

What else did I need to bring with me? International students and their dilemma

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Abstract

Australian universities, providing higher education to the multicultural cohort of their local as well as international students mirror the plethora of colour and creed of Australian society. Multitudes of international students besides bringing their diverse culture along bring substantial monetary benefits to this country. Many Asian students continue to choose Australia as their first choice to study abroad because of its proximity to Asia as well as because of its cheaper dollar. Australian universities, to replenish their fading funds pursue these students and welcome their interest in studying here. However, does the moveable feast of dollar change its tune once the money has exchanged hands and the celebration of diversity change into carping about the differences? This paper discusses the responses of international students, LAS and international student advisors and academics. Looking at the scenario from different perspectives, the paper aspires to bring a touch of reflection and improvement to fill some of the gaps that remain in the full realisation of the internationalisation of higher education. It proposes to accomplish its aim by contributing to the discourse that universities involved in internationalisation of higher education need to have an international philosophy (Welch, 2002) to create inter connectedness in the world (Dewitt, 2002).

Key words: International students, western universities, diversity, differences, gains

Introduction

The advent of large numbers of NESB (Non English Speaking Background) Asian international students to Australian shores is promoted as a celebration of diversity by higher education institutes, and is utilised by them as a platform to enter into the internationalised market of higher education. Though it is clear that the institutes are celebrating the dollar, it is unclear who is celebrating the diversity or how it is being celebrated. Working as a LAS (Language and Academic Skills) advisor in one such higher education institute, I was interested in exploring the education experience of these students to see what evidence existed of this celebration in the educational practices of the institute.

Like other researchers, interested in the education experience of NESB international students, I was focused on their problems and the seed for this research was sown from a particular comment (the title of this paper), made by an international post-graduate student. The initial aim of my research was to find an answer to this question. However, my research has redirected my thoughts. Whilst I did find that students experienced academic difficulties and regularly felt challenged by the demands of academic writing and routine participation in the classroom, most international students developed valuable skills and gained a unique experience of studying and living in a new educational set up and a new culture. However, the findings and my reflections on them have also revealed another track, which needs to be further explored in future. That is the experience of domestic students and how they celebrate the experiential opportunity of interacting with the global community for learning, sharing and exchanging ideas in the true spirit of higher education.

This paper surveys the quality of the educational experience of international students; however, it does not provide a list of recommendations/ suggestions to improve their academic achievements. Instead, it aims to bring awareness and reflection on the part of education institutes to recognise and celebrate their “international dimension”, which is the bequest of the internationalisation of higher education (Hamilton, 1998), so what the international students actually bring is recognised and celebrated. This reflection is necessary for any Australian institute that claims to be an international education institute or is on its way to becoming a global university. Curro & McTaggart (2003) have drawn a road map for this journey which states that the internationalisation of institutes starts with the recruitment of international students but then it must progress to ‘critically self-reflective internationalisation’.

History

In the present age of globalisation, most western countries are reaching out to their poorer neighbours in a bid to “improve” their quality of life. However, most of their “philanthropic” ventures of providing language, knowledge, information and technology to Asian countries have proved quite advantageous to their own economies (Pennycook, 1994, p. 152). Australia is not a novice in these capitalist enterprises. Tracing the history of Australia’s internationalising of its higher education since 1904, Tootell (1999) has commented on the “metamorphosis” that the internationalisation of higher education has had to date. From being, a means of educational aid and promoting international understanding it has continuously been changing into a vigorous moneymaking enterprise. To begin with, overseas students either were scholarship holders or were full fee paying students. In 1992, in a bid to emphasise “the non commercial benefits of internationalisation” (Back, Davis & Olsen, 1996, Smart & Ang, 1996, cited in Tootell, 1999) a new name was given to these full fee- paying overseas students and from that time on, they were called international students.

The new term not only demonstrated the Australian institutes’ acceptance and inclusion of a diverse, international student cohort but it was their promise of providing international education to all of their students. However, the use of the new term transformed the way the students were recruited. From then on targets were set to increase the numbers of these fee-paying students and hundred of thousands of dollars started to be spent by universities promoting their programmes and marketing enterprises to the target countries. This aggressive advertising together with Australia’s cheaper dollar and Australia’s proximity to Asia resulted in large numbers of Asian students flocking to Australia. From 1997 to 2002, the rate of increase for on shore (residing in Australia) international students more than doubled (123 per cent). This year, international student enrolments in Australia have grown by 8% (year to date to end of April 2004) compared to the same period last year (Nelson, 2004).

With this major move in the student population, where more than three quarters of overseas students are from Asia (Nelson, 2004), the question that has interested researchers is; what the educational experience of these students is. Research has posed such questions all along (Phillips, 1990; Tootell, 1999; Ramburth, 2001; Kutieja, 2003) and has also tried to fathom international students’ level of satisfaction with the Australian Higher Education set up. According to an international student satisfaction survey conducted in 1999, 75% students rated Australia as their first choice of studying abroad, and 90 % declared that they would recommend Australia to their fellow countrymen willing to come abroad to study (Study In Australia, 2004), a promise that has been fulfilled faithfully.

The cultural diversity that these students bring to their learning environments has been well documented (Rivers, 1994, Cortaizzi & Jin, 1997; Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, Hellmundt, 2001, O’Donoghue, 1996, Volet & Ang, 1998 cited in Ryan et al, 2003). Research has also investigated the social and academic needs of NESB international students. The quality of their education experience and detailed recommendations to improve it (Phillips, 1990; Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Meggitt, 1995; Sigsbee et al, 1997; Treloar et al, 2000; Ramburth, 2001, Volet, 2003) has been the focus of many studies. Some researchers have talked about the mismatch between the expectations of the institute, the teacher, and the student. Some of them have identified a need for cross-cultural communication skills for teachers and others have recommended intensive enculturation courses for international students. There have been studies that categorise these students into stereotypical images (Phillips, 1990) and other studies that challenge those images (Samuelowicz, 1987; Watkins et al, 1991; Niles, 1995; Renshaw & Volet, 1995; Chalmers, & Volet, 1997; Ninnes, P. et al, 1999; Ramburth, 1999; Ramburth, 2001; Handa & Clare, 2003).

Students coming from different corners of the world bringing their peculiarities with them do stand out in the classroom, the library hall as well as the cafeteria. Their different mannerisms, accents, behaviours and colour make them stand out in any situation as one lecturer commented, “they are so visible”. The extent to which this visibility affected the lecturers’ own classroom practices and how the diversity brought by these students is celebrated in the institute was the quest for the present research. However to what extent the other not so visible, main stream student component is affected by their multi-cultural and multinational class fellows, needs to be explored to have a better understanding of the international higher education set up in the institute.

Method

The research was conducted using questionnaires, focus groups and interviews. Questionnaires (130) asking about their educational experience in Australia were sent/mailed/given to international students; and three focus groups were organised. The student questionnaire invited them to talk about the issues, which usually seem to be the main area of concern for both international students and their teachers. The questions therefore encouraged them to give their comments on their classroom participation, their understanding of the expected academic discourse and their difficulties writing in that style. They were also asked to comment on their interaction with their local counterparts and their social and academic life in their university. Approximately 80 questionnaires were returned. In the focus groups which were formed from those who had accepted to come, students were asked to comment on some of the issues that had emerged from the questionnaire responses. Interviews with International Student Advisors, LAS advisors and academics teaching international students were also organised. LAS advisors and International Student Advisors were asked to discuss their experiences of common issues relating to international students and their adjustment in the Australian university set-up. Academics were invited to share their views on international students and their common difficulties in fulfilling their academic tasks including tutorial participation etc. and were encouraged to share their reflections on their own classroom practices.

Findings

The following themes which emerge from the information collated from questionnaires (approximately 80) and focus groups (three separate groups) confirm the expected findings of international students struggling with classroom participation, academic writing and their confusion about plagiarism. And as could be guessed, there does not seem to be much celebration of diversity happening in the classroom. Interestingly, however the comments given by many participants created a positive picture of our “poor” NESB international student.

Lack of classroom participation

Lack of classroom participation on the part of many international students seems to be a big concern for both lecturers and students. Two main reasons stood out; students’ poor language and subsequent lack of confidence; and students’ poor understanding of the western academic conventions and their own cultural confines. A few complained about being lonely or isolated in their classroom as one of them said “no one seems to be interested in me”.

Of the surveyed students, most seem to understand what is expected of them regarding classroom participation and active learning and many have claimed to have fulfilled that. However, in the focus groups, many were of the view that they were not able to fully participate in academic activities such as tutorial discussions and question/answer times. Students’ comments like “I can not understand what they are talking about”, “I do not ask in the class as they might laugh” and “It is best to ask the tutor after the class” show their lack of confidence in their own ability to form intelligent questions or to indulge in classroom discussions. A few of them also show their frustration with tutors who present local examples to start discussion in the class, disadvantaging students who are not familiar with these topics. Some had difficulty digesting the fact that many teachers did not answer their questions and asked other students to provide answers. Many complained that other students, including even some other international students, who were “noisy” and had better language skills, did not leave any room for them to speak up. Even during a particular focus group, it was evident that some groups of international students were more assertive and “noisy” as compared to some of the other more “passive” and quiet ones.

Lecturers also pointed towards students’ lack of participation and talked about their own response to this situation. One of them commented about a particular student that “..... had this glazed expression on his face from day one and I felt sorry for him” She felt that language was the biggest issue for these students not speaking up or even not knowing what to say. She commented that “I do not think he even understood the sheet I gave him to work on” and felt that it was not fair on other students who had to work with him. On the other hand, another lecturer said that she did not differentiate between local or international students. She commented that in her class she taught as she would if she did not have any international students. “I would not even know whether the students in my class are local or international if I had not known that my

school/subject has a high proportion of international students". She justified her practice by saying, "They all have similar problems and similar issues and I treat them the same".

Regarding their difficulty in participating in discussions one of the students commented, "Participation also means listening and we do that very well as we come from a culture in which it is polite to wait to be asked to comment" and said that "you do not just grab the conversation". This particular student also made a point that being a good listener is very much a good way of participation in the tutorials. This was endorsed by a lecturer's comments that "if they are listening and can understand what is being said, that is participation" but she said that she coaxed her students to nod or to say "Yes I agree" or "I do not know" by asking them directly or just by looking at them. Interestingly another lecturer made the comment that she left them alone "poor soul, did not know what was happening" as she did not think it appropriate to put them on a spot.

There seems to be a dilemma on the part of many teachers whether to leave them alone or "force" them to speak up. Some times students can be relieved not to be asked directly but on the other hand, they would never speak up if not asked to. Being culturally sensitive and using inclusive practices seem to be a juggling act that teachers teaching in such diverse classes need to master. The key seems to be "care and concern" as one lecturer said, "You just have to know your class well enough to be able to judge the right way". In his class, students are required to speak up or shut up so that every body gets a chance to contribute. "At first they are a bit taken a back but as they get to know me and each other well they loosen up". However it has been possible for that particular lecturer to achieve that kind of an atmosphere as the class size is small and most students know each other by name, even the lecturer remembers their names. Still the commitment of the lecturer to practise what he believes in "to give a positive experience to his students" must be the driving force behind his classroom management. He even makes an effort to practise pronouncing his students names correctly, he said.

One particular point raised by a few international students and some lecturers has brought a "sticky" situation into limelight; it is regarding the students' input in their practicum. When education or nursing students are sent to schools or hospitals to face the real world, many of them fail badly. This comment from an International Student Advisor sums up their situation that "they just do not have the people skills and know nothing about the local vernacular". Many such students who are new in Australia or if they come from different cultural and/or linguistic backgrounds not only encounter significant barriers within a range of advanced educational settings (Hathorne, 1999) but also will have difficulties in adjusting to the social dimensions of learning. It is not just their language and their culture, it is also their accent and their mannerism that set them apart from their local counterparts. Some of the students talked about their discomfort in such situations from embarrassing moments like "I did not know how to make a "vegemite sandwich" and told them I ate mine with salad and they laughed at me" to heart breaking ones "the old woman in the nursing home refused to talk to me or take any thing from me". Such situations do not leave these students with great confidence about their own knowledge and ability to perform their duties.

Not much interaction with local students and no mixed social activities

The second theme to emerge from the data collected and analysed was a clear lack of interaction between the local and the international students. Most of the questionnaires that were returned show a clear absence of any solid interaction between the two cohorts inside or outside the classroom. The reasons seem to be the obvious ones, lack of language, lack of time and local students' disinterest in them. In focus groups, a few students have suggested certain remedies to solve this problem as most felt that it was an important part of their international education. Other than working on group assignments and many actually chose to work with other international students, the local and international students did not interact very much. Their interaction only comprised of saying hello to may be talking about the subject or assignment difficulties if they happen to sit together. Outside the classroom, it was a clearly divided world in which the two did their own things. "I hardly talk to any one", "They are not interested in what I have to say", "I do not know what they talk about", Since most students are spending less and less hours on the campus, universities are no longer a hanging out place for most students any more. They have jobs, families and other commitments that demand a higher priority. Moreover, many international students also juggle their time in between job and university study and there are less opportunities of social interaction between students. As one international student put it, "They don't have time and I do not either".

However, those students who found such opportunities to interact with others, especially their local classmates benefited. In a focus group, a heartening piece of information was shared by one of the sporty looking international students, "I play soccer every Friday afternoon with a bunch of students and I have fun!" Another raved about a ski trip he was going on with some local students and was keen "to show them my skills in the field" he said. A couple of students criticised the social set up at their school where "no body knows and cares about us" and suggested social activities arranged by the school "to get to know each other".

Lecturers also commented on this issue, and talked about their efforts in this direction especially in the class, "I always have encouraged students to work in groups and to form study groups", but outside the class, "what they do with their time is very much their own thing, their own choice" one of them said. However, another lecturer talked about starting a fortnightly common lunch hour social activity with all his students to address this issue. International mentoring seemed to be assisting in this situation as in the first two weeks international mentors assist the new students in their initial adjustment in Australia. However one of the LAS advisors suggested school wide peer mentoring or pairing off the local and international students to bring about a dynamic change in the classroom interaction.

Confusion about academic discourse and some other issues

In the questionnaires and focus groups the students have confided about their confusion, "I did not know what she wanted me to write in my answer, I did everything to please her", but have shown satisfaction with the support given by their tutors and LAS advisors, "The examples and the workshop made it clear where I was going wrong". However the assignments which got them passing marks were not deemed by many as being a fair judge of their calibre, "I should have got a credit at least as I did everything that was asked but my language was not good enough". Some have admitted their problems in academic writing one of them said, "In my writing I have great problems" and many have pleaded for more support and more advice in this area.

Some students had difficulty adjusting to the academic readings in general, as in their contents as well as in their style the readings were "so very different from what I was used to". Many times it was the western way of analysing that confused them "we do not write like this, and I did a master degree from my country" one of them moaned after getting a really bad mark on an assignment. One lecturer commented that she did not mind little problems in grammar as long as the content was clear and presented in a cohesive manner. Another lecturer said that in their subject they allowed students to use personal language as long as they answered the questions. However, one lecturer was very clear that "they need to write well and of university standard otherwise they do not get a credit as "it is not fair on others who spend hours and days writing their essays, "I always ask them to go to Learning Skills Unit" she concluded.

LAS advisors said that many international students come to them for the same reasons that many local students do. They come for "question analysis which can be quite tricky for even local students, because of the ambiguous language and unclear directions, but at least we can do that, however many come for grammar and proofreading, which we do not do" as one of them put it. Another LAS advisor said that Learning Skills Unit ran grammar and writing classes but only a handful of students continued in them as there "always seemed to be a clash in time and their motivation". "These students need more skills and training in writing especially subject specific tutorials but the schools do not want to take the responsibility" another one complained. Most of the LAS advisors said that they did help students with grammar but the students "demand more and more and that becomes problematic". With post-graduate students it was mainly the problem of critical analysis and the issue of literature review, "some of them end up plagiarising as they do not have skills of that kind and are not clear about the concept, they come from cultures where it is not an issue", one of them said. However, most international students who were invited to be part of this research seemed to be doing well in their written tasks and they were more concerned about issues other than academic writing.

Some other issues

Another issue that was raised by both academics and LAS advisors was the problem of students being admitted into higher degree classes without adequate language skills and then being "left to their own

device". Many of these students become "... regular customers" one of the LAS advisor said. "I feel for these students" because one student had confided in her about feeling "small and shy" because of his inadequacy in front of his lecturers and class fellows. "Whose responsibility is this" was the question that troubled each one of them. Choosing a wrong course or a wrong subject was another issue that some have talked about. A couple of the students have expressed their regret at not being able to cope with the difficult subjects, one of them said, "I made a wrong choice and lost one semester and thousands of dollars, the readings for this subject were too hard". Many bemoaned the fact that there was a lack of advice from course coordinators in their school. Complaining about lack of advice and lack of guidance regarding various issues like this and expressing his anger with the whole institute, a student emailed this comment in response to the questionnaire that was sent to him, "I will tell every one that the university treats Asian students very badly". Another compared her situation with her cousin who was studying in America, "The system is much better there as international students have more support and people to give them advice", she said.

International Student Advisors are disappointed about the fact that "each time these students have a problem they are told, you are an international student go to your advisors", even though many times the issues can be resolved by Student Administration, course coordinators or lecturers. Often the advisors have to send them back to their school or student administration for resolving the issues and eventually most issues are resolved, "however students feel lost and unowned by the schools as the university seems to have a different set of rules for them whereas they should be treated like other students". One of the advisors admitted that many times the problem arises because of miscommunication between the students and others, however she commented, "universities need to nurture them first and then harvest the gains".

Discussion

The analysis of the information collated from this research has brought home to the researcher that even though the diversity of culture in its student population was very much present in the campus, there was no institute wide celebration of this diversity. There was a lack of interaction between local and international students, many teachers and local students were indifferent towards international students (Ramburth, 2001), teachers practised their traditional ways of teaching and conducting tutorials: and dominant cultural literacy driven classroom interaction and assessments ruled (Mackinnon & Manathunga, 2003, p. 131). An overall lack of mutual exchange between cultural diversities permeating its campus was observed raising a doubt about whether western universities are fulfilling their promise of enhancing the overall development of their graduates as competent world citizens (Volet, 2003) or not.

A typical but unexpected profile of Asian international students has emerged from this research. It presents a picture of NESB international students who come to study in Australia; spend most of their time with other international students, especially those from their own country, and who are mostly ignored by their teachers and local students. They are not considered "active participants" of the academic scene in the classroom and their presence is merely in the background. The academic and cultural problems that were identified were very much in line with previous research carried out in this area (Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Burns, 1991). However, it was interesting to observe that even though most of these students regularly feel challenged by the experience of studying in a different language, a different culture and a different education set up they are enriched by it. They are persistent in getting help or advice from wherever they can which can be very demanding. Some times, there emerges a touch of anger and dissatisfaction for not getting what they think they deserve; however mostly there is a passive acceptance of and even praise for the system and a hint of satisfaction with their own achievements. They work hard and most finish their studies successfully, with many deciding to stay on in Australia.

Therefore the positive effect that studying in another country has on international students, was quite apparent from this picture. The issues, and frustrations, the achievements and doubts expressed in their response to this research, depict a clear progressive journey that they have made towards becoming members of a bigger international community. Their experience of another culture, which they could then marry with their own prior learning and knowledge, has helped many of them enjoy a holistic experience of being an international person. Their education experience and their stay here help them develop valuable skills in communication, inquiry and analysis. All of these skills are valuable graduate attributes that most higher education institutes intend to develop in their graduates.

However, it seems that many teachers and domestic students are not joining in to making internationalisation a part of their own experience. There can be many reasons for this inhibition on their part and many remedies can be suggested. A need for an institute wide change in the attitude and philosophy has been identified by many. Higher education institutes need to integrate an international/intercultural dimension into their teaching, research and service (Back, Davis & Olsen, 1996, p. vii, cited in Tootell, 1999). According to Volet (2003), the internationalisation of higher education is a process through which achieving the educational, social and cultural aims of internationalisation depends on academic staff interest and their commitment to use internationalisation for enhancing the quality of higher education. She feels that it is the responsibility of teachers and I would add to say that it is the responsibility of the whole institute to develop intercultural competence and thinking skills in 'all' students if they aim to create successful members of an international community.

Generally, students coming from different social and cultural backgrounds remain in their different worlds. Even teachers feel more comfortable with "a cohort of homogeneous like-minded students" (Lawrence, 2000, p.8) and can have difficulties communicating with their international students. Many of them feel ill equipped and untrained to teach such students (Ryan, 2003). Cross-cultural skills for such teachers would be of great consequence however employing teachers, who are either from international background themselves or have a clear philosophy of teaching and learning in an international context, would be quite effective. Academics who are reflective educators are required (Handa, 2003); such academics will also be able to mentor other lecturers.

Suitable teachers mentoring small groups of international students providing academic counselling as well as looking after their personal welfare (Meggitt, 1995) can be an answer to many students feeling isolated and "unowned". Peer mentoring between local and international students can also be very useful. It can benefit both the parties as they can learn from each other enriching their respective learning experiences. Moreover as interacting with members of the host culture leads to a feeling of acceptance into another group, mentoring (English, 1999; Anderson & Baud, 1996; Handa, 2003) can facilitate cultural adjustment (Kagen & Cohen, 1990; Mallinckroft & Leong, 1992; Wan, Chapman, and Biggs, 1992; Tompson & Tompson, 1996 cited in English, 1999) bringing mutual respect for each other.

Internationalisation of higher education is a lifeline for most western universities who are struggling to survive in an atmosphere of receding resources. But it also means that they are obliged to assist not only their full fee paying overseas students to be recipients of international education but they have the same obligation towards their local students too. Therefore, a curriculum "with an international orientation in content, aimed at preparing students for performing (professionally and socially) in an international and multi-cultural context and designed for domestic students as well as foreign students" (OECD, 1995 cited in Volet, 2003, p. 3) needs to be developed. For the international higher education to be realised in real terms, the academics must strive to adapt to the demand of the current higher education and tailor their teaching to the needs of the diversity of learners in today's universities (Ireson et al, 1999). With an international curricula in place, committed teachers and interaction going on between the diverse groups of students (Rivers, 1994), universities would bristle with "cultural synergy" which according to Cortazzi, M. & Jin, L. (1997), means respect for others and dignity for oneself. By bringing people from different cultures and countries to study together in an atmosphere of mutual respect and dignity, internationalisation of higher education would certainly be able to increase and reflect inter connectedness in the world (Dewitt, 2002).

Conclusion

The mere presence of international students on university campuses does not create an internationalised institution. To be truly performing as an international institute of higher education, the other more important and vital factors discussed in the paper need attention. Ideally, universities involved in internationalisation of education should be buzzing with the new and dynamic changes in their socio-cultural as well as academic environment. The whole environment of university education should be moulded into becoming a living part of an international entity. The internationalisation of higher education should encourage an interaction and exchange of ideas and cultures among and between international students and their teachers, and international students and domestic students. The diversity in student population should be celebrated through the adoption of new and diverse ideas and ideologies of both teaching and learning, ensuring that

students coming from other cultures/countries do not feel lacking in what they are and are recognised for what they bring.

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