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## The experiences of international students at an Australian University: An exploratory qualitative study

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**The Experiences of International Students at an Australian University:  
An Exploratory Qualitative Study**

**Andrea Halse**

**"A report Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for the  
Award of Bachelor of Arts (Psychology) Honours Faculty of Community  
Studies, Education and Social Sciences, Edith Cowan University."**

**Submitted: October, 2003**

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## **The Experiences of International Students at an Australian University:**

### **A Qualitative Study**

#### **Abstract**

The number of international students studying in Australia has steadily increased over the last ten years providing many benefits both to the country and Australian universities. However, little is known about the transition experiences of these students and there has been little acknowledgment of the issues facing students adjusting to a new environment and learning context. Typical issues that international students encounter include; language difficulties, homesickness, culture shock, lack of background knowledge and skills, housing difficulties, developing new social relationships and adapting to their new environment. Much of the research has been in the form of questionnaires and surveys focusing on academic issues, for instance, language skill, learning style and class participation. However, recent research suggests that social and cultural issues such as mixing with Australians, making new friends and functioning in a foreign country are of greater concern to international students. This review explores the major findings relating to students studying abroad and the future direction of research in this field.

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**Submitted: 27<sup>th</sup> October, 2003**

### Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate, without acknowledgment, any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signature: A. Halse

Date: 09.02.04

### Acknowledgments Page

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## Introduction

The number of international students studying in Australia doubled between 1994 and 2000 to 153 400 students with almost half of these students (72 700) enrolled in higher education (Nelson, 2002). International students studying at Australian universities provide many benefits, such as, economic advantages (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Burns, 1991). For example, in 2001, they added \$4 billion to the Australian economy (Nelson). International students may contribute to the skilled labour force as some students elect to remain and work in Australia (Chur-Hansen, 1999). On campus a mixed student population promotes cultural diversity and understanding which helps to forge links with originating countries (Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Chur-Hansen). Finally, successful education of international students raises the profile of Australian education and universities (Ridings & Pokarier, 1998). Therefore, it is incumbent on universities to cater for international students and not view them as merely a source of income.

Despite the benefits that international students bring to Australian universities little is known about the transition experiences of these students. Researchers have called for university specific investigations in order to identify the strengths and weaknesses of international student support (Cameron & Meade, 2002; Rambruth & McCormick, 2001; Volet & Renshaw, 1995). Most research has been in the form of survey questionnaires by the host university with a focus on academic performance (Volet & Renshaw). There has been little acknowledgment of student adjustment to a new environment and learning context.

Some transition issues are common to all student groups for example, financial difficulties and adjustment to a new environment, but other issues are specific to the university and particular student groups (Evans, 2000; Evans & Peel, 1999). Typical

issues that international students encounter include language difficulties, homesickness, culture shock, lack of background knowledge and skills, housing difficulties, developing new social relationships and “fitting in” to their new environment (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997).

International students face additional difficulties because they are temporary sojourners adjusting to a different cultural and social experience in a foreign country (Burns, 1991; Rohrllich & Martin, 1991). Literature on cross-cultural living, although sparse, focuses on changes in personality and functioning pre and post arrival (Ying, 2002). More recently, researchers have examined the relationship between sojourner, personality and environment. However, much of the research concerns individuals who work abroad for multi national companies with little acknowledgment of the issues faced by sojourner students (Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000).

This review examines the issues that potentially affect the successful transition of international students into the Australian university context.

### The Changing Nature of Higher Education in Australia

A post war trend in tertiary education has developed from elite to mass education at universities (Pokarier & Ridings, 1998). As a result, participation rates have risen but government funding has not matched the rise in student admissions. This has led to a reliance on private funding sources for universities (Pokarier & Ridings). The Higher Education Contribution Scheme (HECS), introduced in Australia in 1989, allows the domestic student to contribute a portion of the educational cost for fully funded university places (Commonwealth Budget, 2003a). The Australian Government loans the money to the student (paid directly to the university) who repays the loan once a salary threshold has been reached. HECS shifted some of the burden of the cost of education, from the Federal Government, to the consumer. However, this contribution

by the student represents only a small proportion of the total cost of a university education (Pokarier & Ridings). Full fee paying international students are seen as a way of increasing university budgets because fees are paid directly to the university and universities have fewer constraints on how the money is spent compared to government funded fees (Pokarier & Ridings).

The demand, particularly from Asian countries, for university places in Australia meant that universities had to do little in the way of attracting and accommodating the needs of these students when Australia first entered the international education market (Pokarier & Ridings, 1998). However, the importance of attracting international students is evidenced by the allocation of funds from university budgets for marketing of Australian universities overseas (Commonwealth Budget, 2003b).

The acceptance of international students at universities has become widespread with the number of international students enrolled in overseas universities, globally, estimated at 1.54 billion in 1998 (Hammer, 1992; Pokarier & Ridings, 1998; Nelson, 2002). Australia's main competitors in this market are New Zealand, Canada, United Kingdom and United States. The need to appear competitive in the overseas education market was recognised in the current Federal budget report. Australia's 2003/04 Commonwealth budget report stated that education provides an important link to the international community and has introduced a number of changes to promote the advancement of Australian universities in international markets (Commonwealth Budget, 2003a). These changes include government investment to improve the marketing of Australian universities, the establishment of international centres of excellence and assistance with visa applications for potential students (Commonwealth Budget, 2003a).

The benefits of accepting international students into domestic universities are acknowledged globally (Harris & Jarret, 1990; Pokarier & Ridings, 1998). For example, Australia benefits through expenditure by international students in the domestic economy, enhanced future trade, international understanding and good will, and increased awareness of Australia as a tourist destination (Harris & Jarret; Pokarier & Ridings). Positive outcomes for universities include increased revenue from fees, an enriched experience for all students and promotion of cultural awareness (Harris & Jarret; Pokarier & Ridings).

The acceptance of international students places universities under an obligation to understand and provide for the needs of these students (Brown, 1995; Cameron & Meade, 2002; Pargetter, 2000). However, there remains little understanding amongst academic staff and the domestic student population about the challenges of studying in a foreign country (Hellsten, 2002; Pokarier & Ridings, 1998; Ridings & Pokarier, 1998; Volet & Renshaw, 1995). Successful integration of international students into Australian universities requires an understanding of the academic support required, course restructuring to meet the needs of a diverse student population, appropriate services at the institutional level, cultural awareness and fostering of host / international student social interactions (Brown; Cameron & Meade; Nelson, 2002; Rambruth & McCormick, 2001)

Successful adaptation of international students has important consequences for the reputation of Australian universities. Several researchers (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Ridings & Pokarier, 1998) have suggested that word of mouth is an important factor in the choice of university. The educational and personal experiences and academic success of current international students will impact on the choices prospective students make (Ridings & Pokarier). Students unhappy with their

Australian experience are unlikely to encourage others from home to study in Australia resulting in damage to the university's reputation.

### Transition to University

Within the higher education system, transition refers to the move from a secondary to tertiary institution (Kantanis, 1998). For most students it represents a move from a familiar to an unfamiliar learning environment (Hellsten, 2002). Ballard and Clanchy (1997) defined transition as a process of socialisation into the university culture, where rules are not explicitly stated. For example, at university the learning structure alters to an environment that is less personal but offers more freedom, choice and independence (Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock, 1995).

This is also a period of transition from adolescence to adulthood for many of the students entering university (Kantanis, 2000; Peel, 2000). University provides an opportunity to experience new freedoms and responsibilities as a legal adult such as driving, drinking and forming intimate relationships. These new experiences can place demands on the student at a time when they do not receive the same level of support they received in high school (Peel). However, the literature tends to focus on academic success and ignores financial, environmental and social factors, which also contribute to a smooth transition to university. Most students, whether local or international, are likely to have some adjustment issues but what remains important is how quickly or well they adjust to university life (Kantanis, 1998).

Successful transition to university can be defined in a number of ways (Abbot-Chapman, Hughes & Wyld, 1992; Evans, 2000). It can refer to academic success such as obtaining a degree or the standard of pass. In addition, successful transition to university can also be gauged by attrition or completion rates as well as the number of students entering postgraduate programmes or acquiring employment (Abbot-Chapman

et al.; Evans). All these measures are flawed to some extent. For example, statistics relating to course completion do not indicate students who have dropped out, changed course or university, gained employment, or deferred their studies (Yorke, 1999). Rates of course completion, although important, neglect other domains of the student's life and do not provide a holistic view of the university experience.

An alternative to utilising completion rates is to develop performance indicators specific to the research. For example, examining student adjustment to academic life by determining the percentage of graduates each year is assuming those students who complete a degree adjusted positively to university. Another useful suggestion is to build a profile to monitor student progress. For example, examining which issues or factors are important during each year of study. A study by McInnis and James (1999) found that satisfaction levels from first to second year improved, whilst the expectations of the students regarding help from the university and lecturers decreased. Students who were happier in their second year of study had developed a more positive perception of the learning environment, were clearer about their intended goals and had improved their relationships with university staff.

Many students question whether they have made the correct decision about their chosen course of study (McInnis & James, 1999). Difficulty with transition to higher education can result in a loss of confidence in the student and poorer than expected performance. For universities the cost is financial, related to a waste of university resources, especially in relation to the early withdrawal of students (Evans, 2000; McInnis, 2001; McInnis & James). International students face similar problems to domestic students but to a greater extent due to the stress of language difficulties, homesickness and isolation (Burns, 1991; Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999). Obtaining feedback from international students should be considered an important part of the



marketing process (Baker, 1993). However, it is often poorly done and due to cultural differences many students are reluctant to complain.

### Academic Adjustment

Students initial experiences of their course and university influence the way that experience is evaluated (McInnis, 2001; McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000). Teaching quality, workload, motivation, goal commitment and outside responsibilities, including work and family, have been linked with student withdrawal and an inability to make a smooth transition to university (Evans, 2000; McInnis & James, 1999). At university there is a change from the structured learning environment of high school to a less personal experience at the tertiary level where students are responsible for their own learning. Pargetter (2000) suggested that there is insufficient training for university lecturers to provide support for students or even an awareness that there is a transition phase.

Students experience varied difficulties adjusting to university dependent upon their academic and social backgrounds and personal characteristics (Evans, 2000). For domestic students, high school is considered a pathway to university but many students believed that the final year of high school did not adequately prepare them for higher education (Burns, 1991; McInnis & James, 1999; Peel, 2000). A study focusing on high school students entering university found four broad categories associated with a difficult transition (Evans & Peel, 1999). These included the perceived quality of teaching and commitment by academic staff to students; accurate and specific information about course structure and content; availability and usage of transition or orientation programmes; and successful social transition often being described as more important than academic transition in the early weeks of university life. If students can

develop a network of contacts at university, this new group of friends can assist in the adjustment process (Evans & Peel; Koutanis, 2000).

As part of a larger study (McInnis & James, 1999) surveyed 4000 first and second year students across seven Australian universities regarding their transition to university. They found that school leavers were less clear about the direction of courses and were less likely to interact or approach university staff or ask for advice. The United Kingdom experience was similar with students stating that they were not properly informed about university courses and the demands of university (Burns, 1991; McInnis et al., 2000). These findings demonstrate that some students enter university confused and unsure of their position in this new environment.

Some institutions are aware of the transition issues facing their first year students. For example, a Monash University project developed a charter of factors contributing to a smooth transition to university (Pargetter, 2000). The charter aimed to provide students with an insight into the transition process to university that included negative features (loneliness, changes in personal life); early orientation to university, including the physical layout of the university, its facilities and learning structure; and comprehensive course and career advice. The project used secondary school staff as liaisons to university because the students had already developed a relationship with those teachers. The study did not evaluate the effectiveness of these measures to assist transition to university.

Some researchers have compared the transition experiences of international and domestic students. Ramsay et al. (1999) examined factors that helped or hindered the learning experience in first year. For this study 20 local and international students were interviewed concerning their learning experiences, specifically positive and negative critical incidents. For local students, the most positive events were tutors and tutorial

groups (teamwork and support), independent study groups, critical analysis and time management skills. For international students support from the Learning Assistance centre, the development of critical thinking skills, improvement in language skills, and a favourable comparison with the teaching approach in their home country were considered the most positive events. Interestingly, peer study groups, which are considered important for academic and social support, were not considered to be effective events for the international students (Ramsay et al.). Peer groups provide support and help in the process of transition to university (Cameron & Meade, 2002; Kantanis, 2000). For international students, who may face greater pressures than domestic students, the lack of positive peer support can have negative consequences academically and socially.

For local students the most negative events were group work and particular lectures or lecturers (Ramsay et al., 1999). International students indicated that lecturers' communication style and their own language abilities were the most negative events. Ramsay et al. stated that more research literature concerns negative aspects rather than positive events. There has been little research assessing the impact of positive events on the learning experience and how they can negate the influence of stressful situations at university.

Various aspects of the university experience including academic, social and cultural differences amongst 47 Korean and Korean Australian students studying at an Australian university were examined by Choi (1997). Students completed a questionnaire (multiple choice and open-ended questions) and some students participated in interviews. Students had difficulties with discussions in class, writing assignments, critical thinking and understanding the lecturer. They also experienced difficulties with their relationships with Australian peers, lecturers and tutors due to a

lack of understanding, little cultural awareness and different cultural role expectations. However, this study focused on negative events only without exploring positive factors that may have improved the situation for the students. The study highlighted that a range of factors including relationships with teachers and peers, language and institutional organisation influenced student perceptions either positively or negatively. Difficulties experienced by international students were not just academic but social and cultural, particularly building relationships with local students.

Some researchers have focused on the academic differences between international and domestic students. For example, Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones and Callan (1991) compared urban and rural Australian students and Asian students enrolled at the University of Queensland to determine whether being a new student or coming from another culture or both resulted in transition problems. First and second year students were recruited for the study. The average length of residence for the Asian students in the study was 23 months. A questionnaire, using a Likert scale, probed four scenarios of common academic situations where it was believed Asian students experience difficulties (addressing lecturers, participating in discussions, seeking help and querying grades). The only situation where Asian students were likely to behave differently to Australian students was during participation in class discussions (Barker et al.). Asian students knew they were expected to express opinions but this was not accepted practice in their culture. They felt unable to participate in class due to language difficulties and culturally inappropriate behaviour. Of the academic adjustments international students must make, class participation appeared the most difficult.

These findings were similar to Burns (1991) who found, from completion of questionnaires by international students, that most felt uncomfortable participating in

class due to cultural differences and language problems. However, lack of participation does not equate to passivity in learning but a reflection of cultural beliefs regarding classroom norms. In some cultures, it is not appropriate to argue or question the lecturer because respect for the teacher is paramount (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Beasley & Pearson, 1998; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Choi, 1997). The cultural factor of "saving face" or not being humiliated by being wrong in front of the teacher has also been cited for the reluctance of students to participate in class (Beasley & Pearson; Choi).

International students can be encouraged to participate in class and promote inclusion through a sensitive approach to this issue. The University of Queensland provided a communications support programme for staff and students. Lecturers prompted international students (asked for their opinion or related material to their home context) who were then willing to participate in discussions (Brown, 1995). Ramsay et al. (1999) found that tutors could bring international students into discussions by explaining local events and providing a context for discussions. These findings emphasise the important role tutors can play in helping international students adapt to the Australian learning context.

In related work, Beasley and Pearson (1998) examined the effectiveness of student support designed within a specific course. Interested students were invited to participate in a restructured Organisation and Management Development course that included more student participation and incorporated a student learning support programme. The learning support programme comprised six, weekly one-hour sessions providing advice on study skills and revising lecture and tutorial material. The course was offered to first and second year international students at Murdoch University. Between 1991 and 1997, the percentage of international students attending increased from 41% to a peak of 61.5% and the failure rate declined to 1.5% in 1997. The

improved pass rate was attributed to restructuring of the course to suit the needs of the student population and integrating a support programme within the context of the unit of study (Beasley & Pearson). These results suggest that assistance should be context specific and address the needs of the particular students requiring help.

Despite the diversity of issues facing international students most research has focused on academic issues. Difficulties commonly relate to problems with English language, differing education systems and learning approaches and requirements at Australian universities (Burns, 1991). Traditionally, university international offices have focused on entrance difficulties, financial problems, academic and language issues (Hammer, 1992).

Research suggests a major issue concerning international students is the difficulties with language at university (Burns, 1991; Cameron & Meade, 2002; Choi, 1997; Chur-Hansen, 1999; Hellsten, 2002). Problems are most likely to be related to oral language rather than written, English as a second language and the differences between colloquial and more formal modes of language (Brown, 1995). Reluctance to participate in class is generally attributed to difficulties expressing ideas in a foreign language. International students may be over estimating their abilities and attempting to perform at a level at which they are not capable. Alternatively, poor performance could be a result of the acceptance of students whose level of English is not proficient enough to cope with the demands of university. For example, the University of Adelaide medical faculty expects a certain competence in English but students are not excluded solely on that basis (Chur-Hansen). Therefore, some students were not aware they had a language deficit when they began the course. However, Mullins et al. (1995) question whether all problems can be related to language difficulties, as the issue of language competency is complex.

There has generally been a focus, in the literature, on academic and institutional issues whilst ignoring the broader context (Kantanis, 1998; McInnis, 2001). For example, Burns (1991) found that students rated financial problems higher than lecturers as a reason for withdrawal. McInnis suggested that students are not being asked what is important to them. There is a danger that researchers, whilst focusing on academic factors, are ignoring the issues important to students.

### Social Adjustment

Students begin university with the expectation of making friends and broadening their social lives (Burns, 1991; Kantanis, 2000; Peel, 2000). Friendships are an important component as they enhance social life, provide support and a source of information and motivation to students (Evans, 2000; McInnis, et al., 2000). However, many students find it difficult to make friends at university because it is vastly different to their high school experience (Abbot-Chapman et al., 1992; Kantanis, 2000). Universities tend to be larger, the rules are different and there is little time within lectures to foster friendships. Students who can make a successful social adjustment are more likely to have a support network for help in other areas (Abramovitch, Schreier & Koren, 2000). The social needs of students are dependent upon the groups to which they belong.

International students provide opportunities for cross cultural awareness and social cohesion but there tends to be a lack of interaction between domestic and international students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Burns, 1991; Choi, 1997; Chur-Hansen, 1999; Volet & Ang, 1998; Volet, Renshaw & Tietzel, 1994). One of the reasons for admitting international students to Australian universities is to foster cross-cultural relations. However, factors such as homesickness and the stress of living abroad make it difficult for international students to form relationships with locals.

Abbot-Chapman et al. (1992) advocated programme cohesion to facilitate the friendship process especially through the core units that all students study. This is a similar idea to the concept of learning communities where two courses in the first semester curriculum are linked so that students take classes together (Tinto, 2000). One of the goals of learning communities is to foster friendships between students in an academic environment. Evidence suggests that learning communities encourage the development of study groups and support networks amongst students that extends beyond university (Tinto). However, the issue of social adjustment at university is dependent upon the student group in question. Learning communities may work well with young people entering university but other student groups have differing needs.

Studies examining interactions between domestic and international students within the academic setting have found that mixed group work is largely unsuccessful at fostering links between students. In Volet and Ang's (1998) study 40 second year business students (17 Australian, 23 Asian mostly Singapore and Malaysia) formed groups for assignments (2 Australian, 3 International, 6 mixed by chance rather than by choice). Focus groups and semi-structured interviews were conducted which reflected on completion of the task as culturally mixed groups, preconceptions and current experience of working in a mixed group. Both Australian and international groups preferred working with their own kind for four reasons (Volet & Ang). These were emotional connectedness to students from a similar background, communication difficulties, pragmatically Australian students were more likely to have commitments outside of university and negative stereotypes, such as, Australian students were perceived as more individualistic and less likely to work hard. This study highlighted that misconceptions from both groups were altered after students worked together.



Focus groups, involving the mixed groups, after completion of the assignment found that perceptions had altered positively and Australian students were seen as hardworking, communication difficulties were not an impediment and individual differences were considered more important than cultural differences (Volet & Ang, 1998). However there was no evidence that students would choose to be in a mixed culture group again.

Chalmers and Volet (1997) found that international students had more success interacting with Australians when participating in activities unrelated to study such as sporting groups. Relationships between Australian and international students may be more successful away from an academic setting (Volet & Ang, 1998). For instance, prospective domestic students could be included in “getting to know you” events held by the international office. Realistically both groups of students are entering a phase of their lives quite different to previous experiences and thus share some common ground.

Several factors are involved in the lack of social involvement between Australian and international students. Hofstede’s measure of power distance, relating to cultural variation between groups, states that individualistic and collectivist societies are unlikely to mix for several reasons (Barker et al., 1991; Volet & Ang, 1998). First, the cultural distance between Australia and Malaysia is greater than the distance between Singapore and Malaysia. Asian students prefer to mix “with their own kind” and Australian students are reluctant to mix. Thus the blame for the lack of cultural integration is shared. However, some students do mix although it is not clearly understood what factors, perceptions or prior experiences promote relationships between members of different cultural groups (Volet & Ang). These findings suggest that the issues facing international students are dependent upon the nationality of the student and the country

of study. For example, Asian students are likely to experience more difficulties in Australia than are students from Europe.

The second factor relates to the perception of academic commitment. According to Barker et al. (1991), Asian students are more achievement oriented and less likely to work with Australian students perceived as more individualistic. Australian students prefer independent to group learning situations. However, both groups perform equally well so reluctance to mix may relate to different learning styles and study habits rather than a question of commitment.

The third factor is affective. International students tend to be homesick, stressed and find it difficult to develop relationships with Australian students in and out of academic settings (Volet & Ang, 1998). They may question whether it is emotionally worth the uncertainty of success to try and form new networks. Further, Australian students have an established social network, both within and outside university, which is already providing the support and security required.

The issue for international students is not only about academic success but being able to function in a foreign environment. Barker et al. (1991) examined everyday social situations comparing groups of Australian students from rural and urban areas and Asian students at the University of Queensland, using the Social Situations questionnaire. Asian students had more difficulty going to pubs and private parties, dating, being in groups with the opposite sex, dealing with aggression by others, dealing with older Australians, taking the initiative in conversations and going to a restaurant (Barker et al.). Asian and rural students had more difficulty understanding the humour and sarcasm in interpersonal encounters, meeting strangers, being introduced to others, leading small groups, dealing with people of higher status, making friends the same age, shopping and using public transport. This research suggests that rural students moving to

the city experience similar problems to international students (Barker et al.). This study demonstrated that some problems are similar for different student groups (Barker et al.). International students require a period of adjustment and guidance as to the social norms in a foreign country. These can be learnt through a peer mentoring programme or by mixing informally with domestic students, although research suggests this is not easily achieved.

### The Sojourner Experience

Sojourners are individuals who live, for a period of time, in a country other than their country of citizenship (Church, 1982; Hammer, 1992; Rohrllich & Martin, 1991). Literature on sojourner adjustment focuses on identifying discrete stages of adjustment such as the u- curve (Hammer; Church). According to this theory, there is an initial period of positive emotions and acceptance of the host culture followed by negative reactions to adjustment problems (culture shock), and then an upward swing of emotions as individuals learn to function in new environment.

An alternative theory suggests that two domains, psychological and sociocultural influence adjustment (Hammer, 1995; Ward & Kennedy, 1999). Psychosocial factors include personality, coping style and social support, which affect emotional adjustment to a new environment (Ward & Kennedy). The most difficult period for adjustment is at the beginning of the journey however, this can fluctuate over time, dependent on the sojourner's experiences in the host country. Sociocultural adjustment is influenced by an individual's ability to fit in which is, in turn, affected by length of residence, cultural knowledge, cultural distance, language fluency and interactions with locals (Ward & Kennedy). Short stay sojourners may not try too hard to fit in because it may not be worth the effort. Adaptation generally follows a learning curve with improvement over the first few months.

Cross-cultural living represents a major life transition (Ying, 2002). It entails ambiguity, uncertainty meeting new people and facing novel challenges. One of the few studies focusing on sojourner effects relating to students assessed the effect of cross-cultural living for 97 Taiwanese students living in the United States over a 2-year period (Ying). Personality was assessed using the California Psychological Inventory vector scales. The three scales used were internality, norm favouring tendency and self-actualisation. Ying found that students became more shy and reticent particularly during the first year. By the end of the second year students had negotiated challenges sufficiently to become more competent and mature. This suggests that the first year experiences are crucial as the students adapt to living in a foreign country. The findings indicate that students are more withdrawn during their first year abroad and may not be functioning to the best of their ability. They need assistance establishing themselves in their new situation.

Likewise, adjusting to Australian customs and attitudes presents problems for international students (Barker et al., 1991; Chur-Hansen, 1999; Hellsten, 2002). Students must learn and understand the rules that apply in a new cultural environment plus cope with the stress of higher education (Abramovitch et al., 2000; Volet & Ang, 1998). The cultural learning model states that the task of sojourners is not to assimilate but to learn the rules that apply in the new culture (Hammer, 1992). International students may find it easier to learn the rules associated with academic study than those governing social encounters. Alternatively, these students may focus their efforts and attention on academic success.

Research indicates that the cultural distance between sojourner and host countries as well as practical problems of living abroad affect adjustment (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991). For instance, a questionnaire completed by American students studying

abroad found that housing and finance followed by coursework were the issues of most concern (Rohrlich & Martin). Overall, students were satisfied with the sojourn experience despite the problems. Students with previous experience abroad or an established relationship with host nationals adjusted most easily. However, the sojourner countries in this study were not too dissimilar from the United States (United Kingdom, France and Spain).

### The University Experience

In a comprehensive study Mullins et al. (1995) compared issues of concern between Australian and international students relating to evaluations of teaching and university services. A questionnaire was developed from previous questionnaires used by three target universities in South Australia. The sample across the three universities comprised 1250 students representing 37.8% of the population. Four hundred and thirty six international and 814 Australian students completed the questionnaire. The two student groups differed on a number of issues regarding university life.

International students usually had the university chosen for them by their parents based on reputation or location (Mullins et al., 1995). This finding is important when universities are relying on their reputations to attract potential overseas students. In contrast, 70% of Australian students chose a university based on convenience, preferring universities close to work, home or public transport. Similarly, the University of Otago (New Zealand) student opinion polls between 1998 and 2000 found the reasons for choosing university included reputation (for international students), contact with students, independence and proximity (Cameron & Meade, 2002).

Australian and international students shared some issues of concern including motivation, doubting academic ability and financial problems (Cameron & Meade, 2002; Mullins et al., 1995; Ramsay et al., 1999). Financial issues were the major worry

for domestic and international students affecting 70% of students (Mullins et al.). A 1991 inquiry by the Industry Commission into complaints by international students found many relating to financial issues including questioning the cost differential between domestic and international students (Baker, 1993). International students complained about paying amenities fees for poor quality services, such as few academic resources, and no public transport concessions (Baker; Cameron & Meade). Most financial issues questioned the cost of education with the standard of service provided by the university.

However, international students were more likely to be experiencing problems and to a greater degree than domestic students (Mullins et al., 1995). The most often mentioned issues were lack of motivation, financial problems, fear of failure and heavy workload. There were few differences between the universities despite other research suggesting that problems are university specific (Evans, 2000; Evans & Peel, 1999). Some problems such as fear of failure, workload, nervousness and tension persisted or increased for international students after one year of study. Again this contradicts earlier findings suggesting that international students find the second year of study easier than the first.

Students attributed study related difficulties to differences in teaching style and inadequate university facilities rather than to the student's lack of ability (Mullins et al., 1995). Both local and international students cited lack of understanding of what was expected of them as an important issue. This issue was more important than language issues in general for international students. Other studies have supported these findings (Burns, 1991; Cameron & Meade, 2002; Finau Enari & U, 1998). For example, international students at the University of Otago were disappointed with the lecturers' inability to communicate clear goals (Cameron & Meade). International students felt

that staff were unaware or unconcerned with problems facing students, academic or otherwise as staff did not meet the expectations of support for international students (Burns; Ridings & Pokarier, 1998). However, by third year, students had lowered expectations of support, which may be a result of students not having their needs met in the earlier years at university (Ridings & Pokarier). What is not clear is whether it is the students themselves, lecturers or tutors who are responsible for ensuring that students understand the academic requirements.

Ridings and Pokarier (1998) were interested in international students' satisfaction with their university experience. A questionnaire was developed after focus group discussions on students' concerns about the learning experience. Interviewers were international students to maximise honest responses and considered less intimidating than local interviewers. 205 respondents from the international student body enrolled at Queensland University of Technology were interviewed. Nearly half the students were dissatisfied with their experiences at university, specifically support received upon arrival, accommodation of language difficulties and the university's attempts to meet the social and cultural needs of international students (Ridings & Pokarier). However, as this was a quantitative study it was not possible to determine what those needs were or whether students had over estimated their language abilities.

In a second study, Ridings and Pokarier (1998) examined client satisfaction with the university. A survey of 146 international students produced some disturbing findings. Over half of the students surveyed were neutral or disagreed with the statement that Australia was a friendly and supportive society (Ridings & Pokarier). These figures may be a reflection of the level of interaction with Australian students rather than the level of support received. 52% of students agreed with the statement that Australia was more racist than their home country (Ridings & Pokarier). These findings

may be related to many factors including personal experience or experiences of another individual or dependent upon country of origin. However, these perceptions can damage Australia's reputation overseas.

Hellsten (2002) used narratives to examine the experiences of international students at an Australian university. The students interviewed had expectations that their university degree would lead to a good job; help them develop relationships with Australians and improve their English skills (Hellsten). However, reality did not meet these expectations and some students found themselves isolated and marginalised. In general, students expected more involvement and understanding from members of the host country, especially teachers.

Few studies have examined the effects of changes to programmes designed to assist international students settle in to their new environment. Abramovitch et al. (2000) were interested in assessing the effects of changes to an orientation programme implemented at an Israeli university. The researchers were specifically concerned with the correlation between adjustment to a new environment and adjustment to medical school. The participants were first year American medical students studying in Israel who completed the Ways of Coping checklist and Appraisal Dimension Scale. The results indicated that students who were not coping well with the move to Israel were coping less well with the demands of academic study. Students who were not coping well were more likely to rely on classmates for support whereas those better adjusted had developed local contacts (Abramovitch et al.). Other researchers have had similar results concluding that the quality of local contacts and positive social support affects the ability of sojourners to adjust to their new lives and achieve goals (Hammer, 1992; Tsang, 2001). However, unlike these other studies, Abramovitch et al. found that



adjustment did affect academic achievement. This may be related to the type of course taken, as medicine is an extremely difficult, high pressure area of study.

### Conclusion

Much of the earlier literature reviewed has focused on academic issues pertaining to the transition experiences of students. Ultimately, the number of students who graduated determined successful transition. Failure was generally attributed to the student, and in the case of international students an inability to adapt to the Australian learning context compounded by language difficulties.

However, recent research suggests that there are a range of issues which impact on student satisfaction and adjustment to university. These may include financial worries, relationships with university staff and adjustment to a new learning environment which are common to both international and domestic students. Other issues, such as homesickness and language proficiency, are particular to the international student experience.

For instance, language difficulties impact both on academic achievement and adjustment to the host country. The university environment does not appear conducive to fostering friendships with many international students finding it difficult to establish relationships and support networks with host nationals. Practical problems are also an issue for international students, such as housing, transportation and local customs although these issues are largely overlooked in the literature. Finally, the nature and extent of transition issues is, in part, dependent upon the country of origin and destination of international students.

Research relating to the transition experience of international students has largely been quantitative, in the form of questionnaires and surveys, and centred on academic issues. There is a dearth of literature examining the entire student experience. In this

respect, qualitative research involving student interviews would elaborate on current knowledge and provide useful insights. Also, there has been a focus on exploring negative events whilst underestimating the impact of positive events as an ameliorating factor in the transition experience. This is an important issue because it is likely that most students will experience some negative events during their time at university.

Literature regarding the sojourner experience has focused on psychosocial adjustment. There appears to be divergent lines of research between sojourner and transition literature with the same goal. There is little evidence of integration of the findings in these two fields or that recommendations are being used by university support offices to improve the experience for international students. Whilst the sojourner literature acknowledges that practical problems of living abroad affect adjustment, the university transition literature provides little consideration for life outside of university.

Finally, a more complete understanding of the experiences of international students making the transition to university abroad should lead to improved services for these students. Enhancement of the student experience will improve the quality of education for the student and the reputation of the host university.

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### **Abstract**

Whilst many students experience a smooth transition to university, others find the first year stressful, socially isolating and disappointing. Difficulty with transition to higher education can be detrimental to both the student and the university. During the last ten years the number of international students enrolled at Australian universities has steadily increased. However, there remains little substantial research that specifically investigates the transition experience for international students. This study explores the first year experience of international students at Edith Cowan University. Eight international students were interviewed exploring the issues salient to their first year of study. The results indicated that whilst students found the experience satisfying, there was concern regarding isolation, adaptation and resilience, support and repatriation after completion of their studies. These results suggest that the university can improve the quality of service and support provided to international students. Further research into the transition experiences of international students is recommended.

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## Introduction

Whilst many students experience a smooth transition to university, others find the first year stressful, socially isolating and disappointing (Kantanis, 1998; McInnis, Hartley, Polesel & Teese, 2000). The transition experience to higher education varies dependent upon student and institutional characteristics. According to Tinto (2000) there is a codependent relationship between the university and the student. If this relationship is not satisfactorily established during the first few months at university the resulting consequences for the student and the university can be severe.

Current research has tended to focus on individual factors which affect transition and withdrawal from higher education (Lewis, 1994; McInnis et al., 2000). The five significant factors identified include high school performance, age, psychological characteristics conducive to completion (study skills, learning strategies, student goals), family and peer support and pressure and finances. However, transition difficulties are most often attributed to academic performance whilst neglecting other factors (Kantanis, 1998; McInnis, 2001). For example, friendships are an important component of university life as they enhance the student's social life, provide support and serve as a source of information and motivation. The establishment of a strong social network can facilitate a student's transition to university. There is a danger that researchers, whilst focusing on academic issues, are ignoring other issues which are also important to students.

The above findings have stemmed largely from research concerning Australian domestic students entering university for the first time. From this research Monash University has developed a charter aimed at assisting students to make a smooth transition to university (Pargetter, 2000). The recommendations include early orientation to university, comprehensive course and career advice and an insight into the transition process that includes negative features such as loneliness, and changes in the student's personal life.

In recent years, the acceptance of international students into universities has become widespread (Hammer, 1992; Nelson, 2002; Pokarier & Ridings, 1998). The number of international students studying in Australia doubled between 1994 and 2000 to 153 400 students with almost half of these students (72 700) enrolled in higher education (Nelson). Due to economic downturn, the number of students originating from Asia has decreased in recent years although Australia remains a preferred destination for many Asian students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). In 2000, 40% of international students studying in Australia originated from Indonesia, Singapore, United States, Hong Kong and Malaysia.

Despite the growing role international students play in the Australian higher education system little is known about their transition experiences. International students experience similar transition problems to domestic students but to a greater extent due to stress created by language difficulties, homesickness and isolation (Burns, 1991; Church, 1982; Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999). Some problems are common to international students beginning

university life in Australian institutions. These include expectations of the university to provide accurate information and support (Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock, 1995); adjusting to Australian customs, attitudes and language difficulties including proficiency (Chur-Hansen, 1999; Hellsten, 2002); developing efficient study skills, learning and teaching expectations of students, stereotyping and racism (Beasley & Pearson, 1998; Cameron & Meade, 2002). However, difficulties associated with transition are dependent on the country of origin of international students and the institution they are attending (Cameron & Meade; Church).

According to research, the single biggest issue facing international students is the difficulties with language at university (Burns, 1991; Cameron & Meade, 2002; Choi, 1997; Evans, 2000; Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington & Pisecco, 2001). Problems are more likely to be related to oral language rather than written, and English as a second language being learnt by international students, in its formal rather than colloquial form (Brown, 1995). Reluctance to participate in class is generally attributed to difficulties expressing ideas in a foreign language (Brown). International students may be over estimating their abilities and attempting to perform at a level at which they are not capable. Alternatively, poor performance may be a result of the entry criteria relating to language proficiency not being stringent enough to cope with the demands of university. However, Mullins et al. (1995) questioned whether all problems can be related to language difficulties, as focusing on a single factor may be a simplistic solution to a complex issue.

For many international students, study in Australia means a transition from a familiar to unfamiliar learning environment (Burns, 1991; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Hellsten, 2002). There appears little understanding between academic staff and the student body about the types of issues facing international students (Beasley & Pearson, 1998; Hellsten). International students come from cultures with different learning styles (Beasley & Pearson; Wan, 2001). For example, Asian students are deferential towards teachers and not used to disagreeing with authority figures. In a review of previous studies, Burns found that the areas of most concern for international students in academic skills were conceptions of knowledge, learning approaches to attain goals and aims of the host education system. The differences in learning approaches result in students experiencing difficulties taking notes, participating in class and initiating student / teacher contact. These differences require a period of adjustment, for international students, whilst they learn the rules at Australian universities.

There are positive outcomes for both the university and the student body in accepting international students on campus. International students provide opportunities for students and staff to develop cross cultural awareness and social cohesion (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002; Burns, 1991; Chur-Hansen, 1999; Volet & Ang, 1998). However, there tends to be a lack of interaction between Australian and international students (Choi, 1997). Factors such as homesickness and the stress of living abroad make it difficult for international students to form close relationships with local students.

Literature on student sojourners has focused on the differences between host and traveller to understand the reasons why cross-cultural relationships are difficult to develop. For example, Hofstede's measure of power distance, relating to cultural variation between groups, states that individualistic and collectivist societies are unlikely to mix (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan, 1991; Volet & Ang, 1998). For instance, the cultural distance between Australia and Malaysia is greater than the distance between Singapore and Malaysia. As such, Asian students prefer to mix "with their own kind" and Australian students are reluctant to mix with foreign students (Volet & Ang). Thus, the blame for the lack of cultural integration is shared. However, some students do mix although it is not clearly understood what perceptions or prior experiences promote relationships between members of different cultural groups.

Several researchers have investigated the relationship between domestic and international students on campus. Volet and Ang (1998) interviewed local and international students, involved in group assignments, examining their experiences whilst working in culturally mixed groups. The researchers found that the students were reluctant to be involved in group work for a number of reasons. These included emotional connectedness to students from a similar background, communication difficulties, pragmatically Australian students were more likely to have commitments outside of university and negative stereotypes (Volet & Ang). After completion of mixed group assignments, Australian students were perceived as hardworking,

few communication difficulties existed and individual differences were considered more important than cultural differences. However, there was no evidence that students would choose to be in a mixed culture group again.

Chalmers and Volet (1997), reviewing the literature regarding study and learning practices of Asian students, found that students had more success interacting with Australians when participating in activities unrelated to study such as sporting groups. Relationships between Australian and international students may be more successful away from an academic setting. For instance, prospective domestic students could be included in “getting to know you” events held by the university’s international office. Realistically both groups of students are entering a phase of their lives quite different to previous experiences and thus share some common ground on which to base these interactions.

Finally, research indicates that the practical problems of living abroad as well as the cultural distance between sojourner and host countries affects adjustment (Rohrlich & Martin, 1991). For instance, a questionnaire completed by American students studying abroad found that housing and finance followed by coursework were the issues of most concern. Overall, students were satisfied with the sojourn experience despite the problems they encountered (Rohrlich & Martin). Students with previous experience abroad or an established relationship with host nationals adjusted most easily. These findings reflect the diversity of issues that affect the transition to a new environment.

Likewise, adjusting to Australian customs and attitudes presents problems for international students (Barker et al., 1991; Chur-Hansen, 1999; Hellsten, 2002). Students must learn and understand the rules that apply in a new cultural environment plus cope with the stress of higher education (Church, 1982; Volet & Ang, 1998). A positive experience with the host country increases the chances of academic success (Ridings & Pokarier, 1998). According to research by Mullins et al. (1995), students who are performing well academically may still be experiencing difficulties with social adjustment. The cultural learning model states that the task of the sojourner is not to assimilate but to learn the rules that apply in the new culture (Hammer, 1992). International students may find it easier to learn the rules associated with academic study than those governing social encounters. Alternatively, these students may focus all their efforts and attention on academic success to the detriment of other relationships or opportunities for social engagements.

Few studies have examined the effects of improving support for international students (Abramovitch, Schreier & Koren, 2000; Church, 1982; Ying & Liese, 1994). These researchers have found several factors that assist international students make a smooth transition to university. Students who cope well abroad have developed local contacts rather than relying solely on classmates for help (Abramovitch et al.; Church). A longitudinal study by Ying and Liese, of 172 Taiwanese students studying in the United States examined factors associated with a positive adjustment to their new situation. Students' psychological adjustment to university abroad was assessed pre and



post arrival using the California Personality Inventory. Students who reported a better experience tended to be younger, outgoing, less homesick, had experienced fewer cultural, academic and relationship problems, were well prepared for the journey and attempted to form relationships with locals (Ying & Liese).

Several studies have focused on student satisfaction with their university experiences (Cameron & Meade, 2002; Mullins et al., 1995; Ridings & Pokarier). For example, Ridings and Pokarier surveyed international students to determine their level of satisfaction at university. Many of the students expressed dissatisfaction in a number of key areas. These included support upon arrival in Australia, accommodation of their specific language difficulties and the university's inadequate attempts to meet the social and cultural needs of the international students (Ridings & Pokarier).

Taking a different approach, Mullins et al. (1995) compared issues of concern between Australian and international students relating to teaching practices and university services. The two groups surveyed shared some issues of common concern including motivation to study, doubts regarding academic ability and financial problems. However, international students were more likely to be experiencing problems and to a greater degree than domestic students due to the added pressures of living abroad (Mullins et al.). Some problems such as fear of failure, workload, nervousness and anxiety persisted or increased for international students after one year of study,

contradicting earlier findings that international students find the second year of study easier than the first. Perhaps issues pertaining to living abroad are resolved or improved but academic competence may remain a contentious issue.

International students attending Australian universities provide many benefits both to the country and the host institution (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2002). For example, in 2001, international students added \$4 billion to the Australian economy (Nelson, 2002). Accepting international students helps to forge links with originating countries and can add to the skilled labour force as some students elect to remain and work in Australia (Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Chur-Hansen, 1999). Mixed student populations promote cultural diversity and understanding (Volet & Ang, 1998). Finally, successful education of international students raises the profile of Australian education and universities.

### *The ECU Context*

International student numbers rose by 50% between 1998 and 2001, with Edith Cowan University's (ECU) market share in Western Australia increasing to 22.5% during that period (ECU, 2003). ECU is committed to establishing a strong international community on campus, citing on its Web site the advantages for students choosing to study at ECU. These include multi campus locations, vocation oriented courses, high employment record and student satisfaction.

The International Support Office (ISO), formed to help international students make the transition to study at ECU, provides a number of services for new students. The primary source of contact between students and staff is the Orientation Day where students are able to meet key university personnel and information is provided about practical issues such as transport, as well as advice about enrolment and university facilities (Edith Cowan University, 2003).

### *Present Study*

The concept of social justice refers to the elimination of inequality between groups and the promotion of the well being of society rather than of individuals (Prilleltensky, in press). This study utilised a social justice framework focusing on an area of potential inequality within higher education (Prilleltensky). The experiences of international students were examined through a process termed praxis, which involves reflection, research and action (Prilleltensky; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2002). The aim of praxis is to translate research into social action. As international students bring a number of benefits to Australia and its universities, it is important that universities cater for the specific needs of these students. International students are accepted on a full fee paying basis and consequently expect value for money from the university they attend. Unless universities undertake research to examine their progress in this area, they cannot be sure they are adequately supporting international students.

In order to provide adequate support to international students and provide the best opportunity for a successful transition to higher education there needs to be a fuller understanding of the issues that specifically face international students studying abroad. A qualitative study will fulfil this need because interviews allow for an in depth exploration of the experiences of international students. The research question will be better answered through participants describing and examining their transition experiences rather than measuring those experiences. The research question for this study is "What are the experiences of international students making the transition to higher education at Edith Cowan University?". As no research of this kind has previously been conducted at ECU, this study took an exploratory approach to uncover issues that may require further consideration in later research projects.

## Method

### *Design*

Research design should be guided by the aims of the study being undertaken (Gergen, 2001). For this study a phenomenological design was used because I was interested in the experiences of international students as they made the transition to university. As individuals live in a socially constructed world it is necessary to examine the meaning of the transition experience for individuals by understanding that experience from their perspective (Creswell, 1998). Although guided by previous research findings, the questions were designed to explore the everyday experiences of students studying abroad.

### *Participants*

The participants were eight international students from the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences (CSESS) at ECU. Seven female students and one male student were interviewed for this project. All students were undergraduates and originated from a variety of countries (see Table 1).

### *Instrument*

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed in order to explore the experiences of international students during transition to university (see Appendix A). The questions were guided by findings from previous studies but were flexible enough to allow new information to emerge. The questions were devised in order to investigate the reasons for studying abroad,

positive and negative aspects associated with being an international student in Australia and factors that assisted students in making a successful transition to university. The questions were purposely general in nature, so that the students were free to explore issues that were important to them. Questions included:

“Why did you choose to study at ECU?”

“What has helped you make the transition to university?”

“Have there been any difficult aspects? Tell me more about those.”

The interview schedule was read by two members of the School of Psychology to assess face validity and clarity of the questions.

Table 1

*Demographic Details of the Interviewees*

Interviewee	Gender	Age	Year	Country
One	Female	22	3	Seychelles
Two	Female	18	1	Indonesia
Three	Female	23	3	Sweden
Four	Male	31	3	U.S.
Five	Female	23	2	Italy
Six	Female	20	3	Seychelles
Seven	Female	35	1	Singapore
Eight	Female	21	1	Kenya

*Procedure*

Letters were sent to international students enrolled in CSESS at the end of first semester, 2003 (Appendix B). Reminder letters requesting volunteers for the study were sent at the beginning of second semester (Appendix B). Students were also addressed at all psychology lectures during a one-week

period. Students contacted me if they were interested in participating in the research. I then arranged a suitable time and place for the interview.

Prior to the commencement of the interview, the participants were briefed on the aims of the study, issues of confidentiality were clarified, and participants signed a consent form (see Appendix C). The participants were advised that they could withdraw from the interview at any time should they no longer wish to answer the questions. Participants were informed that general information on their experiences was required and there were no right or wrong answers. A general discussion helped to relax the participants and build a measure of rapport and trust prior to commencing the interviews. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 minutes. The interviews were audio taped and later transcribed verbatim. On completion of each interview, the participants were debriefed and questions regarding the study were answered. Several participants agreed to include additional information at the end of the interviews subsequent to the debriefing talks.

The transcribed interviews were analysed using thematic analysis techniques. In addition, a journal was kept throughout the research period with entries recorded after each interview and analysis session. These entries reflected my impressions from each interview and these entries formed an integral part of the data analysis process (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2002).

### *Data Analysis*

The data were subjected to thematic analysis as outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994) and Terre Blanche and Kelly (2002). The first phase of

analysis involved multiple readings of the transcripts and immersion in the texts. At this stage notes were taken and the aim was to familiarise myself with the data. This formed part of the audit trail of the research. This phase involved a search for the underlying meaning of the experiences of the participants (Creswell, 1998). At this stage a question ordered matrix was constructed that provided an overview of the important issues emerging from the transcripts (see Appendix D).

The second phase involved eliciting themes, from the transcripts, by organising the data into categories using the language of the participants (Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2002). This was achieved by reading each transcript and highlighting portions of text that appeared significant or interesting in relation to the research question. To assist in the analysis process related text were colour coded. Codes are a useful means of organising transcripts into related categories and themes (Miles & Huberman, 1998). The codes assigned meaning to portions of the text and constituted words, phrases or sentences. Remarks were also made in the margins of the transcripts reflecting my thoughts, ideas and reactions to what was being read. These remarks helped to add meaning and clarity to the transcripts (Miles & Huberman). These coded categories were used to organise the information into dominant themes reflecting the experiences of the international students, marking instances of these themes in each transcript.

The final phase was to reread the transcripts, using the thematic categories, to look for instances that contradicted the interpretations (Miles &



Huberman, 1998; Terre Blanche & Kelly, 2002). During this stage of the analysis, transcripts were reread to verify that the themes made sense and could be identified in other parts of the data where they would be expected (Miles & Huberman). I also looked for over interpretation, prejudice or bias. During this process a journal was kept reflecting the procedures used analysing the data, including my thoughts, reactions and problems encountered (see Appendix E). An audit trail is useful because it helps others understand the research process (Miles & Huberman; Terre Blanche & Kelly).

Finally, to confirm the emergent themes I checked my interpretations with several of the interviewees. Member checking is a valuable means of assuring the quality of the analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1998). In addition, two independent researchers read the transcripts to verify my findings.

## Findings and Discussion

This study was designed to examine how international students experience the transition to an Australian university. Analysis of the interviews revealed that although students found their first year experience challenging and difficult, it was also a rewarding period of their lives. Four dominant themes, isolation, adaptation and resilience, ISO support and repatriation emerged from the interviews (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Themes and Exemplars to Emerge from Transition to University Study*

Theme	Issues	Exemplars
Isolation	Language	<i>I have experienced a lot of problems...with my English</i>
	Social interactions	<i>Getting used to the different sorts of people</i>
	Academic support	<i>Tutor supportive, very supportive</i>
	Social support	<i>Constant support which was lacking there...emotional support</i>
Adaptation and Resilience	Personal development	<i>Learning a different way...how the Australians do it</i> <i>It's helped me to expand my limitations</i>
	Independence	<i>It was the first time I lived independently</i>
ISO	Support	<i>The ISO had some activities when we could meet and socialise</i>
Repatriation	Change	<i>I see things differently...it won't be the same</i>

### *Isolation*

Studying abroad presents challenges that students must face.

Difficulties with language, making friends, coping with an unfamiliar environment and discrimination can impact negatively on the transition

process (Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Furakawa, 1997; Hammer, 1992). Different aspects of the international student's life, if not satisfactorily negotiated, can lead to feelings of isolation and marginalisation.

Research indicates that academic and social support for international students has a critical effect on their overseas experience (Brown, 1995; Hammer, 1992; Rambruth & McCormick, 2001; Tsang, 2001). Students who study overseas may be deprived of the emotional and social support they received at home (Poyrazli et al., 2001). Support from others facilitates adjustment when dealing with difficulties (Abramovitch et al., 2000; Church, 1982; Tsang). All of the students interviewed expressed concerns about the consequences of a lack of support, especially during the first few months after arrival in Perth.

### *Language*

Lack of English language proficiency is a defining issue that negatively impacts on academic performance and social relationships for international students (Beasley & Pearson, 1998; Burns, 1991; Church, 1982; Hammer, 1992; Poyrazli et al., 2001). The students interviewed believed that their acceptable level of English for entry into an Australian university meant they would not experience any difficulties studying in English. Unfortunately, this was not the case for most of the students. Their lack of proficiency in the English language affected their academic performance, relationships with locals and their ability to function in the community.

Several students commented that their level of English proficiency was not adequate to meet challenges both academically and in social situations:

*"Before I came here I thought I had a reasonable command of the language."*

Problems with language can result in a lack of confidence within the student to participate at university and doubt their own abilities (Mullins et al., 1995). The students interviewed frequently expressed doubts about their ability to compete with domestic students and to satisfactorily complete their university degrees. Although the desire to continue on to further education was an important consideration, some students felt that they had not achieved results that reflected their true academic abilities. This left them feeling isolated because their circumstances were different to the majority of students.

Students encountered difficulties in specific situations including class participation, understanding and being understood by university staff, writing assignments and forming new friendship groups. Students felt frustrated when they could not understand the requirements of an assignment and their efforts to obtain clarification were fruitless. A sense of isolation resulted when students were unable to make their needs clear to others. These feelings were intensified when students encountered negative comments from fellow students. Two students expressed dismay at being subjected to prejudicial remarks, with one student commenting:

*"... being Australia a multicultural society it wouldn't be that hard. Not having the language but I actually find the opposite ... they (Australians) didn't like at all the fact that I couldn't speak English and I find a lot of people that be really mean to me."*

The student revealed later in the interview that fellow students often assumed she was stupid because her English skills were poor. What makes this kind of treatment difficult to understand is the fact that this student is proficient in five languages. As Australia is portrayed as a multicultural society it is not an issue that international students would expect to encounter. Further, there is no visible effort to integrate international students into the general population at university.

### *Social Interactions*

Some students feel lonely and isolated during the first few months abroad as they are away from family, friends and familiar surroundings (Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Volet & Ang, 1998). However, most students come to Australia with a desire to meet new people, not necessarily on campus (Mullins et al., 1995). The students interviewed expressed a desire to make friends outside of university but were unsure how to do this.

International students have been socialised into a different cultural context and find some social situations in Australia difficult until the social rules are learnt. Students experienced problems making friends and developing relationships, particularly with locals. Social isolation is an issue for international students due to language and communication difficulties both verbal and non verbal as well as fear of rejection, stereotyping and lack of knowledge regarding local social rules (Mullins et al., 1995).

Social interactions were difficult for a number of reasons. Students found it difficult to adjust to the social rules in Australia and found meeting

people a problem both on and off the campus. Some students had difficulties with locals and the different social rules that apply in Australia:

*"they don't have the same courtesy to someone else in the rough way they speak ... they get too personal too quickly."*

The preceding comment is an example of the transition process whereby the student initially expressed shock at the familiarity of strangers. Later in the interview the student commented that she is now used to the communication style and no longer has a problem with "rude" Australians.

Research indicates that Asian students, especially, have difficulties dealing with aggressive individuals, humour and sarcasm of Australians in personal encounters (Barker et al., 1991). This student, from an Asian country, found that some people tended to get too personal too quickly. In collectivist societies encounters between strangers are more formal and public displays of emotion are restrained (Barker et al.). Not understanding the social rules of encounters is isolating because students cannot get past the feelings of negativity and confusion into developing a more intimate contact. They are intimidated through lack of knowledge about how things are done in Australia and by friendship groups that are already formed. One student mentioned that it was difficult for her to make friends because students already seemed to be in friendship groups.

For another student the structure of university learning made it difficult to maintain friendship groups:

*"... in uni ... everyone have different classrooms and different units and you just cannot hang with that group."*

Mixing with Australians is an important component of the study abroad experience and one of the reasons students choose to study abroad (Mullins et al., 1995). However, the students found it difficult for a number of reasons, such as, the university structure and lack of opportunity especially during orientation week as social functions were designed specifically for international students only. The students interviewed wanted to meet Australians but most found that the support they required was only available through befriending other international students. This highlights the lack of understanding between domestic and international students about their respective needs and motives at university.

Chalmers and Volet (1997) advocated a peer pairing programme to promote friendships between groups. This could also be achieved through peer mentoring programmes already operating in some faculties. Some of the students suggested that more should be done by the university to promote interactions between international and domestic students.

#### *Academic Support*

All students enter university into a community where there is a different worldview than that experienced at high school (Beasley & Pearson, 1998). International students experience this clash of perceptions more so than domestic students do. It takes time to adjust, especially when dealing with other issues such as language and practical problems without the usual support systems available. Clear communication of learning outcomes to all

students and early intervention to remedy difficulties is the key to a smooth transition.

Overall the students were satisfied with the level of support from the academic staff. This is not surprising because the School of Psychology, at ECU, has invested a lot of time over the last few years to ensure that academic staff are aware of student issues and competent to help students. For example, one student stated:

*"I got to know the tutors quite well because I was on the phone with them right away and they were always willing to help I never felt like they weren't willing to help."*

There was general agreement by the students that tutors especially were available to listen and assist their students as much as possible. Despite this, some students appeared confused over requirements for assignments and unable to procure the help they required. There is a need to ensure that the assistance being offered matches the needs of the students.

Students expressed the difficulty of transferring to an education system where they are expected to be responsible for their own learning. During the first few months of university this was an important issue for these students:

*"... it all falls on you if you want to attend (lectures) you attend if you don't no-one's behind you."*

For students who may be lonely and isolated the general attitude of university staff that it is up to the student whether they want to learn can be difficult to cope with. It places greater pressure on students to draw on personal resources in order to continue with their studies. Several students expressed the concern that they were not treated any differently to local



students and there was no acknowledgment of their special circumstances. Whilst it is not practicable or possible to make allowances for the naivete of international students in the Australian academic environment it is also unreasonable not to ensure these students are acclimatised to Australian ways.

International students may have difficulties adjusting to independent learning but this should not be equated with an inability to do so. The students eventually made the necessary adjustment. However, the period of adjustment was stressful because academic staff did not acknowledge these difficulties:

*"I just felt probably there wasn't enough ... they don't consider what it is being an international student in another country like Australia."*

The culture of learning is different for international students (Beasley & Pearson, 1998; Beaver & Tuck, 1998). Whilst some students were prepared to ask for help, others were not, at least during the first few months at university. As one student stated, she knew there was study skills adviser but it was not something that was done back home. International students may eventually have to learn to ask for help but in the mean time they need to be supported through this process. Instead some students felt neglected and isolated because no help or support was offered to them.

Mullins et al. (1995) found the issue of academic support problematic but were unclear as to who was responsible for providing support to international students. The students interviewed found the academic skills adviser of limited benefit, dependent upon his / her ability to understand the student's needs. The skills adviser at ECU is not a part of the ISO but works for all students.

### *Social Support*

Social support may be an important factor of adjustment to a new culture (Church, 1982; Tsang, 2001; Ward & Rana-Deuba, 2000). Students who can make successful contact with the host community are more likely to have positive academic experiences (Poyrazli et al., 2001; Wan, 2001). Further, friendships are an important component of university life as they enhance social life, provide support and a source of information and motivation to students (Evans, 2000; McInnis et al., 2000). International students ability to achieve goals is influenced by the strength of social support (Hammer, 1992). However, many students find it difficult to make friends at university (Abbot-Chapman, Hughes & Wyld, 1992; Kantanis, 2000).

The students considered support an important component for adjustment because they felt stressed and isolated learning to adjust to a new environment. Students specifically had difficulties negotiating public transport and adjusting to the weather and local cuisine. Some of these issues can be dealt with by providing information prior to departure but the students agreed that having support from others would have eased the transition process. Students who lacked support experienced more difficulties in the first few months of arrival in Australia.

Some students looked for support from various sources often without success:

*"I thought to ... go and see the Italian community over here but I couldn't handle the Italian community."*

This student felt doubly isolated because she could not relate to the Italian community in Perth or the students at university. Associating with only international students can intensify the feelings of isolation. The struggle to establish a support network was a common theme throughout the interviews.

One student recognised the value of having that support and the difference it made to her life:

*"... my landlords ... we're quite friendly and they were really helpful to me."*

This person continues by saying that she felt less homesick and able to cope:

*"... when you've got people around you."*

She emphasised this by commenting about the experiences of fellow international students who had been unable to develop social relationships:

*"... they experienced more pressure for quite a long time after me."*

Another student had contacted fellow Kenyan students in Perth who provided support in those early months, which helped to establish a wider network of friends:

*"I got to know them (Kenyan students) better. And then people in class and all that."*

The initial contact with conationals led to the formation of relationships with other students. Through friendships with conationals, students can learn the social rules, meet locals and develop their own strategies for meeting people. However, reliance solely on conationals to meet local students is not always effective. One student interviewed stated that there were no other Indonesian students in her year on whom she could rely

for support. Therefore, students require a variety of strategies in order to make friends and build support networks.

### *Adaptation and Resilience*

This important issue emerged because the study abroad experience is an opportunity for students to grow personally and professionally. Moving to a foreign country can be exciting but also tempered with uncertainty as individuals learn to negotiate new cultural and social expectations (Hellsten, 2002). According to Anderson (1994), the inexperienced sojourner faces obstacles which need to be overcome. These can be external / environmental challenges such as language, customs and social norms, or internal challenges such as homesickness. The adjustment to a new environment can bring about changes in the individual.

### *Personal Development*

Adapting to a new environment is a significant accomplishment for international students that can lead to personal development (Anderson, 1994). Studying in Australia provided international students with the opportunity to learn about a different culture which the interviewees determined to be a positive experience. All of the students expressed the opportunity to learn about a different culture as one of the benefits of studying abroad. As one student commented:

*"I've learnt quite a lot ... about other people other cultures, respecting other people, other cultures."*

International students expect that study abroad will improve language and professional skills (Anderson, 1994; Hellsten, 2002; Rambruth &

McCormick, 2001). The students interviewed expressed the opportunity to improve their English and participate in the Australian education system as another advantage of studying abroad:

*"I improve my English and just learn more about Australian culture and meet all different people."*

*"...because I knew (Australia) was a few steps ahead of us in terms of having a social justice approach to things."*

Studying abroad was seen as an opportunity to advance their educational knowledge that was not available to the students at home. Each student was aware of the personal gains they had made by studying overseas.

International students face many challenges including academic and language difficulties, financial issues and homesickness (Anderson, 1994; Poyrazli et al., 2001). According to Anderson, sojourners must learn to adjust to enough features of the host environment in order to "get along". The challenges these students faced related to their unfamiliarity with the Australian context. Students viewed these challenges as ultimately making them a better person. This concept is illustrated by the following comment:

*"... the difficulties I did face ... forced me to grow and to stretch beyond my normal bounds ... it's made me be more strong and resilient."*

International students must make adjustments in both academic and personal areas of their lives. The students interviewed were challenged by the demands of university life and everyday hassles such as learning the transport system, adapting to Perth's weather and change in diet. As one student commented:

*"... getting things into context ... with coming from a new country to different environment, different people, different food."*

The fact that the students were able to function in a new environment gave them a sense of achievement and satisfaction. Another student who now feels comfortable speaking up in class reflected on her experiences when she first started university:

*"... very scary just sitting down there wouldn't say much, wouldn't participate in class."*

Other students mentioned their reluctance to speak up in class because of the negative attitudes of class mates. One student commented that she was made to feel stupid in class because of her accent. Some students assumed that she had nothing valid to offer to the discussion. Participation in class need not be an issue if students are encouraged to join discussions by tutors and fellow students (Brown, 1995).

The students' experiences abroad have brought a greater self-awareness of how they have changed personally and the benefits living abroad have brought to each of them. For example:

*"I'll look back at it (living abroad) a couple of years back and say that it was a good experience though it's been hard."*

Whilst acknowledging that studying abroad is difficult this student realised that the journey has been worthwhile. According to research, the risks of study abroad are weighed against the benefits (Hellsten, 2002). These students faced many challenges that at times were difficult to deal with during the period of transition. For the students transition was not a separate issue but was examined as part of the entire sojourn experience. The transition period,

although a pivotal time for international students, is one part of the whole experience. However, if this time is not successfully negotiated, students may not settle into their life abroad.

### *Independence*

Overcoming these challenges demonstrated to the students their abilities to survive in a foreign country. Several students mentioned how the experience of studying in Australia has made them more independent and less reliant on others, especially in their daily living. This was viewed as a positive outcome:

*"Freedom. I just love it so much that I'm away from my parents."*

*"I've sort of learnt that I gotta make my own decisions, be my own person."*

This finding contradicts research that has stereotyped international students, especially those from Asian countries, as dependent (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Chalmers & Volet, 1997). Although these students were not used to independence they quickly became accustomed and adept at looking after their own needs. One student stated that she would now find it difficult to return to a more dependent lifestyle at home:

*"there's no way I'm gonna stay with my aunt again."*

Once students had become accustomed to looking after their own needs, they appreciated the opportunities afforded to them, especially related to decision making and personal development. The key, however, is to ensure adequate support systems are in place whilst students adjust to life in Australia.

*International Support Office*

Students who are well prepared for studying abroad tend to have fewer adjustment issues (Church, 1982; Ying & Liese, 1994). The ISO provides support and information for newly arrived students primarily through their orientation programme (Edith Cowan University, 2003). At this point of contact students are introduced to key personnel such as administration staff and student advisers and provided with information regarding immigration and enrolment issues. Social events are organised by the ISO in order to facilitate contacts between international students.

The students were divided on their appraisal of the ISO. Some students found the support provided was adequate and facilitated their transition to university, particularly when dealing with practical issues.

*"I know a lady (at ISO) ... she's been quite helpful whenever I had an issue"*

Generally, the students felt that the ISO was less helpful when it came to more personal issues such as emotional distress and homesickness.

Overseas marketing tends to attract students and provide the positive aspects of ECU such as the new Joondalup campus and its rural location including seeing kangaroos on campus lawns. However, the reality is often different. Students had issues with support upon arrival, differences existed between what has been promised overseas and the reality at university including insufficient information about what Australia is like. One student



felt that the standard of service at ECU did not live up to the expectations she developed at home:

*"... the marketing was great (in Singapore) ... when I got here I got a bit of a shock ... And I found being on the campus things was a bit slow. That attitudes could be a bit provincial at times."*

Several issues were raised regarding the differences between the portrayal of ECU overseas and the reality of campus life. Students found that the support provided did not live up to expectations, and services on campus were poor, particularly the library and the availability of information. Although this may seem a trivial point, students stated that knowing what the weather would be like would have helped them upon arrival.

Several students had little idea of what to expect in Australia. One student commented that her images of Australia came from watching "The Crocodile Hunter" and she believed:

*"I had to look out for al<sup>l</sup> the venomous snakes and spiders" before she sat down.*

For others, they felt the level of assistance was not adequate to their needs:

*"... when English is your second language you don't go and ask (for information) because you just too embarrassed."*

Western forms of help such as counselling and advisory offices are unfamiliar to some groups of international students (Cameron & Meade, 2002). Culturally appropriate advisory services would be beneficial as well as counsellors from ethnic communities. Mainstream student services should be

aware of the student population they are servicing and be culturally responsive to the needs of international students.

### *Returning Home*

Just as international students have issues adjusting to life abroad, so to the readjustment to life at home (Furawaka, 1997; Ying, 2002). This is not an issue for all students but perhaps more so for students returning to a culture quite different to Australia. Readjustment upon returning home has received very little interest in the literature. For example, Ying, acknowledged that studying abroad brought about some changes in personality but did not expand on the consequences of these changes once the students returned home. Church (1982) commented that sojourners often experienced a period of readjustment upon returning home. Returning home is not straightforward because students have spent a portion of time developing in a culturally different environment (Furawaka). Furakawa reported high levels of emotional distress during the sojourn abroad amongst participants. Stress was related to issues surrounding life abroad but shifted to issues facing students returning home.

Students returning home face a number of issues. The first challenge for these students is reconciling the differences between the two countries.

For example:

*"... life is more expensive over there ... would I get a place for myself."*

For one student, the very feature that attracted her to Australia would be what she would miss most and the hardest thing to lose:

*"... when I go back space will be the one big thing ... suddenly I'll be smothered."*

Another student had built up a wide network of friends to support her in Australia, especially outside of university and this she would miss. Although most students do settle back into life at home, this period of emotional disruption is one they are not prepared for.

Students studying abroad acquire new knowledge about the world and themselves. This knowledge affects how they view the world and their homeland. Students have had experiences abroad that people back home cannot relate to (Furawaka, 1997). Those who had greatest difficulty adjusting to a foreign country were likely to have the greatest difficulty adjusting upon returning home:

*"... having been here made me realise a lot of things that's going on out there (at home)."*

Some of the comparisons that students made did not put their homeland in a favourable light. Students expressed the difficulty of returning to a country where there were fewer freedoms than are experienced in Australia. Some of the students must return to societies that do not value independence and freedom of speech. When interviewed students realised that this was a cause of concern for them and would require a readjustment upon returning home:

*"The government is corrupt and you can't do anything you can't say anything if you can't have a political view."*

For some students there is a certain amount of personal conflict regarding repatriation. Whilst in Australia, they have learnt to be independent,

to question others and to speak their mind. Once they return home, they must relearn the cultural and social norms of their home country:

*"I think I have to get used to the situation there and how people react to other people and how they greet and building relationships."*

These findings illustrate how far international students come on their journey abroad. For them leaving university is not a straightforward issue of going out into the world to get a job. They must first reintegrate back into their home environment. This is made difficult because of the experiences and learning they have acquired overseas. The sojourn in another country can put a different perspective on events at home. Situations that were once taken for granted may cause despair and feelings of inadequacy. Further, there is a wrench away from important people in their lives who have helped make the sojourn abroad an enjoyable and worthwhile experience.

Finally, there were differences between students who expressed more difficulties making the transition to university than those who encountered fewer problems. Interestingly, country of origin was not a factor for this group of students. Those that reported the most transition issues did not have previous experience abroad, expressed greater difficulties making friends, felt isolated and had language difficulties. Those who reported fewer transition issues had travelled abroad previously reported fewer language problems and were able to establish a support network within a few months of arrival. They were also more likely to have chosen ECU as a preferred university. Research supports these findings with Poyrazli et al. (2001) reporting that students with

fewer adjustment issues chose a particular university and were more proficient in English.

### Conclusion

Overall the international students interviewed found the transition to ECU a positive experience. Their time at university provided them with an opportunity to develop academically through the course they have taken, respond to a new and different teaching style and improve their English skills with the support of the academic staff. There were also personal developments. Through the study abroad experience students have broadened their horizons, become more independent, developed new friendships, learnt about new cultures and experienced a different way of life.

However, there remain some issues that need to be addressed to improve the experience for all students. These include marketing, isolation, support, language difficulties and returning home.

Support is provided through the ISO to meet other international students but no assistance is provided to meet either local students or how to develop local contacts. One student established a support network through the church she attended. However, it took her a few months to find the right church to join. It would be helpful if international students were provided with a list of local contacts including sporting and recreational groups, hobbies, church groups etc. to facilitate development of their social networks. A peer mentoring programme may also be beneficial because it would assist in developing local contacts and provide a source of informal academic support.

Several students expressed that a lack of information about their destination was a source of concern. One student thought Australians lived in the crocodile hunter's backyard and she needed to check for spiders on the toilet seat. Providing accurate information regarding a student's destination would be beneficial considering the research literature suggests that students who are well prepared for their journey have fewer adjustment issues (Church, 1982; Ying & Liese, 1994).

Most international students would benefit from some form of language support for at least the first six months, ideally within their units of study. Several researchers have found that support provided within the unit of study is beneficial (Beasley & Pearson, 1998; Brown, 1995). Students need to be made aware, prior to coming to Australia, that language proficiency is likely to be an issue. Indeed, Ridings and Pokarier (1998) stated that universities must inform students of the realistic expectations of their performances at an overseas institution.

Students would benefit from some form of debrief prior to departure. Perhaps group discussions with other international students regarding issues pertinent to repatriation. In an ideal world it would be appropriate to provide ongoing support at home during this readjustment phase. Longitudinal research focusing on students prior to repatriation as well as the adjustment process upon arrival home would provide insights into the issues and challenges facing these students and how they can be helped through this transition process.

This study highlighted that some differences existed between students who made a relatively easy adjustment to study abroad and those who experienced more adjustment issues, for the eight students interviewed. The students who experienced fewer difficulties tended to have travelled abroad previously, had fewer language problems, established a support network within a few months of arrival and were more likely to have chosen to study at ECU. These findings have implications for the identification of students likely to be at risk establishing themselves in a foreign country. Further, steps can be taken to limit the impact of some of these factors by ensuring adequate support and information is provided prior to departure.

There were several limitations to this study. Despite confidentiality being stressed some of the students were reluctant to elaborate on their answers whilst others seemed to be looking for the “right” answer. An attempt to gain rapport and trust was made by engaging the participants in conversation prior to commencing the interviews. However, in light of these outcomes a second interview may have served to elicit more information from the students.

A follow-up interview would also have been helpful to further explore some of the issues raised by the students. However, considering this was designed as a pilot study, it has succeeded in the aim of exploring issues pertinent to international students at ECU.

Finally this study highlighted that there is still much to be learnt about the process of transition to higher education for international students. Many

of the students' concerns centred on language skills and the social aspects of life abroad. In order to make this the best possible experience for all students these issues need to be addressed by each university. Further research is warranted to obtain a more complete picture of the university experience for international students in all faculties.



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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Interview Schedule**

1. Why did you choose to study at ECU?
2. How did you feel leaving your home country?
3. What has been your experience, so far, as a student at ECU?
4. What were your expectations?
5. Was there a difference? In what way/s?
6. What has helped you make the transition to university?
7. Have there been any difficult aspects? Tell me more about those.
8. What has been good about studying abroad?
9. Do you think you will have problems returning home? Why?



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Information Sheet**

Hello,

My name is Andrea Halse and I am completing my honours degree in Psychology at ECU. As part of my Honours research I am examining the experiences of first year international students studying at Edith Cowan University. The aim of this study is to explore the issues that specifically face international students. It is anticipated that this study will guide future research into this area and inform student support on issues that may need to be addressed to ensure the smooth transition of international students to higher education.

This research involves international students enrolled at Edith Cowan University volunteering to be interviewed about their experiences at university. The interviews will be tape-recorded for analysis. These discussions will be used to elicit information about the issues that students face when studying abroad.

Participation in this research is voluntary and students are free to withdraw at any time. The identity of participants will remain confidential. That is, apart from the researcher no one will know the identity of the participants. Throughout the interview process no participant will be mentioned by name to ensure confidentiality. Information derived from the interviews will be used to produce my Honours thesis. The results will be mentioned in general terms and no one will be identified by name either in the thesis or any subsequent publication.

This research project has been granted approval by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences.

If you are willing to participate in this research please contact me on 9305 5919 to arrange an interview time. Alternatively, complete the tear off slip below and return to the School of Psychology in the envelope provided. You can contact me if you would like to discuss your participation in this project. If you require further information please contact one of my supervisors: Ms Dawn Darlaston-Jones on 6304 5541 or Dr. Lynne Cohen on 6304 5575. If you would like to speak to an independent person please contact Professor Alison Garton on 6304 5110.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Thank you.

### **Research Project Reminder**

Hello,

My name is Andrea Halse and I am completing my Honours degree in psychology at ECU. My study looks at the issues facing international students who are studying in Australia for the first time. This project provides you with an opportunity to discuss both the positive and negative aspects of studying abroad.

A few weeks ago I sent an information letter to you outlining the goals of my research and asking you to contact me if you were interested in being part of the project. I know how much information you receive from the university and my letter might have been overlooked so I am inviting you again to be part of this exciting project. I am interested in hearing from any student, regardless of your experiences at university. I must stress that your participation in this research will be entirely confidential. No one at the university, other than myself, will be aware of your involvement and the study gives you a real opportunity to provide information to help the university support international students appropriately.

If you would like to participate or discuss this project further, please contact me on 9305 5919 or e-mail me at [andyandmuz@hotmail.com](mailto:andyandmuz@hotmail.com). I can arrange an interview at a time and place (on campus or off campus) to suit you.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Thankyou

## APPENDIX C

### Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the information sheet and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this study, realising that I may withdraw at any time. I give consent to have my interview audio taped and understand that the tape will be secured in a locked cabinet.

I give my consent for the information derived from my interview to be used in the Honours thesis and any subsequent publication that might result from the thesis, provided I am not identifiable.

Participant  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Researcher  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

Question	Interview 1	Interview 2	Interview 3	Interview 4
Why did you choose to study at ECU?	Scholarship Link with ECU	Reputation of ECU Desired course	Link with ECU	Administration helpful and accommodating
How did you feel leaving your home country?	Sad, excited, scared Didn't know what to expect	freedom didn't see parents anyway	Excited, nervous, worried	Fine at first More difficult once differences between countries were apparent
What has been your experience, so far, as a student at ECU?	Hard, pressure and stress Need to be responsible Language difficulties	Unlike high school Interesting, isolating, hard	Problems with language and assignment writing, meeting people	Difference in education systems made it difficult Meeting expectations of education system
What were your expectations?	Easier Expected to struggle at uni but not in personal life	People would be individualistic and independent Difficulties forming friendship groups	Less difficult Problems with language Australia like Steve Irwin's backyard	Difficulties with uni and personal relationships
Was there a difference?		No Became more individual, don't have a "group"	Yes, didn't expect language problems	
What has helped you make the transition to university?	Suppressed problems A previsit would have helped Setting personal goals Support of mum	Personal goals Fear of failure	Academic skills adviser International student office – social activities	Tutors and lecturers Family support
Have there been any difficult aspects?	Adjusting to new culture Understanding knowledge in context Lack of emotional support	Having to be more independent Hard working alone Transport	Time management Writing assignments	Cultural and relationship differences Things you take for granted at home
What has been good about studying abroad?	Learning about other cultures Personal growth Independence	Learning about other cultures Learning from new experiences Personal growth	Improving English Learn about new cultures New experiences Climate	Personal growth through adversity Learning about new cultures Coping with a different way of life
Do you think you will have problems going back home?	Personal change vs no change at home Experiences make it hard to fit in	Readjusting to customs at home	Might stay in Australia	Readjusting to driving on right Different cultural norms and education system

Question	Interview 5	Interview 6	Interview 7	Interview 8
Why did you choose to study at ECU?	Desired course Couldn't go to America	scholarship ECU second choice	Chose ECU Desired course	Marketing
How did you feel leaving your home country?	Excited, sad, scared More difficult after arrival	Tense, scared, mixed emotions Difficult leaving family	Okay, move was planned	Sad, excited
What has been your experience so far, as a student at ECU?	Hard Difficult making friends Transport a problem	Better, in hindsight to be in Perth as pace is slower	Location good Course good Reality different to marketing expectations	Some struggles but satisfying People are friendly and helpful
What were your expectations?	Pretty much how it is Expected more involvement with campus life	Challenging different to expectations	Kept an open mind	Hard work Opportunity to meet new people and take responsibility
Was there a difference?	No expectations because didn't want to be disappointed	Different to image Unanswered questions School system different Need to be self reliant	Student village disappointing Perth quieter Weather cold	More laid back than expected Expected work to be different
What has helped you make the transition to university?	Tutors Personal goals	Support outside uni	Self motivation Finding own accommodation	Friends from Kenya Becoming familiar with surroundings
Have there been any difficult aspects?	Getting information Language difficulties Special diet Uni resources Transport	Not enough help from ISO Lack of understanding re needs of students Apart from family Transport	Language Style of writing Social interactions	Lack of family support Need to be self reliant
What has been good about studying abroad?	Learning English Different education system Meeting new people Seeing Australia	Friends Living in a nice country	Physical locality (space) Course undertaken	Meeting new people Seeing new places
Do you think you will have problems going back home?	No because things haven't changed Yes because friends have moved on	Difficult to keep quiet about corrupt quiet Miss Australian friends and independence	Returning to a confined space	No although initial period of readjustment Returns home frequently

## APPENDIX E

### Audit Trail

Date	Notes
13.08.03	<p>Interviewee 1 was happy, chatty and fairly relaxed during the interview. She kept apologising for her accent and difficulties finding the correct word.</p> <p>Upon reading the transcript it seems that the participant talks a lot about the importance of studying but it is the social / cultural aspects that come across as causing the greatest concern. During the second last question she states that she wouldn't participate (at home) for fear of upsetting someone (collectivist society). The findings of (50) may fit in here. Adjustment is affected by personality. Participant continually states that it was up to her to adjust or it was how she felt inside that mattered.</p>
19.08.03	<p>Interviewee 2 was talkative but not expansive. She Seemed nervous of the tape or questions (?). I got the impression that she wanted to tell me the "right thing".</p> <p>Interviewee 3 was reticent and reluctant to elaborate until I turned the tape off. However, she seemed fairly confident within herself.</p> <p>Interviewee 4 was very expansive, talkative and friendly. However, he seemed to have a chip on his shoulder about education and/or work and recognition of his qualifications.</p> <p>Psychological adjustment and personality – Interviewee 1 seemed quite homesick which may affect attitude to Australia whereas interviewee 3 seemed less so and was thinking about remaining in Australia when studies completed.</p> <p>Students come to Australia for different reasons and International students cannot be considered a homogenous group. Amongst these 5 the reasons</p>

include gaining a qualification, perhaps staying or chose to stay in Australia then study followed.

- 20.08.03 Interviewee 5 spoke English well. She seemed very confident for a young person. Sensed that she was disappointed about some aspect of life here but would not say specifically. Possibly the ramifications of gaining an overseas degree or difficulty making friends.
- 21.08.03 Upon reading the five transcripts the following broad categories relating to the students experiences were found. These included language, social support / friendships, cultural changes, adaptation / assimilation, personal growth
- 24.08.03 A question ordered matrix was completed for the five interviews.
- 26.08.03 Leaving home seems to evoke the expected emotions but is worse after arrival. Therefore there is a need for immediate support.
- 28.08.03 Colleague returned copies of transcripts with own notes regarding categories. I will refer to this when arranging my themes
- 31.08.03 Some students appeared particularly inhibited by this form of interview. It appeared they were trying to give me the "correct" answer although I did say that I was interested in their thoughts and perceptions. Perhaps a narrative style would be more appropriate as participants were more forthcoming during the informal chat after the interview. This came through both by what was said and body language. Participants would look to me for affirmation of what they had said.

The transcripts were read through again and notes made for each one. This time I was looking for things I may have missed on previous read throughs.

#### Interview 1

Scholarship and link with ECU therefore reputation important.

Describes a range of emotions upon arrival.

"So got lost quite a bit" does she mean literally or learning language, customs, looking after self.

"So many factors involved" transition affects all facets of life.

Isolation seems to keep coming through/

Misinterpreted qu 6 what would have helped rather than what did help. Asked question again.

"Doesn't mean you don't do anything else" was she having problems socialising or fitting in to social scene. Does the way we socialise in Perth – clubs and beaches present problems for International students, especially youngsters.

Influence of parents apparent even though overseas – interdependence.

Feels comfortable now speaking in class.

Reintegration question arose because participant was saying that she behaves and thinks differently now to how she did when she lived at home.

Practical considerations like getting used to Perth weather will require a readjustment at home.

#### Interview 2

Accidentally altered question order and interview didn't seem to flow as well.

Cultural isolation at uni – first time away from support of people from own cultural group (present at high school).

Recognises problems associated with uni learning environment, specifically the restrictions brought about by different classes.

Conflict between "I'm not an individual kind of person...actually dependent on other people a lot" and "I just love it so much that I'm actually away from my parents". Can't classify individuals as strictly individualist or collectivist?

Coming to Australia to learn about cultures other than Australian.

#### Interview 3

Reluctant to elaborate with answers despite my leaving open pauses to encourage her to continue. I felt the interview got bogged down because I had to keep probing for responses.

Nine months away from family as preparation to live in Australia. I wouldn't have thought that an appropriate



preparation as locals sometimes complain about the isolation of Perth. Is it's very different from the UK. Was she expecting time in UK to prepare her for Australia.

Attracted to Australia because of warmer climate. Doesn't anticipate problems going home but is not planning on going home so perhaps she has not considered that there may be problems.

Appears more assertive "I should have found out more information myself" I got the impression from other students that they were more reluctant to do this for various reasons. For some students it may be more appropriate to give them the information rather than say it's here if you want it.

#### Interview 4

From the start I got the impression that this person had a point to make and this interview provided the opportunity. All his answers seemed to focus on education and work. I wondered about the questions and forum but I had briefed him prior to the interview that I was interested in all aspects of the transition experience not just university life.

"especially the transitions just in my relationship with my wife" the literature talks of transition from adolescence to adult but this person acknowledges changing roles – husband and student as distinct from primary wage earner.

Pressure of uni to perform – this person has not performed as well as expected (blow to ego?). Blames system for not rewarding qualities that were rewarded in US (apparently).

"not one to sit...back and struggle on my own" another student who will go and get what he wants.

Within qu 6 lies one of his personal gripes although he wasn't willing to be too specific "quite a significant difference in things" and "variables that are influenced by our own individual parents" doesn't agree with Australian parenting style it would seem. How has this attitude affected his perceptions of Australia. Would appear to hold strong opinions.

Is he trying to impress me with his accomplishments "I went from literally doing triple bypass cardiac surgery" – during the debrief it turns out he was a surgical technician not a surgeon. And again "help a friend of

mine to start a business" – my immediate thought was this friend doesn't know anyone in the US who could help so he had to fly back from Australia. Despite agenda he has highlighted that 2 countries that would outwardly appear quite similar can be very different and not easy to adjust to new environment.

#### Interview 5

Still got overall impression of a confident 17 y.o. "I'd give it a go in Australia" whilst waiting for opportunity in US.

Wanted to give me the right answers at first "I don't know exactly what you want me" but loosens up later in the interview.

States that having a goal may help but you still have to do the work and fulfil your commitments. In this case, 3 yrs at ECU.

First participant to mention racism.

Expresses difficulty connecting with Australians and implies that she sticks to other international students.

Despite appearing confident wishes for information to be presented and expressed embarrassment when speaking in class.

Perhaps students need help integrating into off campus life. How to join a recreation centre and that kind of thing. What do the local students do for fun. Local hot spots etc.

02.09.03

Interviewee 6 was cheerful and expansive. Her speech was expressive and she emphasised key words. She was worried about giving the right answer despite being told several times that there were no right or wrong answers, just how she felt.

A few thoughts popped into my head during the interview in response to several comments.

"You decide for yourself. And no-one's behind you as such" – our "independent" domestic students generally have parents around who have expectations and demands on their behaviour and performance at university. Someone is usually watching over them to keep them going. Further there tends to be someone to ask how the assignment is going and such reminders

can act as a motivator without even having to say, do the work.

Young international students are experiencing their first time away from home as adults with all the responsibilities that entails. What impact does this have on them when it is time to return home into the family fold??

14.09.03

Another colleague returned copies of transcripts with important issues highlighted. Following is a synopsis of those findings. I arranged some into themes.

Interview 1

Social – isolation, social support, social norms

Language – competency

Personal – self-discipline, obligation, independence, identity, personal growth, loss (going home).

Interview 2

Social – isolation

Language – competency

Personal – independence, collectivism

Interview 3

Social – social / cultural isolation, support

Language – competency

Interview 4

Social – staff support, cultural differences, social / academic norms

Personal – personal growth

Other – uni flexible

Interview 5

Social – isolation, lack of social support, loneliness, racism, double isolation

Language – competency

Personal – issues of competency, goals

Other – cultural awareness, lack of awareness of student population make up

#### Interview 6

Social – social support, safety, separation

Language – competency

Personal – independence, time management, personal responsibility, issues same for all students (assignments), pressures from home, double adjustment

Other – school as frame of reference fails to prepare for uni

15.09.03

#### Interview 7

This interview took place on Friday, 12<sup>th</sup> September. The interviewee was confident and firm in her beliefs. She was reticent at first about being taped but relaxed during the interview (kept mentioning my name on tape, what was that about). I got the impression the interviewee was trying to decide what it was I wanted her to say rather than just what was on her mind.

Interviewee was a mature age student and had made a considered personal and financial investment in her education. An important issue was the value for money and that service delivery lived up to the promises she received at home (it would appear it did not). Language again an important issue as was culture shock. This person continued to weigh up the pros and cons of studying in Australia and decided that the pros outweighed the problems.

20.09.03

Following input from colleagues and re reading of transcripts, the themes have been re-categorised as follows;

Personal Growth – independence, facing challenges, self awareness, development

Isolation – social interactions / friendships, language, competence

Support – ISO, academic, social

Returning home – challenges, new knowledge, isolation from familiar norms

23.09.03

Interview 8

Interviewee 8 was from Kenya. She had studied at Curtin before returning home due to illness. Her English was excellent but was reticent to expand on answers to questions. She reported no problems associated with studying in Australia.

Interviewee had some knowledge of western education system having studied in a British school (in Kenya) and at Curtin. She was prepared for the academic challenges to some extent. Support network was an important issue, which she referred to a number of times. Her previous experiences may have prompted her connection with Kenyan students prior to arriving in Perth. Seemed to weigh up the pros and cons of study abroad. "It will be hard work but I'll gain new friends and responsibility".

01.10.03

Each interview was examined for exemplars of the themes and sub themes. Possible quotes were listed for use when writing up the results section. I referred to the literature to clarify my thoughts about the themes and what they mean. Reading research often triggers ideas for my own, not necessarily related to what I'm reading.

05.10.03

Completed a question ordered matrix (Appendix D). This provided an overview of what each interviewee said and helped clarify the themes coming through.

08.10.03

a couple of articles have found that there are differences between students who have more or less difficulties making the transition to university. Whilst this wasn't specifically examined and "difficulties" is hard to measure, I thought it would be interesting to see if any patterns emerge from these interviews. Using the question ordered matrix, I highlighted the positive and negative comments made by the students. Then I split the group according to the number of issues students mentioned, rough easy or difficult groups. Then I had a look at each interviewee to see if there were any differences between the two. Although not exact, there were a few. Country of origin was not one, but students who reported fewer "difficulties" chose ECU as apposed to a scholarship, had some sort of support network, had previous experience abroad and were less likely to mention language difficulties. I wonder if

some kind of screening could pick up students who are "at risk" of problems settling in to Australia.

Easy group – mentioned lots of positives about study  
Difficult group – mentioned more negatives than positives.

09.10.03

Following discussion with a colleague, the themes have been altered somewhat. Personal growth is now Adaptation and Resilience (including development, facing challenges, self-awareness & independence), Returning Home is now Repatriation (change). Isolation and Support remain the same. The changes hopefully better reflect what is being said in the interviews.

17.10.03

Another rethink of the themes because some of the sub themes are overlapping, especially isolation and support (2 sides of the same coin). Isolation will be written up as the first theme (most important finding) including language, social interactions, academic and social support. Competence was an issue that came through only for some students and can be addressed within language where competence was mostly questioned. Adaptation and Resilience will have 2 sub themes, personal development (subsuming development, challenges and self-awareness) and independence. The support theme will now be focused on ISO as this is basically the face of ECU for international students and it is essential that the quality of support from the ISO is of a high standard. Repatriation remains the same.