

The international student journey

Gail Baker and Ken Hawkins

Over the last decade the Australian higher education sector has become increasingly reliant upon the income generated by overseas fee-paying students. Yet the experiences of these students are sometimes traumatic, and institutions have been slow to develop appropriate structures to support them. Gail Baker and Ken Hawkins report on recent efforts to overcome this legacy of neglect.

The decision to study overseas

Secondary school, TAFE and university advertisements entice potential students in foreign lands to 'come study with us'. Their brochures and websites show glossy photographs of mountain ranges, sandy white beaches and clean, safe cities in which to live. The parents of these potential students discuss - with family, friends and often a university representative or education agent - the possibility of their son or daughter travelling to the far corners of the world to undertake study that will ensure their future success. After much discussion, the decision is reached, fees are paid, safe accommodation arrangements are optimistically negotiated and the 'chosen one' is readied for this exciting, yet enormously challenging and often frightening journey.

Imagine that you are that individual about to embark on the journey of a lifetime. Hopefully the decision to travel to a far off land to engage in further study is a decision shared with family to follow a dream personally held for your future. This is not always the case, however. Hopefully the course about to be undertaken is also one of your choosing, and one that you have previous experience in - but again, this is not always true. There are many instances of international students undertaking study at their parents' insistence, in courses which have been chosen by their parents based on their assessments both of domestic economic conditions and world marketplaces.

Imagine traveling to a foreign country where the language spoken is not your first language, and then beginning your

studies in a degree not of your choosing and one in which you have limited knowledge. Then, for good measure, add in a different system of education, vastly different weather conditions, money, transport, food, clothing, local customs, along with immigration regulations that if breached can lead to your deportation.

The majority of students who choose to study overseas do so successfully and return to their home country triumphantly. However, for those that become 'at risk' and fail in their endeavours to gain a degree, it means returning home in shame - and for some, it means never being able to return home again because of the enormity of that shame.

Many international student officers will have had numerous discussions with students who struggle desperately to cope with their studies. Many of them are extremely distressed as they speak of never having failed anything before. They do not know how to explain this failure to their parents. Of course they have gained a certain level of International English Language Testing System (IELTS) before being accepted into university studies in Australia, but does their English training course or IELTS test take into consideration Aussie colloquialisms, fast mode of speech or the many other accents of lecturers, once the student arrives in multicultural Australia?

One student described her life in China where she was chosen at age seven and moved from her family home to the city to begin her new life as a potential tennis professional, did not receive formal schooling and was not taught English as a result of the intensive training program. At age 15, she

severely injured her knee and was told she would never play tennis again. Her parents then decided that she needed an education and resolved to send her to Australia where she would begin studies in a high school at Year 11 and 12 level prior to moving on to university.

Upon arrival in Australia she was only able to say her name and the word “hello” in English. Her host family could not speak Chinese. Fortunately her host family was extremely supportive and she was able to learn English, thereby successfully completing her studies at high school. She then progressed to university, where although her first term of study was a struggle, she managed with help and support from the institution’s Learning Skills Unit to obtain her degree. Her story could easily have been a very different one and she could have become one of the international students who fall into the ‘at risk’ category, failing to attain a degree.

‘At risk’ defined

The definition used by Australian Education Departments and Australian Departments of Human Services for ‘at risk’ young people is based upon research ‘Communities that Care’ by Hawkins & Catalano (1992) that states young people become ‘at risk’ because of a lack of connectedness to community, family, peers or significant other. This definition means that they are at risk of dropping out of school early, at risk of becoming pregnant, at risk of becoming involved in criminal activities and at risk of becoming homeless.

This lack of connectedness is not, however limited to young people or those of a particular ethnic or socio-economic background. Evidence clearly demonstrates that everyone, whether young or old, rich or poor is ‘at risk’ if not connected to their community in some way. Our media reminds us of this sad fact regularly when reporting cases of elderly people dying in their own homes and not being found for many days or even weeks, as no one has missed them until a neighbour notices the mail piling up in the mailbox and reports this to the police.

As international students are living overseas in order to complete their studies, they have the potential to become ‘at risk’, to fail to achieve their educational goals and subsequently become involved in anti-social and potentially dangerous behaviours and situations. They are at risk of becoming alienated, lonely and desperate in the country in which they have chosen to study, therefore they are at risk of becoming depressed, vulnerable and of becoming targets for unscrupu-

lous perpetrators. If they are fortunate enough to have family or friends waiting for them as they arrive at the airport to begin their studies and assist them in acculturating to their new surroundings, then they are already ‘connected’ and the chances of them becoming ‘at risk’ are greatly lessened. If on the other hand they arrive and have no one to meet them and assist them in this process, then they are already at risk because they have left behind their support systems: families, friends, schools and community.

One recent example of what can happen to an international student who was not connected to peers or community was the case of the young female Chinese student in Canberra in 2004 whose body was found in her apartment some six months after her death. Her boyfriend has confessed to her accidental murder, but has fled back to China, so the story of what actually happened is incomplete. Sadly he was her only connection in Australia and no one else missed her, resulting in her absence never being reported to the authorities. It is a

poor reflection on our community that this young woman vanished from sight and her disappearance was not registered by anyone (McLennan, 2005).

Of course this is a worst-case scenario, and fortunately one that is rare. However in a recent study conducted by Tooley, Mellor, Cummins, Stokes & Chambers (2004) it was found that, collectively, international students scored higher on measures of anxiety and depression and lower on measures of well-

being than their local peers. Although the report found that most international students were coping well, approximately 10 - 15% are significantly depressed and anxious. Such is the cause for concern that institutions such as Central Queensland University (CQU) and Deakin University are developing monitoring and intervention programs to counteract these issues.

Why international students become ‘at risk’

For all young people, irrespective of nationality or gender, adolescence is a time of evaluating and decision-making; a time of commitment and a time to carve out their niche in the world. It is also the time to establish a sense of their own identity, feelings of self worth, positive body image, a personal value system, whilst adjusting to their maturing intellectual abilities. It is a time of preparing to move into adulthood.

This transition period from childhood to adulthood encompasses biological, cognitive, social, moral and identity development and peer and family influences. This stage of development allows young people to explore alternatives and

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experiment with choices as part of developing a strong sense of self. The successful trajectory of this path depends upon the provision of adequate opportunities, support and a stable base from which the individual can develop within the world in which they live and operate.

Whilst a difficult enough 'rite of passage' for students in their own countries, for international students it means working through all these changes whilst living away from their family, friends, community and other support systems. There is also the added pressure for international students of having to abide by strict immigration department regulations or face deportation back to their home country. The 'visa issue' is always of utmost importance to international students, and experiencing a problem with their student visa can cause the student such stress that they are in many cases unable to focus on anything else including study, until their visa problem has been rectified. It hangs over them like 'The Sword of Damocles'.

Counsellors and other support staff working with international students are well aware of the stress experienced by them when attempting to cope with visa issues and the effect it has on their ability to study effectively. If their visa is in doubt then so is their ability to stay in their country of choice and continue their studies. Like their peers worldwide, issues with housing, family, relationships, illness and uncertainty about decision making all cause stress which impinges on sleeping and eating patterns and consequently the ability to study effectively.

Building resilience

Resilience has been described as "the knack of being able to bungy jump through the pitfalls of life - to rebound and spring back after the hard times." (Resilience Education and Drug Information, 2004). It is the ability to cope with the many and varied challenging and difficult life experiences. Individuals who have strong connections with their family, friends, peers, schools and community are far more resilient than those who do not.

There is a very clear connection between resilience and successful educational and life outcomes. The very same factors such as the provision of caring relationships and environment, the development of effective problem solving skills and positive expectations that encourage resilience, also cultivate learning. A sense of belonging and connectedness, meaningful participation and contribution through both school and community endeavours and the feeling that your life brings success are key ingredients.

"Resilience does not come from rare and special qualities, but from the everyday magic of ordinary, normative human resources in the minds, brains, and bodies of children, in their families and relationships, and in their communities" (Masten 2004). Even the most basic of our adaptational systems as human beings require nurturing in order to promote health and healing.

Research carried out by Werner (cited in Masten 2004) over a period of some forty years found informal relationships between young people and their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, teachers and friends were the factors most conducive to building resilience. Adolescents need a secure base from which to operate in order to grow as they explore the world in which they live. Many international students have described conversations they have had with university staff members, not necessarily lecturers, which have had profound effects on their lives. Some of these students who have been moved to tears following a conversation with a staff member who has expressed genuine interest in their well being, with the students commenting that they did not realise anyone cared about them. Mentors can never underestimate their impact on others.

Although the number of international students continues to grow, the problems associated with international study are as pervasive as ever.

For international students, the community to which they have the closest link whilst living away from home is their education provider, whether high school, TAFE or university. Students under eighteen years of age are required by immigration law to have a guardian, which may either be a suitable rela-

tive living in the country or (more often) a host family. There is an expectation that the host family will include the student in all their normal family activities, including family and social occasions and holidays. This means that the individual is exposed to an acculturation process which acquaints them with the various aspects of their host culture and enables them to feel part of it, hence the likelihood of them becoming 'at risk' is diminished.

Mature age students attending university are generally left to find their own accommodation, friends and social contacts. Often due to a lack of knowledge and poor decision making skills, students find themselves living in less than satisfactory accommodation, lonely, alienated and with a high chance of becoming 'at risk'. Although there is an immigration requirement for students to attend at least 80% of their lectures and tutorials, it is not a legal requirement for universities to record attendance in all classes. This means there is a chance for the younger student to fail to attend classes and for this non-attendance to go unnoticed hence a possibility for the individual to 'slip through the cracks'. In many cases, they will endeavour to endure and cope with their experience alone, sometimes

with disastrous effects. Education providers and the general community need to build climates where international students feel they are able to seek assistance, and that if they do, the service is appropriate to their needs. Working with these students provides insights into their resilience, strength and hope for their futures.

Other factors which contribute to international students becoming 'at risk'

Many international students have to work in order to supplement their finances whilst studying in Australia. Commonly they drive taxis, work in service stations or 24-hour convenience stores, or other relatively high risk areas of employment – and so some become victims of robbery and/or violence. Students regularly report incidents of having guns or knives held to their throats whilst working, but there are also cases where students do not report these incidents to their education provider and try to manage this stressful situation on their own. One student advised that he had been robbed three times with violence in a six week period whilst driving his cab and had become agoraphobic and was unable to leave his house. Client Services staff at his institution maintained contact during the next few weeks via phone and email until a sense of trust was rebuilt and the student was able to leave his home to return to the university and visit a counsellor.

Some female students become victims of domestic violence. They are often quiet and alone before being befriended by males who intimate that they want a relationship. The girls are of course flattered and excited as in many cases they have never been courted before. In time, these males work at lowering the girl's self esteem to a point where he either abuses her himself or in some cases allows her to be sexually abused by his friends. Understandably, in these instances, the females will not reveal to their parents what has happened to them, as they fear their parents will order them to return to their home country, thus preventing them realising their goal of achieving a degree. These young women struggle to continue to study and work, often alone and without appropriate assistance.

As crime against international students has grown to be a considerable problem, the Asian Division of the Victorian Police has, in conjunction with all universities in the central business district, formed the Melbourne City Student Safety Committee. This has been formed to highlight potential dangers to all students, but in particular international students, and to break down barriers between students and the police. Unfortunately statistics are not kept by police specifically relating to international students, but they acknowledge that the numbers are high, hence the formation of the Asian Division. Similar units have been or are being established in other states.

As many international students have never lived away from home prior to beginning their studies overseas, this is the first time they have been responsible for themselves. It is also the first time they have been given control over what they do on a daily basis. A number of these students have discovered alcohol, parties and nightclubs for the first time and as a result have developed a social life to the detriment of their studies. This is a common occurrence for all young people living away for the first time. Unfortunately for international students the ramifications are far more harsh, even culturally devastating, and can result in them being sent back to their home country as a result of academic failure.

Transitional adjustment

Brigid Ballard, well known for her research in the area of education of students, notes that

when overseas students come to Australia, it is tacitly assumed that they will adjust their learning habits to suit the new demands of our educational system. It is never made clear quite how they will achieve this desired metamorphosis, but they will certainly be criticised as using inappropriate learning styles if they do not somehow make such a shift... Most Australian teachers are at a genuine loss as to how to be helpful. (Ballard 1989)

Although the number of international students continues to grow, the problems associated with international study are as pervasive as ever. Therefore it is necessary to continue to examine our current practices in the education of international students together with relevant theory and literature in order to provide an equitable and worthwhile tertiary education for those students who come to Australia seeking it.

Culture shock

Most university students, whether local or international, will experience a certain level of culture shock as part of their initial transition into tertiary study. According to Parr, Bradley & Bingi (1992), in addition to concerns relating to language differences and academic issues, international students are faced with the need to adjust to many cultural and social differences as well. As a result, many international students experience significant problems with social integration, family stress and isolation resulting in homesickness, loneliness and depression. Consequently this culture shock results in lowered work performance. Intense loneliness is often experienced by international students who, due to a heavy academic work load and language limitations, find it difficult to make friends.

International students indicate that studying overseas is far more stressful than studying in their home country. This is due to the different teaching methods, fast-paced class sessions, two-way interaction with professors in the classroom, more student participation in the class, more classroom and

group activities, more reading and writing assignments, more presentation and speech requirements, and more after class study” (Zhai, 2002). In most instances, students stated that they were unaware of these differences before entering into study overseas, thus they were ill-prepared and overwhelmed during their early period of adjustment.

The international student journey – a pilot project

Stage 1: Pre-enrolment

CQU has established a pilot program to help address these various issues. For optimum effectiveness the program targets international students long before they leave their home country. Specifically tailored pre-enrolment programs have been designed not merely to discuss what the degree programs of a particular university offer, but to present in depth general information about what it will be like to study in Australia away from family and friends. This is the ideal opportunity for the education provider to highlight what support services they offer to international students.

The ‘Communities that Care’ program (Hawkins et al 1992) highlights the need for early intervention programs to promote the protective factors needed to offset risk factors. The earlier the intervention, the better the chance of success. By offering such a program, the student and their family are more informed and prepared for the student’s departure. It also offers families peace of mind to know that there are support services in place to care for their child. This program arose after a trip to India for an ex-student’s wedding by one of the Client Services staff. The mothers of prospective students implored the adviser to take care of their sons upon arrival in Australia, with statements like “he is the blood in my veins, the air in my lungs, he is my life”. At no time during these travels was there talk about subjects or degrees, only about what support and help was available to their children at the university.

Stage 2: Transitional orientation

Once the student has arrived in Australia ready to begin study, they are required to attend an Orientation Program. Initially this was held over a number of days where the student was presented with a wide range of academic and social sessions.

Unfortunately, as the orientation period often closely follows the student’s arrival in the country, the overload of information was often too much to absorb and “the student sojourner is at her or his most vulnerable, newly arrived and experiencing the early, stressful stages of culture shock” (Dawson et al 2002). And so a transitional orientation program which is ongoing and run throughout the term was introduced.

Stage 3: At risk identification

According to Hellsten (2002) international students wish for staff that are caring and encouraging, like parents. She argued

that as many international students are shy and do not understand, they look for an environment which is supportive and encouraging, and where they feel comfortable enough to ask questions and seek help.

If a student is found to be struggling, they need reassurance that this is normal and that many students, both international and local, experience such difficulties in this transition phase. They will also need constant encouragement to reinforce that they are not incompetent, but merely facing a period of much change, including educational, language, food, weather, transport, money, local customs, homesickness and loneliness.

It is important to identify potential ‘at risk’ students as early as possible. Lecturers are able to identify those who fail to attend class, those who are always tired or fall asleep during class or continue to fail assignments, tests or quizzes. Many other staff are also in the position of being able to identify potential ‘at risk’ students merely through conversation or noticing a student who is always sitting alone, or who looks sad. Retention of students and caring for students is not just the role of a particular department, but a function for the whole university.

Sessions are run for both academic and administrative staff highlighting the needs of international students and the differences they face in educational systems and the difficulties they face in living so far away from home – including communication difficulties, differences in behavioural and value systems, and different styles of learning. Heikinheimo and Shute found that

students were more likely to have positive academic and non-academic experiences if they could adapt to and enjoy contact with the host community, and their successful achievement of academic goals is more likely if the emotional and social atmosphere is pleasant and the environment congenial. (cited in Wan, 1999)

Stage 4: Monitoring academic progress

The continuous monitoring and follow-up of students is vital if they are to stay on track and continue to succeed. Students need regular feedback and interventions must be modified where necessary, depending on their changing circumstances, and must be continued until the student no longer needs the intervention.

According to Siedman (2004), programs and services must “help bond students to students; help bond students to the college; identify specific deficiencies and remediate deficiencies”. He also states that institutions should not recruit students to their campuses unless they are willing to provide services to those that may struggle and be unsuccessful. CQU have a program in place which is aimed at identifying those most likely to become ‘at risk’. The program is a dynamic one which continually changes according to student needs, university policies and immigration regulations.

Stage 5: Graduation

One of the most fulfilling and enjoyable moments is seeing a previously 'at risk' student who without early and constant intervention would have either dropped out or been excluded, cross the stage at graduation and receive their degree. The pride seen on their face is a wonderful sight.

Conclusion

Educational institutions must work diligently to help those students whom they have invited to Australia to achieve personal, professional and academic success. They need to be provided with a sense of hope and connectedness, to feel as though they belong. Understanding and appreciation of our international students' strengths, resilience and hope for their future are paramount.

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