

Melanesian students: negotiating their identities to succeed in higher education

Fiona Pakoa, Queensland Education & Training International

1 Queensland Education & Training International, Department of Premier & Cabinet, 61 Mary Street, Brisbane, QLD, 4105
fiona.pakoa@premiers.qld.gov.au

Abstract

While working with AusAID sponsored students in a Queensland university, Melanesian students, as a distinct cohort, appeared to struggle the most with their academic program. Their ability to meet the academic expectations of the university appeared to be constrained, not by ability, but by their inability to cope with the competing academic, cultural and social demands. This research sought to explore the role of Melanesian students' cultural identity in their academic experiences.

This research adopted a student centred approach conducted within an interpretative paradigm. Melanesian students, defined as those permanently domiciled in Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu and Solomon Islands, enrolled in coursework programs were requested to voluntarily participate. Thirteen students were interviewed over a period of four weeks in November 2004. The students reported a strong sense of that it meant to be Melanesian. Their experiences although difficult, had to date been generally positive. However most were disappointed with their academic performance. Although this study opportunity was valued by themselves and their families, the students' experienced identity conflict, which compromised their academic outcomes. As with many mature aged students in full time study, they had to negotiate competing demands as a parent, spouse, student, and in the case of the Melanesians, a member of a clan. The role of cultural identity in academic performance is therefore viewed within the frame of the individual's ability to draw on their identity resources to negotiate and manage the "identity conflict" within their present given location.

Key Words: Melanesia, international student experiences, academic performance, cultural identity, higher education

Introduction

Within the context of a rapidly changing world and increasing cultural interconnectivity, individuals are evolving their sense of self as their experiences challenge their ability to acknowledge, interpret and mediate their circumstances. For individuals who come to study in Australia, they bring with them a unique identity, constantly evolving yet framed within the context of identity resources (Falk & Balatti, 2004) acquired through life long social and cultural experiences in geographical, spatial locations. For many their arrival in Australia provides yet another new and exciting episode in their life. Yet for some their ability to positively embrace the opportunities are constrained by disparate cultural, academic and social references.

For seven years as the AusAID Liaison officer at a Queensland university, I was responsible for monitoring the academic performance of AusAID sponsored students. The Melanesian students, as a cohort, consistently under achieved in relation to other AusAID students. Over a four year period (2001 – 2004) the Melanesian students, in comparison to the international student cohort and those students from the Pacific islands, achieved lower student performance units and lower grade point averages.

International students permanently domiciled in Melanesia (Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu) represent barely 1% of those enrolled in Australian institutions in 2004 (AEI, 2005). The majority of international students in Queensland are sourced from 8 Asian nations: China, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Korea and Japan. Much academic theorising on international student experiences focuses on students from South East Asia and their transitional issues. There is limited published literature on the experiences of Pacific island students. Institutional resources have been directed to assessing and understanding the learning and social needs of Asian students rather than students from less economically or politically significant nations, such as those in the Pacific.

Much research on student experiences has been undertaken within a positivistic paradigm concentrating on the relationship between tangible factors such as gender, language proficiency, entry qualifications, fields of study and duration course enrolment. With the growing emphasis on quality outcomes from the educational experience and the increasing competitiveness in the international education sector, outcomes and performance should not be ignored. Recent studies in Australia (Olsen, Sharma, & Burgess, 2004) and the UK (Morrison, Merick, Higgs, & Le Matais, 2005) explore the academic performance of international students but little consideration is given to the more intangible determinants of performance like cultural identity.

Theoretical Framework

International students' academic experiences

International education is important for Australia economically, culturally and politically. The longevity of attracting international students to educational institutions is dependent, amongst other things, on the experiences of current students and their willingness to recommend studying in Australia (Arambewela, Hall, & Zuhair, 2004; Mavondo, Zaman, & Abubakar, 2000). Educational providers have a legal and ethical (Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000; Edmond, 1995) responsibility to ensure that the students who participate in their institution are supported through that experience. Monitoring academic performance and providing support services to those not making satisfactory progress is integral to the National Code, a regulatory framework under the ESOS legislation. Increasingly institutions are looking to understand and respond to the needs of their students (Byng & Rees, 2004; Cronin, 2003).

While there is growing appreciation that international students do experience additional factors in association with the usual contributing factors of success for all students commencing higher education (Beasley & Pearson, 1999; Harding & Kidd, 2000; Hechanova-Alampay, Beehar, Christiansen, & Van Horn, 2002; Ninnes, 1999; Selvadurai, 1991), the “determinants of international student academic achievement are complex and not completely understood” (Stoyhoff, 1997).

Luzio-Lockett (1998), Wicks (1996), Cologon (1997), Yeh & Inose (2003), Abel (2002) and East (2001) emphasis the impact of insufficient English language proficiency on the students ability to overcome educational and social challenges. Affective factors, including illness, worries with the family, trouble at home, finance, stress were also identified in research conducted by Doran & Klimindis (2003) and Eghbali (1985). More recent research undertaken in Australia (Marginson, Nyland, Deumert, Ramia, & Sawir, 2005) highlights the potentially detrimental impact that stress and concerns over financial issues has on the students experiences in Australia. Situational factors which relate to the socio-educational environment in which students find themselves have been found significant in work undertaken by Myburgh, Niehaus & Pogenpoel (2002).

Increasingly the experiences of international students are being explored, yet these studies tend to be limited to transition phases, students predominantly from Asia and view international students as a homogenous group with group issues rather than individual identities (Koehne, 2005). There is little work on how culture impacts on academic performance of international students in higher education institutions (Cologon, 1997).

The only published work (Thompson & Bauer, 1994) relating to the determinants of academic success by Pacific island students found academic failure, by Samoan students, was attributed to insufficient finance, lack of preparation for life at University, difficulties with learning styles and academic expectations, lack of commitment to study, lack of time management and difficulty writing.

This research will add to the existing literature in presenting the experiences of a minority student group from a qualitative perspective on a less tangible aspect of their academic performance, their cultural identity.

Melanesian culture and identity

“who we are” otherwise known as our identity has been and continues to be the subject of intense theoretical analysis. Understanding identity is crucial to exploring the experiences of students participating in higher education (Anderson & Williams, 2001). The way people learn and the outcome of that learning process is affected by the unique and individual nature of their identity (Draper, 2001; Falk & Balatti, 2004; McInerney, 2000; Tomlinson-Clarke, 2001).

“identities are names we give to the different ways we are positioned by and position ourselves, within the narratives of the past.” (Alcoff, 2003 p. 3). Identities are no longer singular; they are both imposed and self-made. Sources of identity refer to social categories that shape the way we see ourselves and the ways others see us: gender, age, ethnicity, family, work, religion, nationality and place (Falk & Balatti, 2004). Our and others perceptions of us affects the manner in which we develop our sense of who we are. Identities are formed through multiple influences none of which has a greater influence than the other (Draper, 2001).

Current theorising on identity no longer assumes it to be acquired at birth and individually fixed. Individuals have multiple identities: that which make them unique (individual), that which is shared by a group to which they belong (collective) and that which focuses on the universality of identity (panhuman) (Tomlinson-Clarke, 2001). Understanding identity therefore requires the exploration of the relationship between individual’s social location, their interpretations of that location and the interplay and consequences of the economic, social, political structures in which they find themselves (Anderson & Williams, 2001).

Our cultural identity, while appreciating biological and historical attributes, emphasizes the role of social structures and patterns of relationships. Hall, considers cultural identity to be “aspects of our identity that arise from belonging to distinctive ethnic, racial, linguistic, religious and above all national cultures” (Hall, 1992 p. 274). Of particular significance to Hall’s work on cultural identity is the concept of cultural identity representing “shared” history and cultural codes for individuals to feel part of a whole. This relates not only to the past but cultural identity as being transformed through the current interplays of culture, power and history.

One’s cultural identity therefore determines how life is lived and experienced in relation to others. It is formed in relation to cultural boundaries and expectations of societal structures: the family, the community and the nation.

As our cultural identity evolves the structural discourses of economics and politics assume pre-eminence and importance. Kinship, power, politics, resources and education dictate who we are to be. Mathews (2000) suggests that our cultural identity may also evolve through a sense of choice. For many in the world today, social, economic and political inequalities within the interplays of choice and power, may prevent the freedom for many to live within their choice of cultural identity.

Melanesian students have a cultural identity that is shaped by experiences of local and global historically positioned events. Over time the interactions of imported and existing cultural forms and social practices, mediated by power and knowledge, have transformed the cultural perspectives at individual, local, national and international levels. These interplays are complex, intimate and socially determined, resulting in unique positions on an individual’s sense of cultural identity, becoming the way individuals experience themselves, their collectives and the world (Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Despite the diversity and difference, the people of Melanesia are connected by common values, practices and sentiments. These include an emphasis on distribution and consumption, priority to kinship (“wantok” system), principles of descent being crucial to the way that people construct their social worlds (Strathern et al., 2002), importance of celebrations, rites of passage and adornment and a lower priority to work and output (Croccombe, 2001), as defined by a “Western” perspective of work. For Melanesians there is great value in productivity but linked to their cultural values of community and celebration, as demonstrated by the value placed on pig rearing, yam production and mat making in ni-Vanuatu communities (Jolly, 1994).

Culture in Melanesia has not remained static. “It has been influenced through contact with other cultures, economic systems, religion and systems of social control” (Banks, 1993 p. 157). Hereniko suggests that such changes have “irreversible altered the social and cultural fabric of Pacific life” (1994 p. 417). The advent and infiltration of foreign, non-familiar representations and institutions in Melanesia, often from dominant

Western centric perspective, is synonymous with the consequences of globalisation for those disadvantaged in the global discourse of power and agency.

Within Melanesia, and in some areas to a larger extent than others, cultures are being transformed as values, practices and beliefs fixed in the realms of history and tradition are modified and mutated on contact with those imported. Individual's ability to construct their own sense of self is dependent on negotiating social structures and relations that exist in multiple layers. Successfully living and participating in society must therefore depend on how well they understand the structure, negotiate their interactions and position themselves as a consequence. It also requires a moral and ethic engagement and commitment of all involved in the associated interplays (J. Mathews & Sidhu, 2005).

Consequently Melanesian students studying in Australia will bring with them a unique set of identity resources that they have drawn on within their home environment to understand and live life. These understandings and experiences are based on the cultural practices, beliefs and values of their lived social experiences. When encountering new social, cultural and academic environments, individuals will experience identity transformations that are dependent on and mediated by their ability to negotiate, interrupt and project their identity resources within a shifting, dynamic and complex landscape.

While the overall research was focused on the role of cultural identity in academic performance, this paper will focus specifically on the student's cultural identity and its impact on how they negotiated their multiple and competing identities within the academic experience.

Research Method

The research focused understanding a small number of individual experiences from the individual's perspective, typifying an interpretative approach (Cohen et al, 2000). Discussions took place within the context of the individual as an integral component of a complex political and cultural organisation, that of a large conventional academic institution located in a vast urban location, geographically and culturally distinct from that of their home.

The research design was guided by the need to ask "how" questions from individuals on a face to face basis. A "semi-structured" approach (Hatch, 2002) to the interview was adopted given the small number of interviews undertaken and the nature of the information discussed.

As recommended by Patton (2002), Rubin & Rubin (1995) and Kvale (1996) an interview guide was developed to ensure that the interview progressed in a focused manner. The interview questions were categorised into those relating to being Melanesian, the student's perception of their academic and non-academic experiences and finally their thoughts on how their sense of cultural identity has impacted on their academic endeavours.

The research methodology was approved by the Monash University Ethics Committee and by the participating Queensland university prior to commencing data collection.

The student's anonymity was protected by assigning pseudonyms to documentation and audio tapes associated with the interview. Only the interviewer was aware of the rationale for the pseudonym and therefore the identity of the individuals.

In semester 2 2004 there were 93 Melanesians enrolled at the university; 67% undergraduate, 23% postgraduate and the remaining higher research degree candidates. Students were requested to volunteer to participate in the research through an email sent by the university. Of the 22 responses, 13 students were interviewed, a profile of which is shown in table 1 below:

Table 1. Profile of students interviewed

	Undergraduate Male 22-29	Postgraduate Male 36-37	Undergraduate Female 24-32	Postgraduate Female 33-40
Average age range				

Papua New Guinea	2	1	6	1
Solomon Islands	0	1	0	1
Vanuatu	1	0	0	0
Mean Age	28	36	35	37

Analysis of the interviews, conducted over the period 1st November to 2nd December 2004, focused on the audio recordings of each interview. Interviewees were invited to comment on the interview report prior to data analyse. An inductive approach (Hatch, 2002) was taken to interrupt the data. Rather than categorizing into predetermined themes, the themes were derived from the narratives.

The analysis was undertaken in three stages; assessment, categorisation and reduction. In the first stage, the interviews were merged into one continuous Word document. Primary category headings derived from the interview guide, were placed at the beginning of the document. Section headings, placed under the primary headings, were aligned to the “themes” which appeared from gaining an in-depth knowledge of the data (Ely & Saukko; 1997 p. 206).

The narrative from each participant was colour coded in the text font. In addition the women’s words were placed in italics.

In the second stage each interview was reviewed, selecting appropriate text and pasting it under relative headings at the beginning of the document. The visual cues, font colour and italics, allowed a recall of the non-verbal characteristics of the interview which could not be derived from the audio tape. This resulted in a more in-depth assessment of the data.

Finally the data within each category was reviewed and reordered to identity and code sub-themes. A further cut and paste process reduced the data set from 60 to 20 pages, a concise, comprehensive assessment of the interview data.

Research Findings

Students perceptions of their cultural identity

For most, being a Melanesian was something to be proud of. In accordance with the concept of one’s cultural identity being shared codes that make up a whole (Hall, 1992), students identified major themes that characterised how they perceived themselves to be Melanesian including:

- the colour of their skin and texture of their hair
- the nature in which individuals dress
- most of the women reflected on the role that food played in their culture
- only women mentioned the role of rituals and ceremonies.

While a number of the students reflected on their cultural identity within an essentialist paradigm as indicated above, all students emphasised the importance of the family and relations within that social institution as being inherently Melanesian, as indicated by Laura:

Family ties are very close and very strong compared to Western society. In our Melanesian culture we are dependent on each other, sisters, brothers and also we have obligations to the husband's family.

Being part of the family/clan meant providing for the financial and emotional wellbeing of the family units, including educating younger family members and ensuring that elderly parents in the villages had shelter and sustenance. For the women there are competing obligations from being part of two families; the one in which they were raised and the one into which they married. For those positioned dominantly in the family, this was an honour but also a burden. Ken reflects:

I am now responsible for looking after my family, extended family and clan. They come to me for help and advice. I manage and distribute resources and mediate as necessary. This is extremely stressful and places a great burden on my shoulders.

The family is security, a place to return, familiarity and acceptance. Family members pass on skills and knowledge through oral and physical practice. The family is an institution beyond that of a nuclear grouping, often geographically dispersed. It is the means through which individuals establish who they are in relation to others and for many binds them socially, financially and culturally through the “wantok system.”

Within the family structure, without exception the student spoke of gender relations as the most defining factor for their cultural identity. The male students interviewed reflected on the dominance of the men within their families. Within their patrilineal and patrilocal societies, which predominant in Melanesia, the men are responsible for decision making and resource management. As young men the formation of close and strong relations was reported by one participant to be more important than that of bonding with his parents.

The female respondents from the patrilineal communities reported having defined daily tasks associated with producing and reproducing. Irene commenced our interview with this statement:

Melanesian women have to know their role in the village. You wake up in the morning and do the household chores. You are expected to do this day by day. You also work in the gardens. You should know to weave mats and baskets. We are the productive members of the family.

Interestingly in matrilineal areas where woman are the head of the clan and first-born daughters inherit all land, women were afforded greater responsibility and respect. Kevin, a matrilineal male, commented that:

I was brought up in the matrilineal society but lived for 20 years in a patrilineal community. When I moved out I noticed a big difference between the male and female roles. In my matrilineal society there is definitely more respect for women. In some communities that I have been in I have seen women not treated the way they would be in my village.

Both men and women reported issues relating to jealousy and trust with a number of women reporting issues of violence against them. Several students reported the freedom they enjoyed by not having their spouses with them in Australia. Peter explained his situation below:

She (his wife) expects me to be home at the end of the day for dinner. When I don't get home she calls me up. When I was on my own, before she came, I used to go out drinking and clubbing with my friends. Although I still have the drive to do this, I feel that it is her right for me to be with her.

Irene indicated that it was not possible for her to stay in the library until late because

My husband expects me to be home at the end of the day. He would bash me up if I didn't get home by a certain time. Now he is changing a bit. He doesn't expect me to cook dinner if he comes home late.

A number of the women talked about the inappropriateness of interacting with “strange men”. Within their societies talking to unfamiliar men, especially making eye contact, was considered inappropriate behaviour. One female student spoke of the additional concern of other Melanesians witnessing such an interaction and the potential consequences of word returning to her family.

Being a Melanesian for these students was, to a limited extent, about how they looked and dressed but overwhelmingly, for them being a Melanesian is about their roles and responsibilities in relation to their family and clan. Their cultural identity is socially constructed within the complexities of social, political and financial obligations and expectations.

Multiple and Competing identities

The students in this study, while they were able to identify common themes that marked them as being Melanesian, their experiences in life to date have been unique and therefore have informed their sense of who they are, as individuals. With the exception of Kate and Peter, all other students interviewed had been lived or visited other countries previous to this study experience. Many students had experienced considerable internal travel within their own nations. With the exception of Belinda, all other students were raised in the village. The mobility of parents or the need to attend high school and/or university often resulted in students being separated from their families prior to studying in Australia. There was therefore a history of mobility and being geographically separated from the social and physical framework of their upbringing.

All these students were able to draw on significant life experiences as they commenced their academic journey. These students presented as mature, sophisticated members of their community accumulating resources through life to improve the quality of their family's existence. Within their own clan, they had status associated with having an education, paid employment and the opportunity to experience life outside the village. These students' identities, shaped by rich, dynamic daily experiences, were also competing within traditional cultural representations and more modern immediate demands of academic expectations. The role of cultural identity in academic performance is therefore within the frame of the individual's ability to draw on their identity resources to negotiate and manage the "identity conflict" within their present given location.

For most of the students their outcomes from their academic journey, defined as their performance, had not met their expectations. They were having to recognise and negotiate competing and multiple identities within a complex, alien social and cultural environment. For them being a student was possible only after being a clan member, parent, spouse.

Being a clan member

As members of the extended family, the students were expected to make contributions, financially and in-kind, to on-going family events at home, as demonstrated by Alice's comments below:

Being here I am still expected to make contributions to those back home. There is a perception that because I am in Australia I have lots of money. It is hard.

This sense of obligation is mediated by the need to ensure that the family is not offended or alienates the individual as reported by Kevin below:

I cannot totally ignore my family because when I go back no one will want to know me because I will have lost my respect.

Individuals therefore forgo consumption in Australia and place undue financial burden on themselves to meet the expectations of the extended family, as reported by Mark below:

I live modesty because I send my money home. Maybe my education may improve because I do not buy books but rather spend my money on my community for some projects.

Being a parent

As a parent the expectations are considerable particularly for the women. For the female students there was therefore considerable conflict between being a good mother and being a good student. Kathy explained that at home the compromise between parenting and employment was managed:

At home I am a working mother but I have relatives that take care of the kids.

While in Australia most of the women find themselves alone in caring for the children even if their spouses are resident. They all talked openly about the consequences of having unwell children on their study.

Being a spouse

Married female students, who are also mothers, find themselves juggling competing demands like many others. However the Melanesians are differentiated by cultural expectations. In Australia we live in a society where it is increasingly expected that men and women take equal responsibility for the development and maintenance of family life. Yet for the Melanesian students and their spouses, the traditional expectations of production and reproduction continue. The values of trust, acceptance and equity do not have similar importance in the Melanesian spousal relations, as demonstrated by Kathy's comments below:

Jealousy and mistrust is part of a Melanesian married relationship.

These issues of sexual jealousy and mistrust were not only voiced as issues for the women. Peter indicated that his wife, who he considered to be a little different because she was also studying and was exposed to Australian ways, reverted to more traditional expectations when it came to his movements and activities after hours, which impacted on his study.

On reflection, many of the challenges facing the Melanesian students are not dissimilar to other mature aged students with partners and possibly children. What differs are the restrictions placed on the students by the cultural values and beliefs held by those that populate their social frame.

Being a student

As a student each individual was on a unique academic journey. Some students were passing all subjects each semester at or below desired grade outcomes. Most of the students were passing most but not all subjects and would be need to seek additional time to successfully complete their degree. There were a few students who were on notice by the university and at risk of not gaining their qualification. Yet all students expressed an overwhelming desire to graduate. However being a student required an expectation of timely submission of work, participation in class and contribution in group work. For many, those requirements were challenging.

A few students indicated that they were shy and found it intimidating to participate in tutorials and approach academic staff. Mark suggests below:

My culture makes me shy and it prevents me from being out going.

Many participants mentioned the challenge of communicating in context both in and out of the classroom. Kevin was conscious of his communication strategies being misconstrued by peers and teaching staff as below:

I sit, listen and try and understand but I don't always talk or participate not because I do not know the answer but rather I am respecting the teaching.

For some female participants, the lack of familiar social interaction contributed to feelings of isolation and loneliness as illustrated by Kathy below:

In my culture it is very friendly and we do a lot of socializing and interacting. We are used to having people around us all the timeBeing here is the feeling of isolation and not being part of the community.

Many of the students indicated that the major cultural constraint to making satisfactory academic progress was their attitude to time management. Ken mentioned leaving assessments to the last minute. Lucy indicated that it was not important for her to get to lectures and group time on time. Kathy and Irene raised the difficulty of managing time for study and home responsibilities, as reinforced by Kathy below:

For you people time is everything. For us we take our time. It is not urgent to do things and this may affect the way we perform.

While there may seem to be significant barriers for the Melanesian students to identify as a student, the male students are solely motivated to succeed by a fear of failing. All the men indicated that the fear of being shamed by the family urged them to do well, as explained by Kevin below:

I know that if I go home and have not passed then I will be a disgrace to the family so I am motivated to pass. I know that I have not done well in the last semester but I am being pushed forward. If I do not pass then it will not be a good thing for my employer and family.

For all the students it was essential for them to maintain a sense of being Melanesian while they were studying. Their period of study at the university was seen as a temporary experience and one from which they would have to return back to their homes.

Overall their experiences were difficult but positive. Factors impacting on their performance include differing learning styles, technical content and familiarity with technology. Others included balancing obligations between study and family and attitudes to time management. Their experience in the university is highly valued by themselves and that of their family, given the perception that obtaining a higher education qualification would enable them to provide financial support to the family and advocate as an educated member of the clan.

For most being a student was only one of multiple and competing identities, an identity not sufficiently resourced to meet the academic expectations of the culturally different organisation in which they were studying. It was difficult for them to be a good student because they were unable to meet academic expectations and were distracted by competing identity obligations.

Discussion

This thesis sought to explore the possible role that cultural identity may play in the academic performance of Melanesian students in a Queensland university. Specifically the thesis provided an opportunity for a small minority of the international student cohort to discuss their academic experiences in a large university in Australia within the context of their perceived cultural framework.

Factors impacting on successful academic outcomes

Determining successful academic outcomes relates to both individual and institutions factors. The majority of the students interviewed acknowledged that they had not performed as well as they would have liked. Yet their experience was one valued by themselves, their families and those in the private sector, their employers.

There were similarities with the factors identified by Thompson and Bauer (1994) in that students identified time management and differing learning styles as affecting their performance. Yet contrary to Thompson and Bauer (1994), these students were motivated to achieve high grades and were disappointed not to do so. The students expressed the importance of furthering their education in order to contribute financial, socially and politically to the needs of their wider community on returning home.

Many of the students were able to articulate personal constraints to achieving their desired academic outcomes. These included understanding the communication context and technical terminology within their

learning environment. These interactions were often based on prior knowledge, which they did not have. Postgraduate students made references to the terminology associated with highly developed financial services that were alien to them. Similarly undergraduate students, while understanding the words, were less confident with how to communicate and interact within the learning context.

The cultural context in which the communication interaction takes place must also be considered when assessing a student's ability to communicate in the learning environment. Increasingly diverse cultural composition of classrooms creates a desire for the implementation of responsive and creative pedagogies (Tsolidis, 2001) with the onus on the teacher or the institution to reformulate the teaching and learning environment. Yet learners are an active and integral component in creating these learning spaces. Understanding the cultural factors that impact on communication and learning process precede developing a reciprocal relationship and responsibility of all participating in the teaching and learning experience.

For many of the students there were significant expectations on them to manage and distribute resources within the family as well as contribute politically and financially to the well being of their community. Consequently Melanesian students were not only having to cope with the affective factors similar to other international students but in addition, given their sense of cultural identity, had additional pressures and stress related to managing and maintaining their responsibilities in their home country.

Yuval-Davis (1997 pg 39) argues "Gender relations are at the heart of cultural constructions of social identities and collectivities." This research highlights the gender dynamics within Melanesian partnerships and the significant impact that it has on individual's ability to study effectively. Culturally understood practices are imported when students come to study including the lack of trust and jealousy in spousal relations. The inability of students to remain late in the library, attend evening classes, and for the female students, the expectation that needs of the family comes before study, places additional burden on what is already a stressful experience. Considerable tension exist between the male spouse who maybe unwilling to embrace the new living environment and modify their behaviour and the female student who is required to participate and interact in a social and academic environment potentially not open to or understood by her male spouse. Incidents of emotional, physical and financial domestic violence are not uncommon and were reported by a few of the students interviewed.

Of particular significance was the different positions voiced by students from patrilineal and matrilineal societies. Their cultural representations, as revealed by the Melanesian students studying in Australia, signify existing cultural power dynamics between the genders. Within patrilineal societies, which predominant in Melanesia, women are often subordinated through cultural codes. Once in a different society, for example here in Australia, women are able to reevaluate their position on basis of experiencing alternative structures and systems of gender relations. There is greater opportunity and freedom for empowerment and self-expression. Yet their attempts to re-negotiate and realign their political and cultural position are not accepted or understood by their men. The dynamics within those gender relations therefore changes often resulting in conflict as highlighted by four participants, both male and female.

While Melanesian students' academic performance is affected by a range of factors similar to other international students, this research would suggest that for the Melanesian students affective factors associated with family and relationships plays a predominantly role in defining their academic outcomes.

Culture, identity and academic performance: the interplays

The students were motivated to successfully complete their academic experience and return to their community to make positive contributions. Yet they struggled to achieve that goal. While many students indicated that their academic experiences were generally positive, they were dissatisfied with their academic performance.

Their lived experiences, both positive and negative, resulted from their ability to drawing on their identity resources and negotiate social and academic interactions on a daily basis. Their capacity to develop and sustain positive relations is determined by what is brought to that first interaction, what is taken away and the acquisition of skills and confidence to interact again.

While the students struggle to manage and mediate their relationships within the institution, they continue to juggle multiple and competing identities: that of being a spouse, a mother, a student. This is not uniquely Melanesian. Yet it is the parameters of cultural identity that defines how these pressures are managed. How individuals see themselves in relation to others and how they acquire and transform knowledge as they negotiate the social and academic structures within their Australian environment determines the outcome.

There is growing awareness of the importance of providing positive and productive academic, cultural and social experiences for international students while in Australia. At present there is no consistent evidence to suggest that institutions are exploring the nature of academic interaction from a cultural perspective. Yet understanding cultural identity and the way in which it impacts on the interactions of students and staff would contribute to more effective communication and learning. This is increasingly important in the current climate of increased utilisation of technology and self-structure learning.

If Australia is to maintain its position within the global market for international students, its comparative advantage may exist through delivering internationally endorsed quality academic programs in association with culturally relevant, student focused academic and welfare support mechanisms. The Australian international education industry would be well served by satisfied and successful alumni.

Conclusion

This paper sought to explore the impact of cultural identity on academic experiences' of Melanesians students. The problems highlighted by these students were not dissimilar to other international students reported in previous research. What this thesis I hope shows is that the student's imported cultural representation that informed their cultural identity determined how they reacted to experiences and events.

While the students' experiences were generally positive, their individual journeys had been at times stressful and their academic outcomes to date had been disappointing. Competing demands from multiple and conflicting agents required them to negotiate social, financial, cultural and academic impediments. Outcomes to these negotiations are determined by how individuals utilise their cultural resources and identity while continuing to be a student, spouse, parent, employee and friend.

For many Melanesians studying in Australia, the focus on the individual and the lack of cultural understanding of the collective as demonstrated through absence institutional internationalisation, makes it difficult for them to prioritise study against the needs and desires of their immediate and wider family.

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