Transitioning into the Australian higher education experience

The perspective of international doctoral students

Tania Aspland

Australian Catholic University

Poulomee Datta

Macquarie University

Joy Talukdar

Australian Catholic University

This research explored the academic and non-academic lived experiences of higher degree onshore international doctoral students studying in one Australian university. While the academic dimension of experiences included curricular, resource, research and supervision issues, the non-academic dimension focussed on students' inter-personal experiences. Students were required to engage in a series of personal and professional transitions to engage with higher degree research programs in Australia. The findings of this research revealed that, for international doctoral students to survive and succeed at the Australian postgraduate university experience in one Australian context, several factors are important, and a series of transitions must occur. These factors and transitions range from matters related to university guidance and counselling, research and supervision experience, and the difficulties implicit in developing both pedagogical and interpersonal or intercultural relationships. The findings provide deeper insights into the experiences of international doctoral students through transitional positioning of their personal and professional behaviours

Keywords: international students, lived experiences, higher education research, doctoral students

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to explore the academic and non-academic experiences of doctoral onshore international students studying in one Australian university. The academic dimension of experiences investigated their curricular, engagement with resource, research and supervision experiences and the non-academic dimension focussed on students' inter-personal and inter-cultural experiences. The array of problems faced by international students while studying at foreign universities is well documented. The works by Maloshonok and Terentev (2019), StudyPortals (2011), Yanhong Li and Kaye (1998) and Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998), de Araujo (2011), Lacina (2002) have explored academic and social adjustment processes adopted by international students studying at universities in Russia, Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America, respectively. Several bodies of research have also looked into conflict issues in a cross-cultural doctoral supervision (for example, Brodin, 2018; Wu & Hu, 2020),

the roles of motivation and self-efficacy for continuity of studies for these cohorts of students (for example, Matheka, Jansen, & Hofman, 2020; Naylor, Chakravarti, & Baik, 2016), the pedagogies of effective doctoral education (for example, Choy, Singh, & Li, 2017) and/or institutional effectiveness in higher education being conducive for doctoral students to thrive (for example, Ayuk & Jacobs, 2017; Coertjens *et al.*, 2017; Heflinger & Doykos, 2016).

In the Australian perspective, a recent body of secondary data analysis published in the Australian Universities' Review and reported by Torka (2020) noted PhD completion rates and times for the period 2005-2018. Torka, albeit pulling PhD completion data provided by the Australian Department of Education and Training, suggests the exercise of caution for future research delving into the structural factors determining completion, because better completions data are needed. Nevertheless, his findings purport to show that the overall doctoral completion rates and times, despite regulatory and funding framework reforms governing timely completion, are different across disciplines, institutions, and student cohort specificities. Torka's findings further point out that the drivers addressing the specific structural and social conditions of doctoral study completions in the Australian perspective are largely unclear and/or remain unaddressed relative to such doctoral education reforms. In a similar vein, Yu and Wright's (2016) study enumerating academic and socio-cultural adaptation and the satisfaction of international doctoral students in Australia, reveals student satisfaction not directly related to academic studies, but to other factors, namely community integration, student interaction, the supervision experience, and physical amenities. Meng and Gao's (2020) work also conforms to this finding by highlighting the need for intellectual interaction between international research students and western educators in Australian research education.

It is this background that renders the current work as timely and significant to delineating the factors integral to a thriving international student experience in Australian doctoral education. Our study explored the academic and non-academic experiences of doctoral onshore international students studying in one Australian university. The academic dimension of experiences investigated their curricular, engagement with resource, research and supervision experiences and the non-academic dimension focussed on students' inter-personal and inter-cultural experiences. Key findings in the literature related to the experiences of international students enrolled in the Australian university context are outlined and discussed below; however, most of

the studies are more than a decade old and, therefore, our study adds fresh information to this body of work. The aspect that makes this study unique in the literature is that both the academic experiences and the non-academic lived experiences of the international student in Australian doctoral education are explored.

The Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations (CAPA) conducted a national survey of higher degree by research (HDR) students at 31 Australian universities in 2012 (CAPA, 2012). A total of 1,166 students responded to the survey with 125 of these participating in a follow-up focus group and one-on-one interviews. The broad themes investigated in this study incorporated, but were not limited to, supervision issues, access to resources, funding proposals for research dissemination, and collegiality and academic independence. The findings revealed that, in terms of supervision, 'a supportive and collegial relationship between supervisor/s and candidate' (p. 10) was found to be crucial for surviving the university experience. The participants in the CAPA study also reported the provision of minimal base level of resources as integral to the 'transparency and adherence to institutional policies' (p. 10). In addition, the participants were in favour of 'best practice in provision of research funding' which was deemed as integral to communicating research findings to a wider audience. The CAPA study also revealed that a collegial environment comprised one 'where HDR candidates' contributions are sought and valued by academic staff' (p. 10).

Nayak and Venkatraman (2010), in their pilot study, explored the academic culture of Indian business students pursuing undergraduate or postgraduate degrees at an Australian university. The findings revealed three main academic cultural gaps as identified by the students. These included differentiations in teaching schemes between foreign and home universities (annual/semester concept), lack of capacity in terms of writing assignments, and lack of familiarity with the Australian accent.

Edgeworth and Eiseman (2007) investigated the perspectives of international students with non-English-speaking-backgrounds from Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and the Middle East regarding living and studying at an Australian rural university campus. The sample (N=18) consisted of a diverse cohort of students enrolled primarily in an undergraduate management degree with others pursuing pharmacy and information technology courses. The findings revealed that, for most of the students interviewed, transition to a new educational environment was markedly affected by the 'move to a rural environment' (p. 11). However, the

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findings also underlined that the small intimate campus was conducive to addressing international student needs in terms of familiarity with academic and non-academic staff, access to resources, and pedagogical approaches undertaken.

The above discussion outlined a sample of recent research undertaken in Australia generally designed to ascertain the experiences of international students in Australian universities. While the outlined research is instructive, it is limited in its contribution to knowledge. The research by CAPA (2012), was based on a self-selecting survey of all HDR students (master's and PhD) including domestic students and those studying in off-campus, online, and distant modes or even part-time, so the results may be skewed by factors unrelated to the perspective of international students studying in Australia. Likewise, Nayak and Venkatraman's (2010) research was small-scale and focused only on a particular academic discipline and targeted both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. Edgeworth and Eiseman's (2007) research, on the other hand, primarily sought to explore the lived experiences of international students attending an Australian rural university campus, pursuing an undergraduate degree.

Therefore, our study is important as it focuses on the lived experiences of full-time onshore doctoral international students studying in one faculty and one discipline at an Australian university. While this brings consistency and depth to the case, it will be shown that the participants come from very diverse cultural backgrounds, and as such their differentiated perspectives are valuable as a rich source of data. There was no intent to pursue sameness, commonality, or generalisability within the purpose of the research project; rather its purpose is to celebrate difference and capture the unique experience of individuals from a range of diverse perspectives. The Australian Educational International (AEI) in their national survey of ascertaining international student voices, stressed the link between student success and retention and the active engagement with fellow learners and supervisors (AEI, 2012). In a like manner, Scott (2008) underlined that the factors influencing the extent of engagement of postgraduate students and their communities include the social climate established on campus, the academic, social and financial support provided by the institution, student in-class and out-of-class involvement with campus life, and frequent feedback provided to students and staff about their performance.

Following on from this work, our aim with this study was to investigate the academic and non-academic lived experiences of doctoral onshore international students studying at one Australian university, across domains of study but based within one interdisciplinary faculty. While the academic dimension explored the curricular, resource, research and supervision issues, the non-academic dimension investigated students'

inter-personal and inter-cultural experiences. The research questions that emerged from the aim of the study were:

1. What are the curricular, resource, research and supervision experiences of doctoral onshore international students?
2. What are the inter-personal and inter-cultural experiences of doctoral onshore international students?

Methods

The appropriate ethics clearance was obtained before collecting the data from participants who were doctoral international students enrolled in full-time study in a particular faculty at an Australian university. The names and contacts of students were accessed through each school/discipline embedded within the selected faculty, where students were asked to participate voluntarily in a structured open-ended questionnaire via the SurveyMonkey survey software. Twenty-one students responded to the survey questions.

The survey questions are outlined herewith:

Q1: What is your country of origin?

Q2: What degree are you pursuing and which year of your candidature are you currently in?

Q3: How different are the curricular demands (for the degree that you are pursuing) back in your home country and at the University of XXXX?

Q4: What strategies do you take to meet the curriculum expectations for the degree that you are pursuing?

Q5: What are your experiences regarding accessing resources in your discipline?

Q6: What are your experiences regarding issues related to research in your discipline?

Q7: What are your experiences regarding issues related to supervision in your discipline?

Q8: What are your experiences regarding the cultural diversity in your discipline?

Q9: What are your experiences regarding the relationship you hold with your colleagues in your discipline?

For data analysis, the researchers read the interview responses several times to ascertain relationships among the responses; similarities and differences. Interview data were thematically grouped, and matrices and visual mapping were used to locate patterns and identify similarities and differences between participants' responses, a technique suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994).

Accordingly, key concepts or themes underpinning the data were identified and from the collective of concepts a propositional theme was built. For the purpose of this analysis, each theme is dealt with in turn, providing a deeper interpretation of the data from which greater insights in the field of study are elicited and presented below.

Results

The demographic attributes of the generated responses are outlined in Table 1.

Twenty-one participants returned the Consent Forms and took part in the current study. These participants ranged from different countries and came from varied cultural backgrounds, and as such their diverse perceptions are valued as a rich source of data.

The three key propositional themes that were generated from the data analyses are outlined forthwith. It was the perspective of the participants that:

1. The Australian higher education curriculum is more research intensive than in the home country institution. This requires transitions in terms of professional engagement in learning.
2. The strategies employed by doctoral students to meet the Australian higher education curricular demands are a result of the interplay of several factors ranging from university guidance and counselling to individualised supervisory feedback. This required transitions in terms of engagement in higher education.
3. Surviving the new educational and cultural milieu of the Australian university is contingent on several factors ranging from research and supervision experience to developing interpersonal and inter-cultural relationships. This requires transitions in terms of personal styles of communication.

Country of Origin	Pursuing degree	Year of candidature (frequency)
China	PhD	2nd
Cambodia	PhD	1st
Colombia	PhD	1st
Ghana	PhD	1st
India	PhD	3rd, 4th
Indonesia	PhD	1st (2), 2nd
Malaysia	PhD	1st (2)
Nigeria	PhD	1st
Palestine	PhD	1st
Pakistan	PhD	2nd
Philippines	PhD	1st, 3rd
Syria	PhD	1st
Vietnam	PhD	1st (3)
Zimbabwe	PhD	1st
Total		21

Table 1: Country of origin, degree pursued, and year of candidature of the sample of international students

In the next three subsections, each of these propositions is deconstructed and it is shown how each was built from the key concepts and themes embedded in the data elicited from the open-ended questions of the survey. In justifying the propositional themes that were generated through the analysis of the data, some of the reported responses are cited against their ID in brackets. This brings authenticity to the findings.

Propositional theme one: Australian higher education curriculum is more research intensive than in the home institution.

Based on their previous experiences in home institutions, it was the perspective of most of the participants in the study that the Australian higher education curriculum is more robust and research intensive. When they were asked about the differences between their home countries and Australia in relation to obtaining a higher degree by research qualification, twelve out of the twenty-one participants emphasised the importance of high-quality research and critical thinking skills as integral components of higher degree qualifications in Australia. This is evident from the following quote:

> In Australia a PhD student obtains better preparation in terms of research strategies. (ID-13)

This was clearly linked to students' perspectives that studying for higher degrees in Australia was more rigorous than they had experienced previously, particularly the studying they had completed in their home country. One student referred to his Australian HDR studies as:

> heavy research. (ID-14)

while another signified that:

> there was a stronger focus on research as integral to postgraduate studies in Australia than was the case in his home institution. (ID-14)

Five of the participants pointed out that the demands arising out of an Australian higher degree are more challenging in terms of the structure, academic requirements and standards and also necessitate more personal resilience and continued efforts on the part of the student to make the transition into the new academic environment. One participant from Asia was of the view that the Australian higher degree qualification is the most robust in comparison to most of the Asian countries in the world, based on his analysis of international programs and feedback from colleagues and friends. Whilst robustness is a desirable quality of a graduate program, the qualities of rigour and demand characterise the programs under question as scholarly and of high quality. It has become evident that the manner in which these programs are operationalised is not overwhelming, rather it is the view of some participants that the programs are presented in a manner that facilitates high

level learning, and in this positive sense, more demanding than they expected. This resulted in students having to reposition their learning styles as they transitioned into the Australian context.

Despite the high demands of the academic work reported by students within the study, two participants, also from Asia, highlighted the contrast they experienced with the perceived flexible and easy-going nature of Australian academics or supervisors who delivered higher degree qualifications:

> Here, assignments, presentations and deadlines are quite relaxed and flexible but in my home country such things are more formal and stricter. Academics are also very relaxed. (ID-2)

Students were required to make a series of transitions in their expectations of supervisors in facilitating these new cultural ways of engagement in a university setting. However, as will be shown below, there are several issues that counter or contradict the perceived high quality and rigour implicit in the design and delivery of HDR programs in this one Australian context, making the transitions more difficult than expected. Prior to moving to a fuller articulation of the issues faced by students, the next section highlights some of the strategies outlined by the respondents as they adjusted their modes of learning and engagement to meet the Australian higher education curricular and supervision demands.

Propositional theme two: Higher degree students adopt a range of strategies to meet the Australian higher education curricular and supervision demands.

As a result of the interplay amongst a number of factors, academic and personal, the majority of the participants reported that they were required to adopt a range of strategies to meet the demands of the Australian higher curriculum and supervision and transition into a new learning context. These included calling on university guidance and counselling staff to meet their need for individualised supervisory feedback. When international students were asked about the strategies they employ to meet the Australian higher education curricular demands, 17 of the students emphasised the importance of turning to external support in the form of guidance from supervisors, senior colleagues, peers in the discipline and experienced professionals. This element of reliance and dependence is a significant strategy adopted by students particularly in the induction and transition phases on their arrival in Australia. This is evidenced from the following quote:

> Guidance from the experienced people and professionals from the area, interaction and discussion with colleagues. (ID-21)

The international students in this study reported perspectives that demonstrated that they have to seek direction in reconstituting the ways they work in higher education in a new university setting, if they were to succeed. Students sought guidance and support in relation to a number of matters, both personal and professional, including academic writing, meeting procedures, modes of communication with supervisors and the acquisition of cultural protocols that were integral to the transition into an Australian academic setting.

When it came to academic writing, developing research capacities, and resituating ways of knowing into new cultural contexts, five of the students elaborated further saying that attending as many relevant workshops as possible was absolutely necessary to scaffold their transition into Australian higher degree studies:

> Attending as many relevant seminars and workshops as is possible. (ID-8)

Participants reported that attendance at these seminars, where facilitators, critical friends and academics helped them to meet the curricular and supervisory demands, were instructive in reshaping their research practices, and their academic writing and their positioning as a visiting student in an Australian university.

Central to this process of reconstitution is the well-recognised process of self-adjustment as international students realign their thinking and learning to Australian ways of working. However, only four of the students believed that they could study, work and research independently to accomplish most of the curriculum and supervisory demands. One student captured this sentiment powerfully:

> I just push myself to keep doing things...I stay awake ’til late and work. (ID-3)

This pushing on is often completed in isolation as one of the students report:

> work hard all by myself. (ID-11)

Another group of students turned to their supervisors for support, firstly to confront the feelings of isolation but also as an intellectual scaffold, to guide their thinking about their topic, about research methods and for more basic counselling and reassurance concerning their chosen academic career pathway. For many of the participants, the strategies employed to meet the Australian higher education curricular and supervisory demands encompass several modes of scaffolding interactions, ranging from university guidance and counselling, academic workshops to individualised supervisory feedback. The reasons for eliciting this type of support vary from personal feelings of loneliness, aspirations for success and to build confidence in themselves as they transition into their status as new career researchers. This support provides visiting

students with the means to sustain their HDR journey in moments of adversity. The next subsection highlights some of the factors emphasised by the participants as helping to survive and successfully transition into a positive university experience.

Propositional theme three: Surviving the new educational and cultural milieu is contingent on several factors

One of the key factors that proved to be problematic to most of the participants in transitioning into the new educational and cultural milieu of higher degree research in Australia focuses on the concept of accessing resources. Both positive and negative student perspectives were expressed concerning their experiences regarding accessing resources in their discipline. Sixteen of the students said that resources within their discipline were easily available and they benefitted enormously due to the easy and plentiful access. They were strong in their sentiments that the ease with which resources could be accessed enabled them to progress their studies with greater confidence and success.

This situation also reinforced in their minds that they had chosen the right university as it was portrayed as a wealthy and elite university in the Australian context. Six of the students highlighted the abundance of library and online resources which students used effectively to search for journals, academic books and learning materials related to their education. These students found the online resources easy to access and noted the excellent quality of resources particularly the journals and e-books reinforcing that for many students the resources were generally very good, facilitating the achievement of personal and academic goals without too much stress. The following quotes substantiate this viewpoint:

> Library resources are excellent in terms of journals and e-books. (ID-3)

> Ease of access, online resources. (ID-15)

> Library resources are easily accessible. Facilities are generally good. (ID-14)

Another two of the student participants pointed out the importance of accessibility to printing, equipment and software resources in their discipline to support their transition as successful researchers:

> Accessing resources (equipment, printing facilities) has been quite easy; most resources that I needed are available. (ID-19)

The relocation of academic work cannot be completed without the necessary knowledge management as well as intellectual engagement. This process requires access to essential academic artefacts to progress the journey. In this context many students found easy access and the fact that good systems were in place to be assets in the complex process of relocation, both physically and intellectually. It was common for students to comment on the generosity of the university regarding the provision of resources and this assisted in overcoming feelings of alienation as the students transitioned into their new academic home and, concurrently, enabling the becoming of self as a researcher.

However, there was evidence of dissent in this matter. Five students expressed their dissatisfaction in relation to accessing resources within the university, and thus felt hampered in their transition to research status. They argued that resources were limited, intermittent, not updated or were inaccessible to international students. One of the students surprisingly pointed out the lack of support and competence demonstrated by the administration staff, which resulted in the provision of resources being erratic and sporadically available to some but not all international students. Feelings of alienation became clear as she indicated that the administration staff would usually take long periods of time to process forms and provide access to some of the basic resources like stationery and keys which often led to delays and feelings of frustration. The following quote portrays this perspective:

> My experiences regarding accessing resources in my discipline (School of A) is not good. Access to the printer and HDR support money is often organised by the administration staff. The admin staff are most often reluctant to some international students or even if they talk positively, they are very slow in processing forms and services for international students. This process most often is frustrating and demotivating. Also, access to cupboards, stationary, keys to the resource room and basic resources are not provided to most students in spite of several requests put forward by international students. (ID-2)

The data in this respect are replete with contestations and dilemmas. On the one hand many students claim that the provision of resources to international students is systematically refined and institutionally generous while on the other hand some students expressed feelings of disrespect towards them, of being undermined and being continually frustrated by lack of support. What is common is the finding that access to resources can make or break the successful transition into a research culture that is markedly different from their home experience.

In relation to their experiences at the university, nine of the participants articulated that their experiences were not only great but also enriching and elevating by way of the challenge and development in their respective fields. As one student reported:

> It has been a very good learning experience. The university provides rich academic and professional environment, which is great. (ID-21)

The group of students within the study who were very positive were able to recognise that the positive research culture in the university led to many outcomes that enhanced their career transition as a scholar. The following quotes portray these perspectives:

I personally have many publications and did research during my candidature. (ID-2)

Very challenging. It provided me a lot of experiences in exploring the related information and learnt from this sort of research journey. (ID-6)

However, 9 of 21 students indicated their dissatisfaction towards their research experiences within the Australian higher education sector. They perceived:

research opportunities as narrow and limited for international students. (ID-8)

They further argued that:

funding was often not enough to cover international conferences, and this left students with little scope to hone and expand their research and professional skills. (ID-7)

Their transition to an early career researcher was stifled due to lack of resources and opportunities. There were three other students who believed that, had it not been for their previous extensive research experiences, they would not consider their current research exposure as adequate. This is demonstrated by the following quote:

Previous work and research experience helps. (ID-16)

One of the students brought attention to a new dimension altogether in terms of the research-related experience at the university. She pointed out that the research journey for higher degree students was often driven by the likes, interests and expertise of their supervisors and even their cultural dispositions towards some students. In such instances, international students often lost control of the focus of their research and were compelled by their supervisors to do things their way, thus limiting the transition in culturally specific ways. As one student noted:

Some students are forced into employing software in their research which they do not understand nor are interested to employ. But due to their supervisor's expertise they are forced to employ software and validate models which they otherwise would not want to do. The students lose control of their PhD. and they are overpowered by their supervisors. (ID-2)

Despite this negative experience by one-third of the group, in response to their supervision-related experiences at the university, 17 of the student participants indicated that:

they received excellent supervision. (ID-3; ID-14)

They further highlighted that their supervisors were excellent and attentive supervisors, enabling a successful transition into the Australian research landscape. As one student reported:

Supervision has been brilliant. The supervisors have been very helpful, always available when needed and eager to make my research life as easy as possible. (ID-8)

From the perspectives of most students, they were content with the frequency of meetings held and stated that their supervisors allowed them great flexibility and independence in their research. It was commonly noted that, in comparison to the supervision that students had experienced in their home country, there was an element of flexibility and independence in the Australian supervision landscape:

Australian supervisors are extremely flexible and allow students to work independently. (ID-2)

These sentiments reflect the broader proposition that emerged from the study that the responsivity of supervisors and their capacities to change or modify their practices in response to student needs, enhanced the students' relocation into a new academic environment and lifestyle. This was not the case for all students. Four of the students expressed their disappointment regarding supervision-related issues. Two of the students expressed the view that supervisors were extremely busy and did not provide adequate time to their students. One of them went on to articulate that this had negatively influenced his study career:

Well, sometimes I need to see my supervisors, but I can't because they are busy or not around. I hope this can improve in the future. After all, the supervisors are responsible to make sure students can seek help when needed. The inability to find help is significantly impacting on the study. (ID-1)

There were incidences that underpinned such dissatisfaction. For example, one student reported that supervisors often did not read students' drafts due to their busy schedule. Further, one of the other students pointed out that often their colleagues were assigned to supervisors without appropriate expertise. These students reported that there were allocated academics who were not from their specialised areas and, as a result, supervisors often tended to dominate or reconceptualise students' projects based on their own research interest area, not the area that the students had been sponsored for or had chosen to investigate. One student who was frustrated with his transition to academia stated:

But again here, sometimes students are assigned supervisors not from the content area and also some supervisors force students to use certain methodologies based on their convenience. In such instances, the students' interests are not taken into account. (ID-2)

For these students the future at times appeared dim, with thoughts of non-completion at the fore in their minds, and the transition towards successful research not deemed likely. Culturally this was unacceptable to many students and generated heightened levels of student anxiety, and consequently they questioned their capacity to survive the doctoral journey in the higher education context in Australia. Another student participant who was unsatisfied agreed that supervisors were often not interested in students' research area and treated it more as a managerial responsibility rather than a scholarly endeavour. She further argued that communication was often difficult, with the formal and short supervisory meetings, leaving very little scope for opportunities to discuss crucial research matters. She stated:

> This is the least satisfying of all experiences. My supervisors are not interested in students' research, focussing on meeting deadlines and filling appropriate forms. Communication is sometimes difficult and coupled with the hierarchy, the formal style and short meetings; research becomes a matter of trial and error. Nothing more. Supervision feels more like interrogation sessions to make sure that the students are not lagging behind schedules rather than (as) opportunities for discussion. (ID-9)

Another concern raised by the same student participant was that supervisors did not make any attempt to familiarise themselves with international students' context and background. Rather that they had to fit a preconceived model, thus limiting every opportunity to build a productive supervisory relationship and reducing scholarly capacity building through feedback to, for example, reductionist exchanges about administrative matters. This type of transition became one-sided with the student continuously trying to please the supervisor rather than focusing on good research outcomes.

In contrast to these sentiments, all the participants in the study responded positively in terms of their experiences regarding the cultural diversity at the University. These students believed that Australia is a country where cultural diversity is celebrated, and this made them feel comfortable in transitioning into a university where cultural diversity was one of its key focus areas.

Further, according to the participants, students from different countries in this context acknowledged that they felt comfortable in being recognised as a part of the Australian mainstream society. One of the students articulated that this Australian university in particular makes an honest attempt to facilitate cultural integration by celebrating special occasions like 'Harmony Day' to encourage cultural, racial and religious tolerance and promoting respect, fairness and a sense of belonging for everyone. The following quote portrays this perspective:

> I was confident I could survive in a context where we came together as a group with academics to celebrate Harmony Day, where we get to know each other's culture more closely. In this process, facilitation between cultures takes place. (ID-2)

It was the consensus of the group that a departmental context that foregrounded the valuing of a range of cultures was a suitable landscape for transition of international students into higher education; one that would facilitate better conditions for a successful, long-term commitment to higher degree study.

The student participants also believed that the understanding and exchange of different cultural views, perspectives and values was a great learning experience for most and built a strong HDR community where students have an opportunity to enjoy knowing and interacting with people from different backgrounds and to learn a lot from people from different backgrounds in the school. A setting of this type enabled the students to meet people from various cultures and ethnicities and, as such, accept that each of them was different, but this difference brought a richness to their community and strengthened their bonds as a HDR group undergoing many changes as they relocated their lives and their scholarship in a new context. One student captured the sentiments of the group in stating:

> Working in a multicultural environment is enjoyable – respecting each other's cultural values is important – building a culture where people can share their knowledge is significant. (ID-5)

However, one of the students expressed her concerns that in an act to facilitate international cultural integration in Australia, the local Australian culture is not fully understood by newly arrived students. She believes that she has not had the opportunity to come to know and understand the Australian community and the appropriate behavioural and communication styles within the local community:

> However, I still think we will not have the real feel of local culture if we do not get to interact with local students and teachers socially. We may be given an opportunity to go out to see some places of interest together as churches, temples, museums and also visit other universities. I want to share I am always thinking about what appropriate and inappropriate

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behaviour is in this culture when it comes to human interaction. I wish somebody could give us an orientation on this. (ID-3)

In terms of their experiences regarding the relationship they hold with their colleagues at the University, there were mixed perspectives elicited by the respondents. Seventeen of the students indicated that they shared a cordial, harmonious and amiable relationship with their colleagues and this is evident in the following quotes from three student participants:

We maintain a harmonious relationship. (ID-17)

Relationship is cordial with most colleagues. (ID-19)

I have some very wonderful people as my colleagues, and I enjoy interacting with them. (ID-21)

Some student participants also believed that the social activities organised by the universities were often a good platform to build these relationships. Similarly, some other student participants found that peer networking within colleagues of the same discipline and similar research interests was useful particularly with those who are in the same research area. One of the students was of the perception that informal research-related conversations over a cup of coffee and lots of humour added to these chats helped not only to maintain significant bonds between colleagues but also build collegiality in the workplace. It was noted that conversations of this type make the work stress-free and fun and enabled a comfortable transition in a workplace that differed from their own back home.

However, four of the students spoke of some 'unhealthy competition' within the discipline area, which had led to some conflicts and disagreements between colleagues in the recent past. One student stated that:

I do not share a good relationship with colleagues due to a lot of unhealthy competition. (ID-20)

which developed into:

some unpleasant relationships (that) have cropped up among colleagues. (ID-2)

This made the transition one that was replete with high emotions, uncertainty and disdain.

One of the students further pointed out that some international postgraduate students often make an attempt to belittle other students and in doing so breed disharmony and unrest among colleagues. One of the key reasons that underpinned the relationships amongst students was based on quality output. As this student reported:

some research students fared favourably in the academic culture with more publications, and this became the sole reason for jealousy and ongoing competition. (ID-2)

The above discussion convincingly portrays that for most of the participants, that transition into a new educational and cultural milieu as international students in Australian universities is contingent on several factors ranging from research and supervision experiences to developing interpersonal relationships. The next section discusses these broad propositional themes and its underlying findings against the backdrop of relevant literature.

Discussion

This research explored the academic and non-academic lived experiences of higher degree onshore international students studying at a particular faculty at an Australian university. While the academic dimension explored the curricular, resource, research and supervision issues, the non-academic dimension investigated students' interpersonal experiences and indicates that transition into academia in Australia can be very successful on some fronts but problematic on others.

The findings of this research are largely similar to other studies conducted in Australia and abroad which explored the perspectives of international students studying at a foreign university. For example, the findings of this research are similar to those of the national survey of HDR students conducted by CAPA (2012) which found that issues related to supervision, access to resources, funding proposals for research dissemination, and collegiality and academic independence are factors enabling students to survive the university experience. The works by StudyPortals (2011), Yanhong Li and Kaye (1998) and Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998), de Araujo (2011), Lacina (2002) which explored the academic and social adjustment processes by international students studying at universities in Europe and the United Kingdom and the United States of America, respectively, also emerged with similar results to that of the present research.

In a like manner, the other broad finding of this research, that international students find the Australian higher education curriculum to be more robust and research intensive reflects the works of Nayak and Venkatraman (2010) and Edgeworth and Eiseman (2007) who found that pedagogical cultural gaps as outlined by international students were mainly in terms of the research rigour in the Australian higher education curriculum.

The findings of this research, therefore, have important implications for policy and practice in Australian higher education. The policy and practice initiatives, largely drawn from the propositional themes as generated from the dataset, are based on the factors enabling doctoral international students to successfully transition into the Australian higher educational experience.

As evident in the findings, international students find the Australian higher education curriculum to be more robust

and research intensive. Accordingly, their transition into the new educational and cultural milieu is contingent on several factors. These factors range from, but are not limited to, university guidance and support, support from supervisors, peers and professionals, the overall research and supervision experience, and developing interpersonal relationships.

In light of this evidence, the following recommendations are suggested for policy and practice in Australian higher education:

1. Development and monitoring of researcher education programs that inculcate research methodologies and academic writing skills and encouraging the initiation of academic writing groups within a particular discipline. These would allow international students to familiarise themselves with the expectations of the Australian higher education curriculum in terms of academic writing and research communication.

2. Enhancing the supervisor-student relationship by organising workshops, seminars, and training programs for supervisors. The content and extent of these training programs should necessarily consider, but not be limited to, the pedagogical and cultural differences of international students in general, supervision issues, research skills, and time management.

3. The guarantee of minimum resources in each faculty should be adhered to and in a timely and appropriate manner. The orientation programs both at the university and faculty levels should highlight the entitlement of each student in terms of internet and printing quota and borrowing books and journals. Moreover, funding should be set aside in each faculty for research communication and capacity building in terms of journal publications and attending seminars and conferences.

4. Cultural activities should be organised in the school, for example, Harmony Day, Flag Day, and barbecue parties in an effort to enhance understanding and exchange of different cultural views, perspectives and values and developing interpersonal relationships. These would produce a sense of homecoming to international students to reduce feelings of disorientation and home sickness they often are plagued with. In addition, it would also allow the locals to understand and appreciate other cultures and values.

Conclusion

This research explored the academic and non-academic lived experiences of higher degree onshore international students studying at a particular faculty at an Australian university. While the academic dimension explored the curricular, resource, research and supervision issues, the non-academic dimension investigated students' inter-personal experiences.

The findings of this research revealed that, for the successful transition of international students into the university experience, several factors are important which range from university guidance and counselling, research and supervision experience, to developing interpersonal relationships. This study was a small-scale study and focused on the experiences of international students at a particular faculty at an Australian university. Although the findings of this study are not generalisable to all cohorts of international students, findings have important implications for policy and practice in Australian higher education. What is of significance here is that students experience the transition differently at all levels of academic transition, with the repositioning of themselves as early career researchers into the Australia university context, and in the reconstitution of their personal relationships with supervisor and colleagues throughout the transition. While some students in this one context were scaffolded successfully throughout the transition, others felt the transition was one-sided, exclusionary, overly competitive and inequitable. While cases such as these that highlight that some dissatisfied students fail to make the transition, higher education in Australia remains wanting in its opportunities for international doctoral students.

It is important that a large-scale study is carried out further testing of this theory and whether the results differ across Faculties/Disciplines and across international student countries of origin. If this can be achieved, the key industry of international higher education in Australia may benefit from listening to the perspectives of fee-paying international students who value Australia for its high research profile but may well be disappointed with the experience.

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Professor Tania Aspland is an Emeritus Professor at the Australian Catholic University, Sydney, Australia and has been a leader in teacher education for many years particularly in relation to professional standards and evidence-based assessment.

Dr Poulomee Datta is a senior lecturer in Inclusive Education at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia.

Dr Joy Talukdar from the Australian Catholic University has research which spans teaching and teacher education, particularly aspects that address teacher quality.
Contact: poulomee.datta@mq.edu.au

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