Managing Academic Support for International Students: the appropriateness of a Learning Support Unit in an Australian tertiary institution

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Abstract

The higher education environment in Australia has undergone a radical change since the 1980s with the phenomenal increase in the intake of international students, particularly from what are referred to as Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC): China, Korea, Japan, Malaysia and Singapore. Students from these countries view the Australian higher education system very favourably. The present increase in the proportion of full-fee paying students at Australian universities is also a result of decreasing government funding to the Australian higher education sector, which has now risen to be one of the most important elements of the Australian economy.

These push-pull factors have drawn more Australian tertiary institution providers into the market place, as they seek more international student enrolments for their domestic campuses and also establish campuses overseas. Potential higher education students are becoming more discerning in their choices and are choosing learning environments that offers them both relevant and stimulating educational experiences and good qualifications, along with a range of both IT and academic support services that cater to their individual learning needs. Increasing competition, both within Australia and internationally, calls for a focus on student satisfaction in order to sustain the existence of the providers.

This paper addresses the issue of what international students seek in terms of academic support and demonstrates that present levels of cost efficient services by Australian higher education providers, generally characterized by IT and language support services, are inadequate and do not meet the specific needs of the students.

Introduction

A striking aspect of contemporary globalization is the movement of international students to many parts of the world in pursuit of higher education. Consequently higher education has become a major export industry in many countries and as such, must be treated like any other business, and establish sound strategic management practices. Enrolments of international students in Australia increased by 230% between 1992 and 2001 (Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee 2002a p. 80). In 2003–2004, education services exports reached around $6 billion. Enrolments by full-fee overseas students in Australia totalled 303,324 in 2003 (DFAT, 2006). In some Australian public universities, full-fee-paying international students accounted for up to 50% of their total student-derived revenue. Education exports are now worth more to the Australian balance of payments than wool (Doherty, 2004) becoming the 8th largest export income producer (Productivity Committee 2002b). Australia, being the 3rd world largest higher education services exporter after the US and the UK (Harman, 2004), nevertheless has the highest proportion of international students who make up 12.6% of all higher education students. In comparison, in 2000 the percentage in the US was 3.2%, 3.8% in Canada and 10.8% in UK (OECD, 2000). This demonstrates the important position of international students in the Australian higher education system. What is clear is the success of Australian education exports at an international level in comparison with its major competitors, the US, UK, Canada and New Zealand (Cohen, 2003).

The dramatic increase in international students has brought home to Australian higher education institutions the need to introduce teaching and learning activities which are tailored to students who have not been educated within the Australian secondary system, which has vast differences from most of its neighbouring countries who are the source of its international students. The said support is not only important from the students'

perspective in order to successfully complete their studies in Australia; it should also be recognised as an important mechanism for providing quality of education and therefore sustain Australian's competitive advantage.

A large number of international students in Australian institutions are from Asian countries. Many of these countries do not share the Australian education philosophy which underpins the teaching and learning systems, and places high emphasis on active learning (Varga-Atkins & Ashcroft, 2004). This phenomenon has presented an on-going challenge to the Australian higher education professionals, with the gap to be covered in any student cohort, between the Australian educational background of local students and the overseas educational experience of international students, becoming increasingly significant. Under such circumstances, large group lectures and small group tutorials have become quite difficult for lecturers to conduct. Consequently an increasing number of students at both ends of the academic spectrum are left with their needs not being taken care of.

This paper discusses the need for, and provision of, a learning support facility outside the formal confines of classroom hours. It focuses on the activities provided which cater for predominately international students, who require additional support in order to adjust to a totally foreign learning environment. Our study was conducted at Monash College[1], a private company that is 100% owned by Monash University, which educates mainly international students in an increasingly internationally diverse class (Kragh & Bislev,

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[1] Monash College is owned by Monash International Pty Ltd which is 100% owned by Monash University. Monash College provides two diplomas which eventually give students the pathway to enter Monash University second year of undergraduate degrees. Diploma part one is available to students who completed year 11. It is equivalent to year 12. Upon successful completion of diploma part one; students enter into diploma part two. Diploma part two provides exactly the same subjects and subject contents as first year at Monash University. Upon successful completion of diploma part two, students are guaranteed places in the second year at various Monash University campuses and degree courses. Students who do not meet the entry requirements of entering part two will then have the option of studying a diploma part one. Upon successful completion of diploma part one, they are accepted into part two and progress accordingly.

2005). A large proportion of the students are from Asian countries (on average they account for about 90%) such as China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan, India, Vietnam, and Thailand. Recognising the need for supporting Asian students, Monash College established a Learning Support Unit (LSU) in order to support students academically with skills that are required to graduate from Monash University. It aims to cater for the uneven needs among the students and provides the most required services in an environment outside normal class time.

Hence LSU provides a range of services to all Monash College students regardless of which diploma they are enrolled in or what year level they are in within the diploma course[2]. The services include workshops, conversation classes, study groups, one-on-one sessions, mathematics support and special programs.   These programs are currently identified as the areas of academic support that are required by the students and have been developed over a period of two years at Monash College. The programs were developed with minimum formal input from the students on the basis of the understanding of international students by the coordinator who is an experienced researcher and lecturer. The program has grown tenfold compared to two years ago when it was first established.

Until now, no research has been conducted on this program. The aim of this research is to establish whether the current direction of support is suitable for the international students and/or to establish new areas of support if required. In short, in a market economy, services and products should be driven by the consumers rather than the providers. Both the workshops and conversation classes are run on a weekly basis during the students' common time when no classes are scheduled. This allows students the opportunity to attend these programs. They may also attend maths support and general one-on-one

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[2] Monash College currently provides two diplomas in five disciplinary areas; diploma part 1 and part 2 in Business, IT, Engineering, Art and Design and Art and Communication.

sessions which are run as half hour sessions. These sessions are posted on the intranet and students are required to book 24 hours prior to attending. In the event that less than 24 hours notice of booking request is given by the students, the College is not obliged to guarantee the service. Students are also entitled to one half an hour session each week, irrespective of whether it is a general session or a mathematics session. Students who require support beyond the fixed programs are assessed by the coordinator and tailor-made programs will then be designed. These programs may range from a combination of one-on-one sessions, which may occupy more than half an hour per week with a specific tutor and sometimes the coordinator as well, other types of workshop sessions and designated study groups.

In addition, LSU support is free however not compulsory to all Monash College students. It is entirely up to the students when they wish to utilise the service, and what type of services they choose.

Literature Review

Research in higher education for international students has emerged in a timely fashion, following the growth of internationalisation during the 1990s (Delaney, 2002). It shows that Asian students attending Western universities may experience significant study difficulties. For instance in a Canadian university it was observed that these students had serious problems with understanding lectures, taking notes, answering questions and writing essays (Ladd & Ruby, 1999 p.364). It is the shift from the "rote learning by lecture" method to a free learning environment that international students often find to be challenging (Delaney, 2002). Myburgh, Niehaus & Poggenpoel (2002) found that the teaching and learning needs of international learners revealed concerns about their adjustment to study in a foreign country. It is now widely accepted that there are a large

number of international students enrolled in universities worldwide who do not have the essential skills to complete their courses satisfactorily (Muldoon, 2003).

International students have invested a great deal of money in their education by coming to Australia. At the same time they are often under cultural pressure to perform well for their parents (Kutieleh, Egege, & Morgan, 2003) and communities. It has been acknowledged and accepted almost universally that there is a fundamental difference in the learning styles of the international student cohort, particularly those who are from what Biggs (1994) has called the "Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC) which include China, Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and Korea" when compared to those students who are from a predominately Western educational background. Yap (1997) notes that overseas students from a CHC background "consider that authors and lecturers are always right, while they themselves are 'nobodies.'" Additionally Ladd and Ruby (1999) assert that "in the Chinese education system, the teacher is the final authority." In contrast, the Australian education system places emphasis on active learning and the acquisition of transferable skills (Varga-Atkins et al., 2004). This phenomenon is not confined to the CHC student group, but is also found among groups of Asian students from non-CHC countries, such as India and Indonesia, and includes students from non-CHC countries who are not members of the overseas Chinese communities. This difference between Asian and Australian education systems is identified as the source of learning problems for Asian students (who represent more than 80 percent of Australian international students (Selected Higher Education Statistics1999; Kutieleh et al., 2003)

One of the problems that international students encounter which could then lead to heightened feelings of culture shock is their contact with the educational philosophy that is the basis of Western education: developing critical thinking by requiring students to

find solutions to ill-structured problems, defined as those "which cannot be described with a high degree of completeness; cannot be explained with a high degree of certainty," and that these "ill-structured problems do not have one right answer but better or worse answers arrived at through reasoning and reflective judgment" (Broadbear, 2003). For Asian students, the focus is on gaining knowledge rather than engaging in critical thinking, an approach to learning that may conflict with the expectations of Western universities (Kutieleh et al., 2003).

Added to these learning difficulties is the fact that many of the international students in their first year at an Australian higher education institution are also experiencing their first time away from home and the culture they are familiar with. This is especially the case at Monash College where a large proportion of the students are younger age students, still in their teens, which would heighten these feelings. Research shows that the obstacles of language proficiency, differences in culture, values and goals are the major sources of culture shock for international students (Delaney, 2002). The feeling of culture shock and isolation is not confined only to international students coming into the tertiary education environment. However it carries with it the potential for alienation, loneliness and withdrawal (Tomich, McWhirter, & al., 2003). The effects of culture shock cannot be underestimated, especially if we realize that it extends far beyond language, customs and legal systems. As Luzio-Lockett (1998) suggests, the international student is "taken into a different educational system, which brings with it its own inherent problems of adjustment".

There has been extensive research (Catterall, 2003; Chanock, 1994; Clerehan & Walker, 2003; Cootes, 1994; Kokkinn & Stevenson, 2003) conducted about the provision of support to international students. Traditionally, this has tended to concentrate on areas

such as language support, through the university making available specialist English language support staff, or information technology services and programs, which are promoted as efficient and user-friendly and able to be accessed outside of business hours. In recent times, there has been recognition of the need to move the support into the students' own comfort zones by making the assistance more visible and accessible (Muldoon, 2003). More importantly, for our focus in this paper, there has also been increasing recognition that discipline or context-specific intervention programs are necessary to improve learning outcomes (Chanock, 1994; Cootes, 1994). In short, the need for additional academic support has been recognised.

Mohr (1994) suggests that consultation and interaction with international students outside the classroom in a less informal environment should be used as a strategy for teaching international students, as "increasing communication with internationals [international students] goes a long way to establish a more productive working relationship, (and) enables an instructor to take a proactive approach to academic assistance." Research has shown that students' results have improved as a consequence of this type of interaction (Muldoon, 2003). The personalized nature of relationships in many Asian cultures, where people interact in networks which are based on multiple layers of contexts, not just the contractual one at issue, but include kinship ties, old school ties, regional or community of origin links, may be a useful principle in the education context, as they are in business circles, when members of Asian societies are involved.

Because of the complex cross-cultural contexts operating, providing optimal support and effective guidance to learners from different cultures (Myburgh et al., 2002) has become a challenge for Australian higher education institutions, and, with the increase in the volume of international students from a CHC educational background entering the higher

education system, it will remain so. As yet, the idea of developing academic support through providing a range of different services is relatively unexplored. It is important to realize that "developing academic support" is frequently misunderstood by both staff and students to mean extending existing language and IT support services, which is not the optimum solution.

The concept of the LSU is a widely applied mechanism across many Australian public educational institutions. However many of the programs were established because "international students don't speak English" and consequently they were often poorly designed (Marginson, 2002). Perhaps a reason for the lack of academic support services initially was that, with the explosive development of international education, it was typically assumed in the initial phases of the influx of international students that international students would be able to integrate seamlessly into the education system in the host nation. The learning relationship that exists between the teacher and the student in Australian universities is a state (Myburgh et al., 2002 p.13) that is characterised by the change from their home country, teacher-focussed approach to learning, to one where "independent learning is encouraged." Thus a primary aim of the LSU service is to prepare students to become independent learners, by providing a range of academic supports rather than merely language support. The benefit of services which LSUs provide is supported throughout the prevailing literature (Luzio-Lockett, 1998). However, more consideration is needed for approaches to personal academic support. These should be designed to bridge the gap between the different learning styles characterised by the CHC experience discussed above and those within a predominately Western educational system. Such academic supports would therefore assist students to achieve a smooth transition from the secondary learning style which they have experienced at home to that

which predominates in Australian higher education. It is the need for such services that should drive the LSU service provision framework.

When considering the range of services offered by Monash College, which include language and IT support along with the LSU programs, which in the main are under-resourced, as is the case in many other institutions, it would appear to be a compromise of trying to meet the needs of the students, but also aiming to satisfy the financial imperative of the organisation through the development of services that are "cost-and-time effective" (Avirutha et al., 2005). The overriding concern of education providers to international students is "the demand for a professional, businesslike relationship that is characterised by convenience, cost-and-time effective services and education, predictable and consistent" (Avirutha et al., 2005 p. 80). This policy may be in conflict with the need to provide services that meet the needs of the students. For private for-profit education institutions, cost effectiveness has been recognised as paramount within their market driven approach (Avirutha et al., 2005; Ruch, 2001) This approach gives them the ability to respond to market requirements quickly, and is part of their focus on providing quality customer service.

A criticism that has been levelled at providers of education to international students is that they are reluctant, or they have so far demonstrated an unwillingness, to use the income gained from fees to provide quality teaching, suitable for students at the interface of secondary and tertiary studies, teaching support and academic support services, but rather have used that income in other areas that may not necessarily bring about "predictable and consistent quality and high customer service geared to the needs of students, but rather those of faculty members, administrators or staff" (Avirutha et al., 2005 p.80). Marginson (2002, p.41) confirms this stating that "dollars generated by the education of foreign

students are not applied to the same purposes as the public funding that they ostensibly replace. Rather than going to teaching and research, much of the money is ploughed back into the costs of doing business: marketing, recruitment, off-shore operations, executive salaries and travel".

As a result, there has been a limitation placed upon both the supply of resources and the ability to use tham at the LSU, which has hampered the consistency of its service provision. As stated above, the common misunderstanding about the LSU is that its primary role is to provide language or library usage support. This has hindered the overall development of the LSU and the effectiveness of its service level because some staff only recommend the service to students when their problems are language related. The wide variation in students' academic abilities, for instance, in essay writing skills, referencing skills, the ability to understand the requirements of an assignment task, etc, is an issue that cannot be addressed in classrooms. Therefore language support only is not sufficient. With this in mind, the LSU at Monash College has aimed to generate and put in place teaching support and other programs which fall outside the boundaries of the formal teaching environment, in order to meet the specific needs of its international students. In this way, a wider range of academic support services are offered to the students than is generally the case.

Research method

The research instrument was through a survey questionnaire. Majority of the questions was quantitative and two of the questions were open ended qualitative questions. The quantities questions were aimed to investigate the appropriateness of the current services and the qualitative questions were designed to further explore other possible areas of services that students may see necessary (Appendix 1). It is argued that the quantitative

method was appropriate in this instance because it allowed for the collection of answers to a number of questions from a large sample of the population of students, which was required to achieve valid results (Malhotra, Hall, Shaw, & Oppenheim, 2002). However, the small component of qualitative data was also necessary to cover areas where the quantitative method could not supply. It was further decided that the survey method of structured data collection was the most suitable with the limited resources available.

The questionnaire consisted of one page of questions, allowing students the possibility of completing the survey within 1-2 minutes. This creates the maximum opportunity for students to participate in the survey as they do not need to be concerned about the time required.

The respondents to the survey were students who had participated in any activities offered at the LSU. It required them to provide their identity in order to validate the data collected. This was necessary because, non attendees of LSU would not be qualified to provide the data. Providing their identities allowed researchers to confirm their attendance using the reservation/booking records used by students when seeking consultations with LSU staff. Therefore, invalid data could be excluded. However, at no stage were the students' identities to be revealed or published or used for any other purpose. This was made clear to the students at the time of the survey. In short, the identification of individuals is purely a measure to ensure the validity of the data collected. All survey records have been stored securely with the LSU coordinator who is the only staff member with access to them. The data was collected over a period of one semester in 2005. No respondents were permitted to complete the survey twice, and the students who completed the survey did so on a voluntary basis.

The design of the questionnaire focused on the following issues: finding out the number of students who had used the LSU service, the frequency of accessing LSU services, the appropriateness of the type of support and the impact of the personality of the staff. In total there were six questions (See Appendix 1)

Questions 1 - 4 were structured multiple-choice questions (Malhotra et al., 2002) with the last option being open ended. This was deemed appropriate as there was a range of options available to the respondents. The open ended choices allowed for the option of selecting more than one suitable answer. In order to cater for the possibility of unexpected options, several open ended questions were provided. Questions 5 and 6 were both open ended questions designed for qualitative data collection. Question 5 directed the respondents to explore options outside the framework that was provided in question 2 (see Appendix 1)

Due to the scale of data collected, it was felt that no technical support was required and that the data could be analysed manually. Questions 1 – 4 were analysed using the basic quantitative method. Total numbers were recorded and a simple percentage was calculated. No cross tabulation or other method was used as the aim of the research was to confirm whether the types of services provided were what were required by the students. Questions 5 and 6 were set up to find out if other areas of services are indeed required by the international students at Monash College. The more qualitative approach to these two questions was aimed to be receptive to possibilities unknown to lecturers and coordinators.

The following hypotheses were formulated and reflected the questions asked:

Hypothesis 1: The range of supports provided is precisely what is required by all students at Monash College.

Hypothesis 2: The support that is required is not language based, but rather, related to academic skills which are fundamental to tertiary studies in the Australian context.

Hypothesis 3: The time that is provided for students in the consultations is sufficient and adequate, due to the fact that they have other commitments and any additional support which requires time and effort would be a burden to them.

Hypothesis 4: Students only need support from the LSU with fundamental academic skills. They do not require subject-related academic support, as subject-related support is well covered within the students' curriculum contact hours.

Hypothesis 5: Expertise in providing the support is more important than the personality of the staff member who is providing the support.

Findings and Discussion

Surveys were collected mainly from students who attend the one-on-one sessions due to the logistic of survey collection at the places of the events. Tutors were briefed to provide students with a survey at the end of a session and the completed surveys were collected prior to departure. This was a method specifically designed to ensure that surveys were completed and collected. It was necessary because students, especially the younger ones, in their early 20s or late teens, have a strong tendency to not complete such tasks if they are left to manage by themselves. One request, students might also take the survey and drop it in to a collection box later. Since the survey content was entirely based on the service provided, that there was no problem associated with filling it out in the presence of the tutors. Students were informed that survey participation was on a voluntary basis and they did not have to participate if they did not want to.

A total of 80 valid surveys were collected. Each survey was checked against the booking record to confirm the validity of the data. That is a safety measure to ensure that the survey was only filled out by students who have attended the LSU service. Although students were informed that only one survey was required from each student, in some cases students filled in several questionnaires. Under such circumstances, surveys were investigated carefully. On separate occasions, where two answers complimented each other, they were amalgamated into one complete survey. This is considered valid and acceptable because if the students added additional information in their second surveys which did not contradict the previous information they provided, it should be considered as an enhancement of their first submission. Duplications were disregarded.

Table 1 provides an overview of the survey results. The discussion of results addresses each hypothesis in turn.

Qualitative comments were recorded separately for analysis later in the paper.

Hypothesis 1: The range of supports provided is precisely what is required by all students at Monash College.

The results support this hypothesis. For instance, only 2.5 percent requested IT/computer support as the desired function of the LSU. This would therefore demonstrate that the current design of providing academic support is moving in the right direction. Although IT support is seen as important, students require academic support and additional personal consultations and interaction with teaching staff, which is consistent with the literature, and is supported by Mohr (1994) and Luzio-Lockett (1998). This perhaps can be further explained by the current level of IT technical knowledge of the students who mostly use computers from childhood. The perception that Asian countries have backwards technology is also fading very quickly.

The results also reveal very detailed information on the areas of support students sought from the LSU. The largest category of assistance sought was for essay and report writing and structuring, mentioned by 45 percent of the respondents. The second most sought after form of support was for help in clarifying assignment questions, 40 percent. The third largest area of support requested was in academic writing skills, 35 percent (Table 1). These results indicate that a large proportion of students were aware of their inability to write academic work within the expected parameters. This can be addressed through broadening the range of workshops provided, rather than adding to class materials and taking over curriculum time.

The next group of categories (see Table 1), relating to academic skills but with lesser frequency were as follows: referencing: 22.5 percent; presentation skills: 21 percent; exam preparation: 18.8 percent, and learning and study skills, 17.5 percent. The lowest level of support required by the students was for time management, at just 0.05 percent (Table 1). This finding is interesting because the time management issue was determined by the majority of the staff members during the course of the LSU's establishment to be one of the critical skills that Monash College students lacked and this could be assumed to be still the case. This result suggests that: i) the students were not aware of their skills shortage in this area, or ii) the teaching staff's perception that time management was what students needed was inaccurate. This question needs to be addressed in future research. Equally, the number of students who do not do well each semester should have supported a larger percentage of students seeking assistance for exam preparation. This was the second lowest area of support required by the students. Indeed these may be examples of providing services that are perceived to be important by the provider but not the students. This could also be an example which demonstrates the lack of true understanding of teaching staff towards international students.

The high level of assistance to clarify assignment questions sought by students, at 40 percent, is an intriguing result. A basic explanation for this result is the cultural characteristics of the CHC students (Biggs, 1994) and several years of personal observation teaching international students, that they are embarrassed to speak up about their lack of understanding or to express opinions within a formal class context, and that they prefer to use services which provide a high level of personal contact which is more comfortable for them culturally. The second explanation is that international students simply have less understanding of assessment requirements. This finding certainly correlates with other research findings that in general international students do not initially understand the rationale and format of assessments in Western universities (Mohr, 1994). Research by Clerehan and Walker (2003), when comparing international students with local students in Australia, found some 80 percent of international students reported some degree of not understanding well what was required of them when writing assignments. The third explanation is that tutors are simply not explaining clearly enough for students to understand exactly what is required of them. Certainly, further research is needed to answer these questions.

In terms of addressing this issue, institutions will no doubt be looking at the potential increase of costs, and the "cost-and-time effective services" (Avirutha *et al.*, 2005) balance may prevent institutions from establishing more personal, one-on-one based student support programs.

Hypothesis 2: The support that is required is not language based, but rather, related to academic skills which are fundamental to tertiary studies in the Australian context.

This hypothesis is supported by the research result that only 11.25 percent of the students attended the LSU for language support. This finding is consistent with the fact that

English entry requirements are at a high level (IELTS result of 6.0 at diploma part two level and 5.5 at diploma part one level) for Monash College. Clearly essay/report writing and academic writing skills are the most needed skills for students, as demonstrated in the results discussed under Hypothesis 1.

The type of assistance sought by the students suggests the importance of their need to transcend the difference between the CHC learning environment and that of the Western education system. This issue merits further more extensive research.

The result obtained also supports the perception of the differences inherent in the sequential stages of the learning environment, which the literature refers to as the secondary schooling environment, which is primarily teacher-focused, and the tertiary education environment, which, in the west, encourages independent learning. For excellent outcomes, this area of service provision is most important and merits significant budgetary allocation.

Hypothesis 3: The time that is provided for students in the consultations is sufficient and adequate, due to the fact that they have other commitments and any additional support which requires time and effort would be a burden to them.

Students at Monash College have five contact hours per subject per week. Therefore for full-time diploma part one students, who are required to take five subjects per trimester by DIMIA (Department of Immigration Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs)[3], they will have 25 hours of class time per week; for diploma part two students, who are required to

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[3] DIMIA regulates that all international students must study full-time. This is a condition to the issue student visa. As a private tertiary provider, Monash College is required to record all students' attendance and report to DIMIA on a regular base. In addition, they are also allowed 20 hours per week working part-time should they wish to do so. Students who breach the regulations may have their visas revoked.

take four subjects per trimester, they will have 20 hours of class time per week. Thus any lengthy support could become a burden to students rather than being useful.

The results did not fully support this hypothesis. Although it is not a large proportion, 17.5 percent of the students requested additional sessions or time for independent learning. This proportion of the students clearly requires further assistance in order to achieve their desired results. They certainly consider that help from a College tutor is a better avenue for achieving such results.

Hypothesis 4: Students only need support from the LSU with fundamental academic skills. They do not require subject-related academic support, as subject-related support is well covered within the students' curriculum contact hours.

The results of the quantitative survey indicate that fundamental academic skills are those which are the most commonly required form of support by the international students at Monash College.

However, the qualitative data also indicates that, whilst the students are extremely satisfied with the prevailing services offered by Monash College through the LSU programs, subject-related support is one additional service required. 10 percent of the respondents indicated that subject-related support was required in order for them to better utilize the LSU support, which is a relatively high level of request in comparison to the other areas of support being sought.

Hypothesis 5: Expertise in providing the support is more important than the personality of the staff member who is providing the support.

The question relating to this hypothesis was structured as a multiple choice question, where respondents had the option of indicating whether they would prefer i) to see one

specific teacher, ii) to see one specific teacher providing he/she is available at the time or iii) to see any teacher who was on duty when they came to the LSU. A fourth option was an open ended question which invited alternative answers from the respondents. 62 of the respondents (78 percent) indicated that to see a specific teacher was important. 45 percent of those students, (35 percent of the total respondents) had a less strong preference on this issue and indicated that they were willing to accept a different teacher from their preferred choice, if that teacher was not available at the time of the appointment. Results also demonstrated that the other 55 percent (or 65 percent of the total respondents) indicated their strong desire to consult with the same teacher each week, or for each appointment that was made by the student. This preference suggests that the LSU support is valued as it is more personal than class teaching, which is undertaken in either large or small class settings. It also indicates that there is a strong preference amongst the international student cohort (which is largely Asian students in this case) as to whom they have as their teacher. This supports the view that multi-faceted, personalized relationships are typical of business and professional contexts in many Asian cultures, as opposed to the compartmentalized, instrumental nature of relationships in similar contexts in the West. Results also indicate that only 10 percent of the students did not have a preference for any individual teacher and they said they would attend the LSU providing they can obtain academic support from any staff member This result suggests that when students do not have the opportunity to attend a session with their preferred teachers, there is a possibility that they would not attend LSU sessions. This result is consistent with the prevailing literature that students from a predominately Confucian heritage learning background seek to establish relationships with specific teachers (Yap, 1997).

Further, and more importantly, this result supports that it is important to recruit suitable personnel for the LSU activities and programs, staff members who will understand and be

able to accommodate these needs for an enduring relationship by the students. This is relevant because, in the main, the LSU is operating with mainly sessional staff who have a high turnover rate. In this situation these staff do not provide the stability of personal support required by the students. Hence this is clearly not a preferred method with which to offer the service to the students.

Conclusion

This paper has described an innovative approach to teaching and learning support structures for international students in a higher education institution in Australia. Emerging issue concerning the implications of cross-cultural differences in approaches to learning by students from CHC and other Asian cultures have been highlighted.

The structured survey was the first one of its kind to be carried out since the establishment of the LSU at Monash College. It is based on the aim of the LSU policy to be innovative and proactive in catering for the learning needs of international students and the majority of whom are from Asia and who can be classified as having a learning background within the CHC paradigm. Services provided were initially based on what the teachers believed the students needed or were lacking. Overall, the survey confirms that academic support to international students is necessary and actively required by them. The results strongly support the proposition that Western universities must consider new methods and innovate beyond the "language and IT support" paradigm, when assisting international students, especially Asian students, in studying in Western countries. This finding has significant meaning to Australia considering the importance of international education.

The second issue revealed in this research is the high percentage of students who seek clarification from the LSU for their required internal assessment/assignment work. This result raises several questions which need to be addressed in future research. Does this

indicate that tutors have not provided clear and adequate instructions during the tutorials? Does this indicate the dramatic consequences of the cultural differences of international students in the learning environment, in that they prefer not to ask questions within formal class time? Does this indicate that Monash College students lack the fundamental skills of interpreting and understanding assignment questions prior to entry to Monash College? Does this simply indicate a level of uncertainty among the students, due to the dramatic change in their environments, both culturally and academically?

The results of the survey indicate the importance of understanding the consequences of the CHC background of international students from Asia, for their learning experience both in formal class time and while accessing learning support services. The CHC paradigm is a very significant element of international students' identities which Western tertiary education providers need to understand at many levels. Within this, the need to establish enduring relationships with staff is a key to the CHC international students obtaining the most benefit from learning support programs. As facilitating this is potentially expensive in terms of contact time and staffing levels, it clashes with the "higher education as international business", cost-effective strategy of tertiary education providers, yet it is very important that these providers get the balance right. The global tertiary education sector is very competitive and this could provide Australia with a niche in the Asian market, as well as creating a more satisfactory education experience for the students, a win-win situation so desirable within management strategy.

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Table 1: LSU Areas of Support

	Types of support provided by the LSU	Number of students who had used the service	Percentage (%)
A	Academic writing style	28	35.00
B	Essay/report structuring	36	45.00
C	Referencing	18	22.50
D	Presentation skills	17	21.00
E	Clarifying assignment questions	32	40.00
F	Learning and studying skills	14	17.50
G	Study strategies	9	11.25
H	Language support	9	11.25
I	Time management skills	4	0.05
J	Exam preparation	15	18.80
K	Other	4	0.05

Appendix 1

MONASH College

Learning Support Unit

STUDENT FEEDBACK QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear student**:**

This feedback form aims to improve the service we provide to Monash College students. Your cooperation in providing genuine feedback will assist us in identifying areas of needs and supports that students require.

Thank you,

Date:	Name:	Student ID:

Pleases circle:

1. How did you learn about LSU?
   a. Orientation day
   b. Teachers
   c. Students
   d. Other, please specify

2. Why have you come to LSU?
   a. Academic writing style
   b. Essay/report structure
   c. Referencing
   d. Presentation skills
   e. Clarify assignment questions
   f. Learning and studying skills
   g. Study strategies
   h. Language support
   i. Time management skills
   j. Exam preparation
   k. Other, please specify_____
   _____

3. How often do you use LSU support?
   a. 1-2 times a trimester
   b. Less than 5 times a trimester
   c. Once a week
   d. I would like to use the service more than once a week.
   e. More than 5 times a trimester

4. When I use LSU support, do you prefer?
   a. I prefer to see the same teacher each time
   b. It does not make any difference whom I see
   c. I would prefer to see one particular teacher, but I do not mind if I get a different one
   d. Other, please specify

5. Are there any other services you would like LSU to provide
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6. Other comments: