

# Strengthening the University Community Through the Successful Transition of International Students to University Life

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## Abstract

*Feedback from academic staff indicates that International students commencing degrees in the Faculty of Health at the University of Newcastle are required to make significant language and cultural adjustments when interacting within the University and external community. This paper describes an Orientation program developed specifically for international students commencing health professional degrees. The program is delivered prior to the start of semester and includes small group learning sessions focused on clinical scenarios interspersed with academic and English language skills sessions and information, wellbeing and social sessions. The program facilitates interactions with local and senior international students, an understanding of the local health care system and the acquisition of skills necessary to function in both the internal and external environments of the university. Student evaluation of the program has indicated that it has significantly increased the confidence and capacity of students to integrate into life in the broader community.*

## Keywords

International, health professional, clinical scenarios, small group learning, clinical placement

## Introduction

The Faculty of Health at the University of Newcastle (UoN) convenes ten undergraduate health professional degrees including Medicine, Nursing, Physiotherapy, Nutrition and Dietetics, Occupational Therapy, Oral Health, Podiatry and three degrees in the field of Medical Radiation Science (MRS). One hallmark of these programs is the early exposure of students to the clinical environment, either to the public health system or to private hospitals or community practice. Another feature of health professional programs in the Faculty is the use of small group learning, either in a problem based format or other interactive models of learning.

Approximately 140 international students from over fifteen different countries, predominately South Eastern and Northern Asian nations, commence undergraduate degrees in the Faculty of Health each year. Generally the students arrive one week before the academic year commences. They gain a general orientation to the University and a brief introduction to the Faculty and their degree. At the same time, they are organising their accommodation and trying to find their way around a new city, culture and for the majority of students, they are adapting to a less familiar language. They must also quickly adapt to highly interactive and questioning learning styles and communication with patients and staff on clinical placement. This could prove particularly challenging for Asian students whose learning style tends to be less inquiring and interactive (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984, 1991).

As part of current best practice, universities should provide commencing international students with access to “discipline-specific academic and learning skills acculturation which includes consideration of language proficiency and communication skills” (Australian Universities Quality Agency [AUQA], 2009, p. 12). Various studies (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Gill, 2007; Major, 2005; Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Topping, & Todman, 2008)

further emphasise that helping international students to form social friendships, networks and relationships with others early on significantly influences their chances of achieving a positive and successful experience at university and in their new community. Therefore, to assist First Year (FY) international students with their transition to studying at UoN, the Faculty of Health, in collaboration with other divisions in the University, has designed a specific Orientation program for international students. The program which was offered in 2009 and 2010 is undertaken three weeks prior to the start of semester and two weeks prior to the whole of University Orientation week.

## Description of the Program's Core Elements

The activities undertaken in the Orientation program can be divided into four main areas: small group learning; academic and English language skills sessions; information and wellbeing sessions; and social sessions.

### Small Group Learning

The key learning objectives of the small group learning sessions are that students gain exposure to:

- Independent learning styles characteristic of Australian universities;
- Interactive and participatory styles of learning;
- Clinical scenarios encountered in Australian health care settings.

Students from different countries and degree programs are allocated to tutorial groups of 6-10 students with each group facilitated by a senior student in the Faculty, including international senior students. The tutorial groups undertake a series of structured tutorials that focus on clinical scenarios representative of health practice in Australia. During the tutorials, students generate individual learning tasks/questions that require them to seek information from the library and other resources available at the University. In total, there are three 2-hour tutorials and one 3-hour tutorial throughout the two week program. These are interspersed with other relevant learning and information gathering activities, and also with free time to research learning tasks and undertake personal activities. Students are also exposed to a community or health service experience.

### Academic and English Language Skills Sessions

International students face many challenges upon commencing studies at Australian universities related to English language learning, academic acculturation and different learning and teaching styles. Research suggests that providing international students with support to cope with these challenges early on is highly beneficial (Burns, 1991; Poyrazli, Arbona, Nora, McPherson, & Pisecco, 2002; Trewartha, 2008). In addition, delivering academic and English language sessions in discipline-specific contexts is more relevant and rewarding for international students at university (AUQA, 2009). In an effort to facilitate international students in their transition to studying at UoN, the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) deliver various discipline-specific academic and English language sessions during the Orientation program. Students also undertake the UoN's online Diagnostic Academic English Language Tool (DAELT) and are given information about regular English language workshops available throughout each semester. There are also sessions that focus on language used in clinical settings.

### Information and Wellbeing Sessions

The key objectives of the information and wellbeing sessions are to provide students with:

- Relevant and useful non-academic information;
- Information related to general wellbeing and cultural adaptation to Australian life;
- The opportunity to meet University staff who can assist them during their studies.

These sessions are aimed at making students aware of the non-academic resources available to them on campus and assist students to develop strategies to ensure a positive experience while living and studying in Newcastle. One of the sessions, entitled "Being a Muslim Student in the Faculty of Health", assists Muslim students to become familiar with the details of their academic program. It also provides them with useful ways to overcome cultural differences in teaching and learning and utilises ideas and strategies outlined in *The 4-D Model of Cultural Differences* (Hofstede, 1986). For instance, Malaysian students, who are largely Muslim, are assisted to consider some of the challenges of participating in clinical settings and small group activities that require them to put

forward personal opinions, justify their arguments, develop professional relationships with academic staff and perform tasks in unfamiliar environments. Senior Muslim students talk about these issues and their experiences and discuss how they have managed to overcome such challenges.

## **Social Sessions**

Various social activities are integrated into the Orientation program to provide students with the opportunity to:

- Build connections with other students and staff in a social setting;
- Develop relationships with local and senior international students;
- Get to know the city of Newcastle and how to live and travel about the city.

The social sessions include a city tour and a trip to a local wildlife reserve. In addition, students catch buses from the University campus to the city (and local beaches) and attend a session on beach safety with a representative from a local surf life saving club.

## **Student Evaluation**

A variety of evaluation data was obtained during the Orientation program in 2009 and 2010. A summary of the evaluation data will be presented at the ISANA conference with emphasis on:

- The English language, including clinical communication, and academic skills workshops delivered by the Centre for Teaching and Learning;
- Overall student evaluation of the 2 week program;
- Facilitator evaluation of the tutorial sessions.

### **Student Evaluation of the English Language, Clinical Communication, and Academic Skills Sessions**

In 2009 and 2010, students were asked to rate each English language, communication and academic skills workshops on a 5-point scale to determine how valuable the workshops were in terms of: the relevance of the content delivered; the usefulness of the handouts and resources; and students' understanding of the topic covered. In both years, the evaluation results were positive with most students either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the workshops were beneficial and valuable. Most students commented that their understanding of the topic was "much" or "most definitely better".

### **Student Evaluation of the Program**

41 students attended the Orientation program in 2009 and 45 attended in 2010. The students were asked to rate the program on a 5-point scale and to comment on what aspects of the program were most useful to them and how the program could be improved. Overall, the students rated the Orientation program a success. In particular, the tutorial sessions rated highly with most students. There was also great appreciation of the Introduction to Degree Program session and many rated the Centre for Teaching and Learning sessions as valuable, particularly the sessions focusing on English language, clinical communication and academic skills.

Students who attended the 2009 Orientation program were also surveyed (by email) towards the end of the academic year. Eight students responded to the survey. All survey respondents believed that the Orientation program had assisted them throughout the year. When asked which sessions from the Orientation program they remembered, students mentioned the Centre for Teaching and Learning sessions on Australian slang, essay writing and time management and the activities used to enhance communication skills. When asked what their biggest difficulties were in 2009, many mentioned that communication issues and making friends remained a challenge.

### **Facilitator Evaluation of Tutorial Sessions**

A total of 12 senior students from degree programs in the Faculty were offered the roles of small group facilitators following a call for Expressions of Interest across the Faculty. Six out of the 11 tutors were international students. The student facilitators undertook a one day training program in small group facilitation in the week prior to Week 1 of the Orientation program. In addition to facilitating tutorials, student facilitators assisted students with library tasks, a tour of the University, visiting hospital sites and they also participated in a number of social activities.

Overall, facilitator feedback was very positive. Tutors found the tutor training informative and found the tutorials interesting and full of discussion and questions.

## Conclusions

International students commencing health professional degrees in Australia face the challenge of early integration into the health care community. When attending clinical placement, they are expected to converse with and comprehend patients and to interact professionally with clinical staff. This places enormous strain on students who are also adapting to learning and living in a new environment. The early introduction of students to relevant communication and academic skills in the context of clinical scenarios encountered in Australian health care settings provides greater awareness and adaptation to the Australian community. The integration of these sessions with social and well-being sessions and the use of senior students as small group facilitators creates a social atmosphere that assists commencing international students in their adjustment to the university and health care communities.

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