Tran, LT and Wall, T

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Ubuntu in international education: Theoretical discussion and implications for teaching international students

Abstract

Evidence now calls into question the efficacy and appropriateness of pedagogical practices that force international students to adapt to economically-driven and Eurocentric expectations. As a response to calls for alternative perspectives, this paper introduces the construct of Ubuntu, an African worldview prioritising 'humanness' and interconnectedness, and utilises it as a conceptual lens to examine the key tenets of engaging pedagogical practices in teaching international students. The findings point to three main ways that the Ubuntu perspective can manifest in teaching international students: humanness, interconnectedness, and situatedness. The paper offers new insights into how an under-researched, non-western human wisdom – Ubuntu – can be used to interpret international education practice. In doing so, it contributes to both theory building and provokes consideration of an alternative pedagogical lens. In particular, the paper draws on Ubuntu as a critical framework to challenge the conventional ways of viewing international students as the 'other' in 'our' educational system.

Keywords: Ubuntu, African philosophy of education, international education, international students, humanness in education, teaching and learning of international students.

Introduction

Between 2000 and 2012, the number of students enrolled in tertiary education outside their home country doubled to 4.5 million 'despite' the global recession (OECD, 2014, p. 343), and is set to reach 8 million by 2025 (OECD, 2017). In terms of tertiary level vocational education, international students now feature prominently in some countries such as Luxembourg (49% of tertiary level vocational education students), New Zealand (21%), Australia and Denmark (both 11%) (OECD, 2014, p. 354). Such a situation 'creates pressure' to establish 'innovative approaches to pedagogy' which enable learners to engage in educational opportunities (Altbach *et al.*, 2009, p. 32). It is no surprise therefore that 29% of the 450 educational policy reforms examined by the OECD between 2008-2014 target vocational education as well as internationalisation of education (OECD, 2015).

While research into the experiences of international students is growing in different educational contexts (Wyse et al., 2012), and is emerging within experiential forms of higher education (see Bache & Hayton, 2012; Green & Farazmand, 2013), the extant literature does

not examine educational practices within vocational education contexts. Especially in Australia, there are two sectors of tertiary education – higher education (HE) and vocational education and training (VET). By the end of 2017, the number of international students in Australia was close to 800,000 with VET enrolling some 217,696 students and making up nearly 30% of the entire volume of international enrolments (AEI, 2018). Competency based training (CBT) and training packages are mandated for VET. VET qualifications are designed to provide learners with competencies required for Australian workplace. Therefore, pedagogical practices in the Australian VET sector tend to be localised (Tran, 2013) despite a significant growing number of international students enrolled in VET, many of whom are unlikely to stay in Australia and participate in the local labour market after their graduation. Due to this potential tension, it is important to study the pedagogical practices and the experiences of international students in this sector.

More importantly, research into effective education practices with students studying across borders remains limited, and often takes a 'deficit' view, where students are stereotyped as "passive, rote learners, lacking in critical thinking and independent learning skills and prone to plagiarism" (Ryan, 2011, p. 637). Under such circumstances there are real risks of "cultural homogenisation and a creeping academic imperialism" (Roche, 2014, p. 597), that is, educational practices which drive students towards dominant 'Western' forms of thinking and writing (Altbach *et al.*, 2009). For example, notions of 'autonomous learning' and working 'critically' in many 'Western' societies can be interpreted in deeply individualistic ways which are oppositional to notions of learning rooted in and oriented towards larger social groupings such as family or country with which many international students are familiar (Goodall, 2014; Yunkaporta & Kirby, 2011). Previous research indicates that international students might feel forced to adapt to Eurocentric expectations of teaching and learning (Tran, 2013). These studies have called for the need to reconsider the efficacies or appropriateness of Eurocentric pedagogical practices for international students in 'Western' universities. Authors have criticised the current practices that are predominantly imperialism-based, Eurocentric, and economic consideration-driven (Matthews & Sidhu, 2010) for teaching how the 'West is done'. Within this context Ubuntu can challenge conventional thinking about the teaching and learning for international students.

In addition, the plethora of research in international education appears to consider the teaching and learning practices for international students from educational premises that have originated from the Anglo-Saxon world or Asia (Goodall, 2014; Ryan, 2011; Author, 2013).

Scholars (Assie-Lumumba, 2016; Oviawe, 2016) have called for the need to draw on indigenous systems of thought and're-discover' alternative paradigms like Ubuntu, 'an African worldview rooted in the communal character of African life' (Brock-Utne, 2016, p.29) to interpret educational practices and draw useful lessons. Oviawe (2016) for example argues strongly:

> "there is a need to include alternative paradigms in education that are less positivistic, Eurocentric and individualistic that what has become the norm today. It does not argue for a wholesale elimination of the more hegemonic Eurocentric paradigm that is predominant in various education systems. Rather, a combination of valuable attributes of the positivistic and the non-linear organic systems of knowledge might create the ideal framework to foster an ethos of a holistic, transformative and emancipatory educational experience for all" (p2).

To respond to this call, this paper moves beyond the traditional international education research parameters by examining the teaching and learning of international students in the context of vocational education from an ancient African educational philosophy – Ubuntu. The Ubuntu paradigm remains under-researched within the field of international education, but the tenets of such an approach are reported to be significant in a number of ways: international student adjustment, performance and success (Gebhard, 2012; Masjuan & Troiano, 2009; Rienties *et al.*, 2012), learning 'sustainability' in terms of interrelatedness to land and wider communities (Ralph & Stubbs, 2014), and learning psychological resilience under the pressures of modern society (Caruana, 2014). This paper does not intend to impose Ubuntu as an ideal framework to be applied in pedagogical practices. Rather it acknowledges there are similar features between Ubuntu and other belief ideologies such as Confucianism and Buddhism as well as different kinds of holistic, transformative pedagogical traditions in the Anglo-Saxon world (see below for detailed discussion). The contribution of this paper is to present and apply a long standing yet newly-researched conceptual perspective – Ubuntu – to interpret teaching practices for international students. It intends to advance Ubutu's distinctive emphasis on humanness, interconnectedness and situatedness in the teaching and learning for international students, in the context of neo-liberal and commercialised international education in which international students are often constructed as 'cash cows' or 'customers of the education export service' (Author, 2012; 2015).

This paper is derived from a research project supported by the Australian Research Council, and involved fieldwork as well as 155 interviews with international students and staff from 25 vocational education institutes in Australia. Drawing on Ubuntu as a conceptual lens to interpret the interview data, this paper analysed the educational practices embraced by the teachers in this research based on three key tenets: humanness (placing high value on each individual's needs), belonging (encouraging interconnectedness of international students to the learning content and to the learning community), and situatedness (recognising international students' ideas and resources based on their cultural and work experiences). The next section reviews the concept of ubuntu in more detail.

Ubuntu: a humanistic spirit

There is an extensive literature describing ubuntu, both as an 'African' philosophical position and as an educational philosophy, both aspiring to counteract the ravages of apartheid ideology and education (e.g. Bangura, 2005). As such, scholars call for a "cultural rebirth and revival reflecting the integrity and pride in self, culture, history and heritage, as a commitment to the collective good" (Ilmi, 2012, p. 9). In this context, ubuntu has been conceptualised as the broad principle of human mutual interconnectedness (Horsthemke, 2009) and a particular 'ethic of care in relation to others' (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012a). Scholars have also attempted to characterise ubuntu's core, for example, Ntseane (2011) described it as prioritising a collective worldview, spirituality and a shared orientation, whereas Bell and Metz (2012) describe it as prioritising community, ethical partiality, the idea that we tend to become morally better as we grow older, the role of ancestors in living an ethical life, and the value of harmony in relationships beyond self. Indeed, although some scholars cast ubuntu as firmly targeting relatedness between and amongst humans, others highlight a broader conceptualisation of relatedness, that is, "relatedness to the entire cosmos" (Le Grange, 2012, p 338). This framing of relatedness and connectedness includes notions of interconnectedness with each other (as humans), with animals, and with the natural environment (Author, 2015, 2016).

Yet scholars have also problematised singular and 'essentialist' characterisations of ubuntu as an 'imaginary consensus' (Hountondji, 1996) and recognise it as a diverse and contested set of practices, beliefs and values that do not 'always unfold' in the same way (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012a). As Bell and Metz (2012, p. 81) point out, ubuntu:

is a largely oral tradition that only in the postwar era has been discussed in written form by academics… [and that there are] at least several hundred different indigenous peoples and languages below the Sahara, [which] means that there is as yet only a small uncontested core of sub-Saharan morality.

Muwanga-Zake (2009) agrees and indicates that ubuntu has multiple localised meanings, and therefore more work needs to be undertaken to understand the various and diverse ways it can manifest (Mungwini, 2011). Indeed, conceptualising ubuntu as a 'complete or exhaustive picture of morality' (Horsthemke, 2009) can position ubuntu as "remarkably similar to characteristics of… the repressive doctrine complicit in apartheid education" (Horsthemke & Enslin, 2009, p. 210). An alternative which attempts to circumvent this response has been to conceptualise ubuntu as a 'spirit' or 'metaphor' to act in service of the community, but which is still intimately aligned to a particular ethic of care beyond self, centred around the broad principle of mutual interconnectedness mentioned above (Higgs, 2012; Mbigi & Maree, 2005; Author, 2016). Although Higgs (2012) questions the distinctiveness and consequences of such a notice, within a context of historical and cultural hegemony, he does articulate that the broader, fuzzier conceptualisation allows for a greater possibility of co-development of ubuntu in education which can enable people to:

participate in mastering and directing the course of change… to… live together as equals with others…. [which] views knowledge and minds not as commodities… but as treasures to be cultivated to improve the quality of life of both persons and societies".

This fuzzier conceptualisation and treatment highlights resonances and similarities of other ancient and indigenous systems, peoples and perspectives, including Daoism, Buddhism, Christianity, Socialism, and Liberalism (Bell and Metz 2012, p81), as well as the Amerindian peoples, Maori peoples, and Aboriginal peoples of Australia and Canada (McLuhan, 1973; Bell and Metz 2012;Author, 2018). In order to elucidate detail about what 'ubuntu as metaphor' or 'spirit' might mean within the context of vocational and work-based education, this paper amplifies selected themes found in the literature. The intention is not to provide a 'complete picture' but, rather, to provide a framework to facilitate discussion, and as such, assumes that ubuntu and education are "always to be struggled with, never comfortably to be settled" (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012b, p. 4). The three themes selected to

render ubuntu will now be discussed: the centrality of humanness, belonging and valuing individual difference. However, to highlight and amplify, the role here is not to claim an essentialist or singular characterisation of ubuntu, but to intentionally deploy it as a fuzzy concept to help elucidate discussion in the particular focus of this paper.

The first theme is inspired by the translation of the word *ubuntu* from Nguni languages used in Africa, where ubuntu means 'humanness' (Scholtz *et al.*, 2008). Humanness as a broad concern for human welfare has been espoused as "a pervasive and fundamental concept in African socioethical thought" (Gyekye, 1997, p. 158), but not necessarily in the ways conceptualised in the West and specifically European thought. Within ubuntu, being human is not expressed in radically individualised ways where 'I think therefore I am' (*cogito ergo sum*), which emphasises an individual's merits and contributions to be measured and valued (Ntseane, 2011). Here, humanness is framed as being interconnected and interdependent, and is illustrated through the proverbs *motho ke motho ka batho* (Sotho languages) and *umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu* (Nguni languages) which translate as "a human being is a human being because of other human beings" (Letseka, 2012, p. 48). Similarly, but perhaps broader in scope to include land and other natural environmental resources, is the proverb *gutiri gitatuirie kingi*, which means 'all things are interdependent' (Gathogo, 2008, p. 43).

In this way, ubuntu can be therefore characterised by "'I am because we are' or 'I am related, therefore I am' (*cognatus ergo sum* or *cognatus sum, ergo sumus*)" (Louw, 2011, p. 183). As such, it is a worldview based on the "indivisibility of human nature, and the commonness of purpose of human beings which make… interests, aspirations and objectives intertwined" (Pityana, 1999, p. 168). Within such a worldview, being human is about expressing humanism towards and with others and the wider natural world with fairness as a central tenet towards mutual wellbeing (Letseka, 2012). When adopting such a worldview, that the underpinning assumption is that:

> A fulfilled and flourishing life ought to be one in which persons are reasonably well fed, well clothed and housed, in good health, loved, secure, and able to make a conscious effort to treat others with fairness and humanness because they in turn are treated that way (Higgs, 2012, p. 47).

Bell and Metz (2012, p. 79) argue that a philosophy which infiltrates all aspects of life, and that prioritises such interconnectedness and mutual welfare, can be traced to "widely

manifested cultural features [which] have been both the product and producer of recurrently held value systems". These features can include, for example, 'characteristically small' communities which share land and natural resources based on need, which share duties for the 'greater good', and which view solitariness as problematic (ibid). As a result, when an individual does not take into account the thoughts and feelings of others or acts selfishly, such behaviour can be interpreted as the 'ultimate moral inadequacy' (Wiredu, 2003). This view of 'righteousness' is also espoused in the Confucianism belief associated with conduct and morality (Cortazzi & Jin, 1999).

Humanness understood as 'I am because we are' is the basis for a second theme found in the literature: the importance of each individual feeling like they belong to the wider community. According to Mungwini, there is within ubuntu, though implicit, a "strong sense of belonging that is captured in another closely related concept of *vobwo* (those of my own kind)" (2011, p. 781), which might include feeling a connection with others who share the same totem, ancestry or language. Indeed, scholars argue that a strong sense of belonging to a 'oneness of community' is 'at the heart' of ubuntu, and as such, highlights the significance of group solidarity within it (Msila, 2013). As such, this intimately reflects the more collective positioning of an individual's contributions, and rather than being judged by any 'intrinsic' merit, such contributions are judged by their ability to facilitate 'harmony and reciprocity' (Scholtz *et al.*, 2008). Buddhism offers a similar perspective in this regard. Like Ubuntu, Buddhism espouses a humanistic view that emphasizes solidarity and harmony with the 'other' as well as any living organism (Kawada, 1999).

Adopting a 'good disposition towards others' appears to be an important dimension of achieving such harmony and reciprocity (Msila, 2013). This disposition can be described as collectively held 'social ethics in relation with others' (Muwanga-Zake, 2009), or specific rules of conduct, constraints and systems of operation (Letseka, 2012). This possibly explains how people subscribing to ubuntu can be described as "welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, and are willing to share… [and] available to others, willing to affirm others" (Muwanga-Zake, 2009, p. 417). Gathogo (2008, p. 42) expresses it as an 'African hospitality' where people carry a "willingness to give, to help, to assist… without necessarily putting profit or rewards as the driving force".

Centralising the need to belong to a wider community suggests ubuntu has strong ties with communalism and collectivism (Mungwini, 2011), and as such, can also be a source of criticism. When ubuntu is employed in ways to guide action, perhaps in the singular and essentialist ways mentioned earlier, Horsthemke alerts us to risks that ubuntu's "strong ties

with communalism and collectivism place it in uncomfortably close proximity to consequentialism, if not utilitarianism" (2009, p. 207). In such circumstances, the ethical stance where the 'ends justify the means' has sparked, and continues to create, 'passionate exchanges' (Horsthemke & Enslin, 2009), especially in relation to the potential for indoctrination through "inculcation of fear and punishment" and androcentrism found in some forms of 'traditional' educational practices (Horsthemke & Kissack, 2008).

Scholars suggest that even though there is a dominant communal concern (which might be the driving force of such risks), the 'particular of the individual' is *also* valued – this is the third theme selected from the literature. Here, contrary to individualism where existence is solitary, potentially against communal interests and competitive, some argue that those who subscribe to ubuntu respect and value 'a plurality of personalities in a community' (Muwanga-Zake, 2009, p. 417). Although there may be a broader pursuit of a wider communally shared 'good', there is also the assumption that "one person's personhood and identity is *fulfilled* and *complemented* by the other person's personhood" (Mtuze in Muwanga-Zake, 2009, p. 417, emphasis added). In other words, this form of ubuntu holds "human need, interests and dignity as of fundamental importance… in the service of the community *and* personal wellbeing" (Higgs, 2012, p. 50, emphasis added).

Understood as such, a difference of opinion is therefore valued to inform a path towards consensus and reconciliation, and indeed, ubuntu is recognised as having broad mechanisms for the resolution of human conflict and violence (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012b). Such mechanisms are described as processes which "rel[y] on extensive discussions that provide a platform to every person until some solidarity is reached" (Muwanga-Zake, 2009, p. 417). Scholars argue that such 'deliberative' spaces provide opportunities for "us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference so as to inform and enrich our own" (Sindane, 1994, p. 8). In this way, some argue that the plurality of views is valued as opportunity for reaching mutual benefit within the community, or perhaps more precisely, enable the community to 'interrogate truths' which might then inform action (Muwanga-Zake, 2009). At the same time, although these platforms supposedly advocate and attempt to stimulate 'rational deliberation and argumentation' and might be characterised as 'modes of deliberative inquiry' which enable voices to be expressed and heard (e.g. Scholtz et al 2008), they can also function to suppress the voice of women in the context of education, thereby reflecting wider cultural norms (e.g. Waghid & Smeyers, 2012b). Similarly, Mungwini (2011) has argued that such communal ways of being through ubuntu are not, and have not been, sustained in the context of the strong individualism imposed from the West.

Nonetheless, the experiences and outcomes of such deliberative practices seemingly reflect differential practices and contexts. Within the context of education, the importance placed on deliberative spaces also indicates the importance of developing capacities pertaining to maintaining interpersonal relationships and cooperation, capacities which have been described as the *sine qua non* of 'traditional African life' generally (Horsthemke & Kissack, 2008), and in educating and promoting moral norms more specifically (Higgs, 2012). Indeed, Scholtz et al (2008), in contrast to (Waghid & Smeyers, 2012b), found that ubuntu enables and promotes a model of 'inclusive argumentation', where people are compelled to listen to others' views, which in turn moves argumentation from confrontational to more collaborative forms. In this way, it can be argued that by valuing individual difference through such mechanisms (this theme), ubuntu practices may intentionally attempt to not only maintain each individual's sense of belonging to their wider community (the second theme), but act within the collective notion of what it means to be human (the first theme). These three themes (humanness, belonging, valuing individual difference), sketched out above as the spirit or metaphor of ubuntu (as a fuzzier conceptualisation), now form a framework to describe and discuss the educational practices employed in international vocational and work-based education.

Methodology and methods

The empirical data that forms the basis of this paper is derived from a research project on the teaching and learning of international students in vocational education funded by the Australian Research Council. One of the key aims of the research is to analyse teachers' adaptation of pedagogical practices in accommodating international students in the vocational education sector. The research adopts a qualitative inquiry because this approach enables the researchers to examine perspectives, behaviours, experiences and insights of individuals regarding a research phenomenon in their own setting (Merriam 2009). Data was collected from different sources including semi-structured interviews, email exchanges with teachers and notes on our observation and fieldwork. Fieldwork was conducted at 25 vocational education and dual sector institutes in in three states of Australia: New South Wales (NSW), Queensland (QLD) and Victoria (VIC). This manuscript is a subset of the larger project and is based on the empirical data from 50 interviews with teachers. Semi-structured interviews were based on the narrative principle to capture the 'lived' experiences of teaching in adapting pedagogical practices. Interview questions focused on teachers' perspectives and experiences in teaching international students, the specific ways in which they have adapted

pedagogical practices in accommodating the needs and characteristics of international students and challenges and tensions in their professional practices in the context of internationalising vocational education.

The interviewees were recruited through an invitation sent to their International Office Director who then helped circulate it to staff. The teacher respondents selected are those who are involved in teaching international students in a public or private vocational education institution and who volunteered to participate in the research. The teacher respondents were those who were teaching in a range of fields including cookery, hairdressing, hospitality management, law, finance, accounting, building and carpentry. Initial interviews extended between 30 to 60 minutes each, were located at a place and time chosen by the participants, and were digitally recorded and transcribed. Secondary interviews were also undertaken with a small number of students who agreed to discuss their changes as they progressed through their course during the first six months of their study.

This study acknowledges the heterogeneity of the international student population and the importance of ethnicity, culture, gender and social classes in potentially shaping the international students' experiences and the issues they may face. However, within the scope of this paper, we mainly focused on teachers' accounts. International students' voices and their negotiation of learning and connectedness in the host environment are important and are the focus of subsequent papers arising from this study. This article focuses primarily on the semi-structured interview data with staff members. To protect the confidentiality of the participants, their names and institutions have been anonymised.

With regard to data coding and interpretation, the first-named author read the interview transcripts several times and utilised NVIVO software version 10 to code the rich interview data. She did the preliminary coding of the interview transcripts and highlighted the phrases, sentences and paragraphs that align with the fuzzier conceptualisation of Ubuntu and three principles associated with it in the literature to unpack the deeper meanings of the pedagogies that the teachers in this research employed in their teaching practice for international students. These are centred around the spirit of morality, human mutual interconnectedness, harmony and valuing differences (Higgs, 2012; Letseka, 2012; Muwanga-Zake, 2009).

The co-author then carefully read through the preliminarily-coded extracts and identified the most common themes or patterns based on the coded data highlighted by the

first-named author. After that both authors read through those key aspects again and interpreted the selected quotations under each theme in light of the Ubuntu literature. The key findings central to this paper were thus identified through a thorough process of engagement with the interview excerpts, constant comparison (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Thomas, 2013) and reflection in light of Ubuntu as a conceptual framework. This process enabled the researchers to develop a critical interpretation of the key tenets of Ubuntu that arise from the teachers' accounts. Part of the constant comparative method for coding data (Glaser & Strauss, 2017; Thomas, 2013), the researchers used names and colours to code the data and highlight the most prominent patterns and the key meanings associated with how the participants exhibited values in Ubuntu theory and how they enacted it in their practice. However, this process of constant comparison and the use of Ubuntu as a conceptual framework is flexibly drawn on to allow the researchers to distil the emerging issues that might reflect the spirit of Ubuntu.

As such, these principles provided a conceptual guide to for our interpretation of teachers' practices but at the same time they are intentionally broad and fuzzy enough to allow for a fluid and dynamic analysis of such pedagogical approaches used in teaching international students. The analysis does not make the assumption that these teachers have been inspired by Ubuntu or recognised that what they are doing is Ubuntu. nor that there is an essentialist nature to ubuntu, as it we accept Waghid & Smeyers's (2012b) view that ubuntu is "always to be struggled with, never comfortably to be settled" (p 4). Rather the study draws on Ubuntu as a conceptual lens to interpret teachers' practices and uncover in which ways their practices might reflect the key constructs of Ubuntu as described in the lietarture. The analysis worked from the premise that there is a critical need to avoid the essentialisation of certain characteristics of Ubuntu but acknowledges that some of these pedagogic practices reflect Ubuntu principles and also represent best practices in vocational education. Therefore, the analysis localised the meanings of Ubuntu in the context of international education in Australia and integrates the body of literature on pedagogies for teaching international students to uncover the various and diverse ways that the spirit of Ubuntu can manifest in this context (Mungwini, 2011). The next section applies Ubuntu as a conceptual lens to discuss the key tenets of pedagogical practices emerging from the data.

Results and discussion

Humanness as core to ubuntu

Humanness is used here to refer to a philosophy that sees human needs, interests and dignity as of fundamental importance and concern. Various examples from the interviews with

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teachers show that humanness as a key element of Ubuntu is embraced based on teachers' recognition of their ethical responsibilities, as a member of the host institution and host community, to take into account the human needs and interests of international students and adapt their teaching practices to accommodate these needs. The following examples reflect that view:

> I think that you have to take each case or each student as a person with needs and wants and aspirations. To respect, respect is a huge factor. But no matter where they're from, their background, I always give them respect and that fosters their respect… I think a lot of different cultures have different rules, *some of my Japanese students are very difficult to, not difficult to discipline but we have to do it quite carefully because they don't want to lose any face. So I have to be wise. And I have to understand that.* (Hospitality Management, Public College, NSW).

> I think I like a personal touch and… I'll spend some more time with them to find what motivates them. Then just sort of talk to them and say, hey, look, you're here for one reason or for another but *let's make the most of it while we're here. So what do you want to learn? What excites you?*. (Cookery, Private College, VIC).

There are some key points in relation to the humanness approach that the teachers in the above excerpts articulate. First, the teachers emphasise on the importance to place the welfare, needs and aspirations of international students at the centre of teaching and learning practice. That is, essential to effective pedagogy are the understandings and recognition of the human needs and aspirations of these adult learners. These teachers embrace the notion of humanness in pedagogy and their goal is driven by a humanist concern for ensuring the wellbeing and aspirations of international students to be catered for in the classroom context. This perspective closely aligns with the underpinning principle of Ubuntu which is centred on the concern with the welfare and interests of others (Higgs, 2012; Letseka, 2000). In other words, to be human is to affirm one's humanity by recognising the humanity of others (Muwanga-Zake, 2009). This view is clearly manifest in the following excerpts:

> The program is the same no matter what. *It's the way probably I interact with the students that might make a difference*. Because I can relate with them, being an

immigrant myself… especially considering the fact that some of these guys do have family. They have kids. *So that's something that you cannot really forget and put aside because it's their livelihood that you're talking about.* I don't think it's the course itself. It's more the way you present the course as a teacher and how you interact with them. (Cabinet Making, Public College, QLD).

A concern about the welfare and human needs of international students is going alongside with the understandings of the language and social barriers they may encounter as sojourners in a foreign country, the disconnectedness and unfamiliarity with the services available and the impact of other life commitments on their study. Here, the human needs that the teachers pointed out are situated in the context of human beings who are experiencing cross-border life and relocating in another culture. Situating the Ubuntu paradigm in the teaching of international students indeed enriches the meaning of this principle as it allows us to conceptualise ubuntu as embedding the recognition of the needs, aspirations, interconnectedness and disconnectedness of humans who travel and study across national borders. Such mobility is characterised with all the unique nature, complexities and dynamics of a cross-border life.

Another aspect of humanness that the teachers highlighted is to locate international students' needs and expectations in a cultural frame. This is a critical point given the growing presence of international students from diverse cultures and the increasing popularity of intercultural classrooms in English speaking countries like Australia and the UK. The teachers in this research shows the respect for students' cultural differences and the sensitivity and display culturally situated principles that might guide international students' ways of thinking, acting and being.

As characterised in this paper, ubuntu illuminates the communal embeddedness and connectedness of a person to other persons, and highlights the importance attached to people and to human relationships. In this regard, the teachers make an effort to build the communal embededness and interconnectedness of international and domestic students in an international classroom, which are interrogated with their mutual awareness of and respect for each other's cultural values and norms. This reflects Ubuntu's expression, umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu, which captures the underlying principles of interdependence, communality and humanness in African life (Letseka, 2000, p. 184). It translates to 'a person

depends on others just as much as others depend on him/her'. Within an international classroom, Ubuntu involves the learning about the difference of others' culturally situated principles and enrich our own. This also echoes a third dimension of the humanness approach, which is the concern for fairness. To understand and accommodate international students' human needs also parallels with ensuring they are given fair access to help and support services. Fairness and humanness are, according to Letseka (2012), crucial to personal wellbeing.

Belonging as integral to ubuntu in international classrooms

As discussed above, belongingness is at the heart of the notion ubuntu. Belongingness and interconnectedness are among the primary factors shaping student wellbeing in the host country. Viewing belonging as a precursor of social connectedness, prominent researchers in psychology Baumeister and Leary (1995) argue that the need to belong is a 'fundamental human motivation' and belongingness is interrelated to the act to "form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive and significant interpersonal relationships" (p.497). When a need to belong is unsatisfied, one often experiences loneliness, isolation, lower motivation and disengagement (Marginson *et al.*, 2010). Many teachers in this research have attempted to foster international students' belongingness to the classroom and host community and regarded this aspect as being core to effective pedagogy in working with international students. The following excerpts capture this essential part of the pedagogy which embraces a core feature of Ubuntu – cultivating connectedness:

> I think because some of our international students are a little bit shy, group activities and things like that to include them into what's going on in the classroom. You would do a lot more of those sorts of things so that they don't feel left out. (Hospitality Management, Private College, VIC).

> It's just a matter of being flexible [in teaching approaches] and helping the student belong (Cabinet making, Public College, QLD).

> In one area, we pair them up, a local with an international. We get them to spend a few minutes talking to each other to find out who each other is, why they're doing the course and where they've come from, what languages do they speak? And then each of the pair introduces the other to the rest of the group. (Cookery, TAFE, VIC).

These teachers mentioned the need to be flexible in organising group work so that students feel included as part of the classroom community. Notably, one of the teachers articulated on how students are engaged in understanding about each other's backgrounds and motivations in undertaking the study. These ice-breaking activities are valuable to help students enhance interrelationship and connectedness, which are fundamental to effective learning. As such, these practices echo the ubuntu ideas of human mutual interconnectedness and interrelationship, where a human is defined by their relationship with others. Mixing international and domestic students via structured activities as described above is also emphasised by the teachers so that both groups can have a chance to better understand each other's cultural background, which sets the foundation for mutual learning. Other teachers link interconnectedness with work readiness capability. They argue that students' intercultural interaction and skills developed as a result of working with culturally and linguistically diverse peers and being out of their cultural comfort zone is an important attribute that enables them to be work ready in an interculturally interconnected workplace:

> I like to put them out of their comfort zone by putting them with students with different nationalities so they are forced to engage. This is helpful for a job in hairdressing, because you might have a client that you don't like and you don't want to cut his hair. But you don't have a choice. (Hairdressing, VIC)

Lack of the opportunity to integrate and develop intercultural interaction with domestic students is often cited to be a reason for international students' dissatisfaction with their education in the host country (Arkoudis *et al.*, 2012). This sentiment is captured in the following excerpt:

> The Australian students are not necessarily, they're not rude or anything like that but they're not openly friendly and it's difficult for them to mix. A lot of the more mature international students who want a broader experience and they've come to Australia not just to sit in a class room. They've come to sort of try to learn more about Australian culture. They feel as if they're missing out on that. (Finance, Public College, VIC).

Communal and collective approaches are nurtured that attempt to create a 'home' environment for international students:

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Because it brings me personally the cultures of other countries and it broadens my view of the world continually… And as with locals, *I see them as part of a family. We have a maximum of about 60 students… so I get involved in the class room with them. I get concerned if I see they are struggling. I get excited if I see them excelling. I'm that close too*, because of the small numbers to be able to see this. (Hospitality Management, Public Institute, VIC).

They just come into this class and they are like friends, like a bond. And that class is almost like a family. They become buddies. I become buddies with them too, in the sense where I'll go out with them sometimes or we'll have a barbeque together. So they form like a close knit group (Carpentry, QLD)

The terms 'home', 'family' and 'doors open' are used by the teachers to depict the picture of international classrooms as family or a 'home away from home' for international students. Creating a sense of belonging through building a safe and supportive environment where international students feel like home is especially meaningful and essential to optimise the learning of this cohort due to their situation of living and studying far away from home. This clearly reflects the 'African hospitality' implicit within ubuntu discussed above (Gathogo, 2008), whereby the openness of the community enables people to connect and interrelate (Msila, 2013). The pedagogical emphasis on cultivating international students' interconnectedness to the classroom and campus environment as revealed by the teachers in this research aligns with Goodenow's (1993) conceptualisation of students' sense of belonging in an educational context as the extent to which "students feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 80). This definition indicates the importance of reciprocity in creating and maintaining a sense of belongingness. Belongingness is relational in nature and is thus achieved through reciprocal and inclusive interpersonal relationships, which sets the background for reciprocal learning and mutual development.

Situatedness/Contextualisation as enriching Ubuntu

Situatedness, reciprocity and recognition of international students' cultural resources and work experiences are embraced by the teachers in this research. This is another key element of Ubuntu. In light of this principle, the *interconnectedness* of international students to the teaching and learning is fostered through teachers' attempts to enable students to capitalise on their cultural skills, knowledge and understandings as valuable resources for learning for all:

> Often, I'm trying to think of an example and I encourage people to use what they are bringing their culture with them into the classroom. Sometimes it's easy. Sometimes it's not so easy but it's all relevant. And the rest of the group can learn and understand from them too. (Hospitality, Private college, VIC).

> I think that from an individual perspective it's up to the department or the teacher in themselves to do like a value-add when they deliver. So whilst the student to be proven competent has to show us an understanding of the Australian rules and regulations. There's nothing to say that the teachers then can't say okay, well you have now have an understanding of that. Can you put that into your own country's context and provide you with an assessment based on your country's context? (Hospitality, Public College, NSW).

> As a teacher, you also need to be able to understand the cultural differences, particularly with things like special dietary needs… that you don't demand someone use it because it may be against their religion… If you went in with a closed mind and thought, I'm going to treat them all the same, I don't think you'd be able to do that. (Bakery, Public College, VIC).

Some common threads highlighted by the teachers in the above excerpts include the respect for students' cultural differences, the validation of students' cultural knowledge and prior understandings and the conceptualisation of vocational knowledge to develop collective understanding of different vocational practices. The first principle that the teachers emphasise in teaching international classes is the respect for students' cultural differences, which is fundamental to an ubuntu educational philosophy discussed earlier. Ubuntu illuminates the communal embeddedness and interconnectedness of a person to other persons, and highlights the importance attached to people and to human relationships.

However, teachers' pedagogy as articulated in the above excerpts might be argued to be more empowering and productive than some forms of ubuntu because it moves beyond the level of merely *respecting* and *recognising* different cultural practices to actively *validating* and *embedding* them in learning activities to enrich learning for all. Therefore ubuntu practice conceptualised in the context of teaching and learning for international students adds another layer of meaning of 'situating' and 'validating' of cultural and experiential knowledge to its basic principle of respecting. Reflecting the spirit of 'ubuntu' in this regard either consciously or unconsciously, teachers are creating a learning environment in which have the potential to make students feel more than just being respected but empowered as an active member, productive learner and valuable contributor to the learning community. Such approach assists with international students' esteem, and meaningful engagement and nurtures their interest in learning (Author, 2013; 2015).

Finally, the teachers also discussed strategies to help international students contextualise vocational theories in their home country, connect them to their home country practice, compare and contrast different national practices. The situatedness and contextualisation approach cultivated by the teachers in this research thus enables *collective* and *reciprocal* learning as students can encounter difference, share their own differences and contribute to turning alternatives ways of doing and understanding into valuable learning resources. In this way, their pedagogical practices are in line with Ubuntu's principle that is concerned with enabling "us to expose ourselves to others, to encounter the difference so as to inform and enrich our own" (Sindane, 1994, p. 8).

Conclusions

Embracing Ubuntu with its humanistic ethos and emphasis on interconnectedness opens up the possibility for international education to move beyond the current practices that are largely imperialism-based, Eurocentric, and economic consideration-driven (Matthews & Sidhu, 2010). Within this context, international students are often positioned as 'cash cows' and customers that help fill out the revenue for Anglo-Saxon institutions. More effort has been made on the marketing and recruitment of international students driven by the market principle of international education as an export industry while less attention seems to be paid to international students' humanistic needs and interconnectedness with educational practice, people, place and community in the host countries (Tran & Gomes, 2017). Within this context, the Ubuntu paradigm offers an alternative in response to the aspirations of international students and the enhancement of pedagogies which cater for international

students' humanistic and academic needs and interconnectedness. While there is a variability of the concept of Ubuntu as described in the literature review, overall Ubuntu perspectives challenge the conventional ways of viewing international students as the 'other' in 'our' educational system and as a commodity in commercialised education export.

Ubuntu principles can provide us with more nuanced understandings of the debates in the field of adult learning. Bangura (2005, p.13), for example, calls for an educational approach that "transcends pedagogy (…teaching), andragogy (…helping adults learn), ergonagy (…helping people learn to work), and heutagogy (the study of self-determined learning)". Yet scholars question how such aspirations can be met in contemporary educational settings characterised by high levels of consensualism, competitiveness and individualism (see Mungwini, 2011; O'Flaherty *et al.*, 2011). On the contrary, the findings of the paper show that it is possible for teachers to embrace ubuntu principles that underscore humanness, interconnectedness and situatedness. Doing so emerges from teachers' recognition of their *ethical* responsibilities, as a member of the host institution and host community, to take into account the human needs of international students and adapt their teaching practices to create a sense of interconnectedness to the leaning and social community for international students. The humanness of teaching and learning is reflected in how recognition and situatedness of students' cultural and work experiences and knowledge is embraced in pedagogic practices. In light of this approach, the *interconnectedness* of international students to both the learning content and to the learning community is fostered.

With Bangura's conceptualisation of ubuntu above, negotiated forms of tertiary learning which prioritise individually tailored learning to personal and professional development needs, with strong elements of self-directed learning (Author, 2013). The use of individually negotiated learning plans or contracts at programme level and at unit level, personal tutors to facilitate learning, as well as a more balanced power relation between the learner and their tutor (Talbot, 2010), are educational practices which suggest that dimensions for humanness are built into negotiated forms of tertiary learning. Of course learning technologies have been used for many years to facilitate interconnectedness in such circumstances, but evidence suggests that students can still be 'digitally distanced' and disengaged (Selwyn, 2011). Since the role of 'place' is so significant in forming transcultural meanings, it is also unclear how this may be effectively supported in practice (Wyse *et al.*, 2012). It is suggested that more research is needed to consider ubuntu in education, especially in terms of how it might inform the design of learning environments.

Furthermore, within the context of self-directed forms of experiential learning pedagogies Bache and Hayton (2012, p. 421) have found that there were "wide ranging expectations and past experiences amongst international students, and differing levels of adaptation to, and enthusiasm for, [the] approach". This places great demands on the adaptive capacity of teachers in vocational education (as any other teacher) who live and work within the confines of specific cultural and disciplinary norms.

Overall, this paper points to how a variety of Ubuntu practices offer an alternative to resolving problems related to disconnectedness and lack of meaningful engagement encountering international students in the host classrooms. Thus the paper suggests the possibility to apply Ubuntu perspectives for more effective teaching of international students. However, the research is limited as it is based on the perspectives and experiences of teachers in the vocational education only. It is suggested here that more research is needed into the experiences and challenges of adopting ubuntu-inspired educational approaches across different educational sectors including the school, HE and VET, which might not only inform teacher training programmes, but might also inform the design of systems and structures of learning support. Together, such strands of research in the contexts of vocational and work-based education can further our aspirations to understand student experience, performance and success as well as educating in ways which educate towards sustainable development and psychological resilience under contemporary conditions.

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