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Overseas students in Australia: An experiential view

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Overseas students have access to a number of learning opportunities available by virtue of a highly competitive tertiary education market system. Despite the increasing trend for remote, online-based learning programs, many students elect to travel outside their home country to experience the cultural difference of studying abroad. The benefit is symbiotic, with crucial university funding being attracted by increased numbers of overseas students seeking an enriched studying experience. The focus of this paper is the on-campus learning experience received by expatriate students studying in Australia and Singapore. How these students adapt to the different physical, social and emotional environments is examined. It concentrates on students' consumption of the 'home' phenomena through an experiential and sensory approach demonstrating the influence of the senses in the adaptation process.

In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-two students using photo elicitation as an auto-driver. Students were given disposable cameras and asked to take photos of important places, people and things that represented home to them in their own country as well as their country of study. When recounting their experiences, all students referred to the positive influence of their senses (sight, smell, touch, hearing and taste) on their experiences, making those experiences more memorable and real. In some instances awareness of this sensory influence helped bridge the gap between their home and country of study. Therefore, it seems that adaptation to the new environment via positive sensory experiences is important if the student is to have a positive, constructive experience studying aboard.

An understanding of the role that experiential feelings and the senses play in the adaptation and learning process is vital for the Australian tertiary institutions if they are to optimise the learning experience for overseas students in a social, cultural and economic context, as well as their economic impact for our tertiary education system.

Introduction

Today, overseas students contribute significantly to the Australian economy. As education is Australia's third largest export (AEI, 2009), it is an important market to research and evaluate. Universities are increasingly using on line capabilities to extend their courses to students in remote locations. Education has become a global product that is consumed by demanding markets as they seek to keep pace with the changing global business environment. Despite this trend for increasing on line-based learning programs, many students elect to travel overseas to experience the cultural difference of studying in another country. The benefit is symbiotic with funding for the university positively influenced by creating an enriched studying experience for the student.

Overseas programs and distance learning packages have become a valuable source or revenue for many Australian universities and as indicated, international education now rates as among the top three Australian exports and contributes significantly to GDP (Marginson 2007, AEC 2009). Even though the trend for remote online-based learning is increasing, overseas student demand for on campus learning still outweighs the offshore learning numbers (Marginson, 2007). While the remote learning sector is rapidly increasing, it is the on campus group of overseas students that contribute significantly to university

funding at present. In addition, this group provides further economic benefits to the wider economy by spending money on accommodation, transport and general living expenses, during their term of study. Consequently, many Australian Universities are implementing strategies to increase their international student numbers so as to attract further funding.

The international tertiary education market is fiercely competitive. The United States is the world's main provider of education for overseas students, followed by the United Kingdom, Australia, France, Germany, and Canada (Marginson, 2002). Student evaluation of higher education has been debated at length within the literature (Clouder, 1998; McKenzie, Sheely& Trigwell, 1998; Wachtel, 1998) and is one of the most extensively researched areas in education (Wilson, 1998). Studies have also been conducted that explore reasons why students seek tertiary education (Floyd & Gordon, 1998; Thornburg 1997); factors that influence their choice of destination (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002) and success factors for universities marketing themselves internationally (Mazzarol, 1998; Marginson, 2002). If Australia is to improve its market share it must understand the key differentiating offerings which may not solely involve academic factors. Australia may need to understand the positive influence and importance of freedom, natural landscapes, space, beaches and climate to the overall decision-making process of overseas students (Margison, 2002). Communicating these attributes to prospective students by using the language and perceptions of overseas students would be effective.

The focus of this paper is the on-campus learning experience received by ex-patriot students studying in Australia and Singapore. How these students adapt to the different physical, social and emotional environments is examined. It concentrates on students' consumption of the 'home' phenomena through an experiential/ sensory approach demonstrating the influence of the senses in the adaptation process.

Attachment to place

The physical and social environments play an important role in determining the success of migrant students' experiences in a foreign country. Research has shown the importance of the environment in maintaining a positive transition process for migrants (Fisher, 1990). In experiencing place the senses are often used to feel, store, code and communicate the experience (Sell, Taylor and Zube, 1984). In a new environment it is important for the student to feel familiarity with and control over the new environment. Perceived lack of familiarity or control can lead to negative experiences, withdrawal from the program, and potentially ill-health (Fisher, 1990; Fullilove, 1996).

Place attachment has been noted in the literature as a complex and hard to define concept (Barker, 1979; Relph, 1976; Sharnai, 1991). It is easier to describe its experiences and resultant actions than to identify it in specific terms (Lewis, 1979). Much sense of place emerges through descriptive dialogue and the collective communication of experiences and feelings of a place evolving over time by generations passing on their experiences from one generation to the next. Rituals, myths and symbols are in this way formed and then strengthen the attachment process (Peterson & Saarinen, 1986; Relph, 1976). The senses have often been highlighted in descriptions or experiences with place attachment. In describing his own sense of place Buttimer (1980, p. 172) expresses "I recall the feel of the grass on bare feet, the smell and sounds of various seasons...". Various descriptive works have resulted in the senses being highlighted in the quest to understand the meaning and consumption of place. Attachment is the result of a long and meaningful relationship between a person and a place. Much has been written about the cognitive attachment process, however the description is often bursting with sensory connections that make the experience real and memorable (Sell, Taylor and Zube, 1984).

Belk (1988) refers to place attachment as part of our extended self. He concludes that this attachment is only related to the extended self when there is an emotional (as opposed to functional) attachment. Place identity refers to the dimensions of the self that define the individual's personal identity in relation to the physical environment (Korpela, 1989; Proshansky, Fabian and Kaminoff, 1983). The impact of place attachment on self identity is discussed by many environmental psychology researchers (Fullilove, 1996; Hull IV, Lam and Vigo, 1994; Korpela, 1989; Williams, et al., 1992). Korpela (1989) describes the control of a favourite place, attributing memories to it, personalising it, and naming it, as the processes by which

we connect the physical environment with our self. The use of the environment in this way helps achieve a balance within one's own psyche. If this balance is upset then people either remove themselves physically from the environment or withdraw themselves emotionally or socially.

The boundaries of place are not limited to the man made boundaries of town areas or parks or gardens. Place is dimensionless, as explained by the artist Allan Gussour in Lewis (1974, p. 40) ones' 'place' and subsequent attachment, can be described as 'a piece of the whole environment which has been claimed by feelings'. These feelings are often described with reference to the senses. The place experience is in fact a "total sensual experience" (Sell, Taylor and Zube, 1984, p.75.), the senses confirming and creating the total experience (Pred, 1983).

Methodology

A qualitative study using an interpretivist approach was selected to provide insights into the phenomena of what makes a place 'home' for overseas students. As this concept is highly individualistic and emotional a qualitative study was chosen to allow the researchers to explore its depth and breadth, with all the richness that is attached to sensory experiences. The photoelicitation technique was chosen to enhance the dialogue from the students, providing enriched qualitative data (Heisley and Levy, 1991).

In depth interviews with twenty-two students (22) were conducted using photoelicitation as an autodriver. The sample consisted of two groups - overseas students studying in Australia (10) and overseas students studying in Singapore (12), originating from a diverse group of nationalities. The Singapore group consisted of Chinese (3), Malaysian (4), Filipino (3), and Australian (2). The Australian student group consisted of Norwegian (1), Scottish (1), Malaysian (3) English (2) and Indonesian (3). A total of 10 males (5 Singapore, 5 Australia) and 12 females (7 Singapore, 5 Australia) made up the sample. The age range was 23 -37 for the Singapore group and 21-40 for the Australian group.

Overseas students who were going back to their home country for the inter-semester break were approached to participate in the study. Students were given disposable cameras and asked to take photos of important places, people and things that represented home to them in their home country. On returning to Australia (or Singapore), they were asked to complete the same process and take photos of people, places and things that represent home to them in their new country. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed resulting in an extremely rich data set which was analysed and coded for emerging trends.

Results

The 22 students generated a total of 286 photographs. These photographs were grouped and coded by the researchers resulting in a number of emerging themes. Students volunteered for this study so a bias toward overseas students that had relocated successfully was an anticipated result.

Recreational site research identified the substitutability of one site with another as an aspect of recreational place choice (Wyman, 1985). This phenomenon was evident in this study's results. Some other mix of environments in the new country became the overseas student's substitute 'home'. This substitutability was reflected in students pictures and dialogue of places, people and objects (Ryan and Ogilvie, 2001). Dispersed throughout the discussions was the consistent reference to sensory stimuli used to emphasis feelings and the importance of the experience to the student. Almost every interview reported some reference to one or more of the senses in the dialogue of recounting experiences and special memories.

Not surprisingly, visual scenery was a common point of reflection when students were talking about their home and special places. Overseas students in Australia referred to the beauty of isolated beaches:

> The scenery in Australia is, well, something that definitely means home to me here, they remind me of the sea at home, yet they are different... I'm not used to the beaches looking like that, with open views.... There is nothing like that in Scotland,

along with open spaces, red dirt and green fields. Specific attractions of 'home' were kept as a sacred memory and not substituted:

> This is a beautiful photo.... Its autumn or late summer... that part of the year the sky gets this really weird light like you can see the orange light..... It just happens sometimes then we all run out of our houses and just look at it because it is magnificent..... that's just the beauty of Norway.

Photographs provided the most common visual stimuli for students. They were a possession that was easily transported as a memory store, providing a sense of the past and help secure their identity

> I like to look at my photographs if and when I have past time .... Since I was young every time my parents said I was leaving my house the first thing I would grab all my photos because other things will be gone but photographs are a memory that I want to have with me forever.

The sense of smell figured prominently in the memories of students' experiences of special places. The smell of wood fires, Australian eucalyptus trees, the smell of freshly brewed coffee and baby powder, were some examples. Students often bring with them into a new country some familiar objects. Belk (1988) refers to the role of objects as maintaining links with the past and creating a security for the present. The object most often transported to the new country from the bedroom was the students' pillow or bolster. This represented the private, individual and safe aspect of the bedroom and even carried with it a "reassuring" smell to further link the new with the old environment.

Taste was often mentioned in relation to local or 'home cooked' dishes. Food was repeatedly associated with friends, family or special places,

> I go down to the beach with a whole basket of strawberries and I sit there with a nice book and I eat strawberries and that's my day... it makes me feel special.

Students reminiscing of home sometimes used food and its associated smells as a comfort. At times the two senses were intermingled with "the smell of wood fires reminding me of a home cooked meal".

The touch stimulus was also evident in the transcripts, although it seemed a more difficult sense to articulate for the sample of students. Examples include, the feel of a special comfortable armchair as the respondent sank into it, the scratch of sand underfoot and the heat of a warm balmy evening on the skin. In the latter example it was the feel of a warm balmy evening that was the most important aspect of the special place, as it reminded the student of the associated fun of having holidays at home. Other sensory stimuli included the sounds of the sea and nature, the muffled silence of snow, children's laughter, the throng from a bustling street and music of various forms. Some of these sensory stimuli were easy to find and replace, but it is often the combinations of the senses, the music, with the smell of the wood fire, with the taste of the home cooked meal all contributing to the 'home' image.

In the process of consuming a place examples were found whereby students changed their behaviour to reflect on place memories. One student from Singapore stated after returning to Singapore from studying in Australia:

> I live in a house so I am lucky enough to have a piece of land to enjoy nature. I do take pleasure in cleaning the garden and mowing the land. I love the smell ...it reminds me of the outdoor in Australia It is something that I developed after living in Australia....after my studies I take a lot of pride in taking care of my garden.

Discussion

Students feel safe and secure in a foreign country when they feel 'at home' with their new environment. The environment can serve to stabilise the self-concept and thus assist in the overall positive experience for overseas students (Hormuth, 1990). This paper has presented research emphasising the importance of

the senses when overseas students relate to their home country and their overseas study country. As the senses are so vital in providing the input for the experience of the 'home' phenomenon, their use in promoting the other (non academic) benefits of studying in Australia could be considered to give an affective, emotional and realistic account of what Australian life has to offer. Adaptation to the new environment is essential for the student to have a positive experience from the learning process. A vital part of this adaptation is experienced through the senses.

Two issues are relevant in this discussion. The first is the importance of understanding the role that the senses plays in helping students feel at home in a new country. This can help in student counselling issues and giving prior advice to students for more effective pastoral care.

The use of the sense in communication has been debated in the Neurolinguistic programming (NLP) training and teaching literature for some time (Dastoor, 1993; Tuesday, 2001 Woodall and Douglas, 1999). It is now agreed that people have favoured and more effective styles of acquiring and processing information. This research highlights a need to further investigate the process of articulating 'place' to overseas students in the most meaningful manner to encourage the holistic on campus learning experiences for mutual benefits.

Australia's hold on the overseas market is not strong and if other players such as the US became more aggressive, numbers could fall (Marginson, 2002). Nevertheless, Australia holds some unique advantages, such as our landscape, climate and beautiful scenery. These have all been referred to by the respondents in this study as contributing to their sensory experience. This paper reminds us of the personal, human and psychological dimensions, which are sometimes overlooked in discussions around internationalisation of education. By recognising this importance universities are able to better market the "Australian opportunity" to the overseas student market.

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