International students in Australia: their challenges and implications for university counseling services

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In the last ten years, an increased number of international students have been a significant feature of tertiary education institutions of Australia. An article in an Australian newspaper, 'The Age' on May 7th 2005 [1] argued that the money gained from international students is critical for the financial viability of a number of Australian universities. For the financial year 2003-04, the economic surplus from international students was reported at AUD 5.622 billion for the education sector [2]. The Department of Education, Science and Training statistical data for 2004 showed 322,776 enrolled onshore international students [3], of which 164,079 were registered in the Higher Education sector. Students with a permanent home address in China made up the biggest share, amounting to 33,506 for the academic year 2004 [4]. The latest figures published by the Australian Education International (a government body), reveal that the offshore Chinese students contribute to more than double the number of university international student as compared to students from other countries [5]. Expectations are that the number of international students in Australia is only likely to increase in the future. It therefore serves to follow that Australian universities, administrators and staffs have stakes in ensuring that international students possess positive views of their educational and social experiences.

Transition and issues related to adjustment in a university setting

The first year of university is the time of adjustment and is often stressful for a majority of students [6-9]. Factors identified as likely contributors to increasing stress include pressures related to academic requirements and financial difficulties. The other factors implicated are those relating to health and wellbeing of the individual, including loneliness, interpersonal relationships and those dealing with personal autonomy [6,8,10]. For international students, the stress of this period is compounded further by the addition of cultural differences and limited family support [6,7,10,11].

McInnis et al. [8] found that out of 2,609 first year students, two thirds believed they were not well prepared for their first year university exams. In other studies, it was noted that a high number of withdrawals or failures of first year students were related to transitional adjustment issues rather than lack of academic ability [9]. Kerri-Lee Krause, Project Director from the Centre for the Study of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, stated that from current research relating to the first year experience of students, it was found that the emotional health was a significant factor in their decision to defer their studies [12]. Krause et al. acknowledged that emotional health might relate to a number

of different variables and not solely to student-adjustment issues [12]. They argued that 'emotional health', lends a more accurate reflection of maladjustment problems. Other studies [8,9,12] suggest that students' inability to deal with transitional change appeared to be a significant factor in their choice to withdraw from university or in their poor academic results in their first year of academic curriculum.

There was no evidence to suggest that international students' responses regarding their ability to deal with transitional change were significantly different from local students. One key difference however between international students and local students, which remained unexplored in previous studies, is the anecdotal evidence which suggests that the repercussions of academic failure or inability to effectively deal with transitional change has the potential to be more devastating for international students, their family, and possibly their community, than for a local student [13]. The Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs, which is responsible for international students' visas, stipulates as a condition, that students must maintain a valid enrolment for their chosen course of study, and that breaching this condition may result in visa cancellation [14]. International students, who, due to university policies, are not allowed to re-enroll as a result of poor academic performance over the previous year of study, are likely to have their visas revoked, which requires them to leave Australia.

Increased challenges for international students

International students as a cohort experience greater changes during the initial transitional period than domestic students [6,7,11,15]. They are required to deal with the differences between their own cultural values, norms and customs and those of their host's. They experience problems with verbal and non-verbal communication, dealing with interpersonal relationships in addition to learning to deal with the issue of becoming an adult away from their families and communities [7]. Cultural differences related to the educational environment, as well as language issues, are discussed in greater depth later. However, Hechanova-Alampay et al. [7] and Bailey and Dua [16] argue that collectively, these challenges, when combined with limited social resource structure and network, lead to a higher level of stress for these students. Brein and David [16] found that the period of greatest stress relating to the adjustment and dealing with a new cultural environment occurred within the first six months of the student's stay in a new country.

For most students, the first year of medicine and other health sciences curriculum presents a range of difficulties and challenges. International students, as a subgroup of the first year student population, are universally required to deal with additional challenges during this transitional phase.

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EXPERT SPEAKS

Universities in Australia are becoming more reliant on the income from international students to remain viable, which makes it imperative for them to understand students' experience in detail, and make sincere attempts to assist them to have a positive experience during their time at university. Having to deal with a new educational environment in addition to settling in a new country, the experiences of international students in the first few months are invariably filled with misunderstandings in interactions due to the complexities of the differences between cultures. These experiences are likely to result in distress and frustration amongst the students and occasionally question their decision to study in an alien land.

Presented here are in-depth discussions of a study by one of my research students detailing extensive interviews of eight international students from a major university in Melbourne, Australia [6]. Four males and same number of females, aged between 20 and 28 years, participated in the study. The three key themes identified relate to the students' difficulties in their spoken English language, continued utilization of traditional support networks and a lack of knowledge of the university counseling service, leading to the conclusion that students did not view it as a support service they would use for personal difficulties.

Confidence in speaking English

The students' level of spoken English was an important theme that influenced every major academic and social interaction. The students' perception of their effective communication ability with local students was highly reliant on their ability to speak English. Henderson, Milhouse and Cao [10] support this in their research study on Asian students in the USA. They found that the absence of adequate language skills, which was apparent in 97% of their sample, was the most serious and frequently identified difficulty [10]. Kono [17], Li et al. [18] and Mori [19], through their studies, also support the finding that language competency is a significant issue for international students.

The perception of greater opportunities to develop English language skills was a significant factor for students to choose Australia for their higher studies. All of them, in the initial stage of study, had a strong desire to make friends with local students, but this appeared to be an expectation that did not eventuate. This unmet expectation is also evident in studies conducted in North America, which showed international students are keen to experience more interaction with local students [13]. Ward et al. [10] argued that interaction is largely dependent on the cultural distance between the hosts' culture and the students' culture, with greater distance correlating with lower frequency of interaction. Pedersen et al. [20] argued that the greater the cultural distance, the greater the adjustment demands placed on the international student. Using Hofstede's dimensions [21] to gauge cultural distance, Mainland Chinese students and Australian students are almost at opposite ends of this spectrum. Therefore, the students in this study face the double hurdle of having a low frequency of interactions and higher adjustment demands in their quest to develop positive relationships with host students.

Students from Mainland China, who were developing their English language proficiency, had possibly developed a different perspective of themselves. They probably viewed themselves as competent students, reinforced by strong academic grades. Arthur [13] and Ward et al. [10] argue that if a student's grades in Australia are lower than expected, the student's view of self may change negatively. If this changed view was unexpected or resulted in confusion in the individual, he/she may find it very difficult to try to explain his/her situation and emotions using English. From a language point of view, one of the possible reasons for the low number of these students presenting to a counseling service (see later section) is that they may have difficulty trying to articulate adequately the emotional state they are experiencing when they do not have the English words to describe their internal world. Sue and Sue [22] argue that the university support services are limited for students who do not possess the language skills or confidence in the host language. This difficulty of developing competency in English is also found in other groups in the Australian community. In a recent study, Liamputtong [23] found that developing adequate English language skills was a major difficulty for the study's participants. For them, English language was essential as it gave them access to information and resources in the community. Similarly, for the students in our study, confidence in their spoken English was required to allow them to be comfortable in accessing and using the counseling service.

For students who can overcome this language problem, increased positive interaction with local students result in an increased identification with the host culture [24], but as one of the participants noted, lack of practice in speaking English eroded her confidence in maintaining contact with her local friends. Ward et al. [10] cites a number of studies which show that increased interaction between international and host students has a positive effect on academic studies, social interactions, language competency and general adaptation of the international students. For international students, obtaining competency in English was essential to understand what was happening around them, but more importantly, giving participants the sense that others understood them.

Support networks

The students in our study predominately spoke to their families, which formed their biggest support system. Cost, time difference or geographical location did not appear to be an issue for the students. Oliver et al. [25], in their study, also found that living in a separate country from their immediate family did not preclude them as a source of support.

One of the main advantages of speaking with their family was that language no longer became an issue. For the students, this allowed a freer flow of interaction, and a number of strategies could be developed to deal with their difficulties. Another advantage was that they helped to reinforce, within the student, the high value of education. In Asian cultures, education is considered a tool to access an increasing opportunities in the economic, social and moral areas [26]. For international students raised in a collective society, speaking to their families and having family

members involved in decision-making might hold greater appeal, than seeking out to a counselor [22, 27].

Use of university counseling service

General information about the university counseling service is available through a number of different media such as pamphlets, websites, orientation talks and handbooks, yet the students in this study still appeared to lack basic knowledge about the service. In Rosenthal et al.'s [28] recently published work; it was found that 65.5% of their sample population of international students did not know where to go for counseling assistance. Prior studies have shown that international students from Asia are generally infrequent users of a university counseling service [7, 20] while in our study, none of the students reported having used the university counseling service. They expressed apprehension that counselors would not understand their cultural context, and thereby would not be able to help them with their problems. Rosenthal et al.'s results [28] support this view by quoting that 46.9 % of the study sample indicated that counselors would not understand them and 47.6% thought that counselors would not be able to help them.

Liamputtong [29] argues that not all concepts are common across cultures and languages, and if the counselor has a different contextual understanding of the words used by the international student, misunderstandings are likely to occur. This may be one of the main factors for the students' belief that counselors would not understand the cultural context of their issue [15]. Students in this study had negative view that counseling services are for individuals with mental illness. This associated social stigma perception is consistent with a number of other studies conducted by Kinoshita and Bowman [30], Mori [19], Sue and Sundberg [31] and Suen [15]. In light of these findings, it is not inconceivable that students do not see the counseling service as a resource centre for developing personal coping skills. In Mori's [19] study, he found that the social stigma associated with using a counseling service was especially prevalent for Chinese students.

Individuals of Asian cultures who have used counseling services tend to be more comfortable with a solution focused and task orientated counseling service [32,33]. Asian students who require the support of university counseling services tend to require academic procedure support, such as special consideration. For these students, counselors hold specific expertise that family or friends are unable to provide. Rosenthal et al. [28] found that international students who had positive prior experience of the counseling service are the main sources of encouragement for other students to seek assistance from the counseling service.

Oliver et al. [25] explored the variable of language, differentiating between English as a first or second language for their participants. They found that language was not a significant factor in influencing their participants' decision to seek assistance from any potential help source. In this study, however, the lack of Mandarin speaking counselors served as a deterrent for Mainland Chinese students to attend the university counseling services. It is unclear from Oliver et al.'s [25] study whether the potential help sources included people who spoke the international students' first language or only the host language.

The students' use of family as their primary source of support during difficult periods is consistent with other findings, which showed that international students prefer informal support sources [34] and have help-seeking behavior different from native-born students [25].

Conclusion

This paper intends to highlight that international students face many challenges in their endeavors to make their learning successful in a foreign nation. Existing literature and my own work have only confirmed the same. Despite their difficulties, many students are reluctant to seek help from counseling services provided within their own university. This may hinder rather than help their progress by creating newer challenges. It is hoped that the discussions provided in this paper can perhaps be used to develop programs and policies that will assist international students to access university counseling services with greater ease during periods of personal difficulties. In addition, a requirement for more research surveys oriented to understanding further problems in addition to those mentioned in this article is a pressing issue. This undoubtedly will ensure success in their future academic endeavors in a foreign nation.

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Competing Interests
The author declares that she has no competing interests.