

Melanesian culture and Western-style higher education: Reflections of PNG university academics

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Abstract

This paper describes the ways in which the different values and approaches of Melanesian culture and Western-style higher education are presented by academic staff at Divine Word University in Papua New Guinea. The research is drawn from a wider study on the construction, presentation and maintenance of academic identities in a PNG context, including consideration of the ‘identity work’ that academics undertake to provide a coherent self-concept. Using a social constructionist framework, the study explored volunteer academics’ views on a range of topics, including a specific question on perceptions of cultural tension. The analysis of interview data on this specific question reveals a wide range of concepts used by DWU academics, which can be grouped into six themes. These themes are: denial or displacement of tension; displaying an awareness of ‘otherness’ or neo-colonialism in PNG society; arguing a pragmatic need for ongoing ‘taking in’ of global knowledge; locating difference and challenge in the context of teaching the next generation; discussion of the challenges of English language instruction; and presenting a critical perspective on Melanesian culture. These themes find echoes in current concerns over academic neo-colonialism and explorations as English as a medium of instruction in post-colonial and emerging nations. DWU academics are accustomed to operating multiculturally. However, an entrenched view of Western higher education as the ideal to strive for may prevent a full appreciation and celebration of the advanced and complex cross-cultural competence shown by PNG academics. As well as adding to the body of knowledge on academic identities in a global context, the paper suggests ideas for professional development and further research for DWU and other Papua New Guinean academics.

Keywords: academic identity; cross-cultural; higher education; Melanesian; neo-colonialism

Introduction

In this paper, we analyse the ways in which Melanesian academic staff at a Papua New Guinean University present their experiences of the multi-faceted relationship between Melanesian culture and Western-style higher education. The underlying questions are whether tensions or mismatches in this relationship are experienced and what such experiences suggest about the maintenance and enhancement of their academic identity.

The source for the analysis is the views of 57 Papuan New Guinean academics at Divine Word University (DWU), which were gathered as part of a broader study on academic identities. The aim of the wider research study was to explore how academic identities are constructed, maintained, presented and adjusted at DWU.

Academic identity

Studies on academic identity have gained prominence over the past decade, as markers of evolutionary change in higher education institutions and systems (Drennan et al., 2017) but also to better understand academic professional socialisation. The vast majority of these studies have been undertaken in developed nations of the Global North with mature higher education systems (e.g. Henkel, 2005; Billot, 2010). Accounts of academic identity formation and maintenance in cross-cultural and trans-lingual contexts are largely unrepresented in the scholarly literature on academic identity. Recently, more diverse academic voices and identity experiences are surfacing (e.g. Mathe, 2018; Ida Fatimawati bt Adi Badiozaman, 2020), together with an emergent literature, relevant to this paper, on experiences of academics using English as a medium of instruction (EMI) in a wide range of national cultures (Dearden, 2014; Milligan & Tikly, 2016).

The theoretical framework for the research study was social constructivism, drawing on a body of work that extends from symbolic interactionism as the basis of a theory of identity (Stets & Serpe, 2013) to constructivist accounts of professional or occupational identity as conditioned by a range of contextual factors but constantly adjusted in the practice of activities and dialogue (Delanty, 2008). That is, there is an underlying assumption that people are active shapers of their own differentiable identities, which are felt, negotiated and expressed through multiple social situations, in a process of “ongoing construction, deconstruction and reconstruction” (Billot & King, 2017, p. 613).

Academics have choices about how they present themselves or describe their identities when interacting with others: “In the context of academia, the individual develops their sense of ‘academic self’ through their imaginings of what comprises ‘the academic’, their past experiences and their understanding of the current circumstances” (Billot, 2010, p. 712). We accept also that individuals engage in ‘identity work’ (Brown, 2017, p. 298; Shams,

2019), to present a socially desirable identity, manage perceived identity consonance and dissonance, and to reflect on questions that shape their identity.

Papua New Guinea and Divine Word University

An emerging nation in Oceania with a population of around 9 million, Papua New Guinea today is shaped by its geography, enduring Melanesian cultural diversity, development since gaining independence from Australia in 1975, as well as by a colonial legacy and the effects of globalisation. Its previous history under that form of colonial rule known as exploitative colonisation (only partial in the case of PNG) led to the recognition of English as a national language and the introduction, from Australia, of higher education from a British Western tradition. In 2021, only a tiny fraction of the population has attended or is attending one of the nation's seven small universities.

DWU, a small, young university is a multicultural community with a majority of Papua New Guinean academic staff but a significant presence of expatriates. As implied above, academics in PNG universities are required to teach in English, as the official language of the country, and they adopt structures and practices of university education that are instantly familiar to anyone with a knowledge of higher education in the Global North, especially in the United Kingdom and Europe.

Methodology

The method used was semi-structured interviews with volunteer DWU academics, conducted almost completely in English. The interviewers, who were 3 Papua New Guineans and one long-standing PNG resident, recognise that in interviewing PNG academics, the outcome of the identity work performed by interviewees was shaped by the interview situation and immediate context, the interviewer, the questions and prompts, and the language.

A series of 21 questions was employed for the broad research study, one of which was '*Do you feel any tensions between Melanesian culture and Western-style higher education?*'. There were two probes: '*If yes, tell us about the kinds of tension you feel*' and '*How do you address or discuss these tensions in your academic work*'. Responses centred on the first question, so the probes were seldom used.

Ethical clearance for the research was obtained from the DWU Human Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were conducted on site in July and August 2018 (Madang Campus) and in March and May 2019 (Wewak and Rabaul Campuses respectively).

In all, 57 interviews with academics were transcribed: 34 from the main Madang Campus; 11 from Wewak Campus; and 12 from Rabaul Campus, involving more than a third of DWU academic staff. Interviewees were from all DWU Faculties and ranged in age and academic seniority. All interviewees were Papua New Guinean, although DWU employs expatriate academic staff. Academics from the discipline of Education comprised the largest group (42%), due to the deliberate inclusion of volunteers from DWU's two campuses that provide primary teacher education. The analysis of findings did not investigate systematically the possible role of disciplinary differences in participants' views, although a comment on responses from health sciences has been included below.

General rather than highly specific transcription was used and text was coded using QDA Miner software. A reflexive thematic analysis was undertaken (Braun & Clarke 2019), exploring the words and concepts employed rather than the examination of precise verbalisation used in other forms of narrative or discourse analysis (Riessman, 2008). Text in brackets following quotes in the next section of the paper indicates the campus and gender of the interviewee, for reference.

As a note, we observe that our theoretical framework for academic identities should be used with caution in PNG. Its constructs are products of the Global North, of developed capitalistic societies, so to explore questions of academic identity through this lens already closes off the possibility of other explorations that might view 'academic identity' through the ways of knowing of Papua New Guinean cultures. The construction and presentation of identities in PNG is the subject of a substantial anthropological literature, most of which demonstrates the range and subtlety of local cultural constructs, including the engagement with Western modernity (Robbins & Wardlaw, 2005).

Findings

Broad themes

Responses to the specific question on tensions between Melanesian culture and Western-style higher education elicited a very wide range of perspectives and examples from interviewees. There was no 'received wisdom' or accepted narrative used by participants in addressing the question; rather, responses show there is not a common set of ideas or language forms (at least not in English) that DWU academics use to discuss matters of cross-cultural

understanding or tension. In the next section of the paper, we speculate on possible reasons for an apparent lack of discussion.

Notwithstanding this variety, we identify six broad thematic responses to the question, suggesting there could be an underlying range of typical responses that are amenable to further exploration in the context of academic identity maintenance but also in the service of better learning and teaching in PNG higher education. These six themes, with extended examples provided below are:

1. Denial or displacement of tension as a manifestation of individual academic identity
2. Displaying an awareness of ‘otherness’ or neo-colonialism in PNG society
3. Arguing a pragmatic need for ongoing ‘taking in’ of global knowledge in modern PNG
4. Locating difference and challenge in the context of teaching the next generation
5. Discussion of the challenges of English-language instruction
6. Presenting a critical perspective on Melanesian culture

1. Denial or displacement of tension as a manifestation of individual academic identity

Some interviewees focused on their personal reactions and how they make sense of the blended experiences they constantly are exposed to or the ways they intersect with colleagues, especially expatriates. They emphasise that there is no tension for them because they are comfortable as academics working cross-culturally:

I felt comfortable with working with other people and I don't no, I don't have that tension, I don't have that tension so I get on well with ahh national colleagues and also umm international colleagues you know (MP1F)

...if I'm relating well with people from another culture, then there is no tension... if I'm relating well with people from another culture, then there is no tension... I feel that if it's forced down my throat then it becomes a tension (KP9M)

I think I've lived enough, long enough overseas to see that I can adjust you know. People can generally adjust (MP6M)

Generally, then, those who said straight out there was no tension related the question to their own personal presentation of an identity: “our Melanesian culture still have some influence on what we do and how we pursue things and all this; our view. But to me, it doesn't really put me into an awkward or some kind of very bad position...” (WP9F).

Others emphasised that ‘tension’ was not an appropriate word to use, displacing any sense of conflict to focus on the co-existence of Melanesian culture and Western cultural elements in PNG. The use of the word ‘tension’ in the question, which could be interpreted as involving aggression or quite a strong conflict, internally, interpersonally or even among nations. Many interviewees, after some reflection, gave examples of differences and how these could tug themselves or colleagues or students in different directions but rejected the label of ‘tension’. As one interviewee said: “I don't think that tension would be the right word to use. I, I think it's all about where you're at, and what you can make use of” (WP3M).

2. Displaying an awareness of ‘otherness’ or neo-colonialism in PNG society

Collectivism is a particularly pervasive concept in PNG culture, the basis for tribal and clan identity coherence and support for one's wantoks. Many ‘us and them’ distinctions however are located among local groups: the vast ‘otherness’ of the rest of the world is of a different order, although one that is increasingly visible to all Papua New Guineans through international media.

A substantial number of interviewees chose to point to general currents of cross-cultural difference in PNG society without necessarily characterising tensions specific to academic identity, as in this extended account that touches also on a concern about using polished English:

As a Melanesian you could probably feel that there is tension... the tension that I always feel is that there is a feeling of what I'm writing, he is a white man, he or she knows the language better, and I'm using the language, and what will he or she say about the kind of language I'm using. So, there's already a feeling there, between me and the person. But I know being a Melanesian, we take things easy, but as a Westerner they have their standard, that's the culture in which they are brought up in. So, the level of their lifestyle is different from our lifestyle. And so I am, so there is a struggle for me now to get into

their lifestyle. So the tension between me and them is that he expects me to get to his lifestyle, and for me is that I am, you know, I have a lifestyle as a Melanesian that I have to break free from them in order to enter into that level in which the Westerner is expecting me to... So I would say that there is always tension between me and a person who is from a different country (KP4M).

The same interviewee, who is one of the few who state they discuss these issues with their students, goes on to say:

I had to explain to my Melanesian students that they understand the difference between what we as Melanesians, our attitudes, the things and attitudes to life, and the Western attitudes to things and attitudes to life. So, there is a clear difference between us and them, so because of that... I try as much as possible to write and to help guide my students to be cautious of the attitudes that we have... (KP4M).

In contrast, some interviewees clearly experience the tensions of being in a post-colonial society, influenced by academic neo-colonialism, and discuss a conscious sense of relative disadvantage that influences their academic identity:

I would have like to think that they should give us all the support we need to move through and achieve through the developed process because it is a working progress. And often times there is a component of discrimination, I think the point of the knowledge is I am equally capable as a developed counterpart, the technology and the knowledge globally has made me read the same text book and have the same level of knowledge as my developed counterpart so there should not be any differentiation or discriminatory in that for conquest of knowledge to demonstrate my capabilities and my intellectual capacity... (MP13M).

I guess it's because of the colonialist mentality I'm sorry to say but we still have that. There is still that separation of national and international we try our best to bring the two together but then in most areas you still see that there is still that tension where they still have the upper hand. That's generally speaking... But again we could do a lot more in acknowledging the hard work of those people who've done a lot in getting this university to what it should or has been and what it should be in the future. Acknowledging the efforts of mainly our national staff. We've put a lot to what we do and just to get a little bit of acknowledgement would be good... (MP20F).

For others, although there is a profound sense of the 'disconnect' (MP25M) between Melanesian cultural values and the values and norms of Western higher education, it is possible to switch fairly easily between different modes, even where teaching about Western norms goes against the cultural grain:

... these professions require you to be very outspoken, they require you to be very assertive, and you're not supposed to take into account the gender or the age of somebody or where they come from, you know this big men style thing, this is not something you're supposed to factor into the way you communicate with another person, but you know Papua new Guineans we still very young, submissive and I think it's very Melanesian of us, because were so used to, we must respect our elders, em bigman and he is a minister. So we have to tread on eggshells and so you can't be very outspoken, you have to know your place I guess, but for teaching students to become good practitioners for [*this profession*], we're kind of going against the grain, so to speak and I know for students it's going to take some time also because they came from you know secondary school where the teacher is the 'know it all' so you just listen and do what you're told. But when you get into the field, you have to be critical you can't just say yes mam or yes sir, and we're not comfortable questioning people. And I think that's a very Melanesian way of our lifestyle, of our upbringing (MP23F).

Several interviewees provide examples of the presence of 'difference' and describe negative features of Western values, while indicating they can readily negotiate such differences in their own academic lives:

Tension, yeah, there are some, Melanesian is unique and we have this Western culture as well. They are not compatible. There is always tension. In the Western culture we have people from overseas they come and because as academics we are used to both cultures now. We can wear one cap and all of a sudden we change. And that's good. But there's certain things I think our culture, some of them are good but because we try to because of Western influence we try to overlook them or things like that. Example, I can talk about family, like many our culture we value family because family is there and they look after us and we are able to come to work and deliver our lessons, things like that. Western culture they don't really worry too much about that (MP21M).

Competing values in one's professional and family or clan life are another obvious source of difference or otherness. A few interviewees report personal tensions between the rules of a university and local cultural pressures:

Usually, family obligations as an academic, they see that you are up there, but with activities at home, I support activities at home so these are some of the connections I still have back at home, when there are feasts or death or any big gatherings that my family and the village require me to chip in in terms of advice or financial support, I help.... And then missing class to stand on the long ques in the bank to send money, these are some of the things that affect my teaching life (MP32F).

3. *Arguing a pragmatic need for ongoing 'taking in' of global knowledge in modern PNG*

Another way in which DWU academics address the question is to propose an imperative to keep adapting to Western norms and concepts, to avoid 'missing out' (WP6F):

Our system of education is changing. And we are, Papa New Guinea has become members to some of the educational policies all these worldwide. And also we need to adjust our teaching and learning in order to meet the standard of the world demand (WP7M).

Several interviewees suggest that cultural displacement or discomfort is the price to be paid for acquiring new knowledge from expatriate colleagues, stressing however that Papua New Guineans have agency in this process:

I think that, you know, like someone in the village would say, oh she, 'em save meri' [*a knowledgeable woman*], and they think it all comes from white man. They have this sort of mentality but, if we look at it on the good side, because this people are here and they help us to get the knowledge and they showed us the way, when you go to school, you will learn things and you will enhance your knowledge so I think like the international influence is good on us so it can help us motivate us and help us to think big.... So with that sort of thinking you have, you don't find any tensions in your own work, when you are teaching your students... (MP31F).

Or, as a different interviewee expresses it: "Understanding what you're trying to acquire. What's your aim of acquiring knowledge? If you want to learn then you have to accept" (KP1M).

Among academics in health sciences disciplines, there is a clear view that to best serve the people of PNG, modern medical knowledge should be brought to bear, with local adaptations as required:

Now, I do not have any tension with that. Because I understand that if, if we want to, to have, to help our people, live better lives. We actually have to understand our people, our Melanesian way of living. And then we can use that information and integrate the new, new knowledges that are coming up that are seen as seen as the current standards of life integrated. And of course, both are good. We just have to find the midpoint with, where they can meet. And then, one advances into another (VP2F).

'Adjusting' and 'balancing' are themes that come through quite strongly, indicating that DWU academics are more or less continually active in mediating competently between different cultural norms and approaches:

Well as an individual they should have some boundaries, you should not be too emotional about the Melanesian culture or the Western culture, there must be boundaries around which options to take and what are the available means and what you wanted to do and the values that you think it's necessary to adapt and to integrate as part of yourself. And also there might become complementary to each other, not really letting go the other particular value but looking at the strengths and weaknesses and where they both can fit into and they also can help you to build yourself. Because I am kind of more, I have found balance between these two, I mean I wanted to find balance between them (MP27M).

4. *Locating difference and challenge in the context of teaching the next generation*

From the interview responses, it is accepted and acknowledged by DWU academics that there are cultural differences – and individual preferences - between traditional Melanesian teaching and Western-style teaching as conceived by them. These are presented somewhat neutrally as 'differences' that can be negotiated. Responses to the question are informed by academics' own teaching experience as well, in some cases, as an academic literature on cultural differences in learning styles for Pasifika learners (Lingam et al., 2013; Reynolds, 2019), including learning through seeing and doing from a senior figure:

Because in the Melanesian value sometimes we depend on people who are technical expertise and then they tell us everything. And sometimes knowledge is kept by certain people. So, when our children come here they know that lecturer is the most respected person so don't ask him questions, so if you ask questions it will become offend to them even with the postgraduate too. They are managers but they come and they sit quiet and they'll become so, they won't really challenge you in some debates. But I like to see that we openly we can share ideas and they should challenge us too. If there are some nice ideas and they can contribute and they can also critique what we do and what we teach too. And then this becomes a healthy discussion for us... (MP26M).

The speaker is describing learning through seeing and doing from a senior figure, of whom it is at times deemed disrespectful to ask questions, because this may be seen as being arrogant or questioning their authority.

This acceptance leads naturally to DWU illustrating the use of ‘contextualised knowledge’ (Nugent et al. 2018) in their teaching practices, where academics find ways to bridge the gap between Western concepts and examples that students can relate to:

I try to see where I can use practical examples in terms of trying to relate this Western concept to something that is practical in Papua New Guinea or Melanesia that students can be able to see the picture, but that's still quite a challenge in doing so.... I think that Western-style higher education, the concepts when it is being taught to students, the tensions is that the students still read it from the local perspective and a lot of times it seems as if they refuse to accept the Western-style because it seems a bit less practical for a lot of students. I think it's something to do with background as well and exposure and all that (MP11F).

So, I see the way lecture and presentation is not the same as Papua New Guineans we do the presentation. So sometimes like I try to imitate some of these qualities that he has and try to put that into practice. From a Western aspect, to a Melanesian, it's a bit, it takes time.... But students, sometimes they need the Melanesian way of seeing things... (WP2F).

In teacher education, in particular, academics stress the need for teaching new teachers about the importance of contextualisation: “So that, we have a lot of good things in our own setting. And we’re awakening us to do a lot more research in that and a lot more thinking in that, so that the child from what is familiar to the child to the unknown, can discover a lot of things” (WP9F). And, at Wewak Campus, several teacher education staff were among the few to mention Melanesian ways of doing and knowing:

Yes, I do feel that there is a tension because we have our own way of learning too - indigenous education, we call it - Yes, we have our own way of learning new skills, yeah skills, knowledge...when this Western education came in, most of our practices were overlooked” (WP4F).

Academics provide many examples of how the differences between Melanesian and Western culture play out for their students in other ways, as well as their own academic practice: “For example, in Divine Word, we try to pass the students. Whereas, where I come from, the university that I went to, they try to fail you. So, if we want to impose that here, it will never work” (MP22F).

And, unfamiliarity can bring danger, especially if one is too shy to ask, as this interviewee notes:

For the students when it comes to doing practical it all starts with protective gears, you should have the personal protective equipment’s (PPEs) so they get to wear shoes, and for some Melanesian culture they don't get to wear boots, and since last year from experience some came with only slippers and I told them you are not allowed to wear slippers, so you have to have your feet covered because we collect samples and run tests. With the Melanesian thinking pattern people feel shy, same applies to when they wear the goggles... When it comes to Melanesian people we have this shy, we feel ashamed, because of that most of the time we get to be hurt and affect ourselves (MP14F).

Academics tend to be sympathetic to the realities of life for many students, as they themselves have experienced the same situations:

We also encourage the idea of sharing and caring you know, because some of these students would come and ask for a marker or cartridge paper because you know, they don't have that money to pay (KP8F).

This attitude of concern and empathy extends to students as fellow Melanesians, even if an academic believes their role is to be an authority figure or looked up to as an expert.

Others note the diversity of the student body, where some students have been ‘urbanised’ (MP23F): “Well that depends on how they perceive themselves, some students they are kind of brought up from the towns and cities and they are kind of more into westernisation or modernisation” (MP27M).

5. Discussion of the challenges of English-language instruction

As indicated in some earlier quotes, the use of English can also be problematic and require quite a deal of explanation or translation:

A lot of our students here are not speaking English. So they're coming into the classroom, and we're teaching them in English, and they sit there, and listening comprehension is a big problem, you give set of instructions, simple ones, you demonstrate, it doesn't seem to get through to them. So how do I teach

students English when English is not a living language for them? They don't use it outside of the classroom. That's a big challenge... (WP10M).

Like, let me give you an example. Like, I have to, when they don't understand English, then I have to break it down to pidgin, I can't, not really necessary that I have to speak pidgin, but at least, just one word or two words that, you know, make sense... (WP2F).

And, because language carries culture, at least one DWU academic experiences genuine angst over the loss of cultural identity by students:

If I had my own university, I'd do everything in Tok Pisin, and even go to the extreme of doing courses in their own language. Because I feel that we need to seek inspiration from our Melanesian heritage, our own language, our own villages, the way we do things, the traditions; they get lost in a place like this. When we try to make our students feel that they need to belong in the western society, I feel like we lose inspiration the way we make our students crossover, crossover from what we hold as true and good from our culture (MP33M).

6. Presenting a critical perspective on Melanesian culture

Cultural adjustment of course can go both ways and some interviewees use a perspective drawn from their own international understanding to express dissatisfaction with aspects of Melanesian culture, such as the 'big man' culture and lack of gender balance, or the wantok system:

But the Melanesian way of doing things, we still have this, you know, I'm the boss, big man. So, the respect for views and decisions, it's just all the time, you say something in the meeting, it never gets done. There's never been our way of solving it, we just talk and we don't solve....

Especially in assessment, and selection also, the practice is still there, ... they give marks, not really assessing them properly. Their wantoks get a high score, 'anyone who makes me angry, I put you down' (KP5F).

And I see that, there is presence of a Melanesian influence or something in this institution. One example is like, maybe, in a, let's say, in a meeting. Somebody says something, and it sounds like, like, he's going against what is being talked about, he will just shut the person up.... It's that big man mentality. Is, is still present (KP2F).

And, returning to issues in DWU academics' personal and family lives, one interviewee supplies this example: "The biggest [*tension*] would be coming relatives coming and expecting you to give them money when you got your budget, and you'd like to stick to your budget" (WP10M).

Discussion

There are powerful examples in the accounts presented above of the ways in which DWU academics experience diverse points of disconnection between Melanesian culture and Western higher education. What do such experiences suggest about the maintenance and enhancement of their academic identities?

It is evident that there is a level of eloquence when it comes to discussing 'difference' and 'adaptation' but a clear desire on the part of DWU academics to reject any direct reference to individual identity schisms. Rather, the differences are acknowledged and dual ways of acting and being are presented as being navigated flexibly.

PNG universities are three-times colonially-inscribed: through PNG's colonial history; through their establishment in a Western academic tradition; and through the ongoing importation of 'good practices' in academic learning and institutional management from the Global North. There is a general appreciation that PNG is a postcolonial society and some understandable suggestions that more could be done to assert the contribution of national academics. However, the calls for decolonisation of imposed Western forms of knowledge, and knowledge production, found in literature from the African continent (e.g. le Grange et al., 2020) are conspicuously absent. Melanesian 'ways of knowing' are mentioned by only a few, often in the context of primary teacher education, where the realities of teaching in English and inevitably in another language such as Tok Pisin are confronted daily.

While DWU academics imply they need to perform little 'identity work' to ensure coherence in their own academic identities between their embedded presence in a Melanesian culture and their practice of Western-style higher education, there are some concepts that do not feature in the accounts they give, such as the expectation of undertaking research. In responding to our question, DWU academics use examples drawn from their general cultural knowledge and their teaching; the Western model of a teaching and researching academic is not foregrounded. We suggest this may be because DWU academics mostly are not research-active but know they are

expected to be, a cause of genuine identity tension. This lack of discussion of research performance contrasts with findings reported by Kothiyal, Bell, and Clarke (2018) on academic identity pressures for Indian business schools in a globalised environment.

The themes presented above, drawn inductively from the analysis of DWU academics' collective responses, find echoes in some current issues for academia, namely the use of EMI and academic neo-colonialism or imperialism (Jeater, 2018; Milligan and Tikly, 2016; Sperduti, 2017). DWU academics reflect these theoretical concerns in both abstract and concrete ways. Consistent with other accounts, DWU academics use translanguaging strategies of translation, local examples, mixing and adjustment to help their students grasp concepts in an essentially foreign language, as the PNG school system mostly does not prepare students adequately for tertiary studies in English.

DWU academics are accustomed to operating multiculturally and few DWU academics express any concern about manifestations of academic neo-colonialism, whether or not the term is used. However, there is an implicit understanding for many that "we need to adjust our teaching and learning in order to meet the standard of the world demand" (WP7M). Responses in the wider research study highlight a pervasive view that DWU needs to "reach up to" international standards. The point of reference for such standards is a mature, well-endowed, internationally ranked university of the Global North. The considerable achievement of academics in countries like PNG, navigating languages and cultures to blend and balance multiple understandings among their students, is seldom alluded to. It thus appears that an entrenched view of Western higher education as the ideal prevents a full appreciation and celebration of the advanced and complex cross-cultural competence shown by PNG academics.

One feature of the responses that puzzled the researchers was the clear sense that DWU academics do not discuss among themselves this subject of the dissonance between Melanesian culture and Western-style higher education. We can only speculate on the reasons for this. One reason may be that the situation of Melanesian academics, teaching Melanesian students in PNG, is already highly naturalised and taken for granted by these academics. Yes, Western-style ideas are being taught, and in a language that may be the third or greater language for students, but this is hardly a new situation in PNG – it has been so for many years. And, as national cultures are dynamic and evolve every day, PNG cultures, always diverse, are becoming more and more combined and influenced by international media and ideas.

A related reason could be that some interviewees have lived for a long time in a partly or even largely Westernised environment or educational system, having studied internationally or being: "I think I've never thought about it. . . . The other thing is like, coming through the education system, because we've been taught by expatriates as well, so I think that also had an influence. . . ." (MP15M). As wider ideas about decolonisation become more prominent, it is possible that DWU academics will talk more among themselves about related questions.

Ways forward

Our research contributes to redressing an imbalance between developed and developing nations in studies of academic identity while echoing current global issues for higher education learning and teaching. The rich and varied concepts presented by DWU academics play into wider narratives of culture and cross-cultural competence, including the recognition of 'otherness' (Bhabha, 1994) and post-colonialism. They raise the issues, current in the literature on higher education, of EMI and academic neo-colonialism (Alatas, 2003). At the same time, for some DWU academics, Western concepts provide an opportunity to critique disempowering features of traditional cultural conventions.

The research provides an evidence base for the design of future activities to support academics in PNG, as they negotiate the complex dynamics of identity and becoming across their local cultures – in this case, Melanesian culture – and the introduced Western-style of higher education. It should be remembered, however, that the site for the research, DWU, employs academic staff from Asia, the Indian sub-continent, and Europe as well as from countries such as Australia and New Zealand, all of whom bring particular academic norms and values.

Rather than striving, inevitably unsuccessfully (Bhabha, 1994), to imitate universities of other times and other cultures, a university like DWU could more strongly articulate how it will be a fit for purpose university in a PNG context, contributing to national development not only through employable, ethical graduates who appreciate Western norms but through graduates who are as empowered and well-equipped as they can be to comprehend and operate cross-culturally and trans-linguistically. In making this statement, we express the need for international 'allies', committed to pursuing an expanded understanding and recognition by the worldwide scholarly community of the diversity and plurality of knowledge production in modern higher education.

Pragmatically, DWU academics' reflections raise numerous matters and questions for learning and teaching of their students, ranging from broad issues of cultural influences on young people, to the diversity of the student body, to strategies and adaptations to engage students struggling with unfamiliar notions. There are opportunities

for DWU academics, especially teacher educators, to explore these issues further, in questioning of their academic teaching practices, in revised curricula, and in applied action research. More conversations are encouraged on how an appreciation of difference could be presented for students in ways that positively acknowledge ‘otherness’ and diverse streams of influence on today’s Papua New Guinean society.

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