The 3C model: Communicating the important stuff to new internationals

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The provision of quality advice to new international students has become increasingly important in Australian and New Zealand universities. It is generally accepted that orientations help internationals adjust to life and study in a foreign culture. Students who receive clear and relevant advice on matters such as health services, insurance and personal safety are more likely to be mentally equipped for the early stages of their sojourn than students who do not receive such advice or fail to understand it.

It is surprising then that few studies have investigated the extent to which new arrivals comprehend the information presented to them. Also, evidence-based models for the orientation of new students are lacking, and so the efficacy of orientation practice is more difficult to assess. This discussion paper will argue that a problem has slipped to some extent beneath the pastoral care radar: a communication gap that exists between education providers and new international students as a result of linguistic and cultural factors. A ground-level communication model is then introduced as a first step towards addressing the problem.

Linguistic limitations

A significant proportion of new internationals in Australasian universities are English as Additional Language (EAL) students, and the extent to which orientation planners account for this is unclear. In New Zealand, international students are required to have a minimum of IELTS 6 for degree course entry. Not surprisingly, students with this level of English do not possess the same vocabulary range as native English speakers, so their comprehension of English text and speech is likely to be, at least initially, more limited. IELTS advise that more English study is needed for students with IELTS 6, irrespective of their chosen subject areas, and that IELTS 6.5 is 'probably acceptable' for some academic courses which are the least demanding linguistically (Daly, 2007, p.3).

The question is whether incoming EAL students are disadvantaged linguistically when negotiating pre-arrival and post-arrival orientation material. According to Nation (2006), second language (L2) research indicates that non-native English speakers are likely to need up to 98% text coverage (1 unknown word in 50) in order to gain sufficient comprehension of fiction and non-fiction texts. He cites Kumia, for instance, whose study found that only a small percentage of L2 readers with less than 98% coverage could achieve adequate comprehension of a non-fiction text. Nation suggests that even 98% text coverage does not ensure adequate reading comprehension.

Is the principle of text coverage being addressed by education providers recruiting and informing international students? There is little published evidence to suggest that it is. Institutional language use can, however, be critiqued to some degree by the use of web-based software that scans the percentage of high-frequency words on any given text. If an information brochure (or orientation session) contains a high proportion of high-frequency words, it is more likely to be comprehended by an EAL student. The most frequent words in the English language have been identified in the *first 2000 word list* (Nation, p.11, 2001), and the most common academic words (570 word families) in the *Academic Word List* (AWL) (Coxhead, 2004). Around 82% of words in any given text are in the first 2000 word list, and around 4% of words in newspapers and 8 % of words in academic texts are in the AWL (Nation, p.17, 2001). The remaining words are categorised as

being ‘outside the lists’ and include technical terms, as well as low-frequency, non technical words. It is estimated that, in general, 13% of words in academic texts are outside either list.

Over a period of several months in 2008 I conducted a preliminary software-based scan of more than a dozen Australian and New Zealand universities’ web pages which presented information on insurance, student health and personal safety to international students. Recognised software was used to determine the percentage of first 2000 words, AWL words and words outside the lists (*Word frequency text profiler*, 2008). On average, around 80% of the words on these pages were in the first 2000 word list. However, some web pages provided texts with only 75% of words in the first 2000, and these included pages which outlined essential health services to students. Further, some pages contained up to or over 13% of words outside the lists. In other words, these texts were as lexically dense, or denser, than academic texts. Nation suggested to me in e-mail correspondence (July 1, 2008) that 95% (first 2000+AWL) would be an optimal percentage for texts that advise newly arrived international students. The preliminary scan indicated, however, that few online texts reached this level. There seems, therefore, to be a need for research to survey the weighting of high-frequency/low-frequency words on information pages designed for new international students.

It is quite possible that web page language is indicative of a broader use of English that is only partially successful in reaching EAL students. And adjusting language use for the purpose of communication is not only a matter for education providers. Documents used by the New Zealand Ministry of Education to explain the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students have been found to be inaccessible to some students:

> When I first read the Code I had trouble understanding it so I needed my friend to translate it for me so that I could understand it. I think it’ll be helpful if the Code was translated into my native language or was written in a simpler way (*Evaluation of the Code of Practice*, 2006, p.69).

Language has also been identified as an issue for lecturer teaching. After investigating the communication styles of four lecturers, Daly (2007, p.6) offers the following conclusion: ‘they may be unaware of the language they are using and the problems this may cause [EAL] students’. Mulligan and Kirkpatrick (2000), cited in Daly, researched student comprehension of lecture content and found significant differences between the ability of domestic students and EAL students to comprehend lecture material.

Added to the concern about an EAL student’s vocabulary range is the instructional approach adopted by orientation planners. There are no clear vocational pathways for international student support professionals in New Zealand, which probably leads to methods of communication that differ from institution to institution. How do orientation presenters respond to the pedagogic challenge of communicating clearly to large groups? This is a task that requires an intricate skill set to achieve consistently and successfully (Davis, 1993), yet some international students have indicated that they were not aware of the Code of Practice because they ‘received a large amount of paper at orientation’ (*Evaluation of the Code of Practice*, 2006, p.69). From a pedagogic perspective, ‘a large amount of paper’ suggests some new students are being subject to ‘information dumps’. Also, reinforcement and repetition are recognised principles for learning, but are these principles an integral feature of orientations? And to what extent do programme planners consider the bio-mechanics of sitting and listening to a series of 30-60 minute presentations (in a second or third language)?

Cultural distance

Apart from language, culture is a significant factor in communication. Research in the cultural psychology field points to the importance of culture-specific knowledge in intercultural interaction (Ward, Bochner & Furnham, 2001) (Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama & Barker, 1999). In other words, if education providers do not account for cultural difference, international students' cultural dispositions are less likely to be accommodated. And if this occurs, the prospect of effective support and advice diminishes.

A significant proportion of international students in Australasian universities are Asian, and the number of students from the Middle East is steadily rising. What is significant about Asian and Middle Eastern regions is that they are home to what anthropologist Geert Hofstede terms 'large power distance' (LPD) cultures (Hofstede, 2005). Hofstede examined a substantial body of survey data about the values of people in seventy four countries and regions. His findings led to the development of the Power Distance Index (PDI), which groups countries into large power distance (LPD) and small power distance (SPD) cultures. According to Hofstede (2005, p46), power distance is 'the extent to which the less powerful members of the institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.' Subsequent replication studies have largely confirmed Hofstede's power distance findings.

With respect to international education, the PDI reveals a stunning contrast between host countries and students' home countries. Australia and New Zealand have been identified as SPD cultures, with New Zealand ranked 71st from 74 countries. On the other hand, Asian and Arab countries are ranked at the *opposite* (LPD) end of the Index, with Malaysia at number one, Arab countries and China ranked 12 to 14th, Indonesia 15 to 16th, India 17 to 18th, and Vietnam 22 to 25th.

The characteristic values of people from LPD cultures differ markedly from people with SPD values. In terms of formative values, Hofstede (2005, p.51) notes that in LPD cultures:

> Independent behaviour on the part of the child is not encouraged. Respect for parents and other elders is seen as a basic virtue ... . [Children] are looked after and not expected to experiment for themselves. There is a pattern of dependence on seniors that pervades all human contacts, and the mental software that people carry contains a strong need for such dependence.

Hofstede juxtaposes this social programming for dependence with that of child rearing in SPD cultures: 'The goal of parental education is to let the children take control of their own affairs as soon as they can' (Hofstede, p.52). The values instilled by parents are subsequently perpetuated by the respective schooling systems. And not surprisingly, the mental programming within homes and schools orders relationships within the workplace. According to Hofstede, workplace relations in LPD cultures reflect a hierarchical system in which power is meticulously centralised. There are a higher proportion of supervisors than in SPD cultures and subordinates are not expected to take initiative, i.e. they expect direct supervision and would be uncomfortable without it.

Another aspect of culture that is measured relative to other cultures is the concept of individualism versus collectivism. Social relations and business contracts in collectivist communities depend on trusted persons or intermediaries, and people depend on social networks as their primary source of information, unlike people in individualist societies who are more inclined to use media. Hofstede

(1980, p.216) notes that 'in the collectivist Chinese society (and in other Asiatic societies such as Japan), the individual is not 'inner-directed' but controlled by a need for not losing face'. Further, the individual has a sense of 'we' in that she finds meaning, solace and protection primarily from an intimate 'in-group' (initially her extended family) which buffers her against the shocks of life (Hofstede, 2005, p.75). Collectivist countries such as China are generally ranked highly on the PDI.

The concepts of power distance and collectivism beg the question as to whether the support of (a large proportion of) international students is based on a cultural mismatch. It could be that Australasian universities are expecting students from LPD/collectivist cultures to access student services tailored for students raised in a SPD/individualist culture. These services, which range from office-based student advisors to clinic-based health care, depend primarily on *individual initiative*, without which support does not occur. In other words, if individual students do not take the initiative to approach a service 'in waiting', they do not receive help.

LPD/collectivist values and behaviours appear to be reflected in government reports and studies that researched international students' use of campus services. For instance, the Final Report for the Evaluation of the Code of Practice commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education (*Evaluation of the Code of Practice*, p67, 2006) raised concerns about international students not accessing sexual and reproductive health services: '*it is of concern that international students do not appear to be turning to their tertiary providers for assistance*'. It is important to note that the international student body in New Zealand in 2005/2006 was predominantly Asian (*Statistics*: *Foreign fee paying student statistics by market 1998-2006*, 2008). Also, health educators in New Zealand had previously expressed concerns about the marked rise in young Asian women, including Chinese students, seeking terminations. For example, the authors of a clinic-based study called for 'immediate sexual health education' for incoming international students (Goodyear-Smith & Arroll, 2003). Such measures, however, are likely to be resisted by SPD support personnel who, according to Hofstede, are culturally disinclined to tackle issues they believe should be addressed by the individual. Indeed, this SPD instinct is reflected in the following comment in the *Evaluation of the Code of Practice* (p.65): 'Pastoral care workers were not in a position to intervene in the habits of adult students, wherever they were from'.

In terms of seeking help generally, the results of the 2007 *Experiences of International Students in New Zealand* survey revealed that international students are 'more likely to seek social and emotional support from their international peers than any other group' (*Executive Summary*, p.4, 2007). This supports Hofstede's claim that individuals from collectivist societies are more culturally wired to resort to their in-group for help, and this inclination is arguably accentuated in a foreign culture in which support systems appear alien to new arrivals.

International research indicates that foreign students are less likely to seek help for some health issues. For instance, Yeh and Inose (2003, p.17) cite research which found that international students tend to underutilise mental health services in the United States (a SPD country), even though their own study showed that Asian international students experienced more acculturative distress than their European counterparts. Also, Mori (2000, p.139) notes that international students in the United States are disinclined to access services on their own, and that mental health services in particular are 'significantly underused'. She concludes that the 'cultural values and beliefs held by most international students are often in direct conflict with a traditional American concept of mental health' (p.143).

Cultural distance appears to be an integral factor in adjustment. Furnham and Bochner, cited in Ward (p. 425, 2006), researched the cultural learning approaches of international students and subsequently divided them into three groups on the basis of the cultural distance between the students' home countries and the host country, the United Kingdom. The 'near group' comprised students from north European countries, while the 'far group' comprised students from Middle Eastern and Asian countries. Interestingly, in 2007 ESANA (European-South African- North American) students in New Zealand were reported to be the most satisfied cohort of students, while the Chinese students were the least satisfied (*Experiences of International Students in New Zealand: Executive Summary*, p.6 2007). Hofstede's PDI helps to account for the cultural distance between the 'far group' and the 'near group'.

The importance of orientation

If LPD students are culturally disinclined to access services tailored for SPD students, then it becomes even more important that they, at the very least, receive clear advice on how to 'survive and thrive' before commencing their tertiary studies. In particular, it would be prudent to alert them to live issues during orientation. One example of a live issue for international education in New Zealand in recent years is personal safety.

According to the *Experiences of International Students in New Zealand: Research findings* (2007, p.5), safety was a significant factor in students' decisions to come to New Zealand. This was supported by the findings of Colmar Brunton survey, which found that New Zealand's perception as a safe country was viewed as a unique strength which appealed to students and their families (*Demand side market research -China and Vietnam*, pp. 75-91, 2007). In fact, comparisons with other commonwealth countries and the United States showed that the perception of safety is more important to New Zealand's image than to the image of competitor countries.

Although the reasons for the sharp drop in Chinese international students coming to New Zealand in 2003/2004 were multi-faceted, a recent paper by Mingsheng Li suggests that the tarnishing of New Zealand's image as a safe destination was a significant contributor. In his illuminating paper *The impact of the media on the New Zealand export education industry* (2007) Li reveals for the first time the broad scope of negative media reporting in China. Chinese students studying overseas were being widely reported as victims and perpetuators of crime, and New Zealand figured prominently and regularly in these reports. This extensive media coverage preceded and coincided with the sharp fall in enrolments of new Chinese students in New Zealand, a fall incidentally which occurred in no other competitor country during this period (*Demand side market research- China and Vietnam*, pp.19-49, 2007). Although some Chinese media reporting was dubious and sensationalised, it was difficult to escape the conclusion that New Zealand was not as safe as students and their families were led to believe. It would seem, then, that an appropriate response for New Zealand education providers would be to ensure that relevant safety information was presented to incoming students, particularly Chinese students, as clearly and simply as possible. This is certainly the view that Li (2008) takes in his review of Chinese students' safety issues in New Zealand.

Introducing the 3C model: addressing the communication gap

The 3C model recognises and responds to linguistic and cultural challenges facing incoming EAL students. Drawing particularly on principles in the applied linguistics field to enhance communication, the model proposes (i) text and speech that provides **comprehensible input** (CI) for new students, (ii) multi-disciplinary **collaboration** which helps to achieve this, and (iii) a

responsive **cross-sector** mechanism that identifies issues that are in most need of CI-translated information and advice. The 3C model is an early stage intervention which is ideally complimented by a post-enrolment mentoring programme that caters for students from LPD countries. Since being developed and implemented by Victoria University of Wellington's (VUW) Foundation programme, the model has been adopted by Victoria International (VI) for the purpose of orientating new degree students.

FIRST C: Comprehensible Input
Using English text and speech that is within EAL students' known vocabulary range

The first C proposes the preparation and delivery of comprehensible input (CI), and reinforcement through comprehension checking and clarification. CI was a term first coined by the linguist Krashen to describe the provision of second language input that is just beyond the learner's 'linguistic competence' (Krashen, 1981). While he introduced the CI concept as a hypothesis for language acquisition, it is used in the 3C model to simply to denote English language that is within an EAL student's existing vocabulary range.

In VUW Foundation Studies orientation sessions, a Foundation teacher with TESOL expertise asks the guest presenter carefully timed clarification questions to help students comprehend the flow of speech 'mid-flight'. In other words, the teacher raises the CI level of the presentation by acting as an *interpreter,* occasionally asking the presenter to explain low-frequency words or idioms to the students. This is necessary because the presenters represent various campus and community services and sometimes have limited experience communicating with EAL students. The usefulness of clarification questions is supported by findings in negotiation studies. According to Nation (2001, p. 65) 'if [second] language learners are engaged in a task, then observing others negotiating is just as effective as doing the negotiation.'

Following selected sessions, the students' overall comprehension is determined by administering exit quizzes (restricted to 3 questions). Early findings of completed quizzes in 2008 indicate that student intake is high. For example, in a quiz preceding a health session, students were asked to compare the services provided by the GP and A&E (multi choice), as well as write down options for avoiding pregnancy. The same questions were repeated in an exit quiz, and a higher proportion wrote more accurate answers, including more specific comments on contraception, such as 'take the pill' and 'use a condom'.

SECOND C: Collaborating Schools/Centres
Employing expertise from across different university schools/centres to successfully deliver comprehensible input

1. Text design and editing
Foundation Studies is working with Victoria International to critique the comprehensibility of Victoria's information for new internationals. Vocabulary scanning software is used to identify the proportion of high-frequency and AWL words in a text. Post arrival brochures for new international students at Victoria have subsequently been edited, and some online texts are currently being reviewed and reworded.

For example, the adjacent excerpt from an (old) online page with 1763 words was scanned to establish the percentage of first 2000 and AWL words. 79.81% were first 2000 (in black); 6.64% were AWL; and 13.56% were outside both lists. The percentage of high frequency words is too low (86%): falling almost 10% below Nation's target of 95%. In other words, new international students with IELTS 5.5/6 are unlikely to digest this text with ease. Fortunately, its comprehensibility can be raised fairly easily by reducing the proportion of low-frequency words (in blue). For instance the phrase drug and alcohol abuse (following the sub heading) could be replaced by the expression 'Taking drugs and drinking too much alcohol', and 'harm' could be substituted for jeopardise. It is important that new students are offered paths of least resistance when presented with essential health and personal safety information. Subtle adjustments to language can be achieved without 'dumbing down' the texts.

Gambling: Some students gamble in an attempt to ''win the jackpot'' and increase their annual budget - however, most of the time they LOSE, LOSE, LOSE! Never gamble with the money you have brought to New Zealand to pay for your study or living. When people cannot control their urge to gamble, it is called ""Problem"" or ""Compulsive"" Gambling. The Problem Gambling Foundation of New Zealand offer professional psychologists and social workers to help people with gambling issues. They are located on Level 3, Community House, 84 Willis, phone 0800 664262.
Drug and Alcohol Abuse: Drug and alcohol abuse can jeopardise your health and your future. Possession of drugs carries penalties that include large fines and imprisonment.

2. Exchange

An exchange in personnel facilitates the spread of expertise. In 2008, for the first time, a Foundation Studies teacher participated in VI orientation sessions as an 'interpreter', asking clarification questions on behalf of IELTS 6 students. The VI advisors observed the questioning with a view to incorporating comprehension checking and exit quizzes into future orientations. In return, VI updates Foundation Studies on emergent pastoral and Code-related matters.

3. Support-research collaboration

Foundation Studies teachers sometime assist postgraduate researchers from the VUW School of Psychology and the VUW School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies. There is scope for extending this cooperation by providing a desk for a postgraduate researcher in either the Foundation Studies or VI office. Collaborative, shoulder-to-shoulder approaches could then be taken to address important questions such as: *What is the extent of student intake prior to and following international student orientations?*

THIRD C: Cross-sector updates

Identifying the issues that are in most need of comprehensible input.

Cross-sector updates help to answer the question: 'Which topics are most relevant to new international students right now and need clear explanation?' Orientations might be code-compliant in content but fail to address live issues.

1. Pre-orientation updates

Foundation Studies achieves this by a scheduled 'ring around': contacting relevant campus and off-campus services prior to orientation. On campus sources include the financial support office, Student Health and Student Counselling. VUW's Risk Advisory Assessment Committee, which identifies at-risk students, also provides information. Consultation extends beyond the campus because risk factors for newly arrived students are sometimes higher in the community. The local

community constable, who participates in orientation sessions, provides updates on issues relevant to student safety and security. For instance, if student flats have recently been broken into and laptops stolen, new students are advised to record the serial numbers on their laptops. Additionally, if students are being pressured to lend money, they are warned of the risks of lending and advised how to deal with stand-over tactics. Tenancy Services also provides advice on emergent flatting problems for students, such as distinguishing between periodic and fixed term tenancies and clarifying the rights of tenants and landlords.

2. Cross-sector connectivity

In 2006, a VUW Foundation Studies staff member co-convened the National Safety Advisory Group, an ISANA NZ initiative which investigated a cross-sector approach to international student support and safety. Michael Cullen, the then Minister for Tertiary Education, commented on the group's recommendations and described its work as important (*Speech to International Education Association Conference,* p.7, 2006). The group found that there were sometimes gaps in the exchange of information between education providers and government agencies in relation to new student support issues. There is an opportunity to extend this work at a sector level by forming a national, cross-sector group that provides a broad perspective on international student support trends. This group could convene once a year to help build 'broadband connectivity' between education providers, police, relevant government agencies and ethnic communities. Cross-sector updates and recommendations would then provide an annual frame of reference for orientation planners across New Zealand. In other words, outside help would be available to help identify 'the important stuff'.

Beyond orientation: reinforcing the input

In addition to a two day pre-enrolment orientation, the Foundation Studies orientation continues over a thirteen week period (one trimester). Student support and community services are introduced to students in a compulsory, fifty minute lecture/workshop every week as a component of the Academic Writing course. Comprehensible input is integral to the sessions. Some workshops such as Student Health 'loop back' to initial sessions delivered prior to enrolment. This reflects the established learning principles of repetition and reinforcement and helps to offset the logistical restraints of enrolment week, which limits the number of orientation sessions that can be delivered. In other words, weekly sessions reinforce and add to what is learned in the initial orientation. Of course, the provision of quality pre-departure material helps to provide the ground work for student learning.

Foundation Studies uses the *Campus Coaches* programme, which is a VUW mentoring programme that matches a new student with a senior student for the first four weeks. Pre-trained mentors are invaluable for reinforcing important information, particularly for newly arrived students from LPD countries who expect a level of supervision and are less likely to take individual initiative (Hofstede, 2005). Advice and support from an assimilated co-national can help to offset the cultural inclination of some of these students to bypass campus services. The Campus Coaches programme is a new initiative, but it offers scope for tailored, one-to-one assistance. For instance, a senior student could help new students access a campus service by modelling the sociocultural competencies involved (Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, & Barker, 1999). It is possible that as campus mentoring programmes develop, mentors will assume greater importance as intermediaries or trusted persons; people who are integral to social relations and support in LPD societies (Hofstede, 1980).

Summary

In terms of communicating with new international students, it is possible that the questions of comprehensible input (CI) and cultural instinct have to some extent passed under the pastoral care radar. Little is known about the information intake of newly arrived international students, and there are few evidence-based frameworks currently available to orientation planners. This is a problem because linguistic and cultural factors present a twin challenge to education providers. Not only do many students have to negotiate a second or third language, they may also find it difficult to access student support services that presuppose cultural inclinations that are foreign to them. In response to these challenges, the 3C model provides practical, collaborative measures for engaging and informing new international students. It also offers a responsive mechanism for recognizing emergent issues that are in most need of a tailored approach to communication. Mentoring programmes offer a complimentary adjunct to the model as means of reinforcing CI to 'service-shy' students post-enrolment. The 3Cs are versatile in that the principles of *interpret, scan* and *ring-around* are easily transferred to other education providers, such as institutes of technology, PTEs and schools. In short, the model identifies a communication problem that has to date received little attention and addresses it by introducing a ground-level framework for informing incoming students.

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