

**Cultural Competence Survey:
From the Perspective of Australian International Students**

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Introduction:

There are approximately 300,000 international students in Australia, overall representing a significant contribution to the Australian economy. So huge, that the Australian government is now accustomed to referring the international students' market as an 'export commodity'. When there are new emerging trends of students from certain countries/regions, the influx more often than not equates to the dollar value each student can bring in to the country. This trend is only likely to increase given the Australian government's continual reduction of real funding to Universities and the pressure to fund activities from commercial enterprises.

The lack of acknowledgement and the realisation of improved service, which constitutes a fundamental reason for these students to be attracted to Australia as their study destination, more often than not, frustrate the students who have different expectations before and after they arrive in Australia.

Deciding to further take on tertiary education is a daunting enough exercise for students in general, let alone if you are international students. Due considerations must be given to visa application, financial affordability, choice of institution, and accommodation among many other things. This complex decision tree is acknowledged by the international education industry, especially by the University. Various efforts are put in to 'ensure' that there is a smooth transition process for international students to 'assimilate and adapt' with the Australian environment. However, many question the motive behind such shift. Is it genuinely to address the isolated problems that international students face, or is it

more of a marketing gimmick to show 'prospective' students that the University is 'genuine' in its efforts to address the looming problems of international students.

Regardless, the process of identifying what ought to be the problems are the difficult one. Apart from it, prescribing a solution to deal with those problems is by the same token, arduous. There is only one way to tackle this: ask the international students directly.

When it comes to international students representations in Australia, similarities can be drawn with oil as scarce resource. There are limited number of international students interested enough to represent their peers in fighting for issues that concern them the most. Because of these scarce resources, the one who have self-identified themselves as international students representatives, are more often than not, overburdened. This set as an unpleasant example for others who might have the first hunch to be international students representatives.

- Therefore, cultural competence is a set of complimentary behaviors, attitudes, and policies that help systems, agencies, and professionals work effectively with people of different cultures.
- Culturally competent services are systems, agencies, and professionals that have the capacity, skills, and knowledge to respond to the unique needs of people from different cultures
- According to the U.S. Census Bureau, as of July 1, 1998, minority groups (Black, American Indian, Eskimo, Aleut, Asian, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic) represented approximately 25% of the population. By 2050, these same ethnic groups are projected to account for more than 47% of the population. To provide the best care possible, the health care and service delivery industries must offer services that are sensitive to the needs of people whose cultures differ from that of what can be called mainstream America.

- A person's culture influences their values, thoughts, feelings, and the way they respond to people and situations. For example, in many cultures physicians and other health practitioners are held in high esteem and their opinions are respected. However, if the health professional is not indigenous to the culture being served, there
- may be a lack of trust of the provider. This lack of trust may hinder the person or family member from seeking necessary treatment, counseling or accessing services.
- Health care, rehabilitation, and other service providers will need to consider how different beliefs might effect treatment and develop strategies, protocols or policies that ensure quality care is administered to everyone.
- Although each employee should take the necessary steps towards cultural competence (e.g., learning more about traditions affiliated with other cultural groups), cultural competence is the responsibility of the entire organization.

According to professor Simon Marginson (2003) "Australia commands 2% of world GDP and 2% of research output. It is not the dominant world power. It is a developed nation with areas of global strength". He argues that for Australian universities to be global players in the international education and provide first class education they need first class public funding.

Overall, the reputation of the Australian higher education is crucially important to the international education industry. With qualifications widely recognised outside Australia, the student has received value for the money they have invested in their education in Australia, thus improving the reputation of the Australian education industry.

Therefore, NLC- the National Liaison Committee for International Students in Australia- the peak representative body for international students currently studying in Australia realises the importance of this reputation outside Australia; the recognition of the qualification the student acquires in Australia is dependent upon both the quality of education and the reputation of the international education industry and the institution. The 20th NLC National Education Conference 5th - 6th of July, 2005 at the Newcastle University, has the theme **International Education " Beyond the Marketing Hype": the**

reality in valuing diversity, which embraces important issues discussed in federal Minister's Brendan Nelson Ministerial statement "**Engaging the World through Education**"; quality and integrity of Australian education, recognition of Australian qualifications and the benefits of internationalised education. The NLC understands that the Australian Government is working extremely hard towards ensuring in every way that international students receive a globally competitive standard of education in Australia, by providing a quality assurance framework and the body AQUA in the Higher Education Sector to maintain this high standard.

Quality through Diversity

Australia is increasingly becoming a popular destination for international students particularly from Asian countries and the Middle East. This is attributed to the geographical proximity to Asian countries, language, reputation and flexibility of study and work arrangements. Hence, Australia can capitalise on these strengths furthermore if more effort is invested in the educational sector particularly higher education, considering the value of differential fees for international students as a way to enhance existing resources available for students and gaining independence from government funding.

There is strong evidence that the educational sector in Australia has extensive offerings and potential to international students. Educational institutions in the last decade became only more conscious of the value of international students monetarily. Nevertheless failed to subsequently recognise the need to internationalise education to cater for the needs of international students.

The post-secondary education sector in Australia has much to offer the international students; hence we are facing a highly competitive environment whereby education is dealt with as a commodity.

The critical question to be asked whether we are providing international students with the level of education and services expected in return for higher educational fees.

From my own experience and one-to-one interviews with international students, there were many concerns raised across all international students

Cultural Adjustment

This is an introductory stage that occurs once they arrive to Australia. The majority of the students particularly those who have no relatives or friends to support them during this transitional period find it extremely hard to adjust to the new culture. This factor is disguised by their worries and concerns about studies requirements, teaching and delivery style, study workload, the adaptation to university resources and systems including the use of new technologies within the universities, locating educational resources. In addition the issue of social interaction with Australian students is a major concern to them at this stage. It is obvious at this stage that international students tend to group to provide a supporting mechanism to each other.

During teaching sessions, international students tend to be quite, shy and embarrassed to ask and inquire about any issues they feel ambiguous to them. This is due to fear of personality judgment by their colleagues and lack of confidence in their language skills. It is noticeable that the theory, lecture and literature material is difficult for them to conceptualise in terms of readings and comprehension.

Cultural awareness and preparedness about Australia and particularly Australian Educational Institutes is a critical success factor to eliminate the length of this dilemma for these students.

The lecturer/tutor role is very important to further encourage interaction within the class highlighting the benefits to them in terms of improving self- confidence, language and understanding of the subject. It is also important to assure them that it is acceptable and highly desired to voice out their thoughts, fears and concerns. Training and education should be provided to lecturers/teachers to improve their teaching ability and skills in a cross-cultural environment.

Language and Communication Barriers

Most of the international students particularly those coming from the Asian region confront major difficulties of reading and writing in English and comprehension skills. There is a substantial time consumed by those students to understand terminology, expected learning outcomes and what is required of them to deliver in terms of performance and assignments. Students find it extremely hard to understand theories or text material assigned for their readings. This is clearly reflected in their result for the first piece of assessment.

International students at their early course of study are very reluctant to clarify the tasks assigned to them due to the cultural adjustment factor discussed above. It is noticeable that they tend to ask other international students for further clarifications to piece the puzzle together, which creates a lot of upheaval and misinformation as each understands the requirement differently.

These difficulties in language and communication require teachers to exert tremendous efforts in their choice of words, reliance on the use of familiar and common vocabulary and pace of speaking needs to be slower and clear. This strategy will enable teachers to distinguish between international students with language difficulty and those with learning difficulties.

System Complexity

Most of the international students coming to study in Australia live in countries where technology is not at an upbeat stage in comparison to Australia. They find it extremely difficult to adapt to the new technologies available within the universities and absorb how the system works in their institutes. If we include this factor to the cultural shock, anxiety, language problems and homesickness it definitely contribute a great deal to their existing problems. The pace whereby they are required to adjust to system complexity is relatively tight, as they are expected to know how to use such technologies and resources.

There should be a proper and intensive orientation program, whereby students are taught how to use such technologies and systems. A printed booklet including all these information would assist significantly for future references.

A good mentoring program should be established by the universities, which include international students from the same country and local students to participate in new students orientation programs.

This is a great opportunity for the new students to have a comfortable kick-start, release their fears and anxieties to those who already went through their experience. It is also a great opportunity for them to establish networks from local and international students. Mentors should be given incentives in participating in such activities such as book vouchers and discounts on their fees.

Methods of teaching and Learning Styles

It is evident that there is a distinct difference between teaching and delivery style in Australian universities in comparison to those methods used in Asian countries.

International students are used to receive information from their teachers without the space to discuss or explore other concepts. Students are used to a learning environment that doesn't foster interaction and critical analysis of material delivered. It is prevalent that their learning style relied heavily on memorising and recalling information rather than conceptualisation and comprehension.

The challenge facing educational institutes in Australia is how to ride the wave to ensure a smooth transition from a passive to an active learning method that rely on critical thinking, analysis and deriving creative and innovative problem solving techniques. They need to be supported individually and face-to-face at their early stage of education to boost their confidence and settlement in the educational system. However, this is time

consuming and requires lecturers/teachers workload to be adjusted to accommodate such needs.

Resources

Australian universities lack the availability of enough resources that cater for the needs of international and local students. The resources include library resources such as books and journals. There are a limited number of copies available within the library, which doesn't meet the increasing and competitive demand for such resources.

Furthermore, international students at the start of their education, find it extremely difficult to utilise the electronic resources available within universities' libraries due to lack of training and assistance. An extra effort and resources needs to be allocated specifically for international students.

Essays and assignments

There is clear evidence that international students lack the necessary understanding and skills in understanding, organising, writing and structuring of an essay or an assignment that clearly illustrates their discussions and supporting evidence.

The lecturer role at this stage is very crucial, as it is the stepping stone to set the norms for these students. Clear and simple verbal explanation of what is expected in the task, simplification of the wording of the written assignments, breaking it into steps and the provision of a marking guide clearly outlining the required pieces of information to be included. Furthermore a one-to-one approach is highly recommended to ensure that they are fully aware of what they are required to do.

There is an immense need to provide such students with similar problems with the necessary assistance and support through extra tutorials by lecturers/tutors and the provision of consultation time to go over assignment drafts.

Linking Theory to Practice

This is a very important link that needs to exist between theory and its application. The majority of the international students don't have working experiences that enable them to link the theory and concepts to previous work experience.

This makes it extremely difficult for them to fully conceptualise the material delivered in classrooms. Extra effort should be exerted by lecturers/tutors at the beginning to simplify the concepts and link it to student's personal experiences. Then gradually move towards applying the concepts to simple cases whereby students can draw back on the first application and establish the links between the concepts and the working environment.

Another approach could be providing samples and case studies that assist the students to comprehend how theory can be applied to situations.

Quality not Quantity - Information Overload

This is a statement I always hear from students whether they are international or local. However, if we add this factor to all the problems confronting international students, it becomes really detrimental to their learning.

Volume of information by itself is a daunting problem due to insufficient amount of time to read and digest the information, assimilate it into knowledge and the pressure to perform at the same time. The cognitive ability of the human brain to absorb and retrieve information has its natural limitations and rather than information acting as an empowering tool, it becomes an overpowerment tool. Particularly if the information is new, irrelevant and has no background experience to relate to.

Students whether they are local or international tend to be overwhelmed by irrelevance, preferring quantity to quality, insatiably pursuing information rather than the satisfaction of turning it into knowledge or wisdom.

Participation in Groups

The advantages of this method of learning are numerous and it is adopted by many universities as a vehicle of cultural integration, built up peer confidence, exchange of ideas and learning from others. It further fosters teamwork in future employment opportunities. In reality, that doesn't happen because the international students feel uncomfortable working with local students because of cultural differences, lack of self-confidence and language barriers. Local students on the other hand, prefer to work together because of cultural and educational similarities and the preconception that international students don't perform well and lack commitment.

However, when both local and international students perform as a group, it is noticeable that international students are less assertive than Australian students in putting forward their ideas, concerns and willingness to play an active role within their group. The international students tend to be passive, concentrate on social acceptance and harmony more than focusing on the task and expect other group members to delegate particular tasks to them. This is interpreted by the local students as lack of co-operation, commitment and unwillingness to accept their share of responsibility.

This vicious circle occurs in the majority of group work, which impose a serious impediment to the expected learning outcomes for international students. There should be a great effort invested in this area to make the process of group work a worthwhile experience for both international and local students.

STUDENT GROWTH, INCREASED REVENUE, NOW WHAT?

- Issue affecting the future of international education in Australia

- Focus: increase students number and revenue. however, problems are identified relating to the international education industry. These include subjecting students to MRT (Migration Review Tribunal).
- Most of the issues (i.e. immigration) are within the DIMIA.
- Benchmarking on different initiatives taken by institutions.

STUDENT SERVICES:

- No measurements of services provided by education institutions to international students (e.g. student staff ratios, resources)
- Professional development program: competencies of staff members in handling international students.
- Compulsory training for sessional and casual staff?? but problems with permanent staff. academic qualification is a priority over whether an academic can deliver teaching effectively.
- The same problem is applicable to administrative staff.
- Inaccurate information on immigration matters (e.g. visa status, success/failure, unsatisfactory progress)
- Factual information becoming a threat? especially to international students? Method of delivery might impact on student's reception.
- University's role is to help students especially over immigration matters?
- Plagiarism: is it a 'punishment' for international students? many international students are not aware of the concept of plagiarism, (not part of the culture).

- Plagiarism as a course prior to tertiary education? However, supply and demand of the subject?
- English as Second Language: problems with IELTS? Who is responsible in ensuring that international students are proficient in English. Lower IELTS intake means increased support?

ACADEMIC SUPPORT

- English for academic purposes.
- The role of policy in University: acts as a platform for students to 'scrutinise' procedures taken by the university?
- Academics are required to take 'random' samples of students' works --> 'moderation'
- Plagiarism vs collaboration?
- The root of the problem: Australian universities have to provide (for) 'more' with 'less'.
- Commercial concerns vs Educational quality
- Differing perceptions on philosophies between domestic and international students in paying and/or qualifying to be in university.
- Marketing vs Student Support Services --> Additional fees from int'l students used for promotion and not services (issue: salary differences)
- Problems with the myths on international students (aka. 'i wish i had a porsche') --> International Education Week (profiling of international students and related issues)

- NLC's potential --> More resources required from external groups/institutions (hopefully) resulting in a greater level of professionalism and in its profile.
- Local Interaction: Lack of integration between international and local students on campus. Problems with purely international campuses and the chances/support they receive in interacting with local students --> More personalization in the servicing of int'l students.

SUPPORTING THE 'GENUINE STUDENT'

- Student visa program: integrity vs outcomes

Focus: ESOS reporting process and what are the legislative requirements

- Reporting processes will be presented through workshops in the near future.
- Student requested companion disallowed due to privacy reasons.
- International offices and students should be made more aware of the proper processes (difficulty lies in each institution's own set of procedures in dealing with exclusions, etc.).
- An extension on the period pending for appeals needs to be increased from its current 28 days.
- Visa expiry prior to certification.
- Limited consultations between DIMIA and other peak bodies aside from 'industry' (AIEPB, AVCC, etc.).
- More accountable forums need to be set up at institutional, state and national levels.
- The lack of uniformity in procedure between the vast majority of institutions is one of the major causes of the current problem.

- Underlying 'corporate' mentality with the running and perception of universities today.
- Is the government providing more regulation and less support?
- The government has to see that tertiary education is not a source of short-term profit but rather a long-term investment.
- It has to be realised that while federal support is being reduced, it must be realised that new policies incur costs and difficulties in their enactment --> thus resulting in poorer services to students.
- Purpose of ESOS act is to protect Australia's tertiary reputation and students. Reform of the Act has been done in order to increase its effectiveness.
- Should the licensing laws be looked at instead?
- One of the worst aspects of the policy is the creation of 'compliance officers'.
- NLC is pleased with the current Education Policy presented, but it is everything surrounding it that is causing concern.
- NLC is concerned that the AIEPB is referred to solely by the government in the creation or advising of future policies and regarded as representative of all aspects of the industry.
- Perennial unresolved issue is that of the engagement/interaction of international students with local communities.

STUDENTS AT RISK

Focus: A lot of student visas are being cancelled in the name of unsatisfactory progress. Concern that it is the responsibility of the individual to meet up with service arms. Unsure that at risk students will only be informed about these procedures and problems until at the end of the semester. How or where do the students get these services?

Students have selective attention. Despite being told at every opportunity by the international office it is consistently ignored or misunderstood. Students need to take responsibility more.

- This information should be made more attractive.
- How do you identify a student at risk?
- Identification of the area of risk --> and presentation of their options, etc, depending on the case.
- Cross faculty students are the biggest grey area.
- Language problems are a common cause.
- 'Potentially every international student is at risk from day one.'
- Students are not acutely aware of the need to renew their OSHC and visa (due to prior hand holding?).
- These issues are not an absolute priority in a student's mind most of the time.
- What is the magnitude of student problems concerning visa regulations? NLC: The numbers are growing year by year --> worrying that course coordinators, for eg, are unaware that they may have at risk students within their cohort, while DIMIA tends to go very strictly by the book.
- Those not involved in the international education sector are completely in the dark about ESOS regulations.

- Visa length health cover or not? Would solve most problems in one go. But what about if any at risk scenarios occur? How long is the refund period?
- Students working while they are studying. At risk students are those who are overworking. Is becoming the norm among students.
- Typically there are multiple reasons combined that results in a student at risk.
- Proposed solution may be to deal with this problem on as small a scale as possible at the department level. But, not all universities can be structured in this way, nor the funding.