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Beyond Mere Presence – Making Diversity Work

Abstract: This article reports on a project that examined the academic and social experiences of international social work students by tracking and exploring the points they identified as being the most stressful over their time at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia. Using group consultation and individual semi structured feed-back sessions, several common themes emerged that students reported as creating high stress; namely language comprehension, adapting to new teaching methods, finding culturally appropriate means of seeking help, and integrating into a new social setting. Students were also able to clearly identify the time periods where they felt most stressed; these being the first semester, exam periods and field placements. This study reports upon the rich descriptions obtained from these students including what they described as helpful in a new academic environment. Many of their responses paralleled the literature in regard to finding confidence and competency in foreign academic and social settings.

Keywords: international, social work, students, academic, diversity

Beyond Mere Presence – Making Diversity Work

Introduction:

In recent years the School of Social Work at Flinders University in Adelaide, Australia, has undergone a rapid increase in the enrolment of international students, especially in Higher Degrees. These students have been located within the classroom, meaning that they sit alongside local students and strive to participate in the educational process. Teaching staff frequently identify concerns about the quality of learning experiences and outcomes for international students – especially those facing significant linguistic and cultural barriers. Such staff have reported individual requests to clarify teaching materials and assessment expectations and refer to the added complications of offering applied courses in social work within the context of often ambiguous and culturally laden concepts such as ‘the nature of care and the helping relationship’.

In addition, anecdotal reports from the international students suggested that they struggle to establish a student life in Australia while attempting to interpret the new cultural, historical and social contexts of university life. They speak of homesickness, cultural alienation, and the overwhelming feelings of academic incompetence. Previous studies conducted in Australia have highlighted the academic, cultural, social and linguistic differences that these students face (Burns 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987; Taylor, Craft, Murray & Rowley, 2000). Relatedly, the literature on diversity in education highlights the necessity for planned integration in making diversity work for all parties (see: Kennedy, 1995; Gurin, Nagda & Lopez, 2004). In this work, the term *integration* does not refer to the discredited assimilationist approach of the mid twentieth century, rather it refers to that quality of experience which transcends ‘mere presence’ and enables a more profound and relevant engagement with the whole learning experience.

Flinders University has a student body of approximately 17,000 students with over 500 students studying in three different programs within the School of Social Work: two undergraduate and one qualifying masters of social work degrees. Within the last five years, the school has undergone a rapid increase in international student enrolments. Currently, there are 55 international students enrolled in the masters degree with nearly half of these students coming from India and Pakistan. Other regions represented include: South East Asia, Scandinavia, North America and East Africa. The School of Social Work acknowledged a need for additional educational support and employed a social work student to work as an international student peer support person. This student employee directed these overseas students to the appropriate channels for academic and personal queries, organised lunches after class and occasionally arranged social events. Recognising the success of this role and the importance of giving these students a voice beyond 'mere presence', the school designed a project to elicit international students' perceptions of academic and social stress to create a more holistic and integrated understanding of their overseas experience.

Literature Review

Academic Considerations and Language - In Eager Search of Knowledge

There is a strong argument that for academic success international students need to understand what is expected of them. Educators also need to be aware of these students' educational background and experience to help them make the necessary adjustments to succeed in an Australian university context. This understanding is critical because as the literature suggests, international students experience considerable stress and difficulty adjusting to a foreign language coupled with an overseas educational system characterised by different teaching

methodologies and approaches (Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Felix & Lawson, 1994; Burns, 1991; Chang & Chin, 1999).

There are often many different teaching approaches between a student's home country and those adopted here in Australia. In particular, several studies suggested that overseas students are accustomed to 'memory oriented' approaches which emphasise rote learning and find difficulty adapting to different teaching and tutoring approaches employed in Australia (Samuelowicz, 1987; Burns, 1991; Quintrell & Westwood, 1994). Felix and Lawson (1994) found that overseas students often reported difficulties with tutorials, lectures and seminars because they were not accustomed to such educational contexts. Samuelowicz (1987) argued that overseas students generally had little exposure to small group teaching and interactive learning/teaching processes making such teaching approaches difficult to adjust. Taylor et al. (2000) also found that small groups presented challenges to international students because of the increased requirement of "competence and confidence in both language and interpersonal interactions" (p. 33). These authors maintained that the primary reason for this lack of confidence and competence was primarily underpinned by language and cultural factors. Indeed, two thirds of all educators participating in this study thought that small group work was a problematic teaching methodology for international students. These vast differences in teaching methodologies when combined with linguistic and cultural barriers can leave students feeling incompetent and confused when asked to perform often at the same level as their Australian counterparts.

The difficulties international students encounter when English is not their first language is well documented (Burns, 1991; Harris, 1997; Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Taylor et al, 2000; Samuelowicz, 1987). Trying to understand the technical language of higher degree topics along

with barrage of slangs and accents can make language comprehension a very difficult task. Green (1982) stated, “No two languages are sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality” (p. 69). In a sense, these students almost have to become bi-cultural as they attempt to synthesise and understand a new academic and social reality with what they have historically known.

Forbearance, the tendency to minimise or conceal problems or concerns so as not to trouble or burden others, is a common practice for many international students as help - seeking behaviours have many important cultural constructions (Moore & Constantine, 2005). Other authors state that a major reason why international students use forbearance was due to the cultural expectation that students are supposed to respect and not question their educators (Samuelowicz, 1987; Marcus & Kitayama, 1991). Samuelowicz (1987, p. 124) stated, “Another factor contributing to the difficulties faced by many overseas students is their excessive regard for authority and, as a consequence, readiness to accept the authority of a teacher or material studied without questioning; expecting this authority to give ‘correct’ answers.” Burns (1991, p. 73) supported this reluctance noting, “In most East Asian countries it is not the done thing to discuss your problems with strangers; overseas students are more inclined to confide their academic, personal and family problems to members of their own ethnic group.” Markus & Kitayama (1991) noted a similar finding for students from Asian and African backgrounds. However, many international students arrive alone without family or friends physically available making it difficult to find the appropriate supports from a culturally relevant viewpoint. Samuelowicz (1987, p. 132) further stated, “While ultimately students are responsible for their own learning, academic staff and counsellors can and should facilitate students’ learning and help them to become independent learners.” Helping international students become ‘independent learners’ in an Australian context

however likely requires some bridging to help students understand what is expected of them and how they can access support in a different educational and social context.

Social Considerations - Squeezing Ones Past with the Present

Living in an unfamiliar environment from their home country, international students often find themselves trying to adjust to new understandings of social interaction and ways of being. The adjustment that international students must make often requires an attempt to integrate with the host country's frame of reference while trying to find a workable synthesis between their past with the present. Luzio-Lockett (1998) referred to this process as the squeezing effect because these students must try to 'squeeze' their own identity with the values and norms of another culture. She notes that language plays a critical role in this process and can adversely affect a student's academic performance and thereby also influence one's understanding of 'self-concept' (see also Moore & Constantine, 2005; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004; Klomegah, 2006). Burns (1991, p. 73) supported this idea of squeezing stating, "The additional role of being an alien exacerbates and magnifies the stress through linguistic socio-cultural-emotional difficulties involved in cultural adjustment." Allowing students to give voice to their experiences and concerns may help this squeezing process where both students and educators can find a common ground of understanding that transcends 'mere presence'.

International students' coping practices may be informed or influenced by culturally based worldviews, values and practices that are rooted in aspects of collectivism and interdependence (Moore & Constantine, 2005; Marcus & Kitayama, 1991; Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Moore & Constantine (2005) looked at different cultural values where some groups of people see

identity as a collectivistic construction whereas others seat identity more strongly within the individual. They state, “Cultural values emphasising collectivism and communalism appear to affect both social support seeking and forbearance coping styles among African, Asian, and Latin American international students” (p. 343). They argue that it is paramount that counsellors and educators consider the student’s cultural constructions of identity and social norms of interaction; as such understandings may help increase students’ perceptions of confidence and belonging.

Having support from a host person has been found to be a potential helping factor for international students. Chapdelaine & Alexitch (2004) cited in a study of 156 male international students in Canada that social interactions with hosts played a critical and positive role in the international students’ adjustment. Quintrell & Westwood (1994) also found that international students paired with host national students reported gains in language fluency and also used positive descriptors of their academic year when compared to other international students that did not receive this service (it is worth noting that that there were no differences found in academic performance). Burns (1991) stated that having a peer buddy system was one of his main recommendations to support international students. Thus, having a specified host person can potentially reduce some of the stress and confusion that international students experience within an unfamiliar educational and social environment.

The Experience of International Social Work Students at Flinders

An end of semester international student lunch was organised in December 2005 followed by a voluntary meeting to ask students about their experiences at Flinders University. All international students were invited and twenty two students volunteered to participate in the discussion that lasted ninety minutes. There were no faculty members present for this

consultation to make students feel more comfortable to express their views and opinions. This discussion was facilitated by a PhD student, and the student's comments were recorded without their names. Some of the questions asked for open discussion included:

- What were/are some challenges of your course to date? Have you found any ways to overcome them? (language, course content, different academic expectations or structure than home country, etc)
- What are some positive aspects that you have enjoyed in your course?
- Has school gotten any easier overtime? If so, how? If not, why?
- What would help make your experience at Flinders better?
- How supported have you felt during your course here at Flinders (faculty, support staff at library, international office, peers, etc.)?
- Have you felt that you have been able to participate in the topics here at Flinders?
- If someone was to come to Flinders next semester to do social work from your home country, what advice would you give them?

After the international student group consultation, the collated responses were used to create a time-line graph indicating different periods within the school year. After the group consultation, 13 students volunteered to give further feed-back on an individual basis. These students were given this graph and asked to report upon and indicate high stress periods of either academic or social stress. The individual feed-back session lasted 30-55 minutes with the understanding that their comments would be kept anonymous, and the facilitator was a PhD student within the school. Stress was defined for the purposes of this exercise as: confusion, feelings of not belonging or worries about academic and social life at university. Respondents could rate their stress on the different chronological periods on a scale from 1-10 (1-4 Low, 5-7 Medium, 8-10 High). The chronological time periods included pre-departure, orientation, start of semesters, break between semesters and end of semester exams. From this graph, students were asked to give their comments through several open ended questions about why they thought they had periods of higher stress for both academic and social life. All participants were current students and had completed one to three semesters of their two year course.

Feed-back from Consultations

The information received suggested that international students felt supported within the faculty and had positive comments about the course on the whole. However, they also reported lacking confidence and competence both academically and socially due to linguistic and cultural barriers, and found that teaching approaches and methodologies differed greatly from their home countries. They mentioned the difficulties associated with understanding technical and slang language in academic contexts and often identified language comprehension as being one of the highest causes of academic stress. Forbearance was also a very common theme in the group and individual consultations as students stated that even though they knew it was acceptable to talk with lecturers about academic concerns, they did not feel highly comfortable doing so initially.

The students also reported feeling socially isolated. More than three quarters of the students mentioned that it was very difficult to make friends in Australia and did not know how to go about making them. Many students reported feeling lonely and strongly identified with being homesick, especially in the first year.

Students also spoke about how they adapted to stressful events and what was helpful to them. Students reported that their first year and particularly the first semester was the time of highest academic and social stress with these levels dropping to much lower levels later in their university experience. They mentioned that having a peer support person was helpful as were university workshops on referencing and writing. Even though students said that they were often reluctant to talk to lecturers, they expressed that communicating with them was very helpful in reducing their feelings of stress. Immersing themselves in the English language was also

something that helped reduce student feelings of stress as they began to feel more competent in their comprehension.

While this information was highly consistent amongst individuals and with what was said in the group discussion, this small scale project (13 students from seven different countries) clearly limits the ability to generalise international student experiences of stress. Nonetheless, this study does give strong indications of some of the actual problems students experience and also what has helped. Another important consideration was that student responses may have also been influenced by their own cultural understandings of what is appropriate to discuss. However, what is interesting is that despite these geographic, cultural, historical and educational differences, there were many commonalities expressed in their experiences of stress that university systems need to seriously consider when opening its doors to international students.

Specific Areas of Concern (Comments in *italics* represent actual student quotes)

Academic

When asked what the main differences between Flinders University and their home country educational background, one student responded enthusiastically, “*Everything! Seriously!*” Trying to adapt to a new educational context arguably has a profound impact on the international student’s experience. One of the major differences that international students reported was that teaching methodologies were very different in their own countries. This difference in teaching approaches could at least partly account the for students’ feelings of confusion and academic incompetence.

“Everything that is learned is directly from the books [in student’s own country].”

This comment highlights the different expectations that universities around the world can have of their students. It is not surprising that a student would find it a difficult task to adjust if they are accustomed to knowing what texts they are expected to read rather than having a topic that requires one to conduct independent research and reading or to use highly critical thinking skills.

“It was extremely difficult to prepare essays- this is done differently in my home country.”

Many of the goal posts with which these students were familiar had shifted for them in Australia, meaning that they had to learn and adapt to new rules in this different academic context. Samuelowicz (1987, p. 124) argued that, “the first step is to help overseas students to change from passive reception of authoritarian teaching to self-developing, self-motivated, critical learning where critical and analytical thinking is more important than reproducing ideas.” Orientations geared towards helping international students adjust to new demands in a foreign educational context were useful, but there was also an identified need and strong argument from students for continued learning in this area. Online learning tools were seen to help facilitate communication and help students feel less stressed since they could prepare for a future lecture in advance. These supports assisted students in making the necessary transitions to adapt to new academic expectations.

Several studies of international students’ suggest that they feel isolated and alienated from academic staff (Burns, 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987). However, these reports starkly contrasted with what the students reported in the individual and group consultations.

“The lecturers were approachable and not as formal as my home country. My interaction with faculty here was much better than my undergraduate experience back home.”

In fact, most students reported feeling that staff in the social work department made sincere efforts to make their experience here at Flinders easier.

“Talking to your lecturers is a crucial part of the social work course here.”

“Faculty makes you feel accepted, it’s a nice place to come back to- it’s like a little family here.”

“It is very important to have contact with the lecturer.”

While forbearance may present itself as a cultural construct, students who feel connected with the faculty may be more inclined to ask for help. However, despite these positive comments, forbearance still appeared to have a critical influence on whether students seek assistance. Even though students felt that staff were approachable, friendly and helpful, most students reported that they did not feel comfortable asking for support. Several international students mentioned that in their home countries it was not a common practice to ask a lecturer for help. Thus, there are some considerations that may address this concern by: (1) communicating that it is fine and even encouraged for students to talk to their lecturers; (2) providing opportunities for lecturers and students to interact through organised lunches or other activities; and (3) offering access to appropriate alternatives where students can go for support if they can not talk with their lecturer, such as an international student peer support person.

Language

Language was almost unanimously cited as a difficulty that international students experienced, even for those who reported feeling highly proficient in English as a second language.

“School here is much harder - I don’t remember a word of my first lecture. So many terminologies and the lecturers spoke so fast...”

International students often find themselves thrown into the ‘deep end’ where their prior English study does not adequately prepare them for a barrage of accents, slang, technical language and different cultural ways of speaking. The technical language required for understanding topics such as: ‘Research Design’ (Grounded Theory, post positivism), the historical understandings of ‘Social Policy’ (Neo-liberalism, Liberal/liberal, Fraser Government, etc) and potentially

confusing concepts of 'Interpersonal Practice' (doorknob communication, helping relationship) create additional work for these students to comprehend the course content. These experiences can potentially mystify the student making lectures, tutorials and readings a very intimidating and confusing experience where the true understanding of such concepts goes well beyond a simple dictionary definition. Certainly the challenges of teaching culturally relative concepts such as the 'nature of care' or the 'helping relationship' are difficult to navigate especially within the broader context of having a core set of values as set by the Australian Association of Social Workers (or equivalent professional bodies in other countries) and being mindful that these students come from different cultural, political and legal backgrounds. This mystification may be partly ameliorated by educators having a greater cognizance of potentially confusing terminologies, encouraging students to talk with them about any unclear terms, facilitating group discussions and the use of online resources that will allow students to prepare for class beforehand.

Social Supports

Many students also reported feeling socially stressed at many points throughout their experience at university. Half of the students reported feeling socially isolated, and that it was difficult to make friends. They noted that even though Australians were friendly in class, it was very difficult to actually socialise with them outside of class.

"It is possible to meet Australians on a superficial level but to actually develop a strong friendship is very difficult."

Other students stated,

"Social norms here are very different; you don't know what to do when."

"It is hard to make friends because of the language barrier. I want to find Japanese [peers], I wanted to speak Japanese, I envy students from India because there are so many Indians, I become email junky [writing home]."

These quotes demonstrate not only the difficulty for students to meet others because of the language barrier but also present the challenges of adapting to unfamiliar social norms. These students may also find themselves in international isolation (no other students from their host country), and they may find university life very hard to adapt with few people (if any) available to understand his/her cultural understandings and experience.

Concerns about home and a lack of local family support can also present some additional challenges to international students. As mentioned earlier, students coming from cultures that value collectivistic and interdependent identities can find it difficult to adjust in an Australian social context where individualism can be more highly valued.

“When you are sick and there is no one to really care for you like a family member or close friend would, it is very very difficult.”

While it is clear that universities cannot bring a student’s family from overseas for support, there is further scope to incorporate peer support persons who can help demonstrate an understanding of the potential stresses facing international students and monitor their needs in order to make the adjustment easier. When the School of Social Work employed the international student peer support person, it became apparent that students were using this person to help them address many academic and social concerns. Several students responded very positively to having this peer support person available to them.

“It was a big help knowing that I had someone to eat lunch with [peer support person] and who could take me to the right person to talk if I wanted.”

This role has been ongoing for several years now and has received positive student responses. This person did not need to be a cultural expert but rather needed to be genuinely interested in understanding an individual international student’s experience, taking on the role of helping to bridge the academic and social experiences of home and host countries.

Chronology

Students reported their first year as being the time of highest academic and social stress with these levels dropping to much lower levels later in their university experience. Many students commented on what helped them to adapt over time to a new educational and social system. They noted attending referencing and writing workshops, having lunch with peers after class and finding paid employment to reduce financial stress all helped to make their university experience better. This process of adapting that they discussed involved talking with other international students, finding the courage to approach lecturers and understanding different social expectations of interpersonal interaction, all of which helped the students to gradually feel less stressed.

“Talking to your lecturers is a crucial part of the social work course here”

While these reactions may not seem that surprising, what is important to emphasise is that some students did not always quickly discover these rather ‘obvious’ forms of adapting and obtaining information, leaving them feeling confused and disoriented for unnecessarily long periods. Systems designed to support students should perhaps consider the processes of academic, linguistic and social adaptation described in this article. As students indicated, active on-going assistance was found to be helpful throughout their educational experience in preference to one intense block of orientation which is most often arranged near the beginning of the students’ academic study.

Summary

This investigation has highlighted several major considerations when looking at some of the needs and difficulties that international students experience. While there are clearly individual

differences among students, there also seems to be some common elements that many students report, such as challenges with language comprehension, adapting to new teaching methodologies, finding culturally appropriate means of seeking help, and trying to integrate into a new social setting. Using a time-line graph specifically designed for this study to ask individual students about his/her academic and social experiences of stress was particularly helpful as students were able to clearly mark times that they felt this way and why. While this small scale project clearly limits the ability to generalise the results, the rich descriptions obtained from these students reinforce much of what is described in the literature in regards to finding confidence and competency in academic and social settings at university.

There is a need for research and debate into the area of supporting international students as they continue to become an increasing presence within Australian universities. The development of effective teaching methodologies and support systems has the potential to ensure a more positive and successful university experience in a home away from home. Two students at the end of the interviews said the following about their reflections on being an international student:

“It’s a mystery why things have gotten easier - I have reasons for more stress but for some reason things are easier.”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself; it is not easy coming from another country.”

These students have shown their remarkable resiliency and adaptability to function and succeed within foreign educational and social contexts. Burns (1991, p. 61) stated, “Overseas students bring to Australia a very different cultural, social and intellectual experience from that which awaits them.” As international student enrolments continue to increase, the educational systems designed to support them should continue to work towards more sophisticated understandings that consider the linguistic, social and academic needs of this growing student body.

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