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Navigating No-Man's Land: Facilitating the Transition of International Scholars to PhD Study: a case of a Scottish university.

Abstract

International Doctoral students face challenges posed by sociocultural differences, as they seek to establish identities as scholars within an academic environment that values and expects behaviours that may be unfamiliar to them. As a backdrop to assessing the content and structure of one institution's efforts to apply innovative and inclusive teaching practices on its Doctoral Induction Programme, this chapter not only critiques *Western* universities as global providers of doctoral education, but also scrutinizes how the term 'international' has been exploited by *Western* academia. The chapter also explores matters relating to the role of the English language in international doctoral education. The results of this case study suggest that international scholars appreciate opportunities to take ownership of their own PhD journeys as they develop their awareness of existing hegemonies within the international academy.

Keywords: PhD & Doctoral studies; International scholars; Transnational education (TNE); Western academia; English for Academic Purposes (EAP); Emancipation

Introduction

This chapter provides a contextual backdrop to complement the focus in section 3 of this book – academic transition, from migration to integration. The main focus is to examine how language and disciplinary knowledge are perceived as traversing and sometimes detached within the postgraduate research curriculum and what English for Academic Purposes (EAP) practitioners can do, therefore, to enable international scholars a smoother navigation from being successful scholars in their own country to becoming effective contributors to the international academy.

Before setting the scene regarding TNE (Transnational Education), international scholars and EAP (English for Academic Purposes), it is valuable to underline the

concept of postgraduate research curriculum. Designing, delivering and assessing level appropriate curriculum has been strongly advocated by curriculum theorists and practitioners. The latest research findings indicate that the postgraduate learners prefer postgraduate curriculum to be challenging, current, offered in a contested mode, career and profession focused (Solomon and Hill, 2020; Okolie, U.C., Igwe, P.A., Nwajiuba, C.A., Mlanga, S., Binuomote, M.O., Nwosu, H.E. and Ogbaekirigwe, C.O. (2020),). Therefore, one of the main objectives of this study was to determine if the current curricula truly account postgraduate learners' experience and perspectives.

We will first broadly define the concepts of TNE, the myth of an international student, and EAP in doctoral education, considering how they reciprocate across the Higher Education topography and generate the systematic conditions and backdrop that lead to the key issues around assimilation vs integration we want to address. Next, we will investigate and analyse the findings of a case study of a Doctoral Induction Programme (DIP) at a Scottish university which aimed at supporting international scholars in navigating the early stages of their doctoral journeys. The subsequent discussion in Section 3 will contribute to the 'assimilation vs inclusion' rhetoric.

Setting the scene

The myth of an international student

Firstly, we discuss the landscape of TNE and the ways in which the internationalisation of the curriculum, and the role of the English language, directly impact international scholars' doctoral journeys. While the internationalisation of HE should be understood as 'the integration of an international or intercultural dimension into the tripartite mission of teaching, research and service functions of Higher Education' (Maringe & Foskett, 2010 in Jenkins, 2014: 2–3), its main agenda is often more focused on income generation than on developing a comprehensive and genuine international culture that is integrated across all HE practices. 'Macro level discourse around finances and international student recruitment have a direct effect on the micro level of the classroom' (Bond, 2020, p 1-2). It is often the classroom where a university's internationalisation policy collides with the local, as teachers and students need to co-learn, but sometimes fail, to work together when making sense of cultures, languages and educational backgrounds (Bond, 2020).

Concepts such as 'international student', 'EU student', and 'home student' not only define fee status, but are also often used to differentiate groups in a negative way. It is paramount to be aware of what is hidden behind the labels. Very often, it is the ability to use English as a first language that appears to be a means of making a distinction between groups of students. Chowdhury and Phan Le Ha (2014, 3) characterise the literature on international students in terms of: the 'deficit' model, the 'surplus', the 'cosmopolitan, global', and the 'self-determined'. Over the last 30 years, international students have most often been researched from either the deficit or surplus model (Phan Le Ha and Li, 2014).

Chowdhury and Phan Le Ha (2014) also point to the other subjectivities about international students which have emerged in recent decades: a passive 'other' made to believe that they need to adapt to the ways of the West, an elite 'other' whose commitments are to be cultivated, and a competitive 'economic subject' with a pragmatic orientation to education. In an examination of the discursive practices of global English-medium universities, they argue that academic welfare and teaching and learning processes show little awareness of the fluidity of race, culture and language or hybridity of international students, whose diversity is ignored. As a result, they note that these students are subjected to "constricting, divisive and exclusionary discursive practices that fail to properly acknowledge their complex histories, subjectivities and professional aspirations" (2014: 4).

In contrast, the 'surplus' model tends to applaud international students for their attributes, perceiving them as valuable resources for *Western* academia to learn from. For instance, some writers point to evidence that 'independent thinking, originality and skill in reasoning and expression have long been recognised and supported in Chinese academic traditions. It seems that the 'surplus' model, while recognising the complexities surrounding 'international students' rarely ventures below the surface. Phan Le Ha & Li (2014) argue that the shift from all 'minuses' to all 'pluses' nonetheless remains a form of stereotyping.

Recent research on international students tends to celebrate cosmopolitanism and worldliness. In particular, it is argued that self-determination plays a decisive role in making sense of international students' experiences and their sense of self (see, for example Marginson and Sawir, 2011; Pham and Saltmarsh, 2013). It would appear that the power has been shifted in favour of the students themselves rather than

being determined by convenient homogenising discourses (Chowdhury and Phan Le Ha, 2014). However, such a paradigm shift “could still well lead to patronising distancing unintentionally, while at the same time presenting the surplus model in disguise” (p. 10), as seen for example in the repetition, ubiquity and persistent representation of the continuing struggles, apologies, misery, isolation, insecurity, failure and discontent expressed by international students in recent studies (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). In particular, recent articles tend to present international students as victimised by their own choice, self-determination and desire to be international students during the Covid 19 pandemic as they report they are “treated like cash cows” (Fazackerley, 2021).

EAP and its potential impact(s)

We now turn to critiquing the current approaches to the English language in HE, which is often perceived as a barrier to knowledge-building and communication (Bond, 2020). The deficit model described by Chowdhury and Phan Le Ha (2014) implies that international students should accept uncritically the norms, values and standards of the *Western* institution they are now studying in, and to eschew any alternative practices or capacities that may run counter to these norms. Traditional models of EAP at UK universities have tended to follow this model, casting EAP teachers as ‘linguistic service technicians tasked with repairing the broken language of international students, in order for them to be successfully “processed” by the institution’ (Hadley 2015, quoted in Hyland 2018: 389). Conceived as sources of “linguistic repair”, EAP programmes are merely focused on developing capacities to assimilate into the UK HEI by complying with existing norms, standards and expectations. Such a model – one in which EAP acts as ‘a tool of institutional indoctrination’ (Hyland 2018: 392), entails an EAP curriculum that is heavily prescriptive, as it is the institution that decides what students require.

Of course, focusing on existing models of academic English need not necessarily entail indoctrination, and Hyland (2018) has argued that a genre-based approach, in which texts are analysed for their style and impact, ‘takes as its main objective to empower learners by initiating them into the ways of making meanings that are valued in their target contexts’ (Hyland 2018: 385). This objective is congruent with a broader, liberalist educational philosophy that promotes individual empowerment and rational autonomy; analysing texts and the real-world phenomena relevant to their academic contexts develops capacities for ‘the identification of oppressive and unjust

relations within which there is an unwarranted limitation placed on human action, feeling and thought' (Simon 1987, quoted in Fielding 1997: 181). A focus on individual empowerment within current structures, then, can allow students to identify, and then rectify, social injustices and power imbalances within the current structure. However, if the priority is to develop individual capacities for success, and if success is best achieved by following the example of published scholars working within the parameters set by *Western* universities, this model 'espouses a benevolent, but nonetheless unacceptably limiting dependency that is too often prone to deference, none of which is in any genuine sense transformational, inspiring or democratically fitting' (Fielding 1997: 188).

Empowering individual international students, then, requires them 'to rationally choose to commit themselves to the values, goals, policies and objectives of the organization as a rational means of improving their life chances' (Inglis 1997: 6). This means that current structures remain intact, and that international students effectively become complicit in maintaining the same system that discriminates against them. In EAP a common criticism is that it 'accepts a set of (Anglo-American) dominant discourse norms and regards students as passive and accommodating, thereby failing to question the power relations which underlie these norms' (Hyland 2018: 385). If the current hegemony that favours *Western* models of academic discourse over 'others' is to be challenged, EAP providers should consider as their objective the *emancipation* of international students, rather than their empowerment, by developing capacities to engage critically with, and seek to decolonise, international education. Such an objective is congruent with the principles of critical pedagogy, which seeks to develop the 'critical consciousness' of students (Freire 2013) through 'the analysis of oppressive structures, practices and theories' (Biesta 2010: 43).

The above discussion demonstrates that different interpretations of the role and purpose of EAP can lead to very different outcomes. Programmes concerned primarily with repairing the linguistic "deficits" of students follow an indoctrinatory model that seeks to assimilate international students into the current, hegemonic structures of the international academy. It is difficult to see how this model can allow international students to make any meaningful contribution to knowledge, as they are only valued for their ability to reproduce what is already deemed "acceptable". Alternatively, a focus on individual empowerment may allow students on EAP programmes to achieve greater success *within* the current structures, but this model still fails to engage with systemic injustices and power imbalances. A third approach,

however, seeks to *emancipate* international students from their deficit positions by addressing structural inequities through a model of inclusion, rather than one of integration. These different educational approaches – indoctrination, empowerment and emancipation - and their corresponding outcomes of assimilation, integration and inclusion, are presented in an 'Emancipation Continuum' (Brown 2021, forthcoming), which is offered as an analytical framework for exploring the emancipatory impact of ESOL on migrant communities. We propose that a similar framework can be applied to EAP programmes to explore the extent to which they promote or restrict the freedoms of international students to contribute meaningfully to the international academy.

Programme Overview

The Doctoral Induction Programme discussed in this chapter was one attempt to challenge the deficit approach to EAP. It was developed and delivered by staff in the English language unit of a Scottish university, in response to a request from that university's doctoral college. A large cohort of Algerian PhD students had been recruited, and previous students enrolling via this route had been identified as needing particularly high levels of support to achieve success. The English language unit was asked to develop an induction programme for this new cohort of students to follow during the first 12 weeks of their PhD journey, with the aim of developing knowledge, understanding and skills to increase their capacities for autonomous, English-medium research at doctoral level. Prior to arriving at the university, the students had already completed a pre-sessional course at another UK university, focusing primarily on ensuring they met the minimum IELTS requirement. Preliminary engagement with the students suggested, however, that further English language development would be beneficial, in addition to a focus on cognitive and research skills. Although one requirement for the programme was to address language needs, the idea of a structural syllabus that presents language items atomistically was rejected on the grounds that this syllabus model is out of step with widely accepted principles of second language acquisition (see for example Long 2015). It was decided instead to address both linguistic and cognitive skills by designing what Hedge (2000) would describe as a multi-dimensional syllabus, with each component prioritising a specific area for development, as follows:

Reading and Writing Component: This component drew primarily on existing, published materials designed for students who need English for academic purposes. Tasks tended to develop generic skills for academic reading and writing.

Listening and Speaking Skills Component: This component was designed in a similar way to the Reading and Writing component, with tasks designed to develop specific skills that were deemed to be particularly important for PhD students. It also used published EAP materials as its principal source of content.

Academic Reading Discussion Forum: Drawing heavily on ideas presented in Seburn's Academic Reading Circles (ARC - Seburn 2016), these sessions required students to read journal articles and then engage in semi-formal discussions designed to promote critical analysis and understanding. In a bid to ensure relevance of content, students were encouraged to propose articles for use in this component.

Doctoral Research Skills: The final component of the programme featured contributions from colleagues across the university providing workshops on a wide range of topics relating to doctoral research. Content ranged from "big-picture" skills such as understanding and selecting research paradigms, research design or methodology, as well as technical skills such as the use of software programs for data analysis.

One of the programme's aims was to provide 'culturally responsive' spaces that question and challenge the assumptions and attitudes of both educators and students towards culture and knowledge. Efforts were made to include such spaces within all components of the programme by encouraging students to relate new input to their own contexts and then to critically examine its relevance and implications for their studies. This process was enhanced by the fact that the students started regular meetings with their supervisors from the outset, allowing them to discuss, revise and re-design their PhD projects as their capacities for effective doctoral research increased.

Methodology

This study used qualitative data through ethnographic fieldwork. To gather data, we integrated 4 different research tools, namely: retrospective classroom observations, document analysis, an end-of-the course survey, and focus group discussions with students from each of the two cohorts. Verbatim transcripts were produced from the recordings of the focus groups. In the findings section below we include some direct quotes from the participants in these focus groups; to preserve participant anonymity

we have named those in the first focus group Respondent 1A, 1B, 1C etc, and Respondent 2A, 2B, 2C etc. for the second focus group.

We implemented thematic analysis using Yin's five-phased recursive cycle of compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding (Yin 2016: 185-187). This enabled us to identify and explore themes that emerged from the dataset, rather than imposing our own, *a priori*, themes upon the data (Bazeley 2009).

Primarily, the collected data provided insights into individual students' meaning making in regard to internationalisation, English language and their perspectives at the beginning of their doctoral journeys, allowing us to recognise and acknowledge students' complex identity relationships.

In the following analysis, we examine how international scholars' early doctoral experiences are shaped and impacted by students' desires to acquire the identity of an international student, as well as their perceptions of the pedagogies applied on the programme. Findings are presented according to three broad themes:

Challenging the 'International Student' Label, The Right Pedagogies and Legitimate Knowledge, and An Enhanced Sense of Belonging.

Findings

Theme 1: Challenging the 'International Student' Label

A common factor among the first cohort was that they had all followed the same progression route; completing Masters-level programmes in Algeria allowed them to enter a competition, designed specifically by the Algerian government to select 'laureates', who were then awarded the 'prize' of funded PhD study in the UK:

Respondent 1A: The way it happened that, is that we had like a contest, a national contest, and we were like, um, over 100, more? [1B: Yes, one hundred, yes]. And um, OK, then, after the contest, those who got like, those who were like the thirty, at the top of the list, were like meant (?) to go to the UK and the rest of them were, um, went to, I guess Jordan?

The fact that these students were selected by their national government to participate in funded research projects suggests that these were elite scholars who had much to contribute to knowledge within their chosen fields, calling into question the legitimacy of a deficit approach to their induction; failure to acknowledge their existing status as

elite scholars on a national level would mean ignoring a significant feature of their identities as academics, as well as de-legitimising their existing contextual knowledge. At the same time, their status as national 'laureates' also entailed limited agency, as they had little control over their own destinies. They were required to spend 6 months studying 'pre-sessional English' at a different UK university (University X) before being deemed 'ready' to begin their actual PhDs:

Respondent 1C: We had to come, to go to University X because, we have to go there, to study the pre-sessional before applying to all the universities.

Whether the perceived need for pre-sessional work came from the Algerian government or from a UK institution, it was not something that the students had any say in. Indeed, some saw the competition and the possibility of funded study abroad as the only feasible way of continuing to progress as academics:

Respondent 1C: If we wanna like continue and pursue our studies we have to go and sit for the, uh, contest.

Reliance on government funding inevitably limits student agency and, for this cohort, it required them to follow the programme provided. A road map towards doctoral study was provided for them, but without their consultation, and it assumed that a significant amount of capacity-building was required *before* they could start their PhDs. These students, then, were identified as elite scholars in their national context, but at the same time were encouraged to self-identify as 'deficient' when re-located to a UK context.

The second cohort was more diverse, with only three members arriving via the Algerian government-sponsored route, the majority having been recruited from various other contexts and backgrounds. The focus group discussion revealed that most of these students were developing PhD topics that were different from their previous academic fields. This was a further reason to encourage a dialogic and highly reflective approach within the programme

Theme 2: The Right Pedagogies and Legitimate Knowledge

As knowledge travels with the international students over space, in place and time, it is worth considering what knowledge is, whose knowledge is considered legitimate, and how this is negotiated in the 'international' classroom. The fact that the first cohort had already spent 6 months at a UK university implies that they had had

plenty of opportunities to develop knowledge and skills that would be particularly applicable to the localised context of 'UK academia'. However, participant responses about how they felt on arrival in Scotland suggest otherwise:

Respondent 1D: Of course we were unsure of our language...we were afraid.

Respondent 1E: For me I was like unsure of my topic because of the matter of originality and creativity.

Respondent 1C: I was not confident about my style of writing, to be honest.

Not only did these participants recall concerns and insecurities relating to knowledge deficits, but starting the DIP revealed further areas that required development:

Respondent 1C: I thought that I know what I'm going to do about the methodology, I was quite sure that this is the right methodology but after the, the DIP, I was like – I didn't know anything! (laughs).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, students who had not undergone the 6-month pre-sessional at University X also expressed insecurities prior to starting the DIP:

Respondent 2D: I was motivated I mean I really felt great that I had my own topic...but at the same time I was really scared from methodology specifically.

Respondent 2B: I didn't know exactly what to expect, because coming from Nigeria, we would study differently there.

When comparing the DIP to their previous academic experiences, whether in the UK or elsewhere, participants in both groups valued the way that the DIP focused on skills and knowledge that could be practically applied to their PhD studies:

Respondent 1C: It was different [from the pre-sessional course], like, it was about the PhD itself. Like, how to read articles, how to use the articles in your writing, in your PhD, so that was very helpful...this is what we really needed.

Respondent 2C: So it helped me a lot, even how to do literature review in my research topics, because I read the abstract and decided if it's useful for me or not.

Being able to apply learning to their own research contexts was clearly a priority for the participants, further evidenced in their valuing more highly of course components that had a less overt language focus:

Respondent 1E: If I might like order them, re-order them in terms of usefulness I would start with doctoral research skills, and then academic reading circles, oral presentation skills, and academic writing would be the last.

Respondent 2A: The ARC was important because it provided a wide view of options that you have in interpreting data and information that I was not aware of.

The prioritisation of content over language did not, of course, mean that the DIP did not develop language skills. Most applied linguists accept that a syllabus organised around linguistic structures creates 'a psycholinguistically unrealistic timetable in the form of an externally imposed linguistic syllabus...[leading to]...virtually guaranteed repeated failure' (Long 2015: 25). Long and others advocate a syllabus that prioritises task completion, with language input provided as required - in context and at the point of need. Participants identified the relevance and usefulness of the input as contributing positively to their development, not only as researchers but also as users of English:

Respondent 1B: Concerning reading skills...we learned more how to be selective, so for example if we need...specific content and we have like a whole article of a hundred pages or I don't know, so we just like know how to...how to skim and scan. So we already know these techniques like from our home university, but you know we...

Respondent 1E: We never applied them! [Respondent 1E and 1C laugh].

By contrast, syllabus components concerned primarily with language development were less well-received, particularly those that drew heavily on published EAP materials:

Respondent 1E: But I was really disappointed, ah, by the content of the writing sessions.

Respondent 1C: Even about the topics that we were writing about...

Researcher: What was it about the topics?

Respondent 1C: So yeah, sometimes like we were, like, it was not academic, like, it was not about education or literature or something that it's in our field,

it was in general, like, for somebody like, I don't know, it was not for PhD students.

The above exchange may reveal a preference for less explicitly language-focused content, but it also implies a reaction against the generic content of many published EAP materials. The participants' apparent desire for content to be directly relevant to their needs relates to a wider appreciation of participatory methodologies – that is to say, methodologies that not only value but require students' contributions in terms of content selection and, more generally, in legitimising their own opinions and those of their peers:

Respondent 1E: we were allowed to freely express our opinions, to be critical. And this is like, this was helpful... Actually they [lecturers] were so open to our ideas. They were even interested – in our ideas and in what we, in the things we want to share with them.

Respondent 1A: They were eager to know what we have to say, and what we are opting for. And they were, they were welcoming and supporting our good ideas.

Respondent 2A: For me, personally, it was a non-judgemental environment where we were encouraged to refer to past experiences in describing a source, so what that enabled me do, in several instances I would go back to relevant knowledge, so there was a lot of applications to past and prior knowledge to the existing concerns or questions that we were dealing with.

Theme 3: An Enhanced Sense of Belonging

PhD study can be a lonely process and, for international students, who are often made to feel inferior from the outset, the sense of isolation can be very acute (Wawera and McCamley, 2020). A key benefit of the DIP to participants, then, was the way in which it provided them with a ready-made community of practice. This community included their classmates, but also extended to their tutors, and even allowed them to maintain a sense of parity when discussing their projects with their supervisors:

Respondent 2D: We supported each other and this just made us really strong to do our literature review or to engage with the research methodology and things like that.

Respondent 1A: And it has increased our self-confidence especially when we have started talking to our supervisors, we have gained a lot of knowledge and we were aware about a lot of things so we were not that afraid or, em, not sure of ourselves. That was really good.

Developing confidence in their own status as PhD researchers was a recurring theme in both focus groups. Most participants expressed the feeling that the DIP allowed them to develop their identities as members of an 'insider' group of doctoral scholars, rather than occupying the 'outsider' positions that international students are often pushed into:

Respondent 1C: In general it was very helpful, like, in terms of preparing us to be PhD researchers. Like after finishing the DIP we were really like, we *are* PhD researchers, and this is how the PhD is going to be, what are we going to expect. And it was helpful.

Knowing PhD students at other universities, who had not undergone the DIP, increased their appreciation of its impact:

Respondent 1E: I've seen it in many different students from other UK universities that do not offer the DIP. And they were like suffering, they were always telling us that you are lucky that you are having that DIP.

A final comment with regard to the sense of belonging relates to the first Covid-19 lockdown in March 2020 and the closure of the university campus. This happened shortly after the second cohort had started the DIP, and required academic staff to adapt the course for online delivery at very short notice. In addition, the pandemic prompted some of the students to return to their own countries, adding physical as well as notional distance between classmates. While one might expect this to result in a more fragmented learning environment and a loss of group cohesion, lockdown and the move to online learning seemed in fact to have a galvanizing impact:

Respondent 2A: we learned so much from each other...we learn about each other's cultures and this actually paved the way to be really strong in a critical situation to prepare for it – the corona virus.

Respondent 2C: [Learning online] was critical and only possible because of the global pandemic.

It is well-documented that times of crisis can bring communities closer together, and it seems that the second cohort had already identified as a community of practice prior to the pandemic - to the extent that they already had a sense of being 'all in this together'. The subsequent move online only seemed to strengthen this. However, it must be acknowledged that the course tutors made significant efforts to reduce the impact of the pandemic on the nature and quality of the DIP. This was done primarily by ensuring that the majority of teaching and learning was synchronous, with teachers and students occupying the same virtual space at the same time; this allowed them to interact freely and continue to develop their relationships.

Further discussion and conclusions

We found Brown's 'emancipation continuum for EAP' model a useful concept in allowing us to make sense of the data. We began the study by asking the students about their identity as international scholars. What emerged was that they seemed to feel they were somehow privileged to be able to study at a *Western* institution as the majority of them was either a 'lucky winner' of a government scholarship and "chosen to be sent to the UK", with one participant saying "it was like a dream" to be able to study abroad. It would appear that much of the students' 'international scholar' identities were determined by convenient homogenising discourses struck by international partnership deals rather than each student's researcher potential. These partnerships followed a deficit model, with EAP practitioners expected to fill knowledge gaps. Nevertheless, it seems the DIP allowed space for the students to become 'border crossers', to engage in an exploration of their own history and to reach an understanding of self and their own culture in relation to others in the new *Western* context. By the same token, it could be concluded that the students actively challenged the stereotypical label of international students by adapting to the new role of 'transformative intellectuals' who challenged themselves to cross the imposed barriers on the borders of disciplines and cultures (Giroux, 1992, 15).

The data also suggests that the students benefitted from the DIP as the programme allowed for experimentation within a new, fit-for-purpose curriculum, effectively fuelling creative explorations across these ideological borders. Students appreciated that the programme embraced the knowledge they brought with them, effectively accommodating their particular cultural trajectories by de-centring ownership of knowledge through criticality and reflection of their PhD proposals. More traditional approaches to EAP were less well-received, as the students regarded the published

materials to be too generic, with little direct relevance to their needs. By contrast, any opportunities to have ownership over the content of the direction of travel was widely perceived as empowering, leading staff to find ways of opening up spaces within each DIP component for the students to formulate and express their own ideas in response to new input and perspectives. This led to students starting to regard uncritical acceptance of existing hegemony as a symptom of deference; as their own critical thinking skills developed, they became increasingly interested in using their own praxis as researchers to *disrupt* the status quo rather than to comply with it. This attitudinal shift implies that the programme had some kind of emancipatory impact, allowing their perspectives to become included in wider academic discourse.

Finally, the focus group discussions overwhelmingly point to students' strong sense of membership of an academic community. Rather than creating distance and fragmentation, the move to online teaching and learning spaces as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown restrictions seemed to galvanize their sense of belonging. The transition from local to international academia involves negotiating some difficult terrain, which is particularly difficult to navigate alone. However, the results of this study suggest that international scholars navigate the borderless higher education terrain at ease, especially when curriculum directly addresses their motivations to do PhDs. Rather than handholding international scholars towards a destination predetermined by the institution, it is more beneficial if students are encouraged to develop more autonomy by finding their own way; our research suggests that the DIP managed to achieve this.

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