions based on their interpretation and responses to social environment. We align with the symbolic interactionism perspectives by emphasising processes rather than structures, but we pay attention to societal and cultural norms within institutions because we want to understand how these processes influence students' points of view. These processes are significant in understanding how international students define and interpret each other's acts which direct their own behaviours. Third, we want to understand how international students interpret the cultural values of intercultural engagement on the basis of their goals and their perceptions of the consequences of their actions. That is how they see their 'selves' as occupying a particular position as members of their community.

The study

This paper arises from a four-year research programme funded by the Australian Research Council. The study involved more than 150 participants including international students, teachers and course managers from 25 institutes in New South Wales, Queensland and Victoria, Australia. The research aims to analyse international students' investment in Australian VET and engagement experiences and teachers' practices in catering for international students.

Twenty-five VET colleges and dual sector universities that offer VET courses were selected for this research on the basis that they enrol

international students. We contacted the international programme directors of those institutes and asked them to circulate an invitation to participate in this research to potential participants. Those who were interested in participating in the study were invited to an interview at a place and time convenient to them. Most interviews were organised at the institution's library. The face-to-face interviews which lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, were digitally recorded and transcribed. With consent from the participants, we took part in various student activities and visited them at their workplaces. Participants' names and their institutes are kept anonymous.

The students' national origins and courses are summarised in Table 1. Further background information, course and type of college of individual students, from whose interview excerpts were taken, are provided in the section 'Findings and Discussion of Findings'.

We read the interview transcripts several times and coded the interview data using NVIVO software. This allowed us to systematically manage a large quantity of in-depth interviews, audio interview tracks, observation notes and participant profiles while quantifying the frequency of key words and themes as well as generalising any trends. The preliminary analysis was inductive and based on the themes and patterns (Corbin and Strauss 2014)

Table 1. The demographic features of the international student participants.

Nation of origin	Number of interviewees	VET course	Number of interviewees
South Asia		Food & Hospitality	40
India	22	Management & Commerce	10
Other	2	Building and Carpentry	16
Northeast Asia		Information Technology	9
China	18	Hairdressing	8
Korea	10	Community Welfare Work	5
Japan	2	Automotive	4
Southeast Asia and the Pacific		Other	13
Vietnam	18		
Other (Malaysia, Philippine, Thailand)	7		
Mauritius	5		
Europe and the UK	12		
South America	3		
Other	6		
Total	105		105

that emerged from the coding from NVIVO. Drawing on the empirical data, a literature review and Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism theory, this analysis focuses on the processes of intercultural interaction between international students and their international peers, domestic students, teachers and administrative staff, and the Australian community; reciprocal intercultural learning and students' sense of connectedness or disconnectedness; and the role of English language as a mediating factor in conceptualising and experiencing of intercultural interactions.

The research is located within the *researcher-as-insider* perspective. Our personal experiences as Vietnamese international students for whom English is not their first language, and as teachers of international students in different Australian institutions provide us with insights into the research topic and help to construct our identity as insiders in this area. However, the critical reflective role that we have built up through various research projects on international education has been drawn on to create a balanced approach and minimise issues of 'insider' bias in data collection and interpretation. Also our former status of international students to some extent helps us develop an intimate understanding of the experiences our participants shared. At the same time, our current professional responsibility, involved in teaching the diverse student body, including international students, allows us to bring a pedagogic lens to uncovering the deeper aspects of their connectedness.

Findings and discussion

Intercultural learning and living experience

For the majority of student participants in this study, the meaning of intercultural engagement involves being exposed to and immersed in diverse cultures of Australia and other nationalities. A common motive for interactions cited by the participants is to develop an international learning experience, that is, an intercultural engagement that allows them to be exposed and immersed in diverse cultures. This can take shape in various ways, primarily through communicative interactions and building upon real connections and friendships. To them, this means having real opportunities to interact with domestic and other international students in the classroom, and in social activities within and external to college campus. They view these opportunities as conditions where they can learn new cultural knowledge as well as become aware of their own cultural norms. They seek development of interpersonal intercultural skills, cultural awareness of their own and that of other, particularly Australian, cultures. However, the extent of developing such skills and awareness is limited by the environment and is influenced by others surrounding them; how they can actually engage and are motivated to engage is a response to how they perceive this environment.

The various responses and experiences, emotions that these students encounter suggest that the degree to which they are motivated depends on the experiences of their adaptation and the process through which they can adapt or fit in with this new culture. Each participant's experience is different depending on his/her personal and situational factors.

The students desire opportunities to be exposed to local people (students, staff and people in the community) and learn and appreciate different cultures and languages (particularly English, but also other languages). They see mixed classes and/or placements in workplaces with local people as opportunities to be exposed to sociocultural nuances and unfamiliar contexts that help them to develop intercultural competencies. The following excerpts illustrate a desire to engage with domestic peers for cultural understanding:

I think mixed class of both international and local students is nicer because in that way I can learn Australian culture more. I want to learn Australian culture more because I'm in Australia. (Japanese, Marketing, Private College)

I mean by hanging out with local students, you get to learn more about the Australian customs that you can't really learn in school. (Korean, Hospitality, Public College)

These excerpts suggest that the motivation to interact with domestic peers is rooted in these students' aspiration for intercultural enrichment and skill transformation. The students refer to development of cultural understandings and Australian social contexts, and mutual learning among international students themselves and with their domestic counterparts. This is in line with the literature that highlights the potential benefits associated with the engagement with domestic students in terms of cultural, social and language development (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010).

However, unlike previous studies, in this research, the participants also make explicit links between the interaction with domestic peers and their employability. There are two main factors associated with this. First, they perceive that engaging with local peers helps them develop relevant knowledge and skills to work with diverse local people and the Australian way of 'doing' in the work environment that they imagine to find themselves in after graduation. Second, the opportunity to connect with local peers and colleagues enhances their local networks and local understanding, which is useful for finding work placements and jobs:

Study with locals is always better because you will know how to live in Australia. The best thing is that you can practice your English skills and become used to local people, how they think about things. For hospitality, the important thing is that you understand your customers. Communication is very important. You have to get better ideas of how the local people think. It may be better for your work. (Chinese, Cookery, Private College)

You get to meet friends and like colleagues here at TAFE who are already living here and have always been here. I think that opens up more corridors like with work placements and stuff like that, you get to know them. (English, Cabinet making, Public College)

It seems that mixed classes of domestic and international students are preferred by not only students who are in stand-alone classes of international students, but also those who experience classes that consist mainly of domestic students. For example, this student reveals:

I would rather have more international students in my class because it's a marketing subject. They need to have global opinions. International students have different backgrounds to provide their own knowledge from their country. So they bring that into the class and we have more discussion and we learn more things from other countries. (Vietnamese, Marketing, Public College)

In this quote, this student stresses that due to the nature of his marketing discipline, the teaching and learning would be enriched if there were more international students in the class. He feels the opportunity for students from diverse national backgrounds to share and learn from each other will optimise their chance to develop global competence and perspectives, which are essential to be successful in their professional field and future employability. In this regard, international students are positioned not only as cultural resources but also as intellectual and skills resources. It seems that these students perceive 'conditions of contact' as providers of opportunities to foster meaningful interactions among class members in international classrooms, to enable them to capitalise the benefit of shared learning from a variety of resources in enhancing students' vocational skills and knowledge and broadening their views about international practices (Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2010; Tran and Nyland 2013). This may also be attributable to the vocational emphasis of the VET sector in Australia, where VET students, particularly those in service industry, such as marketing, hairdressing and hospitality, are often expected to engage with clients from a variety of backgrounds in their future profession. Therefore the opportunity to work with people other than from their own culture is necessary for them to develop relevant interpersonal, social and intercultural skills needed to work in a multicultural environment. These findings suggest that there are both transformative and instrumental motivations for interactions with peers from different cultures to develop intercultural skills and global perspectives pertinent to their future profession, which might be interrelated and complement each other.

These findings, corroborate with Kim (2005) in that the processes in which international students try to engage with their college environment is a continuous negotiation and mediation, where they analyse their own

competencies, culture and orient themselves to fitting in with the new environment. The students in our research seem to regard interaction with domestic peers and other international students as a resourceful means to accumulate the relevant cultural, professional and language skills and knowledge and, importantly, to transform themselves and advance their positional advantage in the world of work. Their desire for interactions echoes with the broader motivations to undertake international education as captured in the literature including academic development, self-formation, the possibility for international work experience, cultural enrichment and social transformation (Marginson 2014; Tran 2011; Tran and Nyland 2011).

Reciprocal intercultural learning and connectedness/disconnectedness

According to Mead (1934), meanings are signified in three ways: by the person who makes the gesture, by the person who receives and interprets the gestures and a joint action where there is articulation of both persons. The international students in this research perceived domestic students' gestures, as indicated by their attitudes and actions, to be lacking in interest to interact with them, which they attribute to lack of empathy and cultural openness and a communication gap due to language barriers. They see domestic students, international students, staff and community members as 'social objects' to engage with in social interactions, and believe that such interactions will enable them to reach their 'abstract objects' of multicultural diversity and job preparations (Blumer 1969). Both of these objects constitute elements of intercultural engagement; however, their meanings differ for different individuals depending on whom they interact with. Similar to findings by Gu and Schweisfurth (2006), the motivations of these students are largely dependent on the power relationships that they have with other students and teachers.

As discussed earlier on in this paper, many students experience segregated classrooms, which make them feel that they are different, singled-out and excluded, and prevent them from actively making contributions to their college community. They feel that opportunities to engage with local students allow them to share their experiences and obtain advice in a reciprocal manner. They aspire to learning about Australian culture but also desire reciprocity of exchange and acceptance of their knowledge, language and culture. They feel that such reciprocity can come from being informed of each other's cultural norms and perspectives, which would allow for professional and personal ways of interacting, communicating and working with each other. Reciprocity can only occur if all group members are equally respected. This is largely missing in many situations where international students perceive domestic students' actions and attitudes as those of superiority towards them:

Sometimes they [local students] feel superior. When I talk with my international friends, with my Vietnamese friends there, they also think that domestic students think they are superior to us. Sometimes local students make us feel like they really belong here but we do not. (Filipino, Hospitality, Public College)

Maybe it's because they can understand each other more. Especially in our communication subject it feels like the class is only for certain domestic students and international students do not belong to that group. (Filipino, Hospitality, Public College)

The excerpts above suggest that the lack of the reciprocal recognition between domestic and international students is a critical impediment for the enhancement of their learning and intercultural experience. As discussed elsewhere in this paper, because international students are viewed within a 'deficit' frame and problematised in the interaction with domestic counterparts (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002; Wiseman and Koester 1993), the motivation, attitudes and intercultural skills of domestic students tend to be made less explicit. As a result, the benefits of adaptability, intercultural learning and change among the domestic students, or lack thereof, tend to be less emphasised than international students' adaptation to a foreign learning environment. This practice misses out the 'very real possibilities of mutual learning' for all students (Ryan 2011, 644).

A sense of lack of reciprocity is also experienced by students in their engagement with teachers. As the following quote shows, the student feels that her teacher shows a lack of interest in her cultural and experiential background. She positions herself as an adult student who brings along a wealth of knowledge and experience in community service from India to the class community but is positioned by her teacher as 'nobody' in the process of knowledge building in the class. Leask (2009) used the metaphor 'beside me is an empty chair' to refer to the common situation when international students are ignored in the international classroom. Various research highlights the value of international students' cultural, experiential, professional and language backgrounds as potential resources for all students to develop global competence and make transnational intellectual connections (Arkoudis et al. 2013; Cotton, George, and Joyner 2013; Tran, 2013a, 2013b). Yet in reality these assets are not effectively validated to optimise the learning for all:

There's always a bit of talk about how we must learn from each other and all that sort of thing. But I don't see how it really goes beyond lip service. I mean, this is the thing that used to really annoy me sometimes in class because the teacher would, say, give an example of something from a so called third world country. First of all I don't even agree with that term. Secondly, you've got students from all over the world in your classroom so why not ask them? Hey do you know anything about this in your country? If you

try to say something, the teacher would, and this has happened to me a couple of times, strike me down, or shut me up. She doesn't care whether international students might know something and might have something to give. I really think the teachers themselves don't want to learn anything from the new students that come in to their classes. (Indian, Community Welfare, Public College)

This quote also illustrates the marginalisation of international students that stems from privileging Anglo-European knowledge as grounding for knowledge construction in the classroom. This leads to student participants' perception that they have to acculturate to Anglo-European norms as a response to the segregation they experience, which entrenches their sense of inferiority compared to local students, and perception of being different and excluded. This practice echoes Matthews and Sidhu's (2005) argument about the imperialism characteristic of Australian international education, which advocates the 'superiority' of Euro-centric academic practices while marginalising different and unconventional ways of meaning making (Matthews and Sidhu 2005).

In a similar vein, some students feel that they are only truly engaged once their contribution of knowledge, ideas and skills counts. For these students, meaningful engagement moves beyond simply the opportunity to interact with domestic peers and other international peers to being able to contribute to the intercultural and intellectual development of those involved in the learning community:

Well, I think when people get to know me they realise a lot of things. So it's a bit of cultural information for them, a form of cultural contribution to the Australians and to everybody in general in this college. (Mexican, Horticulture, Public College)

It seems that the longing for intercultural learning and living experiences (discussed in previous section) gives these students a sense of outward achievement, but is also associated with an inward desire to feel connected with those within the institution and the wider Australian community. Their thirst for belonging in the institutional community and the local community is what motivates them to interact and their ability to interact in return gives them the sense of belonging. Their motivation is evident in various ways. Their aspiration for feeling connected to the classroom community parallels the desire for recognition of their cultural knowledge and the potential to be a valuable contributor or co-constructor of cultural knowledge and skills in a mutual learning process. This is not simply the mutual recognition of their potential contributions but making them feel included and empowered, which might be useful in helping all students develop trans-cultural knowledge and perspective (Leask 2009; Tran 2013b, 2013a), as well as enabling a more ethno-relative perspective through sharing and learning about cultural difference.

According to Blumer (1969), a person interacts, indicates or interprets meanings by virtue of the 'self', that is, she can be an object of her own actions. In this study, the self is exemplified through recognition of being an international student in an Australian college, an aspiring global citizen, a responsible person for her own nation, an intercultural agent or a marginalised person. The student acts according to the extent that she recognises herself as each of these 'selves'. The students who see themselves as global citizens want to contribute to their own society, to the institution that they attend or the community that they are members of. The students who see themselves as intercultural agents want to experience multiculturalism. Those who feel marginalised see themselves as racialised, victimised and excluded. Those who see themselves as workers want to attain the cultural skills to equip them for the Australian job market. As Mead (1934) explains, the person sees the 'self' through the role that she takes. In order to do this, she becomes an object that she attributes meanings to, and sees from a position on the outside. Although the person engages in social interaction, that interaction depends on the vantage points that she sees from being the other.

It is not surprising that students in this research seem to gain comfort and understanding when they are with other international students and thus use these opportunities to interact with the other international peers, understand different cultures and improve their English skills. This seems to suggest that the 'internationals sticking together' is a response to international students' perceived lack of empathy and engagement by local students and their need to build friendship with peers. This friendship seems to be based on common backgrounds and situations, which they perceive to be part of the 'difference' between them and domestic students. This reflects the two sides to identities that international students encounter: inherited cultural identities, which include the stereotypes and imposed values, and the creative cultural identities types, which are associated with the manipulation and subversion of established notions (Holliday, Hyde, and Kullman 2004). For many of these international students, there is a constant struggle between trying to create a new identity that is associated with being a student in Australia that they seek to represent, and the inherited stereotype identity of an international student.

In Mead's terms, the actions of domestic students give rise to a perception of cultural indifference by international students and effective symbolic interaction for mutual role taking required in intercultural interactions can not happen. Mutual role taking activities are thus seen by international students through the *sine qua non* of communication, in this case the use of English (Blumer 1969). Using English language as a mediating space, they try to tell the world about their own cultures, linguistic capital and how they can contribute to the institutional community. Their need for a sense of connectedness is seen through their desired contribution to the institution and

local community; their identity is in how they see themselves fitting in with the others in these communities. The intercultural interactions that they seek are no more than their own desire to create their own identities and to belong in a diverse world.

The role of English in intercultural engagement experiences

Following from desire for a deep and meaningful connection with domestic students, the international students in this study saw English as a medium for understanding different ways of interacting, communicating and working with other students and teachers. The conditions for contact that they believe help them to improve their English are based on their objective of acquiring an Australian cultural experience, and also serve to facilitate their study and enhance their employability. Much research highlights that aspects of language tend to create barriers for many international students in intercultural interactions in English medium institutions and host countries (Lacina 2002; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern 2002). The language barriers that students in this study perceive are as much as their lack as the lack in others in welcoming a different kind of language that is not English.

According to (Goffman 1990), who presents a more structuralist vision of symbolic interactionism, our association with different social groups allows us to carve out our own identity. The experiences of these international students suggest that their aspiration to assimilate to the Australian community implies a kind of selflessness in which they try to find something that they can hold onto, which is English language proficiency and the assumption that English can connect them with others:

There are quite a few international students and a few local students as well. So that's a very good combination for me in the sense that not only to be inclined to the international students all the time but they have a bit of connection between the real Aussie students which is sometimes, in terms of language, spoken English, you can always learn from the other if you ask. (Vanuatu, IT, Public College)

Thus some students seek the friendship and compatriotism of other international students, while at the same time resisting the temptation to always converse in their own language. This is echoed in the comfort and confidence that they seem to have in speaking English with other international students and they use it to build upon the skills so that they can communicate with local people. For example, this student reveals:

I want to make more friends, Vietnamese friends but I want to speak in English. Vietnamese students gather together here but we just speak in English. (Vietnamese, Resort Management, Public College)

Similar to the findings of Pellegrino (2005) about the self-image that occurs when a person is in a second language environment, some students in this study find positive experiences in being able to articulate thoughts or desires with local students and other international students; for others who cannot, they feel patronised and unfairly treated when teachers and other local students react to them in certain ways. Thus, these students who experience such deprivation of language and culture tend to desire the English language proficiency in order to fill in the loss of communicative ability and to fit in with the host community. Beyond feeling like ‘others’, many students see interactions using English as means of procuring fair treatment towards them in relation to learning, assessment and working opportunities. For many, prejudice due to their English language deficiency, cultural differences and their international student status is real:

I think I am not good at listening and speaking English. It is the problem for me so I cannot get them [local students] to talk to me. (Korean, Accounting, Public College)

I want to study hard to make local students understand that we are international students but we can study their language. We can understand everything. Sometimes the teacher doesn’t think that international students can understand her and she sometimes talks down at us. It seems like she doesn’t want to talk to us because she doesn’t think that we can understand her and when we talk to her, sometimes she like doesn’t seem to care. (Vietnamese, Resort Management, Public College)

The student in the second quote highlights two points. First, English language is used for mediating interactions and thus has to be acquired within the interaction environment rather than simply as a skill to be learnt. Learning linguistic skills, such as grammar and vocabulary, without understanding the social contexts in which English is used only result in culture shock when people are actually exposed to the intercultural environment. Instead, English learning needs to be situated in the context of interaction in order to enhance students’ communication ability because effective communication relies on understanding the social norms and values that are constructed through the use of English. This would necessitate teaching English in situational contexts that students are engaged in rather than separating the contexts from them and then expecting them to somehow understand it. Secondly, the student is critical of the fact that teachers might not have understanding and experience in how a foreign language is learnt by foreigners. This highlights that language is not a one-way process, and that, in order for English teaching to be effective, teachers need to take account of the learners and how learners may perceive English given international students’ own language and cultural background. Language is essentially about construction of meanings for the person who uses that language, which

inevitably calls upon the person's own repositories of meanings. Teaching English as if it is a set of codes not attached to a person's cultural knowledge undermines the student who is learning of his/her own cultural and literacy knowledge. It is also an ineffective way of allowing English to be understood in meaningful ways in the social contexts in which it is used.

These excerpts also suggest a much deeper identity complex than merely a desire to acquire English skills as a tool for communicating. These students' motivation to improve their English is from a perception of inferiority because of not having good English skills, which precludes them from meaningful intercultural engagement. They perceive English as essential for them to understand Australian cultural values and norms. They also perceive that English skills would project their image as more capable and similar to domestic students and teachers, which they see as important for becoming a member of the college community. The processes of learning and speaking English are situated and serve to communicate and construct meanings but also shape their point of view about themselves and their position in the college community. This would then allow them the self-confidence and self-esteem to contribute to the community, which is another way of reinforcing their sense of connection to the college community.

Summary of findings and theoretical implications

In this research, our analysis of the experiences of international students through their social interactions shows that at the centre of their motivations of intercultural interactions is a complex fluid process of interaction of language, culture and identity within a certain social context. Their status seems to be found in the solid building of that Australian world of which they seek to be a member, but their sense of personal identity resides in the periphery of that same world. The motivation for international students in this research to engage in intercultural interactions on campus and in the local community is embedded in their desire for respect and consideration for their individual, cultural and linguistic ideas and diversities. They see intercultural engagement as encompassing employability, empathy, sociability, sensitivity and equity. They desire an intercultural experience of learning and living because of the potential for reciprocity of ideas that can help them to generate and exchange knowledge and become socially responsible citizens who can contribute to the local community wherever they are.

International students' motivation for intercultural engagement is linked to how they see themselves in the world of others. The focus of interactions at both levels, interactions with others and interactions with the 'self' enables us to see not only the contexts in which students exist and the various relations that they deal with and negotiate to make meaning for their actions socially, but also the complexity of their identities as they seek to engage meaningfully in the classroom, institutional community and wider

host community. Understanding international students' viewpoints about intercultural engagement and processes of intercultural engagement, in particular how they see themselves in these processes, allows us to understand what matters to them, such as their goals, available means to achieve their goals – of which English language competency is one – their interpretation of the actions of other students and teachers, and how these aspects shape their identities and likely outcomes of their actions.

The implications for using Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism are threefold: First, it provides us with the lens to recognise that a person acts as well as responds and, in acting, they construct and guide their own actions, not just react in response to factors that operate around them, even though they have to recognise and negotiate these factors. Their ability to exercise agency for meaningful interactions is interrelated with their interpretation of the environment surrounding them. For many students, the perception of lack of empathy, sensitivity and sociability towards them places them on the periphery of the local community, and their actions are then a constant struggle for acceptance.

Second, under the premise of symbolic interactionism that we behave in terms of the meanings that things carry not the things themselves (Blumer 1969), English can be viewed as a medium through which international students can relate to domestic students, international peers, staff, administrators, workers and people in the community, rather than merely a competency that they aspire to acquire. They consider English as a platform for real formations of relations that parallel people with different language proficiencies. Within the processes of interactions, individuals interpret meanings and create new meanings for themselves (Geertz 1973), and they draw on the cultural knowledge in order to make sense of the world around them. In other words, language is constitutive and constructive in culture, which shapes people's choices and actions. Understanding language and culture as dialogical and interdependent factors provides the space to conceptualise and investigate the nature of barriers that international students may face in a foreign context rather than conceptualising these disadvantages as 'deficit'. Through the lens of symbolic interactionism, we can focus on how English language is thought of and used in those processes, which may result in real intercultural engagement or simply acculturations to a particular way of life that foster inferiority for international students and reduce potential for them to develop real connections.

Third, the use of Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism as an analytical framework allows us to centre on the interactional dynamics and processes at the interpersonal level of these international students' lives. It allows us to see how international students perceive the organisational practices of colleges and relations with teachers and other students, and how these aspects take on particular meanings, which shape their orientation, identities and sense of connectedness. It is assumed under symbolic

interactionism that to understand behaviours we must understand cultural standards or shared meanings that form context for behaviour, individual goals in that context and individual interpretation of the consequences of their various behaviours. However, as the analysis reveals, there is much contestation and different interpretation of the context, which gives rise to different behaviours. This reveals a need to further understand how meanings are embedded in the social environment that international students exist in; that is, the extent that they embed perceived social and cultural indifference in their hierarchies of meanings, which shapes their motivation to engage with others. This necessitates an extension on the framework of symbolic interactionism in future research to consider various structural contexts such as institutional structures and programme formats, in addition to relationships and social processes, as mediating factors to facilitation of intercultural engagement.

Conclusion: implications for VET policies and programmes

As stated earlier, while international students in VET are a growing and important group in international education, they are often neglected in the literature on international students. This paper thus responds to the paucity of the literature by engaging in a critical discussion of the connectedness between international and domestic students in the VET sector and its implications for students' development of intercultural competence and employability. This research shows that the current structural conditions in VET, with segregated classrooms, create significant boundaries for nurturing the engagement and mutual learning between international and domestic students. Creating the condition for interaction between international and domestic students and building meaningful learning between the two groups is essential for developing students' intercultural competence and international outlooks, which are important to VET graduates' employability in an increasingly global interconnected world. Therefore it is critical to have a coherent whole-institution approach to foster domestic and international student engagement in VET and this needs to be explicitly linked to VET institutes' core goal of enhancing graduate employability and performance in an intercultural world. While the nature of VET programmes for domestic and international students differ, both cohorts need to attend classes, so it is possible to organise theory and practice classes of mixed groups.

In addition, VET institutions should organise on-campus activities and social groups where students are provided with opportunities to mix with peers of different cultures and individual students should be recognised and given incentives for acting as intercultural peers, ambassadors or mediators on campus. It is important to give all students the opportunity to discuss in class what the intercultural activities in class and on campus mean for their academic, cultural and personal learning and their employability in the

current globalised and diverse workplaces. It is also important to integrate this goal of intercultural competence and interaction among students from diverse backgrounds at both the programme and course levels and make them explicit in course objectives. Teachers play a central role in this process, and unless teachers see the value of mutual learning through intercultural interaction and know how to facilitate this in the classroom context, this remains rhetoric.

Even though this study focuses on Australian VET, the findings in relation to the students' aspirations for intercultural engagement, employability, sociability and equity are useful for teachers and institutions across different educational levels and national contexts. In particular, there is much that can be learnt from the implications for fostering meaningful reciprocal learning between international and domestic students. These features are fundamental to teaching and learning in international classrooms within the current context of international classrooms.

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