International Students and Doctoral Studies in Transnational Spaces

Fazal Rizvi

Introduction

The phenomenon of international students from developing countries attending universities in developed countries for advanced research training and doctoral degrees in the social sciences is nothing new. During the colonial period, international students completed their PhDs from leading universities in Europe, such as Oxford, Cambridge and London in the UK and Sorbonne in France, as well as the elite research universities in the United States. Their studies were often a part of various colonial arrangements designed to develop a local elite that was sympathetic to the economic and political interests of the colonial powers. The talented students in the colonized countries benefited from various scholarship schemes, as well as a system of patronage that enabled the local ruling class to take advantage of these schemes. Many of the graduates returned home to assume significant leadership positions, often in support of colonial interests, while others stayed behind in the West.

In the postcolonial era, this pattern continued. In the 1950s, programs such as the Colombo Plan were developed in the British Commonwealth to provide advanced technical, scientific and administrative training that was not yet available within the newly independent countries. Designed primarily as a foreign aid program, the Colombo Plan highlighted a commitment by the richer Commonwealth countries to provide students from the developing countries opportunities to get the training that was considered to be necessary for the development the social, administrative and economic infrastructure of the new nations (Oakman 2005).
Scholarships were provided in a range of academic and technical fields in support of this developmental aspiration. The Colombo Plan was not, however, merely an aid program but was also linked to the strategic interests of the West, within the broader politics of the Cold War. The Plan was grounded in an assumption that it would promote social and economic stability in the newly independent commonwealth countries, making them less likely to embrace communism.

The Colombo Plan, and similar programs in the United States, such as the Fulbright Scheme, articulated an ideology of ‘developmentalism’, which implied that rapid national economic development was not possible without highly skilled labor that was technically efficient, possessing research skills needed to solve local problems. ‘Development aid’ in higher education was designed to ‘modernize’ societies through technology training and transfer. This idea of development was based on a particular perspective on modernity, involving an essentialist and linear view of historical progress, which have in recent years been widely questioned. The notion of technology transfer, for example, has largely been undermined by subsequent experience. It is now recognized that the processes of transfer are never simple, and often involve complex modes of understanding that are not generalizable across different social and economic conditions. It has also been noted that a large proportion of PhD graduates of the Colombo Plan not return home, creating a pattern of ‘brain drain’ (Rizvi 2005); and even those who did found it difficult to apply their training to solve local problems and thus contribute to the national economic development in the various ways that were anticipated.
Part of the problem lay in the kind of knowledge to which the doctoral students were exposed, restricted as it was mostly to abstract concepts that were often remote from the specific requirements of the developing countries. At the same time, their research training occurred within contexts that failed to acknowledge the relations of power in which research training was embedded. Little attempt was made to provide a broader understanding of the links between colonial history and contemporary political processes and developmental requirements. As one of the earlier critics of developmentalism, Escobar (1991: 24), argued, the discourse of development has its origins in colonialism and modernization theories, which ‘choose to remain blind to the historically constituted character of development as a cultural system’. Research training similarly did not question how the broader relations of power served to define some knowledge and skills as more important than other. It thus produced scholars who often became alienated from their own cultural traditions; who acquired in their doctoral studies little understanding of the particular needs of their communities.

In recent years, the context in which doctoral studies take place has been greatly transformed not only by these postcolonial criticisms (Gupta 1998), which have largely demolished many of the epistemic and normative assumptions underlying the Western discourses of development, modernity and historical progress, but also by the processes of globalization that have altered the social and political terrain within which universities now operate. The space within which doctoral studies now takes place has become a transnational one, characterized by multiple ties and interactions linking people and institutions across the borders of nation-states. In this paper, I want to argue that the contemporary transnational formations have major implications for
thinking about doctoral studies, not least because of the challenges they pose for doctoral students’ attempts to negotiate their research aspirations, interests and experiences, and career trajectories. I want to discuss the expectations international doctoral students from the developing countries have of their research training in the social sciences; how they interpret the forms of knowledge which they are exposed within the Western academy; how they accord a sense of the legitimacy and utility to this knowledge; and the dilemmas they confront in forging their professional identities as researchers who are globally oriented but remain linked, in a variety of complicated ways, to their countries of origin.

In presenting my arguments, I draw both on my own experiences as an academic who has advised over the past twenty years a large number of international students in Australian and American universities, and also on the data I have collected from research projects that have examined issues of the global mobility of students and internationalization of higher education. These projects have sought to understand the cultural dynamics of international student experiences in both Australia and the United States, not as an aggregate account of individual experiences but as an attempt to theorize relational issues concerned with the emerging forms of transnationality. In this paper, I use international students’ own reflections on their expectations and experiences to draw a broader picture of doctoral studies within transnational spaces than is often presented in the rapidly growing literature on research training. This picture, based on five student narratives, seeks to point to the competing pressures the students face, and the ways they negotiate their experiences in order to make sense of their shifting cultural affiliations, as well as the calculations they make about the role of research training might in
enabling them to strategically position themselves in both national and transnational spaces.

**Transnational Spaces**

The idea of transnational spaces is central to my analysis. It represents a conceptual optic for understanding how the world is now constituted by cross-border relationships, patterns of economic, political and cultural relations and complex affiliations and social formations that span the world. It is used to name the multiple and messy proximities through which human societies have now become globally interconnected and interdependent. In a recent book, Steven Vertovec (2009: 3) describes transnationalism as

\[\text{…a condition in which, despite great distances, and notwithstanding the presence of international borders (and all the laws, regulations and national narratives they represent), certain kind of relationships have been globally intensified and now take place paradoxically in a planet-spanning yet common –however virtual –arena of activity.}\]

In this sense, the notion of transnationalism suggests systems of ties, interactions, exchanges and mobilities that spread across and span the world. It also refers to a mode of consciousness –a way of thinking about ourselves as belonging to the world as a whole (Cohen and Kennedy 2007: 58).

Vertovec (2009) discusses a number of different ‘takes’ on transnationalism. First, he suggests, transnationalism may be viewed as a
kind of social formation spanning borders. ‘Dense and highly complex networks spanning vast spaces are’, he suggests, ‘transforming many kinds of social, cultural, economic and political relationships’ (Vertovec, 2009: 5), producing a transnational public sphere that has rendered a strictly bounded sense of community obsolete. Second, Vertovec argues, transnational networks have produced a type of consciousness, marked by multiple senses of identification. Third, transnationalism involves a mode of cultural reproduction, associated with ‘a fluidity of constructed styles, social institutions and everyday practices’ (Vertovec, 2009, p.7). Fourth, transnationalism is linked to new patterns of capital formation that arguably involve globe-spanning structures or networks that have largely become disconnected from their national origins. Thus, new global systems of supply, production, marketing, investment, and information management have become major drivers of transnational formations.

Fifth, transnationalism, Vertovec argues, may be viewed as a site for political engagement where cosmopolitan anti-nationalist sentiments often exist alongside reactionary ethno-nationalist notions within various diasporas, representing the dynamism of the relationships between different sites of political activity. And finally, Vertovec (2009) suggests, transnationalism has reconstructed localities, regrouping, as a result of the mobility of people and ideas, the practices and meanings derived from multiple geographical and historical points of origin. It has changed ‘people’s relations to space particularly by creating transnational ‘social fields’ or ‘social spaces’ that connect and position some actors in more than one country’ (Vertovec, 2009, p.12). Vertovec cites with agreement, Appadurai’s (1996: 213) contention that the condition of transnationalism
is marked by the ‘growing disjuncture between territory, subjectivity and collective social movement’.

Now, as useful as Vertovec’s account of the various ‘takes’ on transnationalism is, its limitation lies in its failure to analyze how these ‘takes’ are related to each other. While Vertovec recognizes that these ‘takes’ are not mutually exclusive, he does not explore how, for example, global capital flows shape new modes of cultural production; how these modes define the social morphologies across systems of relationships and networks; how these systems transform the social configurations of communities, and how these configurations affect not only the cultural consciousness of people but also the calculations they make about how to position themselves within the transnational space. Also left unaddressed are the questions about ways in which transnational space is constituted by the globalization of capitalism and the expansion of social networks that facilitate the creation of new conditions of economic and political organization, on the one hand, and the political agency of individuals and groups of people, on the other –that is, how the transnational space is a complex product of both objective and subjective forces.

In the past two decades, an understanding of space as an objective phenomenon has been largely abandoned (Massey 2005), replaced with an idea that suggests a social grid within which objects are located, events occur and relations articulated. In this sense, space is no longer assumed to be natural, explicable solely in terms of pre-existing physical laws. Critical geographers now favor a more relational view of space, which seeks to provide an account of how it is constituted and given meaning through the various dynamics of social relations. In this way, space is no longer represented as a passive geometry, but in terms of
socio-spatial relations. It is conceived as a product of a specific set of cultural, social, political and economic interactions. It is something that is socially experienced, negotiated and named. As Massey (2005) notes, space is constituted through both social relations and material practices.

It should be stressed however that space is not merely a social construction. In a very helpful analysis, Soja (2000) makes a useful distinction between space and spatiality, suggesting that while not all space is socially produced all spatiality is. His analysis is thus focused both on the symbolic construction of space at the level of social imaginary and its more concrete articulation in the landscape. In this way, while a university, for example, can be minimally represented as a spatial allocation that has a physical form, it is, more accurately viewed as a complex phenomenon given meaning through rules, myths, language and rituals that speak to its spatial form –it is defined by a set of social relations and cultural practices. This suggests that space is a lived, felt and experienced phenomenon that is negotiated through both larger historical relations and the contingencies of everyday life. Space is thus imbued with ideological and political content: it involves dealing with broader structures, including various contrasting representations of space and spatial practices, and working towards social imaginaries of various kind.

This complex relational view of space provides a most useful theoretical backdrop against which to understand the contemporary drivers, forms and consequences of international student mobility, and the challenges international doctoral students confront in negotiating the transnationality of their experiences, and making calculation about how to strategically
position themselves in transnational spaces they have themselves helped create. Such a spatial analysis of the global mobility of international students is useful not least because mobility is primarily a spatial notion. However, such a relational spatial analysis is helpful also because it underscores the importance of human agency, while at the same time pointing to the connections between macro-economic and geopolitical transformations and patterns of social action and calculations. It highlights the need to account for the ways in which international students interpret, engage with and negotiate various generalized processes associated with globalization.

Significant in this discussion of transnational spaces is the manner in which the national features in their constitutions. Following such globalization enthusiasts as Appadurai (2000), it is assumed by many that transnationalism is ushering in a new period of weakened nationalism, a post-national global cultural economy, expressed in practices both ‘from above’ and ‘from below’. However, as Smith and Guarnizo (1998) point out, there are several reasons for doubting this claim. First, while transnational formations are certainly in evidence everywhere, these formations seldom occur outside national configurations, since, for a variety of strategic reasons, nation-states have an interest in defining their transnational connections. Nation-states are, for example, increasingly incorporating their diasporas into their nation-centered projects. Second, globally mobile people too seem to want retain their national connections, both for sentimental reasons and also as a way of ensuring greater flexibility to move in between national and transnational spaces, and to enjoy opportunities emanating from such ambiguity. So far from withering away in the era of globalization, nation-states are in fact active in promoting a particular kind of transnational subject.
If this is so then we need to ask how international doctoral students participate in these complex processes of transnationalism --how they negotiate the creation of the transnational spaces that they inhabit, becoming transnational subjects of a particular kind. How are their aspirations and expectations forged by an already formed understanding of transnationality, affected both by national discourses and those that are globally circulating? What dilemmas do they confront in negotiating these spaces, and how do they utilize various discourses to resolve tensions that are invariably an important feature of transnational processes? In what follows, I provide a number of narratives of international doctoral student experiences in order to understand the complexities of these processes, and point to the ways in which transnationalism involves a dialectic of the national and the global. I argue that such an understanding is important to universities in becoming clearer about the new practices of research training that are needed by the globally mobile students.

**Student Aspirations and Expectations**

Much has been written in recent years about the reasons students have for going abroad for their higher education (Guruz 2007). Among the reasons cited are lack of academic opportunities at home in certain disciplines and for certain ethnic groups; perceptions of better instructional quality and higher standards; following a family tradition; exposure to other cultures and intercultural understanding; possibilities of international networking; impressions of international qualifications as a marker of status and prestige; views of international education as leading to immigration; and so on. It needs to be noted however that these
reasons relate mostly to undergraduate studies. International students interested in graduate programs engage in a wider set of calculations that are more self-reflexive, and not driven by the preferences of parents. These calculations are informed by perceptions of transnationality, and the role higher education plays in building professional identities and forging academic careers. In this sense, doctoral student aspirations and expectations are already forged in transnational spaces.

As Aihwa Ong (2006) has pointed out, even before attending universities in the United States, many Asian graduate students have developed a strategic sense of the kind of transnational subject they wish to be. She has argued that ‘flexible strategies linked to specific educational availability in different countries further normalize the production of flexible, multilingual and multicultural subjects, as well as their disembedding from a particular set of values’ (Ong 2006: 153). Yet these students are often caught between the stress on individualistic skills and entrepreneurial competition, on the one hand, and on general humanistic concerns and national cultural values, on the other. Their expectations are tempered by the realization that the on-going internationalization of American and Australian universities is driven as much by neo-liberal market considerations as they are by specifically academic and cultural concerns. While Ong (2006: 153) may be correct in maintaining that ‘graduates of American universities the world over represent a global standard of professional excellence based on the calculative attitude and practice, articulating with egoistical individualism and self-enterprise in a spectrum of fields’, she overstates the content of these calculative considerations. For the fact is that international students in the social sciences in particular develop a sense of their aspirations and expectations and negotiate their experiences abroad in a range of diverse
and complicated ways. Furthermore, their calculations are affected by considerations that are both national and global.

For example, a Malaysian student, Nasir, I interviewed in Australia in 1999 while he was in his first year of a doctoral program in Economics at an Australian university exemplifies the pressures that entered into his calculations, and the ways in which the Malaysian state sought to construct his transnational aspirations. Nasir was awarded a graduate scholarship by the Malaysian government on the strength of his outstanding performance as a lecturer at a regional Malaysian university. He had applied for scholarship because he felt that his training abroad would strengthen his career possibilities, and provide him with the kind of education that was not available in Malaysian universities. To secure the scholarship Nasir was put through a ‘long’, ‘difficult’ and ‘grueling’ process. He felt that in the end he got the scholarship because he was ethnic Malay, whose family had close links with the governing political party -- United Malay National Organization (UMNO). The state was interested in promoting, he felt, mostly those students who could be more readily incorporated into the structure of Malaysian national politics.

When asked to reflect further on the selection process and how the state communicated its expectations, Nasir spoke of the state wanting him to do something that would be useful to the government in its attempts to ‘modernize its economic planning processes’. The term ‘modernization’ is interesting here, and points to the ways in which the Malaysia government had in the 1990s begun to pursue neoliberal economic reforms, designed to make Malaysia more competitive within the global economy. Nasir was to be instrument of a national policy preference that sought a particular kind of transnational subject with an understanding of
global processes, but who would nonetheless remain loyal to the state. Indeed, during the interview, Nasir got the impression that he was expected to come back from Australia and work for the state bureaucracy, even though he was himself more interested in teaching and research. ‘I had to play the game because otherwise I would not have got the scholarship’, he said. What was more worrying to Nasir was his impression that the state was determined to ‘keep tabs on me’ throughout his time in Australia, both formally through regular reports and interviews but also informally through the appointment of a mentor, a senior Malaysian student who was himself required to report to the Malaysian government on his own as well as Nasir’s progress on a regular basis.

In contrast, Neelu, a PhD student in Geography at a public research university in the United States had more autonomy to negotiate the transnational space. When interviewed in 2005, Neelu was a Fulbright scholar during the second year of her doctoral studies. She had always wanted to study in the United States and had devoted most of her studies in India in preparation for a Fulbright award, pursuing this goal with unwavering conviction and determination, learning as much about Fulbright Scheme as she could, even going to the extreme lengths of seeking advice from earlier Fulbright scholars. She had realized that Fulbright officers favored a discourse about ‘cosmopolitanization of attitudes and values’. She was thus able to recite at the interview how her transnational experiences in the United States would help her develop ‘global competence’, and how she would ‘bring back from America an understanding of economic and cultural globalization that was much needed in India’. She was able to speak confidently about India as an emerging power within global knowledge economy, and about the
growing relationship between India and the United States as a defining feature of the new world order.

It would be wrong to assume however that Neelu acted cynically, simply to secure the scholarship. On the contrary, she had internalized these beliefs, making them her own. She had fully intended to develop further new practices of thinking, judging and acting that would develop her into an enterprising global subject capable of maneuvering herself as effectively in the field of corporate business as at a large research university. Many of her sentiments largely parodied the arguments put forward by Tom Friedman (2005) in his book, *The World is Flat*, which have been embraced enthusiastically by the new global corporate class (Robinson 2004) and with which Neelu was ready to identify. She had no problem imagining a professional career that lay outside India, and viewed her graduate education as way of making her globally mobile, working in a transnational rather than a national space. In this way, Neelu calculations differed markedly from those of Nasir, who still privileged a commitment to national priorities, even if these were becoming re-framed by the processes of globalization.

**Dilemmas of Transnational Experiences**

Beyond the multiple considerations that lead international students to pursue their doctoral studies abroad, they also encounter a range of dilemmas during their studies. Many of these dilemmas are common to all doctoral students, but international students face additional challenges of negotiating a transnational space that is constituted not only by their aspirations and expectations but also by the forms of knowledge to which they are exposed; the ways in which they have to make sense of the
significance and utility of this knowledge; and the manner in which they are positioned within the academic relations of power. In addition to the requirements of their studies, they have to learn and negotiate the structures and traditions of the Western academy. But equally important to many students are the pressures emanating from ‘home’, not only the formal requirements of the kind Nasir faced, but also the more informal demands of family and friends expressed as responsibilities to their countries of origin. With the availability of cheaper telephone and Internet that has become the ‘social glue of transnationalism’ (Vertovec 2009: 54), demands of home are expressed to students on an almost daily basis. International students thus have to straddle a space somewhere between an emerging sense of cosmopolitanism, on the one hand, and national loyalty, on the other.

These dilemmas were most evident in the experiences of Kamal, a Turkish student with a PhD scholarship from the Turkish Ministry of Education. Kamal was a very serious student, with a solid background in Social Theory. His education in Turkey had provided Kamal with good analytical and critical skills with which to think about social changes taking place in Turkey and elsewhere. For his research he wanted to examine shifting representations of key twentieth century historical events in school textbooks widely used in Turkey. He was therefore correctly advised at his university in the United States to take courses in such areas as discourse analysis, critical social theory, postcolonial studies and curriculum history. His advisor saw in Kamal a potential to not only cope with complex theoretical and political issues, but also carry out an exemplary piece of critical research, for which the advisor himself was widely known. Kamal enjoyed these courses, performing brilliantly, producing papers that could have easily been published in major journals.
Some of these papers showed a level of political courage that many international students hesitate to express, even if they embrace progressive and critical politics.

However, during the writing stage of his dissertation, Kamal’s courage deserted him. He became increasingly concerned about the risks associated with writing a dissertation that was highly critical of the ways in which Turkish textbooks represented contentious issues. As a scholarship student, he worried about the ways in which he might be treated once he returned home. ‘I am not sure how honest I can be. I don’t want to risk my job chances back in Turkey’, he maintained. It was not only the job prospects that worried him but also the risks he imagined in losing his friends and attracting his family’s disapproval. He wondered if his critical scholarship had not in fact forced him to consider remaining in the United States. Yet this was a possibility that was also unavailable to him, as his scholarship required him to return to work in Turkey for five years. When he tried to discuss these dilemmas with other Turkish students, he did not get a sympathetic hearing from them, let alone the kind of understanding he needed. Nor did he believe his academic advisor fully appreciated his dilemma or indeed wished to become engaged with what was for Kamal not only a personal matter but also a political and theoretical one. In the end, Kamal wrote a dissertation with which he was not entirely happy, and has now returned to Turkey to work as a faculty in a small regional university.

Kamal’s story illustrates some of the complexities international students have to negotiate while studying for research degrees in a transnational space. It shows how the production of knowledge in the social sciences is inherently political and how this politics is exasperated for international
students subjected to conflicting pressures. These pressures however do not only arise in relation to the processes of knowledge production but also with respect to the ways in which international students are treated in the Western academy. The case of Marina, a doctoral student from Mexico, illustrates the ways in which international students experience marginalization through pedagogic processes that do not always recognize their prior academic experience. Marina came to the United States to study for a doctoral degree in Sociology, sponsored by her university in Mexico, where she had been a professor for over ten years. She wished to pursue advanced research in Information Sciences, and had a very clear idea about her research project. While in the United States, she wanted to get opportunities to have serious scholarly conversations about her ideas with not only her fellow students but also the faculty.

When interviewed during the last year of her studies, as she was preparing to defend her dissertation, Marina believed she did not get these opportunities, and expressed deep disappointment about her experiences as an international student in general. To begin with, she felt slighted about the lack of recognition of her prior learning and scholarly achievements. She maintained that: ‘by and large, I was treated like a young student by faculty here…more than that I felt marginalized by them, treated as if I had nothing to contribute, as if my ten years of [my own] faculty experience was irrelevant’. Marina insisted that the faculty in the United States had not yet learnt to deal productively with mature doctoral students from abroad, and that while she was keen to benefit from her transnational experiences, the faculty did not view their engagement with doctoral students as equally important. She suspected that the faculty are unable to make a clear enough distinction between
international undergraduate and graduate students, treating them both equally as objects of their patronage, not realizing that international students in graduate programs are often professionals and academics with a vast amount of experience in their country of origin.

Marina’s impressions are consistent with Matus’s (2006) analysis of the ways in which international graduate students are positioned within the American academy. Matus has argued that, in both policy and practice, the discourses of international students in US are constituted in a number of different ways. While there is a liberal discourse of mutual benefit that surrounds internationalization of higher education, Matus maintains, there is also a relatively hostile discourse of international students that is constructed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS). This discourse positions them in a distinctive bureaucratic category, as ‘non-immigrants’, who are both privileged and disadvantaged at the same time – privileged because they have opportunities for higher education in the United States but disadvantaged because they lack the rights available to citizens. They occupy an in-between space. International students are also subjected to discourses of control and threat, especially since September 11, and are now subjected to surveillance and regulations that lead many to feel insecure and uncertain about the extent to which they are welcome in the United States. In this sense, the transnational space in which international doctoral students pursue their studies is constituted by a complicated set of social relations, often defined by national policy regimes.

The national enters the constitution of the transnational space for international students in another way, through their links with the diasporic communities. This is amply illustrated by the case of Meena, a
student who came to a university in Melbourne from Sri Lanka to study for a doctoral degree in Financial Services, forgoing a lucrative corporate career in Sri Lanka. On the strength of her outstanding academic results in her Masters at a British university, her studies in Australia were funded by an Australian government scholarship. Her early days in Australia were very difficult, she confided, as she had to leave her elderly parents behind in Sri Lanka. Her father died within the six months of arrival in Australia, leading her to consider abandoning her studies. She found solace and encouragement however in Melbourne’s large Sri Lankan community. Indeed, during this time, she became closely involved in the ‘diaspora’ politics, which was deeply aligned to the ethnic fractions in Sri Lanka between Tamils and Sinhalese. She felt that she was forced to take sides in Australia, something she had studiously avoided in Sri Lanka itself. ‘If you want to be a part of the community’, she said, ‘you have no option. In many ways, the [Sri Lankan] politics here is more intense and less forgiving than it is in Sri Lanka’.

Meena’s participation in diasporic politics illustrates how it powerfully embodies broader trends in the changing nature of nation-states. The power of the Sri Lankan government was no less diminished for Meena in social relations in Australia, where her links with Sri Lanka became more complex, as she negotiated the transnational space constituted not only by the requirements of her studies but also a whole of host of new personal and community considerations. This complexity was further compounded by the need for her to send money to her mother, especially after the death of her father. To pay for the regular remittances, Meena had to get a part time job in a transnational corporation, further reducing the time she could devote to her studies. For her then the transnational space in Australia turned out to be a very difficult terrain characterized
by a whole range of conflicting pressures. Towards the end of her studies these difficulties were exasperated as she considered her options after graduation. These options ranged from working for the transnational corporation where she had a part-time job and perhaps becoming relocated where the corporation decided she was most needed; returning home to Sri Lanka to an uncertain future; applying to immigrate in Australia where she had become an integral part of the diasporic community; or taking up an offer of a post-doctoral fellowship in the United States. This was no simple choice: it involved contrasting life trajectories that her transnational experiences in Australia had opened up for her.

*Calculative Logics and Professional Identities*

What these five narratives of international doctoral students in Australia and the US demonstrate is their professional identities are developed around a complex set of processes that are hybrid, channeled and networked: they are formed in a diversity of self-directed ways that are socially situated in transnational spaces. The formation of their identities involves calculative logics that both require them to interpret the social spaces of their research training and also the transnational space they might occupy after their studies. Their experiences are forged in transnational social networks that suggest that their professional identities are in a state of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘arrival’ (Smith & Guarnizo 1998: 21). Professional identity formation is thus best understood as ‘a dialectic of embedding and disembedding which, over time, involves an unavoidable encumbering, dis-encumbering, and re-encumbering of situated self’. In this way, as Smith and Guarnizo argue, and as the student narratives illustrate, identity is ‘continuous but not radically
discontinuous’. In a transnational space, the student retain links with home, develop new links in Australia or the United States and imagine themselves playing a role on the global stage.

It could be argued however that there is nothing new about these transnational practices of international students -- and were arguably similar during the Colombo Plan era, for example. However, these narratives indicate that while some international students might have exhibited transnational characteristics in earlier eras, the current context is substantially different. The current transnational pressures, activities and aspirations of international research students are quite heterogeneous, and are affected by new transnational conditions shaped by global media and communication possibilities and new institutional neoliberal ideologies that have reconfigured the structure of universities. The students now are also able to imagine a wider set of professional trajectories. These conditions are of course variably manifested among different students depending on a range of factors, including their academic background and research interests. Social Sciences, in particular, have been transformed by global processes, with the recognition of the complex relations between knowledge and power across cultural traditions that are now increasingly characterized by intercultural links of various kinds (Connell 2007). International research students in the Social Sciences cannot avoid addressing these issues, acquiring greater self-reflexivity of not only their research questions but also the transnationality of their experiences.

The narratives of international research students presented above undermine a view popular among some recent globalization theorists, such as Strange (1996) and Ohmae (1994) that suggests that transnational
processes have weakened the nation-state, and that national cultures andpolitical systems have lost their significance by the forces ofglobalization, such as those associated with transnational capital, globalmedia and supra-national political institutions. Equally, it has beenargued that transnationalism has strengthened both cross-border ethnicand religious affiliations, and also grassroots activism. Thesedevelopments are often presented in celebratory terms, as increasing thepossibilities of new liberatory practices (Hannerz 1996) and of culturalcreativity and hydridity (Bhabha 1994). On the other hand, transnationalconditions are assumed to be associated with many negative outcomes,including the consolidation of capitalist modernization, driven by adestructive culture of consumerism, individualism and even rampantgreed. Both of these perspectives on transnationalism may be found inrecent writings on internationalization of higher education, withinternationalization presented in positive terms as contributing to greaterinternational understanding and freedom from the constraints of nationalprejudices in education (de Wit 1995), and also in negative terms as a sitethat produces a new global elite more interested in its own interests thanin any commitment to the public good embodied within the nationalimaginary (Robinson 2004).

The student narratives show both of these positions to be misleading,because they imply a binary between the national and transnationalspace, and between positive and negative outcomes of transnationalformations. As we have noted, national considerations enter at each ofthe stages of the students’ transnational experiences -- in the formationsof their aspirations and expectations; in their experiences abroad; in thedefinition of their pedagogic and research; and in the development oftheir professional identities. Their country of origin is deeply interested
in shaping the transnational subject they become, as a way of utilizing their knowledge and skills in positioning the national economy within the global economy. This construction of the transnational subject is not always in line with the calculations that international students themselves make of the transnational space they want to inhabit. Australia and the United States have yet another set of expectations of the international research students, possibly as highly skilled immigrants or cultural mediators across national interests. In this way, transnational space is constituted by power relations, cultural constructions and economic interactions, but always in ways that require calculative logics.

These calculations are never easy, and have to take into account numerous conflicting demands. Some of these demands are personal, while others are created for international research students by the sponsoring state, such as the Malaysian government for Nasir and the US authorities for Neelu. To negotiate the complexities, both Nasir and Neelu needed an understanding of ‘grounded reality’ – first, the social constructed conditions within the transnational networks they had to form and move through and, second, the policies and practices of the territorially-based sending and receiving local and national states. The transnational practices thus do not take place in an abstract ‘third space’, located in-between national territories (Bhabha 1994), but in specific concrete spaces, by social actors whose life options are defined by local constraints and social moorings. This was clearly evident in the case of Shanti, who had to negotiate a difficult terrain of competing demands of the her employer, a transnational corporation, her research advisor, the Sri Lankan diaspora in Melbourne and the Sri Lankan state. For each of these students the transnational space during their studies was a space of trans-local meaning making, territorial specificities, juridical control, and
personal relations, articulated in transnational economic, political and cultural flows. Certainly, this is a dynamic space of personal rewards, but equally it is an uncomfortable, contested and even traumatic space that should not be romanticized in the ways in which some cultural theorists do, but recognized for what it is – full of constraints as well as opportunities.

**Conclusion**

This paper describes some of the ways in which international doctoral students participate in the contemporary processes of transnationalism -- how they negotiate the spaces they inhabit, and become transnational subjects of a particular kind; how their aspirations are forged by an already formed understanding of transnationality, affected both by national discourses and those that are globally circulating; and how they utilize these discourses to resolve tensions of living and working in a transnational space, and thus develop a sense of professional identity that is responsive to both the constraints and the possibilities of transnational flows and networks. I argue that international research students are highly sensitive and self-reflexive about the complexities of transnational formations as they inevitably have to negotiate competing pressures emanating from a wide variety of sources. If this is so then I suggest that research advisors would be well advised to not only develop their own understanding of transnationality but also help international research students to build upon their tacit familiarity with issues of transnational formations to better understand the conditions in which they are expected to produce new knowledge and forge their professional identity.
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Bibliography


