

1-1-2011

Staff perspectives on the role of English proficiency in providing support services

Sophia Harryba
Edith Cowan University

Andrew Guilfoyle
Edith Cowan University

Shirlee-ann Knight
Edith Cowan University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2011>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of: Harryba, S. A., Guilfoyle, A. , & Knight, S. (2011). Staff perspectives on the role of English proficiency in providing support services. Paper presented at the Teaching and Learning Forum 2011. Curtin University. Perth, Australia. Available [here](#)

This Conference Proceeding is posted at Research Online.
<https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2011/638>

Staff perspectives on the role of English proficiency in providing support services



Category: Research

Sophia A. Harryba and Andrew Guilfoyle

Edith Cowan University

Shirlee-ann Knight

Curtin University of Technology

sharryba@our.ecu.edu.au, a.guilfoyle@ecu.edu.au, s.knight@ecu.edu.au

A case study approach was applied to understand the challenges of offering support services to international students (IS) within a university setting. A social constructivist theoretical framework informed the collection and analysis of data. Perspectives from service providers - general and academic staff members and international students were triangulated. To date, 63 participants have been interviewed and preliminary findings show that although international students encounter a number of academic and socio-cultural difficulties during university transition, many do not access support services offered by university for various reasons including; perceived language and cultural barriers, unawareness, feeling uncomfortable; and avoiding any stigma associated with help-seeking. The data shows service providers too have reported difficulties when working with international students, such as cultural and language barriers, lack of staff, funding and training. The focus of the current paper will be on one of the major themes explicating these tensions, namely English proficiency which acts as a pervasive barrier for both staff service provision and students service utilisation. Implications of findings, recommendations for universities and direction for future research will be discussed in reference to this theme.

International student issues: Literature review

Due to the effects of globalisation and internationalisation (Davies, Evans, & Reid, 2005) and following the decision by the Australian Department of Trade in 1985 to allow Australian tertiary institutions to offer places to full fee paying international students, the number of international students entering Australia for tertiary studies has grown rapidly (Megarrity, 2007). There were 543,898 international students (IS) in Australia in 2008, with IS referring to those on a student visa (Australian Education International, 2009). Of those, enrolments in higher education ranked first growing by 58.5% between 2002 and 2008. Full-fee paying international students (IS) are seen as an important and competitive export industry for many English-speaking western countries (Bradley, 2008; Hatoss, 2006).

Benefits of cross-cultural learning can occur at a personal level and in the university setting (Sam, 2001). Studies show that international students enhance cultural diversity among university students (Sam, 2001; Summers & Volet, 2008). According to a report from the University of South Australia, the presence of international students “*enriches the quality of the intellectual and social life of the university*” (Liddicoat, 2004, p.2). Moreover, it is possible that international students may act as cultural carriers, resources and links between cultures, thereby reducing hostility and prejudice amongst cultures (Bartram, 2007; Sam, 2001). However, literature has shown that without intervention, intercultural integration does not happen and so the benefits of having IS may not be fully realised (Brown, 2009; Brustein, 2007).

Despite cultural benefits, primarily tertiary institutions and host countries welcome international students for the economic benefits they bring (Kingston & Forland, 2008). Education services were the third highest export for Australia in 2004-05, generating more than \$9 billion for the Australian economy, and in 2007-08, this figure rose to \$15.8 billion (Australian Education International, 2009). Because full-fee paying international students pay their fees directly to

individual universities, these institutions directly benefit financially according to the number of international students enrolled. In addition, the Australian government does not directly penalise them for this significant income (Grebennikov & Skaines, 2007; Soutar & Turner, 2002). IS also help universities achieve their minimum enrolments for the year (Wang & Shan, 2007).

Researchers have argued that because of the localised positive benefits brought by international students, it is the host country's moral obligation to fully understand these students and facilitate their smooth transition (Simpson & Tan, 2009). Theoretically, this enhances their commitment to the host country (Simpson & Tan, 2009). It has been suggested that the paying of full fees warrants a focus on developing quality service or the host country and universities may be seen as exploiting IS (Abbott-Chapman & Edwards, 1998; Simpson & Tan, 2009).

International education is a competitive market and IS consider several factors when choosing the country and institution for their studies, including prestige, quality of teaching, facilities, admission, cost, living and studying environment, and general issues surrounding the country (Rao, 1976; Steadman & Dagwell, 1990). Their subsequent experience will influence their recommendations to other prospective students (Brown, 2009; Hellsten, 2002). For universities, it has therefore become important to understand these experiences (McLaughlin, 1995).

Literature about IS has shown that they experience complex transition issues and these often interact with each other so that each IS experiences these difficulties differently. The current paper offers a snapshot of some these issues as part of a research project in progress.

Research into social and cultural difficulties faced by international students has revealed: language barriers (Searle & Ward, 1990), disparity between cultural values and norms or 'culture shock' (Delaney, 2002; Talbot, Geelhoed, & Ninggal, 1999), distress with the new physical environment (Searle & Ward, 1990); difficulty in forming and maintaining friendships and relationships from the host country (Townsend & Lee, 2004); low or no participation in social or leisure activities (Wang & Mallinckrodt, 2006); discrimination and stereotyping (Talbot *et al.*, 1999); lack of social support (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007); accommodation difficulties (Li & Gasser, 2005); dietary restrictions (Wang & Shan, 2007); problems with immigration (Mori, 2000; Wan, 2001); and financial stress (Forbes-Mewett, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2009). All of these problems make international students' socio-cultural adjustment difficult, particularly given that the problems described often co-exist.

There are particular concerns for IS related to academic issues. Both domestic and international students face academic problems such as higher work and study load, financial problems, poor health, loneliness, interpersonal conflicts and problems with developing personal autonomy (Baker & Siryk, 1986; Erikson, 1963; Glover, 2000; Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978; McInnis, 2000). These issues are intensified however, for many international students, as university teaching and learning styles occur along with possible language barriers and culture adaptation problems (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005).

Other academic issues include problems following academic procedures, such as referencing guides, which can lead to plagiarising (Song-Turner, 2008; Walker, 1998). Depending on their cultural background, IS may also have problems accessing resources, adopting a critical thinking and writing style, getting used to the informal nature of the higher education system, becoming independent learners, participating in oral presentations and working with other students and supervisors (Bartram, 2007).

Universities therefore provide a number of support services to help alleviate some of the stress associated with transition, however literature has shown that IS often do not access these due to being unaware of them or experiencing discomfort with staff who provide these services (Chung *et al.*, 2005; Kumar & Suresh, 2001). Other issues included facing possible stigma associated

with seeking help not being familiar with using some services; and perceived cultural and linguistic barriers.

Both general and academic service providers also report concerns about working with IS, including linguistic and cultural barriers; inadequate staff; infrastructure and funding (Bektas, 2008; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004; Zhang & Dixon, 2003). In a study done by Trice (2003), faculty members were asked about their views on working with IS. Although they generally agreed that IS bring a number of benefits such as providing international ties, they also identified numerous challenges. These included language barriers, cultural differences, difficulties in managing *domestic students* (DS) and IS in the same classroom and managing the extra time and effort it took them to work with IS compared to the DS.

Based on this literature, the challenge is that there are potential gaps between service provision and service utilisation and the factors that might mitigate. The current study aims to investigate gaps as a set of challenges faced by IS, as well as the staff who work to support them. Before specifying the current aim further it is important to set this in context of past literature, as there is limited research on the challenges of service provision for IS.

Limitations in the current literature

We can highlight two main limitations in the current body of literature regarding IS university experience of service provision within the Australian sector/context. These are:

- *International student population*: Most research has been done with Asian IS and/or grouping all IS in one group and findings from this research cannot necessarily be applied to other international student cohorts. Grouping all IS as one cohort can lead to incomplete findings (Arkoudis & Tran, 2007; Hanassab & Tidwell, 2002), since each student has their own personal experiences, cultural and linguistic background. It is essential to understand individuals' cultural group issues instead of their experiences broadly as an 'international' student. Individuals from different cultural backgrounds differ from each other and so studying them as one 'international' cohort limits the findings. We need to create space to include new information about all cohorts, especially those that to date have not been included in the literature (Richards, 2005).
- *Limited focus*: A number of studies have either focused on the generic services provided by universities, or specialised services for IS (Dhillon, McGowan, & Wang, 2008). These studies have been small scale and did not explain in depth the complexities of issues.

Alongside these limitations, there is also a paucity of research which examines staff perspectives on service provision. *In particular* there are limited studies done from an Australian university perspective which take into account both students' views and service providers' as well. Also, many of these studies have been quantitative in nature which does not allow for participants to explain their views in detail.

The research

The full study – introduced in this paper – aims to address some of the research limitations cited above by investigating the complex issues which play out at one university. This will facilitate an in-depth, contextual approach, examining the intricacies of the various factors involved in the support service provision and utilisation between staff and students within a bounded setting, in which they share the same reference points. When both IS and service providers have the chance to contribute on issues affecting their shared interactions, we can develop from their accounts a more holistic understanding of the complex issues.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to identify the challenges present in service provision and utilisation at an Australian university. This report is part of a PhD dissertation which will be submitted in 2012; the full findings will be used to compile a set of themes for understanding factors that transfer to the development of better tailored services to help IS. However, the research area addressed in the current paper is: *What are the challenges faced by staff when working with IS?*

In this paper we will detail the data collected relating to one key theme, English proficiency.

Methodology

Theoretical approach

In line with the above aims this study was exploratory and social constructivist in nature. University transition is a complex issue, involving at least two stakeholder categories, and requiring a design and method which appreciates this level of complexity in data collection and analysis. Social constructivist studies argue that people construct their realities through personal experiences (Charmaz, 2000). The methods allow for a full picture, by allowing the participants themselves to describe their own experiences thus framing their own perspectives and allowing the researcher to triangulate the perspectives of international students with those of their service providers. As such, these multiple realities of experience can be brought to light.

Case study methodology

Within this framework, a case study approach was used to understand challenges of providing and utilising support services at a specific Australian university. Case study allowed the researchers to focus on one particular unit of analysis (Willig, 2008). It involved in-depth and focused investigation of the chosen case. As such, case studies have more flexible guidelines about data collection and analysis (Marvasti, 2004). This provided:

1. An idiographic perspective, whereby researchers are focused on the details of the case (Willig, 2008).
2. Attention to contextual data, which involves investigating how the factors being studied are played out in their particular case. In the current study, the researcher will aim to understand support services available at an Australian university.
3. Triangulation, whereby researchers gather information from a number of sources to aid in deeper understanding of the phenomena (Willig, 2008). In the current study, methodological triangulation was used. Primary data which were interviews with various participant category members were analysed. Triangulation of sources ensured validity of the research by using a number of data sources such as interviewing student advisors, lecturers and tutors as well as the international students (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005; Stake, 1995; Yin, 1994).

The case study method is supported by literature and shows that each institution has their specific characteristics, budget and student population and so should be studied separately (David & Renea, 2008). It will allow for a critical understanding of the intricacies of a single, unique system (Calder, 2004). It is important to note that through a Social Constructivism based Case Study approach we are not aiming to arrive at a theory about social phenomena which can be applied to every university setting. Although our participants might share similar ideas and thus might for all intent and purpose be experiencing the same thing as members of other university settings, our aim is not generalisation per se. Thus although most universities have some similar generic support services, such as counselling, multi-faith chaplaincy and academic support, we aim to observe the accounts of people experiencing these services within one shared setting and how they construct their perspectives within the context of this. Charmaz (2000)

argues that a theory derived is suggestive, partial and uncertain as it entails the researcher drawing conclusions on the dataset of one group of participants at a particular point in time. We agree. Therefore, we are not designing a theory of the social phenomena of challenges faced by staff and students in the context of their experiences of service provisions. We hope some themes can provide discussion which might transfer to other settings and experiences of other university campuses though.

Participants

To achieve the triangulated sampling desired and to fit with the exploratory nature of this research, a theoretical sampling process was employed. It began with staff based interviews. Data saturation (Bluff, 1997; Byrne, 2001; Fossey *et al.*, 2002; Morse, 1995 and Sandelowski, 1995) for this group of participants was achieved at $n=35$. The saturated sample included a heterogeneous group, of academic and non-academic staff (Figure 1), 10 males and 28 females, who were mostly above 45 years old.

In this sample, staff experience working with IS ranged from 6 months to 23 years. Academic staff represented just over 42% of staff interviewed. Of the academic staff approximately one-third (13.2% of total staff) were in leadership roles, including course-coordinators and faculty Dean Roles. The remaining academic staff were all lecturers, who worked directly with international students in their classrooms.

Administrative, or support-type roles, are classified into three types of support. Those support tasks designed to support students psycho-social and university-life adjustment (28.9%); support tasks associated with student/staff university processes, most often related to Teaching and Learning (15.8%); and support roles associated with the management of processes (13.2%) – these were usually people in relatively senior roles. The sample also included ($n=3$) staff from external institutions which offer courses such as intensive English language as an alternative pathway to university. This sampling was due to the need to qualify and validate about how IS were granted entry to university through these institutions.

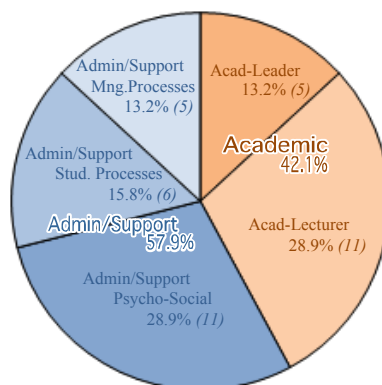


Figure 1: Demographic information about staff member participants

In contrast to the expectations of diverse cultures having diverse positions, on the topic of service provisions, saturation for IS occurred quite early, after 25 interviews. The final sample included students with varied cultural backgrounds and only two whose first language was English. There were both undergraduate and postgraduate students and their length of stay in Australia varied from 2 months to 9 years. The small sample of 25 for saturation here is likely due to the specific nature of the interview questions which were being continually adapted as new themes arrived, and which were thus quite focused around several key themes that were emerging (see below).

Note: Staff members and IS often identified during the interview that domestic students either did not want to work with IS, or in the case of the students themselves, that the domestic students did not want to interact with them and tended to form their own groups. Thus, domestic students will be sampled in the next stage of theoretical sampling.

Gaps in sample

There was an important gap in the sample. Staff from the Student Services Centre (SSC) did not respond to the numerous invites to participate. The SSC is the body responsible for offering support to all students. Since at the university there is no distinction between IS and DS, all services are generic and are accessed through the SSC. The reason was a policy and administrative issue which was an obligatory deterrent by which any staff working in the SCC were technically unable to participate in the (any) research within the course of working hours. Therefore, ironically no pastors or student advisors were interviewed. We lost this invaluable information and perspectives since a lot of literature concentrates on those roles and their challenges; because participating in the research to give these experiences was defined as an act that would detract from their time spent in providing the services.

Materials

Questions in the three evolving interview schedules were initially drawn from the existing literature and then adapted as new data emerged in line with a theoretical sampling process. All participants were given a consent form and information letter as per the university ethical guidelines. A digital voice recorder was used during the interviews as well as a pen and notepad to note down the researcher's impressions. This will be compiled into a reflective journal. The NVivo8 software was used to store the data.

Participants were contacted via invitational emails and those who responded were requested to fill in a demographic information form. This recruitment process worked best in the Faculty of Business and Law (a faculty with a large IS enrolment). Both academic and general staffs in that faculty were helpful and quick to respond. In other faculties and some schools, the response was low (Figure 2). In psychology and nursing, peer mentoring programs which stated the inclusion of IS, were contacted several times. Some coordinators did not reply whilst others mentioned that the mentors and mentees did not wish to participate but would not specify the reason.

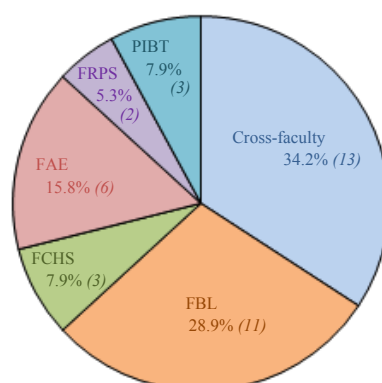


Figure 2: Staff members' affiliated faculties and departments

Procedure

The research received ethics clearance from the university in March, 2010. An iterative theoretical sampling process included interwoven phases:

1. Invitational emails, flyers and website posts were used to sample IS and staff. The sampling then continued through snowballing and volunteering. Interviews were then carried out concurrently sampling both sets of participants, and interviews ranged from 30-60 minutes long.
2. A review of the interview schedule after each interview gave the researcher the chance to include new questions for future participants and to target new participants who could address these.

Sampling staff members

1. University-level services: An email containing an information letter about the study as well as the consent and demographic forms were sent to the student retention officer to request approval for the invitational email to be forwarded to potential participants. This email was then approved by the Head of School or similar. The same invitational email was sent to Deans of International of all faculties, which was then forwarded to the Heads of Schools (HoS) and they then forwarded it on to identified staff who have worked with IS. Another approved method was to contact staff members was to include a flyer about the research in their newsletter. This method was used because a flyer was seen as an alternative way to inform participants as it was a condensed summary of the research. Interested participants could then access the full information letter to read more.
2. After two weeks, no one from the SSC had replied so individual invitational emails were sent to the student connect officers, counsellors, pastors, student advisors and career advisors. All emails included the information letter and consent and demographic forms. This process was done over a two month period with reminder emails sent every two weeks because of non-respondents.
3. Since the above approaches were not working, the researcher decided to contact the managers of student central of both campuses to find out if they could help. The researcher was told approval was needed from HR so that staff members could participate. The director of SSC and Director of HR were both contacted and although they reported that approval was not needed, the staff members were still unwilling to participate.
4. Snowballing was also used with staff, both at the faculty and university levels. This was by far the better method as participants were able to convince their colleagues that it was a good use of time, and that their inputs were invaluable to the research.

Data analysis

As social constructivism framed the methods of data collection and analysis (Charmaz, 2000), data was analysed using a process of Constructivist Grounded Theory (Figure 3) and stored using the *NVivo8* software. Data from the interviews were transcribed and analysed after each interview throughout the data collection to assist the process of constant comparison to identify themes and potential questions for subsequent interviews.

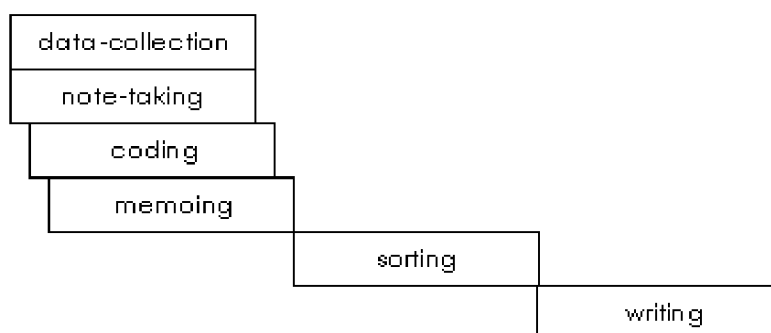


Figure 3: Phases of grounded theory (Moghaddam, 2006)

Preliminary findings

English proficiency was a dominant issue for all three cohorts- however, the process of triangulation showed there were tensions between different types of staff.

On a basic academic level staff members reported it was difficult to work with students whose English skills were below what they expected, which is a finding also supported by the work of Trice (2003) discussed above:

That's why we shouldn't take students in who don't have the English to be able to complete them. So I have great sympathy for staff who are marking students work because the screws have been put on tighter and tighter and staff are teaching more and more and marking more and more and it's very sad (Staff 34- academic/lecturer).

I find it difficult when their English is not very good, because they have troubles then understanding my instructions to them, or what is expected of them (Staff 20- academic/ lecturer).

Support staff members reported this candidly suggesting for example like below that the 'obvious' problem with IS relates to language, and claiming clearly that their perceive this is a problem encountered by their colleagues:

The obvious one is language. It's very difficult to write correct English at a high level, at a university level. Also just understanding what they need to do, trying to comprehend what the task is really about and sometimes I think it's not that they don't understand what's needed but they lack the language skills to be able to express it (Staff 17- support).

I would say some of the main challenges for me is obviously language barriers, that's an obvious one and it's I guess having to adapt your language to be very simple and not kind of overwhelm them with jargon or technical terms, that sort of thing and I guess I find some international students who's English is sometimes not that great. You sort of keep saying to them, do you understand and they'll nod and smile. Then two seconds later they will ask you a question that shows that they didn't get it at all, so then you have to realise okay I'm obviously not explaining this properly. So yeah I guess you just have to adapt to your own communication a little bit (Staff 30-support).

Some teaching staff reported that marking grammar is outside of their qualification, and that they should be focusing on the content of the work:

I feel more and more like I need a qualification in English as a second language. I struggle with my English as a first language but I actually look at some assignments and I really, I actually don't know what to say in terms of feedback because they are so poor in English. And I can write myself but I can't explain, when I read something that's all wrong, I can't explain what's wrong with it (Staff 6- academic/lecturer).

I mean I'm one of the few professors in the faculty that teach. I also think the professoriate should teach, I think the students deserve the very best and I'm one of the very best and they should have me, but I'm a really busy person. I don't have time to teach them grammar and English and content (Staff 25- academic/lecturer).

The salient theme from some staff members' reports was that they were experiencing a type of 'burn out' and felt 'frustrated', which again was supported by research (Trice, 2003). One support staff member reported other staff felt resentment over having to teach IS because of their perception that IS lack English skills and the effects this had on their construction of IS:

I think some people are either resistant or even resentful of having international students whose language skills are not good enough to be there, especially in the courses that demand a professional level of English, and if anything they should not take students into those units because it's either impossible for them to pass or to pass them is really a travesty of the course, and it's distressing because it's distressing to the student, because they often don't realise it until they get into it and then they don't know how to get out, or they ... so with things like journalism, they should not be taking students unless their English is at a very high level, but for some reason there are students who go into that, you know they might be good writers in their own language You're setting them up to fail. I mean we know students who get through but it's distressing for them and I think a bit soul crushing and they work really hard. So I do feel that it's wrong (Staff 17- support).

Alarmingly a commonly reported effect was that this frustration and resentment coupled with having a heavy workload, transferred to many staff members openly asserting they were more lenient when marking English as a second language (ESL) students' papers:

There are often times with international students that the language isn't as good and probably you accept a lower standard. Like if a local student handed in something with the same grammar, you would probably say - this isn't good enough (Staff 26- academic/lecturer).

For some academic staff this was expressed as a moral dilemma they wrestled with:

It [marking IS assignments] does put you in the dilemma. That is probably the biggest impact it has, it puts you in the dilemma of because I think why am I failing this person? I'm failing them because they don't meet the requirements or meet what we believe to be a passing grade and I'm also conscious that they're in second year and they'll be in third year next year and I wonder whether I'm being too hard or will it have improved by third year (Staff 12- academic/lecturer).

As one member describes below, for them the practical strategy was that work produced by English as second language (ESL) students were marked based on content whilst those produced by native English speakers were marked on both grammar and content:

What I try to do is, and it is frustrating because it does take a lot longer. I try to correct it, so you're writing it how it should be. And I tend to try not to take it into consideration with their final mark. Where English-speaking students I go no reread, rework, read your writing, go back and edit your work, go and see the academic skills advisor. I tend to be a bit more lenient on the international students (Staff 20- academic/lecturer)

The rationale for leniency was based on an idea of justice and equity:

I really like my international students. Most of us do. Most of us go they're the fun ones and often I think I'm harder on the onshore students than I am on my international students because I feel like they're getting over a lot to get here so you tend to view them a little more sympathetically, whereas I feel like I'm a bit harsher on onshore students (Staff 12- academic/ lecturer).

With this, the researcher asked non-teaching staff and later IS themselves, about their views on this issue of academic staff having 'double standards'. In the first, it seemed to elicit heated discussions and a potential crevasse in the views of the two types of staff:

It's [leniency] discrimination and should the domestic students appeal then they would actually have grounds for the appeal to be upheld because they're being marked differently (Staff 34-academic/ lecturer)

Another form of equity was discussed here:

There should be no watering down of standards, and people shouldn't be being influenced. We have a quality assurance system at the university and we have things called moderation, and moderation is where we check that the marking of assignments is consistent, and that the grades that are being awarded are genuine grades. So absolutely, there should be no suggestion that markings should be different because of an outcome expected from a student. And frankly, going down that route really potentially exposes the university (Staff 33- administration).

Additionally, support staff reported inconsistencies between lecturers and tutors, where some would advise the student on seeking ESL help and others would not, which also relates to leniency:

One of the things we need is for staff to be aware that it's not just about providing content of the course but we do now have to advise students about skills development. So and I think one of the other conversations is about consistency regarding skills and language. What I mean by that is what I see when I see students is some academic staff when they give feedback on work, comment on the structure of the assignment and the language and encourage students to do something about their grammar or their sentence structure, encourage them into workshops in the learning centre and so on. Other people simply look at the assignment and think oh the student's had a go, clearly done some reading, there's some content there, don't know what to do about the grammar, so I'll just bump them through. And I think that leads to students getting a very inconsistent story and that encourages them to think oh I'm okay really I don't need help, I passed three of my units so I don't know why that person was mean to me and said my grammar is terrible, I can ignore that (Staff 7).

One difference in the data was between those who were ESL staff members and those who were not. Staff sampled who were themselves non-native English speakers or had extensive experience in the ESL area reported that English proficiency was not a problem, as they could understand the IS better:

Because I'm a specialist ESL person and I've been doing it for some time, I actually really enjoy working with international students and you know there are particular regions of the world where students come from that I'm very familiar with and I find it very comfortable for me (Staff 7- support).

These particular support staff members had very positive views on IS. They levied their concern onto the academic staff for not doing enough to understand IS:

There are no poor students; there are only poor teachers... If you're the teacher then you're the rephraser as well. You can't keep saying the same thing over and over again because they don't understand and you can't expect them to understand (Staff 14- support).

I would say it depends on their level of English. It's probably a mixture of language and culture and expectations and the education system they've come from. So to say it's a language barrier, it's a problem to do with language, is probably being a bit simplistic (Staff 21- academic/leader).

If they can't understand me it's probably because I've said something a funny way and they are not familiar with that particular word. So I try and rephrase it or speak slower or. I've witnessed some people who will simply say you don't speak good enough English, I'm not going to listen to you and whether that's conscious or subconscious I don't know. There are lecturers out there who think you shouldn't be in this course because you can't communicate well enough (Staff 32- support).

Some staff argued further the problem was not a lack of English skills, but a combination of issues which academic staff failed to appreciate. The complexity of this issue has been supported by literature (Arthur, 2004). It has been pointed out that the issues faced by IS are often complex and interwoven. Arthur (2004) argues what might seem like language issues could rather be cultural in nature, where some cultures frown upon outspokenness and critical thinking (see also Bailey & Dua, 1999). Some support staff expressed some of these cultural differences:

I think sometimes for academics they misunderstand the problem. There are some cultures that are not as well spoken as western cultures, and people don't freely express themselves in group work, and it's very easy for a lecturer to label that as English. It may not be English, it could be that the student is not Australian enough for them in terms of what do they expect a student to be (Staff 11- administration).

Initial analysis of IS data showed that they saw no issue in their level of English proficiency. Most students sampled to date report that because they had passed their IELTS, (which is a common English proficiency test used for entry into university) then their English must be good:

like I just have six point five in IELTS so that's a good mark, but I just have six for reading, for reading yeah right, but just for you know half a point I pay three for four thousand dollars 10 weeks and that's a huge money, and frankly I haven't learnt anything about it [English language]. I think I'm good enough to start studying at universities (IS 20).

The issue of English testing was also discussed amongst staff, however in a very different way. For academic staff the test is only one indication of student's proficiency and that language acquisition takes a long time:

I think a lot of people who make decisions in universities lack understanding of what it's like to be an international student. I don't think they really get, one, how difficult it is or two, how problematic operating in a second language in particular is. I think it's hard enough operating in a different culture and sharing the same language but operating in a different language experience is so difficult and people tell me oh we'll give them six months of intensive English and then they'll be right and it's like they have no idea that English acquisition takes so long. I mean Cummins has been saying it a long time and in his threshold hypothesis that you actually take about seven years to acquire academic English proficiency or second language proficiency and so somebody who enrolls in a post graduate degree and only just has the English requirement is going to struggle a great deal (Staff 34- academic/ leader).

Discussion

Preliminary results suggest that English proficiency is a major dilemma when working with ESL students. As well as creating extra stress for the teaching staff, it is also leading some staff to be more lenient and mark only content in assignments. The repercussions of this can be far-fetched, and involves equity issues at various levels, as this practise may not seem fair to other students and might place the university's reputation at risk. To date, there is a lack of literature

to support this finding, but it may be because quantitative research does not allow for participants to expand on their views and so it has gone undocumented.

The issue of English testing was also widely discussed. Staff, regardless of position and/or background agreed that the IELTS was not enough to determine a student's English abilities. However, this was not supported by IS, who were under the impression that because they had met the entry level set for university, their English skills were up to standards. A major problem is that this self-view of the IS is neither challenged nor clarified because of the lack of consistency regarding feedback that students got from their assignments. When some staff recommend ESL support and others do not, IS tend to be confused as to whether or not it is indeed needed, and opt for non-support.

A limitation of the current paper is that SSC staffs were not interviewed. Future research should incorporate views of pastors and student advisors as well, since they also work with IS.

Recommendations

Based on these preliminary findings, some recommendations are provided below. These are for staff members working with IS, universities providing courses for IS as well as for the IS themselves.

1. A forum between ESL staff and non- ESL staff should be made compulsory to allow for discussions amongst peers. This would generate techniques for non ESL staff to use when working with students from multi- cultural backgrounds.
2. More learning advisors who specialise in ESL should be made available, and teaching staff should be made aware of the services these ESL staff would offer. Referring students with written English issues to specialised staff could alleviate the stress felt by staff when working with IS and also reduce the likelihood of leniency.
3. More support should be made available to teaching staff in terms of counselling to help them deal with the IS 'burn out' and stress. Literature has suggested that when teaching staff feel supported and incentives are given for extra work, burn out is reduced (Byrne, 1991; Lackritz, 2004).
4. Following the proposed 2012 curriculum, where it has been suggested that all students sit a basic literacy and numeracy test in their first year, this may alleviate stress for some teaching staff when it comes to marking assignments. Students will be required to pass these tests before furthering their studies, which will hopefully raise the standard of literacy and numeracy.
5. Professional development sessions relating to cultural awareness and sensitivity provided by universities should incorporate techniques to help staff relate to IS around issues of language. As mentioned in the findings, often the problem is not language related, and so if specific training designed for teaching staff could be provided, these misunderstandings might not occur.
6. Also, it seemed that the IS focus was on content whilst some staff marked both content and grammar, so in the cultural awareness sessions, staff's expectations contrasted with those of the IS could be discussed so that both are made aware of what is expected. This will provide consistency in marking. Alternatively, an online forum could be developed whereby both staff and students discuss their expectations and students might then clarify what is expected of them language-wise.
7. IS should be made aware that an English proficiency test is only an indication of their language abilities. Online tools should be made available to these students so that they can enhance their proficiency.

Where to next?

The research will now be sampling domestic students and analysing their data compared to what IS and staff members have said. Constant comparison of the staff's views on English proficiency compared to what IS think will also be done. As mentioned above, it may be a cultural issue that the staff members are labelling as language deficiency and so it would be useful to understand IS points of view. Moreover, the DS might or might not see English proficiency as a problem because they are not working with IS like the staff members. In social situations, language issues might pose a problem and so it is necessary to understand their views on this issue as well. After data collection and analysis, a more comprehensive set of recommendations will be built.

References

- Abbott-Chapman, J., & Edwards, J. (1998). Student services in the modern university- Responding to changing needs. Paper presented at the *3rd National Equity and Access Conference*, Yeppon, Queensland, 29th September-2nd October, 1998.
- Arkoudis, S., & Tran, L. T. (2007). International Students in Australia: Read ten thousand volumes of books and walk ten thousand miles. *Asia Pacific Journal of Education*, 27(2), 157-169.
- Arthur, N. (2004). *Counseling international students: Clients from around the world*. NY: Plenum Publishers.
- Australian Education International. (2009). *International Student Enrolments in Higher Education in 2008*. Retrieved on 7 May 2009, from <http://www.aei.gov.au/>
- Bailey, F. J., & Dua, J. (1999). Individualism-collectivism, coping styles, and stress in international and anglo-australian students: A comparative study. *Australian Psychologist*, 34(3), 177-182.
- Baker, R. W., & Siryk, B. (1986). Exploratory intervention with a scale measuring adjusting to college. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 33, 31-38.
- Bartram, B. (2007). The socio cultural needs of international students in higher education: A comparison of staff and student views. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11, 205-214.
- Bektas, D. Y. (2008). Counselling international students in Turkish universities: Current status and recommendations. *International Journal for the advancement of Counselling*, 30, 268-278.
- Bluff, R. (1997). Evaluating qualitative research. *British Journal of Midwifery*, 5(4), pp.232-235.
- Bradley, D. (2008). Review of Australian Higher Education: A final report. Retrieved on 16 March 2009, from http://www.deewr.gov.au/he_review_finalreport
- Brown, L. (2009). A failure of communication on the cross-cultural campus. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(4), 439-454.
- Brustein, W. I. (2007). The Global Campus: Challenges and Opportunities for Higher Education in North America. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 11(3-4), 382-391.
- Byrne, B. (1991). Burnout: Investigating the impact of background variables for elementary, intermediate, secondary, and university educators. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 7, 197-209.
- Byrne, M. (2001). Evaluating the findings of qualitative research. *Association of Operating Room Nurses Journal* 73 (3), pp.703-706.
- Calder, A. (2004). Peer interaction in the transition process. *Journal of the Australia and New Zealand Student Services Association*, 23, pp. 4-16.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). *Grounded theory: Objectivist and constructivist methods*. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 509-535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Chung, M., Kelliher, M., & Smith, W. (2005). Managing academic support for international students: The appropriateness of a Learning Support Unit at an Australian tertiary institution. Retrieved from <http://www.isana.org.au> on 16 April 2009.
- Dao, T., Lee, D., & Chang, H. (2007). Acculturation level, perceived English fluency, perceived social support level, and depression among Taiwanese international students. *College Student Journal*, 41(2), 287-295.
- David, S. F., & Renea, F. (2008). Predictors of First-Year Student Retention in the Community College. *Community College Review*, 36(2), 68-88.
- Davies, I., Evans, M., & Reid, A. (2005). Globalising citizenship education? A critique of 'global education' and 'citizenship education'. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 53, 66-89.
- Delaney, A. (2002). Enhancing Support for Student Diversity through Research. *Tertiary Education and Management*, 8(2), 145-166.
- Dhillon, J., McGowan, M., & Wang, H. (2008). How effective are institutional and departmental systems of student support? Insights from an investigation into the support available to students at one English university. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 13(3), 281-293.
- Erikson, E. (1963). *Childhood and Society* (2nd Ed.). New York: Norton.
- Forbes-Mewett, H., Marginson, S., Nyland, C., Ramia, G., & Sawir, E. (2009). Australian university international student finances. *Higher Education Policy*, 22, 141-161.
- Fossey, E., C. Harvey, F. McDermott, and L. Davidson. (2002). Understanding and evaluating qualitative research. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry* 36, pp.717-732.
- Glaser, B., G., & Strauss, A., L. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine.
- Glover, R. J. (2000). Developmental tasks of adulthood: Implications for counseling community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 24(6), 505 -514.
- Gould, R. L. (1978). *Transformations: Growth and Change in Adult Life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Grebennikov, L., & Skaines, I. (2007). Comparative analysis of student surveys on international student experience in higher education. *Journal of Institutional Research*, 13(1), 97-116.
- Hanassab, S., & Tidwell, R. (2002). International students in higher education: Identification of needs and implications for policy and practice. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 6(4), 305-322.
- Hatoss, A. (2006). Globalisation, interculturality and culture teaching: International students' cultural learning needs in Australia. *Prospect*, 21(2), 47-69.
- Hellsten, M. (2002). Studies in transition: needs and experiences of international students in Australia. *Paper presented to the 16th Australian International Education Conference*. Retrieved on 7 May 2009 from <http://www.aiec.idp.com/>
- Kingston, E., & Forland, H. (2008). Bridging the Gap in Expectations between International Students and Academic Staff. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 12(2), 204-221.
- Krause, K., Hartley, R., James, R., & McInnis, C. (2005). *The first year experience in Australian universities: Findings from a decade of national studies*. Canberra: DEST.
- Kumar, S. L., & Suresh, R. S. (2001). Strategies for Providing Effective Reference Services for International Adult Learners. *The Reference Librarian*, 33(69), 327 -336.
- Lackritz, J. (2004). Exploring burnout among university faculty: incidence, performance, and demographic issues. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 20, 713-729.
- Levinson, D. J. (1978). *The Seasons of a man's life*. New York: Knopf.
- Liamputtong, P., & Ezzy, D. (2005). *Qualitative Research Methods* (2nd Ed.). New York: Oxford.
- Liddicoat, A. J. (2004). *Internationalisation as a concept in higher education: Perspectives from policy*. In A. J. Liddicoat, S. Eisenchlas & S. Trevaskes (Eds.), *Australian perspectives on internationalising education* (pp.13-26). Melbourne: Language Australia.
- Li, A., & Gasser, M. (2005). Predicting Asian international students' socio cultural adjustment: A test of two mediation models. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 29(5), 561-577.

- Marvasti, A. B. (2004). *Qualitative Research in Sociology*. London: Sage Publications.
- McInnis, C. (2000). *Trends in the first year experience in Australian universities*. Canberra: Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs.
- McLaughlin, D. (1995). Teaching overseas students and learning from them: A professional and moral dimension. *Education Research and Perspectives*, 22(1), 103-113.
- Megarrity, L. (2007). A highly-regulated 'free market': Commonwealth policies on private overseas students from 1974 to 2005. *Australian Journal of Education*, 51(1), 21-53.
- Moghaddam, A. (2006). Coding issues in grounded theory. *Issues in Educational Research*, 16(1), 52-66.
- Mori, S. (2000). Addressing the mental health concerns of international students. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 78(2), 137-144.
- Morse, J. (1995). The significance of saturation. *Qualitative Health Research* 5, pp.147-149.
- Nilsson, J. E., Berkel, L. A., Flores, L. Y., & Lucas, M. S. (2004). Utilization Rate and Presenting Concerns of International Students at a University Counseling Center. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy*, 19(2), 49 -59.
- Rao, G. L. (1976). *Overseas students in Australia*. Canberra: The Australian National University.
- Richards, L. (2005). *Handling qualitative data: a practical guide* London: Sage.
- Sam, D. L. (2001). Satisfaction with life among international students: An exploratory study. *Social Indicators Research*, 53(3), 315-337.
- Sandelowski, M. (1995). Sample size in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing and Health* 18, pp.179-183.
- Searle, W., & Ward, C. (1990). The prediction of psychological and socio cultural adjustment during cross-cultural transitions. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, 14(4), 449-464.
- Simpson, K., & Tan, W. (2009). A home away from home? Chinese student evaluations of an overseas study experience. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(1), 5-21.
- Song-Turner, H. (2008). Plagiarism: academic dishonesty or a 'blind spot' of multicultural education? *Australian Universities Review*, 50(2), 39-50.
- Soutar, G. N., & Turner, J. P. (2002). Students' preferences for university: A conjoint analysis. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 16(1), 40-45.
- Stake, R. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks Sage Publications.
- Steadman, G. T., & Dagwell, R. H. (1990). A survey of overseas students in Queensland. *Australian Universities Review*, 33(1/2), 59-63.
- Summers, M., & Volet, S. (2008). Students' attitudes towards culturally mixed groups on international campuses: impact of participation in diverse and non-diverse groups. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33(4), 357-370.
- Talbot, D., Geelhoed, R., & Ninggal, M. (1999). A qualitative study of Asian international students' attitudes toward African Americans. *NASPA Journal*, 36(3), 210-221.
- Townsend, P., & Lee, C. (2004). Research note cultural adaptation: A comparative analysis of tertiary students' international education experience. *Tourism Review International*, 8, 143-152.
- Trice, A. (2003). Faculty perceptions of graduate international students: The benefits and challenges. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 7(4), 379-403.
- Walker, J. (1998). Student Plagiarism in Universities: What are we doing about it? *Higher Education Research & Development*, 17(1), 89-106.
- Wan, G. (2001). The learning experience of Chinese students in American universities: A cross-cultural perspective. *College Student Journal*, 35(1), 28-63.
- Wang, C., & Mallinckrodt, B. (2006). Acculturation, attachment, and psychosocial adjustment of Chinese/Taiwanese international students. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(4), 422-433.
- Wang, T., & Shan, X. (2007). A qualitative study on Chinese postgraduate students' learning experiences in Australia. In *Proceedings AARE 2006*.
<http://www.aare.edu.au/06pap/wan06121.pdf>

- Willig, C. (2008). *Introducing qualitative research in psychology [electronic resource]: adventures in theory and method* (2nd Ed.). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Zhang, N., & Dixon, D. N. (2003). Acculturation and attitudes of Asian international students toward seeking psychological help. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development*, 31, 205-222.

Please cite as: Harryba, S.A., Guilfoyle, A. & Knight, S. (2011). Staff perspectives on the role of English proficiency in providing support services. In *Developing student skills for the next decade: Proceedings of the 20th Teaching and Learning Forum*, 1-2 February 2011. Perth: Edith Cowan University. <http://otl.curtin.edu.au/tlf/tlf2011/refereed/harryba.html>