

e-Counselling For International Students to Assist in Successful Transitions

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Abstract

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In 2008, the ACT Department of Education and Training conducted focus groups in all ACT government high schools and colleges hosting international students. The issues identified included the need for more thorough and comprehensive strategies for disseminating relevant career development information to international students and their parents.

With this in mind, the International Education Unit initiated an e counselling service for international students. This service is now fully operational and incorporates career advisory, coaching services and general issues advice. This emerging area of career counselling offers our international students' greater access to career development services without time, location and language limitations. There are also interpreter services available if required. The reflective nature of writing an email gives students the opportunity and time to think without the pressure of face-to-face communication.

The service is operated by fully trained career practitioners. The international students have embraced the service and support has been provided for study and subject concerns, career pathways, transition and personal issues. When necessary the Career Counsellor has referred students to a health professional for support.

Keywords: international students, e counselling, transition, career development

Introduction

In 2008, the ACT Department of Education and Training International Education Unit initiated an e-counselling service for international students. This service incorporates career advice, coaching services and general issues advice. This emerging area of career counselling offers international students greater access to career development services eliminating time, location and language constraints. The reflective nature of writing an email gives students the opportunity and time to think, without the pressure of face-to-face communication.

The advantages of using email to provide career counselling services are numerous. Firstly, email is fast and generates an immediate response. Students are provided with targeted advice and correct information very quickly. This assists the career counsellor to eliminate uncertainty and anxiety. Secondly, email enables the career counsellor to foster enduring relationships by building a regular and ongoing dialogue.

Background

In 2008, in my role as Assistant Manager for the International Education Unit, I conducted focus groups in all ACT government high schools and colleges hosting international students.

The focus groups were initially designed to provide feedback to the International Education Unit to assist with developing policies and best practices relating to international students studying in the ACT government schools. The information gathered from over 300 students was used to monitor the quality

of education and pastoral care provided to international students; inform policy development relating to international student programs and assist the International Education Unit to review and adjust service provision and support.

During these focus group sessions, international students were asked how they could be supported to make the transition into ACT government schools and then onto further tertiary studies or employment more successfully. Current students listed the following suggestions to assist new arrivals to make a successful transition:

- an increased focus on student support services as this is very important to both prospective students and their parents
- increased publicity and availability of career and vocational guidance

These findings suggested that the International Education Unit should initiate more thorough and comprehensive strategies for disseminating relevant information to international students and their parents.

The Role of the Career Counsellor in Assisting International Students

When I decided to develop and initiate e-Counselling, I was very aware that as a career counsellor, there would be a need to assess the students' cultural background, career aspirations, future study pathways, current course selection, study patterns and many other issues that may be affecting their general well-being or influencing their decisions.

A form was designed and issued to every student that clearly articulated the service available to them. It was explained to the students that the service was optional and that career counsellors are bound by confidentiality. The form asks for their contact details and educational/career goals. 88% of the forms were returned. In 2009, this figure has risen to 93%.

The data collected was entered into a data base and all students were sent an introductory email outlining the benefits of the service in providing support for study and subject concerns, career pathways, transition and other general issues. It is explained to the students in this initial email that e-Counselling may be able to help them to establish whether they need to see a specialist organisation, face to face, to overcome their difficulties. If necessary the Career Counsellor will refer the student to a health professional for support. Telephone Counselling might sometimes be recommended; an agreed time can be arranged when the Career Counsellor can telephone the student. Alternatively, the student can arrange a time and date for a meeting with the Career Counsellor at the International Education Unit.

It became apparent very early on that there was a need to accurately determine the extent of each student's acculturation into their school and wider community and the issues that may arise when dealing with specific and diverse cultural groups. In addition to the pressures to make informed career decisions faced by any student, international students sometimes face additional difficulties such as:

- pressure from parents, who are paying considerable money, to achieve high marks
- pressure from parents to articulate into a particular degree at a particular university
- feeling challenged and isolated when transitioning to the Australian educational system
- feeling isolated or different from their peers. Many international students find it very difficult to seek assistance and often they do not know where to look for support; many feel they have very limited social support
- cultural differences and misunderstandings both at school and in homestay that may lead them to make poor and often uninformed career decisions

In order to ensure that the e-Counselling service for international students was meeting their requirements, I needed to develop an understanding of their career needs. I conducted more research and asked the students what their long term goals were in relation to their future career needs.

My research indicated that there are three types of international students studying in ACT schools. The first are those students that are focused on remaining in Australia to complete their education. These students also overwhelmingly expressed a desire to remain in Australia beyond their education. Specifically, these students are in greater need of learning Australian employability skills. The second group of students are those who plan to return to their home countries. These students may need more

assistance in networking and how to seek employment in their home countries. The final group of international students said they were still undecided about their future career and education directions. These students expressed a desire for additional support and information in looking at various local and offshore opportunities to advance and assist them with their career development.

From literature and my own personal experiences when working with international students, there are common characteristics of international students that emerge. International students demonstrate strengths that may not be immediately acknowledged or recognised. These may include:

- a strong motivation to learn and take advantage of every educational opportunity.
- a mature and broad global perspective and familiarity, often having varied international connections and networks.
- the ability to adapt quickly to new situations

After sending the initial email, most students replied immediately with questions regarding subject choices, university degree requirements and in some cases, questions regarding employment and long term career goals. Other students did not reply immediately, but chose instead to make contact as the need arose.

In the initial email exchanges, it was vital to determine the students English language proficiency. When counselling international students, language is very important. To avoid misunderstandings, it is vital that the counsellor avoid colloquialism and use clear and concise sentences. This service has assisted me to build stronger personal relationships with my international students and has increased my communication with them.

In many cases, the students have requested a face to face interview to assist them to find part time employment. During this interview, information is collected on the student's background, education and training history. The student is also asked to verbally complete a job satisfaction summary to ascertain their strengths and preferences. Information is also gathered in regards to work condition preferences, physical/medical considerations and financial considerations.

To value add to this interview, I have also developed a work interest profile. This profile is derived from Australia's Employability Skills that were developed in 2002 by the Business Council of Australia and the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry, in consultation with other peak employer bodies and funded by the Australian Federal Government. Employability Skills for the Future featured an 'Employability Skills Framework' which identified eight employability skills:

1. Communication
2. Teamwork
3. Problem solving
4. Initiative and enterprise
5. Planning and organising
6. Self-management
7. Learning
8. Technology

After ascertaining each student's existing employability skills with a series of questions and prompts, it then becomes evident what their skills and areas of expertise are. It also has enabled me to focus on areas that need further attention and development.

Some students have also requested a session to assist them to develop a resume and assistance with interview and networking techniques. During this session, I discuss immediate employment needs versus long-term career choices and assist them to develop realistic career and future education and training strategies.

The Way Forward

The e-Counselling service is now in its second year of operation and has assisted more than 220 international students. Overwhelmingly, students have reported that the service is very useful and provides them with direction as well as being positive and encouraging. The service has ensured that international students are provided with the opportunity to access accurate advice and information.

The e-Counselling service has also found that pre-existing career services did not always meet the needs of the international students. Many of the existing providers/programs did not have an international focus.

To meet this need, a specific International Student Canberra Careers Market experience was implemented. Tours and sessions targeting the needs and information required by international students were introduced and conducted by the TAFE's and Universities. The students all reported that this was very beneficial and enabled them to establish contacts with the correct people in the various institutions.

Further, the e-Counselling service has also highlighted the need for additional workshops for international students. In 2010, there are plans to offer workshops on career related topics that are relevant to international students such as academic writing, plagiarism, preparing a resume, cover letters, and interview skills and techniques.

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