First year experience (FYE): International students' experiences

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Abstract

International students confront a range of challenges during their transition to living and studying in Australia. Despite these challenges over 80% of international students reported high satisfaction with their life and study within Australia. This qualitative study reports on the experiences of 53 first year international students at ECU. Participants were students from across a range of study areas who responded to an online or face to face survey. Participants were required to respond to four questions which were analysed thematically to provide a summary of their experiences. Survey questions included their positive and negative experiences of being a first year student at ECU and changes that they suggested be considered by the university. Thematic analysis revealed a range of issues, most of which were reflected in previous research, however a range of ECU specific issues were also revealed, for example, resources and timetabling. This introductory research has provided initial data for developing future research. The cognitive nature of the survey may have limited the responses of participants. It is recommended that future research consider interviews with international students to review social and emotional issues.

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Introduction

Although over 80% of international students reported high satisfaction with their life and study within Australia (Australian Education International, 2010), research indicates that students who decide to study in another country (international students) will endure a range of additional and different challenges associated with their decision compared to students who commence university in their home country (domestic students). Issues such as financial concerns, feeling lonely, and homesickness were identified as the three main concerns of international students prior to their arrival in the United Kingdom (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010) and up to 37% of international students in Australia have financial concerns (Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2009). Language barriers, communication issues, cultural differences, financial burdens, heavy workloads and difficulty in developing relationships with local students have been identified as hindrances to adaptation (Andrade, 2007; Malau-Aduli, 2011). Later concerns indicated issues about establishing relationships with lecturers and understanding their expectations (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010) which are also issues for domestic students (Lizzio, 2006; Noble & Henderson, 2011). Also, similar to the experiences of domestic students, international students' experiences are both

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positive and negative (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010).

International students may suffer culture shock (McLachlan & Justice, 2009) which has been defined as "the anxiety that results from losing all of our familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse" (Oberg, 1960, p. 177). Even differences in the weather between their home and host country of study can affect international students (McLachlan & Justice, 2009), however it is the cumulative effect of a range of issues that can affect student adjustment and their successful transition to the new environment (McLachlan & Justice, 2009). Complex issues can be even more demanding on an individual when they are in an environment which is already stressful. Popadiuk (2008) reported increased psychological distress in female international students who had complicated intimate relationships. This increased distress affected their ability to adjust to their new environment. More commonly however, academic shock rather than social shock is the greater challenge (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010) and some research has suggested that females adapt to a different culture better than males (Lee, Park, & Kim, 2009). Students from Western cultures adapt to other Western cultures more easily than students from Eastern cultures (Malau-Aduli, 2011; Ng, 2006). Such adaptation to other cultures is supported by the work of Hofstede (1980, p. 11) who initially identified four main dimensions for differences amongst cultures: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity. In 2001, Hofstede, (p. xix) added the fifth dimension of long term orientation. The wider the differences in these dimensions between students' home countries and the country in which they come to study, the greater the chance and intensity of culture shock.

A range of difficulties with language and writing, teaching and learning styles, and customs may impact on academic performance and potential relationships with local students (Andrade, 2007; Malau-Aduli, 2011; Wang, Sing, Bird, & Ives, 2008; Ying, 2003). Yet international students often report enjoying the challenges of critical thinking which is frequently new to them (Wang et al., 2008). English proficiency has been identified as a predictor of academic success (Lee, Park, & Kim, 2009; Li, Chen, & Duanmu, 2010). Language difficulties can be addressed by taking the opportunity to speak in English as often as possible (Andrade, 2007), even with friends from their home country (Wang, Sing, Bird, & Ives, 2008). Differences in teaching and learning styles can affect the use of university resources such as the library (Hughes, 2010). When students come from countries where rote learning, use of only a text book is required, and teacher-centred learning is experienced, students often do not realise that the use of a library is an essential feature of student-centred learning (Hughes, 2010; Wang, Sing, Bird, & Ives, 2008).

International students have reported feelings of isolation, powerless, a general sense of not belonging, and a sense of unfriendliness by domestic students (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Wang, Sing, Bird, & Ives, 2008) as well as direct and indirect forms of discrimination both on and off campus (Bonazzo & Wong, 2007). Lack of integration with local students is a common issue, both in academic and social situations (Gu, Schweisfurth, & Day, 2010; Malau-Aduli, 2011; Wang, Sing, Bird, & Ives, 2008). However some groups of international students form bonds amongst themselves and provide academic, social, and emotional support to other group members (Andrade, 2007; Malau-Aduli, 2011; Montgomery, & McDowell, 2009). This strategy is one way international students have overcome their lack of integration with local students and continued to pursue their educational goals. Some students make friends with both local and other international students (Andrade, 2007) and this can provide them with social support and facilitate their integration into their new society.

Therefore the needs of international students cross both academic and social areas and to ensure retention of these students, institutions need to consider these

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issues/requirements. From an academic perspective international students have indicated that more extensive academic support services, such as extended information on library skills are required (Hughes, 2010). These services may include language and learning skills support, counselling services and student advisors, accessibility to learning resources, and student organisations (Wang, Sing, Bird, & Ives, 2008). Additionally, there are indications that for international students, the orientation week seminars or courses are offered too early in the semester (Hughes, 2010) as many students may not have arrived on campus, others have different priorities such as organising accommodation which prevent them from focussing on learning.

From a social perspective, linking international students with local students in a peer mentoring program may be a useful strategy to support adaptation. However, the program must provide the local mentors with additional information and support to assist them in the task of mentoring students from different cultures (Geelhoed, Abe, & Talbot, 2003). Such a program, if managed competently could raise the cultural awareness of both mentors and mentees.

The range of challenges mentioned above may affect the retention of international students and universities should address these issues and provide support for international students that facilitate their coping in the new environment. The study reported in this paper is part of a larger research project investigating the first year experiences of students at Edith Cowan University (ECU). This is an exploratory study and the descriptive results are designed to provide information which requires further investigation.

Methodology

This research sits at the nexus of quantitative and qualitative methodology as it used a survey that provided for open responses which were then analysed for thematic content and coded according to that content to provide some statistical analyses. This approach was the result of the researchers' pragmatic approach to research which allows them to adopt a particular methodology to answer a research question. Pragmatism is one of four positions in philosophical underpinning to research strategy (Cresswell, 2003, p. 6).

Participants

Participants were 53 international students from Edith Cowan University. The students were from three faculties, namely, Faculty of Business and Law, Faculty of Computing, Health and Science and the Faculty of Education and Arts. Participation was voluntary and students completed a questionnaire during a lecture. All respondents reported as being on campus students and the majority were full time students. One participant reported to be studying part time and two failed to respond to the question. The mean age range was between 21 and 24 years of age (70%). Most students were studying four units (91%).

Materials

A questionnaire was devised specifically for this research which included demographic information (e.g., age, gender, whether full time or part time student, international or domestic student and the number of units being studied that semester). Students were asked to identify three items the university did that

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made them feel welcome and appreciated as a student, three items that the university had not done well that resulted in them feeling uncomfortable, and three items that they would change. A further question asked students to identify what the university could have done differently to support them as a first year student. The questionnaire was designed for open responses. The questionnaire is available from the researchers.

Procedure

Lecturers interested in the First Year Experience negotiated completion of the questionnaires as part of unit evaluations within their area of study. Students from the three faculties completed the questionnaire during a lecture. The responses were collected as part of unit evaluations on a face to face basis with lecturers providing a copy of the questionnaire, intimating that its completion was not compulsory. An envelope was provided in which students could place their completed (or not completed) form. Overall 292 students (both international and domestic) completed the questionnaire, from which 16 'blank' questionnaires were returned. No identifying information was collected and all responses were anonymous.

Theme	Uncomfort able 1 (n)	Uncomfort able 2 (n)	Uncomfort able 3 (n)	Total n	Total %
Resources not available or poor	18	6	3	27	36
Poor communication	6		1	7	9
Times for lectures	2	3		5	7
Teaching/Assessment Issues	4	4	3	11	15
Other	14	9	2	25	33
Total	44	23	8	75	100

Data Analysis

The data collected was qualitative as it was responses to open questions for which a range of responses could be provided. The data was entered into PASW Version 18 and the qualitative data were thematically coded according to a range of pre-agreed themes that had emerged from a review of the literature. The themes were related to student satisfaction and retention. One researcher coded the data and that coding was reviewed independently by another member of the research team. Interrater reliability was 100 per cent on the thematic coding of each comment. The frequency of each theme was counted on the basis that themes that revealed a higher number of comments were important on a group basis. The number of themes was limited to eight; however the 'other' category which was designed to reflect a response outside the initial seven categories was reanalysed to ensure that other specific, regularly occurring themes had not been missed.

Results

With the data in PASW each of the four questions was analysed separately. This section presents the results for each of these questions. The first question was "*List three things that ECU has done to make you feel welcome and appreciated as a student*". From the 53 respondents a total of 113 positive comments were provided. These comments were coded and the frequencies by code are shown in Table One. The total column represents the percentage of comments within that category in relation to the total number of comments provided (113).

Table 1 Question 1 responses by category to 'List three things that ECU has done to make you feel welcome and appreciated as a student'

The second question asked respondents to "*List three things that ECU has not done well, that has resulted in you feeling uncomfortable*". From the 53 respondents a total of 75 comments were provided about what the respondents felt the university had not done well. These comments were coded and the frequencies

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by code are shown in Table two. It is noted that the number of comments about what ECU did not do well is 66% of the positive comments (113), or that the ratio of positive comments to negative comments was 1.51:1. The high number of comments regarding lack of or poor resources includes comments regarding car parking which accounted for almost 50% of these comments.

Table 2 Question 2 responses by category to 'List three things that ECU has not done well, that has resulted in you feeling uncomfortable'

Question three asked respondents *"If there were three things that you could change about your experience as a first year student at ECU, what would they be?"* From the 53 respondents a total of 58 comments were provided about what the respondents would change about their experience as a first year student. These comments were coded and the frequencies by code are shown in Table 3. Some categories are based on what students could do to alter their own experience and others relate to what the respondents believe the university could action. Therefore the categories have been reported under 'self' and 'university'. As indicated in Table 3, responses to this question were equally balanced between 'self' action and 'university'.

Table 3: Question 3 responses by category to 'If there were three things that you could change about your experience as a first year student at ECU, what would they be?'

Theme	Change 1	Change 2	Change 3	Total (n)	Total %
Actions for self:					
Time Management	2	1		3	5
Motivation	8	1	3	12	21
Personal interaction	2	3		5	9
Attend more workshops	1			1	2
Other	7			7	12
Total for 'self'	20	5	3	28	48
Actions for the university:					
More workshops	1			1	2
Timetable	1	1		2	3
Other	13	11	3	27	46
Total for 'university'	15	12	3	30	52
Overall Total	35	17	6	58	100

Question four sought to identify issues of change *"What could ECU have done differently to support you as a first year student?"* From the 53 respondents a total of 27 comments were provided concerning the provision of support to first year students. These comments were coded and the frequencies by code are shown in Table 4. These are items that students believed ECU should develop to enhance the experience of first year international students.

Table 4: Question 4 responses by category to 'What could ECU have done differently to support you as a first year student?'

Theme	n	%
Social events	1	4
Teaching and Learning	9	33
Communications	4	15
Workshops	3	11
Improve resources	3	11
Other	7	26
Total	27	100

Discussion

This study is part of a larger research project investigating the first year experiences of students at ECU. The exploratory nature of the study has provided a range of descriptive data which can provide a basis for future research. The data provides a summary of some issues currently facing international students at ECU. The results suggest that overall international students are positive about their experiences as a first year student at ECU. This is supported by the ratio of positive comments to negative at 1.51:1, although no weighting was applied to the different themes which assumed that comments provided carried equal weight for the respondents. In relation to change for the experiences of these students, almost half the comments related to personal actions that the student could have taken. It was interesting that in response to the question about changes nearly 30% of these students suggested that they would change their level of motivation, and that 12 of the 15 categorised responses to the change question were self reflective in that students indicated that these changes were not ECU driven but a need on the part of the student to alter their behaviours. This indicates a level of responsibility within these students to adapt to the particular context of studying in a higher education institution and which is reflected in the academic literature as one aspect of adult learning (Minter, 2011). Some of the comments made regarding lack of or poor resources were focused on issues that also concern domestic students. For example, there is considerable pressure on car parking at university campuses which concerns both local and international students.

Comments included aspects of learning and teaching however there were few comments about the social aspects of being an international student at ECU. This may be the result of how the data was collected. However, as there is considerable research literature about the social lives of international students (Andrade, 2007; Malau-Aduli, 2011; Montgomery, & McDowell, 2009) this aspect of the life of an international student at ECU is worthy of consideration for further investigation.

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A limitation of this research is that the survey was not designed to investigate in depth emotional issues. However this issue could be resolved through individual interviews which may incorporate social and emotional issues. This approach would enhance our understanding and increase knowledge about international students at ECU. As the literature suggests, international students may suffer a range of challenges that affects their integration into the university culture and which may also affect their learning (Andrade, 2007; Malau-Aduli, 2011; Wang, Sing, Bird, & Ives, 2008; Ying, 2003). Additionally, the sample in this research was small (n=53) and may not be representative of the larger population of international students at ECU. Nevertheless, respondents were studying in diverse faculties.

Recommendations emerging from this research include:
1   Provide information to students about the workload and the need to maintain motivation, attend lectures and tutorials.
2   Promote the use of the services provided to support academic and English literacy.
3   Internationalise the curriculum which has already been identified as a required outcome for ECU.
4   Highlight specific knowledge of the challenges facing international students to academic staff.
5   Consider the implementation of a specific peer mentoring program within each discipline. There are benefits of an inter-cultural approach to this, providing each international student with an Australian mentor. However, this approach needs to include a range of specific culturally appropriate information and development of skills in the mentors.

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