Challenges Faced by University Staff Members when Providing Services to International Students: An Australian Perspective

Sophia Harryba
*Edith Cowan University*

Andrew Guilfoyle
*Edith Cowan University*

Shirlee-ann Knight
*Edith Cowan University*


This Journal Article is posted at Research Online.

https://ro.ecu.edu.au/ecuworks2012/225
Challenges Faced by University Staff Members when Providing Services to International Students: An Australian Perspective

Sophia A. Harryba, Andrew M. Guilfoyle and Shirlee-ann Knight
Challenges Faced by University Staff Members when Providing Services to International Students: An Australian Perspective

Sophia A. Harryba, Edith Cowan University, WA, Australia
Andrew M. Guilfoyle, Edith Cowan University, WA, Australia
Shirlee-ann Knight, Edith Cowan University, WA, Australia

Abstract: A qualitative case study examined the challenges of service provision and utilization at an Australian university. Using a Social Constructivist Grounded Theory methodology, 73 participants were interviewed, including 38 staff members (16 academic, 22 non-academic), 25 international (IS) and 10 domestic students (DS). Challenges that staff members experienced when working with IS included university and student-level challenges lack of incentive, heavy workloads, and perceived language barriers. A main issue related to equity and whether or not staff members were acting in an equitable manner towards the IS and DS. Themes that emerged included lack of training for staff members responsible for working with ESL students and miscommunication between staff members. These issues added onto an already heavy workload which was felt as even heavier because of IS perceived language barriers. For many academic staff members, these factors appear to have contributed to the reported increase in leniency-whereby lectures evaluate academic work from IS differently to those of DS. The implications of these findings for institutions which enroll IS are discussed.

Keywords: International Students, Equity, University Staff, Academic Support

Literature Review

Background

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (IS) are important to contemporary higher education for a number of economic, cultural and academic reasons (Sumer, 2008). There were 543,898 international students (IS) in Australia on a student visa in 2008 (AEI, 2009) and of those, enrolments in higher education ranked first-growing by 58.5% between 2002 and 2008. The increasing number illustrates how internationally-driven higher education (HE) has moved from elite to mass education (Naidoo, 2009). This increase meant that through various schemes and scholarships, less-privileged students could access Australian HE. The increasing numbers also mean that IS bring more economic benefits to the educational institutions by not only helping them reach their minimum annual intake, but also more IS means, for many universities, increased income for research and teaching (Beaton-Wells & Thompson, 2011).

Literature, particularly that which is focused on the marketing of international education argues that “institutions must be accountable for serving those they admit and for adjusting methods of instruction and support systems to address learners’ needs” (Andrade, 2009, p. 1). Students are therefore seen as ‘customers’ and staff members as the ‘service providers’.
A lot of research has been carried out to understand the difficulties that IS customers may face during their transition to university (Guilfoyle & Halse, 2004; Guilfoyle & Harryba, 2009). These may be classified into academic and/or socio-cultural difficulties as often IS have to get used to a new teaching and learning environment, but also to a new culture and language (Harryba, Guilfoyle, & Knight, 2011). While there has been focus on student’s experiences, and the role staff members have in shaping these, what is lacking thus far is substantive research on the challenges experienced by staff members who work with these IS and how they can provide services. Some of the research regarding staff challenges will be discussed below, as it is important to understand these challenges in order to help equip these staff members with skills to better work in diverse classrooms.

**Research about Challenges of Service Provision**

In light of the body of research showing that international students experience difficulties when transitioning to university, the Australian government introduced legislation which targets institutions which enrol IS. This directly affects staff members who work with IS, because they need to be aware of the many federal and state legislative requirements which deal with IS. For example, Part D of the national code, amended in 2007, includes 15 standards which are legally enforceable. Standard 6 of this legislation specifically deals with support services, whereby all institutions enrolling international students must:

1. Provide a student contact officer
2. Document critical incident policy
3. Provide support services including welfare services and a culturally sensitive and age appropriate orientation (DEST, 2007).

Apart from being aware of the legislation regarding services to IS, teaching and administration staff have reported several challenges as ‘service providers’ when working with IS within this sort of business model framework. In a study by Trice (2003), faculty members were asked about their views on working with IS. Although they generally agreed that IS bring a number of benefits such as providing international ties, they also indentified numerous challenges. These included language barriers, cultural differences, difficulties in managing domestic students (DS) and IS in the same classroom and managing the extra time and effort it took them to work with IS compared to the DS. As such, lecturing staff consciously altered their teaching to accommodate these needs. Some provided extra supervision for IS, spent more time explaining tasks and concepts, used overheads and avoided using colloquialisms to aid understanding. Perhaps significantly, the study found differences in staff responses between the four departments being interviewed. The public health and architecture departments were more positive about having IS when compared to the engineering department. Staff members of the engineering faculties argued that students learned more from them than from each other and that engineering concepts were universal, with no space for inputs from different cultures.

Trice’s (2003) findings supported an earlier Australian study where staff reported students’ language barriers, problems with evaluation and meeting IS academic needs, dealing with their personal problems and handling segregation and discrimination in the classroom; as costing staff more time and energy (Volet & Ang, 1998). A more recent Australian study
found that staff members from the ‘soft’ (so called faculty of arts, economics and business) disciplines had different views of IS compared to those form ‘hard’ (engineering and science) disciplines (Sawir, 2011). Three main themes regarding the staff members’ challenges when working with IS included: helping IS adjust to the Australian teaching and learning styles (38%); handling language issues (25%); and adjusting their teaching to accommodate IS (16%). Eighty academic staff members form four faculties were interviewed regarding their views of internationalising the curriculum and how they perceived IS. 34% of the academic staff reported that they had not changed their teaching to accommodate for IS because the content being taught did not require changes. These staff members also saw all students as one cohort, with international students not needing any special attention. This finding was more from the ‘hard’ disciplines than from the ‘soft’ disciplines. Staff from the soft disciplines in fact gave IS more time in supervision and in classrooms due to a perceived English deficiency.

Staff members also reported that it was challenging to work with IS who over-relied on instructions, used rote learning, had a lack of critical analytical skills and who were reluctant in class participation (Zhu & Flaitz, 2005). In research conducted in a UK university, both staff members and East Asian international students were given questionnaires and participated in four focus groups aimed at understanding both groups’ expectations regarding teaching and learning. Staff members from the study agreed that viewing IS in a deficit way, and as a problematic cohort, was not helpful for either the staff members or the students. The research concluded that a more positive viewpoint was necessary to bridge the gap in expectations between students and staff (Kingston & Forland, 2008).

Other studies, involving both general and academic university staff, report concerns about working with IS, including inadequate staff; inadequate infrastructure and inadequate funding (Bektas, 2008; Nilsson, Berkel, Flores, & Lucas, 2004; Zhang & Dixon, 2003). One noted factor is that while the number of enrolled IS increases, the number of staff members employed to work with these IS has by and large remained the same. At Australia’s Monash University in 2001, the ratio of IS advisors to IS was around 3:6200 (Dunstan, 2007). This issue not only causes potential work related ‘burnout’ for the advisors, but the IS population can be left feeling neglected if they cannot access help when they need it (Seow, 2006). Further, research shows many universities do not have clear guidelines as to the role descriptions of staff who work directly with IS (Calder, 2004). This lack of clarity in boundaries can mean that staff members are sometimes performing the role of counsellor, academic advisor and friend. This is not only a problem for the staff but also to IS who are then not offered the necessary or appropriate services. In addition, the IS may have specific expectations about the role of a staff member and may feel rejected and/or confused when these expectations are not met (Dunstan, 2007).

A number of research projects have focused on the challenges that counselors and pastors face when working with IS (Al-Darmaki, 2003; Arthur, 2004; Barletta & Kobayashi, 2007; Bektas, 2008; Corrigan, 2004). It was found that IS do not access counselling for various reasons including unawareness of their mental health needs, which may manifest into physical ailments, making these students turn to their GP’s instead of counsellors (McLachlan & Justice, 2009), lacking faith in-or unaccustomed to-western practices (Rothstein & Rajapaksa, 2003) and for many IS, the stigma associated with seeing a counsellor leads to them preferring to seek help from their peers (Barletta and Kobayashi, 2007). When IS finally do utilise counselling services, which often comes about when their academic progress is being
threatened, counsellors have to deal with their expectations, cultural issues as well as perceived language barriers (Arthur, 2004).

In reviewing the studies cited, the following limitations were identified, which need be addressed in future research.

Firstly, none of the research took the perspectives of all three parties involved, namely DS, IS and staff members. There are limited studies done from an Australian university perspective which take into account both students’ (customers) views and service providers’ as well. Previous research tended to be uni-directional in nature, focusing on only staff or students’ views (Kimmel, 2010). Understanding the challenges that staff members or IS face is only one side of the story. Focusing on only one part of this complex customer-service provider relationship can limit the amount of information that can be gained when all parties are given a chance to give their views.

Secondly, research which takes into account all the services provided by a single institution is lacking, and this would provide invaluable information into how the system works as a whole and the unique set of challenges staff members would face trying to navigate through this system. Of the cited research, the focus was either on counselling services, learning advisory, mentoring programs and/or academic staff. In this research we argue that in order to understand the challenges that staff members face when working with such a diverse group of students, it is necessary to understand the working of the whole university, including both generic and specialised services. While a number of studies have either focused on the generic services (Breeding, 2009; Collins, 2001) provided by universities, or specialized services for IS (Drysdale, 2010; Gibson, 2005; Lu, 2001), these studies have been small scaled and did not explain in depth the complexities of issues.

The Research

The study aimed to understand the challenges of university service provision and utilisation from a holistic point of view-taking into account the perspectives of all three groups involved, namely: (1) International Students (IS); (2) University staff members; and (3) Domestic Students (DS).

Understanding reality from the unique perspectives of the individuals experiencing it is the essence of social constructivism, which sees each individual’s experiential story as true and valid at one iteration, because it has been experienced and is a perception of that experience (Manis & Meltzer, 1972). Thus social constructivism forms the paradigmatic foundation of this study, and this will allow the researcher to develop a rich understanding of the complex social interactions and realities between the groups of people involved.

The research questions for the full dissertation included:

1. What are the challenges faced by staff when working with IS?
2. What challenges do IS face when accessing support services provided by the university?
3. What challenges do domestic students face when working with IS?

This paper discusses the literature and findings associated with research question #1. The paper therefore, seeks to address the challenges that staff members face when working with IS.
Investigative Framework

A social constructivist (Charmaz, 2000) theoretical framework was used to construct a research design consisting of semi-structured interviews of 73 IS, university staff and DS.

Firstly, the ‘university’ was conceptualised as a “case”, consistent with David & Renea’s, (2008) assertion that each institution has its own specific characteristics, budget and student population and so can be studied separately using a case-study design. Thus, the university was the case, and the three cohorts interviewed made up the three units (or contexts) of analysis (UoA) from which various phenomena such as intercultural interaction (Arkoudis et al., 2010); service utilisation (Russell, Thomson & Rosenthal, 2008); and service provision (Trice, 2003); could be investigated. This approach allows the researcher to develop a critical understanding of the intricacies of the case (Calder, 2004).

Secondly, since service provision and utilisation are complex issues, the researcher needed to understand multiple realities of the different stakeholders involved. Social constructivism argues that reality is subjective to the person experiencing it (Charmaz, 2000 & 2006) and so was able to frame the anticipated complexity of the research design. Constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) was used to help conceptualise and triangulate responses from the three cohorts being interviewed, and allowed for theoretical sampling, which permits researchers to follow up new directions in subsequent interviews as themes emerge during data analysis, which can take place between data collection sessions. For instance, when staff members discussed the issues they faced with group work, follow-up interviews with IS or DS could incorporate what was being learned from the staff narratives.

Finally, the chosen framework allowed the researcher to triangulate responses (Willig, 2008) from all three sources to obtain a more holistic understanding of the complex issues at play.

Participants

A total of 73 participants were interviewed, with the interviews ranging from 30-60 minutes long. Data saturation, i.e., when no more new information was being gathered (Bluff, 1997; Byrne, 2001; Fossey et al., 2002; Morse, 1995); was reached at different points for the different cohorts. For staff members, saturation was reached at 38 (n=38), comprised of 28 females and 10 males, most of whom were above 45 years old, and were a mix of academic and non-academic staff. Saturation for IS was reached at 25 (n=25) since the interview questions were more specific in nature than for staff, and included undergraduates as well as postgraduates, with all but two being EAL (English as an additional language) students. Length of stay in Australia varied from 2 months to 9 years.

Figure 1 presents demographic information regarding staff (academic vs. non-academic) and IS (faculty and course-levels).
An important gap in the staff sample emerged as the study progressed in that no staff member from the SSC (student services centre) responded to the invitation to participate in the research. It transpired that there existed a departmental policy whereby staff working in the SCC were not allowed to participate in research within office hours. This proved prohibitive to populating the participant group with staff who worked in the SSC.

Data Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used to obtain the detailed views (Minichiello et al., 1990) of the three groups involved. The timing of interviews related to when participants agreed to participate, so groups were interviewed simultaneously. This meant that questions asked of each cohort could evolve through theoretical sampling, as new directions for enquiry became apparent.

Procedure

All participants were given an information letter, a consent form and a demographic information form. All participants were contacted via invitational emails which were sent to various key individuals who then forwarded these emails on to prospective participants.

A digital recorder was used during the interviews, with the generated data then stored and transcribed in NVivo8 immediately after interview. Researcher notes were also generated during each interview, and recorded the researcher’s thoughts and impressions during and immediately after interviews. Notes were compiled into a reflective journal (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992) which also included the researcher’s thought processes during data analysis. Data was stored and managed using NVivo8 software.

After ethics approval was obtained, the sampling process was carried out using snowballing (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993) and call-for participant self-volunteering techniques (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Emails, flyers and website posts were used to inform staff members, IS and DS about the research. Participants then contacted the researcher to arrange for an interview.
Data Analysis

Data was analysed within a Constructivist Grounded Theory (GT) (see Figure 2) framework (Charmaz, 2000 & 2006). Transcribing, note-taking, coding and memoing were done immediately after each interview so that a constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Charmaz, 2000; Moghaddam, 2006) of previously data collected could be carried out during the process of further interviewing.

As portrayed in Figure 2, the first few stages of the data-interaction process began with data collection, which included the recording of each interview and keyword note-taking. As soon as interviews were completed, the data was transcribed and the third phase, coding, started. This involved labelling pieces of the interviews into meaningful, comparable categories. This was a central phase of the early analysis process (Dey, 2004; Marvasti, 2004; Moghaddam, 2006). Coding involved constant comparing of each interview to the previous transcript to ensure that no information was lost and to facilitate making categories of similar codes.

At the same time as coding the data, memoing was started, which involved using cards and post-it-notes to remind the researcher about the categories and any relationships to other categories. The card-memo system helped make the fifth stage, sorting, more manageable. All the cards were placed on a large table and assembled together into groups which represented similar ideas. This allowed the researcher to visualise the categories as well as discover relationships between categories. Categories were then written up to help build the study’s findings, which will be discussed in the next section.

Findings and Discussion

Staff members reported in highly emotive terms feelings of “frustration” and “resentment”. Resentment at their employer (e.g., lack of trained staff members, miscommunication between the university and schools) and frustration at the students’ academic abilities (e.g., perceived lack of English proficiency and lack of motivation) were all reported as staff challenges, and these will be discussed below.

Supportive of much previous research (Bektas, 2008; Nilsson et al., 2004; Trice, 2003; Zhang & Dixon, 2003) a major challenge for staff members working with IS was perceived language barriers:
“The obvious one is language. It’s very difficult to write correct English at a high level, at a university level. Also just understanding what they (IS) need to do, trying to comprehend what the task is really about and sometimes I think it’s not that they don’t understand what’s needed but they lack the language skills to be able to express it” (Staff 17-support-student processes).

Since perceived language barriers were seen as a challenge, lecturing staff argued that they had to change their teaching style to accommodate for IS, which took more of their time:

“I think the biggest issue with international students is obviously they struggle with the language and the grammar, . . . need to change your approach when lecturing to them because they won’t always understand things first time so then we have to explain a few more times and use good examples to assist with the understanding and of course they also struggle a bit when they do things like assignments and so on with the grammar and the language and so on. And often it’s harder for me as well to understand what the point they’re trying to get across” (Staff 9-academic-lecturer).

In the current study, 6 out of the 7 lecturers and 3 academic leaders, reported that it took much more of their workload time working with IS compared with working with DS:

“You can impart things much quicker and easier so I know that in terms of what we try and get through in a session, in a three-hour session, because my classes are predominantly English as a first language students, we get through all of the materials within good time. The other sessionals that are teaching very large international English as a second language class groups have to go a little slower through the material so they’re not covering the same ground” (Staff 12-academic).

This point was supported by support staff members who also agreed that working with IS required more of their time than DS’s:

“I’m aware that there’s a lot of extra needs for most international students that usually they take a bit more time and that’s both in explaining things a bit more thoroughly, whether it’s because that English isn’t their first language or because things are just run differently in different universities” (Staff 5-support).

The fact that it took more time to work with IS presents potential equity problems since it impedes upon how staff members then work with DS, as suggested by one staff member below:

“I can’t sit for three hours with one student because I cannot offer the same service to the next student” (Staff 14-support-student processes).

Perceived language barriers were a challenge for support staff as well, whereby many IS indicated that they had understood instructions when in fact they had not. Staff members had to then explain over again, which became frustrating both for the IS and the staff members. IS self-esteem might also be affected when staff members have to repeat instructions over and over again:
“I find that sometimes a little bit frustrating because I will say to them that this is what we need to work on, or this is a mistake, or this is what—and they will say yes, yes, yes—but they don’t actually understand. And I would rather them say I don’t know what you’re saying” (Staff 24-support-student processes).

A number of staff members pointed out that their frustration was about being forced into being a type of service provider. They argued they were not there to provide the service of “teach English, but to focus on content” (Staff 26-academic-lecturer):

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

Interestingly, non-academic staff members had a different view about academics’ roles, arguing that because academic staff were the ‘teachers’, it was their responsibility to find a way to get through to IS and help them understand instructions:

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

There were conflicting views amongst staff. For some, the issues attributed to lack of English proficiency, meant some staff members have argued that the entry level for English should be higher:

“Certainly within this university there are senior staff who wish to raise the level, the (English) entrance level. Conversely when I’ve been overseas and tried to do my little bit for recruiting students, one of the comments that were made was, from a PhD student, she would require a high level. There are two issues, one is, is the score honest? And we do get some students who, you just cannot believe that they could have got that score without some intervention” (Staff 1-support-student processes).

On the other hand, staff noted that if the university increased the IELTS scores, which tests English proficiency, then the market would suffer and the university could potentially lose students and the economic benefits they bring:

“But if you ask for an IELTS score of seven at entry that significantly reduces the market you can sell to” (Staff 7-support-student processes).

It is obvious that the issue of English entry level brings to head key debates around IS. At the university level, it seems profitable to enrol students even when their English standard is low, but at the teaching level, staff members are finding it hard to work with these students. What others reported though is that many times it is not the lack of English proficiency, but it is a combination of issues for the IS that staff members might misunderstand and label as lack of language skills (Arthur, 2004):
“I think sometimes for academics they misunderstand the problem. There are some cultures that are not as well spoken as western cultures, and people don’t freely express themselves in group work, and it’s very easy for a lecturer to label that as English. It may not be English, it could be that the student is not Australian enough for them in terms of what do they expect a student to be” (Staff 11-support-management).

Support staff members and other staff members who had experience working with ESL students or who were themselves from ESL backgrounds had a better understanding of this combination of issues which were labelled as language problems:

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

Because of the perceived language barriers, and the fact that the teaching staff members reported it took more time to work with IS, a critical theme for teaching staff members was raised. Some staff members reported being more “lenient” or less stringent when marking IS assignments as compared to marking DS work, because it took too long for them to mark IS work. In the current study, four lecturers out of the 7 interviewed explicitly reported being “lenient”. Staff members described how they focused on ‘concept in the content’ when marking work from IS because they felt that IS understood the concept but could not put it in grammatically correct sentences (Birrell, 2006; Ramburuth, 2001).

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

When asked why they felt they had to be more lenient towards IS, one staff member’s rationale was based on an implied idea of justice or equity:

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

This ‘double standard’ was made clearer when staff members also noted that with DS, they tended to be stricter in terms of grammar and writing styles:

“There are often times with international students that the language isn’t as good and probably you accept a lower standard. Like if a local student handed in something with the same grammar, you would probably say ‘this isn’t good enough’ but with an international student I tend to be a little bit more lenient in that I don’t mind if the English is imperfect in terms of grammar” (Staff 26-academic-lecturer).
For some academic staff, ‘leniency’ was expressed in the form of a moral dilemma, one they had an ongoing wrestle with:

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

Significantly, it is this perceived moral dilemma which appears to be a motivating factor in lecturers’ leniency towards IS submitted academic work. The issue (of leniency) is nonetheless divisive. Some staff viewed leniency as “abhorrent” and as a potential problem for the university, in lowering the university’s standards, as well as being potentially discriminatory towards DS:

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

“No, I’m not more lenient. I actually with find it abhorrent that people will have different rules... It’s actually discrimination. It might be reverse discrimination but its still discrimination and again as an academic and as a parent, I don’t want to see anybody marked differently” (Staff 34-academic-leader).

This staff member went further to warn that if other students found out and reported this, they would have grounds to appeal their academic results, claiming discrimination:

“Should the domestic students appeal then they would actually have grounds for the appeal to be upheld because they’re being marked differently... And as a parent, I have two children who are university students and I actually encourage my son quite strongly to transfer his major. He’s not studying at (NAMES UNIVERSITY) by the way, but I really strongly said swap your major because...he was spending all his time re-writing student’s work who couldn’t produce adequate English. So as a parent, I have problems with that” (Staff 34-academic-leader).

Here there was often a discrepancy in response between academic and support staff. When support staff members were asked about the occurrence of leniency, most expressed their clear frustration in suggesting this was not acceptable, and that it was in fact disadvantaging IS:
Instead of kind of building cultural bridges from both ends and making sure that the gaps are easily covered, they tend to go “Oh well, she is Chinese after all so I won’t be too hard on the grammar”, do you know? And that might be very nice but I don’t think it’s actually particularly helpful” (Staff 22-support-student processes).

Another challenge for staff members working with IS was regarding support services. For example, the university adheres to a centralized model of generic support services for all students, a culture that, at least at a policy level, does not embrace the notion of specialized support of sub-groups within the university student population. Most staff saw this as a policy, rather than purely pragmatic, issue within the university, which furthered the debate along equity lines for staff members. The move from specialized to generic service provision, which occurred approximately 3 years previous to the study, was not seen as a positive initiative by some staff, and left some feeling as if their opinions were not taken into account by the university when considering IS based policy:

“We had a team of international student support, and that team basically over many years have come up with the services they were providing, and there was method in what they did and there were reasons why they did what they did. However when we transferred away from international student support being part of (names University) International to student support in general to the student services centre, I’m not aware of any knowledge or systems or processes or services that were transferred from us to the student centre services” (Staff 11-support-management).

The move from specialized to generic services for all students was seen as ‘ignorant’ by one staff member who argued that IS need specialised help since they have different needs to those of the DS:

“I think they made a mistake getting rid of the international student advisers. I mean that was a department that specialised in that area; they knew what they were talking about. We used to deal with them a lot and they used to advocate as well for students at appeals and that sort of thing and quite strongly as well and yeah, I just don’t understand what they are saying and where they are coming from by saying everyone has the same problems. It’s just ignorant to say that. I mean obviously international students have so many more issues to contend with. You know homesickness, culture shock, like we were saying that shame and the whole thing of not knowing where to go for help and being isolated and just so many different issues that domestic students are never going to face those same issues” (Staff 30-support-psychosocial).

A non-academic staff member also argued that IS do have different needs compared to DS, and that because the university has enrolled them, there should be a duty of care to make sure these students are taken care of, through emotional support rather than academic leniency:

“They need often an awful lot of support. International students face separation from their families, their support networks, everything that they need to get along in life basically. They come to a country that they don’t know anyone, they don’t know how the country works, what the culture is like, anything like that. And that would make you feel very isolated and alone and there needs to be more social support and like emotional
support. Now that may not be the university’s job, but the university goes and takes their money, there should be a duty of care somewhere, as far as I’m concerned” (Staff 31-support-psychosocial).

This view was expressed by academic staff members just as well:

“A lot of the support services have been centralised so we are losing our student support officer and I know that a plan by the university to optimise it’s resources and streamline them but I don’t know that that’s appropriate, particularly in a school that has so many international students” (Staff 2-academic-lecturer).

Yet another challenge that staff members reported facing was miscommunication. Staff members reported that they felt frustrated because basic miscommunications occurred at the faculty and school levels and this caused even more frustration. This supports a general finding by McInnis (1998), which indicated that administration staff members were often dissatisfied with the collegiality in the university between themselves and academic staff. Of the respondents in the McInnis (1998) study, administration staff also reported that academic staff did not appreciate the amount of work they do, which was supported in the current study when administration staff reported that academic staff did not work in collaboration with them on issues specifically related to IS:

“I think at the moment there’s a lot of an inconsistency between different schools, different faculties, different advisers or whatever” (Staff 32-support-psychosocial).

Additionally, staff members were explicit and animated when suggesting that the university had to realise that with the growing number of IS, there needs to be more staff members being employed to work with these students. Lack of support staff was a major challenge in IS service provision:

“It’s very hard for us to meet the needs of all our students, both international and local with that number of staff. We’re trying to address it through a series of workshops but my feeling too is that there’s a great need for individual consultation [with IS] and it’s hard to accommodate the needs of all those students with so few of us” (Staff 7-support-student processes).

Academic staff members agreed that the ratio of learning advisors to the number of enrolled IS was too low and that administrators were out of touch with the pressures they faced in teaching IS:

“There has to be much better support systems and just having, was it at one stage here, three or four learning advisers for the whole university, is just ludicrous... and I think that the problem with (names university) is that they don’t understand the requirements for international students because they never taught really themselves” (Staff 34-academic-leader).

Many argued that a low amount of support from non-academic staff members meant that supporting IS fell back to the academic staff members to provide social support. This aca-
ademic staff member was articulate about the process and generally claimed that having support staff members ensures that IS do not fall through the cracks and help IS integrate better into the university system and feel part of the university culture.

“We have still have got our student support officer at the moment but if we lose her and there isn’t anyone down there, the students first port of call will be us, which will mean that we will be inundated with students and that sort of centralisation of university services doesn’t help to build a feeling of belonging to the university... which is really important for international students because they are out of their comfort zone and away from home. So we work really hard to do that but it’s very difficult if you’ve lost your student support as well” (Staff 2-academic-lecturer).

Critically, staff members discourse often showed how easily frustrations could transfer onto the IS. This misattribution seemed to make it more difficult for staff to want to help IS. On the other hand, staff members also pointed out that there were IS who made it even more challenging to work with. One of the issues raised by staff members was an idea that IS students did not seem to be motivated to perform in their courses per se, but rather in simply passing the course so they could obtain permanent residency in Australia afterwards:

“Sometimes I have a little bit of concern sometimes with international students, their actual interest in the course or whether it’s an interest in the visa... And so I try my best to help them, go out of my way to help but it’s as if they’re not motivated, not interested in content” (Staff 26-academic-lecturer).

As a senior management staff argued, although universities do not sell education as a pathway to permanent residency, the staff member argued many IS are aware of such a link and some may be taking courses that they may not necessarily want to pursue, but are doing so as a means to secure permanent residency in Australia:

“There are a significant number of international students that come to Australia with the hope that one day they might be able to provide for permanent residency, while we don’t sell that link, they know that that link exists... The skilled occupation list that recently came out does make a greater focus on high end qualifications, higher education. Previously you could get permanent residency if you went off and did a diploma in hairdressing or commercial cookery. They [IS] don’t care how they get to that in point [residency], but as an education provider, we should be thinking about quality education and not about what outcomes are or not available for a student afterwards. I don’t like education providers, whether it’s our university or any other university, being part of an immigration game where students are looking to link up to university with no intention of coming, so they can obtain visa outcomes.” (Staff 33-support-management).

As mentioned by the staff member, universities do not advise students on which course to take based on migration purposes. But since IS enrolment has decreased and international education being such a competitive industry, this means that universities have to take into account courses which attract IS.
It is clear from the study that there are myriads of challenges that staff members face when working with IS - both at the student level (lack of motivation and perceived language barriers) as well as university level (lack of trained staff and miscommunication).

Conclusions

The study aimed to understand the challenges faced by staff members who work with IS. It was found that there was a level of frustration that these staff members faced, either at the university level or at the students’ level that they attributed to working with IS. Themes included lack of trained staff and miscommunication between staff members. Also, it was argued that many IS lacked the motivation to learn and were pursuing HE for migration purposes. These, together with perceived language barriers created a heavy work schedule and staff members required more time to work with IS compared to their domestic counterparts. Because it took so much time to understand work written by IS, teaching staff members argued that it was easier and faster for them to mark IS based on content rather than look at grammatical errors. On the other hand, if DS handed work in which had grammatical errors, these lecturers reported being harsher with these students.

The data shows staff wrestled with a number of dilemmas, and often there was conflict in these between academic and non academic staff perspectives. The finding about leniency has been reported by previous research, with mixed results. In research done by Barber and Morgan’s (1984) study with staff in the engineering faculty, in an American university, staff members were asked whether they felt they needed to lower their standards when working with IS and 80% reported that their expectations were the same for IS and DS. When asked if they were more lenient with IS, 97% of staff responded that the same grading system were used for both cohorts. From more recent research though, Trice (2003) and Andrade (2009) concluded that faculty staff interviewed in their research did not ‘intentionally’ become more lenient when marking IS work. Andrade (2009) for example suggested that because staff had been working with these students for a long time, they might not realise themselves how accommodating they have become and may be lenient unconsciously. In the present data however, staff clearly reported that they were conscious of being more lenient. This suggest that English proficiency is a major dilemma when working with IS who have English as a second language (ESL). As well as creating extra stress for the teaching staff, it is also leading some staff to be more lenient and mark only content in assignments. The repercussions of this can be farfetched and involves equity issues at various levels, as this practice may not seem fair to other students and might place the university’s reputation at risk.

The issue of leniency also connects with research where academic staff members agreed that having IS lowers the university’s standards (Burch, 2008; McGowan & Potter, 2008). According to McGowan and Potter (2008) “the presence of Chinese learners fuels the impetus to internationalize the existing curriculum but that this process could lower academic standards if the Corporate University’s economic priorities are allowed to unproblematically over-ride educational ethics” (p. 181).

The overall and related critical dilemma was thus one of equity. For DS, it might mean that they are being marked according to a different standard to IS even though they are doing the same course and will graduate with the same degree. For IS, this issue of leniency has a number of repercussions. For one, not all lecturers are lenient and so when picked on their English proficiency in another course, IS feel confused about the mixed messages and might
be reluctant to seek language support. Moreover, staff members interviewed in the current research commented on the fact that these IS are graduating with a degree from an English speaking university and employers will expect their levels of English proficiency to be high. When they fail to meet that level, the university’s reputation might be jeopardized. Furthermore, the issue of leniency shows how some staff members might be ill equipped to work with ESL students and therefore institutions enrolling these students should take that into account.

Finally, it must be noted though, that some researchers have cautioned against the use of stereotyping IS with learning and adjustment problems (Chalmers & Volet, 1997). We found evidence that many staff members did just that; they began to view IS through a deficit lens instead of using these students’ strengths to enrich learning. Others have argued that teaching should reflect the universality of the learning process and not on the students’ ethnicity (Biggs, 2003; Biggs & Tang, 2007). However, many staff do request training in cross cultural teaching, with the idea that being culturally aware will help teaching, and lecturers being culturally competent communicators (Andrade, 2009; Knewstub & Bond, 2009; Le Roux, 2002). However, not surprising given the complex findings presented in our study; to date there is mixed opinions regarding effectiveness of culturally competency for improving staff teaching in the context of IS (Knewstub & Bond, 2009).

The data suggested that academic staff in particular face a series of serious challenges when working with IS. In the extreme, academic staff from the current study show signs which we would classify as experiencing burnout. In the current study, staff members reported having heavy workloads, lack of time and miscommunication between staff members (within and between faculties) and between staff members and management (policy makers). These findings echoes the factors listed below which, according to literature are associated with burnout:

1. Workload and intensity, time demands, and complexity;
2. Lack of control over establishing and following day-to-day priorities;
3. Insufficient reward and the accompanying feelings of continually having to do more for less;
4. The feeling of community, in which relationships become impersonal and teamwork is undermined;
5. The absence of fairness, in which trust, openness, and respect are not present; and
6. Conflicting values, in which choices that are made by management often conflict with their mission and core values (Maslach & Leiter, 1997, 1999).

The idea that staff members here were specifically experiencing a form of what we have coined as ‘IS burnout’ expressed as frustration is worrying. Many felt ill equipped to deal with the numbers of IS in their classes, whilst others felt that the university were taking in students who were not qualified or capable of undertaking university level education. As mentioned previously, international education is Australia’s third largest export and there has been a decline in IS enrolment which has caused concern for institutions which rely more on IS fees. On the other hand, as pointed out, academic staff from the current study showed signs which we would classify as experiencing burnout. Some researchers argue that there is “tension between the economics and ethics of education” (McGowan and Potter, 2008, p. 181). Therefore institutions that are enrolling IS need to take into account the reported...
experiences of staff members working with IS. One key finding supported by the data was that staff members with ESL experience and/or backgrounds could be a resource to help up-skill staff members who are experiencing IS burnout. In any case, institutions must look into providing more support, resources, and incentives for these staff members if the consensus is to enrol more IS for the economic benefits.

**Contributions and Limitations**

The findings from this study make several contributions to the current literature. Firstly, there was a dearth of research which focused on staff challenges when working with IS. Secondly, research done with staff members were either from one faculty (Trice, 2003) or focused on specific services such as counselling. The current study looked at the challenges that both academic and non-academic staff at one university faced when working with diverse populations. The limitations of this study though, are two-fold. Sampling wise, SSC staff members, who directly provides services to students, did not participate and so their views were missing from data analysis. Secondly, only one ‘case’ was used and it might be argued that findings therefore cannot relate to other institutions. Arguably, all institutions enrolling IS in Australia are legally bound to provide certain services to its students and as such, the contribution of this paper lies in its applicability to other institutions which enroll IS. Thus, this research could serve as a base for future studies in other institutions.
References


About the Authors

Sophia A. Harryba
PhD candidate at the Edith Cowan University. Has researched and published in the area of Higher Education and International Education. Is interested in the area of Internationalising Higher Education and the Transition journey of International students.

Dr. Andrew M. Guilfoyle
Dr. Andrew Guilfoyle (PhD) is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Psychology and Social Science at Edith Cowan University. Andrew has published over 50 peer reviewed publications, completed several large scale national and regional funded projects and regularly presents this work at international forums. His research is focused on developing sustainable services for social inclusion of Indigenous communities and CaLD populations He wqorks within a constructionist, participatory, locational, community based approach. His recent book chapter on Participation with Australian Aboriginal Communities’ (Elsevier Ltd: London) received an outstanding international review by Prof. Ron Chenail, Editor of The Qualitative Report (http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/): “Participatory Action Research as Empowerment Evaluation: Andrew Guilfoyle, Juli Coffin, and Paul Maginn illustrate the utility and challenges of understanding and encouraging not only community involvement, but also community engagement in policy making and evaluation.”

Dr. Shirlee-ann Knight
Dr. Shirlee-ann Knight is a Post-doctoral Research Fellow with the Systems & Intervention Research Centre for Health and West Australian Centre for Cancer & Palliative Care at Edith Cowan University (ECU) Western Australia. She holds a PhD in Information Systems, and specialises in the analysis of the complex relationships existent within systems. Shirlee-ann’s PhD “User Perceptions of Information Quality in World Wide Web Information Retrieval Behaviour” was funded by an Australian Research Council Discovery Project between ECU and University of Wollongong, and earned the prestigious “2008 Ballou & Pazer DQ/IQ Dissertation of the Year” award (ICIQ at M.I.T.) for its contribution to the field of information quality research. Shirlee-ann currently works in a Health Systems context, investigating novel and innovative approaches to understanding Health ICT implementation and adoption.
Editors
Mary Kalantzis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.
Bill Cope, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Editorial Advisory Board
Michael Apple, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.
David Barton, Lancaster University, Milton Keynes, UK.
Mario Bello, University of Science, Cuba.
Bill Cope, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.
Robert Devillar, Kennesaw State University, Kennesaw, USA.
Daniel Madrid Fernandez, University of Granada, Spain.
Ruth Finnegan, Open University, Milton Keynes, UK.
James Paul Gee, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.
Juana M. Sancho Gil, University of Barcelona, Barcelona, Spain.
Kris Gutierrez, University of California, Los Angeles, USA.
Anne Hickling-Hudson, Queensland University of Technology, Kelvin Grove, Australia.
Roz Ivanic, Lancaster University, Lancaster, UK.
Paul James, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.
Mary Kalantzis, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.
Andreas Kazamias, University of Wisconsin, Madison, USA.
Peter Kell, University of Wollongong, Wollongong, Australia.
Michele Knobel, Montclair State University, Montclair, USA.
Colin Lankshear, James Cook University, Cairns, Australia.
Kimberly Lawless, University of Illinois, Chicago, USA.
Sarah Michaels, Clark University, Worcester, USA.
Jeffrey Mok, Miyazaki International College, Miyazaki, Japan.
Denise Newfield, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
Ernest O’Neil, Ministry of Education, Sana’a, Yemen.
José-Luis Ortega, University of Granada, Granada, Spain.
Francisco Fernandez Palomares, University of Granada, Granada, Spain.
Ambigapathy Pandian, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia.
Miguel A. Pereyra, University of Granada, Granada, Spain.
Scott Poynting, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, UK.
Angela Samuels, Montego Bay Community College, Montego Bay, Jamaica.
Michel Singh, University of Western Sydney, Sydney, Australia.
Helen Smith, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.
Richard Sohmer, Clark University, Worcester, USA.
Brian Street, University of London, London, UK.
Giorgos Tsiakalos, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.
Salim Vally, University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa.
Gella Varnava-Skoura, National and Kapodistrian University of Athens, Greece.
Cecile Walden, Sam Sharpe Teachers College, Montego Bay, Jamaica.
Nicolia Yelland, Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia.
Wang Yingjie, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.
Zhou Zuoyu, Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China.

The Learner Community
This knowledge community is brought together by a common concern for learning and an interest to explore new educational possibilities. The community interacts through an innovative, annual face-to-face conference, as well as year-round virtual relationships in a weblog, peer reviewed journal and book imprint – exploring the affordances of the new digital media. Members of this knowledge community include academics, teachers, administrators, policy makers and other education practitioners.

Conference
Members of the Learner Community meet at The International Conference on Learning, held annually in different locations around the world, each selected for the particular role education is playing in social, cultural and economic change.

In recent years, the Conference has been held with Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang, Malaysia in 1999; RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia in 2000; the University of Athens, Spetses, Greece in 2001; Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China in 2002; Institute of Education, London University, London, UK in 2003; Institute of Pedagogical Sciences, Havana, Cuba in 2004; University of Granada, Granada, Spain in 2005; Sam Sharpe Teachers College, Montego Bay, Jamaica in 2006; University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa in 2007; the University of Illinois, Chicago, USA in 2008; the University of Barcelona, Spain in 2009; Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong in 2010; and the University of Mauritius, Mauritius in 2011. In 2012 the Conference will be held at The Institute of Education, University of London, London, UK.

Our community members and first time attendees come from all corners of the globe. Intellectually, our interests span the breath of the field of education. The Conference is a site of critical reflection, both by leaders in the field and emerging scholars and teachers. Those unable to attend the Conference may opt for virtual participation in which community members can either or both submit a video or slide presentation with voice-over, or simply submit a paper for peer review and possible publication in the Journal.

Online presentations can be viewed on YouTube.

Publishing
The Learner Community enables members to publish through three mediums.

First, by participating in the Learning Conference, community members can enter a world of journal publication unlike the traditional academic publishing forums – a result of the responsive, non-hierarchical and constructive nature of the peer review process. The International Journal of Learning provides a framework for double-blind peer review, enabling authors to publish into an academic journal of the highest standard.

The second publication medium is through the book series The Learner, publishing cutting edge books on education in print and electronic formats. Publication proposals and manuscript submissions are welcome.

The third major publishing medium is our news blog, constantly publishing short news updates from the Learner Community, as well as major developments in the field of education. You can also join this conversation at Facebook and Twitter or subscribe to our email Newsletter.
# Common Ground Publishing Journals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Website</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>SPORT AND SOCIETY</strong></td>
<td>The International Journal of Sport and Society</td>
<td><a href="http://www.sportandsociety.com/journal">www.sportandsociety.com/journal</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For subscription information please contact [subscriptions@commongroundpublishing.com](mailto:subscriptions@commongroundpublishing.com)