

Tensions and Contradictions in Research Higher Degree Innovations

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Abstract:

Current changes in Research Higher Degrees (RHDs) in Australian universities stem mainly from continued reduction in government funding for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and globalisation issues. The old idea of education as a service provided by the government and as a given right for citizens is rapidly being replaced

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Introduction

Continued reduction in government funding for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has led to the commodification of educational services and subsequent changes in both the nature of Research Higher Degrees (RHDs) and student cohorts. The gradual shift from government-funded HEI education towards a user-pays system over the past two decades is evidenced by the introduction of the Higher Education Administrative Charge in 1987, the adoption of the Higher Education Contributions Scheme in 1989 and the continuing growth in full-fee-paying courses for both international and local students. Currently, Australian HEI revenue from the Commonwealth Government is less than 50%, down from the 1991 figure of 62% (DEST, 2002a) and the period between 1991 and 2000 saw the number of fee paying overseas postgraduate students rise by 464%, fee paying domestic postgraduate students rise by 479%, and total non-government sources of income as a share of university revenue double (DEST, 2002b). This changing political economy of education is putting in jeopardy the idea of education as a service provided by the government and as a given right for the participation of citizens; it is rapidly being replaced by the idea of education as trade, available only to those consumers who can afford to buy it.

Within this context of increased full-fee paying RHD students and the general commodification of Higher Education services, contradictions and tensions are emerging. HEIs are caught between trying to balance the reduction in government funding and addressing students' needs. On one hand, we see curricula in Australian HEIs becoming 'internationalised' in an effort to make our education more culturally accountable, while on the other we see HEIs and their students as players in the largely-homogeneous 'globalised' knowledge economy. There is a similar tension between the hegemonic Western canon of HEI research and freedom for local and international students to pursue their indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. Further contradictions are seen between the instrumental, practice-based research of some of the newer fee-for-service RHDs and the more entrepreneurial research needed in the exponentially-growing knowledge economy. As buyers of a service, students' needs in terms of an appropriate education also seem to be in conflict with the need for HEIs to maintain economies of scale, which is likely not to be conducive to providing the desired level of service. These contradictions are now explored in order to establish a case for further research into RHD innovations and to provide some insights that will help inform the research.

Globalisation and internationalising the curricula

Defining globalisation is problematic. Burbules and Torres (2000, p.1) identify various definitions by chapter authors in their book as ‘the emergence of supranational institutions whose decisions shape and constrain the policy options for any particular nation-state’; ‘the rise of neoliberalism as a hegemonic policy discourse’; ‘the emergence of new global cultural forms, media, and technologies of communication, which shape the relations of affiliation, identity, and interaction within and across local cultural settings’; and ‘a *perceived* set of changes, a construction used by state policy makers to inspire support for and suppress opposition to changes because "greater forces" (global competition, responses to IMF or World Bank demands, obligations to regional alliances, and so on) leave the nation-state "no choice" but to play by a set of global rules not of its own making’. In the main, however, all of these definitions have a common factor: the domination of a homogenous world order over nation states.

A major impact on education in terms of globalisation is likely to be the World Trade Organization’s General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS). This is ‘the first multilateral, legally binding set of rules covering international trade in services’ (WTO, 2000). The potential impact of this globalised trade agreement on education is substantial in that it opens up all services, including education, to full global competition. Covered under GATS are the educational services of countries whose education systems are not exclusively government funded, or education systems that have commercial purposes (WTO, 2000). Given the current economic climate, it is likely that almost all Australian HEIs fit the latter description. Cohen (2000) points out that, under existing GATS rules, access to educational markets along with the authority to grant degrees would be guaranteed to overseas education providers. Further, she argues, it will not be the local education bodies that make these changes; rather, once they are codified in the GATS, changes and disputes will be dealt with at an international level and not negotiated within the nation state. This has ramifications for RHD programs, which are already very successfully packaged, branded and marketed to off-shore students. Although GATS is likely to further open up the global market for Australian HEI research degrees, it also paves the way for new competition for Australian RHD students. HEIs will either need to market their unique qualities or their cheaper prices, and given that we do not have HEIs of the perceived quality of Harvard or Cambridge, it is likely to be the latter, with quality a possible casualty.

In our globalised environment, many HEIs in Australia and elsewhere have encouraged internationalisation of the curricula, and, although there is no absolute agreement about what ‘internationalisation’ means in this context, the general consensus is that it considers and includes cultural diversity. We should be clear, however, that internationalising the curricula is not necessarily compatible with the idea of internationalising education in a general sense. Scott (2001) seems to capture this difference when he identifies a transition from internationalisation ruled by geopolitical considerations which he calls the ‘old paradigm’ to the economically dominated ‘new paradigm, linked to globalisation. The latter is often not used in any pedagogical sense,

but merely to describe the international student market and in this case is not only compatible with globalisation, but often synonymous with it. Indeed, Knight and de Wit (1995) point to the inevitability of internationalisation of education since the advancement of knowledge became a borderless global enterprise.

Two motivations inherent in the following definitions are that internationalisation of curricula is intrinsically desirable for its own sake, and that it is necessary in a global environment. For instance, IDP Education Australia (1995) define it, in part, as ‘curricula which prepare students for defined international professions,...curricula with an international subject,...curricula in which the content is especially designed for foreign students...’. At RMIT University, it has variously been defined as ‘...producing graduates capable of solving problems in a variety of locations with cultural and environmental sensitivity’ (Aulakh et al, 1997, p.15), and ‘teaching and learning which incorporates a global, international and multicultural orientation [as well as] promotion of international and cross cultural understanding and empathy’ (Hill, 2003). Further, internationalising the curriculum means more than mere enrichment; it is important to adopt an integrative view, ‘which locates internationalisation ...as integrated into all aspects of teaching and learning *and* research and development...’ (original emphases) (Hill, 2001).

But what does this mean for the increasing numbers of international RHD students? We might be internationalising our undergraduate and postgraduate coursework curricula, and perhaps, with no curricula as such, it is difficult to internationalise the RHD for local students, but there is little evidence of the spirit of internationalisation in the RHD programs of international students. Attending conferences and contributing to academic publications encourage international networks for both local and international students, and, at a local level, international students are likely to learn something about the Australian culture. However, although research by international RHD students is sometimes based on home country issues, a truly internationalised research approach would surely allow for indigenous epistemologies and methodologies. What international students are faced with is the hegemony of the Western academic canon – the ‘one size fits all’ model, limiting the scope for research design that might be more meaningful to them and their communities.

Globalisation of education is a possible threat to internationalisation in terms of bringing value systems which challenge notions of our own identity: the necessary educational standardisation of degree and credit systems and curricula is likely to eliminate all but the most powerful dominant culture. In encouraging tolerance and appreciation for other cultures, the idea of internationalisation fits with previous multiculturalism discourses on liberal pluralism (see, for instance, Galston, 2002) which is at odds with the transnational reality of a deregulated, globalised world. The cross-cultural understanding and empathy of internationalisation has no purpose in a world of corporate educational imperialism and hegemony. We will therefore have a paradoxical situation where the increasingly globalised nature of education necessitates that we acknowledge and accept cultural diversity by incorporating internationalisation into our education programs, but this very

globalised nature also threatens to homogenise societies into a single dominant paradigm – that of the West.

Epistemological and linguistic imperialism

Understanding globalisation from within the context of neocolonialism and post-colonial imperialism, there exists a tension between the hegemonic Western canon of HEI research and freedom for international and Australian Aboriginal RHD students to pursue research grounded in their indigenous ontologies, epistemologies and methodologies. This, of course, also applies to other students who feel alienated by ‘traditional’ research in terms of their gender, sexual preferences or other differences.

Much has been written about cognitive imperialism and inherent hegemony in education and language (see, for instance, Said, 1993; Spivak, 1993; Giroux, 1992; Bourdieu, 1990). Referring specifically to Higher Education in Australia, Brady (2000) argues that we need to move away from world domination of the narrowly Western culture and develop other ways of thinking, and to redefine what it is possible to know. Similar claims (see, for instance, Pennycook, 1994; Kachru, 1990) have been made in the interests of acknowledging and accepting varieties of English other than ‘standard English’ (the concepts and definitions of which are also contested). Perhaps consent for RHD international or indigenous students to contest the dominant epistemologies and to deconstruct Western ‘universal’ knowledge and reassemble it to include indigenous ways of knowing could be a measure of how serious we are about an internationalised curriculum. Further, what could be more ‘internationalised’ than a RHD thesis written in ‘Singlish’ (a legitimate variety of English with its own grammar), or in the student’s first language.

However, although the social research is persuasive in encouraging us to accept and embrace difference, negotiating between an ‘ideal’ thesis (ideal, that is, from within the traditional canon) and research students’ own voices is a difficult task because HEIs are constrained by their own systems. All HEIs have regulations governing writing style and presentation of information in theses that are designed to maintain the *status quo*; these are generally along the lines of presenting the thesis ‘in a manner consistent with publication in the relevant discipline’ (RMIT, 2002). As Chubb (2000) points out, given that RHD students are examined by university staff, a university cannot shift from current expectations of what constitutes a RHD on its own without potentially disadvantaging the students. These are powerful constraints against allowing a social and cultural construction of knowledge that might be more appropriate and useful to particular RHD students.

A compounding tension is also seen within the issue of educational hegemony. If RHD students were to engage in indigenous epistemologies and methodologies, would they, in fact, be disadvantaged? If the homogenised world of educational globalisation becomes an entrenched reality, their esoteric degree is likely to be devalued. Also, since the PhD is still sometimes used as an ‘apprenticeship’ into an academic career, how useful would

such a degree be? After all, many international students from non-Western countries choose to study in the USA or Australia because they *want* to engage with the Western education paradigm, but is this just another example of hegemony? Are non-Western nations being positioned to 'buy' Western education to be competitive in the global world?

Industry-based RHDs

Research graduates have grown rapidly in the last decade and increasing numbers are destined to use their RHDs to further their careers in industry and commerce rather than academia, or to use their research training in subsequent workplace research. As a corollary of identifying the strengthening competition on a global basis, a readiness to work with industry to improve the quality of research training (DETYA, 1999) is on the agendas of both the Commonwealth Government and many Australian HEIs. For example, at Swinburne University of Technology, the work of more than 40% of research postgraduate students is in collaboration with an industry partner, and most have industry-based supervisors or second supervisors as well as academic supervisors (Swinburne University of Technology, 2002).

In identifying that student and employer needs are not always supported by the nature and requirements of existing, more traditional, research degrees, RMIT (2000) outlined a framework for a range of different research degrees. Of particular interest here are the PhD or Masters degrees by Project. Although these degrees are not new to disciplines such as art and design, areas such as education have been more 'traditional', generally opting for the professional doctorate (EdD) when a close link with the teaching profession is needed. However, the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services at RMIT recently introduced their Masters and PhD practice-based research degrees by Project in which the aim is 'to create a research and development capability within the workplace or community, produce a documented outcome from the project and develop applied research skills within the candidate' (RMIT, 2003). These are mostly action research projects, the products of which, for instance, could resolve a workplace problem or contribute to enrichment of the community (RMIT, 2003).

These new types of degrees, however, bring their own contradictions and tensions. With more investment from industry, there is a need to ensure research remains independent. We need to be vigilant about the ethics of receiving research support from external sources (outside the university/Government). Whose responsibility will it be to ensure the research is independent? How much guidance/interference will we accept from 'interested' funding sources? Similarly, who will be the guardians of the quality of research? What if there is a conflict – if research meets or exceeds the expectations of the industry, but not the university supervisor (or there is doubt that it will meet the expectation of the examiner)? Also, as Rothblatt (2000, p.18) argues, '[t]he right to pursue knowledge implies the right for others to share it', but what happens to the thesis/exegesis if, for instance, an RHD student's industry research needs to remain confidential? Further tensions along these lines have been identified in the hard applied sciences, where the industry partners' expectations are that

students will also work on activities not related to the RHD study, and in the soft applied sciences, the student's topic is often not closely associated with the supervisor's expertise and therefore definition of the topic is often contentious (Neumann, 2003). These are important issues and contentions given the present climate of increasing industry-relevant research.

Issues surrounding the value and appropriateness of instrumental, practice-based research in RHDs provide yet another tension. Although this issue has been around for some time (Gibbons, et al, 1994), the need for new practice-based RHDs (such as, for instance, the new Project Masters and PhD degrees at RMIT University) is seen, perhaps surprisingly, to be in conflict with the globalised knowledge economy. The problem is not that these degrees are potentially income generating or that they are based in industry. The tension comes from a discrepancy between what is perceived to be narrow research based on specific workplaces, and the 'holistic understanding of systems thinking [and] interdisciplinary research approaches critical to achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the complex reality currently facing the world system' (Cogburn, 1999). The Government, too, has reiterated its concerns about narrow, highly specialised research programs producing a lack of relevant useful generic skills for industry, with the resultant cultural mismatch between academic researchers and staff in industry (Kemp, 1999). But what is it that we want our RHD graduates to be proficient in? On one hand, we want smooth transition between RHD study and the workplace; on the other we require that RHD study produce a new and original contribution to knowledge. Of course, the two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but perhaps we need to ask the students what they want. Cogburn (1999), seemingly to contradict what he said above, also advises us that academic institutions must be able to 'meet the varied needs of learners', which, of course, is precisely what the Project research degrees are designed to do.

Similarly, RHD students who want something of the 'alternative' liberal arts notion of education could miss out while HEIs attempt to meet the needs of industry-based students, their own survival needs and to fulfill the government agenda of industry-based training. As globalisation takes hold, will there be a threat to the autonomy of national educational systems in terms of what they can and cannot teach? What happens to those disciplines that do not fit the notion of industry-based education, such as cultural studies and other branches of social science and humanities-based disciplines? Will the majority of RHDs merely become training for industry? These are tensions that must be addressed.

The effects of 'new' disciplines and literacies on RHDs

There has been much debate around the nature and value of the PhD and the development of professional doctorates (see for instance Evans, 1997, 1998; Pearson, 1999), particularly in terms of notions of research training for the workplace. However, research degrees are developing in an eclectic array of innovative possibilities, and to date this has attracted very little debate. Many of these new areas of research are the inevitable result of the unified national system of Australian universities which brought new areas of study from the CAEs to the universities. The project or focus of research can now involve

activities such as designing a range of fashion garments, choreographing a dance sequence, producing artwork for an exhibition, and writing a novel, or it can be the result of new transdisciplinary combinations such as, for instance, media and history. Along with these new ways of producing knowledge are also new kinds of research writing. We can now find RHD theses and exegeses on CD-ROM, produced not only in the traditional linear orientation but also as a lateral 'choose your own adventure' mode, sometimes with accompanying pictures and music (see, for instance, Brearley, 2002).

However, although these innovations reflect the diversity of student backgrounds and needs, there are unresolved issues. Apart from the tensions produced by issues of quality and rigour between institutions that do not endorse these new style RHDs and those that do (usually, the elite 'sandstone' institutions versus technological institutions), until these new orientations have established some sort of internal benchmarks there can be pedagogical issues with supervisors who may be uncertain as to how to guide the student and similar issues with examiners who may have few points of reference to guide them in their examination of such theses. This calls into question the very nature of the RHD.

Students' needs versus economies of scale

Tensions can also be seen as HEIs look to a market solution to reduced government funding and at the same time find themselves in an era of the globalised, competitive marketplace. As buyers of a service, students' needs in terms of an appropriate education are likely to be in conflict with the need for HEIs to maintain economies of scale, which could be argued is not conducive to providing the desired level of service. For full-fee-paying students, HEIs need to provide the kinds of services that buyers demand at a price they are willing to pay. This invariably means increasing the HEI's market share by packaging education into an easily marketable commodity.

A concerted marketing campaign over the past decade or so by Australian universities for international RHD students has had the desired effect. International students currently contribute an average of 10 per cent to HEI revenue (DEST, 2002a) and the numbers of international research students relative to local students have increased steadily over the past decade (DEST, 2001). In 1992, there were 1,482 international students enrolled in RHDs compared to 7,725 local students. By 2001, this had increased to 1,858 international students compared to 7,434 local students. However, the biggest change is seen between 2000 and 2001 (figures from 2002 are not yet available): while the numbers of local PhD commencing students decreased by 6.1 per cent and Masters by research students decreased by 6.5 per cent, the figures for international students showed an increase of 5.2 per cent and 4.9 per cent respectively (DEST, 2001).

However, although commodification may be a solution to the reduction in government funding and a way to join in the benefits of globalisation, there are likely to be unhappy students. There is evidence that international students have generally not been happy about the commodification of their education. Marginson (1994, p.243) reports, for example, that some international students are unhappy with the 'hard-nosed

commercialism' of Australian HEIs, and that Singaporeans hold widely to the view that we treat international students as a 'money making racket'.

The advertising copy in the glossy 'prospectuses' advising future international students of the benefits of studying in Australia also fail to point out the generally inadequate services for language and academic skills. These are essential services for all students, but particularly so for international RHD students from a language background other than English. Although most have an IELTS English language level of around 6.5 to 7.0, this will not produce work of so-called 'publishable quality' that their thesis demands. Even where supervisors identify a responsibility towards working with students' language development, they sometimes do not have a sufficiently explicit enough understanding of the discourse of their particular discipline or the rules of grammar to enable them to adequately assist the students, other than proofreading and editing. The language issue causes considerable distress to many students, who either have to pay for extremely costly editing (with ethical issues yet to be addressed by most HEIs) or face waiting lists for HEI language support.

Since the advent of the Research Training Scheme with its 50 per cent weighting for research degree completion, it is important now more than ever to meet the needs of students to ensure completion and access to funding. The economies of scale needed for these business ventures to be successful means that students of some new research practices are unlikely to have the individual support of supervisors that students of the more traditional RHDs enjoy. The new RHD by Project in the Faculty of Education, Language and Community Services, RMIT, is an example of such a product. The structure of the new RHD was able easily to be tailored to consumer (student) application, and the degree was very successfully marketed to a large number of students from a variety of workplaces. In this case, a variety of networked forms of support have been used which can include a supervisor in the traditional sense and assistance from academics in other disciplines, as well as an industry mentor (Reeders, 2002). However, for cost-effectiveness with the large number of students, a cluster model has been extensively used. In this model, groups of students from the same workplace and at the same stage in their research belong to clusters, each cluster having one facilitator. Although this HEI-funded program has been largely successful (one group recently winning a Design and the Social Context Portfolio 2003 teaching award for research supervision), increasingly the cluster model has needed to be supplemented with individual support, leading to discussion not of whether to introduce fees, but of what a future fee structure might be (Reeders, 2002).

Conclusion

Higher education in the Western world is changing, as it always has. However, the effects of the changing political economy and globalisation have caused change at a pace not seen before, and have produced RHDs where both the form and function have become fragmented and contested. Some see these changes as postmodern (see, for instance, Scott, 2000; Bauman, 1997) and others believe that, although universities are adapting to a changing

world, there are some ideas of values, practices, purpose and role that have not changed (Kumar, 1997; Filmer, 1997). Given the increasingly diverse aspirations and backgrounds of current and future RHD students reflecting the need for new and distinctive modes of knowledge and knowledge production, what, then, are we to make of these changes? Although it is important for HEIs to adapt in order to maintain relevance in the changing, post-industrial, knowledge-based, globalised world, whether we like to think of our uncertain times as postmodern or otherwise, the daily realities and changing needs of RHD students, supervisors and examiners need to be addressed. Although we need innovation, we also need debate about the nature of the innovations; if a RHD can be many things, we need to ask what its defining features are, what is considered to be a 'good' RHD and who will determine this.

Although there is substantial discussion of the emerging effects of the commodification of higher education and its relationship with globalisation, much of this is emotionally-driven and very little has dealt specifically with RHD students. However, the issues surrounding RHD practice in terms of choices, expectations and student satisfaction are serious and complex for all stakeholders: the students, the HEIs, the Government, and industry. It also seems clear that, under the prevailing neoliberalist government policies, these issues are increasing and are not transient, making it timely to engage in some critical debate of the tensions and contradictions emerging and what these mean for the continued diversity and variety of RHDs.

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