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International Postgraduate Student Experience: How Can We Enhance Transition Management?

K Singh

Edith Cowan University

L Armstrong

Edith Cowan University

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S Singh¹ and L Armstrong²

¹Teaching and Learning Office
Faculty of Computing, Health and Science
Edith Cowan University, Australia.
E-mail: k.singh@ecu.edu.au

²School of Computer and Information Science
Faculty of Computing, Health and Science
Edith Cowan University, Australia.
E-mail: l.armstrong@ecu.edu.au

ABSTRACT

Within the broad scope of literature addressing the issue of student experience very limited attention has been given to examining the particular issues impacting international students. This paper draws attention to transition as an aspect impacting the international postgraduate (IP) student experience within a School of Computer and Information Science with a high proportion of IP students (65-75%). Literature relating to both, first year experience and international onshore education provided a frame of reference for a pilot survey (N=58) investigating student perceptions and attitudes on choice of study destination; academic orientation, application and coping; future orientation; social integration and belonging; university structures and processes; peer engagement, and course satisfaction. This paper discusses the issues of academic and social integration. While the findings suggest a positive overall IP student experience, critical areas for improvement in transitional support were identified to enhance both academic and social integration. The recommended transition strategies include implementation of course specific academic orientation programmes, integration of academic, research and generic skills development into the curriculum, provision of English language development resources, initiatives to raise staff awareness and promote cross cultural sensitivity within the teaching and learning environment, and incorporation of a range of ongoing social activities to promote staff-student and student-student interaction, communication and belonging.

INTRODUCTION

Within a highly competitive higher education climate and one that is increasingly focused on quality the complex issue of student experience has demanded much interest in recent years, and is particularly relevant within the vision of higher education as a commodity in a global market. Consequently, higher education institutions are under pressure to assure foreign governments and international students about the Australian educational 'product' on the one hand and to bridge the gap in student experience to avoid the risk to losing current and potential students. Notwithstanding economic imperatives, a positive student experience is integral to improved educational outcomes for students, as well as institutions. Due to global expansion in the international education market the issues influencing the international student experience are shared not only by Australian universities, but also by institutions in the UK, USA and Europe (Marginson 2002). Hence improving the student experience is a matter of global interest and one that requires shifts in the way universities interpret and respond to the changing needs and expectations of diverse cohorts within the student population.

This paper explores a number of themes relating to the international postgraduate (IP) student experience within a School of Computing and Information Science (SCIS) at an Australian university. These issues relate to international students' academic and social transition, focusing

particularly on the parameters of diversity within the cohort, student needs and circumstances, and satisfaction with the system of transitional support currently available (e.g. access to faculty learning advisors, orientations for international students provided by the International Students Office, etc.). The overarching aim of this ongoing study is to examine the implications of the findings for improving transitional support at a School level, within a broader context of demonstrating quality and professionalism in teaching, learning enhancement and assessment practices. This paper largely borrows from work done by Guilfoyle (2004; 2006) and his colleagues who analysed the transition variables impacting international postgraduate students' and located this within the context of economic and social agendas facing Australian Universities. In fact, the term 'IP students' is borrowed from Guilfoyle's work. Whilst articulating a similar aim and argument, the current work is an attempt to examine the transition issues as experienced by a fairly homogenous international student cohort studying coursework postgraduate programs at a School level. Further aspects of the current research attempt to integrate wider issues on student transition as drawn from national student experience research (McInnis, 1995) and other smaller studies on academic and social adjustments made by international students (Krause, 1998, 2001). The paper begins by sketching a background to the context and then provides a review of relevant literature. The methods and findings of a pilot survey investigating the IP student experience are then discussed and conclusions and recommendations presented.

BACKGROUND

In 2005, 25% or one in four students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions were international students, including 38% of enrolments at the postgraduate level (DEST 2006). This reflects a 6.7% increase in IP enrolments over the previous year, with IP students comprising almost 10% of all postgraduate enrolments in 2005 (DEST 2006). The top 10 source countries include China, India, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand, Taiwan and Bangladesh. (IDP 2006). The enrolment pattern in the present context is not dissimilar; IP students comprised 65-75 % of postgraduate enrolments during the past three years. The main source countries of IP students are India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and China.

Most of these students are new to the Australian educational environment and are challenged to make adjustments rapidly to integrate into the socio-cultural and academic environment; the latter involves socialisation into the teaching and learning culture as well as adjustment to the vertical transition into postgraduate study. Difficulties sometimes arise as a consequence of conflicting assumptions and expectations held by both academic staff and students, and the institutional climate may be perceived by students as unsupportive at times. For some students this has negative consequences not only on their academic performance, but also their overall university experience. Enhancing the teaching and learning and social environments will promote IP students' integration and overall experience. However, support structures and processes must be timely, appropriate and responsive to the needs of this cohort.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Earlier work by Guilfoyle identified the need to consider transition variables particularly at what was labelled the 'IP' or international postgraduate level and this need was placed within the context of economic and social agendas facing Australian Universities. The present paper borrows from this earlier review, structure, argument and aims and applies the work to transition for School of Computer and Information Science postgraduates. This literature review draws on two fields of research. The first relates to the first year experience (FYE), with particular emphasis on the importance of fostering academic integration during transition. The second area from which the literature is drawn relates to international education, particularly the experiences of onshore students. In linking these two broad areas of existing literature we extend previous literature to enrich our understanding of the issues and strategies specifically related to the IP student experience. The general thrust of this literature is that effective transition management strategies at institutional and Faculty/School levels are critical to cultivating a positive student experience since the early experiences of university students have a profound impact on their approach to academic study and their overall experience. Indeed the provision of transitional support is invaluable to

international students who are confronted with academic and socio-cultural challenges as they adjust to their new environment.

First year experience

In the last decade much attention has focused on student experience including first year transition (Ballard and Clanchy 1997; Krause 2001; McInnis, James, and McNaught 1995; McInnis, James, and Hartley 2000; McInnis 2003). Transition is defined as a process of socialisation into the university culture and internalisation of the norms and valued ways of 'being' (Ballard and Clanchy 1997). University transition experiences generally involve adjustments to a new, unfamiliar learning environment and social context (Evans 2000; Ryan and Twibell 2000) and for international students this may also include adjustment to the social and academic culture. Transition affects all students and is particularly challenging during the first year (McInnis 2001). Previous transition research has dealt with students' integration into the university community, including integration of all aspects of a student's life (e.g. academic and social needs, abilities, aspirations and previous educational experience) with the academic demands and specific social makeup of a university environment (e.g. level of preparation, motivation, generic skills, workload, teaching, learning and assessment issues). Within this context, student experience is a generic term used to refer to the overall impact of a range of specific experiences students encounter; these include relationships, situations, activities and skills, and values and attitudes operating within and impacting upon students' experiences within the educational environment.

Integration into the educational environment operates on several levels and in a range of ways. In order for students to become academically integrated during the initial stages of their studies they need to develop a strong affiliation with the academic environment (Nora 1993), 'both within the formal learning context and in the social setting outside the classroom' (Krause 2001, p.148). Interaction with others as an invaluable aspect of the learning process has been widely documented (Johnson and Johnson 1994; Krause 2001; Nora 1993, Tinto 1998) particularly its contribution to the development of students' knowledge, ideas, attitudes and values. The added benefits of interaction for those integrating into a different cultural context, highlight the importance of interaction for IP students' integration into the academic and social life at university, or as Nora (1993) puts it, interaction helps to 'develop a strong affiliation with the academic environment' (p.223). The value of student-student interactions as well as student-staff interactions in both social and academic contexts has been observed by Kraemer (1999, cited in Krause 2001), Krause (1998, 2001) and Tinto (1993), and may be linked to Terenzini and Pascarella's (1977) claim that the quality of these interactions have a strong bearing on university retention rates as they influence students' ability to navigate successfully through the demands of academic study (Bruffee 1993). Among the issues related to interaction with tutors and lecturers are staff accessibility and availability, and students' perceptions of the value of interactions with staff during the assignment writing process (Krause 2001). Another area of staff-student interaction is feedback on assessments, particularly the processes of clarifying and demystifying assignment requirements (Ballard and Clanchy 1997; Krause 2001; Nora 1993; Samuelowicz 1987). But, improving student-staff interaction begins with raising staff awareness of student perceptions and expectations, and should be supported by strategies for breaking down communication barriers. Similarly, opportunities to promote student-student interaction are essential to enhance integration and improve students' overall experience.

What constitutes effective transition programs and experiences are linked to students' needs and expectations on the one hand and educational and institutional requirements and expectations on the other hand. However, the above are not always easy to negotiate as they are implied and tacit, and often not explicated in tangible ways. Krause (2001) states, 'The most effective transition experiences are those which facilitate integration into the university community through positive educational experiences that are responsive to students' needs' (p.147).

Onshore international education

While earlier research into international students' transition experience tended to focus on socio-cultural adjustments (Fisher and Cooper 1990; Furnham and Alibhai 1985) with a limited number of studies attending to international students' overall experience more recent studies have tended to

examine social, cultural and academic adjustments (Guilfoyle 2004; Guilfoyle and Halse 2004; Volet and Renshaw 1995). Despite this there is still need for more work to be done on international students' overall experience. The present focus on IP students' experience is a move in this direction.

Understanding IP students' transition experience is a necessary step in optimising educational, social and economic outcomes for all stakeholders. In support of this view Guilfoyle and Halse (2004) cite four reasons why research focusing in IP students is needed: 'IP students represent an expanding educational market that is linked to the key aims of Australian universities; there is limited research on the transition experience of IP students; as a cohort IP students are susceptible to both vertical transition and cross-cultural adaptation; and IP students are often socio-politically different from their undergraduate counterparts [e.g. are older, arrive with / without family, depart from well-paid jobs and status, have previously enjoyed high levels of educational success and have well defined expectations]'. Suffice it to say that the reasons cited by Guilfoyle and Halse (2004) capture the strategic institutional perspective as well as the key issues impacting IP students' transition (i.e. academic and social adjustments) within the local context.

Effective transition strategies for international students offer potential benefits to all stakeholders. Apart from the obvious educational and social benefits to the students themselves, appropriate and effective transition approaches have far reaching economic and educational benefits for the institution (e.g. potential improvements in student retention, UTEI rankings and competitiveness in international marketing) and the host country (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006; DEST 2006; IDP 2006). Some writers align the economic benefits with perceived social benefits accrued from hosting international students (Ryan and Twibell 2000; Stier 2003) although this is not implicit. Whereas McInnis (2001) suggests an alternate relationship, he says 'optimising social outcomes increases the chances for economic gains' (p. 110). Indeed this recursive loop between social and economic benefits strengthens the need to provide quality transition programs to optimise both the social and academic integration of IP students, at least from an economic imperative standpoint, if not an educational.

Although international students have a lot in common with domestic students regarding the challenges of integrating into the new academic environment, their experience is unique primarily because they have removed themselves from their language and educational environment, cultural norms and traditional support and social networks (Cruickshank et al. 2003; Samuelowicz 1987). Research has shown that language difficulties and other affective and situational factors are detrimental to academic performance and negatively impact their overall experience. For instance Luzio-Lockett (1998) describes this as the 'squeezing effect', meaning that students' self concept is constrained by the language difficulties, affective (personal) and situational factors they encounter within the new educational environment. She explains that language difficulties include both their quality of language production and their ability to understand academic discourse. Closely associated with language difficulties is students' previous educational experience which may involve varying academic conventions. For example, students bring varying understandings of what constitutes particular genres of academic writing (e.g. assignment, report, and essay) which involves not just the issue of format and presentation, but also notions of rhetoric and argumentation. This influences not only their contributions in seminars and performance in written assignments, but become the surface manifestation of their 'knowledge' or cognitive ability which in turn constrains them to adjust their self concept. Luzio-Lockett (1998) adds that affective factors such as family related worries, illnesses, political instability in their home country, etc. are likely to impact upon their studies especially within a climate that is absent of understanding and support. Situational factors impacting international students' overall experience also include their engagement with the socio-educational establishment, including for example the quality of infrastructural support, clarity of standards and expectations, quality of staff-student and student-student interaction, social integration, the nature and form of academic and personal support and cross cultural understanding, a view that is supported by other researchers (Biggs 1999; Krause 2001; McInnis, et al.1995, McInnis 2003). An effective transition support framework must therefore integrate IP students' needs relating to language, affective and situational factors in addition to providing a general orientation to the educational environment.

Available literature on transition explains the complex nature of integration into the educational environment including the various levels of interaction that occur within the student – educational environment interface. With specific reference to the experience of IP students, Guilfoyle (2004) and his colleagues have focused on students relational network (Guilfoyle 2006; Guilfoyle and Halse 2004; Sims and Guilfoyle 2006). The four levels of relationships with the host university - the 'intra-personal [within the person], inter-personal [personal relationships between the individual and others], inter-group [how the person is affected by own and others' group memberships] and societal [ways in which broader social factors shape experiences]' identified in this work frames the complexity of IP student engagement; a notion also contained within earlier work (for example Luzio-Lockett 1998). The IP student experience is deeply embedded in a range of social, cultural, situational, educational and personal issues that impact upon transition and therefore influence the overall student experience. Consequently, successful social and academic integration of IP students into the university community requires effort and careful planning to enhance the quality of their relational network to strengthen their social and academic integration.

Designing effective strategies for diverse student populations of the 21st century can be challenging. The IP dimension adds complexity because of the presence of multiple cultural identities and educational backgrounds located within diverse academic traditions. Notwithstanding, diversity also arises from the demographic dimensions of age, gender, academic ability, financial means and varying social aspirations and motivations. The educational context itself also contributes to diversity within a cohort, for instance mode of study, mode of delivery, degree types, the basis of admission, teaching and learning approaches, the system of support services and the prevailing institutional culture add to the diversity within student cohorts. Unsurprisingly, integrating the needs of a diverse cohort appropriately into a transition support framework is complex; hence neither a generic approach nor reliance on institution-wide pre-semester orientation events is adequate by themselves. It is necessary for transitional support mechanisms to be focused upon the specific characteristics and needs of a cohort and to be situated to facilitate adjustment to the dynamics within the specific teaching and learning environment. This requires transition planning and implementation to occur at different levels- institutional, faculty / School, course, unit, and the individual student level, to promote effective integration of IP students.

METHOD

Data was gathered using a structured online survey. The questionnaire included a number of scales on academic and social adjustment drawn from the First Year Experience Questionnaire (FYEQ) (McInnis et al. 1995) as well as additional dimensions linked to the literature on transition. The survey instrument included mostly check boxes, and a few short answer items. Items were grouped into the following broad categories: demographic information; factors influencing choice of study destination; academic orientation, application and coping; future orientation; social integration and belonging; university structures and processes; peer engagement and course satisfaction. A five point Likert-style scale (strongly agree, agree, disagree, strongly disagree, not applicable) was used in the latter six categories. Neutral response categories were deliberately omitted because the questions were designed to discover leanings rather than convictions (Payne 1951 cited in Kalton, Roberts, and Holt 1980). Further support for omitting the neutral scale is drawn from Frary (1990) who suggests that there is no assurance whatsoever that subjects choosing the middle scale position harbour a neutral opinion, adding that it could in fact indicate ignorance, uncooperativeness, inapplicability, uncomfotability, etc. Hence, providing a 'not applicable' response category potentially alleviated such a problem.

The survey was hosted on an in-house server for four weeks during which all IP students in the School were invited to complete the questionnaire voluntarily and anonymously. A total of 58 completed questionnaires were received from a potential sample size of 105, yielding a response rate of about 55 percent.

The data was collated and presented on a spreadsheet and percentages calculated where appropriate. The SPSS software package was then used to statistically analyse the data. In order

to assess the significance of the relationship between variables a Chi square test was performed to the .05 level.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Three broad aspects of the findings of this survey are examined in this paper: demographic profile, academic adjustment and social integration.

Demographic profile

While international students do not in general form a homogenous group as there are significant variations in terms of country of origin, ability, attitudes, level of prior qualifications, and so forth, the results of this survey reveal a fairly homogenous cohort of IP students within this School. The demographic profile suggests that most students are male (76%), between 20-30 years old (89%), and English second (76%) or third language speakers (8 %). The majority have undergraduate (76%) qualifications from their home country, and are enrolled as private fee-paying students (91%) in an on campus mode doing three units (89%) or four units (11%) in various stages of mostly coursework masters programs (90%). The sample consisted of fewer females (24%); English first language speakers (16 %), mature aged students in the category '31 – 40+ years' (11 %). A small proportion of the sample had obtained either diplomas (7%) or postgraduate (17%) qualifications from their home country. A large proportion of the sample was engaged in paid employment for between 10 and 20 hours per week (83%), with just 7% and 10% employed for less than 10 hours per week and over 20 hours per week respectively. Given the fairly homogenous composition of this cohort, particularly with respect to age, gender, language background and previous educational qualifications, specific patterns relating to these variables were not evident.

Since the characteristics of this cohort is less diverse than the general student population, it is easier to predict and plan transition support needs particularly in relation to English language assistance, academic preparation to cope with the expectations associated with postgraduate studies within the teaching and learning climate and socio-cultural support needs to promote social integration. The high levels of involvement in paid work may partially explain some of the coping difficulties impacting academic integration and application, particularly workload and time management issues; this is not dissimilar to findings from studies of domestic students (McInnis, et al. 1995, McInnis 2003). Also of significance is that this cohort does not appear to enjoy a high degree of flexibility in terms of mode of study which is known to be a challenge for students trying to balance work and study resulting in difficulties with managing time, workload, and financial pressures while maintaining high levels of class attendance, as was found by McInnis et al. (2000) in their study of domestic first year students. Given the financial pressures faced by international students, it is not surprising that almost all of them are involved in paid work. In fact, informal discussions with students have revealed that they rely on this source of income for their living expenses thus relieving the financial burden on family in the home country, which is indicative of the critical impact affective and situational factors have upon these IP students' transition experience.

Academic adaptation

Thirteen items were included in the questionnaire to probe students' perceptions of academic orientation, application and coping as indicators of their transition experience. A significant statistical relationship was observed between students' perception of academic preparation and motivation in their studies and overall satisfaction with their academic progress ($p < 0.05$ respectively) suggesting that most respondents were enjoying a positive academic orientation. Further investigation however is needed to determine how this relates to actual academic performance taking into account the possibility of subjectivity associated with student self evaluations.

Table 1: Students' Academic Orientation (%)

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
Feel academically prepared for postgraduate level study	14	74	10	0	2
Have difficulty maintaining motivation	5	21	53	16	5
Overall satisfaction with academic progress	10	70	10	7	3

With regard to coping within the teaching and learning environment most respondents reported that they found the lectures stimulating, enjoyed the intellectual challenge, had adjusted relatively easily to the style of teaching, and had not experienced too much difficulty in understanding the study material. Statistically significant associations reveal that respondents who experienced difficulty understanding study material might also have experienced difficulty adjusting to the teaching style and keeping up with the volume of work ($p < 0.001$ respectively). In contrast, it may be suggested that those who did not have difficulty in understanding the study material also found that lectures stimulated their interest in the subject ($p < 0.01$), and it appears that those students who felt academically prepared were also satisfied with their progress ($p < .05$).

Table 2: Students Coping Ability within the Teaching and Learning Environment (%)

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
Lectures stimulate interest in subject	21	59	17	2	1
Find intellectual challenge enjoyable	19	64	12	3	2
Difficulty in adjusting to style of teaching	9	12	48	24	7
Difficulty understanding study material	5	17	48	21	9
Difficulty keeping up with volume of work	9	33	36	14	8

Against a generally positive picture of respondents coping ability, anecdotal feedback from some IP students and lecturers is conflicting which may suggest differences in orientations to learning and teaching. An apparent mismatch between students' and staff perceptions may be partially understood by Scheyvens, et al.'s (2003) explanation of why IP students tend not to participate actively in class discussions, a dimension upon which lecturers might be basing their assumptions. Scheyvens et al. explain that IP students are generally highly confident individuals' who have considerable professional experience and high status within their societies, but because this is negatively influenced by their language difficulties, they tend not to participate actively in classroom discussion; further support for this tendency may be found in Luzio-Lockett's (1998) study. While the respondents may perceive themselves to be coping well academically, this may not actually be demonstrated in their levels of classroom participation, which is possibly an indicator used by lecturers to informally monitor students' coping ability. Biggs (1999) has also referred to this as a possible indicator of differences between the cultures of teaching and learning operating within the home as opposed to that of the host country. Furthermore, close to half the respondents expressed difficulties with managing workload which is probably an indication of both language related difficulties (e.g. their ability to understand academic discourse) and inadequate preparation for postgraduate level studies within this educational environment.

The third aspect of academic integration addressed the issue of students' application within the learning environment. Here again, results were very positive revealing that most respondents felt that sufficient transition support was available within the host institution, that they had worked consistently throughout the semester, that they regularly sought assistance from lecturers and support staff, and that they rarely skipped class and rarely had not completed homework tasks. In this regard, statistically significant relationships suggest that students that had worked consistently were more likely to be highly motivated to succeed in their studies ($p < 0.05$), perceived themselves to be better prepared academically ($p < 0.01$), were more satisfied with the transition support services available at the host institution ($p < 0.01$), were more satisfied with their overall progress ($p < 0.05$), and were less likely to skip classes ($p < 0.01$).

Table 3: Students' Application within the Learning Environment (%)

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
Sufficient transition support available	5	43	29	7	16
Worked consistently throughout semester	29	45	21	3	2
Regularly seek academic assistance from lecturers / tutors	19	52	26	2	1
Skip classes	7	9	33	47	4
Does not complete homework tasks	2	22	45	22	9

Interactions with lecturers to seek assistance were reportedly high although two thirds of the sample reported they found it easy to understand most of the material suggesting reasonable help-seeking initiative. There appears to be a significant relationship between class attendance and completion of homework activities ($p < 0.01$). Furthermore almost half the respondents indicated that they found it hard to keep up with the volume of work, although they agreed that the workload itself was reasonable, indicating a statistically significant relationship between students' actual experience / management of workload and their perceptions of workload at the postgraduate level ($p < 0.001$). Less than half the respondents (46%) felt that there were effective academic transition support services available, and suggested more support was needed specifically to improve their English language abilities, academic writing skills, and to develop generic and practical / technical skills. They also expressed a desire to have more financial support through scholarships available to international students. To fully address the above concerns further investigation of students' academic orientation, application and coping ability is needed. Support for this is drawn from Wyatt, et al. (2005) who found that attitudes toward academic preparation, effort, performance and standards differed significantly between lecturers and students. Further investigations would also contribute to better alignment between student perceptions and actual academic and social adjustments students make during transition.

Social integration

With regard to social integration and belonging, almost half the respondents indicated that they found it difficult to adjust initially, although most were currently enjoying being a student at this university. This may imply that the transitional experience of IP students extends over the duration of a year at least, considering that the sample was almost equally split between the first and second year of study. The data also revealed a relationship between initial difficulties experienced in social adjustment and participation in social activities arranged by student organisations ($p < 0.05$) implying that increasing the level of students participation in social activities during the initial stages may increase their opportunities for social integration. The average level of participation in social activities may also be associated with students' lack of enjoyment of the types of available activities ($p < 0.01$). Other reasons for low levels of participation could possibly include competing

work and study commitments as well as difficulties with scheduling events and transport difficulties. Related to this, only half the respondents felt that the available social activities promoted intercultural understanding among all students suggesting a significant gulf in the facilitation of socio cultural integration. Similarly, there was a gap in the area of interactions with staff with regard to which respondents thought they would benefit from more social interaction with School staff; it could be assumed that this would enhance students' sense of belonging and their relational network. Respondents clearly indicated a desire for more social activities and special events catering for postgraduate students, such as more cultural type events, theatre productions, music shows, and career development opportunities including networking with key industry stakeholders.

Table 4: Social Integration and Belonging (%)

Item	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Not applicable
Found social adjustment difficult initially	19	33	38	7	3
Enjoying being a student at host university	24	66	10	0	0
Participation in social activities arranged by student organisations	7	28	40	10	15
Enjoy the type of activities available to students at uni	7	40	22	10	21
Available social activities promote intercultural understanding	9	41	19	7	24
Would benefit from more opportunities for social interaction with School staff	22	43	16	9	10

These findings may be interpreted in light of Cheney's (2001) work which states that structured intercultural interaction may provide a way to assist students overcome difficulties associated with language barriers, academic pressures, difficulties adjusting to the local culture and coping with difficulties in interpersonal relationships, and could improve students' overall experience. Social activities appear to be especially important to enhancing communication and improving the relational network of students within this educational climate.

Overall student experience

Respondents were highly satisfied with their overall experience within this educational environment. Factors of relevance within the learning environment included perceptions of the level of intellectual challenge, the supportive attitudes of domestic students toward them and the nature of class discussions ($p < 0.001$ respectively). Significant aspects within the teaching climate included positive perceptions of the quality of teaching ($p < 0.001$), approachability of staff ($p < 0.01$), the level of interest staff show in students' progress ($p < 0.01$), and feedback provided by staff on student progress ($p < 0.05$). Social adjustment appeared to be most strongly linked to motivation to succeed (intrapersonal) rather than environmental and interpersonal relationships; this is not surprising since social engagement within the university environment was not significantly high. Lower levels of social engagement are possibly associated with the type of activities available.

Among the services respondents found most useful during their transition were those provided by the International Students' Office, the computer facilities for students, library tours, and the general student services. Among the people that students found most helpful during their transition were the learning adviser, international student support officers, some teaching staff and student

volunteers during orientation. The most helpful resources included library resources, good course materials, clearly stated unit outlines and assessment guidelines and facilities available in computer labs. The skills that improved their transition experience included academic skills support (integrated academic writing, referencing, oral communication and presentation skills workshops). The latter findings are supported by Krause (2001) and Nora (1993) who found that clearly stated assessment requirements and support through the process of the first written assessment provides valuable pathways for academic integration.

LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study are susceptible to sampling bias. Being a voluntary survey the authors are mindful of the likelihood that students who were satisfied with their overall experience at the host institution may have been over-represented in the sample, while those who were less satisfied / dissatisfied might have chosen not to participate in the survey. Hence further investigation is needed to probe students who were less satisfied with their overall experience as this would ensure that a balanced student perspective is obtained.

CONCLUSIONS

Analyses of the findings point to useful conclusions about the characteristics of this cohort, and the nature of their academic and social integration. The fact that this group is far more homogenous than a typical university population means that a situated School / course level approach to transition is not only feasible, but would be highly beneficial in enhancing the initial and overall student experience. Based on the demographic characteristics of this cohort, transition support is needed in the areas of English language and academic skills preparation to enable students to enhance their vertical transition into postgraduate studies within this environment.

Secondly, although students' perceptions about their academic integration indicate a positive transition experience, management of workload, adjustment to the teaching style and help seeking behaviours are areas that can be enhanced with more effective transition support mechanisms and processes in place. This is further linked to promoting a positive teaching and learning culture including the quality of relationships among students and between students and staff, as well as fostering intercultural understanding and communication and awareness of the situated nature of students' prior educational experiences. Such adjustments within the teaching and learning environment will begin to address some areas of difficulty that are apparent.

Thirdly, the respondents' perceptions and attitudes about their social integration are less positive. It is necessary for the institution to provide more transitional support particularly during the initial period and to rethink the types of social activity of offer. It is advisable that such initiatives have a Faculty / School orientation as this would promote social integration and belonging within the immediate educational setting. It is particularly important that the social climate promotes both staff-student and student-student interactions and intercultural understandings as these factors impact significantly upon IP students' social adjustment and sense of belonging which impacts their academic adjustment and overall experience.

Despite some areas of difficulty within the academic and social spheres most respondents were enjoying being a student at the host university and felt that their overall experience was positive. The results draw attention to gaps and gulfs in the transition experience of IP students within this setting. For instance, there are apparent mismatches between students' expectations, perceptions and attitudes and actual practices, implying a possible gulf between staff and student perceptions about academic adjustment. This together with students' perspectives on the impacts of affective and situational factors are areas deserving further investigation and could potentially reveal useful information about the quality of the transition experience of this group.

At a School level, this study has helped to raise awareness of the issues and challenges IP students experience and provides a perspective on how this shapes students academic and social integration during transition. The findings provide a foundation to plan a systemic approach to

improve management of transition in two broad areas – academic and social integration. At the classroom level, transition support strategies may need some level of curriculum adjustments to integrate opportunities for academic and generic skills development as well as English language support. Similarly, the social climate may be optimised to promote peer interaction and intercultural awareness among students.

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