

The Influence of Organisational Culture on Tertiary Education: Observations from the West Indies and North Africa

Keith Miller

University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia
keith.miller@utas.edu.au

***Abstract:** An objective of many students undertaking tertiary education in developing countries is to gain work experience or undertake research in a more developed society. They may perceive a different standard of living, or better education, or an idea of returning to their country of origin with knowledge that was otherwise unavailable. In some ways the grass typically appears greener on the other side. It did to me as an academic in the UK with ten years teaching experience when I moved firstly to the West Indies, and then to North Africa. I draw on these experiences of working within contrasting cultures to consider how students are prepared to face the challenge of work or study in the developed world. Within any society there are those who will excel no matter what the circumstances, but the typical student meeting requirements for post-graduate study or employment must be equipped with skills acquired through their first degree. The question of the necessary background is addressed, and whether this is being adequately met by academic institutions in the West Indies and in Egypt, where both are attempting to deliver a style of education equivalent to that on offer in the UK. It is argued that the modern culture of the West Indies is making students from this region highly successful, while the principles of operation in North Africa are underpinned by a heritage that could make it difficult for a student to undertake further study overseas without additional preparation.*

Keywords: culture, tertiary education, North Africa, West Indies

Introduction

Personal experience in lecturing at Universities internationally has provided an appreciation of different educational frameworks and a perspective on how these are influenced by the people involved. From working within the UK educational system throughout the 1990's, I spent the following eight years in the West Indies and then two and a half years in Egypt before landing in Australia. While some factors within the UK educational system have changed in the intervening years, the fundamentals and principles are similar to those in Australia. Students typically undertake the transition from school to University at much the same time of their life, and I have found the expectations, learning styles and assessment strategies within the institutions to follow similar principles.

There is a perception amongst students within the developing world that study in the developed countries, particularly English speaking states within Europe, North America and Australasia will provide enlightenment and prospects beyond those available at home. My advice to inquisitive students with financial constraints was to undertake their first degree

locally with a view to further study overseas. Not only were there more funding opportunities available for post-graduate study, but the student would also benefit from maturity and from the contrasting experiences. While academic establishments in the developed world are eager to accept full-fee paying overseas students, those involved directly in the educational process have to deal with variations in background and culture within the student cohort.

In addressing globalisation of education, Marginson (2002) identifies Australia as being the third largest provider of international education, and in considering the role of the national university system, it is argued that the educational framework be strengthened to meet the needs of the global market. The current focus is on the attraction of students from South East Asia, and formal links exist with Malaysia (Commonwealth of Australia, 2007). From the student perspective, an ability to perform at post-graduate level in a different environment requires skills beyond academic ability. Nisbett (2003) considers issues of culture within the thought process, as this plays a significant part of any post-graduate programme where students are expected to undertake guided study or research. Within this paper, contrasting examples are presented through personal experiences in Egypt and in the West Indies, which are supported through discussion of cultural dimensions of these societies. To place these in the familiar context, reference is also made to Malaysian, Chinese, US and Australian societies.

Towards Globalisation

Realising that there is a demand amongst students of the Caribbean and North Africa for post-graduate study in the more developed countries offers the potential hosts with an opportunity on which they can capitalise. Immigration statistics for temporary admission to Australia and to the US under student entry with residency from the English-speaking West Indies and from Egypt are provided in Table 1. Admissions from Malaysia and China under the same category are also provided for comparison.

Region of Origin	Country of Entry	
	Australia ¹	USA ²
English speaking West Indies	37	20556
North Africa	707	2857
Malaysia	29356	4675
China	107294	106044

Table 1. 2009 overseas admissions as students to Australia and to the USA.

Sources: 1. Australian government (2009), 2. Homeland Security (2010)

Data provided in table 1 suggest that students prefer to study closer to home, but while the USA is attracting 16% of the number coming to Australia from Malaysia, the number coming to Australia from the West Indies is insignificant. Many students studying overseas from North Africa are likely to be going to Europe, where detailed data on entry is less readily available, but Australia is attracting only 25% of the numbers going to the USA. These figures suggest that globalisation of education is not being fully realised by Australian universities.

In my personal experience of supporting graduates in their search for overseas study opportunities towards a higher degree, very few considered Australia as an option. In one instance a Caribbean student applied for an internal scholarship offered by an Australian university and was awarded the place. The offer was rejected, the student worked for a year locally, and then obtained funding to enter a UK university the following year. While

numerous graduates from the Department of Surveying and Land Information at the University of the West Indies went on to study at post-graduate level in Europe, Canada and the USA, I am only aware of one going to Australia. My understanding from discussion with individuals is that the preference relates more to lack of appreciation for Australia rather than simply distance. If there is intent within Australia to broaden globalisation by attracting students from further afield then there are additional cultural issues that may need to be considered within the selection of applicants and within the educational processes.

Contrasting Culture and Society

The Egyptian culture has been developed over thousands of years, while that of the modern Caribbean is less than five hundred years old. Educational norms also differ between these two regions. In order to address the issues involved in accommodating students from overseas in academic programmes, we must first understand what they have come from and deal with development of study skills accordingly. These cases of Egypt and the West Indies provide an interesting insight into different requirements.

Development of West Indian Society

Development of infrastructure within the English-speaking West Indies has been on-going for the last one hundred and fifty years. From the middle of the nineteenth century, introduction of Indian and Chinese labour added further diversity to an already colourful culture made up of Amerindians, Africans and Europeans. Beckles and Shepherd (2006) detail historical developments throughout the region. School systems developed within the British colonies and until recently the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) was offered at Ordinary and Advanced levels. Educational systems and procedures were aligned with those in the UK, but the students had come from a different background. As West Indians they had been in place for just a few generations and considerable diversity in culture existed within the demography. Independence in the 1960s finally provided the people with identity. Holmes (2008) suggests that people throughout the region have undertaken innovation within the society and an economic assessment by Elu (2000) shows a diversification from agriculture to industry. The GDP of some states within the region has increased in recent times, but there is still a lack of private investment and an inequality in income. While there is a financial divide, personal experience suggests that the social division does not restrict movement between brackets. The concept of wealth does not propagate to the beach, the bar or the cricket pitch. It does, however, influence living standards and education.

Development of Egyptian Society

In complete contrast, the Egyptian people have existed as a race for thousands of years, and Egypt has been invaded and ruled by numerous external forces. The Pharaohs led a very structured society of which the Persians took control, followed by Alexander. During the spread of Christianity the Roman Empire extended into a part of what is now Egypt. At the time of Napoleon's visit the Mamluks of the Ottoman Empire were ruling the country, and almost a century later Egypt was under British occupation. A revolution in 1952 changed the country from a monarchy to a republic, and there have been a total of three presidents since. For the last 45 years the country has been in a state of emergency with extended police powers and censorship. Since the time of the Pharaohs, the people of Egypt have become accustomed to being ruled. The result is a people of mixed ethnic origins, and who are accustomed to a society that is heavily structured and separated by class.

Formalisation of Culture

Hofstede (2001) has developed a quantitative means of assessing survey data to evaluate differences in culture. Results for specific countries are available from the associated web site (Hofstede, 2010). Cultural dimensions are provided by five measures on a 100 point scale, three of which are considered here as being potentially relevant to education, and data extracted from the web site is given in Table 2. Australia and the USA show very similar characteristics. Within these two countries, the results for Individualism (IDV) are the highest in the world showing that self-interest is normal within the culture. Lower than average values for Power Distance Index (PDI) shows a greater acceptance and expectation for power to be shared equally within groups. In contrast, high values for both PDI and Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) in the Arab World indicate a highly structured society with a strong emphasis on rules and regulations with a caste system that does not allow upward mobility of citizens. Jamaica is representative of the West Indies where there is an expected sharing of power, less order to the society that does not attempt to control outcomes and is more open to a variety of ideas, thoughts and beliefs. In both Arab and West Indian societies the IDV is below average, again emphasising the significance of groups with strong bonds. Differences in UAI and PDI indicate that the relationships and skills inherent within these groups are very different.

Country or Region	PDI	IDV	UAI
World Average	55	43	64
Jamaica	42	35	10
Arab World	80	38	68
Malaysia	95	20	30
China	76	11	36
USA	38	91	44
Australia	35	90	48

Table 2. Three of Hofstede cultural dimensions for countries of interest.

Having lived and worked with people from the West Indies and Egypt in their own society, the Hofstede dimensions formalise my experiences. Within the recently evolved culture of the West Indies, the people live in a society where new challenges are continually encountered. Small communities, remote from the world, have developed the skills required to tackle real-life problems that arise while maintaining standards that eventually align with international developments. Teachers and academics pass on these skills in their delivery, which reinforces elements of daily life within the Caribbean where young people are active in the society as a whole. All members of the Caribbean society are considered as equal, but some are afforded better opportunities. Recent discussion within one university has focused on means of providing access to applicants who have shown some aptitude despite their origins from an adverse learning environment, such as attendance at a school in a poorer part of the community. The Caribbean people are working as one to establish their society, giving due consideration to ensuring equality.

The majority of Egyptians undertake menial duties that are normally performed elsewhere by machine; they are kept busy. Data from Nationmaster (2010) indicates that 32% are employed in agriculture, while in the English-speaking West Indies the equivalent lies between 4% and 20%, depending on the state. Another labour intensive industry in Egypt is construction, where much of the work beyond excavation is done manually. In undertaking their duties the

workers function as a team, collaborating to achieve the specific objective. Amer (2007) shows that those from a working class background who have obtained a degree are unlikely to progress within the societal structure. Strong family ties mean that those in positions of power are selective in appointing friends and family to take such positions. Within their regular work the Egyptians will know exactly what to do without any reference to or use of technology, but demonstrate low adaptability in unusual circumstances. There is little appreciation of why a duty is being performed, or understanding of the larger framework containing the task. Operations are typically based on an ability to memorise and recall, and it is these skills that are developed within the educational system.

Education in the West Indies

Throughout the English-speaking West Indies, schooling to age sixteen is free, but there is a difference in offerings by various high schools with entry to the better schools being highly competitive. Places at the local state Universities are competitive with typically 30% to 50% of applicants being admitted, depending on the Faculty. Many programmes offered by the University of the West Indies carry accreditation through international professional bodies from the UK, which is an indicator that standards are equivalent to those of universities globally. From a personal perspective, my initial reaction on moving to the West Indies from the UK was astonishment. The students were a delight to teach. Given some initial support and guidance they would take problems and find solutions. Attendance rates were good, and academic standards were better than many universities in the UK. These students were mature; they enjoyed the West Indian lifestyle, but at the same time they worked hard. Working as groups, supporting each other, making the best use of the excellent facilities on offer within the University, they achieved the designated learning outcomes at the undergraduate level. Assessments were set at appropriate levels to challenge students such that the distribution of results for award of degrees was typical of expectations. Average overall marks were in the mid 50's, about 10% of the graduates obtained first class honours and a similar proportion would drop out along the way.

The Hofstede measures of culture accurately characterised the student body. Students preferred to work in groups, but without one individual taking the lead, and they could extend knowledge to situations that they had not previously encountered. Students were open, honest and reliable. They were involved in university life through engagement in wider academic and co-curricular activities. As Head of Department, I was continually requested to make resources available outside of working hours, and within my research, which involved extensive field campaigns, there was never any shortage of volunteers amongst the student body. However, as Hickling-Hudson (2000) indicates, not all potential students have the opportunity to attend university. Using current statistics from university web sites, a total of five state-run universities operating regionally maintain about 30,000 students. CIAT (2005) put the population through this same region at 6 million, so approximately 0.5% of the population are enrolled in higher education locally. A limited number of university places distributed throughout universities in some of the states means that those who are not in the right place have less chance of attending.

Education in Egypt

The divide that exists between classes within the Egyptian culture extends through to the educational system. A full report on the status of education within the country was produced by the World Bank (2007). While education to the age of sixteen is free, not all participate as children are sent to work on menial tasks in support of the family income. The more fortunate complete the Thanawiya Amma examinations in Arabic, and those coming from higher class homes receive education at one of a large number of private schools to take International GCSE or American Diploma examinations. Entry to university is gained by one of these three routes, and a degree takes typically four or five years to complete, depending on the discipline. There are a number of public universities where class sizes are often large, and can be up to 1000 students in the early years of a degree programme. Amer (2007) provides data showing that in 2006 there were 1.8 million students (just over 2% of the population) enrolled nationally. In recent times some twenty five private universities have opened their doors selling education to children from the more wealthy families, and in 2006 there were 37,000 students enrolled. Some of the private universities are associated with partners abroad, two or three award overseas as well as local degrees, and each is run as a business. All but one of the universities within Egypt are governed by the Supreme Council of Universities; a government body that grants each university an existence, approves the appointment of senior university positions, such as President, and allows programmes to be offered. Like all systems in Egypt, education is heavily governed through bureaucracy.

Students within the private universities have come from the more powerful classes. In alignment with the Hofstede cultural characteristics, when assigned group activities or field work, the students expect to be led. If there was not a natural leader within the group then little would be achieved. A few dedicated students would make use of facilities, otherwise without constant supervision the remainder would achieve little. Through their behaviour, students demonstrate traits that suggest immaturity. Activity observed on the campus is what might be expected in a junior school playground with fights breaking out frequently and regular vandalism of amenities. Attendance at university is poor, and in lectures it is worse. In communication with staff and graduates from the Egyptian government universities, it would appear that the attitude towards study is very different. While disadvantaged through large classes, lack of resources and poor remuneration to academics, the students are keen to learn and view their study as a potential means of a change in status within society. Irrespective of class, the students do not like dealing with uncertainty through investigation or research, but gain comfort in following a given procedure.

Potential to Study for Higher Degrees Overseas

Beyond the theoretical background required to undertake a higher degree, a further set of criteria for candidates to do well might be defined as:

- Intellectual Engagement
- Insight
- Thinking and Problem Solving
- Social Competence
- English language

Personal observations suggest that the Hofstede scores given in Table 2 apply equally to education. Graduates from the Caribbean have strong social competencies in terms of their IDV score, the PDI shows that they are likely prepared to accept joint responsibility, and the UAI suggests that they will have the thinking and problem solving skills required. However,

there is evidence to suggest that students remaining within the Caribbean educational system after their first degree have difficulty in progressing to research. An internal quality audit document (DSLII, 2001) for one small department operating since 1983 reported that no students had ever graduated with a PhD and two Masters of Philosophy had been awarded. Staff appointed at the level of Graduate Research Assistant to undertake research were not completing. However, of the 200 students graduating with a BSc between 1985 and 2000, six went on to obtain PhD's overseas, all completing within a four year time frame. All of the fifteen graduates travelling overseas to undertake an MSc completed within the time frame allocated, but those remaining in the West Indies to undertake their MSc would typically require an extension for the thesis.

Reason for success in research overseas in comparison with the performance locally is an issue that senior management within the University are aware of. As Head of a Department struggling with this issue I made an attempt to segregate post-graduate students from the undergraduates. Given a separate room that was closer to staff, but some distance from the areas where undergraduates worked, fitted with new computers for each individual student with their own space and a dedicated server, I failed to retain them in that location. Within a matter of weeks the graduate students had migrated back to the undergraduate area, and I am suggesting that their low individuality (IDV) score indicating desire to be with a group is the cause. Graduates typically obtain a place to study overseas by securing a grant, and those who are unsuccessful but wish to undertake a higher degree, then register locally. Under the overseas scenario, when West Indian students are taken from their environment and placed into new surroundings with a group of peers they have the attributes necessary to undertake post-graduate study. However, when they are alone, or when they are amongst a group undertaking work at a lower level, they find difficulty with improvement. This particular example reflects the general pattern that was observed as students returned to a comfort zone where they would be with a large group working in familiar territory.

Private Universities in Egypt are staffed by Egyptians who have been overseas to study and returned. They are normally from the upper class of society and can have a better lifestyle in Egypt than would be available from similar positions overseas. In paying fees, the students and their parents consider that the award is guaranteed and the University management are keen to ensure that cash flow is not a problem. Academic staff are hired on short term contracts, which can be terminated if their performance is not up to expectations. In a system where quality is confused with quantity, success rates are important and this principle starts within the private school systems. Observing the behaviour of students in preparing for examinations at private university suggests that they have been accustomed to support. In reviewing examination papers set in one subject at a state university, the questions were repeated regularly, thereby testing memory rather than understanding of material.

Experience in teaching international students on an intensive post-graduate programme offered in the UK suggested that many from the Middle East and North Africa expected to pass. A few were able to acclimatise in a short time frame, but others could not discern the differences in society. Students from this region would typically come from the upper class and were the most difficult to deal with. Only in retrospect, having worked in a society where the class structure plays such a significant role, has the reason become apparent. Within their culture, they are dependent on a well-defined structure of rules, and as a consequence have developed skills in memorisation rather than those of problem solving and insight. In delivering field work where students operated as groups, a group would do well if there was a strong leader involved; otherwise the group would have no direction and little would be

achieved. The student body is used to being directed by somebody who asserts authority rather than thinking for themselves, and this removes the requirement for most individuals to be concerned with uncertainty in outcome. A small proportion had the ability to appreciate the requirements of the set task and to lead.

Conclusions

It is suggested that educational standards and practices adopted internationally have strong agreement with the properties of the culture as defined by Hofstede's (2010) dimensions. In examining these two extreme cases from the perspective of personal experiences, it is found that the people of the West Indies are as fresh and vibrant as their identity. They function as one, and opportunity is available to all. Within the ancient class driven society of Egypt, wealth is used as a means to obtain what is considered a right. Wealth provides entitlement, and it is in the interests of the wealthy to ensure that they remain in the minority. While their education is being bought, they must also ensure that offerings to the remainder of society are sub-standard. Through control they ensure that the status quo is maintained. The characteristics of the society would make it difficult for many graduates to undertake study towards a higher degree beyond the bounds of their familiar cultural environment.

In considering selection of applicants from overseas, there is a need to consider their ability beyond the language proficiency. In the case of a student from the West Indies, they are almost certain to acclimatise to the new society and to succeed. In particular, the West Indies provides a source of people from a culture suited to study at higher degree level that is apparently untapped. A student coming from Egypt will have more difficulty in adaptation to a different culture. From the perspective of Australian universities considering globalisation, there is a need to accommodate diversity. A system of a preparatory year that operated in one private Egyptian university offered little benefit due to the cultural environment that it operated in. However, a slow migration to a different learning process might be more successful within the new study environment, but at the cost of extending the duration.

References

- Amer, M. (2007). *Transition from education to work: Egypt country report*. European Training Foundation.
- Australian Government (2009). *Immigration Update 2008-2009*. Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Australian Government.
- Beckles, H. M., & Shepherd, V. (2006). *Freedoms won: Caribbean emancipations, ethnicities and nationhood*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- CIAT (2005). *Latin American and Caribbean population database. Version 3*. Retrieved August 2010, from <http://gisweb.ciat.cgiar.org/population/report.htm>
- DSLI (2001). *Quality audit report for the Department of Surveying and Land Information*. The University of the West Indies. Internal document.
- Elu, J. (2000). The journey so far: The effect of Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), sustainable growth, and development in the Caribbean region. *Western Journal of Black Studies*, 24 (4), 202-215.
- Hickling-Hudson, A. (2000). Globalization and Universities in the Commonwealth Caribbean. In N. Stromquist & K. Monkman (Eds.), *Globalization and education: Integration and contestation across cultures* (pp. 219-236). Maryland, USA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Hofstede, G. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviours, institutions, and organizations across nations (2nd ed)*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Hofstede, G. (2010). *Cultural dimensions*. Retrieved August 2010, from <http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>
- Holmes, K. C. (2008). *Black inventors, crafting over 200 years of success*. New York: Global Black Inventor Research Projects Inc.
- Homeland Security (2010). *Yearbook of Immigration Statistics 2009 (Supplemental Table 2)*. US Department of Homeland Security, Office of immigration Statistics. Washington D.C.

- Marginson, S. (2002). Nation-building universities in a global environment: The case of Australia. *Higher Education*, 43, 409-428.
- Nationmaster (2010). *Labour force by occupation*. Retrieved October 2010, from http://www.nationmaster.com/graph/lab_lab_for_by_occ-labor-force-by-occupation
- Nisbett, R. (2003). *The geography of thought: How Asians and Westerners think differently ... and why*. New York: Free Press.
- Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia (2007). *Australia's relationship with Malaysia, Chapter 6: Education*. Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee.
- World Bank (2007). *Arab republic of Egypt: Improving quality, equality, and efficiency in the education sector*. Human Development Department, Middle East and North Africa Region. Report No. 42863-EG.

Copyright statement

© Miller 2010. The works included in these conference papers are the property of their authors and are used by permission. Readers should apply the same principles of fair use to the works in this electronic journal that they would to a published, printed journal. These works may be read online, downloaded for personal use, or the URL of a document (from this server) included in another electronic document. The text itself may not be published commercially (in print or electronic form), edited, or otherwise altered without the permission of the author. As with printed materials, care should be taken when excerpting or referencing text to ensure that the views, opinions and arguments of the author accurately reflect those contained in the original work.