

# The Safety of our International Students – A Proactive Approach

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## Abstract

Each year, the University of Queensland opens its doors to thousands of new international students. Although Student Support Services at the University of Queensland introduce international students to some essential safety issues relating to their new environment within the first few days after arrival, it has become apparent that given the number of avoidable critical accidents over the past few years, more specific information was needed to ensure students are made sufficiently aware of the dangers and hazards of their new surroundings. This practice based paper aims to describe the design and implementation of the ‘Safety and International Students’ session at the University of Queensland, and the measures taken to ensure that the information provided caters to the needs of international students. Further, this session is designed to introduce, reinforce and equip international students with a greater knowledge base of safety issues that is imperative to maximise their safe stay and reduce behaviour induced and therefore preventable critical accidents. The safety session is a compulsory one hour component of Orientation Week and is repeated twice to allow for maximum attendance. This study is a result of two years of reflective practice initiated by the International Student Advisers at the University of Queensland. Six hundred and fifty-three student evaluations were collated over the two years and feedback provided was very positive. This Safety Session was also presented at the Queensland ISANA Branch Meeting in March 2006 and was extremely well received.

## Keywords

Safety, International Students, Critical Incidents, Duty of Care, Risk minimisation

## Introduction

When deciding to study abroad, safety is one of the key factors that students take into consideration when selecting their destination. As Deumert et al (2006) explain, “...a logistic regression analysis of choice-making by Chinese students by Mazzarol et al (2001;2002) demonstrated that a safe environment was the most significant predictor of intentions to choose Australia over competitor nations”. Marketing and tourism have certainly played a significant role in not only promoting Australia as a relatively *safer* destination than other parts of the world, but are particularly successful in upholding Queensland’s image as one of the safest states in Australia, with slogans such as ‘Sunshine State, beautiful one day, perfect the next’, capturing the attention of international students.

Students who choose to study abroad are particularly vulnerable for various reasons. They are unfamiliar with the behavioural codes prompted by their new cultural environment, thus in some instances are required to relearn certain behaviours to encourage risk minimisation. Further, based on my experience, it seems that international students are more prone to risk taking behaviour which they would not usually do in their home country. This may be due to environmental and/or economic factors which may not be prevalent in their home country. For example, students from countries with no ocean surrounding them may experience scuba diving while in Australia. Further, students who come from countries where driving is not as orderly, may choose to drive on Australian roads. Moreover, there is often the misconception that students generally think they are invincible from danger in their host country, as David Larson (1998: 2, cited in Rubin: 1998) states, “...students often think they’re safer abroad than they are at home, so aren’t always as cautious as they might be”.

Despite the current heightened level of awareness concerning safety, many international students also arrive with the belief that their existing knowledge and experience equips them adequately in maintaining their safety in their new environment. This is clearly not the case. International students are generally lacking specific information relating to their new host environment. Nonetheless, no matter how prepared a university is or how many safety related programs are in place, illnesses and accidents can happen anytime and anywhere. Nevertheless, common incidents in the past with international students have resulted from behaviour induced situations which in hindsight could have been preventable. Thus, as a university that hosts thousands of international students, it is our duty of care to ensure that they are equipped with the knowledge necessary to significantly minimise the potential of harm.

### **University of Queensland Safety Program**

International Students are currently introduced to the topic of safety and security during the compulsory *Getting Started Session* (held within 72 hours of their arrival). As well as receiving information in the International Student Orientation before the commencement of each semester, they are given an International Student Handbook which contains a detailed chapter on Health and Safety. However, it can be assumed that most students *do not* read their handbooks thoroughly at the beginning of the semester as they are often overwhelmed with other important matters such as enrolment, accommodation and settling in.

The number of critical incidents that have either resulted in the serious injury or death of international students has sparked concern at the University of Queensland. Specific triggers were highlighted, such as the death of a Chinese student who jogged onto the road after looking *left* first rather than right, and died after only three weeks of being in Australia; a Malaysian student who drowned after going swimming alone; and the multiple deaths and serious injuries of international students as a result of road accidents. Experience has highlighted the fact that a lack of knowledge of Queensland streets and road rules, beach safety and sexual health issues could have been avoided by a heightened awareness, thus emphasising the need for the University to become more proactive in their duty of care to their international students. Furthermore, the University of Queensland Policy 2.10.8 'Risk Assessment and Management Guidelines' clearly indicates the need to establish, identify and analyse the risks that may result due to hazardous situations. In this context, given the growing number of international students at the University of Queensland, it is imperative that students are consciously made aware of the dangers and hazards in an attempt to minimise the risk of harm.

As a result, the International Student Advisers have developed a 'Safety and International Students' Session which is a one hour compulsory component of Orientation, held in Orientation Week before the beginning of each semester. This session includes information on personal safety strategies, road safety, beach safety and other general information such as places to avoid, on and off campus security, drugs and alcohol (drink spiking), and an outline of some of the laws that all students must be aware of and abide by during their stay in Australia. This session is presented in a dynamic, attention-grabbing way and includes such media as a colourful PowerPoint presentation, TV commercials, Queensland Government campaigns and audience participation.

#### *Phase One- Initial Implementation*

The safety session for international students was initially designed and implemented as a compulsory part of Orientation in July (Semester 2) 2004. At the outset, it was thought that inviting key stakeholders from the community to come and present would be beneficial for students as they can identify them as approachable, friendly people. Presenters included representatives from Surf Life Saving Queensland who spoke about beach safety; Queensland Police Services who focussed on personal safety strategies; and Queensland Transport who discussed issues related to road rules and regulations in regards to drink driving.

Further, it was acknowledged that students' perceptions of authoritative figures of the community such as the Police may vary, depending on their country of origin. For example, in some countries, policing is conducted by the military or armed forces, while in others the police force is viewed as a corrupt and excessively aggressive organisation, which makes them an entity to be feared and avoided at all costs and definitely not approachable in times of need. Thus, by seeing Police Officers in uniform who were friendly and

approachable, students may change their perception of their pre-existent ideologies and hopefully approach the Police and other service delivery providers in times of need during their stay.

To assess the effectiveness of the safety session, a quantitative analysis was conducted via student questionnaires distributed at the end of each session. International students were asked to evaluate the session's information and content as well as the presenters and mode of delivery. These questionnaires were devised to provide a greater understanding of the main topics that international students felt useful to know during their time in Australia, as well as giving the students the avenue to indicate topics that have not been addressed through the safety session. They were collected over two semesters (July 2004 and February 2005) and showed that the majority of students found the information invaluable, particularly in regards to personal, road and beach safety. It should be noted that even though the invited presenters provided valuable information, some failed to identify and understand the needs of their target audience. Some presenters used a lot of Australian slang, spoke too quickly and some assumed a level of cultural knowledge that many of our students lacked as first time visitors to Australia. Other presenters did not use any form of media and thus, in turn, lost student attention and interest. Furthermore, evaluations indicated that following the sessions, many students felt frightened and overwhelmed due to the authoritative mode of delivery of some invited presenters, which was contrary to the desired outcome of the session.

### *Phase Two – Getting it Right*

As a result of student feedback from Phase One, the Safety Session was modified and adapted to reflect students' comments, and it was decided that the International Student Advisers deliver the presentation rather than invited guest speakers, incorporating all the valuable information deemed necessary. The enhanced form of this Safety Session was presented to international students from July 2005 and again, quantitative analysis of their responses was conducted.

Results indicated that over 95% of all participants found the session to be useful, fun and provided information that they felt was important to have during their stay here. Students have responded favourably to the session and have commented that this session should continue to be made compulsory. Part of the evaluation asked students to comment on the length of the session, and it was noted that the majority indicated that a one hour session was *just right* (see Figure One below):

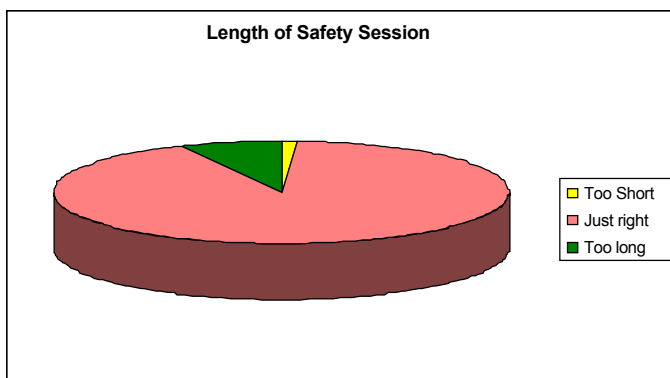


Figure 1. Evaluation of the length of the One Hour Safety Session

When asked: *What was the most useful thing you learnt from the session*, it was highlighted that students appreciated the following information:

#### Personal Safety:

- 112 number from a locked mobile to emergency services
- Emergency call numbers off campus such as the Poison Information Number, and 000
- Emergency call numbers and Security Services on campus (namely the Safety Bus and the Security Escort Service)
- Drink spiking and safe drinking information
- Places to avoid at night

- Safe sex (including “no means no”)
- Personal safety when using public transport (e.g., the Guards Compartment on trains)
- Awareness of the Asian Policing Unit and other Police Liaison Officers
- Awareness of the existence of gang activity.

Beach safety:

- Marine life and the sea
- Signage on the beach (including swimming between the red and yellow flags)
- Sun protection (slip, slop, slap and wrap) and UV intensity between 10am and 3pm
- What to do when in danger in the water.

Road safety:

- The use of seatbelts when either the passenger or driver of a motor vehicle or motorbike
- The use of helmets when cycling
- Drink Driving regulations
- Roundabouts
- Speed limits on Brisbane roads
- Road safety (as a pedestrian).

Other:

- Regulations surrounding drinking alcohol in public places
- Contacting your consulate to advise that you are in Australia and the duration of your stay.

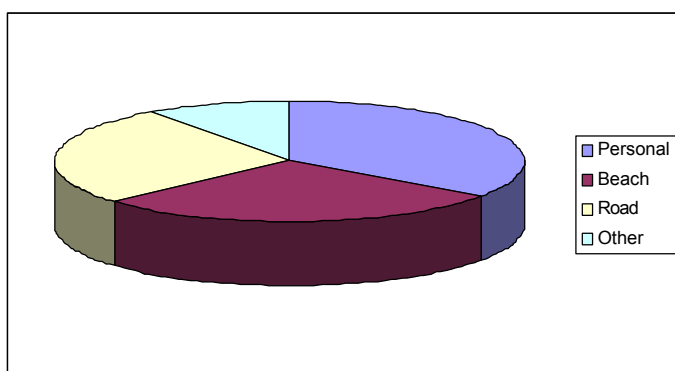


Figure 2. Most useful information that International Students learnt from Safety Session

When asked: *What was the least useful thing you learnt from the session*, the majority of students either responded *nothing* or did not respond at all. Few students’ responses included; drink/drug driving regulations (particularly for those that did not plan to drive while in Australia); some common sense information such as not walking alone at night; and safe sex. While some of these issues may appear to some as “common sense” topics and that the majority of countries around the world have the same stance regarding such issues, it should be noted that common sense can not always be assumed.

Other overall comments from students emphasized that although many have heard parts of the information before, it was imperative to hear safety related information again and to note the differences from their home country to those of Australia, however slight or significant these differences may be. This served to reinforce student knowledge and awareness and bring an element of reality into the students’ new surroundings. It was also noted that students appreciated the different forms of media which kept their attention and the light-hearted humour during the presentation which was reassuring, particularly when delivering somewhat ‘hard and dry’ information. Some students thanked the University for its concern and were grateful that the University is aware of what students want to know and present it in a compulsory session. Some students suggested that there should be more information about the dangerous marine life such as stingrays and sharks that seem to be so commonly discussed internationally, as well as more information on particular ‘Australian’ security issues and more detailed information on road rules.

As previously mentioned, some students felt that the information provided on safe sex and consent issues was already common sense knowledge. However, other students indicated that the most useful thing they learnt from the session was the whole concept of “no means no” in relation to sexual conduct. This enforces the fact that prior to their arrival, many students will have already formulated a set of pre-conceived notions and ideas based on their expectations of their new environment and how their existing mindset regards our culture. As difficult as it may be to determine what is *common sense* information and what needs to be reiterated, the duty will always fall on the International Student Advisors to determine the content and information to be communicated. At the commencement of the presentation, students are advised that even though some of the information might be familiar to them, other students come from different countries and what is common sense in one is not necessarily the same in another. Furthermore, students are often advised to listen to the information open-mindedly, as there are many subtleties that often present themselves (e.g. laws regarding drink-driving and blood alcohol content).

One also needs to be mindful that the level of English proficiency among newly arrived international students may vary considerably. For this reason, the information provided orally during the safety session is reinforced visually through the PowerPoint slides. Also, a printed summary of all the important points and contact information is handed out to students, allowing them to refer to the information when needed.

The questionnaire responses also indicated that many students wanted more information on personal safety issues (particularly for women), terrorism/security issues and poisonous creatures. Some students suggested an extra half an hour be added to the length of the session to provide a more detailed discussion. In all safety sessions, students are directed to sources for further information of any of the topics discussed and an information sheet is provided with contact details including websites and emergency phone numbers.

### *Phase Three – What’s Next?*

With issues surrounding student safety constantly changing to reflect the current trends of society, the safety sessions must continuously be monitored and evaluated in relation to content and delivery modes. At the University of Queensland, we are on a constant lookout for new ways to enhance our current service and attempting to stay ahead by devising new plans and strategies to reach students on all fronts.

In our current climate of global change, it is hard to predict what future events may trigger the need for new information content, or what new breakthroughs and cutting edge technologies may shape our future. The 1990’s have been dubbed as the “Age of Information” and at the moment we are experiencing a heightened new era of mass-communication and media breakthroughs, which creates new possibilities for safety information to have more avenues of distribution and more ways to reach students. The printed information sheets and online PowerPoint presentations may very soon become a thing of the past. Given the current trends in technology, the University of Queensland may look into providing safety sessions to students via iPod broadcasts and vPods (iPod video broadcasts). We must turn our attention to the future and to alternative technologies in reaching the maximum number of international students, while creating the maximum impact. By no means is this a licence to take away from the human contact and personalising the information base; on the contrary, this is to ensure that each student may have access to information that could provide the difference between life and death, injury and well-being.

### **Conclusion**

As a university that hosts a large number of international students, we have a duty of care, not only to our international students, but to their families and loved ones. This initiative discussed above is a proactive approach to student safety, whereby the University of Queensland can increase international students’ awareness of their new culture and surroundings to prevent and minimise the number of behavioural and environmental factors resulting in critical incidents.

One of the key elements to the success of this Safety Session is the ability to deliver such ‘hard and dry’ information in a dynamic, attention-grabbing, and somewhat “fun” way that appeals to students.

Student evaluations have been and will always be an integral part to the ongoing development of the Safety Session. As the situations on the political and environmental fronts change, as our knowledge and horizons continuously expand, as various events continue to dictate and challenge our society, so will the needs of our students and so will the information and methods of delivery that we present to them.

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