
Connecting, Networking, Integrating: Enriching the relationship between international Muslim students and academic staff in health areas.

Gresham, Ruth
Newcastle International
University of Newcastle
Newcastle, Australia
Ruth.Gresham@newcastle.edu.au

Walsh, Jeannette
Counselling Service
University of Newcastle
Newcastle. Australia
Jeannette.Walsh@newcastle.edu.au

Abstract

The University of Newcastle has taken a proactive approach in promoting interactions between international Muslim students, staff of the University and members of the broader community. The development of networks has been integral to a number of projects and has been vital in connecting students to the community.

Through these networks, three resources were collaboratively developed. Their focus was on assisting international Muslim students to integrate into the local community and to assist the broader community to better understand Muslim beliefs and practices.

The development of these resources led to requests for training. Training for the Faculty of Health focused on building knowledge and skills for staff. The content of this training was developed into two further resources. These resources and training continue to develop intercultural interactions and aim to build connections for international Muslim students in academic and social environments.

Keywords Muslim, teaching, cross-cultural, medical, students, community

Introduction

Since 2005, the University of Newcastle has developed a proactive approach in building the capacity of the University and local communities to accommodate and meet the needs of Muslim students. This approach has required the University to develop collaborative partnerships with external organisations, such as the Newcastle Muslim Association. These partnerships and networks have been invaluable in developing resources and in providing support and building connections for students.

The impetus for this strategy was the challenge of new cohorts of Muslim students from Qatar, Malaysia and now Saudi Arabia who were studying with a culturally diverse group of students and living in a community that has a less culturally diverse population than other cities of Australia (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006)

Through these partnerships, workshops have been facilitated and five written resources have been produced through two funding grants, one from the Department of Immigration and Citizenship National Action Plan and the other an Equity Initiatives grant from the University of Newcastle.

Resources produced include:

- (i) ‘Welcome to Newcastle: Information for Muslim Students and their Families’
- (ii) ‘Understanding Islam’
- (iii) ‘Focusing on Islam: Answers to Frequently Asked Questions’
- (iv) ‘Teaching International Muslim Students in Health Areas’

(v) ‘Challenges for International Muslim Students in the Academic Environment’

With the development of the first three resources, university faculties and schools responded with interest and requested training so that staff could gain greater understanding of the needs of Muslim students in the learning environment. Consequently, students’ experiences have been enhanced as staff have reported greater confidence in interacting with the students. Orientation sessions have been developed, specifically targeting the issues identified as most challenging. All of these strategies have supported international Muslim students in their academic, cultural and social experiences whilst studying at the University.

Background to the project

In 2005 a cohort of international students arrived in Newcastle from Qatar to commence studies at the University of Newcastle and Hunter Institute of Technical and Further Education NSW (TAFE). The University’s international student population was at the time culturally diverse, with students from eighty countries, studying at the Newcastle campuses (The University of Newcastle NuStar report 2005). This group required special attention because the majority were young and accommodated in Homestay. During Ramadhan, Homestay hosts requested information so they could better understand how to support the students while fasting. Information about Ramadhan, with suggestions about appropriate care of students was prepared and provided to hosts. In the process of doing this staff began to consider whether there was a need to produce a resource(s) that would assist: (i) the local community to gain understanding of Islam and (ii) newly arrived Muslims to have information about services within the local community.

The development of a collaborative partnership

The first step in establishing whether there was sufficient need to proceed with this project was a discussion with staff from Newcastle TAFE about the experiences of students from Qatar. The conclusion was drawn that the highest priority was to produce a resource that would assist new students to access services within the community and to obtain information about life in Australia that would assist with their adjustment. Contained in the resource would be tips and ideas to assist newcomers to develop connections with members of the local community and to gain understanding of how systems work in the local context. To some extent this resource would aim to address some of the issues identified by Ellis, Sawyer, Gill, Medlin & Wilson (2005). In their study at the Whyalla campus of the University of South Australia, students commented on the small size of the campus and the lack of facilities and entertainment options relative to larger metropolitan campuses. The resource would also: (i) recognise and address to some extent the desire expressed by many international students to have greater interaction with domestic students (Chalmers & Volet 1997), by giving them information on how to connect with local people and (ii) assist in creating stronger bonds between international and domestic students in the educational setting. It is notable that Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland & Ramia (2007) have subsequently identified loneliness as an issue for international students.

During these initial discussions it was also decided that the resource would be made available to new members of the Newcastle Muslim community generally and not kept exclusively for students and their families.

A team of representatives from key organisations, the University, TAFE, Northern Settlement Services (formerly Newcastle & Hunter Migrant Resource Centre), Department of Education & Training and the Newcastle Muslim Association were brought together. This latter group were regarded as special cultural advisors to the project.

Although unknown at the time, the decision to develop collaborative partnerships with these community organisations was one that would guide and influence the direction of the project far beyond the production of the initial resource. The relationship building that has occurred among members of this group, particularly between the University and the Newcastle Muslim Association, has been a key outcome of the project.

By collaborating with community organisations the resources that have been produced through the project have served the needs of students and also people within the broader community. They have also demonstrated that students belong not only to the institution but also to the wider community.

Funding

The production of these resources required the acquisition of funding and an initial approach was made to Newcastle City Council. There was interest in providing funds to produce these resources on the basis that they would be used as marketing tools to demonstrate the openness of the city to newcomers. This offer was rejected by the project team as it was seen that the development of the resources was largely to inform the local community and to welcome and settle newcomers and was not about promotion. This decision was seen as critical to maintain the integrity of the project, even though it was difficult to make at the time.

Funding was eventually secured through the Department of Immigration and Citizenship National Action Plan, who financed the production of the original resources and have funded the reproduction of 10,000 copies of the resources in 2008.

Early outcomes

By November 2006, three resources had been produced: (i) ‘Welcome to Newcastle: Information for Muslim Students and Families’ – a booklet with key contacts, services and information about life in Newcastle and Australia. (ii) ‘Understanding Islam’ – a brochure containing information about Islam. (iii) ‘Focusing on Islam: Answers to Frequently asked Questions’ – an internet based resource with more detailed information about Muslim beliefs and practices.

These resources were launched during a community dinner held at the Hall adjacent to the Newcastle Mosque in November 2006. The resources were launched by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Newcastle and the evening was hosted by the Newcastle Muslim Association. Approximately 150 representatives from local, regional and national organisations attended the event. Launching the resources in this way cemented the relationship between the organisations that produced the resources and demonstrated in a tangible way the support of the local mainstream community for the local Muslim community.

New projects

The acceptance of the initial resources and positive feedback from staff within the University and various agencies opened possibilities to develop the project further. Staff from the Language Centre requested a workshop on ‘Teaching Muslim Students’ – particularly those from Middle Eastern countries; staff from the Faculty of Education and Arts asked for assistance in communicating more effectively with Muslim students and staff from the Faculty of Health requested a workshop on developing their confidence in interacting with Muslim students in the academic environment.

The Faculty of Health had a particular need as a cohort of international, mainly Muslim, students from Malaysia come to the University to study Medicine. Academic and general staff had previously been provided with general cross-cultural training in engaging with students from different cultures, teaching and supervising international students. Staff had found this useful, but requested specific information on teaching Muslim students.

Projects in the Faculty of Health

In developing the workshop for the Faculty, the literature was reviewed for strategies that other universities had developed for teaching cross culturally in Medicine.

Kai, Spencer, Wiles and Gill (1999) write that:

institutions have a continuing responsibility to evaluate recruitment of *both learners and teachers* (emphasis added) and ensure that they are encouraging under-represented groups in selection and assessment processes underpinned by non-discriminatory practice. They must also address and carefully support the training of those they expect to teach about valuing diversity. (p.622)

However, a review of the literature shows a focus on preparing students to work with a culturally diverse population of patients (Thistlethwaite & Ewart 2003; Morell, Sharp & Crandall 2002; Betancourt 2004; Rosen et al 2004), or teaching international medical graduates (IMGs) who are beginning residency training in another country (Hall, Keely, Dojeiji, Byszewski & Marks 2004; Steinert & Walsh 2006, Thille & Frank 2006) without a corresponding focus on academic staff engaging students from different cultures in the learning process. Betancourt 2003 as quoted by Thille and Frank (2006, p8-9) highlights that attitudes, knowledge and skills are key to cross cultural education. We would also argue that effective teaching must begin with engagement and valuing of difference in the student population who are themselves being encouraged to value difference.

In 2003, Erasmus Medical Centre, Rotterdam first year students were surveyed on ethnicity, religion and expectations of their education (Sellegger, Bonke and Leeman, 2006). A follow-up in-depth interview with a smaller cohort of these students comprising a mixture of immigrant and ethnic Dutch, identified three main issues relating to their experience of education amongst this ethnically diverse student group: (i) training in physical examinations in mixed gender groups, (ii) lack of attention in the pedagogical approach to student diversity and (iii) demand for education in cross cultural medicine. The issue of physical examinations on mixed gender student peers from this study is illuminative of the complexities for this area of cross culturally sensitive teaching. The Centre had developed policy on students practising physical examinations on each other with “religion as such not being reason enough for dispensation [not to participate]” (p146) in these examinations. Students in this study, as the first cohort under this policy, all agreed with the policy - somewhat unexpectedly for some students, given the cultural practices in their country of origin. However, even though there was no wide or organised resistance from students, some teachers seemed reluctant to apply the official rules. Students reported that they found differences between official rules and practice. This example highlights “the conflict between the two principles: respect for cultural or religious values of the individual on the one hand and responsibility for general standards in medical education on the other” (p. 146).

Learning styles and practices were key areas that were taken into consideration in developing the workshop. Ballard & Clanchy (1984, 1999) contrast learning styles between Asian and Australian students. These include: (i) the emphasis in some Asian cultures on the conservation of knowledge rather than the Australian pedagogical emphasis on the revision and extension of knowledge, (ii) the expected respect for teachers which leads some students to be reticent to question, and (iii) the view that teachers are responsible for their students’ learning. As a result of these views, many Asian students tend to learn all the information their teachers provide, but are reluctant to ask questions about, raise objections to, or criticise existing knowledge and their teachers. They are often unused to independent, analytical and critical enquiry.

In developing the workshop, contact was made with some Australian Universities to explore their approaches to the needs of academic staff in teaching Muslim students, but we found no specific programs to address these issues.

To prepare for the workshop academic staff from the Faculty of Health were surveyed to determine the precise situations that caused them concern. The issues identified from this survey were: (i) the need to have an increased understanding of practices associated with Islam, (ii) the need to understand how dress impacts on developing communication and relationships (iii) the need to understand cultural and religious practices around birth and death (iv) the need to understand cultural and religious issues in clinical examinations, particularly in relation to cross gender examinations (v) strategies to get the right balance between academic integrity and accommodating religious practices and beliefs (vi) the need to understand whether there are cross cultural issues that impact on the teaching relationship between students and teachers.

Practising health professionals, who were also members of the Newcastle Muslim Association, collaborated to develop a training session that would address these identified issues and provide information about Muslim beliefs and practices. Through this information, strategies were developed to address issues. The workshop took the form of a Panel question and answer forum, speaking to an initial set of focus questions and moving out to questions and discussion from the workshop participants. Notable from this process was that there were differing views expressed by individual panel members (both male and female) – a reminder of the differences of emphasis and practice within the Muslim community.

Evaluation of the workshop by staff

Staff were surveyed at the conclusion of the workshop. All 12 participants found the workshop either valuable or very valuable. One participant reported that the workshop demystified the faith and requirements. Participants indicated that they found most useful (i) the increased understanding of the Muslim religion, (ii) information about the students’ orientation program, and (iii) being able to discuss relevant issues with members of the Muslim community who are also clinicians in the health profession. One participant wrote that they now appreciated the distinction between religion, culture and personality. Participants appreciated hearing different opinions between members of the panel.

Participants indicated that they had increased confidence in working with Muslim students: “I’ll feel freer to ask the students questions about what they are uncomfortable with”; “I’ll be more confident and relaxed in my communication and interactions with Muslim students”.

There was strong support amongst the participants for reviewing orientation sessions to more thoroughly prepare Muslim students for what to expect in their learning, including the possibly unfamiliar teaching methods used (such as problem based learning, small groups, scientific exploration). There was also strong support for ongoing workshops for staff, so that all staff, including lecturers and tutors, could have this information and support.

It would be interesting to survey staff twelve months after the workshop to assess whether the information from the workshop has been incorporated into their teaching, and if it has influenced their interaction with students.

Development of new resources for teaching International Muslim students

In order to maximise the opportunity of disseminating the information from the workshop, it was decided to develop written resources for staff, as many were not able to attend the workshop. After the workshop, the key information was developed into a brochure entitled ‘Teaching International Muslim Students in Health Areas’ and this was linked to a website based resource, ‘Challenges for International Muslim Students in the Academic Environment.’ An Equity Initiatives Grant, from the University of Newcastle, funded these resources.

The resources focused on the issues that had arisen as part of the workshop discussions, including (i) differences in learning styles, (ii) ways to build communication, (iii) teaching physical examination skills, (iv) maintaining modesty of dress and providing good infection control. The emphasis was on students developing skills to prepare them to practise and provide safe care for patients. Both resources aimed to help academic staff (a) to understand the challenges for International Muslim students, (b) to provide some ideas for building an inclusive environment and (c) some information on Muslim beliefs and practices in relation to health issues. In the resources, there is recognition that Islam is made up of many different ethnicities and cultures, so whilst it can be difficult to generalise about many practices, core Islamic beliefs and practices were the focus of the resources and workshops. Often, the focus is on religion when it can be argued that the issues are really cultural differences within the various Muslim communities.

From the discussion and evaluation of the workshop, a number of initiatives were identified as being vital in the preparation and orientation of students commencing Medicine, to avoid difficulties where possible and to prepare students for their studies. As reported earlier, Selleger, Bonke and Leeman (2006, p. 146), identified the tension between maintaining academic integrity and respecting cultural practices as an issue for students. This also emerged from the workshop as an important issue for University of Newcastle Faculty of Health staff. As already noted, it was identified that it is important for students to have as much knowledge as possible prior to commencing studies in Medicine, to be informed about what would be expected. To address these issues in a proactive way, two key times were identified for students to be informed of course content and expectations so that they could be both prepared for studies in Medicine and also assisted to develop strategies in relation to these challenges. The first was at the point of initial interviews with University of Newcastle staff in Malaysia. It was important that potential students understood explicitly what was expected of them in their studies so that they could begin thinking about their own strategies and how the course may challenge them. The second point was during the orientation period after students had arrived in Australia. At this point students can be reminded to think about the reality of studying Medicine in another culture, as well as receive support and mentoring by senior students, practising Muslim doctors, and members of the local Muslim community.

Initiatives to prepare students for learning

A tailored orientation session has now been developed for the cohort of Malaysian students who come to Newcastle each year. This session involves a similar approach to the one developed to assist staff from the Faculty of Health. Practising Muslims, whether they are health professionals from the local community, or senior students at the university, are engaged to share their experiences and demonstrate how they practise in the health professions or participate fully in their academic program while concurrently adhering to the principles of their religion. Evaluation by the participants of the orientation program immediately after the orientation rated this session as one of the most useful in the entire two-week orientation program.

A follow up of these students, one semester after they participated in this session, indicated that the students found the panel session helpful. Helpful outcomes were identified as: (i) preparation for what to expect (“It allowed us to be mentally and emotionally prepared for what was about to come”), (ii) tips for changes in attitude and behaviour such as ways in which to be more approachable and what to expect from people, and (iii) reassurance that Australian people were friendly (“It helped us overcome our shyness because our seniors mentioned that Australians are all friendly”).

The students did report however that most of them faced unexpected challenges in their studies: (i) the language barrier, (ii) managing the “partying culture” in the wider community, (iii) the need to be independent (iv) finding ways to connect with domestic students’ groups, (v) understanding and participating in “problem based learning” and (iv) managing the balance between maintaining support from their home country group, while seeking to meet Australians and connect with them in lecture and tutorial groups.

There was no mention in the surveys about their experiences with managing their faith and learning and practicing medical skills. This may have been because it was an online survey and the survey did not ask specifically about the issue of faith and learning. In depth interviews would provide more detail about their experiences and could question more carefully about faith and learning. It may be that students had found ways to manage the challenges so they were not a focus in their process of adjustment.

Edgeworth & Eiseman (2007) reported from their study of international students at the University of Sydney Orange campus in 2004, that students chose to ‘opt out’ of engagement with domestic students largely because it was easier and more comfortable to make connections just with international students on campus. In doing so they deny themselves the chance to make meaningful contact with domestic students. It is to be hoped that at the University of Newcastle, international students are being assisted to make connections with other students, particularly domestic students, through senior students sharing strategies that have worked for them. In this way it is anticipated that the international student experience can be broadened to support meaningful inter-cultural exchange and learning.

Subsequent Developments

Subsequently there have been two further developments: (i) there has been a cross cultural training session for General Practitioners (GPs) who supervise these students on placement. One of the key issues addressed in this session was managing the cross-cultural interaction, when a student arrives in a GP practice. (ii) the Faculty of Health are in the process of developing a new resource for supervisors/educators of students who go on placement, rotation or practice experience. The aim of this is to better equip supervisors to teach students from different cultures and manage the challenges of cross-cultural communication with students.

Conclusion

These resources have been developed in a city with limited cultural diversity and highlight some important issues associated with building connections for international Muslim students in academic and social environments. As discussed earlier, Betancourt 2003 as quoted by Thille and Frank (2006, p8-9) highlights that attitudes, knowledge and skills are key to cross cultural education. The Faculty of Health training focused on skills and knowledge. It is anticipated that in building connections with the local community that barriers associated with uncertainty are broken down and that confidence in interactions is heightened.

This has been a relatively small study and our findings are suggestive rather than definitive of approaches that can support, and hopefully enhance, the inter-cultural exchange possibilities available to international Muslim students and their host educational institutions, as well as the wider communities around them. We look forward to larger scale studies to refine and develop such inter-cultural exchange opportunities.

References

- Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006) *Australian Census* Retrieved 8 October 2007 from <http://www.abs.gov.au/census>
- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1984). *Study Abroad: A Manual for Asian Students*. Kuala Lumpur: Longman.
- Ballard, B., & Clanchy, J. (1991). *Teaching Students from Overseas: A brief guide for lecturers and supervisors*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- Betancourt, J.R. (2004) Cultural competence – marginal or mainstream movement? *New England Journal of Medicine*, 351;10, 953-954 Retrieved 13 February, 2007, from WWW.nejm.org
- Chalmers, D., & Volet, S. (1997). Common misconceptions about students from South-East Asia studying in Australia. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 16, 87-98.
- Edgeworth, K., & Eiseman, J. (2007, July 18). Going Bush: International Student Perspectives on Living and Studying at an Australian Rural University Campus. *Journal of Research in Rural Education*, 22(9).
- Ellis, B., Sawyer, J., Gill, R., Medlin, J., & Wilson, D. (2005). Influences of the learning environment of a regional university campus on its international graduates. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 32, 65 – 87.
- Hall, P., Keely, E., Dojeiji, S., Byszewski, A. & Marks, M. (2004) Communication skills, cultural challenges and individual support: challenges of international medical graduates in a Canadian healthcare environment. *Medical Teacher*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 120-125
- Kai, J., Spencer, J., Wilkes, M. and Gill, P. (1999) Learning to value ethnic diversity – what, why and how? *Medical Education*, 33, 616-623.
- Morell, V.W., Sharp, P.C. & Crandall, S.J. (2002) Creating student awareness to improve cultural competence: creating the critical incident. *Medical Teacher*, Vol 24, No 5, 532-534
- Rosen, J., Spatz, E.S., Gaaserud, A.M.J., Abramovitch, H., Weinreb, B., Wenger, N.S. & Margolis, C.Z. (2004) A New approach to developing cross-cultural communication skills, *Medical Teacher*, Vol 26, No. 2, 126-132
- Sawir, E., Marginson, S., Deumert, A., Nyland, C., & Ramia, G. (2008) Loneliness and International Students: An Australian Study. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, Vol 12 No. 2, 148-180
- Selleger, V.J., Bonke, B. and Leeman, Y.A.M. (2006) Student diversity at Erasmus Medical Centre Rotterdam: does it make any difference? *Medical Teacher* Vol 28, No 5 142-148.
- Steinert, Y. & Walsh A (2006) *A Faculty Development Program for Teachers of International Medical Graduates*, The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada, Retrieved August 6, 2008 from http://www.afmc.ca/img/programoverview_en.htm
- The University of Newcastle 2005 NuStar Report Semester 2
- Thille, P. & Frank, Blye 2006 *Educating for Cultural Awareness: A cultural diversity training program for teachers of Internationally Educated Health Care Professionals*, The Association of Faculties of Medicine of Canada, retrieved August 6, 2008 from http://www.afmc.ca/img/ECA_en.htm

Thistelwaite, J.E. & Ewart, B.R. (2003) Valuing diversity: helping medical students explore their attitudes and beliefs. *Medical Teacher* Vol.25 No.3 277-281

[Author/s names] © 2007. The authors assign to ISANA and educational and non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The authors also grant a non-exclusive licence to ISANA to publish this document in full in the Conference Proceedings. Those documents may be published on the World Wide Web, CD-ROM, in printed form, and on mirror sites on the World Wide Web. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the authors.