To transition and beyond! Strategies to assist international students' throughout their university experience

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Abstract

Transition is an area which is critical to the overall student experience in higher education, from students' entry into university to exit from the university. The University of South Australia has developed and implemented various strategies to respond to the needs of international students studying business degrees. The needs identified relate to international students' feeling part of the university community, level of interaction with other students and career planning and development.

This paper will discuss the University's response to these areas, the strategies developed and the importance of internal collaboration to provide a comprehensive plan in responding to these areas. The strategies identified include the establishment of a Business Mates student mentoring program to assist first year students with the transition to university life. In addition, an international student career strategy has been developed to assist international students with career development skills by facilitating participation in career planning, networking and industry engagement.

Key Words

Interaction, international students, transition, first year, career development

Introduction

The first year experience of university students' is well recognised as an area of transition. There is a focus in higher education on first year initiatives to assist students' with this transition. A national research study into the first year experience, Krause et al (2005, p. 4) commented that in the last 10 years 'universities have become more responsive to the needs of first year students during their transition to university and their first year on campus'. Furthermore, there is a need for various areas of the university 'to work together to integrate their efforts and initiatives for the benefit of all students' (Krause et al, 2005, p. 89). This notion is also supported by Kift (2008, p. 1) in that first year experience initiatives 'are integrated, coordinated and intentional in aid of early student learning, engagement and success'.

This transition period is influenced by various factors affecting students' satisfaction, success and retention. The term 'engagement' is often used as a determining factor in being critical to students' overall success (Yorke, 2005). The term 'student engagement' is defined in the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement report (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2008, p. vi) 'as students' involvement with activities and conditions likely to generate high-quality learning'.

There is diversity of the transition period due to the diversity of students. The varying factors, while not homogenous, depend on where the student is transitioning from, such as high school, the workforce, as an international student attending university in a different country. The place students' are coming from affects their experiences at university in relation to the social and academic environment, as they come from the familiar to the unfamiliar. In relation to international students, 'in order to make sense of their transition into the Australian educational environment students generally made comparisons with the familiar cultural practices of their home country' (Hellstén 2002, p. 7).

While first year transition has been highly recognised, the growing emphasis placed on career development has seen the emergence of another transitional phase – that being the completion of university and entry into the workforce. This process differs between international and domestic students, due to workplace culture, English language proficiency, and permanent residency status. The recognition of exit transition has resulted in the need for significant institutional investment with regards to curriculum review, support services and skills development for students to successfully articulate into the workforce. This is supported through the Business, Industry and Higher Education Collaboration Council (BIHECC) report (Precision Consultancy, 2007) which acknowledges the involvement and role universities play in this transitional phase. According to Precision Consultancy (2007, p. 24),

> Australian universities are taking many different approaches to ensure that their graduates are prepared to meet the professional responsibilities, and that they will start their careers with the skills that workplaces need.

Background

First year experience

The University of South Australia (UniSA) is a university in South Australia, Australia which is spread over four metropolitan campuses, one rural campus and one regional centre. The university has in excess of 30,000 students, over 27,000 onshore and 5800 offshore students. The Division of Business has over 5000 undergraduate students, with 21% international students and 79% domestic students. The number of onshore international students is the highest when compared with all the other UniSA divisions.

A factor of student engagement identified in the national research study into the first year experience is students' agreement with the statement 'I feel like I belong to the university community' (Krause et al, 2005, p. 36). This is also an area of particular concern identified for international students, with 35% indicating a sense of belonging compared with 52% for domestic students (Krause et al, 2005). This area of students' sense of community and interaction between students has been the focus of first year initiatives at the University of South Australia, Division of Business.

There are various sources of university information which were examined when looking at the area of transition. In particular the UniSA Student Experience Questionnaire (SEQ) (UniSA, 2006) which provides valuable information in relation to students' sense of community and level of interaction with other students. Students were asked the statement, 'I am happy with the level of interaction I have with other students', and overall 61% of commencing undergraduate students in the Division of Business agreed with this statement.

This is a decrease from 65% in the 2004 SEQ. The results vary between international and domestic students; 63% of domestic students agreed with this statement compared with 49% of international students.

Additionally, students were asked the statement, 'I feel I am part of the UniSA community', and overall 48% of commencing undergraduate students in the Division of Business agreed with this. The agreement level for this statement for commencing students had slightly decreased from the 2004 SEQ (51%). The results vary between international and domestic students; 49% of domestic students agreed with this statement compared with 39% of international students. Refer to figure 1.
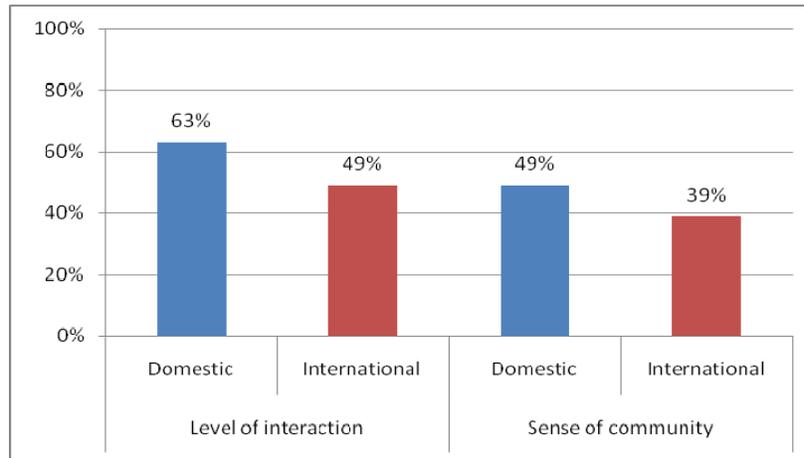

Figure 1: Commencing students' satisfaction with level of interaction with other students and sense of community SEQ – 2006

Business Mates student mentoring program - Design

Due to the SEQ results indicating lower agreement levels between international and domestic students, the Division of Business looked at strategies to assist with students' sense of belonging and interaction with other students. There are numerous social peer mentor models that are used both nationally and internationally. To look at facilitating interaction between international and domestic students it was decided to have the pairing of an international and domestic student as the student mentors. This was based on a University of Canberra model, where the Buddy Program leaders are one international and one domestic student, and they jointly plan the program of activities for their group of new students (Devereux, 2004). While the aim of the Business Mates program focused on first year students, it is recognised that 'students who participate in peer support programmes as peer supporters or mentors develop valuable skills and attributes while involved in the support of others' (Muldoon, 2008, p. 207).

The Business Mates student mentoring program was set up in 2007 with all international students' automatically allocated Business Mates and domestic students upon request. To assist with a higher level of interaction between international and domestic students this model was then amended to have all new undergraduate international and domestic students automatically allocated Business Mates. The program was designed to assist commencing students with the transition to university, and provide new students with an opportunity to meet other students, attend social activities and ask their Business Mates questions.

Objectives
- Assist students with the transition to the social and academic culture of the University.
- Facilitate interaction between students through social and learning networks.
- Encourage interaction between international and domestic students in particular.
- Provide a reliable and accessible support network for commencing students.
- Improve the quality of the first year experience for mentees.
- Increase retention rates in first year for Division of Business students.
- Provide continuing students with the opportunity to develop leadership, communication, organisation and team work skills.
- Develop the international perspectives of both mentors and mentees.

The Business Mates were students currently studying at UniSA, and were made up of both postgraduate and undergraduate students. The Business Mates (N=57) worked in a voluntary capacity as a pair, one international and one domestic, and 1448 new students were automatically allocated Business Mates (matching 2: 50).

Business Mates student mentoring program - Findings

Questions from the SEQ were asked in the surveys of the mentees and the Business Mates to review if any improvements had occurred in the areas of interaction with other students and sense of community.

N=163 commencing students completed the survey with a response rate of 11%. Figure 2 indicates that students' satisfaction on their level of interaction with other students has increased from the SEQ results. While the domestic students' satisfaction level only improved slightly (1 percentage point), the main improvement has been in relation to international students. International students exhibited the main improvement with an increase in 23 percentage points from the 2006 results.
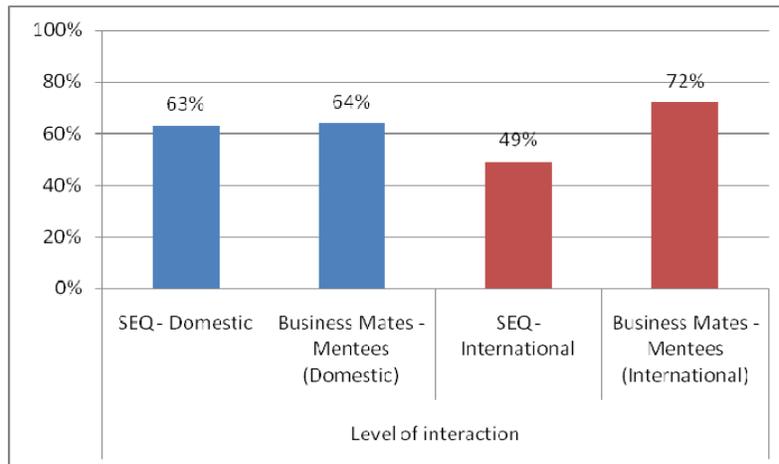

Figure 2: Commencing students' satisfaction with level of interaction with other students SEQ – 2006 compared with 2008 results

Figure 3 indicates that students' satisfaction on their sense of community has increased from the SEQ results. The improvements were evident for domestic students with an increase of 12 percentage points, the main improvement has been in relation to international students with an increase of 25 percentage points from the 2006 results.
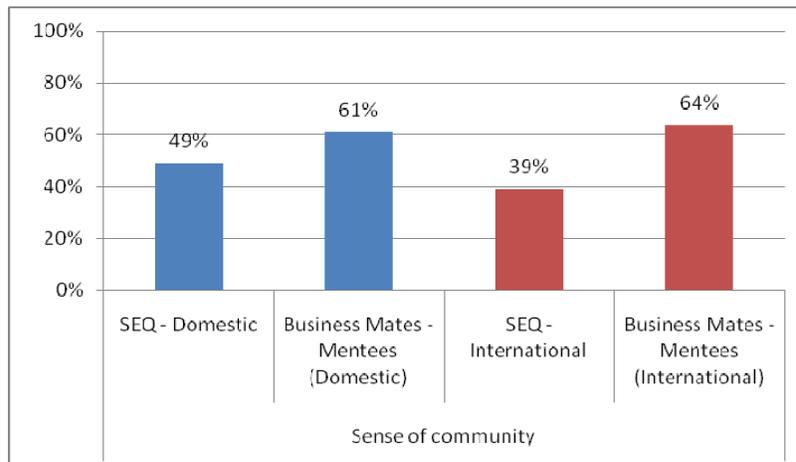

Figure 3: Commencing students' satisfaction with sense of community SEQ – 2006 compared with 2008 results

The results for the Business Mates were then reviewed. N=43 Business Mates completed the survey with a response rate of 75%. The survey results for the Business Mates satisfaction with their level of interaction with other students' was compared with the SEQ results for 2006 for continuing students. Figure 4 indicates that students' satisfaction with their level of interaction with other students has increased from the SEQ results. The domestic students' satisfaction level improved by 10 percentage points, however the main improvement has been in relation to international students. The Business Mates who were international students showed an increase by 19 percentage points from the 2006 results.
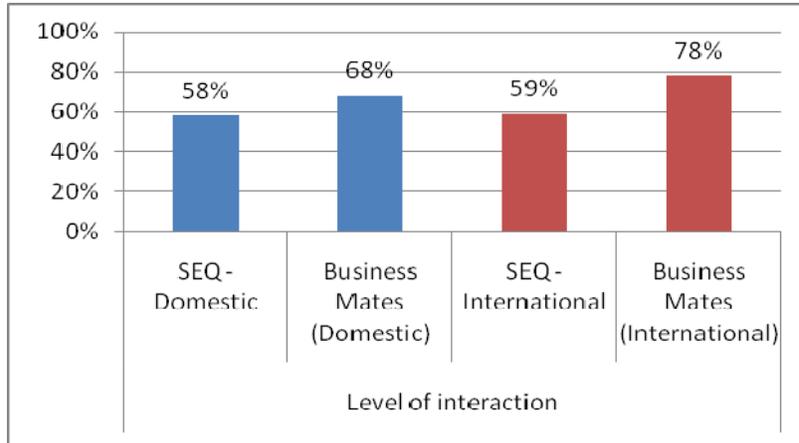

Figure 4: Continuing students' satisfaction with level of interaction with other students SEQ – 2006 compared with 2008 results

Figure 5 indicates that students' satisfaction on their sense of community has increased significantly from the SEQ results. The improvements were evident for both domestic students with an increase of 53 percentage points, and international students with an increase of 56 percentage points from the 2006 results.
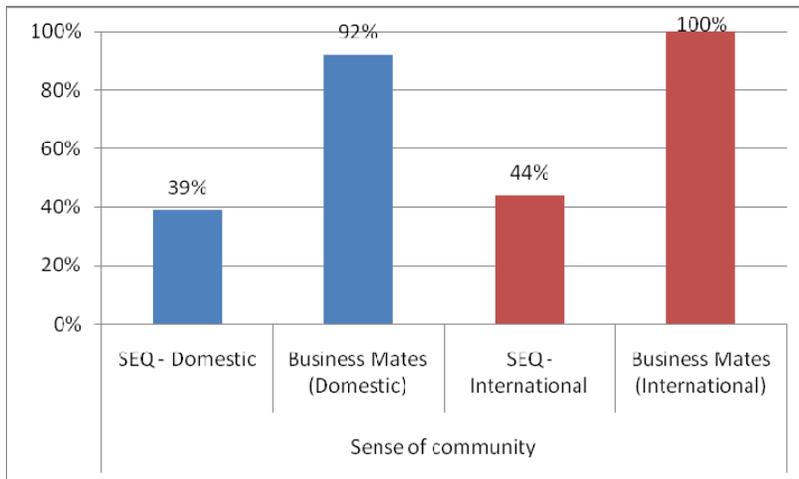

Figure 5: Continuing students' satisfaction with sense of community SEQ – 2006 compared with 2008 results

This comparison between the SEQ results from 2006 and the Business Mates survey results from 2008, while not an exact comparative measure, do provide an indication of improvements in the areas of satisfaction with interaction between students and sense of community. Chi-square tests were used and the results are statistically significant ($p<0.05$), except for the commencing domestic students' satisfaction with level of interaction with other students from the 2006 to 2008 results. The results for the Business Mates are also from a small cohort of students who could be perceived as already being more engaged with the university due to their involvement in the student mentoring role.

Career development

Following the important early stages in students' transition to university, is the exit transition when students are looking to move into the workforce. The successful development of graduate attributes is important to assist with the transition from higher education to the workforce. DEST (2002a, p. 3) define employability skills as 'skills required not only to gain employment but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions'. DEST have identified an 'employability skills framework', which includes the following skills; communication, teamwork, problem solving, life-long learning. UniSA (2008, p. 1) 'has adopted as institutional policy a statement of seven Graduate Qualities as the outcomes it seeks for its undergraduate students'. These include; knowledge, life-long learning, effective problem solving and critical thinking, working both autonomously and collaboratively, social responsibility, communication skills and international perspectives. As identified by Precision Consultancy (2007, p. 11) 'the Employability Skills Framework is widely acknowledged as evidencing what employers need in the workforce.' This is reinforced within university curriculum by highlighting the importance and application of Graduate Qualities with regards to successful transition from study to the workforce.

The Course Experience Questionnaire (CEQ) (UniSA, 2007a) provides data on students' development of the Graduate Qualities. It is evident from this that international students perceive they are underprepared and potentially disadvantaged to enter the workforce. This provides important information about the differences in domestic and international students' agreement levels with various CEQ statements. International students had a lower agreement level on all generic skills statements in 2007 when compared with domestic student responses (ranging from 12 to 26 percentage points less, with the average agreement levels being 21 percentage points lower than that of domestic student responses). In relation to comparing 2006 results with 2007, international students' responses have either stayed the same or declined on all of the generic skills scales.

In order to determine whether there is a connection to the perceived level of preparedness and actual employment outcomes for domestic and international students', data from the Graduate Destination Survey (GDS) (UniSA, 2007b) has been reviewed. The GDS data has revealed that over a 3 year period (2005-2007) graduate employment outcomes for international students has been reported at an average of 33 percentage points lower than that of domestic students who have successfully gained full time employment at the completion of their studies and 24 percentage points higher for those not working and still seeking full time employment. Although it cannot be determined that the results are directly related, it does highlight the need for further investigation in order to address the development of Graduate Qualities for international students as a means to provide assistance with successful articulation from study to the workforce.

Career strategies

In order to respond to the career development needs specific to international students, an International Student Career Strategy (ISCS) was drafted with input from onshore international alumni members and continuing international students. It is important to note that it is problematic to identify international students as a homogenous group and develop an umbrella strategy to address a generic set of transitional issues to improve employability. Many factors affect transition from study to the workplace. Some of these issues are more evident in certain cultural groups than others and include such things as workplace culture and English language proficiency. However, this is not applicable to all international student groups. The provision of effective support for individual cases is generally addressed through career consultations which takes place in a one-on-one situation with a Career Counsellor or Adviser (which is extremely resource intensive). However, identifying international student motivations for study can assist in developing broader strategies.

The ISCS framework has been based around student motivations for study rather than by citizenship or needs classifications. The cohorts were separated as:

Group 1: Studying at UniSA to receive an international qualification with the intention to return to their home country for employment.
Group 2: Studying at UniSA with the intention to remain in Australia and seek ongoing employment.

This classification enables each cohort to easily identify career needs based on their desired outcomes. For example, a Group 2 student will be able to identify that in order to address permanent residency requirements they will need to achieve specific competencies such as English language proficiency and local work experience. Being able to identify such criteria allows the student to determine specific career planning objectives and maximise relevant opportunities available to them throughout their studies.

Ongoing anecdotal evidence has been provided by international students in Group 2 regarding issues with successfully gaining graduate employment upon completion of their studies. Further discussions revealed other concerns relating to transition from study to the work place. Examples include:

- Visa and permanent residency issues (however this is a matter that falls outside of the jurisdiction of the University)
- Gaining work experience and transferable skills to support their qualification(s)
- Adjusting to Australian work place culture
- Understanding employer expectations

CEQ and GDS data supports the anecdotal claims of the students. However, there is a need to collect further data to have a greater insight into students' specific career development needs.

It is students in Group 2 where specific strategies are being developed for implementation. Initially a mapping exercise was undertaken to identify the current initiatives being offered to support the career development of the entire student body and specific activities for international students. The results revealed a number of stakeholders operating in isolation and providing a variety of support services. Thus, the ISCS is aimed to develop a consolidated program of activities to support the career development of international students and improve their eligibility for graduate employment and permanent residency eligibility. The philosophy is that career development starts at the beginning of a students' degree with specific sessions that occur throughout all years of study to support career development.

Implementation of the ISCS will occur from 2009, and part of the strategy will include effective ways to evaluate the program. It will be particularly interesting to look at the employment outcomes from students who have participated as Business Mates. This is in line with Muldoon's (2008, p. 214) notion that through involvement as a student mentor 'employability would be enhanced because of improved personal attributes and skills'.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Transition is an important factor in the student experience and not just isolated to students' first year at university. Rather, it is ongoing throughout the students' university career and beyond.

The focus on the transition of students to university, and then to the workforce, has led to the development of various initiatives by universities to adequately support and prepare their students. The areas of sense of community, interaction with other students and career development were identified at the University of South Australia, Division of Business, as showing varying experiences between domestic and international students.

The lessons learned have been:

- the importance of identifying the needs of the student cohort
- developing responses to these identified needs
- facilitating collaboration across the University
- and reviewing the initiatives implemented.

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