An ethical commitment: international student recruitment and a loss of moral values in higher education

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The historical model of international student mobility was that of travelling scholars; in the contemporary Western university, international students tend to be consumers of an export business. In this philosophical exploration of the ethics of our relationships with international students, I will argue that it is here that market relations in education are most acute. International student recruitment brings with it a test of our relationships with others, thereby posing fundamental questions about human pluralism which we neglect at great cost. I will illustrate this argument by exploring the emergence of a care-less culture in higher education (following Lynch’s recent work); the value of accepting responsibility towards others (in the philosophy of Levinas); and the ethics of living with strangers through cosmopolitanism (Appiah). Without establishing ethical relationships with students in ways which go beyond financial transactions, I will suggest, we are reduced to simply selling them a service.

Universities have held open their doors to students from other countries for centuries, and the idea of the ‘international scholar’ runs deep within the history of universities (Harris 2008). Yet international students today move, particularly into English-speaking higher education systems, not so much as travelling scholars but as consumers of an export business (Luke forthcoming; Kuo 2007). In this philosophical exploration of the ethics of a consumer model of international student recruitment, I will argue that we are entering into ethically dubious relationships with students.

Why does a philosophy of ethics for higher education matter? As many commentators on the contemporary university suggest, the ‘neoliberal turn’ within higher education is rapidly replacing traditional, educational values with market values. We are therefore losing sight of an ability to answer the question ‘what are universities for’, apart from the utilitarian responses aligned with producing graduates for the labour market and improving economic competitiveness. The concepts of education that hold out hope for the betterment of civil society, for social justice and for a more peaceful world are slipping under the surface. This lack of human values represents, on many different levels of interaction, an ethical dilemma in our relationships with students. If we are offering them a service which they have bought, we are operating within the rules of a market economy rather than basing our relations with students on a commitment to humanity.
There are three concerns, then, related to the lack of a moral compass for educators that I will use to develop this argument. The first concern I will explore is that of care towards others; the second concern is that of responsibility for others, and the third is the commitment to cosmopolitanism and the ethics of living amongst strangers.

These concerns arise from the practices that surround international student recruitment in mainly English-speaking higher education systems as it is here, in the customer model of education par excellence, that we see thrown into sharp relief that nature of market relations in education. Of course, it is arguable that these practices have already seeped into the ‘home’ students’ education, which points to the need to be mindful of our ethical relations there too. Yet international student recruitment brings with it a test of our relationships with others, thereby posing fundamental questions about universality and plurality which we neglect at great cost.

The first ethical concern is that of humanity and care. Here I am inspired by the idea that contemporary higher education has become a ‘care-less culture’ (Gummell et al 2009; Lynch forthcoming). The point being made here is that the contemporary higher education culture is one in which those who have the responsibility of caring for others (e.g. to children or the elderly) are encouraged to keep their duties of care separate from their academic lives. To ‘care’ is a weakness in the neoliberal university; yet this lack of appreciation for responsibilities of care signifies a fundamental lack of appreciation for humanity.

In the second set of ethical concerns – that of accepting responsibility for others – I am suggesting that not only should we live in the knowledge that caring for those around us is a core human value, but also that we have responsibility towards all others who cross our paths. Levinas encourages us to be open to the otherness of the other, which is a particularly difficult task in an international university in which it feels ‘safer’ to place others into neat boxes. The dominant approaches within the literature on teaching international students, for example, helps to remove the ‘otherness’ by providing us with boxes in which to place international students (e.g. by promoting cultural stereotypes such as that Chinese students learn through memorization).

Accepting responsibility for others in a Levinasian sense means that I do not know others but it is my responsibility to be open to others (Coate 2009). Therefore if I find it hard to accept that others come to me with worldviews that challenge my own; with ways of speaking that require me to listen again; or with emotions that sit uneasily with my rational, academic self: my responsibility is to learn from them rather than teach them to be more like me. As Judith Butler (2005) has suggested through her reading of Levinas, our own subjectivities are shaped through our most immediate encounters with others, and we can not therefore give an account of ourselves until we accept responsibility for others in this way.

In an internationalized university, the values of human pluralism associated with cosmopolitanism seem to offer a way of bringing together these concerns. A cosmopolitan ethos encourages us to find ethical ways of living amongst strangers (Appiah 2006) and of bringing together the local and the
global: acknowledging, at the most fundamental level, that universities have a contribution to make to humanity. Could our task as educators be more productively shaped by an ethical approach which values others and is rooted in a sense of responsibility and care for others? In the consumerist model, by contrast, if I find it difficult to be open towards strangers, I can seek solace in the knowledge that I am selling a service, and my only responsibility is to sell an excellent service. The consumer model strips away the ethical foundations of humanism.

By making these arguments I do not wish to suggest we move towards some sort of utopian vision of higher education. We know that there have always been imperfections in our education systems; however, as Todd (2009) has so eloquently argued, an acknowledgement that education is an ‘imperfect garden’ goes some way towards accepting a shared vision of society’s betterment whilst also being mindful of our flaws. The crucial point is whether we can live with and work through our flaws. The neoliberal drive for efficiency and instrumentalism, it seems to me, is convincing us that imperfections are unacceptable. We need to reconsider whether we can embrace humanistic values - with the messiness and awkwardness they entail – in order to redefine the purposes of universities and our relationships within them.


