Responding to student diversity in New Zealand university settings Making connection between academic learning advising and international students

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Abstract

Many universities in western countries attest with eloquence that international students are now an important learning community in their campuses. In the case of New Zealand, international education is synonymous with educating Asian students because of the numerical domination of fee-paying students from Asia. Often referred to as non-traditional, these students bring with them different academic learning styles. Addressing their learning needs has often been a challenge for the lecturers as well as for the students. This paper suggests that an academic-centred approach which links learning advising to the university's mission on teaching and learning has the potential of enhancing the students' readiness to be integrated into the host intellectual community. Accordingly, academic learning advisers can play a critical role in creating significant learning experiences for the international students. However, the road to achieving this goal is not a straight-forward one.

Keywords International students, academic learning support and advising,

The international education context

International students are now regarded as a critical part of New Zealand's national interests (Ministry of Education 2007; Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade 2007; Tarling 2004)). Like many institutions of higher learning in the west, universities in New Zealand, in recent years, have called for expanded access for international students to enrol in their institutions. The steady, constant and concerted efforts made to recruit them, especially those from Asia, have resulted in a wide diversity of students in New Zealand campuses. Racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity has increased substantially, and in some campuses, for example, in the University of Auckland, diversity is the norm. The converging trend is that international students are a "vibrant part of our education sector" (Deloitte 2008, p. 1). In numerical terms, international education can be taken to mean educating students from Asia because they form the bulk of the fee-paying international students studying in the country. The prospect is expected to accelerate.

This growth trend in numbers and the policy orientation towards recruiting international students indicate that the stakeholders need to take a serious look at the responsiveness of the campuses hosting international students. The implications of the new learning population for universities have become far deeper than the diversity of demographics. More specifically, educating international students raises fundamental questions about the diversity of learning styles (Reinders, Lewis & Kirkness 2006; Zepke & Leach 2008). How do these non-traditional students relate to the new academic settings? What are the academic skills these students must acquire and develop? How successful are the host institutions in matching the promise of a New Zealand education with practice? In short, how might the campus look ready when the different and unfamiliar teaching and learning needs have now become the centre of institutional concern?

In a competitive international education market, the reputation of educational institutions lies in their capacity to create significant learning experiences for their 'clients'. It calls for a focus on student satisfaction and positive learning outcome. This paper suggests that engaging the disengaged students is about promoting student learning and development. It is an accountability issue and academic learning advisers (and others in advisory roles) are strategically located to respond to them. This is similar to the position adopted by Hunter, McCalla-Wriggins and White (2007):

> Academic advisors are in a unique position to deal with both the changing student population and the evolving institutions. As a result of their individual interactions with students and their role as student advocates, they are able to identify and respond to changing student needs (p. 1).

Clearly, the hallmark of international education is about academic quality assurance. Guaranteeing excellent quality in teaching and learning for international students should be part of the effort in enhancing the 'educated in New Zealand' brand. In this regard, the academic learning advising profession can move to the centre of campus academic life by structuring advising into the student's academic portfolio and formally linking it to the host institution's vision and mission statements.

Educating international students: Contesting their readiness to learn

Educating international students presents academics and students alike some specific challenges. International students are faced with remarkably common challenges (Arthur 2004; Caroll & Ryan 2004; Gonzalez 2004; Jennings & Angelo 2006; Singaravelu & Pope 2007, Ward, 2006). Their readiness to handle university level study has always been questioned. For example, they are seen as having particular learning needs based on linguistic and cultural differences. Their study habits and outlook are regarded as non-traditional. Not only they lack the English language skills, they are unable to engage in intensive academic discussions, unaccustomed to critical analysis, and unfamiliar with the writing protocols, especially in 'language-intensive' disciplines or subjects. Impressions are formed that international students do not see themselves as active agents in constructing knowledge; their inclinations towards accepting the authority of the lecturers wholesale hinders them from engaging in learning from multiple perspectives. Consequently, their learning approaches are regarded as 'deficient' because they are a departure from the norm. The learning advising process often means providing remedial assistance of a technical nature. This deficit model is inadequate in explaining and meeting the advising and learning needs of international students.

The 'natural' approach to enhance preparedness for tertiary studies for those who come from a non-English speaking background is to offer language support. Being trained to speak and write in English is definitely a step forward but it is not necessarily an indication of total readiness to use learning practices which will lead to success in a New Zealand university. As Skyrme (2005) asserts, 'It would be foolhardy … to assume that tweaking the English language centre experience would be fully effective in preparing students for their university experience' (p. 11).

Undertaking tertiary study in a second/foreign language context is no simple matter, nor should some of the difficulties be underestimated. The level of academic engagement is much higher than meeting the initial language threshold. The shift from 'rote learning' or teacher-centred to a free learning or student-centred environment is particularly daunting for many international students. Especially in language-intensive subjects or discipline, merely expecting them to immediately adapt to the New Zealand academic norm simply by being told to 'think critically', to use 'APA referencing", and practice academic honesty, should be balanced and not taken to the extreme. Learning to function in the new academic settings is not an act of substituting students' prior learning orientation from their home country with that of the host institution. It is about capacity building and an acknowledgement of the multiple routes or levels to learning, benefiting from both their host and home academic traditions.

Diversity in learning-centred context: A difficult discussion

Certainly there has been greater dialogue about how campuses can play in helping students succeed. An analysis of New Zealand university annual reports on university objectives from 2002-2006 suggests that 'more than three-quarters' contained development objectives in 'assess and recruitment', 'half to three-quarters' contained development objectives in 'student support services', 'quarter to a half' in 'teaching practice' and 'student achievement and opportunities', and 'quarter or less' in quality of provision for teaching (Earle 2008, p. 22). In terms of internationalisation, the reference to international education was about "access and recruitment of students and international relationships with other universities' (p. 26). While most universities have made provisions for meeting the various needs of international students, the learning support services for this category of students have often been about meeting the English language needs only. From the learning advising perspective, the support services are at risk of being seen as lacking coherence and have limited depth. The literature of educational change points out that visionary statements will remain as static if practitioners do not know what they mean in practice; the anticipated changes will not be transformational. This policy-practice discrepancy is not dissimilar to the view that '[a] common assumption is that most institutions use a mission, vision, or goal statement to endorse diversity, yet the reality is that such proclamations do not translate into real change, nor do they remove institutional barriers' (Anderson 2008, p. 8).

Although there are a number of studies on international students' experiences (for example, Deloitte 2008; Ward 2006), the research orientation is directed to issues relating to market share, living arrangement and adjustment, integration with local communities, and life in New Zealand, with a diluted focus on academic learning issues. A report commissioned by the New Zealand Ministry of Education on student support services was 'disappointed by the small number of published studies undertaken by New Zealand scholars and would encourage any efforts to encourage a greater of best practice' ((Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby & Sepke 2005, p. 94). According to the report, 'research evidence would seem to justify further attention and investment in student support services' (p. 94).

There are several possible explanations as to why there is a lack of attention on the academic learning needs of international students. The oft-quoted one is the 'In Rome do as the Romans do' rhetoric which regards the responsibility of the host institution as one of assimilating international students into the academic norms of the providers. The sentiments expressed in the following statement are not unusual:

> The response of many academic staff is that Asian students come to New Zealand to study in English, but that also involves learning and fitting in with the conduct of university teaching and study in New Zealand, whose universities, like those in the UK, North America and Europe, expect students to study independently and to contribute to tutorials … . Of course academic staff should feel a fundamental obligation to treat all students with tolerance and politeness, but, in the university context, many staff are asking what happened to the old maxim 'when in Rome, do as the Romans do (Miller 2006, p. 51).

This issue of adaption versus assimilation (also see Zepke & Leach 2008) in learning habits by Asian students is not new. But it is one which merits immediate attention because engaging Asian international students in particular underpins the direction of the international education strategy in New Zealand (Ministry of Education 2007). The cautious attitude expressed by Miller puts to rest the implicit assumption that there is willingness among academics to acquire new skills or stretch their preferred pedagogical orientation in response to campus diversity. This adjustment does not occur spontaneously. This raises a critical question: 'Who should be making the adjustment – the student, the lecturer, the faculty or all of them?' (Pang 2007, p. 8). There are no straight-forward solutions. But '[s]uch tensions can lead to ad hoc decisions by individual lecturers and a 'lottery system' for students as to how well their needs are met' (Carroll & Ryan 2004, p. 5). The potential of international students being "overlooked and under-served" (Pang, 2004) is real. It has been suggested that such issues need to be tackled quickly 'so that universities' reputations, the experience of all students, and the morale of those who teach them are not damaged' (p. 4).

From the 'distributive justice' perspective**,** students who do not share similar academic traditions with New Zealand must be given assistance to integrate into the teaching and learning cultures and prepare them meet the academic requirements. In the words of Professor Minogue (1972), a former academic of the University of Auckland, 'if there are relevant grounds, unequals should be treated unequally' (p. 38). These imperatives do not imply extending a favourable status to a particular group of students. This is because '[m]aking adjustments is not the same as conferring advantage. It is more about levelling the playing field so all students are doing equally difficult tasks' (Carroll & Ryan 2004, p. 8).

The brief overview of the academic learning profile of international students suggests that meeting their learning needs is a contested issue. At least at the commencement phases of their sojourn in New Zealand, international students may demand a more supportive framework than the self-directed learning approach tends to dictate. How does academic learning advising fit into this context of change?

Connecting learning advising practices to student learning success

Inadequate academic advising has been identified as a performance gap in creating significant learning experiences for students at the university level (Hunter, McCalla-Wriggins & White 2007). While there are different ways to support and engage students in learning, academic learning advising is one strategy that is increasingly being acknowledged as critical to overcome the learning barriers. According to Light (2001), it is probably one of the most 'underestimated characteristics of a successful college experience' (cited in Campbell & Nutt 2008, p. 4). Parallel to this trend is that help seeking is now considered an important learning strategy that is linked to students' achievement goals and academic performance (Karabenick & Newman 2006). In his preface to the book, *Help seeking in academic settings*, Wilbert McKeachie points out that 'We teachers need to help students understand that help seeking is not a sign of weakness but is rather an important learning strategy. We need to help them developed help-seeking strategies for gaining understanding rather than asking simply for the answer to a problem' (cited in Karabenick & Newman 2006, p. viii).

As a strategy, academic learning advising holds the potential to address the key concerns of the 'deficit model', particularly when the advising process is grounded in teaching and learning. Viewing advising from a student-centred perspective effectively moves learning support from a perspective of teaching that focuses on fixing a 'deficit' to one of learning that centres on development of academic skills. As an educational process, learning advising effectively shifts from a static mode of 'prescribing' solutions to a more dynamic one where students are given opportunities for reflection and construction of knowledge from multiple approaches and perspectives. The success of this shift hinges on forming an effective interdependent adviser-advisee partnership. Among some of the critical factors are accepting students 'as they are', using their learning experiences as a foundation for capacity building, and avoiding passing judgement on them as deficient or incapable of forming personal learning strategies. This partnership views knowledge as complex and co-constructed. In this collective process, advising is a form of teaching while the advisee plays an equally active role in knowledge construction.

The notion of advising as partnership parallels with the more recent self-authorship research (Meszaros 2007). According to this approach, the students with self-authoring abilities can 'construct learning partnerships that intentionally combine challenge, reflection and support to help students develop increasingly complex frames of reference to guide their academic decisions' (Magolda & King 2008, p. 9). The self-authored ways are a form of guided reflection where the focus is on 'encouraging students to make sense of their experience rather than the educator making sense of it for them' (p. 9). This advising-learning partnership encourages students to be active co-constructors of knowledge. It is a dynamic process where learning advisers must realise that the intended change and learning outcomes on the part of the students is cumulative and do not occur immediately. This developmental process provides time for students to reflect personally and academically and they remain in control as autonomous learners. This is well suited to the practice of learning advisers. An academic states this in these terms:

> Academic learning advising has the advantage of providing students with repeated one-on-one interactions across multiple years. In considering how to create advising practices to promote self-authorship, advisors need to learn to effectively share single moments with students and respond in ways that encourage individual students to see themselves as active knowledge constructors (Pizzolato 2008, p. 21.).

Collectively, this adviser + teacher + partner approach is, potentially, a powerful way to organise academic learning advising, an area which deserves the attention of a stand-alone paper. In practice, academic learning advising is one the most learner-centred activities in the university campus because the outcome is not simply a display of received knowledge but the manifestation of the personal ability of students to develop study skills and create new knowledge.

Conclusion: An opportunity for change

As universities becoming increasingly international, academic learning advisers must address the learning needs of a much more diverse student population than before. This paper believes that developing a thick relationship and connection is possible between academic learning advising and educating international students. It advocates a transformative adviser-advisee relationship where academic learning is placed at the centre of their international education experience. Self-directed or self–authored learning can provide a pathway for the students to integrate their intellectual growth with the academic culture of the host institutions.

It is important to reiterate that when an institution claims to be student- and learning-centred (Jennings & Angelo 2006), the logical or even mandatory steps to follow is to have professionals who have the expertise to respond to its vision. And academic learning advisers are strategically located to contribute to the student centreness of a university. As such, academic advising has been described appropriately as 'the only structured campus endeavour that can guarantee students sustained interaction' with a professional adviser, and a 'powerful educational strategy to engage and support student learning' (Campbell & Nutt 2008, p. 5).

To date, the discussion of academic learning advising in a growing international education context has yet to generate a strong literature base in New Zealand. The connection between the two has not been made sufficiently succinct or clear. However, the arguments in this paper should allow a view that learning advising and student development are part of the same overall teaching and learning strategy of a university which hosts international students. Tertiary institutions that have a large international student population should conduct research to gauge the adequacy and effectiveness of current learning advisory services provided by them. It is critical to move beyond the market analyses that have dominated much of the literature on international education so far. Making the case for viewing advising and learning development as inextricably linked is 'to move advising from what it has been, to what it potentially can be' (Hunter, McCalla-Wriggins, & White 2007, p. 225). This resonates well

with the recommendations of the synthesis of research on student support, academic development, and learning outcomes, published by the New Zealand Ministry of Education:

> Tertiary institutions should be encouraged to view their academic development units as centres for research on teaching and learning as well as training and development. Such a development would increase the status and appeal of the academic development profession, as well as engendering a continuing commitment to informing practice with research. (Prebble, Hargraves, Leach, Naidoo, Suddaby & Sepke 2005, p. 93).

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