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Kelly Coate

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Exploring the unknown: Levinas and international students in English higher education

Kelly Coate*

Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, National University of Ireland, Galway, Ireland

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This article will start with a description of a small, pedagogic event: a snippet of conversation recorded in a classroom as part of a research project on working in groups with postgraduate students. I will use these few minutes of data to illustrate several of the arguments I wish to make about the policy of increased international student recruitment in English higher education. More specifically, the recorded conversation will act as a springboard into some reflections on the ways in which international students are positioned within the higher education system in England, in terms of policies, pedagogic practices and the research literature on international students. The argument will centre on the idea that English higher education institutions are on ethically dubious grounds in terms of their relations with international students, and that these flawed relations are reflected in pedagogical practices in the classroom. These reflections will draw from the writings of Levinas to explore the current failure of staff and students in sharing responsibility towards the experiences of the ‘other’.

Keywords: higher education; Levinas; international students; unknowability; other

Stepping outside

I was alone, undisturbed and happy before the other person crossed my path. I, now and in this moment, have to give way, and, now in this moment, I am alone and solitary in my responsibility. (Purcell 2006, 11)

During an evening of MA session on evaluation and assessment in education, the students were asked to form small groups in order to discuss the assigned reading. At the time, I was conducting research for a project on learning in small groups (Klenowski and Coate 2003), and I sat down with one group to video record their discussion. A small fragment of their 20 minute discussion has remained in my thoughts for the several years that have passed since it took place. It was not the research project on small group work which gave it salience, and it is not that project on which this paper is based. I am using it instead as a springboard into quite a different set of reflections on the ways in which international students are positioned within the higher education system in England, in terms of policies, pedagogic practices and the research literature on international students.

*Email: kelly.coate@nuigalway.ie

The group consisted of six postgraduate students: one British female student, plus four male and one female student from outside the UK. The female, British student asked that she be allowed to lead the discussion, as she had prepared notes on the reading and was keen to share them. As she held up her notes and pointed to them, she explained to the group that the author of the assigned reading seemed to be asking them to step outside their normal frames of reference and gain another perspective. She repeated the idea several times: he wants us to step outside and see things differently. A male German student interrupted, and after a few false starts of trying to explain what he intended to convey, he said, simply: 'where do you go when you step outside?'

There are several layers of interpretation that I wish to unravel here. The first is about pedagogical relationships in higher education classrooms that are diverse. This particular MA course was heavily populated by British students, but it had attracted a significant minority of international students. The research project we were conducting was about the facilitation of small group activities, and I found it impossible to examine the group dynamics without the variable of the 'home' and 'international' student distinction more so than any other (even gender). Yet this distinction is not particularly straightforward in the UK context, as I would like to go on to discuss. Here I will introduce just some of the complexities through the illustration of this particular small group of students.

The British students were mainly teachers in UK schools who were undertaking a part-time MA degree. They were confident and eager to debate educational policy with the type of critical stance that comes from hard-won professional insights, and – it gradually became apparent – had mixed feelings about being in a class with international students. In the interviews that we conducted with them about the group activities, they said that the international students brought a rich diversity and new insights into their learning. On their (anonymous) questionnaire responses, however, a few of them felt able to say that the international students slowed down their learning and that they felt the 'mixed' groups did not work as effectively.

The international students were from a range of countries but mostly they were from Ghana, Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The German student was technically not an 'international' student, but in diverse classrooms it does seem that the non-UK, EU students are typically perceived to be international students by everyone in the class, including themselves. They are 'others'; but of course there are degrees of 'otherness', and varying degrees of cultural adaptation are required to adjust to English universities (Burnapp 2006). Some of the Sri Lankan students, for instance, gradually and fairly quietly made it known that they had been 'sent' to the UK by their government in order to learn how educational policy is formed. In other words, they did not come to criticise, and were baffled by the requirement to continually engage with critical discourses. Shades of post-colonialism taint the policy of international student recruitment in the UK, which is a point I will develop later (Sidhu 2006).

So we can return to the moment in question. We have, sitting around a table in a typical university environment one evening, a group of students attempting to address the assignment they have been given. We have a young British woman who is confident enough to put herself forward for leading the group discussion. Initially, a Sri Lankan student had volunteered to share his notes, but he quickly backed down when the British woman reiterated her desire to lead (only slightly apologetically saying that she knows 'she talks a lot in these sessions'). We have a few fairly silent students from Ghana and Sri Lanka, and we have one German student who manages to interject a pertinent question: 'where do you go when you step outside?'

Indeed, where *do* you go?

In that moment, a phenomenological question is nicely posed. The final layer of interpretation I wish to pursue is about that moment. The stepping outside of ourselves, I will suggest, is what happens when we encounter the 'other'. It is, in Levinasian terms, the 'hesitation' before the other. The eagerness of the British student to take the lead in the discussion was, somewhat paradoxically, her form of hesitating before taking responsibility for the other: she does not have to be confronted with 'the other' if she can manage to speak to her notes for 20 minutes. Or, conversely, is she benignly 'helping' the others by ensuring they do not have to speak? Either way, her reluctance to engage collaboratively is apparent but it is not her fault: she does not wish to 'step outside' and she has not been compelled to do so.

What is the responsibility of the university community in this situation? The complexities that I have introduced above will form the basis of the reflections that follow in the next sections. First I would like to pursue the policies that drive the recruitment of international students and question the ethical implications of such policies. I will then go on to discuss the pedagogical responsibilities of staff and students in diverse classrooms, while finally suggesting a way forward through an understanding of our responsibilities towards the 'other' as Levinas proposes.

Policies: the export business agenda

Arguably, the dominant driver of international student recruitment is an economic agenda (De Vita and Case 2003; Kuo 2007; McNamara and Harris 1997; Williams and Coate 2004). International students are the source of a valuable export business. A recent report from the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) calculates that non-EU students injected £2.87 billion into the economy in 2004–05. The authors go on to point out that: 'Higher education is an extremely significant export industry in this country, outstripping the export value of, for example, alcoholic drinks ...' (Vickers and Bekhradnia 2007). In Australia, remarkably, the export of higher education is a bigger business than wool (Bullen and Kenway 2003). In the contemporary higher education landscape, it is possible to discuss the economic value of international students in such stark terms of commodification (students, wool, beer ... it's just business).

It is now widely understood that the economic value of international students is a product of a conservative government policy to reduce expenditure on higher education by allowing universities to charge full-cost fees. The New Labour government has done little to change our understandings of the economics of recruitment. The Prime Minister's Initiatives (known as PMI1 (1998) and PMI2 (2006)) clarified the government's position regarding international student recruitment: there must be more of them in UK higher education. Accordingly, the international student offices in universities often set targets for increased recruitment from particular countries and operate as small business enterprises. Indeed, universities in the UK are eligible to win the Queen's Award for International Enterprise through their efforts to export higher education internationally (which of course includes the recruitment of international students).

The Queen's Award for International Enterprise is highly valued by those universities that win it for their international student recruitment success. One of my favourite photographs relates to this award and was given to me by a former student, which she captioned 'The Queen and I'.



Figure 1. 'The Queen and I': Queen Elizabeth II pictured at the University of Westminster.

At the time, she was working at an English university for a Japanese company that sends students to England. When her university won the Queen's Award for International Enterprise, she was presented to the Queen in traditional, Japanese dress. In the photograph, the Queen has on a striking blue suit and hat, the student has on a beautiful, deep red kimono. They are facing each other, and in that single snapshot they are a vivid portrayal of an encounter between the 'other' (the 'international student') and the ultimate signifier of the former Empire, together celebrating the successes of international trade.

It is difficult not to see the binaries in this photograph: East/West, Oriental/Western, and perhaps, ultimately, Them/Us. Bullen and Kenway (2003) have produced a trenchant, post-colonial critique of the Asian student as cultural 'other' in Australian higher education. They draw on Said's work on Orientalism, in which he explains that when binary categories are invoked in this way, the results become even more polarised so that the 'Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western' (1978, 45). The symbolism of the Asian female student is particularly potent, and Bullen and Kenway (2003, 43) quote Ghandi to describe how she symbolically is 'a casualty of both imperial ideology, and native and foreign patriarchies'.

Post-colonial ties are never far away in discussions and analyses of the mobility and recruitment of international students. European higher education institutions are often able to establish links in former colonies, because education systems that have been colonised bear many similarities to the colonising system. As Sidhu (2006) suggests: 'Educating colonial subjects was part of an imperial investment aimed at maintaining British influence in colonies and protectorates, and creating demand for British goods and services' (127). Furthermore, as Sidhu argues, the Blair government promoted the new Britannia through the export of higher

education in order to establish a new imperial role for Britain. Universities have not been shy in relation to the PMI and exploiting what opportunities the market will bear.

The University of Nottingham, for example, has attracted much attention for its ventures in China and Malaysia. As reported in the *Times Higher Education Supplement (THES)* in January 2007:

In Britain, the boldest step has been taken by Nottingham University, which has built a reproduction of its entire campus, clock tower and all, in the city of Ningbo. As a result, a Chinese student can pay much lower fees to get a degree from a top British institution that just happens to be located in China (and indeed, British students could choose the same option, although they can opt out of the course in Marxism-Leninism that Chinese students are required to take). (Mitter 2007, n.p.)

The Ningbo campus is described by Nottingham as a proud 'reflection' of the Nottingham campus. The aim is to provide the 'Nottingham experience' in Asia, as is the case with their Queen's Award-winning Malaysian campus. An initial impression of this desire to transplant a slice of Nottingham into Malaysia and China could be that of a 'new imperial role' for Britain, as Sidhu might suggest. As it turns out, however, the 'Nottingham experience' is precisely what some of the students are seeking. The writer of a blog about Malaysian education (educationmalaysia.blogspot.com), for example, is careful to note just in how many ways the Nottingham in Malaysia experience mirrors the 'real' Nottingham experience (lecturers shipped over from Nottingham, and a degree certificate that says only University of Nottingham and not University of Nottingham in Malaysia). Apparently, these factors help distinguish Nottingham's offerings as more credible than some of their Australian competitors.

However, there are no easy interpretations of this type of trade in higher education. The University of Nottingham only partly owns their Asian campuses, with a 37% share in Ningbo and a 30% share in the Malaysian campus. They are 'fully branded' as University of Nottingham campuses, but they are part-owned by state and private enterprises. A recent Employment Appeal Tribunal decided that, contrary to the claims in Nottingham's publicity, the University of Nottingham in Malaysia is a 'franchise' and not an integral part of the University (Newman 2007a). Although these claims were denied by a 'university spokesman' who argued that the campuses were academically controlled by Nottingham, a later story in the *THES* quotes another (or the same?) 'spokesman' for Nottingham University as saying they expected a 'phenomenal return' on their investment in Malaysia and China (Newman 2007b). There seems to be much confusion about the nature of Nottingham's enterprise, both within and out with Nottingham itself.

This is a new world order. The global higher education marketplace is offering new opportunities to students all over the world. Perhaps the market should drive the future shape of global HE, and certainly there are many suggestions that 'consumerist mechanisms' now operate on many levels within universities (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005). Yet before we rush into a free trade vision of higher education as an export business it may be worthwhile to pause and consider the fundamental purposes of higher education and its suitability as an export business. In other words, we need to hesitate, to step outside the pace of change for a moment, and consider the pedagogical relations that are possible and not possible within this vision.

An imperfect market

The most compelling reason to reject the idea of free trade in higher education is that education is not, and never will be, traded within a 'perfect' market (van Vught 2007). There are too many complicating variables that prevent free trade. The GATS negotiations are rumbling away with enormous difficulty, because education has traditionally been a public good, and therefore higher education systems gain unfair market advantages in their own countries. There are other reasons, most notably that education is not 'consumed' at the point of delivery but is only satisfactorily gained through a social contract lasting over a period of time (it is a status good). Here, I want to briefly consider two other compelling factors that mitigate against the notion of free trade in higher education and the ethical implications of them: the rationale for designating certain students as 'international' rather than 'home', and the notion of the student as a 'customer' of higher education.

Anyone familiar with the English higher education system will understand that the entire rationale for designating certain students as 'international' rather than 'home' is based on a need to decide who pays full-cost fees (of up to £18,000 for some courses) when registering. In other words, this is an economic distinction and not an academic distinction (which is odd, given that academics so readily adopt the term 'international student' when discussing academic matters). The danger of treating international students as somehow identifiable in academic terms can be illustrated by the fact that someone bearing a UK passport could still technically be classed as an 'international' student, depending on their normal country of residency. The classification method is fairly arbitrary, as becomes apparent when encountering the information available to potential students, such as this FAQ on the UKCOSA (UK Council for International Education) website:

Many of the provisions of the fees and Student Support regulations require ordinary residence in the UK and Islands, or in the EEA, Switzerland, overseas territories and/or Turkey. In most cases, it is clear whether you have been ordinarily resident in the relevant area. However, in a minority of cases, you might have to persuade an institution or Student Support authority that you meet this requirement. In such cases, the legislation provides no guidance and those assessing your eligibility for 'home' fees and Student Support have to rely on cases that have been decided in UK courts and tribunals. (www.ukcosa.org.uk/pages/guidancenote.htm#fss, accessed March 27, 2007)

The slipperiness of the term 'international student' as derived from legal definitions is in itself a cause for concern. The cases that make it to court are probably no indication of what happens when most students' applications to pay home fees are rejected on the basis of someone's interpretation of the residency requirements. Visa refusals are also, undoubtedly, a hidden layer of arbitrariness in terms of who comes to study in English higher education institutions and how they are classified when they arrive. We do not know how many potential students have been denied the opportunity to study in England because of the legal, political and financial systems that may exclude them. The recent decision of the Home Office to require all student visa applicants to show evidence they have supporting funds of £9000 a year for the duration of their studies is bound to exclude even more potential students. Are there ethical questions to be raised around the meritocratic aims of higher education as against these fairly arbitrary barriers to higher education in England?

Given that the majority of those international students who choose to study in the UK do so only if they are able to afford full-cost fees, the economic potential of

their visit comes to the fore within institutional discourses (Kuo 2007). Naidoo and Jamieson argue persuasively in a previous article in this journal (2005) that the commodification of higher education has the potential to ‘corrode’ the learning that takes place in universities. They suggest that consumerist models of education erode the elements of faith and trust that students should have in their teachers:

Unlike the products on a supermarket shelf that can be sampled relatively quickly, to be on the ‘inside’ of a discipline takes time, hard work and persistence. When these attributes are linked to acts of faith and trust we are some distance from the type of commodification exemplified by the supermarket model. (Naidoo and Jamieson 2005, 275)

Yet the language of customer service has sprung up around this particular export business without much protest, and ‘customer service’ policies are now in place in some universities. At the same time, universities are considering how best to protect themselves against future complaints against the services they provide. Extraordinary times indeed, when the higher education system is reduced to a language of customer satisfaction.

Even beyond all of that, the system itself is diminished by these economic imperatives. Unfortunately, international students in general are perceived as having more economic than academic capital in English higher education, and this tendency to treat them as economically important but academically deficient has become perhaps the defining characteristic of their journey through higher education. Ethically, again, these are dubious grounds on which to base our relationships within universities.

A class of their own?

The Other comes to me as having depths that I cannot know and, in order not to do violence, I must acknowledge this unknowability. This negativity is at the heart of things. It is the ethical relation *par excellence*. (Standish 2004, 494)

The above reading of Levinas suggests that we are doing violence to others when we claim to know that which is, initially, not knowable to us. My interpretation of this idea is that every time we claim to ‘know’ something about international students, we are in danger of diminishing humanity. As one example, we can consider the ways in which international students are often treated in the literature about pedagogic practices.

The term international student is often used to implicitly suggest a group of students who are non-native English speakers largely unfamiliar with Western academic conventions (Trahar 2007). In Australian higher education, in particular, the increased recruitment of students from Asian countries has led to a proliferation of research and publications on overcoming the (perceived) academic deficiencies of international students. Titles of articles such as ‘Language difficulties of international students ...’ (Sawir 2005) or ‘A consideration of the challenges involved in supervising international students’ (Brown 2007) or even ‘Critical thinking: Teaching foreign notions to foreign students’ (Egege and Kutieleh 2004) help to reinforce the perception that international students share common experiences, typically through their lack of academic capabilities in English-speaking higher education systems.

I am not questioning the value of an approach that seeks to enhance the learning experiences of students. Arguably, academics in Australian higher education have not

only promoted that approach more helpfully than elsewhere, but academic publications on the complexities of teaching international students have also been theoretically more advanced in Australia than in the UK (e.g. Kenway and Bullen 2003; Sanderson 2004). However, I am concerned at the extent to which international students are deemed to be an easily-identifiable, non-English speaking group who have particular needs, whereas the ‘home’ students – particularly those we tend to think of as ‘traditional’ students – are not perceived as problematic in the same ways.

Bullen and Kenway (2003) are critical of the ways in which Asian students in particular are perceived to have certain intellectual dispositions which are not valued in higher education systems in the West. The number of Chinese students in English universities has resulted in more research on students from Confucian-Heritage Cultures (CHC). Typical issues within this literature are the perceived lack of critical thinking of CHC students and their over-reliance on memorisation. Other issues that tend to get discussed at conferences on Chinese students, for example, are the tendency of Chinese students to look to their tutors for moral direction, their desire to maintain ‘harmony’ within group settings, and the perception that they do not understand basic rules of plagiarism (see, e.g. Huhua 2006; Jin and Cortazzi 2006).

Whilst greater intercultural understanding is important, and much of this work is insightful, there is a danger that stereotypes can become reified in people’s minds. There is also a danger that the learning styles associated with certain international students assume a homogenous culture that does not change and is not influenced by other cultures (Bullen and Kenway 2003). My interpretation of Levinas leads me to suggest that, although intercultural understanding is important to promote, I should not assume every time an Asian-looking student walks into a classroom that I somehow ‘know’ what their particular approach to learning might be.

The arbitrariness of the ways in which international students are given their designation, as discussed in the previous section, reinforces this view. We do not ‘know’ who the international students are more than we ‘know’ who the home students are. The Japanese student in the photograph is, ironically, a home student as she has lived and worked in England for quite some time. I have supervised several PhD students who were born outside the UK but who have met the residency requirements necessary to be categorised as home students. We do not have statistics on these anomalies but even my own limited experience suggests that they may call into the question the statistics that are produced on the presence of international students in universities. Why do we think we can so easily categorise people, and to what purpose?

Furthermore, the binary thought entailed in the international/home designation entails a hidden layer of the classic Them/Us binary. The classification of certain students into the international or home categories implies that home students can not become ‘international’, in the sense that they are enabled to gain an international outlook or sensibility (Lowe and Tian 2007). As Turner (2006a) also points out, there are ‘post-imperial assumptions’ underlying the binary, as if the benefits only flow from the university to the international student, rather than more reciprocally. ‘They’ come to ‘us’ in order to gain a valuable, Western education, and ‘we’ give to them without much in return (or so the thinking seems to be). Turner (2006b) also highlights the tendency of university staff to speak about the ‘home’ students as ‘our’ students: a slip that reveals a tendency to exclude rather than include.

The academic ‘deficit’ model of the international student is probably one of the most ethically dubious discourses around students classified as such. Unfortunately, this deficit view has been a pervasive feature of the literature for some time, although

new frameworks are challenging this perspective (Carroll 2005; Ryan and Hellmundt 2005; Turner 2006b). It is probable, however, that it is still a potent discourse, given the tendency of research about the experiences of international students to discuss the 'challenges' of working with international students, rather than the advantages. Research that suggests how damaging this discourse can be often can be found within the grey literature of academia. Conducted by international postgraduate students and often undertaken as part of an MA or PhD, these student researchers seem to have little problem finding student subjects who seem fairly alienated by their experiences in English higher education (Leonard, Pelletier, and Morley 2003; Welikala and Watkins 2008). Perhaps more notice should be taken of their concerns.

The subjectivities that are inscribed through all of these practices, I would suggest, are 'diminished images of human potential', to use Ecclestone's (2007, 457) terminology. The discourses around the phenomenon of international students in English higher education paint a picture of diminishment of humanity: academically, socially and culturally. If universities are intended to make a contribution to humanity, we need to re-think how some of our practices and discourses might be dehumanising, unethical and damaging, not just for the students but for ourselves.

Where do you go when you step outside?

The relation with Others challenges me, empties me of myself and keeps on emptying me by showing me ever new resources. I did not know I was so rich ... (Levinas 2006, 29–30).

The insight gained from my readings of Levinas enabled me to understand a bit better where I might go if I step outside of myself for a minute. The most liberating notion I have gained from Levinas is that I do not, initially, know any of my students any better than any others. The young British woman I discussed at the start of this paper is no more 'known' to me than the Sri Lankan sitting next to her. Any subconscious notions on my part, however unintentionally, that she is one of 'ours' and he is not, is doing violence to all of us.

To step outside is to cast off, at least initially, the preconceptions or stereotypes or 'cultural understandings' we think we might have when we meet others. Zembylas (2005, 141) suggests, in this vein, that 'otherness is not epistemologically available', therefore all students (and staff) become unknowable to me. The ethical relationship that is necessary is one in which I open myself to all others and let them come to me without prejudice. In that way, we all become richer as we learn from each other who we are.

My role then as a teacher and facilitator of classroom interactions and intercultural awareness is, I suppose, to model these ethical relationships in the ways in which I speak and interact with students. The goal would be to enable students to understand how they might be 'othering' one another, and to enable them to see how this might be damaging all of our relationships. I hesitate while writing this, as I can of course see the difficulties with what might seem to be an idealistic view of the world.

There are other challenges. To accept 'unknowability' is to strip away some of the political foundations and strategic essentialism of the debates. We need to discuss international students as a group because of some of the very unethical practices that surround them. I would also hesitate to step off into some type of post-modern relativity which left me with no handle to hang onto while I wave my banner. If everyone

is unknowable, where do the women go, what happens to the patriarchies, and what happens to the familiar territory of the Them/Us divide?

And yet I believe there is something in Levinas that provides a type of liberation. What I hang onto is the hope I felt from another moment in a classroom, several years ago in a reading group that I facilitated for doctoral students. We were reading a number of the articles which have ended up in this article, about internationalisation and higher education. In a culturally mixed group, spanning South America, Africa, North America, Europe, South and East Asia, there was one moment in which a student began to cry. She had just begun to make the links between her home country's post-colonial ties to England, and her own feelings about making a journey to the place that evoked strong emotions about colonial history, oppression and racism. Our group sat silently, opening ourselves to new understandings (albeit painful ones) of each other.

The hope I feel now initially sprang out of anger. I was working in a university that took lots of money from people, convincing them that they were customers of a highly-regarded product that we would deliver with the best service we could provide. No one in the university had given me guidance on how to cope with a woman crying in my classroom as she embarked on a painful, personal journey. It was the silent support of the other students, and eventually their kind words and deeper engagement with the task of learning at hand that gave me hope. We had hesitated, stepped outside of the classroom for that moment, and opened ourselves to the possibilities of better human relationships with each other.

Notes on contributor

Kelly Coate is a lecturer in teaching and learning in higher education in the Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching at NUI, Galway. She worked previously at the Institute of Education, University of London, conducting research into higher education policy and practice.

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