Engaging to empower to educate - NESB international students at western higher education institutions!

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Abstract

A rise in the trend of International education that gives tremendous business opportunities to many western education institutes and provides valuable education opportunities to many NESB (Non English Speaking Background) international students from the developing world however brings many issues with it. The discontent arising from many unmet expectations from both sides and the cross-cultural 'mismatching' between international students and their new academic environment do create a gap. For a harmonious alliance between international students, their lecturers and their host institutes there is a need for an engagement process to fill this gap between the expectations and the delivery from both partners in this 'business' of International education. Just like any appropriate engagement period before marriage (especially an arranged marriage) this needs to be an explicit, formal and deliberate arrangement to ease NESB international students into the western academic culture as well as to get introduced to what they bring in. Written from the perspective of a learning skills and language advising position and in a bid to educate educational organisations to the value of such an empowering engagement process in the form of academic support for new international students, this paper aims to advocate for these services to be an integral part of not only the induction activities but to be spread over the first few weeks of the semester for all undergraduate as well as post-graduate international students. These services for international students need to be considered as an essential part of a normal developmental process that is common to all students as they become part of a tertiary learning community, rather than from within a deficit framework.

Key Words

International students, cross-cultural 'mismatching', engagement process, induction activities

Introducing the characters

Engagement in the context of higher education means students' active and positive involvement in educationally oriented activities at their university and refers to their assimilation into the academic community. Higher education research, both here in Australia and overseas has confirmed that students engaged with their academic environment including their learning, their peers and the socio-cultural facet of their university have a positive education experience. Hence in the recent academic discourse engagement has become a buzz word and the means to ignite this engagement a holy grail for universities. Universities are exploring strategies to enhance their students' engagement because a positive and successful experience for their students also means retention. In a competitive environment where universities already stretched for funds are vying for students' interest in their courses as it converts to funds as well as the lucrative monetary benefits brought by both local and overseas full-fee paying students, attrition is an ugly word. Academics and many teachers teaching these students however value and endeavor to stimulate this engagement as it enhances teaching and learning initiatives in higher education. Other than retaining students this engagement empowers the students to make the best of their learning opportunities; to engage with their subject, their course and their learning inside and outside the classrooms. Thus the students not only stay on the campus but stay happy and fulfilled.

Lights

The current paper written to address the present conference theme of Educate, Advocate and Engage, strives to advocate for engaging to empower to educate NESB international students as a moral and practical solution to many issues related to internationalisation of higher education in western higher education institutions. This paper posits that students' engagement which is considered one of the most important ingredients for their positive experience at university would be even more crucial for international students whose very existence in their host country can usually be summed up by their experience and presence on their university campus. It also suggests that an empowering engagement process in the form of academic support for new international students especially organised and supported by their academics should be put in place as a gesture befitting the ethos of international education. This academic support program it is claimed will not only enhance students' academic skills but would enhance their social adjustment as well. Written from a Learning Skills lecturer's point of view who as a member of Student Support Staff is involved in many university initiatives to induct and retain students and as a teacher is interested in the pedagogy and ethics of international education the paper makes use of an initiative which is a product of an ongoing research project on international students' experiences on a metropolitan university in Australia to show benefits of such an approach. The paper draws its purpose and background from recent literature on international students and related issues as well as literature on first year experience including transition and engagement of new students in their academic environment leading to their success.

The backdrop

Internationalisation has remained a priority agenda item for governments and institutions of higher education for the last two decades (De Wit, 2002). Internationalisation of Higher Education (HE), by providing valuable education opportunities to students from the developing world and by giving tremendous business opportunities to western education institutes just like any other global enterprise, has brought east and west together in a business partnership. However as it is a one way flow of especially NESB Asian students to the developed and more academically recognised institutes providing western academic degrees, internationalisation of education can not stray from being the westernisation of Higher Education (Flower Dew, 2001; Masemann, 1986, cited in Pennycook, 1994). May be for that reason termed as "commercialisation" or "marketisation" (Marginson 1993, 178-79, 1997, 36-38, cited in Chen, 2002, p.2) of higher education, internationalisation of Higher Education is sometimes accused of upholding economic and cultural imperialism (Kell, n.d.) as information and knowledge usually flow from north to the south sector with resources like man power and money from the south to the north. The discourse of HE therefore is rife with themes of internationalisation of academic institutes engaged with teaching western conventions of higher education and imparting western 'manufactured' information and knowledge to the world and is involved in discussions regarding the teaching and learning issues that go with it (Tootell, 1999). The most important issue that both international students and their host institutes face in this environment is the academic adjustment of international students. The cross-cultural 'mismatching' between international students and their new academic environment does result in some discontent from both sides (Handa, 2004b) and lack of engagement on the part of international students becomes an issue for their institutes (Scott, Bond & Webb, 2005).

Empowerment means getting confidence through the process of education however students coming from a different language and culture background first need to be empowered to get the education. This empowerment it is believed comes from an engagement process. As research has suggested for most first year students the initial few weeks are crucial (Tinto, 1998; Kantanis, 2000; McInnis, 2001; Pitkethly & Prosser, 2001; Krause, 2005) as it is in this period of transition students either get integrated into their academic community to later on perform well or do not subsist either by withdrawing from the course or university all together or by barely surviving and not performing well enough to meet their goals. Research in the US (Tinto, 1998; Kuh, 2002; Ewell, n.d.) and recently at

home in Australia (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005; Krause, 2005; Scott, Bond & Webb, 2005), has shown much interest in this phenomena. Students' active involvement and their sense of belonging at university have been claimed as the most effective factors in their learning; as their engagement with the academic environment seems to translate in "a range of outcomes including persistence, satisfaction, achievement and academic success" (Krause, 2005, 1) and the graduate attributes development in them (Cleary and Skaines, 2005). Attrition which is one of the ugliest issues for universities to face and retention one of the sweetest results of their efforts to address it, are both directly related to students' disengagement or engagement at university and for a "high quality undergraduate learning experience" (Krause, 2005, p.1) universities must offer opportunities to get their students engaged in the academic as well as in the social components of the learning environment (Krause, Hartley, James, & McInnis, 2005) and it would be appropriate for universities to offer similar opportunities to their international students. However what is appropriate and works for local students may not be appropriate or effective in the case of international students. McInnis (2001) suggests that universities need to find solutions within their own specific context to accommodate their students' needs hence universities enrolling large numbers of international students (and all universities for that matter) need to find ways and means to implement an engagement process for their international students to see them through their transition period.

For international students period of their transition to western university culture is usually more challenging than that of their local counterparts. Adjustment problems that they come across while in a new country and an unfamiliar culture (Pederson, 1995; Robertson, Lane, Jones and Thomas, 2000 cited in Leasks, 2004) as well as lack of support networks may exacerbate issues related to their first year experience at university too. On top of that "the transition between .passive. (non-Western) and .active (Western) classroom cultures coupled with the insecurity imposed by adverse cultural know-how and less than adequate competence in language skills" (Hellstén, 2004, p. 10) might all conspire to make their transition into western university culture a particularly painful experience. Loneliness which has been confirmed as one of the major transition issues for most first year students (McInnis, 2001) troubles international students even more (Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia & Sawir, 2005). Other than the services provided by the International Office plus occasional academic support from Learning Skills lecturers, most international students are responsible for their own learning and developing their skills according to the academic conventions of their host university and their chosen course.

Tertiary education demands independent learning and university students are expected to learn of their own initiative but it also means that students are left to their own devices. In the absence of a structured academic preparation program which could assist many students settle down in higher education environment for example freshman year (Major, 2005) most students enter an unfamiliar academic environment without a guiding hand. Being independent learners also means students themselves are instigators of their own academic adjustment at university. In the case of international students who have not had any schooling here in Australia and who might have prior experience of the academic culture from another country only; any issue that arises from this adjustment period can have drastic results. It can not only affect their academic success and persistence in education but may affect their self concept and world view (Major, 2005).

Moreover as university students, both local and international, are spending less and less hours on the campus (McInnis, James & Hartley, 2002) there are less opportunities of social interaction between students hence they lose valuable opportunities "for close engagement with the learning process" too (Employment, Workplace Relations and Education References Committee, 2005, p.72). In the case of especially NESB international students as research suggests adjusting to a new environment using a second language can be extremely challenging (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990 Ellis, 1995; Handa, 2003). Many of these students who lack confidence in speaking up in their tutorials or who never have courage to ask a question of their teachers or other students would not be engaged with their academic environment hence endangering their learning even. Interaction between these students' "enlightenment and engagement" (Schugurensky, 2001, p. 1) can be improved through intentional as

well as more systematic collaboration and dialogue between the two. It also means giving extra academic support, as well as time to adjust to the new academic culture (Handa, 2003; Carroll, 2004).

Action

My research and a model of Academic orientation that I have been working on at my university both have, to some extent, shown that faculty staff need to strike an explicit, formal and deliberate arrangement to ease NESB international students into the western academic culture as well as to be introduced to what these students bring in. Learning Skills academics can help them in this. My research on international students' learning experiences (Handa, 2004a) at my university confirmed that many international students were disengaged with their learning as a result of various transition issues. Their transition to the new culture had been problematical because of their language problems but also because of the various academic conventions of higher education system in Australia being different from their home culture. Their own cultural background and prior learning experiences in their home culture were hindering their adjustment and in the absence of any academic orientation offered by the university they were left to their own devices to sink or swim. Some of them had come for help to the Learning Skills Unit of their own accord whereas some were sent to see Learning Skills advisors (the surrogate academics) about their language difficulties or if they had committed plagiarism. Therefore bridging the gap between their skills and expectations of the new academic environment as well as acquiring skills to meet these expectations (just as in the case of most other students) was usually: "either left to the interventionist (such as the Learning adviser)" or it was hoped that students will learn "it by osmosis" (Peach, 2005, p.7).

As a result in my capacity a Learning Skills lecturer at my university I came across many international students and dealt with their academic literacy related issues. Since these students were facing some of the very problems that as a university student in Australia I had faced too (Handa, 2003), I felt I had a better insight into their academic problems. Hence I started working on an idea of inducting especially NESB international students into the university academic culture in Australia. In collaboration with the International Student Office (the main body responsible for international students related issues at UWS) an academic preparation program was devised and approximately 40 students attended it. In a follow up evaluation most students expressed their keen desire to continue academic induction with Learning Skills Unit in the form of Spoken English or Grammar Classes. These were offered to them for a few weeks. The few students who came to some of these workshops remained in contact with me and each other and reported benefits of the continuous academic support. However one issue that came up from the follow up sessions was that the academic preparation program being very generic in nature did not meet many subject specific needs of these students and many times their lecturers had somewhat different approach towards academic writing and assessment tasks which clashed/or did not completely agree with what was told to them by their LSU advisors just making it very difficult and confusing (Handa, 2004a) for the students. These students even though showed their disappointment in many such study related issues, they seemed to have an open mind and a will to engage with the university and kept coming back to the academic literacy workshops the whole semester. While practising their seminar and tutorial presentation skills or while developing their written skills, they shared their problems and achievements with me and each other and benefited from their exposure to a learning situation which was non-threatening and looked forward to coming every week.

In a bid to rectify some of the concerns expressed by these students; a proposal to set up a school specific Academic orientation program was then offered to few schools from where many international students were usually coming or being sent for help. Impetus for this proposal first of all was to provide academic support for their international students and then it was also to make it context specific too. It was hoped that if schools took the responsibility of inducting their international students along with the Learning Skills lecturers; the students will have a positive experience of getting adjusted at the university. Unfortunately none of the schools at that stage took this offer. Empirical evidence was required to convince the academics from these schools about the value of such

an academic engagement process that most international students required. However later in another phase of my research while I was interviewing academics especially who were teaching classes with large numbers of international students certain possibilities started to emerge (Handa, 2004b) and one of the schools decided to collaborate to run an academic orientation program for their masters (all were international). The main problems that international students and their lecturers were facing in that course were discussed in a roundtable meeting and an Academic Induction Program was devised.

The evaluative data collected from the students after the program clearly indicated that, "while academic study skills (such as academic writing, critical thinking and analysis) were areas of most benefit to students, some of these were at the same time the areas in which students continued to crave still further knowledge and skills" (Handa and Fallon, 2005, p.5). Hence after two such Orientation Day repeats "lunch-time seminars", were introduced during the semester to address some of the topics that the students had raised as problematic. These seminars were not only organised for their academic literacy development but were also built around social activities organised by their academics. In a three way communication set up with their academics and myself students started to feel more confident with their lecturers in asking questions and expressing their needs and doubts. Hence a dialogue had started between academics and their students with the Learning Skills lecturers helping in creating a seamless experience for these students which in turn helped them engage with their academic environment and do better in their studies. According to one of the academics the most beneficial part of the program that academics teaching these students thought was "Student engagement in their degree program" and "Less frustration and fewer tears" (Fallon & Handa, 2006).

Hence a need for these proactive interventions was clearly identified to start an engagement process for international students for their better adjustment and academic success and perseverance at universities. As a result of their differing prior academic experience many of these students were having difficulties in argumentative writing, critically analysing their texts, and in participating in discussions at tutorials. Relevant guidance from LSU as well as their academics; their interaction with their peers and academics in both academic and semi-social settings assisted them.

At least in the case of many of these students it was confirmed that some of the above mentioned problems – once they were acknowledged as developmental issues by their academics were addressed by both students and their teachers even if not resolved completely. It was also confirmed that to put an engagement process in place for settling most new students at university requires both academic and social support from their teachers, their peers (Cleary & Skaines, 2005) as well as Learning Skills lecturers (Handa & Fallon, 2005).

As they start their life in a new country and environment most international students go through a "process of initial adjustment to an unfamiliar environment" (Pederson, 1995, p1) and experience stress as an international student has expressed "Adjustment problems to the climate, the culture and the workload, adjusting to a new way of teaching. Making new friends too, creates a lot of stress" (Australia Now, n.d.). The "socio-emotional variables of group interaction, including motivation, satisfaction and anxiety reduction" (Stacey, 1998, p. 77, cited in Crease, 2003) can however help them settle down which in turn assists them in their learning. "Teaching and learning activities that expand the students' generic capabilities and encourage critical thinking" (Reid and Loxton, 2004) therefore need to become part and parcel of their academic environment, thus making it imperative that learning experiences of these students both in and out of the classroom are deliberately structured to include peer interaction (Krause, 2005) and academic support.

Curtain & Encore

With their limited language skills many NESB international students struggle to make efforts to participate in the discourse of their academic discipline. However sometimes they are not seen to be able to contribute much (Kell, n.d.) hence what they bring in to classrooms and discussions is not considered worth the effort of their classmates and teachers. Especially as the "cultural and political

polarisation" (Marginson, 2005) infecting the higher education sector, their difficulties and concerns are either labelled as "language problems" or just ignored by their teachers and other students. Their host universities other than the monies they bring to their coffers do not acknowledge their prior experiences and learning. However in an environment of Internationalisation of Higher Education according to the AVCC's Code of Practice (2002, cited in UTAS, n.d.) it is important that all students including international students are given opportunities to relate their discipline to their home context because for their conceptual change and development students must see their new acquired knowledge in relation to their own experiences (Prosser, Ramsden, Trigwell & Martin, 2003). Hence, the curriculum designers need to be aware of the context that the international students come from (Leask, 1999; Ramburuth, 2001; Volet, 2003).However, universities must ensure that it is not only international students who are provided with opportunities to get international education but that opportunities "relevant to the experiences of all of its students and staff" (Rizivi, 2001, p. 5) are created.

To take the metaphor of "engagement process" even further it can be said that after the period of courtship is over and students have been recruited and have arrived on the campus, an engagement process needs to be put in place not only for the international students entering western education system but for the teachers as well who are going to teach them. For a good partnership and a happy marriage both parties must be provided with an opportunity to get to know each other well and it should be their mutual responsibility to avail benefits from their alliance. Therefore, to maintain a positive teaching and learning experience between the western universities and the international students, students as well as staff must share "the responsibility of developing a better understanding of each others culture, values, attitude, beliefs and identities" (Volet, S.E. & Tan-Quigley, A. 1999, p. 99). Not only for international students but for all students increasing their engagement with their learning, their peers (both international and local), and their learning environments is crucial to empower them to make the best of their learning opportunities.

The International academic preparation programs that I have been involved in, especially the embedded and school based ones; have shown students' positive engagement with their learning. These activities as mentioned earlier usually include an Academic Orientation Day and two or more follow up sessions on their academic needs plus some social events organised by their teachers. The students have shown much appreciation for these activities and according to their teachers students in those courses seem to be more engaged with their academic environment than their predecessors were before this program was put in place. Their end of the semester evaluation, anecdotal comments/emails from students and lecturers and the clear dropping failure rate in some units have confirmed the benefits of this engagement process in helping these students achieve a sense of belonging and a positive experience in their chosen course. Over a period of the last two semesters I have been collecting data and have now started to make a case for these programs to become an essential regular part of all international students' initial adjustment period at my university.

Nevertheless the success of these programs naturally rests in the hands of international students and their academics who both need to come together in a productive partnership and in their willingness to participate. However, there is actually a third party involved too and that is the Institution, the university where this alliance called Internationalisation of Higher Education takes place. Therefore to conclude this paper I would like to make some recommendations for the three willing collaborators in this act of coalition. It is important for Institutions to recognise the importance of activities which connect international students with their academic environment to ensure that international students are engaged therefore empowered to be educated in their chosen courses. While many institutions do these on a voluntary basis, the research seems to show that it may be important to be more 'encouraging' of students to engage with such programs (Handa & Fallon, 2005) and social activities to give them a chance to engage with other students. Academics need to be involved in these induction activities so that while initiating their students into the western academic culture they also become aware of their students' prior educational experiences (Handa, 2003; Handa, 2004b) which might help them to be flexible and accommodating in their classroom practices. Finally it is for the students to take initiative and find out as much as they can about the academic expectations of their

university, find out about the academic preparation and other activities that are offered, actively participate in them, seek out senior students to get advice, engage in group activities with local students and join peer mentoring programs to immerse in the culture of their course and university.

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