

The Secret Lives of International PGRs: shedding light on the hidden labour of being and becoming an international student

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Research Domains

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

Abstract

This project sought to uncover the hidden labour undertaken by ‘international’ PGRs, which remains invisible to academic and professional services staff. Challenges within PGRs’ academic studies include their experience being imbued with not only pedagogic power relations in their relationships with their supervisors, but also with the legacy of a colonial past still visible in universities. This legacy manifests in the language used to them and about them: interpellated as ‘international’ students, as a homogenous group, grounded in their fee-paying status, rather than with an understanding of their diversity and the hierarchies of such a diverse group. The qualitative data gathered through 10 semi-structured interviews uncloaked the ‘hidden challenges’ international PGRs encounter and the physical and emotional labour required to face them. Outputs included a set of recommendations (a toolkit) for supervisors, departments and the university, and three fictionalised composite case studies, illustrating the experiences of the international PGR community.

Full paper

The category of ‘international students’ covers a wide diversity of individuals (in terms of cultural, geographic, linguistic and class differences) and we recognize the problematics of the term in both its homogenizing and potentially othering effects. Similarly, we recognize the potential binary it creates with ‘home’ students. We further recognize the use of the pronoun ‘they’ as potentially binarizing and othering. In this paper, we use these terms as shorthand for their institutional currency, but this does not diminish our view that language/discourse is important in the consideration of power-infused contexts such as this.

This project sought to uncover the hidden labour undertaken by ‘international’ PGRs that often remains invisible to academic and professional services staff. ‘International’ students face many challenges within and beyond their academic studies located in a country that is not their own. This project has relevance for all students and staff, but our focus on PGRs reflects the current context of our wider University Vision and Strategic Plan, which includes an explicit desire to recognise PGRs as a “vibrant, core part of our research community and integral to our research excellence, ensuring that they feel valued, supported and have a strong sense of belonging”. We are interested in how this vision conflicts with the reality experienced by ‘international’ PGRs— code for ‘non-Western’ – the very term constructing for them subject positions.

The challenges within PGRs' academic studies include their experience being imbued with not only pedagogic power relations in their relationships with their supervisors but also with the legacy of a colonial past still visible in our universities every day. This legacy is visible in the language that is used to them and about them – they are interpellated as 'international' students - as a homogenous group – grounded in their fee-paying status – rather than with an understanding of their diversity and the hierarchies of such a diverse group of people.

Our project sought the voices of international students in unclocking these 'hidden challenges' and the physical and emotional labour required to face them. An international PGR conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with international students, during which they discussed the range of challenges they encounter as well as the often hidden labour involved in dealing with them. These included but not limited to:

- An institutional discourse which labelled, positioned and 'othered' them, often disadvantageously in relation to a normative conception of 'home' students – indeed the binary of 'home'/'international' intrinsically positioned them as not being 'at home' in the university setting.
- Internal power structures and institutional racism which privilege 'whiteness' and perpetuate colonial legacies, e.g. in the names of our buildings and institutions, and in the lack of staff of colour and/or with a non-English home identity in positions of authority or represented in the curriculum (Doharty, Madriaga and Joseph-Salisbury, 2021).
- Challenges in attitudes to their languages and their language use, in the literature / theoretical frames and methodologies students were directed towards and in epistemic orientations to knowledge and pedagogy.
- Temporal challenges where, as Manathunga (2019) has argued, they are subjected to increasing time pressures and required to produce a wide variety of outcomes in very short timeframes, which present particular practical and epistemic difficulties for Indigenous, migrant, refugee and international students and encourage assimilationist pedagogies that have been shown to be especially detrimental for international doctoral candidates. Such temporal challenges also came with affective economies of shame and guilt, where international students felt ashamed for not keeping up with the 'required' timeframes, internalising this as 'personal failure' and, therefore, hesitating to disclose such hidden labour to their supervisors
- A variety of hidden psycho-emotional challenges in moving to and adapting to a different cultural setting. These included, but were not limited to, accommodation, finance, bureaucracy, work, family life (including often being separated from close family), constraints on travel, language and colonially normative social practices.

These findings then informed the creation of two outputs: a set of recommendations (a toolkit) for supervisors, departments and the university and three fictionalised composite case studies, illustrating the experiences of the international PGR community. These findings also speak directly to the urgent need to decolonise the university and doctoral pedagogies.

References

Doharty, N., Madriaga, M. and Joseph-Salisbury, R., 2021. The university went to 'decolonise' and all they brought back was lousy diversity double-speak! Critical race counter-stories from faculty of colour in 'decolonial' times. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 53(3), pp.233-244.

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