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Intercultural PhD supervision: exploring the hidden curriculum in a social science faculty doctoral programme

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ABSTRACT

International knowledge markets rely heavily on a ready supply of highly mobile doctoral students, many of whom are from the global South, to bring in revenue. The supervision of these PhD students, however, can reproduce neo-colonial knowledge relations, often in subtle ways. In settler nations, international PhD students may find that they are assigned subaltern status in their university departments and this can have a significant impact on their learning. This paper explores the experiences of a group of international PhD students in a social science faculty in a New Zealand university during the first two years of their doctoral studies. It examines how they responded to the displacement of their cultural values and priorities, the way they navigated intercultural engagements with supervisors, and their ensuing relationships with indigenous and ethnic allies in the faculty. Despite considerable pressure to conform to the dominant modes of academic knowledge production that characterise universities in settler nations, it is concluded that international students find ways of speaking out, often in highly coded forms, that complicate their subaltern academic status.

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The international education industry in New Zealand is worth around NZ$2.85 billion with international university students, who comprise 20% of the overall university population in the country (Education New Zealand, 2014), bringing in approximately NZ$1003 million (Education New Zealand, 2015). As the country’s fifth largest export, international education is an important source of revenue. While international students are seen as being vitally important to the economic and cultural life of the nation and official publications show high levels of student satisfaction (Generosa, Molano, Stokes, & Schulze, 2013) not all international students have uniformly positive learning encounters (Cao & Zhang, 2012; Henning, Krägeloh, Moir, Doherty, & Hawken, 2012; Lee & Rice, 2007; Manathunga, 2014; Zhang & Brunton, 2007). Their experiences as newcomers to university departments may be dominated at one level, by institutional and discipline-related expectations and priorities, and at another less tangible level, the neo-colonial knowledge relations of the host country and the manner in which these are played out in the context of PhD supervision (Houshmand, Spanierman, & Tafarodi, 2014; Stein &...
Andreotti, 2016). While the doctoral process is often an extremely difficult one for many doctoral students, the focus on this paper explores the ways in which intercultural factors intensify these challenges for international students (Manathunga, 2014).

Some of the most acute silences in supervision encounters between host nation thesis supervisors and international students, especially those from the nations of the global South, originate in the everyday cultural scripts of settler societies with unresolved histories of cultural and ethnic conflict. We have argued elsewhere that neo-colonial forces have an impact on the way cross-cultural supervision relationships are formulated (Cornforth, 2013; Kidman, 1999; Manathunga, 2010). The higher education system in New Zealand is underpinned by just such a colonial history that continues to reverberate in modern settler nations, including in its sites of knowledge production (Grant, 2010; Kidman, 2009; Manathunga, 2011, 2014).

In this paper, we extend these arguments to an exploration of the supervision experiences of a group of international PhD students in a social science faculty in a New Zealand university during a period of academic restructuring. We track how they navigated the complex web of intercultural supervision arrangements in their doctoral programme and their ensuing relationships with ethnicised ‘Others’ including indigenous Māori and Pacific academic staff and students in the faculty and with some ‘indigenous-friendly’ Pākehā colleagues (a phrase coined by our participants). The term ‘Pacific’ is commonly used in New Zealand in reference to New Zealand-born Pacific peoples and indigenous peoples from a range of ethnic groups in Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia. We argue that broader tensions in academic environments can amplify existing intercultural misunderstandings between thesis supervisors and students in predominantly white institutions but that alliances with ethnicised ‘Others’ and ‘indigenous-friendly’ Pākehā supervisors can provide spaces for epistemological resistance to take place. This paper is situated within a Southern theory framework that acknowledges the repercussions of colonialism in settler nations and the epistemological imperialism of the North/West in knowledge production (Chakrabarty, 2007; Middleton & McKinley, 2010; Trudgett, 2014). We also draw on critical theories of whiteness to problematise intercultural supervision in these contexts (Doane, 2003).

‘Eduscapes’ in postcolonial academic space

Academic knowledge production is a global activity with intellectual workers in universities across the world engaging with each other through their academic disciplines and the web of homogenising discourses that surround them (Breidlid, 2016). Beck (2012) describes this as an ‘eduscape’ or the ‘flow of educational theories, ideas, programs, activities, and research in and across national boundaries’ (p. 142); a fluid and contingent form of internationalisation, peculiar to higher education, that is intersected and impacted by other ‘scapes’ including ideoscapes (the engineering of ‘ideas’ about education), ‘ethnoscapes’ (the movement of those who generate ideoscapes) and so on.

While the arterial routes and thoroughfares of academic knowledge span the globe, the nature of intellectual work and the institutional systems of academic knowledge production differ significantly from country to country and are deeply inflected by the local educational histories and practices of nation states. As Connell (2014, p. 212) contends, ‘[i]ntellectual workers reflect the divisions in and the history of societies in which they live […] It is also important to recognize the different situations for intellectual
workers created by the process of colonization’. Knowledge relations are therefore unique to the societies in which they operate.

In settler societies like New Zealand, these histories speak to a colonial legacy that continues to shape intercultural relationships in contemporary university settings and heavily influences the evolving eduscapes of postgraduate environments. As Manathunga (2010, p. 11) argues, ‘because our world has been so profoundly shaped by colonialism and neocolonialism in so many forms, our own personal positioning in relation to colonialism has an impact on our personal and professional ways of thinking, being and supervising’. In this respect, thesis supervisors in New Zealand, both Pākehā (New Zealanders with European or settler heritage) and Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand), often play out a series of cultural scripts that reflect an unresolved and unsettled colonial history (Grant, 2010; Middleton & McKinley, 2010). This not only has an impact on the supervision of Māori students, we contend that it also affects the supervision of international students. It is in investigating these relationships that critical theories of whiteness are helpful in interrogating how whiteness is enacted in postgraduate educational contexts within settler states.

Emerging in the US in the late 1980s, critical whiteness studies seek to remove whiteness as a default category and to unearth the taken-for-granted privileges that whiteness brings to people who are often unconscious of their dominating presence (Doane, 2003). Doane (2003, p. 9) contends that whiteness can only be understood in the context of the society in which it operates; noting that, ‘whiteness must be understood as a position in a specific set of social relations … and as a historically contingent social identity’. In settler societies, whiteness therefore assumes a local character which ultimately shapes intercultural supervision practices in universities.

Drawing on Connell’s (2014) notion of historically situated intellectual labour discussed above, we argue that some Pākehā supervisors in New Zealand perform whiteness as academics with strong affinities to a global knowledge elite that has its origins in the North/West. These knowledge elites exercise epistemological hegemony by positioning themselves as the only legitimate producers of knowledge and theory. Accordingly, Eurocentric norms about knowledge production represent Northern/Western knowledge as the only valid, universally applicable set of knowledge claims (Merlingen, 2007). These knowledge hierarchies have been described as a form of ‘epistemic violence’, which Merlingen (2007, p. 441) argues, are overlaid across the modes of knowledge production.

International students are caught within these neo-colonial development discourses that position their home countries as ‘backward’ and ‘developing’ (Manathunga, 2014). Their Northern/Western PhD qualifications are seen by some host nation supervisors as being pivotal in allowing students to eventually return to their home countries where it is assumed that they will contribute to ‘modernisation’ – a game of catching up with the West. Thus, supervisors are positioned, tacitly, as white saviours who impart Northern/Western knowledge to Southern students who will then be intellectually empowered to ‘fix’ their countries’ problems. This approach to supervision gives little acknowledgement to the cultural, historical and linguistic knowledge that international students bring to their studies. Fotovatian and Miller (2014) contend that international students are aware of these dynamics and recognise the ‘hegemonic nature of Western culture’ (p. 291) embedded in their doctoral educations.

There is also very little space in this construction of intercultural supervision for an understanding of difference that foregrounds cultural acts of hospitality and generosity.
(Fotovatian & Miller, 2014; Manathunga, 2014; Martin, 2000). Martin (2000) argues for a politics of care and connectivity in education but in New Zealand, many Pākehā contend with questions about who they are in relation to indigenous Māori and what they stand for as members of a settler nation (Bell, 2009). In higher education contexts, this may also translate into confusion about who is responsible for welcoming new arrivals and how best to create ongoing markers of belonging for international students in a context where the very notion of belonging is contested between indigenous and settler groups (Holmes, Marra, & Schnurr, 2008). There is therefore a need to study the experiences of international doctoral students in settler nations in order to understand the impact of these unresolved tensions on intercultural supervision.

Methodology

This case study was conducted in a social science faculty in a New Zealand university which had 75 PhD-enrolled students, over half of which were international. Ethical approval was obtained and all efforts were made to preserve the confidentiality of participants, all of whom were international doctoral students. An electronic questionnaire was sent to the international students in the PhD programme and a research assistant collated the responses ($N = 22$) and removed identifying characteristics before sending them to the research team for analysis. In the questionnaire, students were asked to comment on aspects of their doctoral experiences that worked well for them as well as areas they felt could be improved. They were also invited to attend either a focus group interview or a one-to-one interview, the purpose of which was to build on information gathered in the survey. These interviews were conducted by a research assistant who was also a postgraduate student with experience in working across a range of cultural contexts. The interviews were semi-structured and designed to provide the participants with an opportunity to speak about whatever matters relating to their experiences on the doctoral programme that they considered to be important.

The research assistant then transcribed data and removed identifying information about the participants prior to handing the materials to the research team for analysis. Nineteen students originally agreed to an interview but four dropped out along the way due to clashes with fieldwork schedules. In the end, 12 students participated in two focus group interviews and three one-to-one interviews. The focus group interviews each lasted approximately two and a half hours while the interviews averaged about 70 minutes.

The participants selected pseudonyms, based on the names of flowers, which are used in this paper. Several students chose the names of plants that are commonly grown in New Zealand gardens and while we are aware that this anglicises their identities and potentially ‘flattens’ their cultural origins, the participants opted for this approach because it disguised their genders, nationalities and personal identities. Data were analysed thematically through close and iterative readings which allowed us to identify the operation of power in supervision from the perspectives of international students.

Doctoral ‘eduscapes’ and the faculty

The international students in this study came from home nations in SouthEast Asia, Africa, South America and the Pacific and were in their first two years of full-time PhD
enrolment. During the interviews, they talked about their friendships with other international students in the faculty with whom they shared a sense of intellectual solidarity, collegiality and community. They had strong emotional attachments to New Zealand and saw it as a desirable place to live while they did their studies. They reported having fewer social and intellectual ties with Pākehā doctoral students, however, noting that their New Zealand peers, while not unfriendly, were less open to establishing friendships with international students. This finding is in line with previous research relating to relationships between international students and their host nation peers (e.g., Leask & Carroll, 2011).

At the time of this study, the ‘eduscapes’ of doctoral research in the faculty and the evolving relationships between international students and their supervisors were enacted against a backdrop of severe academic recession and constraint. A series of departmental reviews and restructurings had taken place over a two-year period and many academic staff lost their jobs while others left the university voluntarily. The international students in the programme were deeply affected by these changes. Most had attended a round of cheerless and dispiriting farewell functions for staff that left them anxious and worried; some were assigned new thesis supervisors in the wake of academic redundancies; others spoke of a siege mentality amongst academics and a pervasive atmosphere of unhappiness and tension that left them reluctant to ask for additional help or guidance. These students could not always call on supervisors for support outside of supervision meetings and felt very isolated as they embarked on student life in New Zealand. One participant said:

I see that with other departments […] they have that sense of cohesiveness that I think is missing with mine. So it’s even more of a solitary journey and then I keep saying, ‘Oh God, I’m so lonely.’ Who do I talk to about my research? Who do I go to for help? Who do I go to for just a kind word? And just the support you need for this. I regret my decision to come here and I almost regret the decision to pursue a PhD. It’s not going to stop me from completing it but in hindsight I would have done things differently. (Orchid)

Another student spoke of the atmosphere of instability and flux within the faculty which she suggested was, ‘because of the restructuring, because [there are] new hires, because everyone has a [high] workload and they are stressed as well. It causes tension and I don’t want to know any more about it. I don’t want to take sides’. The students’ sense of frustration was exacerbated by their confusion about their status within the faculty and the lack of any formal welcome. The welcoming of international students into postgraduate programmes in New Zealand is an important milestone. Most universities have a range of cultural rituals around hospitality and the welcoming of newcomers. In many instances, these events centre on Māori welcoming ceremonies, known as pōwhiri, which usually take place at university Marae (Māori meeting grounds). These pōwhiri serve an important function in higher education contexts, as Simmons, Worth, and Smith (2001) note:

In the contemporary postcolonial context of Aotearoa, the pōwhiri is a moment when Western cultural rationalism is peeled back in order to submit to a different form of cultural appropriateness with regard to the values of ‘welcoming’, ‘honouring’, ‘greeting’, and ‘hospitality’. (p. 12)
The rituals of welcome that take place on university Marae are almost always conducted by Māori hosts and are usually highly valued by newcomers (McIntosh & Johnson, 2004) and this was also the case for the participants in this study. The problem, however, was that the students’ arrivals in New Zealand coincided with a series of departures of faculty staff and no formal welcomes had been arranged for them nor were orientation or information sessions offered. The wider pressures on the faculty at this time had an impact on almost every aspect of the students’ doctoral education and this in turn affected their ability to create a sense of place and belonging within the institution. Faculty initiatives that were usually in place, such as welcoming pōwhiri for postgraduate students, orientation programmes, faculty seminars, and so on, were left to academics to organise individually and the flow of information and scheduled events around the faculty was consequently less reliable. One participant said:

What’s missing is the personal thing. […] if your supervisor sees an event on the calendar, like a pōwhiri for example and asks the student, ‘Have you been welcomed? Have you been welcomed on to the Marae? You should go. I’ll see you there. Come along.’ I know that’s not happening with a lot of the supervisors because it’s not important to them. But if you start doing something like that then the students feel welcomed and you realise, oh, okay, that’s a really good thing. (Iris)

Despite these challenges, academic staff were eager to create opportunities for doctoral students to interact with each other, especially in the absence of formal coursework. To this end, a series of cohort groups had been operating across the faculty for several years. These groups met regularly and included postgraduate thesis students and faculty who shared similar disciplinary, theoretical or methodological interests. PhD students were invited to join these cohort groups and some were involved with several groups. The cohorts operated variously as reading groups or discipline-related ‘book clubs’ or as discussion groups that explored topics of shared scholarly interest, while others provided day-to-day support and advice about navigating postgraduate study. These cohort meetings performed an important function for the international students by providing them with a ‘home-base’ in the faculty and opportunities to extend their intellectual and social networks and the participants spoke of them enthusiastically during the interviews. However, these cohort groups were not factored into staff workloads and during the lengthy period of restructuring, academic staff struggled with extended work hours and consequently some of these groups began to flounder. One student said:

… the worst part was that during the first few months there were cohort meetings and that was really good. [There was] an encouragement to go to the cohort meetings. But then the supervisors dropped the ball on that. There are no more cohort meetings now because everybody is too busy and the people who were in charge of the cohorts have left so I really did feel abandoned. (Parsley)

In a faculty that was going through a difficult and unsettled time, thesis supervisors subsequently became the main point of contact with the institution and the discipline for many of the international students. In the next section, we discuss how these relationships were enacted and the ways in which they shaped the modes of knowledge production within the doctoral programme.
Intercultural doctoral supervision, whiteness and the hidden curriculum

The participants in this study were familiar with the formal, explicit and mutually acknowledged tasks and goals of supervision. The elements of the overt curriculum include co-supervision; academic advice about scholarly matters and research ethics; negotiations around expectations of work, such as setting timetables and research schedules; and providing feedback on students’ work. Most of the participants had formed productive relationships with their supervisors in this respect and they talked positively about the ‘official’ pedagogies of supervision, but there were deeper undercurrents that surfaced throughout the interviews with participants. Supervision across cultures frequently involves a ‘hidden curriculum’ whereby tacit messages about ethnicity, power and knowledge are given and received (Guo & Jamal, 2007; Margolis, Soldatenko, Acker, & Gair, 2001). McLaren (2016) argues that the notion of a hidden curriculum relates to the ‘unintended outcomes of the schooling process’ (McLaren, 2016, p. 145), defining it as a mechanism that ‘deals with the tacit ways in which knowledge and behaviour get constructed, outside usual course materials and formally scheduled lessons’ (p. 145). As the participants talked about their supervision experiences, it was clear that these forces were also at work within the doctoral programme.

We were first alerted to this hidden curriculum by an observation made by one of the participants who spoke of having to contend with ‘judgemental perceptions about your country as a horrible place’ (Daisy). As we drilled down into the data, we came across several examples of apparently ‘throw away’ comments made by supervisors to their students about the peoples and nations of the global South. These comments signalled a ‘dysconscious racism’ (Crozier, Burke, & Archer, 2016, p. 40) on the part of supervisors who, as we discuss below, placed Pākehā cultural and epistemological norms at the centre of the supervision relationship. As one student noted, ‘I haven’t felt that my supervisors are interested in my culture and how my cultural background can contribute to my research.’

The positioning of Pākehā ‘whiteness’ within supervision had the effect of displacing the students’ cultural knowledge and experience by assigning them subaltern status, although these messages were delivered in subtle ways. For example, one participant spoke of wanting to establish a good relationship with her supervisor when she first arrived in New Zealand but was told not to bring food to meetings:

At first I overdid it, I tried to create a trusting relationship at the very beginning, and I would bring things, because that’s what we do in my culture. You know, you bring food, or you bring what you have to share and my supervisor actually asked me not to anymore. She said that I didn’t need to and it wasn’t necessary. (Zinnia)

The students reported many experiences like this. One participant commented that Pākehā New Zealanders seem very reserved and are difficult to get to know, ‘they are very polite, usually kind people. You feel good in general with them. But if you try to pass one step forward they immediately close the doors’ (Peppercorn). As one student noted:

I show them [the supervisors] respect because in your own culture you have to respect what your superiors and elders are saying. But then at the same time there’s just their lack of cultural understanding happening. A lack of intercultural understanding, I guess. (Rose)

We argue that the relationships between these thesis supervisors and their students reflect wider intercultural tensions that operate within and across the global North/West and
South. Supervisors’ underlying attitudes, assumptions and beliefs about the global South have a direct bearing on their relationships with students from those regions (Baker, 2015; Breidlid, 2012). Within the pedagogical imaginaries of the North/West, the global South is often viewed homogeneously as a site of poverty, corruption, greed, oppression and unmitigated need (Jefferess, 2002). These stereotypes may evoke feelings of guilt, pity and anger (Tallon & McGregor, 2014) and frequently come into play when Northern/Western peoples encounter the peoples of the global South such as within the supervision relationship (Jefferess, 2013). The stereotyping of their home nations by some of their supervisors left the students feeling exasperated and angry.

There are a couple of things that one of my supervisors said that I don’t think she realised was insulting regarding my nationality. I’ve gotten used to the complaints about my country. I think sometimes she would make remarks and forget where I came from. [...] It was uncomfortable. I was friendly in the beginning but then I pulled back. (Nīkau)

Several participants reported that they modified their own cultural behaviours and expectations during supervision meetings to more closely match those of their supervisors. Alongside this, the students also felt frustrated when their supervisors spoke paternalistically about economic and cultural conditions in their home nations. This finding reflects previous research, for example, Baker (2015) found that white Americans are more likely to support increased levels of economic aid to countries where inhabitants are peoples of colour because there is a widespread perception that those peoples have less agency in creating lasting positive change within their own societies. Baker concludes:

Given the standard American media portrayals of Africa as well as the sheer physical and symbolic distance between Western and African lives, white Americans are more likely to treat foreigners of African descent as enigmatic others with less than full capacities to plan and act. (Baker, 2015, p. 14)

In this study, the students reported that these attitudes were also expressed by some supervisors, many of whom considered that a PhD from a university in a ‘developed’ country like New Zealand would provide students with an education that would help them to ‘fix’ the economic, social and political problems of their home nations. The roots of these beliefs run deep. As Bryan (2013) contends, the desire of Northern peoples to help, give aid or ‘benevolently’ assist citizens of developing nations in the global South, ‘cannot be understood apart from a set of deeply racialised, interrelated constructs of thought [that] have been circulating from the era of empire, through which the Northern sense of self is constituted and affirmed’ (Bryan, 2013, p. 13). The participants in this study reported seeing these constructs in operation in their engagements with supervisors.

I sense there is an unease with my culture and all the bad parts of my culture, I’m always quite aware of it in our [supervision] meetings so I try to actually be the opposite of those things which disadvantages me too. I’m hyper aware of my culture. I can’t be myself [...] I can’t get on with the parts that are going to be troublesome for them. I don’t feel like they are comfortable with it [...]. No, it’s like constantly trying to make allowances for who I am. (Shortie)

The centring of whiteness within supervision becomes a particularly acute form of epistemic violence (Merlingen, 2007) when it extends to ‘anglicising’ the modes of academic knowledge production. In this study, the participants reported that thesis supervisors encouraged them to read widely and thoughtfully and provided extensive reading lists.
The problem was that these lists almost exclusively referenced foundation texts and key theorists from the global North/West. Knowledge produced in the global South, by people of colour, or indigenous writers was rarely included. Some supervisors were unfamiliar with these writers or simply unaware that extensive systems of knowledge production exist outside the Anglophone academic literature. Others required their students not only to become conversant with the academic protocols and intellectual paradigms of the North/West but also to adopt them as their own. The students were willing to critically engage with this material and considered it worth reading in its own right. Problems emerged, however, when they were expected to apply theoretical or methodological approaches drawn from the academic literature of the North/West that were ill-fitted to designing, conducting and analysing research undertaken in the cultural and social milieux of their home countries and communities. Since all of the participants had conducted fieldwork in their home nations, this was a significant issue for several of them and most found it difficult to initiate discussions with their supervisors about this. As one participant said:

I was really scrambling when they talked about methodology, methods and theory. I didn’t understand the vocabulary and I didn’t feel safe to ask questions because [they would start] looking at their watches and all that. (Kowhai)

Despite being assigned subaltern status in these encounters, however, the participants found ways of articulating their concerns that both drew attention to and complicated this positioning, as is discussed below.

**Alliances with Indigenous Māori and Pacific ‘Others’**

Their experiences in the faculty led many international students to establish informal, ‘below the radar’ alliances with Pacific and indigenous Māori staff and doctoral students and their ‘indigenous-friendly’ Pākehā colleagues as they made sense of the doctoral environment. As indigenous peoples of New Zealand and the Pacific region, Māori and Pacific academics in the faculty had developed long-standing professional and academic ties that were underpinned by strong and highly collegial cross-cultural alliances. Together, they had claimed shared institutional spaces which they refurbished with indigenous Māori and indigenous Pacific artwork and carvings, and they also opened up meeting and teaching spaces where staff, students and visitors could sit and eat together, work quietly in groups or talk in a supportive and validating environment. The international students were pleased to discover these small pockets of staff and students at the edges of faculty life. The strong cultural commitments to hospitality and the rituals of welcome which were led by both Māori and Pacific staff provided the students with a sense of acceptance and belonging that they felt was lacking elsewhere in the faculty. As one participant observed:

I have been encouraged by people here […]. I’m welcomed here. I definitely have that sense of welcome here. I know there are some changes going on throughout the faculty, and I know that there are some professors who do outreach but I think everybody needs to understand that we need to communicate beyond just our own little groups. (Daisy)

Several participants subsequently joined a doctoral cohort group that was run as a collective by Pacific and Māori academics. Topics were decided by group members each
fortnight and these covered a range of scholarly issues and debates as well as offering the international students a social forum where they could talk openly with other ‘ethnicised’ students and staff who had similar institutional experiences. This proved to be an eye-opening exercise in many respects. During cohort gatherings, Māori and Pacific staff and students talked about their own experiences and analyses of dysconscious racism in the institution and for several of the international students, this was the first opportunity they had since they arrived in New Zealand to articulate their concerns, ask questions or talk about the things that puzzled or frustrated them, in an environment of confidentiality and safety.

One student spoke of the sense of relief in finding a space within the institution where having a supportive peer group mitigated the loneliness of doctoral study, noting that ‘I’d just kind of float in and out there … other than that I was pretty isolated and distanced a bit from student life.’ Another participant described these academic ‘others’ as ‘compensating’, to a certain extent, ‘for the lack of support’ elsewhere in the faculty where relationships with staff were seen as, ‘very contractual. Very black and white. Very up and down’.

Discussions within the cohort group often centred on systems of knowledge production beyond the anglophone North/West, for example, within indigenous communities. As the participants developed intellectual and social connections with others in the cohort who had also experienced being simultaneously exoticised and made invisible within the predominantly Pākehā faculty, they began to validate and claim knowledge that had been produced in their own languages, nations and communities and started to channel these paradigms and ideas back into their doctoral work. They did this in various ways. Some simply began to draw on academic literature produced in the global South and include it in their work; others reshaped their methodological and theoretical approaches to better reflect the priorities of their own participants and participating communities in their home nations, while others made more subtle shifts. As one student commented, ‘my research questions haven’t changed – how I write has changed’.

As the students began to incorporate these values into their work, they reported a sense of achievement and renewed energy as they started to weave together knowledge production practices in new ways. Ultimately, these experiences provided the students with opportunities to validate and establish scholarly identities that spoke directly to the needs and priorities of their own communities in the global South. By creating ‘off the radar’ alliances with Maori and Pacific staff and students, they found a forum through which they could ‘speak back’ to the normatively white hidden curriculum operating elsewhere in the faculty and this gave them confidence to insert the epistemologies and intellectual practices of the global South back into their research, albeit often in highly coded forms.

**Discussion**

In this paper, we have borrowed the term ‘eduscape’ to describe the macro-level flows of knowledge markets that convert students in search of an education abroad into a hot commodity. The participants in this study are part of those international streams and migrations and their presence in New Zealand is seen by government as a highly desirable manifestation of the international student phenomenon. Once international students arrive at a university, however, the nature of their doctoral experience and their ability to feel a sense of connection with their discipline and faculty depend on how well their
expectations and needs are mediated by supervisors and other members of the academic community within their institutions. When tensions within universities are in play, whether they involve a difficult faculty restructuring process as was the case here or other kinds of academic recession, students’ learning can be profoundly affected and this may magnify some of the problematic aspects of doctoral education for international students in unexpected ways.

We have argued here that whiteness manifests in ways that are responsive to the unique histories and power relations of nations. Settler societies, particularly those with ongoing tensions between indigenous peoples and settler communities, produce their own forms and conditions of whiteness which, within university contexts, overlay the supervision encounter in ways that replicate and reproduce settler-colonial knowledge–power relations. International PhD students enter into host nation environments as newcomers but also often as members of societies with their own histories, experiences and memories of colonisation and, as such, they bring their own ‘place’ histories into the supervision relationship. These supervisory engagements are therefore experienced variously by students as puzzling, frustrating or enraging, as well as at times stimulating, exciting and creative. Doctoral education is a complex process particularly across cultures. However, as this study illustrates, it is especially important to pay attention to times when an unofficial and often unacknowledged doctoral curriculum that sits deep inside the supervision relationship in host nation universities becomes evident.

The participants in this study were carrying out their research in a disrupted and unsettled faculty environment and this led to heightened tensions and anxieties. As the faculty restructuring process stretched on, cultural and ethnic fault lines began to appear more visibly, exposing elements of the hidden curriculum within the doctoral programme that had previously been submerged. Several students broke their silences around supervision by entering into intellectual associations with indigenous Māori, Pacific and ‘indigenous-friendly’ academic allies. These allies were able to throw light on the knowledge–power relationships and modes of knowledge production within the faculty and help students develop new strategies for navigating the doctoral process. This proved to be productive for the students, although it did not ultimately shift the institutional structures that placed Pākehā norms at the core of thesis supervision. It does, however, point to the importance of providing spaces to develop intellectual alliances between ethnicised ‘others’ and ‘indigenous-friendly’ Pākehā supervisors in academic environments and the potential of these alliances for developing strategies that ‘speak back’ to the hidden PhD curriculum. Certainly, by placing the more tacit elements of cross-cultural doctoral supervision at the centre of analysis, a deeper awareness can be fostered about developing more responsive official supervisory processes, such as providing more programmes on intercultural supervision and dysconscious bias and developing formal mechanisms for monitoring the quality of supervision relationships. Pākehā supervisors who operate in ‘indigenous-friendly’ ways and Māori and Pacific supervisors could be encouraged to share their knowledge and strategies with their colleagues. There could be the potential for cross-institutional collaboration in the implementation of such programmes on effective intercultural supervision.

This study highlights the importance of conducting more studies about the experiences of international doctoral students in settler nations. While there are many studies about international student experiences, the majority of these focus on the official and formal dimensions of academic encounters and are either un-theorised or draw upon implicitly
deficit discourses. Studies that draw on Southern theory and critical whiteness theories such as this one not only illustrate the more allusive cultural dimensions of academic life as it is experienced by many international doctoral students but also demonstrate the agency with which they complicate and resist their subaltern academic status.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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