Please cite the Published Version

l.hammersley-fletcher@mmu.ac.uk

The use of Critical Thinking in Higher Education in relation to the International Student – shifting policy and practice

Linda Hammersley-Fletcher and Christopher Hanley

Manchester Metropolitan University

Abstract

Academic staff working within Western Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), have a responsibility to encourage the continuous critique of knowledge and values, expressed both within the curriculum that they deliver and within society more widely (Wals and Jickling, 2002). Critical thinking is often regarded as the hallmark of a good education (Walker and Finney, 2006). Atkinson (1997) however raised concerns, that such practices may possess an exclusive (and reductive) character, fraught with cultural issues. Consequently, international students may be at a disadvantage in understanding the underpinning principles of critical thinking. This paper draws upon data from a small case study sample of international Masters level students, as a means to examine and refine notions of critical thinking in relation to practices within one UK University. We suggest that these data indicate that it is time to re-evaluate and reconsider the ways in which we understand and promote critical thinking within academic work.

Key Words: Criticality; Critical Thinking; International Students; academic development; academic success

Introduction

This article arose from the experiences of one UK University tutoring team working on a home-based International Masters programme in Education. The team had developing concerns about the levels of critical thinking adopted within the international student cohorts and had been working hard to adapt their teaching approaches to convey notions of critical thinking, so that students could express this in their writing. However, this process became an area of debate both in terms of the approaches adopted and in terms of the team's varying views of what constituted and justified critical thinking. Tutors had felt some frustration and recognised their negative conceptions of non-critical approaches to learning, particularly as marks would be adversely affected were the use of critical thinking not evident. As a consequence, it was thought beneficial to engage in some deeper thinking in this area, through an initial small piece of investigative research undertaken by two of the tutoring team. Consequently this article is intended to provoke discussion in the area of critical thinking and to add to a developing debate about how critical thinking practices may be understood and valued.

The purposes of Western higher education institutions (HEIs), by which we mean English speaking HEIs and those located within Western Europe, are orientated around developing students as critical thinkers and critical actors, ready to contribute to society though the innovation and creativity, engendered by critical examination of the world which surrounds them (Kreber, 1998; Curzon-Hobson, 2003). We depict 'Western' reasoning as involving both critical *thinking* and critical *being.* Critical *thinking* draws on an idealist conception of a thinking human, whose criticality is directed towards an externally existent reality (Atkinson 1997). Critical thinking in this (Cartesian) tradition is also self-directed, concerned with the status of knowledge we have about ourselves and how this can be channelled towards autonomous forms of action. In our depiction of critical *being*, we are influenced by Barnett (1997), who developed an ontology of critical awareness, supplementing the Cartesian perspective of the rational thinker. Here the intention of the critical perspective is to transform relationships between having a sense of self, having knowledge and being in the world. Thus, for Barnett, critical thinking is presented as the development of an emancipatory power. In the subsequent discussion, alternative kinds of critical activity are not strictly defined as belonging either to 'thinking' or 'being'. Rather, these notions are allowed to inform and shape our thinking around these issues.

In higher education, 'criticality' is something that takes people beyond the technically competent, in ways that enable both teachers and students to adopt a 'critical stance' (Curzon-Hobson 2003). The argument here is that students and educators within higher education, should develop a critical perspective in which all aspects of critical activity, including the nature of reasoning, the self and our relations with others, are open to challenge and debate. This approach may pose a challenge to a technicist view of knowledge formation, where the teacher 'delivers' knowledge to learners in institutionally acceptable forms. This approach also resonated with the critically

minded approaches favoured by the researchers, as tutors of international students. In the context of our study 'international student' refers to students who have left one country to study in another, are full fee-paying (so not part of Europe) and speak English as a second language.

Ridley (2004) explains that students, and particularly those from non-Western backgrounds, may have a difficult time in adjusting to the criticality-based requirements of Western higher education. They need to contend with gaining familiarity with approaches to writing, tutor expectations and discourses of particular disciplinary study, before they are in a position to conform to, or resist, a criticality-based attitude to learning (Ridley, 2004). Complexity is added when considering that there is often a gap between tutor and student expectations. This article begins with a discussion of critical thinking, how this might be conceptualised by students and tutors, then related to international student experience. The data gathering approach is presented next, before moving on to look at the data in detail, discussing issues of understandings of critical thinking, the importance of critical thinking and how concepts of critical thinking compare with the pre-UK experiences of education for the international students responding. We then consider the significance of the debates raised.

Critical Thinking in professional contexts

Critical thinking is that which challenges academic staff to think about the ideals that they wish to promote in the light of their role being both political and empowering (Curzon-Hobson, 2003). Teaching others can be considered to be a political activity, as educators are engaged in making interpretations of the world to aid student understandings of it (Arendt, 1993; Friere, 1985). Therefore they key issue with critical thinking, is with how we encounter and engage with knowledge. In 1997 Barnett conceptualised a radical approach to criticality in relation to the purposes of Higher Education. He concluded that critical thinking comprises three domains (knowledge, self, world) which together comprise the field of critical thinking. Each of these domains has four levels through which the leaner passes in achieving the highest levels of understanding or 'social wisdom', where the three domains of thinking are fully integrated. Working at the highest levels of critical insight would enable students to become enlightened, understanding, critical transformers of society. See Figure 1. (figure 1 about here)

In this model for developing criticality, individuals move from thinking in particular styles, disciplines and traditions towards a critical summit, at which point their thinking is self-motivating and self-defining. Achieving these higher levels enables the individual to re-conceptualise what it means to maintain a critical orientation within a multiple and diverse world. Barnett argued that Universities should be involved with all of these domains and at all levels. Indeed, the notion that students should be empowered to challenge the boundaries of conventional thought, pushing towards

new thinking, new conceptions and creative innovation, appears to align with the ostensible purposes of a university education.

The research team have been particularly influenced by Barnett's model. Barnett's depiction of criticality as moving from an initial desire to solve particular problems in restricted areas of study, towards a more generally applicable critical attitude, mirrors our experience of the ways in which students develop. Moreover, Barnett provides a useful schema for thinking about the different modes and stages through which thinking can progress. However, we are conscious that there are many possible alternative conceptions of criticality and critical thinking, which could be appended to Barnett's model or allude to alternative ways of conceiving relationships between a thinking human and the wider socio-cultural context. For example, Bailin et al. (1999), argue that critical thinking requires an understanding of the *intentions* of those who regard themselves as developing such thinking in others. Here, critical thinkers would learn to challenge the personal and social motivations of received attitudes to knowledge. Another perspective is posited by Atkinson (1997), who argues a critical thinker is assumed to be someone who is objective and rational, unsullied by emotion or irrational influences. Whilst this view alludes to the cognitive basis of reasoning, it overlooks the affective dimension of thought and can therefore be considered incomplete. Alternatively, Walker, and Finney (2006) see critical thinking as a process of continuously testing and refining hypotheses, describing the process as engaging in 'falsification' in order to arrive at a reliable 'truth'. Whilst this view is valuable for explaining how ideas become clarified through logical processes, critical thinking might be reduced to a technical procedure, with the sensitivity of thinking to its environment overlooked. As Egege and Kutieleh (2004) point out, there is a diversity of interpretation of what critical thinking might be, the value of critical thinking and how it can be defined. In this paper we remain sensitive to the broad division highlighted here, between 'cognitive' and 'personal-cultural' dimensions of reasoning, in attempting to present a point-of-view in which these dimensions may be better reconciled.

 Approaches to engaging students in critical thinking reflect some of this variation. For example, Roberts (2006) suggests that students should engage critically with *texts* as a way of deepening their appreciation of the world in which they live. Alternatively, Brookfield (2002) draws on Marcuse in arguing that critical thinking involves taking up *positions* that are not part of the existing order, thus testing thinking by working outside of, or beyond, traditional limits. According to Brookfield (2002) Marcuse felt that this could be achieved through the use of visual art as a medium through which the familiar can be made strange. The student would be assumed to be asserting critical distance between her own perspective and the objects of her study, which become open to critical appraisal through a process of 'estrangement' (See also Friere 1972). These ideas offer rich potential for the development of criticality, returned to in the final section. Using visual art, or other disorientating stimulus material to foster thinking, would mirror the current promotion of 'experiential' learning, seen in many universities

in the UK today. Moreover, the adoption of a critical stance towards ones learning perspective, may make further pedagogic opportunities available, by stimulating the learner 'to search for new and unique possibilities through imagination and creation' (Curzon-Hobson (2003: 202).

Understandings of critical thinking are, however, tied into particular cultures and practices in ways that might be difficult to disentangle for those who are not part of them. Atkinson (1997) has argued that critical thinking has more in common with a social practice than with an educational concept; it is something learned via living life in a particular context and at a particular time, tacit and unconscious rather clearly defined and considered. Clearly this raises questions about the potential for tutors to 'teach' critical thinking to students. Researchers in this study were challenged with developing a conception of criticality with learners rooted in different cultural traditions, where 'criticality' may not have presented itself as a distinct or desirable educative activity.

We did take the view that critical thinking should be included in our taught sessions, however difficult it would be to be precise about the associated ideas and skills students would need, As Johnston et al. (2011) suggest, it is not as simple as supplying students with rules about the kinds of thinking they will need, because the connection between making a logical argument and having knowledge is not straightforward in practice. We therefore recognised the importance of establishing parameters for students' thinking, whilst acknowledging that the exact nature of the knowledge gained would still be open to debate and, as has already been suggested, influenced by the cultural setting of the educative experience and backgrounds of the participants. We are encouraged by the ideas of Walker and Finney (2006), who suggest critical capacities can be supported and furthered by 'life-long learning' as well as intensive bursts of critically minded study.

Critical Thinking and the International student

We have been suggesting that critical thinking is amenable to alternative formulations, reflecting the rational activity of a learner relative to her own perceptions and the influence of the surrounding culture. This leads to questioning whether or not 'critical thinking' can be accepted uncritically. Experience suggests in some arenas 'critical' thought is privileged above other kinds of thinking, but that the reasons for this privileging by academics are rarely understood or questioned.

Vandermensbrugghe (2004) points out that study in English speaking countries is seen as beneficial, for developing linguistic and cultural competencies that facilitate students operating in a global context. There is a tendency in the English speaking

countries to assume the education that they provide and their educational approach is superior (see for example Vandermensbrugghe's arguments on the Australian education system). Thus international students begin their studies facing a number of challenges. For example, Atkinson (1997) associates the critical thought with the concept of 'the individual'; in cultures where there is less stress on the individual, critical thinking becomes a much less powerful tool. Zhou et al. (2008) argue that international students, moving to other countries to study, will experience what was traditionally referred to as 'culture shock', which will affect them irrespective of whether or not they are already aware of the differences in values and approach to study. Vandermensbrugghe presents a complex picture of student adaptation, where international students have to build new understandings of what is required and what leads to successful educational outcomes. Zhou et al. raise further issues of the stress induced in adapting to new circumstances and discuss how this is influenced by individual adaptability, language skills and sociability.

Zhou et al. suggest that students can be supported in three ways. Firstly, through ongoing relations with those in their home country; secondly, through relations developed with host nationals, such as fellow home-based students, lecturers, support services etc; thirdly, through friendships with other foreign students, where they gain mutual support (Furnham, 2004). Nonetheless, Zhou et al. argue that host institutions do not always facilitate this level of support. They further point out, that there are complexities in cultural synergy between groups and exemplify this through the attitudes of American and Chinese students, where Americans are regarded as independent and questioning, able to challenge tutors, whilst the Chinese students are seen as obedient and conservative, accepting and respecting the views of the tutor. As Egege and Kutieleh (2004) argue, this is often regarded as a 'deficit' situation, where South-East Asian students do not engage in 'deep learning' (with the attendant assumptions of homogeneity within cultures). Moreover, as Vandermensbrugghe (2004) argued, international students are often stereotyped as 'rote learners' in a Western environment where techniques such as memorisation and respecting the voices of experienced educators are not valued. Further, where students are being expected to assimilate the learning approaches of the country of study, deviation from the expected learning style may be viewed as the student's *problem,* rather than an inevitable consequence of being in an unfamiliar situation (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004). Thus, in an institution where students are expected to engage in dialogue and to challenge the tutor, this can create significant difficulty for students who have previously experienced very different approaches to learning.

Whilst acknowledging the student as an active participant in addressing issues of adaptation, together with recognising that tutors are gaining in awareness of differences of cultural approach to learning, nevertheless questions remain around 'how we learn best'. Kreber (1998) argues that there are links between students' approaches to learning which subsequently appear to affect their ability to engage in critical thought. For example, students' ability to be self-directed learners is linked to

their ability to think critically. Egege and Kutieleh (2004) however, raise concerns about making too many culturally-based links and suggest there can be a perceived correlation between differences in learning styles associated with different cultures and capacity for learning. This poses a risk of 'conceptual colonialism' (identified by Biggs, 1997) where the behaviours and learning styles of particular non-Western international students are regarded in a deficit light and where the University has to address this perceived 'lack' (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004). Atkinson (1997) has also stated that dominant (rationalist) notions of critical theory and pedagogy act to marginalize 'other' ways of thinking. Taking a different angle, Vandermensbrugghe (2004) pointed out that assumptions made about the universal applicability of critical thinking is largely a result of Western Anglo-Saxon countries being involved in the process of internationalising educational practices. What could be richer is an acceptance of this being just one approach to learning, where international students in Higher Education are seen as advantageous in supporting thinking from different perspectives from those norms of the institutions' host country.

A Western perspective might emphasise the importance of developing critical thinking in international students, whilst understating the difficulty of engaging home students in such practices. As Vandermensbrugghe (2004) has argued, critical thinking is often not clearly understood by home students and takes time to acquire irrespective of country of origin. Further, the notion of 'delivering' critical thinking in a programmatic way, assumes that academic staff will are working from a uniform understanding of what it is (Egege and Kutieleh, 2004). As has been suggested in this paper, and as Bailin et al. (1999) argued, gaining staff understanding of how to deliver critical thinking is not a straightforward process. Kreber (1998) argued that academic staff need to be sensitive to the self-directed readiness of students in bringing about critical approaches to learning. Moreover as Ridley (2008) suggests, academic staff need to consider whether they are making reasonable demands of students, particularly if students and tutor are based within different systems of ideas and beliefs.

A response for Egege and Kutieleh (2004) would be, to accept the legitimacy of alternative approaches to perceptions of learning where no one system is seen as superior to the others, without emphasizing difference to the extent that alternative approaches are seen as an obstacle to learning. They outline one Australian university programme, set up to explain different approaches and behaviours around learning, situating these within the appropriate contexts and demonstrating how specific approaches work in particular situations. Egege and Kutieleh claim that this approach did not assign value to any one perspective but enabled students to understand more clearly the critical processes in which they were engaging. This was viewed as an empowering approach and students reported feeling better informed.

Egege and Kutieleh argued that this approach had been well received by international students and made western approaches to learning more accessible to them. Nevertheless as Curzon-Hobson (2003) argues, critical thinking with students is undertaken in an environment of tensions around time and space, academic freedoms

and accountability, alongside pressures to be efficient and also intellectually demanding. As Curzon-Hobson (p.211) explains,

> This kind of pedagogy requires teachers to develop attributes of respect, care, courage and empathy, for they must be willing to show students that their own understandings are fragile and incomplete, that they can, want and need to listen to students' interpretations, and that their growth is also subject to the growth of those around them.

Approach to data collection

In the research presented in this paper, students were experienced professionals already working as practitioners in the field of education. Moreover, as a consequence of course activity, students were developing more nuanced explanations of the purposes of educative practice. As has already been suggested, course tutors located themselves within the tradition of critical studies (e.g., Gunter 2012), whereby learners are encouraged to scrutinise the pre-suppositions that may already be built into learning situations. In developing their capacities for critical thought, students on the course were therefore tasked with analysing how their professional experiences to date may have been shaped by similar or different sets of assumptions, and how these might be challenged.

Our data gathered understandings through interviews from a small sample of 6 international level 7 students engaged in a programme focussed in Education in one UK University. Short semi-structured interviews were designed to explore what these international students understood by critical thinking towards the end of the academic year programme, in order to begin to ascertain what value they placed upon it and moreover to examine what these students saw as the differences between the emphasis on critical thinking in the UK and their home country. Six students volunteered to be interviewed and each is identified by gender and home country (4 students were from Saudi Arabia, 1 from India and 1 from Nigeria; 4 were female and 2 male). Interviews were conducted by a tutor who had taught the students early in the year but was not teaching them at the time of the interviews. Given that only 6 interviews were taking place the same tutor conducted all interviews to ensure consistency. Data were transcribed, an interpretivist position adopted and, as Rumsby (2007) recommends, we worked to develop a level of trust so that students could co-elaborate ideas. In addition notes were taken at tutor meetings where the 4 tutors involved in the programme could reflect on the progress of the students. For purposes of anonymity these were not verbatim records but rather the overviews of the discussions taking place. Analysis was conducted with a second tutor, who had only led one session with the students and thus had not developed an in-depth knowledge of the students, with the aim of reducing bias where data is linked to the individuals concerned.

Clearly the most problematic aspect of the approach to data collection is that of conducting research with students who may feel that their answers might influence the

outcomes of their assessed work. Students were reassured of their rights to withdraw at any point and that the data collected would have no bearing on their grades. Moreover, the purposes of the research were explained so that the students were aware of the researcher's intent to use this information to inform future practices. The other tutors on the team were aware of the research activity and supportive of it but did not choose to engage in the research itself. We now present these data, to begin to examine what might be necessary in order to introduce renewed conceptions of critical thinking that are rigorous and yet more viable for the current higher education climate, where drawing in International students is an important funding stream.

Notions of Critical Thinking

Asked to explain what critical thinking meant to them, students demonstrated a reasonable interpretation of our (tutor) expectations with some notable additions. Thus an Indian female student expressed critical thinking in the following way,

> We have to think something different or ask questions about something or asking why is it like this or what does it mean asking questions, or to use the word why..

This response seemed closely linked to the tutor team approach to developing a basic level of questioning skills aligning with Barnett's (1997) first and second level of criticality, involving reflecting on one's own understandings. Interestingly however, the Saudi Arabian students added qualifiers to this kind of approach which situated critical thinking as a means to provide a solution to a problem, to find the 'truth' more firmly situated at level one in Barnett's table.

> it's to do better decisions…(Saudi Arabian Female Student 1)

> To carefully evaluate or examine to reach for example to a crucial point also it help me to make decision… (Saudi Arabian Female Student 2)

Thus this is presented as a means to an end – an instrumental view of criticality as a tool to help provide an answer or a way through a difficulty. Another student gave a wider exploration of criticality but nevertheless tied it down to in the end being an instrumental process that facilitated decision-making.

> It's about how to be objective it's about how to think outside the box not just to be a follower to follow an idea not just for following but to analyse it and know if it is true or false …I think criticality is about your knowledge, labour and your life style also…do you just think as people think or not…or just think about being critical… or you analyse it and think about where it came from… now life is so complex we need that critical thinking, you know what is wrong what is right…(Saudi Arabian Male Student 2)

The Saudi students all discussed their interest in debate as a way of getting to the heart of a decision in a complex world and this being the usefulness of critical thinking as it would provide 'an answer' through investigating the possibilities. As Balin et al.

(1999) argued, this is a stage in coming to understand critical thinking, as being able to make a decision by weighing up the evidence is an aspect of it. It could be argued this represents a stage in the development of being able to test a hypothesis to seek the 'truth' (Walker and Finney, 2006). These findings raised some interesting challenges for the tutors. There was some sense amongst staff that these students' critical thinking was evolving; however there were apparently differences between the tutors in terms of the level of critical thinking that they promoted. Critical skills and reflexivity (levels 1 and 2) were perceived as attainable targets. However only two tutors attempted enhancing the student experience beyond this point into the areas of refashioning traditions and transformatory techniques (levels 3 and 4). Through conversation, it became apparent that each of the team had a slightly different notion of what level of critical thinking was applicable and necessary for Masters' level work, and how this can be encouraged. This raises interesting questions about tutor understandings of critical thinking and about their expectations of students, particularly in terms of the types of logical thinking necessary to fulfil assessment criteria, set against alternative valuations of the social and professional worlds. Staff thought that they were operating with similar goals, but this had been assumed rather than definitely established. Over the period of study, we could see students were being given differing advice about being 'critical' without, perhaps, very systematic understandings coming from the tutor.

Walker and Finney (2006) argued that critical thinking can be associated negatively with criticism. Another quotation indicated the boundary between the two wasn't always clear to all students.

> We live with criticality but it depends on the situation we live in we use critically our social life in the university and at home so I think usually to be critical or to criticise someone it's about behaviour and …it's also about knowledge something like …if you go for example step by step from the school to the university …you get more critical and you criticise more deep thinking about things deeply… we criticise the situation…I think we use it too much…if you are in the UK you have to criticise different point of view (Saudi Arabian Male Student 1)

Further discussion indicated that this student had linked critical thinking to the upbringing of children and a belief that you criticise them to improve them. The student had understood that critical thinking represented thinking about things more deeply and he also understood the importance in the UK of presenting different perspectives and techniques to deepen a capacity to critique. Thus it would seem that in general the students were recognising the basic level approaches, where critical thinking enables the learner to solve problems defined in particular ways, whilst not necessarily fully understanding the drive behind this requirement from the tutor team.

How important is Critical Thinking?

We noted some apparent contradictions or tensions in the students' reflections on the importance of critical thinking. The following student quotation was interesting in illustrating this.

> I have to be more critical in my thinking…as a scholar it will really help my work…in Nigeria I would have to be more descriptive in my work…if I go back to Nigeria as a lecturer I will want my students.. to be more critical (Nigerian Female Student)

This statement indicates the readiness with which this student is ready to adopt notions of critical thinking without question (or perhaps critical examination). Critical thinking is viewed as a good thing and practice that this student would like to mirror with her own students. However this student then goes on to say,

> …I think my whole voice should be important, if my whole voice is not important in my work then people will not make reference to my work…

This was an interesting response as on the one hand, this student is referring to what she sees as an advantage in being more critical in her approach, but she then places this in opposition to being able to express herself and her own views. Clearly for the tutor team there was a challenge here about how to induct students in critical methods in ways compatible with the students' understanding (Curzon-Hobson, 2003). For example, students were tasked with reflecting critically on the academic literature in ways that enabled them to articulate their own positions and priorities. For many of these students this advice felt contradictory and difficult to grasp. So this difficulty around the technical aspects of writing became intertwined with student understandings of what it was to be a critical thinker, demonstrating continued misconceptions that the tutor team had not unpacked sufficiently. Another student made reference to her perceived lack of voice in her academic writing.

> …when it comes to writing things for an example we can say when you are writing you have to support your views with a reference in the UK, but in India if you are giving your views then it means that you are talking in the air… you [*in the UK*] have to give appropriate reference to their views to that topic not what you are thinking… (Indian Female Student)

Again there is the perception that the student's own voice is drowned out through the need to gather supporting evidence for the arguments made and that this is connected to critical thinking. Referencing is something academics in the West value highly as a method of defending and justifying viewpoints but clearly this is a particular approach to demonstrating current knowledge, on the basis of authoritative precedent. The students interviewed were demonstrating their received understandings that clearly exemplified a confusion, between the right to have a voice and a process of critical thinking being promoted in particular ways by the tutors, and reliant on the conventions of academic scholarship. Perhaps this explains some aspect of the resentment that Egege and Kutieleh (2004) discuss where students have to adapt to other cultures,

where the tutors operate with particular assumptions about what counts as knowledge. We are not disputing the need for scholarly and academic rigour in the development of academic work of merit. However, in that the tutors were not sufficiently aware of how to connect these requirements with student perceptions of what a 'critical' response ought to be like, it is possible that as Atkinson (1997) suggests, we as tutors were failing to recognise and support the critical potential in other approaches.

Interestingly, whilst the students interviewed reported the usefulness of critical thinking, they aligned this with usefulness to the UK academic context in particular.

> I find it [*criticality*] helpful for me in the UK education context…they encourage us to see any subject or any situation from the different views or opinions (Saudi Arabian Female Student 2)

This interestingly begs questions about expression of power and the dominance of western educational approaches as highlighted by Vandermensbrugghe (2004). This quotation suggests criticality is a useful tool for passing the course, but the notion has not developed in ways that make its applicability elsewhere obvious to this student. Further, the students were situated in the UK and in an academic environment so may have felt compelled to adopt (or be seen to be adopting) a positive perspective on critical approaches. Students had chosen a Western country for study, which may imply prior beliefs about the relative value of education in the host country or University. All of these issues add complexity to the potential nuances of the data, notwithstanding the Western approach and perspectives in which we, as authors, are immersed. We hoped to gain a deeper sense of the values attached to critical thinking through asking the students to compare the UK with their home country approach.

Contrasting the UK and home approach

The focus on difference between host and home country was for one student, very much based on the need for constant referencing and the lack of personal voice as expressed in the earlier statements reported. The following quotation demonstrates clearly the students' sense of the burden of this.

> It's [*criticality*] not a new concept but its more complex here in the UK… here it's too complex, it's reference, reference, reference, reference, in Nigeria it's just introduce your whole idea, let people know your whole idea whereas in UK … you have to understand that is was other people's idea not so much your own idea …whereas in Nigeria its what's your own work, what are you thinking, what do you want us to work on? (Nigerian Female Student)

This seems to express a sense of a shift from a culture of taking personal opinion seriously to one where 'other' academic voices are given greater attention than ones own. Moreover, criticality is equated to providing references which does not indicate a sophisticated understanding of this approach. Again, this sits at the lower level of

Barnett's (1997) table. The student from India appeared more convinced of the efficacy of critical thinking and explained that this approach was developing in India. She also expressed a sense of the challenge of writing critically and the need for self-reliance in developing these skills.

> … it's starting now [*critical thinking in India*] …thinking critically is fine but writing critically is difficult… you have to learn by yourself you can learn about the meaning of something but to apply in your life depends on you …I'm sure it's going to help me (Indian Female Student)

This quotation demonstrates the reflexive level of this student's thinking. She also explained that her younger siblings asked a lot more questions than she did when young and that questioning is becoming more accepted practice in India. This might, as Ridley (2004) suggested, imply the growing influence of Western norms. Certainly, there seemed to be little indication that the students interviewed were wary of or resisting this influence. The Saudi students pointed out that whilst there was a gap in practice between the UK and Saudi, they thought this gap was closing.

> …different culture different idea, I think it's [critical thinking] become bigger then because it's from the local now to the international … I think in my country they are open to others and try to think about it [criticality]… (Saudi Arabian Male Student 1)

> …in my home we debate more on the description than critical thinking…but here I find myself learn a new concept …they [*in Saudi*] collect every viewpoint on this subject as description as explanation but they don't encourage someone in critical thinking in the situation… it does not encourage us to see the situation from different point…but they have a new generation who think about things different, they ask, they ask many times…my children ask me questions that I can't ask my colleagues… before I just believe it without any question but now … I would like to translate this strategy to our curriculum… (Saudi Arabian Female Student 2)

> … everything has changed, if you asked me this question before 2005 I would say no now…new people think critically because now we have a similar lifestyle… many countries around the world have the same cultures… (Saudi Arabian Male Student 2)

These responses imply that these students have accepted critical thinking as a 'beneficial' approach to problem solving (Atkinson, 1997). It moreover suggests that they recognise that they need to adopt a particular level of critical thinking (Bailin et al., 1999), one that takes them beyond description and empowers them to make decisions. Critical thinking is also presented as the new way forward, that helps align them to the Western world. These statements suggest that critical thinking as an approach may be gaining in status, which may also be associated with the traditions

and perceived dominance of Western thinking. A point made by one of the Saudi students was that many Saudi's had studied in the US or the UK thus were taking these academic practices back to Saudi as they returned. However, this data sample did not include students from other traditions (such as a Confucian tradition for example) and is clearly not large enough to act as more than an early indicator of potential issues.

Significance:

As academics working in the UK it is hard for us to disassociate notions of academic rigor from notions of critical thinking as the route to enlightened perspectives. However, we are open to the criticism that critical thinking may be doing little more than reproducing the interests of particular groups and constraining thought within the boundaries of Western traditions. It may therefore be important, to be open to consideration of the perspectives of international students, in particular those non-Western students, whose approaches may add richness to thinking, bringing us into contact with new avenues by which we understand the world around us (Vandermensbrugghe, 2004).

There is clearly a link between academic success in Western academic establishments and the ability to present academic arguments in a particular logical form, drawing on accepted forms of criticality. Throughout this paper it has been suggested that criticality comprises both ways of *thinking* and ways of *being,* through which human beings relate to their own cognitive processes and socio-cultural milieu. 'Criticality' does not therefore imply a self-contained analytical process but is sensitive to the outlook, values and cultural mores of the learner. It seems desirable, indeed essential, to open up to debate notions of critical thinking with staff and students, as well as adopting more practical measures to support such activity. Egege and Kutieleh have suggested induction programmes that familiarise international students with various traditions of thinking and thus contextualise 'critical' thinking as just one of many possible approaches. In this way students can become better informed about why they think as they do, that which influences thinking, and how criticality can be enhanced from their socio-culturally located perspectives. This kind of induction programme may also benefit home students and staff, alerting all to the particular positions or stances that they adopt, in order to gain academic or professional success. This may also have the benefit of helping to make the familiar strange, to all students and ease some aspects of the culture shock experienced by International students (Zhou et al, 2008).

We propose that an induction programme for all students and staff, would draw attention to how thinking is channelled in certain directions in an academic environment. Alternative forms of thinking might be encouraged in responding to stimulus material open to sensory, affective and imaginative responses, as well as analytical and deductive reasoning. Brookfield (2002) points out that Marcuse recommends the visual arts as a vehicle through which conventional ways of thinking

might be challenged. Marcuse believed that the arts tap into the creative mind and this allows thinking to take place in a less bounded environment. If Marcuse is correct, then the thinking of all students could be extended and broadened allowing for fresh ideas and voices to rise. Moreover it might be possible to recognise where 'academic' ways of seeing the world depend on personally and culturally located forms of response. As has been suggested in this paper, international students can feel a loss of voice upon entering the UK system. Meanwhile tutors might be able to recognise their participation in a social process that naturalises particular ways of thinking. In this way, both students and tutors might see the educative process for what it is and begin to think more freely and creatively about the future.

Educational practices are shifting quickly in a climate where the value of raising funds derived from international students is vital for institutional survival. Thus academic institutions need to engage tutors and students in a more enlivened examination of the qualities and expectations of academic success, whilst at the same time recognise the potential biases built into such judgements. This will benefit all students and staff alike. Our data have added some evidence to the growing debate about traditionally held assumptions of what constitutes critical thinking. We argue that in such 'shifting sands' academic tutors need to re-examine what we mean by critical thinking, in a way that enables all of our students to engage in an educational experience that is robust, can withstand close analysis and starts to shape a new higher educational landscape.

References:

Arendt, H. 1993. "The crisis in education". in *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political thought*, 173-196. New York: The Viking Press.

Atkinson, D. (1997) 'A Critical Approach to Critical Thinking in TESOL' *TESOL Quarterly* 3(1) 71-94.

Bailin, S., Case, R., Coombs, J., and Daniels, L. (1999) 'Conceptualising Critical Thinking' *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 31(3) 285-302

Barnett, R. (1997) *Higher Education: A Critical Business*. Buckingham: Open University Press

Brookfield, S. (2002) 'Reassessing Subjectivity, Criticality, and Inclusivity: Marcuse's Challenge to Adult Education' *Adult Education Quarterly* 52. 265-280

Clinchy, B. (1994) 'On Critical Thinking and Connected Knowing' in Walters, K. *Re-thinking Reason: New Perspectives in Critical Thinking* Albany: State University of New York Press 33-42

Curzon-Hobson, A. (2003) 'Higher learning and the critical stance' *Studies in Higher Education* 28(2) 201-212

Egege, S. and Kutieleh, S. (2004) 'Critical Thinking: teaching foreign notions to foreign students' *International Education Journal* 4(4) 75-85.

Ford, P., Johnston, B., Mitchell, R. and Myles, F. (2004) 'Social work education and criticality: some thoughts from research' *Social Work education: The International Journal* 23(2) 185-198

Freire, P. (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Harmondsworth: Penguin

Freire, P. (1985) *The Politics of education: culture, power and liberation* London: Bergin & Garvey

Furnham, A. (2004) 'Foreign students: Education and culture shock'. *The Psychologist* 17(1) 16–19.

Gunter, H. (2012) 'The Field of Educational Administration in England' *British Journal of Educational Studies* 60(4) 337-356

Johnston, B., Ford, P., Mitchell, R. and Myle, F. (2011) *Developing Student Criticality in Higher Education: Undergraduate Learning in the arts and social sciences.* Bloomsbury: Continuum

Kreber, C. (1998) 'The relationship between self-directed learning, critical thinking, and psychological type, and some implications for teaching in higher education' *Studies in Higher Education* 23(1) 71-86

Moore, T. (2011) 'Critical Thinking: seven definitions in search of a concept' *Studies in Higher Education* 38(4) 506-522

Ridley, D. (2008) 'Puzzling Experiences in higher Education: critical moments for conversation' *Studies in Higher Education* 29(1) 91-107

Roberts, P. (2006) 'Critical literacy, breadth of perspective and universities: applying insights from Friere' *Studies in Higher Education* 21(2) 149-163

Rumbsy, R. (2007) Staff well-being: negotiating new organisational realities in schools facing challenging circumstances, *International Electronic Journal of Educational Leadership and Learning,* 11(17). Available online at: http://www.uofcpress.com/

Vandermensbrugghe, J. (2004) 'The Unbearable Vagueness of Critical Thinking in the context of the Anglo-Saxonisation of Education' *International Education Journal* 5(3) 417-422.

Walker, P. and Finney, N (2006) 'Skill Development and Critical Thinking in Education' *Teaching in Higher Education* 4(4) 531-547

Wals, A. and Jickling, B. (2002) ""Sustainability" in higher education: From doublethink and newspeak to critical thinking and meaningful learning", International Journal of Sustainability in Higher Education, 3 (3), 221 – 232

Zhou, Y., Jindal-Snape, D., Topping, K. and Todman, J. (2008) 'Theoretical models of culture shock and adaptation in international students in higher education'. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(1) 63-75