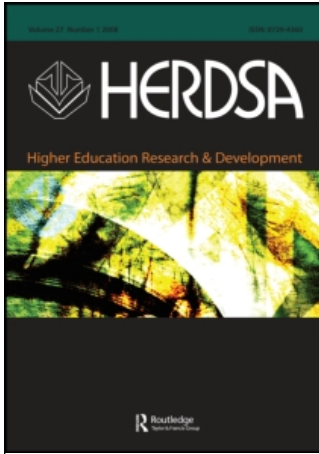


This article was downloaded by:[Ingenta Content Distribution - Routledge]
On: 18 July 2008
Access Details: [subscription number 791963552]
Publisher: Routledge
Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954
Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Higher Education Research & Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713423834>

International Students, Learning Environments and Perceptions: a case study using the Delphi technique

Margaret Robertson; Martin Line; Susan Jones; Sharon Thomas

Online Publication Date: 01 May 2000

To cite this Article: Robertson, Margaret, Line, Martin, Jones, Susan and Thomas, Sharon (2000) 'International Students, Learning Environments and Perceptions: a case study using the Delphi technique', Higher Education Research & Development, 19:1, 89 — 102

To link to this article: DOI: 10.1080/07294360050020499

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/07294360050020499>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article maybe used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.



International Students, Learning Environments and Perceptions: a case study using the Delphi technique

MARGARET ROBERTSON, MARTIN LINE, SUSAN JONES & SHARON THOMAS

University of Tasmania

ABSTRACT *While there are a number of reports on problems faced by international students in Australia, there is little information on the perceptions of such students relative to those of the academic staff teaching them. Using the Delphi technique, whereby problems identified are narrowed by consensus, a study conducted at one Australian university highlighted some expected and some unexpected outcomes. Difficulty understanding colloquial language, cost of tuition and feelings of isolation ranked highest amongst the problems cited by international students. Academic staff were critical of their own speed of lecturing, as well as international students' poor writing and critical thinking skills.*

Introduction

Competition for the overseas student market brings into focus variables not readily identified by existing understandings of learners' needs. The common management practice is to provide support staff services (Hawkins & Bransgrove, 1998) to deal with the orientation and welfare of international students. Such service units act as intermediaries between students, their families and the teaching and learning community of the university. However, the actual experience of international students participating in courses may be difficult for support staff, counsellors, advisers, academic staff and students to anticipate. To provide some guarantee of quality outcomes and student satisfaction with the delivery of teaching programs, we should ensure that the different perspectives of these interest groups are factored into the service equation.

Recognising and demystifying the problems they face as learners in unfamiliar contexts is the critical first step towards improving the learning environments of international students. Where there is a willingness within an institution to learn about the backgrounds of students from other countries, a process of intercultural learning can begin (Volet & Ang, 1998). Arguably, the new knowledge then can become the strongest antidote to misguided, albeit well-meaning, teaching (Mills, 1997).

This paper reports on a project aimed at securing a deeper understanding of the

contextually relevant issues facing international students in one Australian university, as part of the plan to develop cross-discipline strategies aimed at improved teaching and learning outcomes for international students in particular, and all students in the longer term. Some comment on selected strategies for change is included.

Related Literature

For some time, the literature has been highlighting the need for university teachers to look carefully to the background experiences of students from other cultures. For instance, in a study of first year students, Burns (1991) found that stress levels were considerably higher amongst overseas students when compared with local students. They felt more pressure from their families to succeed, less competent with academic skills, and were misunderstood by academic staff. Similar problems have been reported in subsequent studies (Choi, 1997; Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock, 1995; Ramsey, Barker & Jones, 1999; Yanhong Li & Kaye, 1998).

At the same time, Biggs (1997) argues that identifying problems is not enough. In his view, not moving beyond the gaps or problems will do little to overcome the difficulties and result in a deficit model. He maintains that we need to analyse the prior learning of students and look for the overlaps in skills and strategies adopted by students. Identification of such overlaps provides points for cognitive engagement of all students which will lead to better outcomes. Such engagement he equates with good teaching.

Not surprisingly, this message regarding the qualities of good teachers is well recorded in the literature. At the beginning of the 20th century, Dewey (1916) was challenging educators to take account of individual differences by looking to the experiential learning of the students and the specific context of their experience. More recently, Dunkin (1995) has explored the qualities of expert versus novice teachers in higher education. The expert qualities that enable teachers to facilitate students' learning include many of the points made in the reported studies related to international students' needs as learners. "The teacher explains well" is illustrative of the overlap. It seems ironic that in looking to improve the teaching and learning experiences of international students we may be well advised to reflect on and review what we already know.

There is no doubt that good advice is available to assist academic staff to appreciate the teaching and learning expectations and needs of international students. Ballard and Clanchy's, *Teaching students from overseas* (1991), for example, has become an essential guide for Australian academics teaching international students. At the same time, and notwithstanding the importance of this kind of assistance, there is a danger in our thinking that there are universal truths to make the task easy.

In their more recent research, Ballard and Clanchy (1995) maintain that contextual understanding may be the key to improved outcomes. Knowing the culture of the institution and sub-cultures that exist in departments will help to generate some practical improvements for learners. Such scrutiny should assist the quality of the

learning experiences of international students, but should also lead to improvements for all students.

Over a decade ago this was, in part, the theme of Samuelowicz's (1987) study. She surveyed both staff and international students at the University of Queensland, comparing the learning difficulties described by the students with the staff's perception of their students' problems. As well as trying to categorise the learning approaches of the international students, she drew on comments of both staff and students to put forward suggestions for helping these students develop new learning approaches more suited to the Australian educational system. Samuelowicz sought positive solutions based on the experiences of the learning community of a specific institution. However, the ensuing decade seems to have lost this insightful approach by bringing more of the same in terms of problem identification. Samuelowicz's paper complements and foreshadows the approach we take in the present study.

The Study

The Delphi Technique

To access knowledge of the culture of the university from the perceptions of international students and the staff teaching them, we used open-ended questions. The anticipated sizes of the sample groups meant that the technique for data gathering had to allow for condensation of gathered information, while preferably obtaining consensus views. To achieve these aims a Delphi study (Whitman, 1990) was considered appropriate. The Delphi technique was developed in the 1950s by the RAND corporation as a strategy for complex problem solving that relies on iterative feedback to obtain consensus and statistical summaries. Thus, unlike popular versions of survey questionnaires where the judgements are limited by the choices available in each item, all judgements using the Delphi technique are made by the participants. Through a committee approach (Whitman, 1990) that negates the need for face-to-face meetings, participants' judgements help focus the feedback on the most widely shared views. In recent times, the Delphi technique has also been used increasingly as a method for quantifying variables which are intangible or shrouded in uncertainty (McCull, Newton & Hutchinson, 1994). As such, the technique provided a compromise between a qualitative study and the alternative reductionist approach of quantitative analysis. Furthermore, the likely outcome would be a genuine reflection of student and staff opinion in the university.

Another advantage of the Delphi technique is that it is particularly suited to studies on individuals who have no history of adequate communication and who represent diverse backgrounds (Whitman, 1990). Domination by a few is avoided and minimal time is required of the participants. Three or four iterations between participants and the panel are usually adequate to reach consensus on important points. Statistical summaries may take the form of medians and ranges, but conclusions can be in the form of priority rankings.

Limitations of the methodology include lack of agreement on sampling methodologies or on criteria for selection of a panel of experts who oversee the process. The

reliability of the methodology is also uncertain (Williams & Webb, 1994). Nevertheless, the process is seen to be a fair method for identifying areas of consensus.

In brief, the Delphi technique allows all participants to express their views in an open-ended questionnaire, these being summarised by a panel of experts for categories of meaning and returned to all participants as feedback for further evaluation at the completion of each round (iteration). Through this process, individuals are free to modify views previously expressed without embarrassment.

The Participants

The initial sample group comprised 408 undergraduate students attending the university, representing 79% of the population of international students, along with 121 staff. An initial mail-out of explanatory letters and questionnaires resulted in a positive response from 38 students (9.3%) and 31 staff (25.6%), this reducing to 20 students and 26 staff by the final round of the study. It was a voluntary exercise without reminder letters. The poor initial response was a concern, attributed in part to the timing of the mailing during the early part of the semester when pressures from teaching were high. Also, there was cognisance of the sensitivity of the questions for students who come from cultures where critical comment is not encouraged and, indeed, can be viewed quite negatively. However, many of the responses received were detailed and after three rounds of iteration were regarded as providing valid and reliable representations of the opinions of the respondents.

Questionnaire Survey and Results

In the first round of the study, sets of five open-ended questions were asked of students and staff in separate questionnaires, allowing maximum freedom to the participants in their responses. The questions to students were:

1. What difficulties, if any, have you experienced as an international student during this course?
2. Which of the problems have been resolved? Please list these and the solutions.
3. Which of the problems are ongoing?
4. What, if any, racial discrimination have you observed at the University?
5. Is there anything else of relevance that you would like to tell us?

While Questions 1 to 3 were designed to gather information relating directly to teaching and learning experiences of international students, Question 4 was included to assess their degree of cultural acceptance, and Question 5 for information on any other factors that might be considered of importance to their well-being. Staff were asked a similar set of questions, but Question 1 sought information on their difficulties in teaching international students of non-English-speaking backgrounds.

Round 2 of the study shifted from the open-ended qualitative questions of the first round to a focused distillation of responses arising from Round 1. The request to rate the relative importance of problems cited in the second and third rounds was a cause of concern for some staff. As one lecturer commented: "I have overseas

students who are top of the class, and one or two struggle to get by. It would be totally unfair to put everybody in the same category. They are entitled to individuality like everyone else.” “Australian students could equally have been rated the same way” seemed to sum up these observations. To give added credence to the empathy demonstrated in these responses, the second round item “international students are very demanding of lecturers’ time” was ranked lowest by staff.

The consensus views of the students after three iterations are given in Table 1, those of the staff in Table 2 show that the degree of consensus appears much stronger amongst the sample of international students. Most items within the categories related to experiences “inside” and “outside” the university were similarly rated. The exception was “in employing strategies other than memorising” which, when interpreted as a comment on ability to adapt intellectually, is not surprising. When compared with staff ratings, there appears to be a difference in perceptions relating to this comment.

Both staff and students agree that the speed of lecturers’ spoken English exacerbates the problem of understanding by international students. But, unlike staff, students view their lack of confidence with the language as the source of their problems, forcing them to seek a practical remedy through rote memorisation and textbook copying. To staff, these appear as culturally specific solutions. Arguably,

TABLE 1. Student consensus view (after three iterations) on problems and their relative ratings

Category	Items—ranked in order from most important to least important	Relative rating
Activities inside university	• Feelings of isolation	1 =
	• Books are too expensive	1 =
	• Difficulty conducting research	3 =
	• Stress associated with workload	3 =
	• Tuition is too expensive	3 =
	• Lecturers’ lack of interest in prior knowledge	6 =
	• Different learning styles	6 =
	• Difficulty in employing strategies other than memorising	8
Activities outside university	• Difficulty understanding slang, idioms, colloquial language	1 =
	• Difficulty making friends with locals	1 =
	• Racist remarks or actions	3
	• Homesickness	4 =
	• Financial problems	4 =
	• Adjusting to cold weather	5 =
• Adjusting to Australian culture	5 =	
Language-related issues	• Lack of confidence in verbal skill	1
	• Difficulty in writing essays	2
	• Difficulty in comprehension	3
	• Lecturer speaks too fast	4
	• Lecturer speaks unclearly	5

TABLE 2. Staff consensus view (after three iterations) on problems and their relative ratings

Items—ranked in order from most important to least important	Relative rating
• Poor concept of multiple answers	1
• Poor critical thinking and analysis	2
• The speed of lecturing is too fast	3 =
• Written language skills	3 =
• Spoken English	3 =
• Responsibility for own learning	6
• A dependence on rote learning	7 =
• Grammatical English understanding	7 =
• Reluctance to participate	7 =
• Textbook language understanding	7 =
• Technical language	11

from the students' perspective, there is no alternative. Students and staff may perceive the problem similarly, but the perceptions differ in the root cause and the motivation for "unacceptable" responses like plagiarism.

In relative terms, those lecturing staff who responded confirmed the direction of students' responses by nominating items related to language as the major points of difference between international students and Australian students. Interestingly, more than half the sample in both student and staff groups considered the item related to "difficulty in taking responsibility for their own learning" to be a significant problem. As such, this view is considered important for drawing attention to the similarity in issues raised in this study with broadly based teaching best practice.

Specific Students' Responses

There were 38 student responses to the first round of questions, including 22 males, and 16 females. Of these, 21 were Malaysian, eight were Singaporean, with the remaining individuals being from Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. As expected, problems with spoken English, notably the Australian accent, and with written assignments were particularly common in the responses.

Responses to Question 1 (difficulties experienced) can be summarised:

- *Social*—the most common references were to feelings of isolation from Australian classmates, homesickness, and the need for social activities.
- *Facilities and administration*—common problems cited were insufficient guidance on course selection, and restricted access to computer rooms and other facilities.
- *Staff*—unfriendly, inexperienced lecturers were a concern of the Malaysian respondents.
- *Language*—this was the overwhelmingly dominant perceived problem for Malaysian students with 41 mentions of language-related problems. The most frequently cited problem related to understanding the lecturers and their meaning.

Also of concern was a lack of confidence to speak in front of their Australian classmates. Other issues raised were problems with colloquial language, writing, and question interpretation.

Representative examples of responses to Question 1 were:

Catching up with some of the lecturer's accent in note taking. Showing myself up in public speaking as I have the feeling that my English is not as good as other local students and fear that they won't understand what I mean. [I] write down the answers on exam papers as I memorise the points in my language because I find that I gain better understanding by doing that. I tried to avoid [this] but often I ended up with just memorised things without a good understanding (female Malaysian Medicine student—second year after two and a half years in Australia).

Home sick. Personal relationships, e.g., house mates, boy/girlfriends. Work. No mentor at the initial stage to guide newcomers (female Singaporean Commerce student—third year).

The students' responses to Question 2 (problems solved) included:

- *Social*—most mentions related to self-determination to overcome personal problems with strategies like “walk around and discover for yourself”; overcome homesickness by “making attempts to meet new friends” and “being more open-minded”.
- *Administration*—“time has helped”.
- *Staff*—give staff a shortened name version to overcome pronunciation problems.
- *Language*—“Try to talk to as many students as possible”, “Use the Study Skills advisers”, “Read newspapers and listen to television”, “Listen more actively”.

These and other responses provided interesting insights. Comments like “deep concentration on listening” suggest strong reflective powers and a willingness to accommodate the problem of understanding “Aussie” English. Similarly, the proffered solutions to homesickness by “attempting to know more friends” or “indulge in work” reflect a genuine desire to overcome this problem. They also highlight the extreme loneliness of being an international student and the need for empathetic support. References to “mentoring” as a solution to such problems suggests the valuing of the scheme as well as its importance for problem solving, especially in the first few months of residency.

Notable comments given in this category were:

As time by time, I gradually starts to understand the language spoken by lecturers and tutors. Anyway, the problems still exist where they sometimes speak too soft or too fast. [Understanding was] actually achieved by deep concentration on listening.... [It wouldn't] really work at the time when I was confronted by noise. Moreover, it's hard to maintain it for a long period of time.

Problem of lecturer's accent seems to be okay now as I get used to their accent and I found out that full concentration in note taking is very important. Pay more attention on what is he talking—more listening than looking.

Home sick. Personal relationships [partially solved] by mentoring, by attempts to know more friends and [by] indulging in work.

Questions remaining unresolved (Question 3) are summarised:

- *Social*—most frequently mentioned were “Not enough social activities organised” and “difficult making Australian friends”. Financial concerns were an ongoing concern for some Malaysian students.
- *Administration and facilities*—access to facilities remained a problem for a few students along with high fees.
- *Language*—with 23 related mentions, this remained the single greatest unresolved problem.

Also listed among the problems not solved were lack of participation in Australian-student activities, fear of public speaking, and stress.

Most racist incidents (Question 4) were reported in the wider community, usually in the street, when shopping, or on public transport. However, a surprising finding was that a total of 46 racial incidents was mentioned by 20 students as occurring on campus. Some comments related to being laughed at in classes, or to overt annoyance expressed by native Australian students at the standard of English presentation in class. Also reported was a perception that lecturers gave less attention to overseas students relative to native-Australian students.

Responses to this question included:

Not in uni, but in other public service i.e. I was mistreated by a housing agent while looking at units/flats. I guess that person is hate Asian for no particular reason.

While responses to the open-ended Question 5 were wide ranging, there appeared to be some shared concerns, particularly relating to support groups. Useful suggestions regarding course delivery and solutions for adjusting to the “new” environment included: “Force yourself to integrate”, “If in trouble seek help early”, “Recognise that your results will be different while you adjust to a new teaching and learning style”. Many additional comments related to the beauty of the landscape and the lifestyle associated with a strong wish to be accepted. Interesting responses to the open-ended Question 5 were:

From an e-mail sent by my friend from the University of [deleted for confidentiality] he describes the lives there is “killing” him because his academic work load is considerably hard to cope with as a First Year student. It doesn't really happen looking back to my university but by the way, I don't think this is a satisfactory phenomenon. Undergraduates should be trained to be more competitive, self-reliable and creative in their

first year course. Therefore, they can get prepared to face the forthcoming years which was described by some senior students as critically challenging.

There is disadvantage on us in accessing to certain credit card business in order to ease the payment of bills and some other stuffs as most of them think that the international students are financially incapable to do so. Some people who give service over the phone are just like to insult international student or may be any other new migrants. They being ill-mannered which seems to underestimate the international students.

From the last comment on access to credit cards in Australia, we might suggest that students should be made aware of the utility of such cards prior to their departure from their home countries. The hesitancy of Australian banks to provide a credit card to any transient student is easy to understand; misinterpretation of their response as racist by overseas students can also be understood. Better provision of advice prior to departure is clearly needed here.

Staff Responses

Staff responses tended to echo many of the concerns of students but with different emphases. Of the 31 staff who responded, 21 were males and 10 were females, with an average experience of 8 years in higher education.

The focus of staff responses to Question 1 (problems faced) related to a reluctance/reticence of overseas students to contribute to discussion; their difficulty comprehending content of lectures, in particular subject-specific terminology; speed of delivery; and interpretation/understanding of spoken English. Also noted by many respondents was the overseas students' difficulty with the concept of there not being one correct answer to a question. They were generally regarded as showing a heavy reliance on books, not taking responsibility for their own work, having little appreciation of critical thinking, and not understanding the concept of plagiarism. Considered particularly germane was the following response to Question 1 (problems faced) from an English Language lecturer with 8 years' university teaching:

- International students are often less worldly and less knowledgeable of past and present world events, and past and present social and political issues, than the average Australian student.
- Many international students are reluctant to give a personal opinion or to involve themselves in tutorial/class discussions, especially the Japanese. This is a cultural difference. Female international students are often reluctant to argue with an older person, especially if the older person is in a position of authority, e.g., the tutor or lecturer.
- International students have a different attitude to learning and consequently go about learning differently. They tend to take the word of the book or lecturer as truth, and won't question it. They see learning as receiving the knowledge of an authority. Therefore, to regurgitate text from books etc. is seen as normal learning.

- International students come from cultures that have different discourse patterns, e.g., conduct in a tutorial, essay content and structure, which are not appropriate in an Australian context. They need to learn the Australian discourse conventions—written and spoken.

In response to Question 2 (problems solved), it was noted that some problems may never be resolved for many students. In the case of students learning English through the English Learning Centre, it was suggested that they be encouraged to read and listen to news as much as possible outside class. Teachers could also organise debates or presentations on topical issues. Improving students' awareness of the accepted attitudes and conventions in Australia could also help to change their learning styles.

Many staff pointed out that problems are rarely completely resolved and stressed that it is difficult to generalise, as all students are individuals. Problems for some are resolved, but not for others. Generic terms like "time", "tolerance" and "perseverance" were cited on a number of occasions as being helpful in the resolution of problems. Unlike responses to the first question, many of the references were singular, but merit recording because of the valuable suggestions made.

Solutions to assist overseas students suggested by staff included the following.

For seminars/tutorials:

- using pair and group work instead of whole class discussion;
- mixing of international and Australian students in presentation groups;
- encouraging participation by inviting international students to answer simple questions initially;
- providing adequate time for students to prepare and providing appropriate guidance prior to, and following, a presentation.

For lectures:

- providing written support material to supplement lectures;
- taking time to check that international students comprehend material by asking questions—we need to be inclusive and try to involve local students as well;
- ensuring that oral explanations are not hurried;
- educating staff about the problems likely to be experienced.

For written communication:

- providing support tutorials run by international student support staff;
- offering private tutorials;
- being explicit in the terms of instructions given;
- allowing students to re-sit tests/exams, where culturally-specific language has been a problem;
- reviewing drafts prior to submission.

Relating to their different pedagogical approaches to learning:

- promoting the mentor program;
- carefully explaining to individuals the inappropriateness of plagiarism, wherever it is found;

- continually questioning students to check that they understand material presented;
- explicitly teaching to different learning styles and discourse backgrounds.

For Question 3 (problems unresolved), recurrent themes were a reluctance to participate or present orally, poor understanding of spoken English and poor written language skills. It was noted that it was the university's responsibility to create awareness among the staff and set in place (with adequate funding) educational programs about how best to cope with the ongoing problems faced by overseas students. Also suggested was that staff should be taught to write clearly on the board, speak clearly, structure their lectures clearly, and provide a copy of the lecture on tape.

Regarding Question 4 (experiences of racial discrimination), no staff respondent claimed first-hand experience of racial discrimination, although one staff member commented that graffiti in the university toilet cubicles was often racist. It was also noted that the natural aggressiveness of some Australian students, especially male students, may be interpreted as discriminatory by international students. The suspicion noted above, that staff favoured Australian students, had also come to the attention of some staff.

In the open-ended Question 5, one respondent highlighted strategies that would help to resolve a number of the common problems experienced by international students and staff. They were to provide adequate funding to the university English Language Centre; provide a liaison officer in each department; and encourage lecturers to write clearly, speak clearly, structure lectures clearly, provide a copy of the lecture on tape, and avoid using whole-class discussions. Of particular concern to many staff was a lack of will among the "powers that be" to accept the responsibility that they have towards international students, as well as a lack of co-ordination in addressing the problems outlined above.

Discussion

Although there is variation in the emphases of the responses which suggests differences in students and staff perceptions, a number of observations support the view that good teaching practice is at the heart of many of the perceived issues. Despite the comments recommending caution in highlighting national differences, staff generally seemed critical of the reluctance of international students to participate. Taken together with the students' responses, the perception, if valid, tends to overlook the fact that the cause of poor participation may well be language competence rather than cultural reticence.

Just as Biggs (1997) suggests, by looking for linkages of concepts and focusing on the similarities in students' approaches there is scope for effective remediation of perceived difficulties that have emerged in the present study. In a genuine effort to improve the teaching and learning outcomes of international students, there is a need to look for starting points for engagement. Realistically, these will be located in the context of the specific environment as viewed by the students and teachers

concerned. This study has shown that the perceptions of staff and students may be similar but that the sources of these similarly perceived learning behaviours often differ.

As with previous research (Kirby, Woodhouse & Ma, 1999), the findings of this study show that there is common acceptance that language comprehension and competence are at the heart of difficulties for international students. The mismatch between students and staff perceptions comes when personal behaviours are examined. In the final round of this Delphi study, staff still rated quite highly their belief that international students do not take sufficient responsibility for their own learning. Counterbalancing this was a comment from some students that staff were not sufficiently interested in them. Because they were so sensitive to their language inadequacies, their full participation in classes was then often extremely difficult. However, as Salili (1999) reports in relation to the issue of personal responsibility for learning, the truth may not be so simple. It is more likely to involve a complex set of interacting cultural and social variables.

Responses highlighted an overwhelming desire by students to be accepted by their fellow class students and staff. While there were plenty of calls for more assistance and recognition of their problems, there was also a strong component of self-help strategies in the responses, and a willingness to try new ways once the issues were fully understood. The latter appeared to be mostly contingent on language proficiency. Knowing the culture of the institution will help to generate some practical improvements for learners. At the same time, the process needs to go beyond the physical boundaries of the university.

Stress, in particular, is a problem that is frequently noted by overseas students in Australian universities (Burns, 1991; Choi, 1997; Mullins *et al.*, 1995; Yanhong Li & Kaye, 1998), and one that was reinforced in this study. The possibility that stress might be detrimental to the learning experience of students is most often ignored by the teaching staff, if not by student counsellors. Lack of awareness by staff seems to be a key component here and is reinforced in the findings of this study.

Also missing from many of the staff responses was consideration for the emotional and psychological dilemmas faced by international students when they arrive in Australia. Not surprisingly, homesickness was part of the adjustment and was not eased by language and social barriers, perceived or real. These problems were frequently exacerbated by the monetary pressures faced by students, particularly those on scholarships or without independent support. Suggestions offered by students to overcome their difficulties indicated a desire to find solutions to their own problems. Self-help strategies reported by students support this claim. Mentions of "it works out in time", "confusion at first about course was eventually sorted out" and the value of mentors as a support through this process suggested the need for academic and support staff to work closely with international students.

This study highlights the desire by international students to be accepted, to "fit in" and to overcome the hurdles of lifestyle changes. "Foreign" teaching methods, different learning styles, and poor English competence were often made worse by staff use of idiomatic language. Staff who have reflected on these issues show a desire to support the students as evidenced by the responses provided in this survey. At the

same time, and taking into account the willingness to contribute by participating in this study, there appears a shortfall in empathy shown in many of the staff responses. As a start, a simple acceptance by lecturers that they could assist overseas students by speaking more clearly and slowly ought to be part of the shared learning process. Best practice in teaching demands effective communication; to this end staff should take responsibility, as well as students, for improved learning outcomes.

The “whole student” approach seems to be the missing element. While Australian students are in their cultural comfort zones, for many students entering higher education this is not the case. International students, like other special needs students, are part of the community of learners within the university. “All students have special needs” was the point raised by a critic of this study who saw no real purpose in trying to prioritise issues. Ironically, this opinion needs rephrasing so that statements like “they need to take more responsibility for their own learning” are turned around to read more like “we [students and staff] need to work more closely together to achieve a mutually desirable outcome”. As Biggs (1999) describes, this is the start of the process of developing an appropriate teaching and learning environment which is context related, inclusive of and accepting of intercultural difference.

This study has several important outcomes for an important population cohort of the university. It highlights the strength of motivation of students to learn, it points to language competence as the key to successful integration and it shows a high level of agreement on the strategies that teaching staff can employ for improved outcomes. The study also demonstrates the strength of the Delphi technique for providing a clear consensus view of staff and students for ways forward.

Address for correspondence: Dr Margaret Robertson, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, PO Box 1214, Launceston 7250, Tasmania, Australia. E-mail: M.Robertson@utas.edu.au

References

- BALLARD, B. & CLANCHY, J. (1991). *Teaching students from overseas*. Melbourne: Longman Cheshire.
- BALLARD, B. & CLANCHY, J. (1995). Generic skills in the context of higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 14(2), 155–166.
- BIGGS, J. (1997). Teaching across and within cultures: the issue of international students. In R. MURRAY-HARVEY & H. S. SILINS (Eds.), *Learning and teaching in higher education: Advancing international perspectives. Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society Conference* (pp. 1–22). Adelaide: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA).
- BIGGS, J. (1999). *Teaching for quality learning at university*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- BURNS, R. (1991). Study and stress among first year overseas students in an Australian university. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 10(1), 61–77.
- CHOI, M. (1997). Korean students in Australian universities: International issues. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 16(3), 263–282.
- DEWEY, J. (1916). *Democracy and education*. New York: Macmillan.

- DUNKIN, M.J. (1995). Concepts of teaching and teaching excellence in higher education. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 14(1), 21–33.
- HAWKINS, K.G. & BRANSGROVE, T.G. (1998). International students in Australian universities. *Unicorn*, 24(1), 65–70.
- KIRBY, J.R., WOODHOUSE, R.A. & MA, Y. (1999). Studying in a second language: The experiences of Chinese students in Canada. In D.A. WATKINS & J. BIGGS (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 141–158). Hong Kong: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- MCCOLL, E., NEWTON, J. & HUTCHINSON, A. (1994). An agenda for change in referral—consensus from general practice. *British Journal of General Practice*, 44, 157–162.
- MILLS, C. (1997). The lived in realities of internationalisation. In R. MURRAY-HARVEY & H.S. SILINS (Eds.), *Learning and teaching in higher education: Advancing international perspectives. Proceedings of the Higher Education Research and Development Society Conference* (pp. 91–128). Adelaide: Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA).
- MULLINS, G., QUINTRELL, N. & MURPHY, K. (1995). The experiences of international and local students at three Australian universities. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 14(2), 201–232.
- RAMSAY, S., BARKER, M. & JONES, E. (1999). Academic adjustment and learning processes: A comparison of international and local students in first-year university. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 18(1), 129–144.
- SALILL, F. (1999). Accepting personal responsibility for learning. In D.A. WATKINS & J. BIGGS (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 85–106). Hong Kong: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- SAMUELOWICZ, K. (1987). Learning problems of overseas students: Two sides of a story. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 6(2), 121–133.
- VOLET, E.E. & ANG, G. (1998). Culturally mixed groups on international campuses: An opportunity for inter-cultural learning. *Higher Education Research & Development*, 17(1), 5–24.
- WHITMAN, N.I. (1990). The committee meeting alternative: Using the Delphi technique. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 20(7–8), 30–36.
- WILLIAMS, P.L. & WEBB, C. (1994). The Delphi technique: A methodological discussion. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 19, 180–186.
- YANHONG LI, R. & KAYE, M. (1998). Understanding overseas students' concerns and problems. *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 20(1), 41–50.