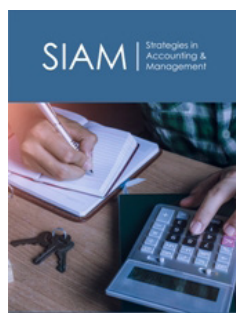


Avoiding the Cultural Prison of the International Student?

Ian Pownall*

Lincoln University, UK

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*Corresponding author: Ian Pownall,
Lincoln University, UK

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Opinion

A metaphorical discussion (warning?) of the international student studying in higher education as a cultural prisoner of their host educational institution. New international higher education students arriving to their host country and institution can be viewed as prisoners who have been anxiously awaiting their sentence. They have worried family members, experienced sleepless nights, and now feel real fear over how they will function in the new environment. Will they have the right knowledge and skills? will they be able to build relationships to survive and progress through their studies so that they can leave and move on? Or will they regret their decision and succumb to debilitating culture and pedagogical shock, withdrawing from engagement? Like a newly sentenced prisoner, they are anxious, worried, lacking confidence and at risk of alienation from others who already have established relationships in an existing shared culture. These liabilities can be further exacerbated by any language difficulty and potential racism. Having arrived at their new institution, a skilled educator can focus upon developing their learner autonomy, building and sharpening their competence, focusing upon their social relatedness and supporting pursuit of their goals. When this is done well, as it is by many professionals, these new learners develop their self-efficacy and the belief, that they have the abilities to achieve their desired outcome and they can succeed.

The opposite can also happen though, that new international students just like new prisoners, are required to assimilate, cope and practice a learned behaviour that is not their own. Their time then becomes endured rather than enjoyed. Of course, the analogy of the international student as criminal prisoner is limited (the food is probably better at a university), but it is a powerful metaphor to recognize the nature of challenges they face. Consider the motivation of the learner. A new international learner's motivation can focus upon outcomes such as marks or career development but then these need to self-originate and not be owned by someone else (such as a parent or employer) [1,2]. Sustaining such motivation is difficult as like a prisoner it may be a societal goal they are striving to achieve and not one owned by them. Motivation can also come from a focus upon the challenge of learning in a new context and the experience of a new social world but this can manifest as toleration as they seek to just pass their sentence time efficiently. These are over simplified views of course, but they help the educator to consider the nature of international student motivation to understand resultant behaviors that are shaped by student ownership of their situated context. Cognitive theory suggests educators work to shape the learning environment so that learners identify with it and establish an action orientation [2]. When done well, this can lead to positive coping strategies such as information seeking and language development. When neglected, negative

coping strategies such as poor attendance, engagement avoidance, procrastination, and self-sabotage, may emerge [3]. HE educators have started to consider more actively their pedagogy in terms of the environment and learner motivation [4]. This includes for example through the cross-cultural adjustment of learners [5-8], the role of teachers as positive motivators (Raufelder et al., 2013), the Willingness to Communicate (WTC) of international students [1,9-11], learner socio-cultural adaptation [6,12], learner worry and anxiety [13,14], and learner social self-efficacy [15]. However, there remains the risk that like prison guards managing the passage of time, some educators just aim to maintain the status quo of their materials and deliver from course to course and year to year without considering their captive audience.

If the learner's motivation and situated context is not considered, support is at risk of being developed from a deficit view that emphasizes the negative aspects of difference. 'Catch up classes' or 'bridging programmes' in the HE sector are evidence of this and take a view of the international student position as inferior. Developing supportive activities because the learner is different, and pursuit of the claim of the need to fit in, may actually result in pushing away those who might benefit the most. Instead, offering support to all, pitched in a developmental and exhortative fashion is a better starting place. Learners then feel that they own the process, have a shared collective need and are in control of the outcome which may be particularly valued by some. They do not feel coerced or shamed into participating [16,17].

An important part of that situated context is their social world. Supporting new international students in finding new friends with shared values but not forcing this especially early in their study period is important. It allows time for wider social networks and friendships to develop, and to support resilience before any proactive structuring of that engagement. Prisoners, like international students have a role to play in their self-organization in the penal system by influencing which 'cell mates' they get placed with to support acculturation in a situated environment. Supporting the emergence of learner ownership of a process is integral to the effectiveness of that process and can be as trivial as delaying negative feedback on any early assessments so as to allow time for confidence to develop. Whilst there may be engagement barriers for new international students arising from motivational reasons, other barriers can be more structural and disciplinary and harder to change. Educators want the graduating learner, like the paroling prisoner, to be independent, articulate, creative and innovative, capable of making a positive contribution to wider society. What then is the clear value in requiring the use of academic conventions that risk constraining the articulation of credibility and argument to those with the skills set to frame those arguments? This is typically not a developed skill set of an international student joining the final year of an undergraduate degree or a learner fresh to postgraduate study for example. Punitive systems managed by HE institutions to dissuade the use of unfair means by apparent poor use of academic conventions, risks disadvantaging those not as well practiced in those conventions or, more worryingly, in the

art of misrepresentation and/or lacking the knowledge and skills to hide their deceit in the use of them. Attending an investigatory hearing session with an international student facing an allegation of plagiarism but who then struggles to articulate their working method or understand the nature of the offence facing them, is not a sign of an engaged or supportive process. It does satisfy the needs however of those making claims the system works by punishing those found guilty and seeking to dissuade those who might commit the same crime. If the crime is not understood though, what is the point of this system for them? Educators would be better served in pursuit of their goals by focusing upon actual delivered value rather than their acceptable conventional expression of it. Are gatekeeping assessments and the means of their quality assurance rooted in the disciplinary history of the practitioner and institution rather than reflecting the context of the learner and what they can actually contribute to the topic and its wider application? Is the purpose of this system then, like the penal structure, to punish, satisfy public opinion and service wider societal economic goals or in some form support education and pursue acculturation as integration into the wider community for the prisoner?

As a final thought we might consider the overall pedagogy of those involved with educating international students by extending a little further the analogy with the penal system. What is taught, why it is taught and how it is taught perhaps can be considered further this way. Like the penal system, is higher education for international students meant to be difficult, austere and a system of regulation and control to ensure progressing learners fit with accepted views of being able to talk in a preferred manner, practice established conventions, thus propagating the views of their institution? Is it to change different individuals who may have wonderful sparks of insight and creativity but are unable to find acceptable avenues for that expression, so that their intended acculturation then becomes assimilation instead? Or is it to accept the situational position and accompanying network of values that all institutions propagate and in doing so emphasize the need for a constant and critical vigil between the needs of the learner and their context? The HE experience for the international student, is at risk of being one that subverts originality and creativity rather than supporting it; an experience that assimilates rather than integrates. In the worst outcomes, it is sometimes managed in a punitive way to seek to change learning behaviour without considering the reasons for such coping outcomes or the context of that learner. The HE cultural prison rewards inmates able to survive, learn the language, manage, and work within the rules and regulations. Conversely, those seeking escape from this often attend poorly, participate little and grade badly. An ideal inmate does not necessarily result in an ideal parolee just as creative, challenging and insightful learners can exit with graduate outcomes not reflective of their true potential.

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