

# Learning at University: The International Student Experience<sup>1</sup>

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*This paper reports on research that explores internationalisation of the University's curriculum offerings and how this affects international students. The central focus of this paper is to highlight some of the student commentary on communication between teachers and students exemplifying the way it subsequently affects the quality of student learning. The paper concludes by raising some questions concerning how we may best meet the needs of international students by drawing on inclusive teaching philosophies.*

Inclusivity and diversity, international students, internationalisation and sustainability, transition experience

## INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of curriculum in Australian universities has increased significantly in recent years. International students (IS) are now an integral part of university teaching classes. The rapid increase in international student numbers is also reflected in current research. However, relatively little research has focused on the student perspective (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Jones, Robertson, and Line, 1999; Ramburuth, 2001; Reid, 2002). This paper is a contribution to this area of higher education research.

The accommodation of IS is an important goal in the Australian higher education sector that is reflected in the commitment to quality education and teaching expertise. The benefits of the integration of IS into the Australian academic cultures are highly esteemed by university leadership. The diversity of our university populations is enhanced by IS and further research may be found by exploring how diversity may add value to the transition experience as a whole (McInnes, 2001). However, reports on students' experiences provide a somewhat contrary understanding of that experience. For example, Reid (2002) conducted a comprehensive study, which surveyed over 300 postgraduate IS at Macquarie University. Contrary to common beliefs, about students from Asian backgrounds in particular, IS students were reported to value the interactive mode (*i.e.* discussion based learning) of unit delivery over a sometimes assumed teacher centred mode. Another example is the common stereotypical belief that students from Asian backgrounds prefer rote-learning styles and tend to be passive in classroom interaction. It seems then, at least rhetorically, that ideas about what constitutes high quality teaching and learning differ between international students and academic personnel.

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If the practices that characterise quality are perceived and acted out differently by members of Western and Eastern cultural groups it assumes a questioning of the very meaning of concepts such as 'quality' and 'teaching'. These can account for deeply contrasting expectations of educational practice. International students' cultural traits have been blamed for subsequent teaching and learning problems (for example, Burns, 1991; Jones et al., 1999; Leask, 1999; McInnes, 2001; Ryan, 2000). Some problems include poor English language and critical thinking skills, failure to participate in the collaborative learning mode (for example, group discussions), differences in cultural communication, academic literacy styles, and expectations of rote learning resulting in lack of independent learning initiatives. Where does this occur?

Some researchers have refuted these claims. Biggs (1999) provides a broad review of research findings that reveal institutional stereotyping of students from Asian backgrounds. He argues that such students continue to rank in the top levels of university courses, which testifies to their ability to adjust well into the Western learning cultures. The issues and problems are no different from those generally raised by researchers in the field of the first year experience of mainstream students undergoing the transition to an academic university culture (Levy, Osborn, and Plunkett, 2003; McInnes, 2001). Biggs (1999) reports on results showing that at least for some, the mainstream transition experience is fraught with uncertainties about fitting in to disciplinary cultures in terms of academic writing genres (for example, Krause, 2001). Anecdotal evidence suggests that students quickly develop the ability to work out their position within disciplinary cultures, with beginning students being able to guess at what is important as sanctioned disciplinary practice within three weeks of commencing their studies in a major discipline area. Therefore, research is needed into the acquisition of disciplinary know-how that seems readily accessible by students in universities; a skill that would not in such cases be acknowledged by the academic community.

What seems to be at the core of the debate is the notion of communication between IS and university staff (Hellstén, 2002). There seems to be a need to increase cultural understanding that is reflected in the ways in which pedagogy and practice are mediated between IS and academics. There also seems to be a need to establish opportunities for discussion between IS and staff about the communicative differences that constitute pedagogy, and the way in which these are reflected in the university teaching settings.

In order to examine the relationship between cultural practices and pedagogy among incoming students we conducted one-hour, semi-structured sessions with volunteer IS in their first year in Australia. The 48 participants (undergraduate and postgraduate) were enrolled in many different discipline areas of the University, as shown in Table 1, and came from a range of countries around the world, presented in Table 2.

**Table 1. Participants' course of study**

	Undergraduate	Postgraduate	Total
Accounting	3	1	4
Actuarial	3		3
Commerce	1	2	3
Economics	1		1
Translation	1	13	14
TESOL		3	3
Linguistics	1	6	7
Languages	1		1
Education		3	3
Anthropology	2		2
Computing	1		1
Exchange	4	2	6
Total	18	30	48

**Table 2. Participants' country of origin (N=48)**

Country	No.	Country	No.
China	16	Sweden	1
South Korea	13	Sri Lanka	1
USA	5	Spain	1
Japan	2	Singapore	1
Germany	1	Malaysia	1
Vietnam	1	Kenya	1
Thailand	1	Indonesia	1
Taiwan	1	Hong Kong	1

Of central interest was the first six-month time period following overseas students' arrival that constituted their transition period between the old and new learning environments. The questions centred on the students' encounters with Australian communities, learning environments and the academic disciplines. We were also interested in the students' overall sense of experience as reflected in subsequent word-of-mouth referrals to fellow students in their home country. We found important impressions inherent in such descriptions. They provided insight into aspects that might otherwise have been hidden due to discursive politeness and courtesy constraints of the interview. Below are some features of their commentary.

### COMMUNICATING IN CLASS

One of the common assumptions made about IS from Asian cultures is that they find it difficult to contribute in class and to participate in classroom discussions. There are many substantial explanations for this, the most salient being that IS feel self-conscious if conversational flow does not come easily in the English language. This shows in their reluctance in attempting to pronounce English words for fear of failure in front of the evaluative eye of other native speakers.

*Yes.... Um... they [teachers] think it's a job. They ask something. We say nothing... 'cause we wanna say but ... (inaudible) shy. And I'm afraid sometimes I'll make a mistake, so I don't want to like that ...*

*I think, my friends, sometimes they stay in one course for two ... months. Because their character very shy. They don't want to say, you know, anything even though they know everything. They know everything. So teachers didn't know that.*

*It's just hard and difficult. I don't know the feeling, the nuance, I don't know those in English so.. I... I'm not a good English speaker at all. It's very uncomfortable when I talk with somebody. So I think I... When I speak with Australians I feel they treats me as a children, you know. And they think of me as a just a... [indicates height of a child with hand] that language level person. Like a ten year old kid.*

In conversation with native speakers the student in the third example feels she is being spoken to in the diminutive voice. The perception that others speak to her 'as a child' must be damaging to her self-esteem as an academically successful individual. The perpetuation of this perception may in turn result in a reluctance to speak in public, thereby accentuating a difficulty in the learning process.

### COMMUNICATION ISSUES

A common communicative feature is for speakers to adjust their conversational style to suit each other in terms of genre and register. Australian lecturers of IS are perceived to lower their level of language use in the hope of making their teaching more effective and beneficial for low level language speakers ( Jones, 2001).

The consensus was that the mode of delivery was easier than that expected of mainstream students. The necessary feedback may not have reached the lecturers due to culture-specific constraints for politeness in discourses. For example, students from some cultural backgrounds did not feel comfortable offering criticism of their teachers as a gesture of respect:

*The one thing is they (lecturers) try to speak easier (laughter) because sometimes we misunderstood. And lecturer say to student but nobody nodded. So he try to explain again. So I think most of the Australian lecturer try to give lecture (in an) easier way.*

Delivering lectures using lower level language registers can be perceived as contrary to IS expectations of improving English proficiency as part of their student experience in an English speaking country.

*Before I came here I think uh, if I got to Australia I will improve my English skills really very fast. But it's just a dream. I must do everything. Every day I practise, practise, practise for this.*

Within this commentary is the realisation that achievement in the learning experience hinges solely on personal investment of time and practice. The interpretation here is the refusal of the lecturer to provide the necessary skills to which the student aspires. It is also a reaction to the realisation that the low level of language provided by the classroom interaction would not provide him with advanced level linguistic ability — a rather troublesome side effect of an overseas university experience in an English-speaking country. It seems, based on our student commentary, that the slowing down of English language learning results, at least in some cases, is a lack of challenging classroom opportunities. So adjusting to a conversational style may not be useful and may be interpreted by IS as a gesture that further marginalises them from mainstream students.

Leaving the social comfort of home country for study in a foreign country, language and culture can be a harrowing experience, especially for younger international students. The mentoring programs in place within universities go some way toward meeting the basic transition needs. However, the interviews revealed that IS consign the responsibility of teaching to lecturers rather than the institution. On this theme, one feature of the discussion is the student perception of a lack of support by the teaching staff. For example:

*So, I want teacher to encourage that, and like mum or dad... yes, to take care of them (other IS) a lot because they are really shy and they sometimes they don't understand.... Just to say 'OK'. I want our teachers to know that.*

*So there is a consultant. He consult with me. But he is really busy. I can't contact easily. Just the one (consultant) and a lot of students here. So, and he only work... I think, twice maybe three days a week. So I can't meet."(Is this a reference to a teacher or a student counsellor?)*

*I visit many times this office. When I need their help I am looking for someone but I can't.*

Commentary about the unavailability of consultation opportunities is extensive among newly arrived international students in our study. We suggest that this lack of resources is partly a bi-product of the current global economic rationalisation in the higher education sector; the effect of which is compounded for IS who often have greater needs than local students. There is a perception that special efforts should be made by academic staff to accommodate incoming students' needs. This is attributed to the need for care and emotional support, and in a familial sense as tantamount to so-called 'parenting'. This is especially voiced in talk about the younger IS groups. The ethic of care is an expectation of the teaching practices by the students interviewed.

The unavailability of part-time staff poses a further problem for international students due to the pressures imposed by their timed candidature. There is a sense of urgency about the study program and waiting to see staff who are not available is interpreted as obstructing progress toward the completion of the degree. Such concerns are directly linked with the marketing of education in the new global knowledge economy (Rizvi, 2000). Certainly, international competition for student places and resources is of central interest to Australia as one of the Western English speaking countries with extensively developed international education targets. Australia is competing against other English speaking countries for IS numbers. The competition and urgency of this new global dynamic is then reflected in the responses of IS and may result in the experiences perceived as less desirable as in the above commentary. The commitment to internationalising the curriculum needs to seek critical and innovative solutions to a re-evaluation of existing curriculum content, enhanced capacity and mode of program delivery.

To this end, Bellis and Clarke (2001) found a course online bulletin board to be extremely useful for students interacting with other students and staff. Students were encouraged to discuss difficulties among themselves, with academics only participating when necessary. While Bellis and Clarke recognise that not all students participated, for IS whose first language is not English, a bulletin board allowed students to think about and compose their response without the pressure of the discussion progressing past the point where they wanted to participate.

### **SOME IMPLICATIONS**

There is a widespread call for implementation of various bridging programs to prepare IS better in their transition to the Australian study environment (Jones et al., 1999; Leask, 1999; Ryan, 2000). Successful mentoring programs are in place in many universities (Austin, Covalea, and Weal, 2002). These go a long way toward the creation of important links between IS and Australian communities and may decrease feelings of social isolation and loneliness. Implications can be considered in terms of enhancing culturally sensitive curriculum delivery and communication, and by enhancing a reflective and inclusive teaching culture throughout the university.

#### **Implications for teaching and learning**

Some useful resources for the critical examination of our teaching modes and practices may be found in a number of professional-development initiatives. Inclusive teaching practices are particularly pertinent. While inclusive teaching philosophies are part of effective teaching policies, whether in schools or universities, there seems to be some uncertainty about their applicability to the teaching setting. Making the curriculum and its discourses explicit is a starting point discussed by Leask (1999) and Garcia (1991). Provision of obvious and workable program and assessment guidelines that are sensitive to individual variation and diversity are also listed among their recommendations.

One implication that emerged from the current study involves the need to provide opportunities for staff to communicate and reflect upon their practices in teaching IS. One cost-effective way is the formation of focus groups that contain impartial representatives of the international student body (such as representatives of the National Liaison Student group) who convey the views of students to academic and other staff. Awareness of cultural open-mindedness and responsibility towards IS is an issue that could be explored. Information sessions may address the examination of religious and other culturally divergent traditions, as well as culture specific discourses. Rizvi (2000) calls for the internationalisation of curriculum to ensure the promotion of cultural change, that would become part of both the mainstream and other groupings. The culturally sensitive curriculum would then move away from the stereotypical thinking that claims internationalisation as a responsibility that belongs to someone else other than oneself (Leask, 1999).

The underlying premise of Leask's (1999) statement of shared responsibility for the internationalisation of the Australian higher education curriculum prescribes that strategies are put into practice to enable the meeting of individual IS needs for communication. Where this relates to increasing staff availability, further resources may be needed. Clearly, the conditions of IS academic experience rest on adherence to time management and other restrictions as dictated by temporary visa requirements. Such constraints necessitate mediation with academic and other university staff for increased accountability and loyalty to consultations and other scheduled commitments. One suggestion for implementation is to make a point of contact facility available that is staffed by academics and experienced IS mentors. We found that many of the questions of incoming IS are of a general nature and can be answered by individuals within the university system. Such a facility (for example, an information booth, linked to an on-line service) meets the deeper need for social and emotional support that is currently felt by new students to be lacking.

Garcia (1991, p.3) points out that classroom teachers who were thought by others to be "highly committed to the educational success of their students" perceived themselves as being "instructional innovators utilising new learning theories and instructional philosophies to guide their practice". Professional development activities were also considered to be important. They had high educational expectations for their students. Some students in our study thought their lecturers were off-hand about their students' success or failure. It would appear, therefore, that good teaching is recognisable, no matter what the venue.

### **Implications for practice**

Educational practices are largely related to everyday conduct, held values and attributive actions. To this effect, we benefit from recommendations for teaching methods that draw on reflective and inclusive teaching philosophies. However, it is our experience that these philosophies are not entirely understood by the academic community. There needs to be some recognition of inclusivity as a dynamic negotiation, as opposed to the domination of one over another. This reasoning makes the notion of flexibility and change everyday requirements for the accommodation of diversity in our teaching and learning settings. There still exists a great need among academics in Australia to reflect upon their cultural affiliations, to explore their ethnicities and acknowledge that these are not only traits we identify in others but also in ourselves. This reflection should then allow for inclusive practice to begin by asking, what can I do to meet the particular cultural and discursive needs of international students. This may in itself, and without further extended effort, transfer into the duty of care for the IS in particular classroom settings.

However, there are some recommendations that provide examples to implement culturally inclusive practices into the teaching of IS. An initial issue is to consider a needs analysis of the students and how their needs can be met within the constraints of the teaching program. A second issue is, to allow for flexibility in understanding some of the cultural discourses and genres that may be encountered in communicative exchanges with IS. Knowledge of the background of students acknowledges an acceptance and interest in their cultural backgrounds. There are many publications describing cultural practices of particular nationalities. For example, an exploration of different religious and cultural traditions may provide stimulating introductory material particularly if this is carried out with sensitivity and without marginalising individual students in the group. Another effective introductory session may investigate communication conventions of different cultural groups. Allowing students to explore culturally specific behaviours such as the use of voice, tone, affect, body language and body contact in communicating with different members of the community may also open up channels of communication between staff and students. This may also act as effective preparation for later identification of unexpected features of communicative conduct.

### CONCLUDING COMMENTS

The internationalisation of Australian higher education is still in its infancy inviting greater collaborative effort from university communities. Although many generalisations exist, we now widely acknowledge the possibly erroneous perception of quantity underwriting quality. There is a discernment that increased numbers of IS have not reflected in the capacities of learning institutions in terms of the provision of quality and expertise — at least when it comes to inclusive practices and culturally sensitive communication styles. The implications addressed here go some way towards meeting these needs. Further investigation is clearly necessary especially in comparing student commentary with staff perceptions and experiences. The assurance of quality teaching and the provision of culturally amenable learning opportunities for international students may be achieved by means of cultural change and critical evaluation of current academic discourses and practices.

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