

Expectations and reality – a model for meeting international student needs.

Abstract

International student numbers studying within the Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology now make up more than 20% of total student numbers and come from increasingly diverse parts of the world. Through strategic action by the university this diversity will increase.

This study identifies the differing expectations of students from different geographical regions, and how reality met these expectations. The data was collected through a series of informal groups where students from particular regions were encouraged to discuss their expectations and the nature of the reality of their study. It cannot be assumed that students coming from very different cultural backgrounds and geographical locations have the same expectations of the educational experience they will receive, or respond in the same way to the processes they encounter. The study also contributes to the development of a model for providing an effective learning experience for international students.

Expectations and reality – a model for meeting international student needs.

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Introduction

Tertiary education, and business education in particular, has become increasingly 'internationalised'. That is, students appear to be increasingly willing to move country to gain their post school education. International student numbers in higher education in Australia have quadrupled since 1994 up from 35,290 in 1994 to 151,796 in 2004 (AIEC 2005). This phenomenon is not unique to Australia. Many Western countries including the United States and The United Kingdom provide education for foreign students. 'Foreign' education has become big business. Education is the fifth largest services export in the United States and the third largest in Australia. (Marginson 2002). In 2000 there were over 100,000 foreign students studying at Australian universities.

The reality is that international students are essential to Australian university survival, both from a financial and a relevance point of view. The revenue generated by international students is essential now to many universities. No less important is the fact that Australian universities, particularly in areas such as business, must be seen to be relevant in the new global reality.

For many international students, their first language is other than English. Their experience of tertiary education is often significantly different from that which they encounter at in Australia. Their experiences are also different from each other. This raises challenges for teachers who are faced with sizeable classes made up of a combination of domestic and diverse international students.

These international students may want to understand the 'Western' way of doing things, but may not be familiar or comfortable with the processes used to facilitate learning. (Pincas 2001) Business classrooms traditionally use a range of Western teaching and learning strategies that focus on critical analysis, oral discussion, problem solving and the possibility of multiple solutions using case studies and discussion groups that require active participation by the students, which many international students find unfamiliar. These students come with their own expectations arising from the educational practices of their communities. Their potential lack of participation in classroom activities puts constraints on classroom interaction and learning. It also means that nothing that they have to teach about their way of doing things, is learned.

The potential benefits of diversity are many. (Cox & Blake 1991) Not only do international students bring significant revenue to the university but they provide an opportunity for intercultural learning, for a sharing of knowledge and perspectives that could be so important for success in today's global business environment. Yet research suggests that cultural engagement is largely unidirectional – Australian students expect international students to adjust to them, not vice versa. (cited in Marginson 2002b). An important question then arises, what do the facilitators of learning, the teachers, lecturers and tutors expect? What do they see as the benefits or disadvantages of this international diversity in their classrooms? In classrooms with students from Europe, North and South America, Asia, India, Africa and Australia, the potential for intercultural understanding and skills development is enormous. But it won't happen without assistance. Many international students spend most of their time with other students who speak their language or who come from a similar cultural background. Australians are not different in this respect. Therefore many international students who come to study in Australia, learn about Australian business practices in the classroom but gain no practical experience of what Australian business, or in fact Australians, are like. The attitudes and skills of

teachers are of critical importance to the internationalisation of the classroom. (Anderson 2001) Their attitudes impact on providing effective learning experiences to all students in culturally diverse classrooms.

Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology.

International students at Queensland University of Technology are big business, earning the university \$64.8m in direct revenue in 2003 (Harding 2004). However, the university has been prudent and conservative in its approach to international education. It has not sought to build 'off-shore' delivery mechanisms but provide a quality service, integrated with domestic students. Whilst to date this has been successful there is recognition that if the university is to be a significant international player it needs to become known internationally for the strength and relevance of its connections to the rest of the world – the professions and the world of work in particular. (Harding 2004)

This paper explores one initiative, in the Faculty of Business, that gathers feedback from international students on their perception of QUT, what they want from an international education experience and how their experience meets their expectations and needs and uses this and other data to build a model of learning support for international students. This is the first report of an ongoing process of focus groups with international students from differing regions of the world. In addition to data collection, these focus groups, organised as morning teas with the Director of Internationalisation in the Faculty of Business, provide an opportunity for interaction between students and the staff responsible for their care in the Faculty. It provides a safe forum for discussion of issues of concern to them and an opportunity for them to contribute. To the students, these groups appear to indicate that the Faculty, despite its size and diversity, is interested in them, their successes and their views.

The Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology is one of the largest business faculties in Australia. Like other business faculties around Australia it has seen a rapid increase in international student numbers with over 22% of the 7,500 students now coming from overseas. Over the past five years source countries have diversified from the traditional markets in South East Asia. In 2004 students were received from 65 countries (Equis 2004). Whilst the traditional markets are still strong there are a number of interesting emerging markets as far a field as South America. Currently the strongest markets are China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Norway, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Germany. Given the diversity of languages and cultures that this represents it cannot be assumed that these students have the same expectations or requirements.

The vision of the Faculty puts internationalisation at the centre – not simply in terms of student numbers but the central role the internationalised workplace has for all the students.

“Our vision is to be a destination of choice for high quality staff and students, known for our excellence in real world teaching, research and service; our deep engagement with the communities we serve; and the capacity of our graduates to work effectively in a changing and internationalised workplace.”
(QUT Faculty of Business 2004)

This is a more comprehensive view of internationalisation than the movement of students across international borders. As will be seen from the student feedback, international student expectations impinge on all aspects of their time at the university, as it does with all students, and the idea that simply having foreign students will 'internationalise' the program or university is overly simplistic.

Methodology

The data collection approach taken was largely inductive, gathering as much evidence as possible about the topic, with nothing ruled out, using focus groups. Through the inductive process, it is possible to identify issues that have not previously been identified in the existing literature. The focus groups of students started with a general formulation of the potential issues gained from previous experience and the literature, but this was general in nature, and did not start with a theory or an hypothesis. As Miles and Huberman (1984) comment "any researcher, no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to fieldwork with some orienting ideas, foci and tools." (Page 27). A clear set of questions was used, but students were able to move outside of this framework where they had something they wanted to add.

Each group was drawn from students from a particular geographical region e.g. Africa, Thailand, India and China/Hong Kong /Taiwan. All students from the national group were invited, though only a small percentage responded to the invitation and an even smaller number attended.

Focus groups were chosen for a number of reasons. One of the critical issues in inter-cultural communication is that of power. (Roach & Byrne 2001, Williams 2003, Yao & Wilson 2001). As the convener of the groups, the facilitator had a number of perceived bases of power that might inhibit open discussion; 'mother tongue' understanding of the language, a senior hierarchical position, a prestigious position as a teacher within the institution and as the host. To offset this imbalance groups with a shared language and cultural background were chosen and the setting was as informal as possible. Questions were asked over morning or afternoon tea, in an informal setting. The facilitator did not have teaching responsibilities with the students to avoid the possibility students may feel they had to give a 'required' answer.

The purpose of session, to collect information that might enable the Faculty to improve the learning experience of students, was explained at the beginning of the session. The confidentiality of individual comments was guaranteed – and at no time was the identity of any individual speaker recorded. The session lasted between one and one and a half hours. Where students had individual issues that they wanted to be addressed, they met with the facilitator or the Administrator of the International Student Office (who took the notes) after the session.

Those students who attended contributed openly, though it is to be expected that only the most obvious issues would have been raised in a single meeting. The fairly relaxed conversational nature of the groups enabled whatever issues were raised, to be explored by the other students. However, the focus groups were in many ways ethnographic in character in that the students were informed of the purpose of the groups and the facilitator had control of the process, asking questions and probing the person's responses. (Potter, page 96).

The questions included:

- Why did you choose QUT?
- What were your expectations prior to arrival?
- What has not worked out/or been very difficult?
- What has been the best part of your study?
- What can we do to improve your learning?

38 students participated in the focus groups from 4 regions, Africa (4), China/Taiwan/Hong Kong (14), India (10), and Thailand (10). Of the 38, 13 were undergraduate, 13 post-graduate and 12 MBA students. Of the 805 students invited, 38 is a small (4%) sample and can therefore be indicative only. It can, however, provide some insight in what attracted students to QUT in the first place, how this might differ from region to region and how we might provide a more effective learning experience.

Results.

The following is an analysis of the responses to the questions in the focus groups – indicating where relevant the particular region where the issue appeared significant. There were a number of comments and expectations that appear to be common across the student groups. It was also apparent that post graduate and MBA students had much clearer expectations, and were able to articulate them more cogently, than undergraduate students.

Why did you choose QUT?

The reasons why students from these four regions chose QUT fall into a number of different categories. Some appear to apply only to one region – others across the student body.

For Indian students the difficulty getting a US visa has led to prospective students looking elsewhere and to Australia in particular. QUT was also seen as affordable by this group of students.

The reputation of the institution appears to be significant across the board. Thai, Indian and African students also identified that they were looking for particular subject offerings e.g. Entrepreneurship and Public Relations. The features of the MBA program, 6 entry points, wide choice of electives, older age range and required work experience were attractive to the Indian students. Chinese, Thai and African students were attracted by the practical orientation of the programs.

Recommendation played a significant role for all the students. Recommendations came from agents, ELICOS teachers, teachers and college placement officers. Meeting QUT academics overseas also played an important role.

Pathway programs of different kinds helped students choose QUT, as did articulation arrangements with local institutions. All the regions with the exception of India identified these relationships. This may be because currently there are no articulation relationships in India, and many of the pathway programs are focussed on English language learning which is not relevant in India.

Location in Brisbane, the warm climate and city location were also important, particularly to those from warm home climates.

A fast response and offer was seen as important.

Expectations prior to arrival

African students appeared to be unaware of the international nature of the student base, and were pleasantly surprised. They had expected a totally Australian experience but felt that having the other international students was an additional bonus.

Thai students had great expectations of the social facilities that would be available, sporting, catering and social interaction options generally. The nature of a city campus, and the increased need for Australian students to work and therefore not spend a large amount of time on campus meant that these expectations were not met.

Indian students were surprised by the difference in teaching style between Australia and India. They felt the benefit of a more self directed learning regime but found it difficult to adjust. As a result, missing orientation could cause great stress and difficulty catching up. They felt that the importance of orientation should be reinforced.

What has not worked out/been very difficult

Indian students appear to have had great difficulty with agents – 5 had to go through 2 agents before their arrival at QUT.

Thai students found class sizes (post graduate) in some subjects too large and felt the lack of individual attention. They were also concerned that some units without pre-requisites were too difficult for those without prior experience in the field. They found the time allowed for examinations a challenge.

Chinese and Thai students raised a number of study related issue such as pressure during examinations and assignment times, the lack of confidence they felt and the impact this had on understanding lecturers.

Importance was placed on having access to university social activities and an opportunity to meet Australian students. They felt that these opportunities were lacking.

Best part of your study?

The multi cultural environment and international focus was valued by everyone. There was appreciation for the high quality programs with practical focus relevant to the workplace. They also valued the hard work required. This was identified as a mark of quality. They also valued the contact they had with teaching staff.

What can we do to improve things.

The areas that they identified for improvement follow on from their previous observations. They felt it important to encourage multi-culturalism and mixing of students from different countries in the classroom and socially.

They enjoyed social functions for students and staff to get together and would appreciate this to happen more often.

They felt that there could be some way of staff and fellow students supporting commencing students and helping them adjust to the new environment.

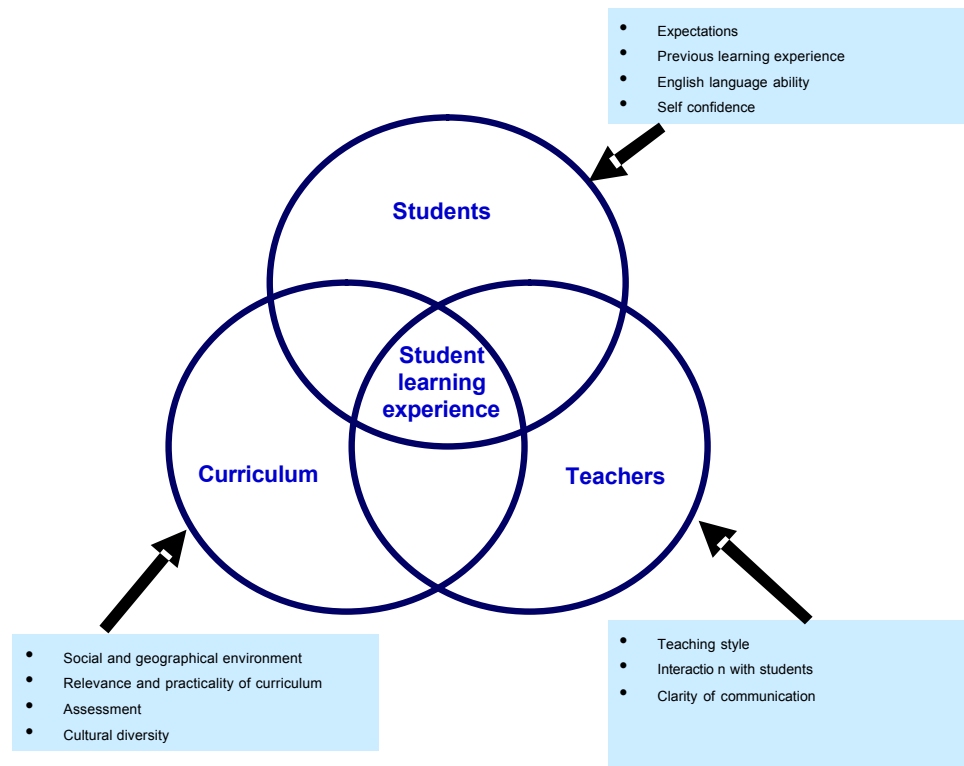
Conclusions and a Model for Action .

This feedback offers a range of challenges. What are prospective students told? Are they adequately prepared for study in Australia? Do we provide adequate learning support? Some of the factors that impact on their choice are outside of the control of the university e.g. visa regulations – but once here there appear to be a number of expectations that need to be met.

International students appear to value multi-culturalism, the ability to network across the globe, perhaps more than Australian students do. Encouraging intercultural interaction will be an ongoing challenge for tertiary institutions. This includes recognising the differences in learning style and previous education experience, providing bridging programs and enabling staff to provide the interaction that many students are seeking. It may be necessary to examine the curriculum that is taught and the assumptions made about prior knowledge and well as recognising study pressures particularly around assessment. Such examination would benefit domestic students as well.

The students who gave feedback had chosen QUT because they believed that the curriculum and teaching and learning practices would assist them to get employment. They were looking for content knowledge that reflected the demands in the work place and processes that equipped them to transfer their learning to the employment. They are also looking for a 'campus' experience which is increasingly difficult to provide with so many students having to work part-time to support their studies. This has a range of implications for how internationalisation is conceptualised, and how an institution meets student learning needs.

To assist the process of internationalisation and improve the student learning experience to enable students to operate effectively in an international, multicultural environment, a conceptual model has been developed around which activities could be developed. The nature of the student learning experience is dependent on the student, the design, delivery and assessment of curriculum and the pedagogy and attitudes of teachers in a complex relationship. The feedback from the focus groups enhances our understanding of what needs to be addressed in each of the elements of the student learning experience.



All three of the elements, students, curriculum and teachers, have an impact on the student learning experience. It is necessary therefore to address all three of the elements there will be a cumulative impact on students learning – with each activity building on, and enhancing, the others.

The learning support will enable international students to focus on their areas of need (different pedagogy, epistemological understanding, language etc.) and help them make the transition from previous learning models and expectations to the philosophy and methods used at QUT.

An examination of the curriculum will help define what is meant by 'internationalisation' of the curriculum – be it content, context, or pedagogy. Providing a genuinely international context to learning for all students will enable them to place their learning in the context of international business and be aware of the impact of globalisation and cross cultural issues on business practices.

Teachers are the key to facilitating the student learning experience – enabling teachers to be more effective in a classroom with students from diverse international backgrounds in areas of design, management and assessment as well as enhancing their ability to engage more effectively with students from multiple backgrounds will have a positive impact on student learning. It will also provide a more rewarding professional environment for teachers.

It is vital that institutions are clear about the nature of the learning experience that they are offering students. Not just the content, but the learning processes, the social activities, and the links to potential employment. International students are looking at the world from a different perspective, assessing the relevance and quality to fit into a context quite different from Australia. To be successful, not only in

generating income but in equipping students for their future careers, universities need to listen to students, prospective students and those on the ground in countries around the world to ensure that what is offered continues to meet emerging needs.

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