

Profiling international students: a practical approach to improving student experience and understanding diverse cultures

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Abstract

As traditional international mono-markets decline, our knowledge of other cultures is being challenged by the influx from a more variable market. We need to question if, on the basis of our past cultural encounters, it is now possible to deal effectively, realistically and empathetically with the increasing range of factors presented by this cultural variety.

This is an issue confronting support areas, such as Monash International at the Gippsland campus of Monash University, where, at any one time, over 30 different, and often distinct national groups require perceptive support. Profiling individual students via one-on-one interviews, as representatives of disparate cultures, is a one approach that facilitates and creates opportunities for empathetic understanding.

A number of benefits to the international office accrue from this: increasing cross-cultural knowledge, broadening of perceptions, identifying service gaps, building of individual relationships, creating insights into student needs, generating contextualization of students' actions, constructing student experiences and strategies, and encouraging acceptance of difference. The student also benefits in that the opportunity enables them to take the role of an expert authority, to be a deliverer rather than a receiver of knowledge, to share their culture, to make cultural comparisons that provide personal insights and to connect their home experiences with their study experiences.

This paper discusses one strategy used in a multi-focused approach to improving the experience of international students at university.

Key words:

international student support; cultural profiling; professional development; cultural awareness; student experience; narrative research

Reflection on the International Student Adviser (ISA) role

Why should international support people concern themselves with anything but visa obligations and changes, student health cover, basic counter enquiries, or office administration? Should we engage in professional development? Surely, international students, like all students, just need information and social events to help keep them academically successful and happy? (Dunstan, 2003).

Assumptions like these may imply a limited level of understanding about the role of international support. It is a difficult area to articulate and this definitely needs addressing. Historically, there has been little formal professional development for ISAs to engage with in the international education industry (Dunstan, 2003). Increasingly, more university-structured opportunities have become available and the professional body in this industry, ISANA: International Education Association, is also working to address this gap and has been for the past few years. However, at the moment, it all relies heavily on the goodwill and potential opportunities its members have to be willing, and able, to pass on their hard-earned knowledge to new and existing entrants. While admirable, this takes time and requires expertise building in terms of how best to capture and pass on this knowledge in a useful form. This means there is still a need for an ISA to continue to be proactive in searching out and constructing methods of knowledge building, and how best to develop a coordinated sense of their student body and then to translate that to meet the needs of both the students and their institution - a seemingly endless, ever-changing and overwhelming task.

This is the challenge of taking on the ISA role in international education. It is not a static profession. It is an occupation that provides opportunities for continual growth personally, emotionally and intellectually. A practitioner requires a high level of empathy, an intellectual curiosity about people and different cultures, an

ability to form relationships, a reasoned capacity to understand and translate that understanding, and a strong, well developed acceptance of difference. Arnold (2003, p.23) describes this as empathic intelligence, “grounded in practice and intrinsically mobilised by speculation and imagination”.

As international education becomes further entrenched into the Australian economy, the ability of the ISA to support their institution’s internationalisation goals in a changing environment can have an influence on the student experience. In order to offer a positive experience, ISAs need to continually develop their key competencies and be supported by their institutions in improving professional standards (Dunstan, 2003). The added value an ISA can bring to their institution’s internationalisation process is reflected in the multidisciplinary nature of the demands that are placed on them. Universities cannot just talk the rhetoric of the market advantages of a good ‘student experience’ in order to increase student numbers; instead, they need to support opportunities that directly activate that experience. The assumption that currently tends to characterise the sector, that students can only be successful if they adapt to the institution, needs to be discarded, or at least, heavily modified. It needs to be acknowledged that as well as financially contributing 15% of university revenues, international students are “important as cultural contributors and human beings in Australian higher education; as well as being important to their own nations and families” (Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Sawir, 2004, p. 1). An additional challenge for universities, as the international education market matures, is the shift away from traditional markets (IDP Education Australia Limited, 2004) into broader, less familiar regions.

In this new cultural scenario, where market and customer attitudes become an increasingly prevalent feature within international education, there is, for the ISA, a growing need to appreciate the importance of these attitudes and the additional demands they will require of the international support person. One important issue here is how customers, be they student or institution, can be best satisfied and supported by the ISA given that “it is not sufficient to simply rely on survey data and ... overseas students should not be treated as a single homogenous group” (Moon, 2003, p. 9).

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International student support practitioners often find themselves in the unenviable position of apparent ignorance. This position is unenviable in that generally they are expected to offer care and support to a diverse and wide range of culturally influenced beings - of the student kind and institutional kind, all of whom come without instructions about their mode of operation, but who are usually accompanied by a list of disparate expectations. These expectations create a tightrope of uncertainty upon which an ISA walks daily – uncertainty about how to strengthen, service and authenticate the international experience for all, including themselves. Profiling international students is one approach by which an ISA can improve the student experience and gain an understanding of diverse cultures. This profiling provides an opportunity to gain knowledge and a perspective of their students’ cultures as well as the story elements that have created the student’s life to this point. This can become a mechanism by which a student’s actions can be contextualised and interpreted for a wider audience into “comprehensible human experience” (Flood, 2002, p. 107).

As a type of cultural profiling, in the form of narrative research, this method transforms the tightrope into something resembling a meandering, leaf littered forest path where uncertainty and ignorance move more to the side and take on a dark tree-like form that lends itself to being regularly chopped down. In the connectivity of telling, listening, writing, reading and retelling of students’ stories about their own cultural positioning and understandings, much is revealed about “themes and patterns” (Flood, 2002, p. 105) that the international office can extrapolate, with care, into a broader context. In practice, although time consuming, the narrative style of cultural profiling offers benefits to students as well as practitioners who, in turn, can extend those benefits on to their institution.

Using narrative as a way of profiling students’ cultures is, as a form of professional development for the international support person, a means of satisfying customer expectations, a tool of interpretation and translation for all parties, and an opportunity to create neutral cultural space (Eisenchkas & Trevaskes, 2003) where student and staff member can step into or between cultures. Here, conducting one-on-one interviews, as a qualitative form of investigation in the narrative style, with students representing diverse cultural backgrounds, is one approach to facilitate and create opportunities for empathetic understanding for all participants.

The rationale for the use of narrative has been widely published and will not be addressed in detail here; however, the narration process does lend itself to an approach where both speaker and listener can be heard. One outcome is that it does incite thought in others and a comprehension of alternative perspectives (Flood, 2002; Nita, 1999). This approach, initially envisaged as a method of building cultural awareness and understanding of over 30 different and distinct national groups requiring perceptive support by Monash International at the Gippsland campus of Monash University, has resulted in broader benefits.

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The underlying purpose the profiling approach was to extend, in a formal way, information already known at a practical, if sometimes intuitive, level by most practitioners in the international education industry – that students bring underlying ways of thinking about themselves and their culture which influences how they respond to the new culture in which they are now situated. However, when added to past experience within the Monash International office of inadvertently discovering ‘strange’ and ‘unusual’ facts about its students’ lives prior to coming to Monash, these issues gradually became a priority to investigate. For it is clear that ‘strange’ and ‘unusual’ are in the eyes of the beholder. In order to interrupt negative cultural perceptions and to challenge assumptions of students, staff and institutions, opportunities for communication between people of differing cultures helps to create a common context where misunderstandings are minimised (Wang & Le, 2004).

The development of cultural awareness may start out as a one-way process where the student is expected to assimilate into and engage with Australian university cultural practices in order to be successful both academically and socially. This process reflects an exercise of institutionalised power/knowledge in which “some voices become dominant, [and] others are subsumed” (Koehne, 2004, p. 2). However, support staff who work closely with international students eventually realise over time that cultural awareness is a two-way process of enrichment – “for any kind of successful communication, both sides must share a set of patterns to explain, evaluate and predict communicative behaviours, otherwise efficient communication is impossible” (Wang & Le, 2004, p. 3). This industry requires the adoption of a different perspective on the character of institutional power. To be effective, ISAs must grow in confidence and develop alternative perspectives that ease them into a more considered approach, one where the student could be teacher and expert.

When culture is conceptualised “as the experiences of everyday living” (Eisenchakas & Trevaskes, 2003, p. 87), it provides an interesting perspective when ISAs aim to maximise successful operations and opportunities for international students. Developing cultural profiles gives ISAs and students insight into everyday living which can be utilised by staff to interpret and advocate for the legitimacy of a student’s attitude or behaviour to the university. Therefore, the students’ ‘everyday’ motivations and actions are understood as having some level of validity within the institutional culture. Prasad, Mannes, Ahmed, Kaur and Griffiths (2004), although talking about a teacher’s position, point out that cultural goodwill is generated for students by at least trying to acknowledge and work around known cultural sensitivities. This can easily be transposed into the general support environment where relationship building, based on mutual respect, can minimise difficulties and facilitate communication in an intercultural setting.

It is this enrichment in communication and the understanding of everyday operations that will enhance student experience within their new culture, broaden the personal outlook on life for all parties, enable international support staff to access an area of specialist knowledge in order to offer a high level of support, and shape mechanisms to give international students a ‘voice’.

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At Monash International Gippsland, the formal process of cultural profiling has been undertaken with five students to date. The aim of this process was to engage with students’ cultural life stories in order to expand the cultural knowledge of international student support staff. It was envisaged that one outcome would be the development of tools which would have an impact on others’ awareness of the student experience and enable them to visualise and imagine themselves as someone who had been transposed from one known cultural space to another, unknown space. In the engagement of this empathetic understanding, it would

hopefully lead to a greater appreciation of cultural differences and therefore reduce misunderstandings and negate the tendency to assume a homogenous student experience.

There are many approaches to undertaking narrative research. In this case, as part of the groundwork, consent was sought from the student, as a representative of their national group, to give prior thought to various initial topics considering the story of their lives and family; the reasons as to why they had decided to study at Monash University in Gippsland; and how attitudes or actions they noticed in the first few weeks of arriving in Australia and the University had generated feelings for them. These reflections were to help to site the student in their current situation. Further, students were asked to consider aspects of their culture which a stranger would need to know; the feelings of their parents in sending them to study in Australia; their history, both national and familial; and a personal story that reflects for them, a special time in their lives.

These topics are only guides for encouraging the student to start to think along reflective lines and to make sure there was preliminary material to talk about during the interview. The actual interview was more a conversation over lunch or coffee. One important aspect of this process, in this case, was that the proceedings were deliberately kept informal and casual and that the topics remained fluid, following new directions as they occurred. It should be noted that students who already had prior contact with the international office were asked to be involved. No particular course of study was targeted. There is one warning – this process takes a lot of time with each scheduled conversation taking up to three hours plus additional accumulations as opportunity and time permits.

The final product, the students' stories, are characterised by the author's interpretations and compilations. As noted earlier, this is a feature of narrative research. In writing these narratives, an attempt has been made to translate facts, feelings and impressions as experienced and told by a member of one culture into a format that offers revelation to members of another culture. There has been an overarching honest endeavour to capture the essence of what is said, to craft a "space for telling, and listening to, people's stories, ... and from writing and reading stories" and to create a perspective where the sharing of a narrative produces knowledge which "can facilitate personal learning and change" (Nita, 1999, p. 2).

From the five conversations completed to date, there was the expected outcome of an increase in the cultural knowledge of the interviewer and the development of a set of life stories that as a narrative collection can be utilised in a number of ways. This generated a number of positive impacts with benefits accruing to the university, the international office and the ISA from this activity. For example: an increase in cross-cultural knowledge, broadening of perceptions, identification of service gaps, the building of individual relationships with students, formation of insights into student needs, generating contextualization of students' actions, constructing student experiences and strategies, and encouraging acceptance of difference.

Further benefits of this process for the ISA included the contribution to improving and informing the practices of the international office at the Gippsland campus, several of an innovative nature. Service gaps identified in the process have been addressed by a unique approach to transition (Cook & Murray, 2003), with institutional collaborative efforts in the development of the M-Power Game, where students are confronted with hypothetical situations. Responses to these situations have various consequences in regards to students' movement across a game board. The game uses anecdotes to stimulate students to be more aware of challenges ahead and to give some pre-thought to possible strategies. Secondly, the stories have been used as a tool to engage students and staff about cross-cultural awareness and to provide insight into the fact that interacting with the university culture, beyond language acquisition, is very demanding for international students (Major, 2005). This was instrumental in attracting social welfare students to undertake a 16-day placement with the international office for academic credit. Another application of the profiling process was its use to inform the international office's practice about the needs of international students living in a regional area. This has resulted in Life Skills training which looks at practical skills and information for living and surviving in a new culture through enlightening international students about, but not imposing, new, cultural attitudes.

Finally, students appeared to relish the role of an expert authority and to be a deliverer rather than a receiver of knowledge, with a common response of gratification that the activity enabled them to share their culture with an interested audience. It encouraged a sense of value in their own culture which some students have

subdued in order to survive in this new environment (Major, 2005). The process of conversation and communication, plus active interaction with an interested listener aided the students to make cultural comparisons that appeared to provide personal insights into the operation of themselves and others in their new environment (Wang, 2004; Major, 2005). Such introspective conversations gave the student an opportunity to put their experiences, both past and current, into perspective (Arnold, 2003). As such, the profiling experience helped the students to construct a connection between their home experiences, with their study and Australian experiences.

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An ISA works in an industry without a currently defined structure of professional development, yet it is an industry that asks a lot from its members in that they often expected to act as a surrogate parent, a multicultural expert and an innovator in program delivery. Therefore, to build the professionalism, it is imperative that ISAs as individuals, engage in reflective practices that will inform and guide proactive approaches to their work. The understanding attached to the life story of an international student, the willingness and flexibility of institutions to accommodate diverse cultural interfaces, and the working practices and demands of the ISA converge within the narrative structure of profiling international students. While the project, given changing markets, started out as a means to address cultural difference and for knowledge accumulation, it has become a significant tool that continues to inform the practice of the international office at the Gippsland campus of Monash University and to contribute to the student experience. Actively developing a growing collection of cultural snapshots allows practitioners to utilise the process as a form of professional development as well as a technique to contextualise student actions and motivations. Institutions have an opportunity to gain a sense of the internationalism of their student body in a cultural space where national and global perspectives interact intimately with the personal. Students also achieve a number of benefits not least of which is the opportunity to create meanings and connections without disadvantaging themselves as different.

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