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AUTHOR Navaratnam, K. K.; Mountney, Peter
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ABSTRACT

A study was conducted to identify the extent to which the needs of overseas students enrolled in the Queensland, Australia, TAFE (Technical and Further Education) system are being met and to identify ways in which student support services may be improved. A multiple case study methodology was used and data were collected using the following methods: review of the literature; discussions with college administrators, student counselors, and personnel in the International Programs Branch; and a student questionnaire returned by 256 students, for a 73 percent response rate. The variables most associated with overseas students' satisfaction with TAFE were their competency in English and motivation to succeed. Eighty percent of student respondents reported that they would recommend their TAFE college and their course of study to their friends. In addition, 60-70 percent of the students were satisfied with the services they received. Among areas identified as needing improvement were the provision of course information, help in obtaining visas, reception at the airport, accommodations, tutoring, English language support, library facilities, orientation, help with study skills, and social activities. (CML)

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MEETING THE NEEDS OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS: EXPORTING
QUALITY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

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K. K. Navaratnam
Peter Mountney

Operational Performance
Dept. of Employment, Vocational Education, Training and Industrial Relations
PMB 3, South Brisbane, Qld 4101

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University of Southern Queensland, Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia
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MEETING THE NEEDS OF OVERSEAS STUDENTS: EXPORTING QUALITY VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Perspective of the study

Australia's geographical proximity and the Commonwealth Government's policy on overseas students (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1984) provide an excellent opportunity to export vocational education and training to customers in Asia and in the South Pacific. According to the latest information obtained from the International Students Branch, Department of Employment, Education and Training (DEET), overseas students from about 75 countries, including some 95% from China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Indonesia, Korea, Japan, Singapore, Taiwan and Thailand, were enrolled in a wide range of award courses and in English Language Intensive Course for Overseas Students (ELICOS) in Australian technical and further education (TAFE) colleges. Table 1 shows current data on the enrolment of full-fee paying overseas students by states and level of their study. The Industry Commission (1991) has stated "TAFE colleges are making more efforts to attract overseas students, and the revenue they generate is increasingly seen as important against a background of government funding constraints and continuing high demand from domestic students" (p.149). However, in order to sustain the demand, TAFE authorities must ensure that quality vocational education and training is made available. Currently all Australian States and Territories are involved in the provision of programs for full-fee paying students and therefore, a study such as this has Australia-wide significance.

Table 1: Enrolments of full-fee paying overseas students and the level of course at June 1991

State	H.ED	Other Post	Level of Course		Total
			Secondary	ELICOS	
ACT	708	165	115	195	1183
NSW	4601	4884	1840	5751	17076
NT	49	8	35	2	94
QLD	2366	443	908	1181	4898
SA	968	376	501	145	1990
TAS	486	15	126	27	654
VIC	6896	2596	2884	2717	15093
WA	4145	420	1429	900	6894
Total	20219	8907	7838	10918	47882

Source: International Students Branch, DEET, 1991.

In Queensland, "exporting" programs for overseas students commenced in 1988. The process is managed by the International Programs Branch within TAFETE Q and some 14 TAFE colleges are involved as delivery units. A wide range of award courses is offered in a variety of fields, in addition to ELICOS at the Centre for Language Education of the South Brisbane College of TAFE. Annual tuition fees are \$4000 - \$7000 for a certificate course, \$7500 for an associate

diploma course, and \$1800 for each 10 week ELICOS course. Some 30% of the revenue collected from tuition fees is used to operate the International Programs Branch and 70% is returned to the participating colleges. Similar arrangements exist in other States and Territories.

The overall purpose of the overseas students programs in Queensland is to promote its colleges of TAFE in international markets in order to provide additional resources and educational opportunities for Queenslanders through the generation of revenue (International Programs Branch 1991). The Overseas Student Program: Policies, Guidelines, and Procedures (1990) indicated that 14 of 33 Queensland TAFE colleges would participate in overseas students programs in 1991. The TAFE colleges are generally responsible for offering courses and places to overseas students; their orientation, counselling, social, cultural, and welfare support; and identifying students in need of English language tutorial assistance and its provision. Since the inception of the program in 1988, enrolments have increased from 10 in 1988 to 350 in 1991, generating income of about \$4 million. For every full-fee paying overseas student enrolled in a college of TAFE, it is expected that 3-4 places will be created for Queenslanders.

However in some quarters, there are growing concerns with regard to full-fee overseas students programs. The issues include the economic impact and displacement of local students; the educational ability of the overseas students; teaching strategies, methods, and teaching loads; and administrative implications (Jones, 1989). As a consequence, an inquiry was conducted into the export of education services to determine the effects of growing numbers of full-fee paying overseas students on the supply and use of education resources, about how immigration policy might be more effective in maximising the welfare of Australians (Industry Commission, 1991). However, many questions remain with regard to the level of support services provided to meet the needs of the overseas students and there is a lack of firm data available on this matter.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study was to identify the extent to which the needs of overseas students enrolled in the Queensland TAFE system are being met and to make suggestions to improve the student support services from the view points of recruiting, enrolling, educating, and servicing the full-fee paying overseas students in vocational and technical education in Australia.

Methodology and data source

A multiple case study methodology (Yin, 1989) was used for this study. Data were collected from several sources: a student questionnaire survey; a literature review; and discussions with college administrators, student counsellors, and personnel in the International Programs Branch. A reference group representing International Programs Branch, Operational Performance, a college student counsellor, and a teacher was set up to provide advice on this study. A student questionnaire were developed, revised, and refined in consultation with International Programs Branch. The questionnaire was designed to gather the opinions of the overseas students on the services provided to them by the Queensland TAFE system. Data sought included background characteristics; educational qualifications and achievement; enrolment and education in Queensland TAFE; services provided by International Programs Branch; services provided by the TAFE colleges; and their future plans. A draft questionnaire was pre-tested and appropriate changes were made to improve the readability and simplicity of the questionnaire. Three hundred and fifty (350) questionnaires were administered and returned by the contact persons nominated for this study in each of the participating colleges.

Group and individual discussions with personnel in the colleges and in International Programs Branch were conducted to gather information with regard to the overseas students programs. They include: the current status of the programs; student support services; teaching and

learning strategies, standard and quality of learning outcomes; English language competency; assessment and performance; economic, educational, and social impacts; operational problems; processes for meeting the needs of overseas students; and suggestions and recommendations for making a continuous improvement in the overseas student program at each operational level.

Student counselling staff were interviewed individually to gather information on the problems encountered by overseas students. Draft reports were prepared based on the students survey and interviews. Appropriate changes were made in the reports based on the suggestions and advice received from the reference group. Thus, the validity and reliability of the information on the report were confirmed.

Findings of the study

Background information on the respondents

Survey questionnaires were returned from 256 students, representing an overall response rate of 73%. The background characteristics of students varied widely. Table 2 shows the country of origin, age, gender, marital status, previous educational qualification, and competency in English of the respondents. The majority of the students was from Asia, 18-29 years old, with a near balance in gender. A wide range of educational qualifications, including university degrees (7%) was possessed by the respondents before they came to Australia. The majority of them (64.8%) had high school or equivalent educational qualifications. Nearly 89% of the respondents reported that they had studied English before coming to Australia. Of all the respondents, 56.6% of them had not taken any English proficiency tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS), the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), or the Australian Secondary Language Performance Rating (ASLPR).

Enrolment and education in TAFE Queensland

The respondents indicated that they found out about Queensland TAFE from more than one information source, including friends/colleagues (35.9%), agents (23.4%), the Australian Education Centre (14.1%), and exhibitions (12.9%). At the time of this survey (second semester, 1991) the courses of study undertaken by the respondents included 39.5% in ELICOS, 7.4% in certificate courses, and 49.2% in associate diploma courses. Ten different certificate courses and 17 different associate diploma courses were cited by the respondents as their courses of study. Certificate courses such as Commercial and Office Studies; Food and Beverages; and Preparatory Engineering; and Associate Diploma courses such as Business Computing/Computing; General Business Studies; Accounting; Hospitality Studies; Marketing; and Electronic Studies were popular among the overseas students.

The major accommodation modes of the respondents included flat/apartment/home (71.9%), homestay (22.3%), and hostel (2.7%). The majority (90%) were sharing with other overseas students from other countries or from their own country. Approximately 85% of them were happy with the accommodation which they found by themselves or had arranged for them by International Programs Branch. On the other hand, lack of comfort, lack of facilities, high costs, poor relationships with flat/room/house mates, lack of food, and lack of study facilities were reported as reasons for dissatisfaction with their accommodation.

A larger proportion of the respondents (57.8%) experienced some form of learning difficulties. Terminology and slang terms used by teachers; the limited vocabulary of students; poor English skills; lack of confidence in oral and written communication; difficulties in understanding questions; poor classroom facilities; difficult assessment procedures; and poor quality teaching were cited as the major reasons for their learning difficulties. Approximately 72.7% of the respondents indicated that they would have liked to have had more help in tutorial assistance

and on-going language skill support. With regard to their health insurance, 71.5% were not satisfied with it because it did not cover all medical bills, it was expensive and inconvenient.

Table 2. Background characteristics of overseas students enrolled in the Queensland TAFE

Background Information	Number (N = 256)	Percentage
Country		
Hong Kong	94	36.7
Taiwan	45	17.6
Thailand	28	10.9
Japan	16	6.3
Indonesia	15	5.8
Fiji	12	4.7
Korea	11	4.3
Malaysia	6	2.3
China	5	1.9
Singapore	4	1.6
India	4	1.6
Other countries	16	6.2
Age group		
Less than 18 yrs	15	5.8
18-23	147	57.4
24-29	76	29.7
More than 29	18	7.0
Gender		
Male	120	46.9
Female	136	53.1
Marital Status		
Married	15	5.9
Single	241	94.1
Educational qualification		
University	18	7.0
High school	168	65.6
Commercial course	13	5.1
Technical college	13	5.1
Others	44	17.2
English test taken		
IELTS	75	29.3
TOEFL	12	4.9
ASLPR	7	2.7
Other	9	3.5
Not taken	145	56.6
Not required	8	3.1

Services provided to overseas students

Pre-departure, arrival, and college-based services were provided to overseas students by agents representing the International Programs Branch overseas, International Programs Branch itself, as well as by the participating TAFE colleges. Table 3 depicts the level of satisfaction of the respondents with the various services provided to them, from initial marketing to course delivery. As Table 3 indicates, nearly one-third were not satisfied with the course information offered to

them. Misinformation; lack of information about the TAFE system as a whole; and lack of information about the English testing associated with ELICOS program contributed to their dissatisfaction. The majority of them were not satisfied with the processes and limitations associated with obtaining visas even after they provided all the paper work associated with their admission to the Queensland TAFE system. With regard to arrival services, a majority of respondents (59%) who were not satisfied stated that they did not receive arrival services. Among those who received arrival services dissatisfaction was expressed because they did not receive their airport reception letter in time, their homestay did not meet them, and International Programs Branch did not fully ascertain their real needs.

Table 3. Services provided to overseas students and their satisfaction

Service Components	Percentage	
	Satisfied	Not satisfied
Predeparture Services		
Course information	68.0	28.9
Assistance by Agents	34.8	27.7
Obtaining visa	14.5	83.2
Arrival Services		
Airport reception	39.1	59.0
Accommodation and placement	52.0	46.1
International Programs Branch		
Very helpful	21.5	
Helpful	64.1	
Not helpful	5.1	
Sometimes	0.4	
No comment	9.0	
Services provided by TAFE colleges		
Counselling	73.8	10.2
English Language support	66.4	18.4
Subject/Tutorial assistance	71.1	14.8
Library facilities	68.4	21.9
Examination preparation	63.3	18.8
Orientation	62.1	18.0
Social activities	49.2	32.0
Cultural activities	58.2	19.9
Study skills	68.0	14.5

As in the Table 3, some two-thirds of the respondents were satisfied with the counselling services, English language support, tutorial assistance, library facilities, examination preparation, orientation, and study skills. However, 32% and 21.9% of the respondents respectively were not satisfied with social activities or library facilities. Not enough books, limited lending time, lack of facilities, and difficulties in finding books were cited as the major reasons for their dissatisfaction with the library. The respondents suggested that social and cultural activities were rarely organised and they were not geared toward meeting the needs of overseas students. In general, the respondents who were not satisfied with the services provided by the TAFE colleges indicated that courses were too intensive; teachers were boring; language support was inadequate; and some subjects were useless. In considering all the services provided, 7.4% of the respondents reported that services such as airport pick-up, good accommodation, language support throughout the course, car parking, cultural activities, sport facilities, and tutorials were

not adequate although they were told that they would be available when they started their course.

Perception of value of education

The respondents were enrolled at Queensland TAFE colleges for a variety of reasons. They included obtaining a job (37.5%), entering university (38.3%), improving English (2.7%), learning a trade (2.0%), changing a field of study (1.2%), or a combination of some of the above (15.2%). When the respondents were asked about the quality of education they were receiving, 49.2% reported that the education was good value for money. They suggested that they were gaining knowledge and job skills on which to build their careers. However, others (50.8%) claimed that their course was too expensive; there was an absence of new ideas in the course work; facilities and equipment were lacking; teachers were incompetent; there was an absence of a practical orientation; or there were too many subjects in a semester. In total, 75% of the respondents reported that after successfully completing their course they would be able to find a good job in their country while others suggested that the lack of recognition of TAFE awards; the lack of demand for associate diploma level qualifications; insufficient practical experience; and their poor standard of education were the major reasons that they would not get a good job in their country.

A majority of the respondents (81.6%) reported that they would recommend Queensland TAFE to their friends. However, others indicated that the high tuition costs; changes occurring in overseas student policies and procedures; variation among the participating TAFE colleges in offering courses and services; the negative attitude of local students; and poor standards of teaching were the major reasons for their not recommending Queensland TAFE to their friends. When they were asked about their TAFE college, 82% reported that they would recommend it to their friends. However, a lack of suitable courses; intensive course offerings; and the lack of initiative in resolving conflicts between local students and overseas students were cited as the major reasons for their not recommending the college to their friends. With regard to their course of study, 80.9% reported that they would recommend it. However, 19.1% reported that the courses they were doing were not good enough; it involved too many hours of teaching per week; promised subjects were not offered; poor standards of teaching; difficulties associated with the course content; and a high level use of technical jargon and slang terms were the reasons that they would not recommend the course to their friends.

Perception of the administrators, teachers, and counsellors

The college personnel strongly believed that the overseas students program is a good initiative in terms of its educational, economic, social and cultural perspective. However, they had a mixed feeling about the problems associated with the overseas students at the college level. A few believed that some major problems such as lack of understanding between local and overseas students; lack of cultural and social understanding by some teachers; and failures in providing educational programs that are suitable to their needs and competency in English need to be addressed immediately. In addition, the increased number of overseas students was seen by them as the major cause for the lack of facilities such as canteens, libraries, and car parking.

Some personnel suggested that the recruitment, enrolment, teaching, and assessment of overseas students is a regular process and wherever possible they should be treated like any other students in the college without any discrimination. However, they said that due consideration was given to the educational background, social and cultural conditions, and English language competency of the overseas students to assist them to overcome barriers associated with their studying in the Queensland TAFE system.

Counsellors indicated that there is a need for a comprehensive counselling service, along with better orientation programs, better tutorial systems, and follow-up work. The counsellors suggested that many problems faced by the overseas students could be overcome by making systemwide improvements in providing services according to the code of conduct for marketing Australian education services overseas. The counsellors claimed that there is no proper system in place where students can get immediate remedial help. Personnel in the International Programs Branch suggested that overseas students programs are relatively new programs and their impact needs to be evaluated from the perspective of students, teachers, administrators, and the TAFE system as a whole. While underlining the positive impact of overseas students programs, the staff of the International Programs Branch noted there were some process problems that needed to be rectified through the cooperative participation of all stakeholders. Staff indicated that they are currently reviewing recruitment and support services from the viewpoint of the entry level qualification required, and the necessary competency in English in particular, to overcome some of the problems associated with the quality of the overseas students.

Summary and Conclusion

The overseas students program in Queensland TAFE was successful in terms of achieving its targeted enrolment and it is reaching its potential capability. However, some TAFE colleges have yet to make a real commitment to contribute to the overseas students programs other than an involvement simply for financial gain. State and Territory administrative units and participating TAFE colleges need to develop joint strategic, long-term, and annual plans of action outlining functional roles and responsibilities, and strategies for marketing and recruitment, market research, commitment for offering popular courses, revenue sharing, efficiency and effectiveness indicators, accountability, educational, social, and economic impacts, administration and management, support services, and the satisfaction of the overseas students.

There are a number of contrasting views among administrators, teachers, counsellors, local students, overseas students, and International Programs Branch personnel about the impact of overseas students programs on TAFE colleges in Queensland. However, it is important that all partners involved in the overseas students programs are able to achieve their expected objectives at the right time and at the right price. For this reason, mutually agreeable targeted outcomes and appropriate standards for them must be established, managed, and maintained by all parties concerned to achieve worthwhile outcomes from the overseas students programs.

The findings of this study revealed that it is a combination of the basic academic ability of students; their motivation and aspiration for training and work skills development; their expectations; social and cultural barriers; oracy and literacy in English language; the expertise, experience, and tolerance of teachers; the attitude and support of local students; difficulties associated with money, accommodation, and food; the type of courses and subject matter; and teaching and learning strategies used were influencing variables determining the satisfaction of overseas students. Most notably, the study suggests that competency in English and motivation make a significant difference in overcoming problems.

A majority of the students possessed only secondary level educational qualifications (with or without a knowledge of English) and a considerable proportion of the overseas students enrolled in Queensland TAFE would be regarded as underachievers in terms of the educational standards and entry requirements for post-secondary education institutions in their country of origin. Many of them might have been denied post-secondary educational opportunities by their own educational system. In fact, some students mentioned in the survey that they would not have enrolled in a TAFE course if they had been qualified to enrol in a university course. It also

became clear that many students were using TAFE as a stepping stone to enter a university in Australia. Some TAFE colleges recommended that more stringent recruiting of quality students must be a necessary condition for the long term viability and quality provision of overseas students programs.

The code of conduct for the overseas marketing of Australian education services clearly says that all institutions must ensure that overseas students have access to adequate orientation, accommodation, counselling, and remedial educational and welfare facilities, including an effective grievance mechanism. The findings of this study revealed that several student support services provided were not considered by the students to be adequate. There appears to be a service gap between what was promised and offered to, and needed by the overseas students. Table 4 summarises the services offered and the complaints made about them by the overseas students.

Table 4. Services provided and the comments made about them by the overseas students

Service Offered	Reported problems
Course information	Misinformation & lack of information
Assistance by Agents	Expensive and not helpful
Obtaining visa	Difficult and inflexible process
Airport reception	Not organised well & did not know about it
Accommodation	Expensive and not good for studying
Counselling	Good and need more
English Language support	Insufficient & need ongoing support
Subject/Tutorial assistance	Very little and not very helpful
Library facilities	Not enough books & lack of facilities
Examination preparation	Not provided for many courses
Orientation	Not based on the needs of students
Social activities	None or lack of activities
Cultural activities	Not paid any attention
Study skills	Need a formal and regular commitment

Overseas students come from many countries and their needs and expectation vary according to their educational, social and cultural, and economic backgrounds. It must be the joint responsibility of management and the TAFE delivery units to identify the major concerns as well as the specific needs of the students for effective and efficient provision of support services. It would be impossible to meet all the needs of the all the students. However, it is possible to satisfy the major needs of the majority of the students through needs analysis, prioritising, planning, and delivering them at the time of their needs. Overseas students pay for both education and services and thus they expect to have certain services not only when they arrive in Australia but also during their stay as students within the TAFE system.

The overseas students program is developed and marketed as a business activity and gaining economic advantage is the primary goal. In the provision of overseas students programs, one could easily identify customer-supplier relationships; requirements of codes of conduct; and expectations of specific benefits by all involved. These emphasise that the overseas students program is a complex activity and needs to be managed through quality assurance objectives. That is, meeting the needs of the customers 100% right every time and next time. It also means assuring the quality of programs; assuring the quality of services; and assuring the quality of learning outcomes.

According to the findings of this study, 80% of the students reported that they would recommend their TAFE college, and their course of study to their friends. In addition, nearly 60-70% of the students were satisfied with the services they received. However, 60% or 70% or even 80% is not good enough for exporting training and services overseas in an open and very competitive world market. Overseas students programs need commitment in terms of quality education, quality services, and quality outcomes. There needs to be commitment from everyone, including senior management. For any TAFE system in Australia, it is not good enough if it cannot offer the courses that were promised; it is not good when providers of the services and programs concentrate on quantity instead of quality; it is not good enough if students in need of help do not know who to ask for; it is not good enough if some local students and teachers feel that overseas student programs are liabilities rather than benefits; and moreover it is not good enough if there is lack of support, communication, coordination, and cooperation among partners involved in the provision of the overseas student programs.

Quality assurance must be the number one theme in the marketing strategy. Marketing strategies must be honest and credible. It is important that overseas students be told the kind of services available and not available at the beginning of their enrolment or during marketing and recruitment. Speculative promises should not be part of any marketing strategies. Dissatisfied students can cause a great deal of damage to the overseas students program because as this study revealed, friends and colleagues are one of the primary means of finding out about TAFE courses. Overseas students are rational and they do intelligent shopping for their education and training. The majority of them can differentiate between good and poor quality training programs, services, and outcomes. Quality programs can only attract quality students.

Finally, the findings of this study revealed that some countries such as Japan, Thailand, and Malaysia do not recognise the courses offered by TAFE colleges in Australia. In addition, it also revealed that the overseas students have high expectations from the Australian TAFE system in gaining hands on experience in terms of the application of modern technology, and the use of technologically and scientifically advanced materials and equipment as a part of their vocational training. Regardless of the magnitude of these concerns and issues, they need to be rectified by TAFE authorities in Australia in order to give a new image and a competitive edge to TAFE overseas. There must be credentialing arrangements both nationally and internationally. International recognition of vocational education and training is important for long term improvement and success in exporting vocational education and training overseas. Courses and services offered by the institutions must meet international standards, expectations, and requirements. Meeting the requirements of customers locally and internationally through quality objectives must be the ultimate aim of the overseas students programs not simply quantity of offerings and profits.

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