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The Roles of International Student Advisors: Opportunities And Challenges

Introduction

International student advisers (ISAs) in New Zealand work with a unique group of students. On the one hand, their sojourners' status bestows upon them an exciting opportunity to develop and grow as individuals. On the other hand, their academic and personal growth comes with challenges which they must overcome in order to achieve their goals. This essay argues for the need for specific university pastoral care personnel to help meet the needs of these students, in addition to traditional university counselling services. It examines the role of the international student adviser (ISA) and the challenges that arise in attempts to address the distinctive needs of international students within these institutions.

Historical context

Traditionally, guidance structures and roles are established within the school system in New Zealand. Regardless of the on-going challenges surrounding the nature of guidance work, the need for guidance within the school system has been recognised by the government since the late 1950s, and various policies and programmes regarding guidance in schools have been established accordingly (Besley, 2001). Most literature regarding guidance/pastoral care focuses on schools. Within the school system, there is arguably a clearer structure and delegation of guidance/pastoral care responsibilities than there is within university system. Moreover, it seems that students within the school system receive more attention from various sources of guidance and care (eg. teacher; guidance counsellor; career counsellor…etc). Pastoral care personnel within universities are mainly counsellors, who are usually situated within the student health services system,

or chaplains (Haas, 1969). The assumption is that university students are adult individuals who are committed towards their academic careers, and they have the maturity and ability to make appropriate adjustments to achieve their goals (Haas, 1969). In other words, university students are expected to understand their responsibilities and actively seek assistance according to their personal circumstances. This value-laden expectation and cultural practice (i.e. counselling), together with a lack of a well-organised guidance/pastoral care structure, becomes problematic in a cross-cultural context.

International Education in New Zealand began in 1951 within an aid and development framework as a result of the Colombo Plan (Butcher, Lim, McGrath, Revis, 2002; Ministry of Education, August 2001). The Government in the 1950s saw education as a venue for pursuing its obligations to less fortunate/developed neighbouring countries, and all but a handful of the international students who came to New Zealand to study did so on the public purse (Butcher, Lim, McGrath & Revis, 2002; Haas, 1969; Ministry of Education, August 2001).

Since then, the New Zealand education system has undergone a significant shift. Under the current social-political climate, education is regarded as a profitable good and industry, and there has been a significant reduction in government funding (Butcher, Lim, McGrath & Revis, 2002). This has led to New Zealand universities strategically and actively marketing their qualifications off-shore. As a result, education has become one of the country's major export items, contributing around 2 billion dollars annually to the New Zealand economy (Ministry of Education, June 2001 & August 2001; Ward &

Masgoret, 2004). While the economy and educational institutions benefit from the 2 billion-dollar economic influx from exporting education, there are many challenges that come with the financial gain. As the number of international students in New Zealand educational institutions rises, the demands and pressures on these institutions to meet and accommodate the needs of these students increases proportionately (Butcher, Lim, McGrath & Revis, 2002 Ministry of Education, August 2001).

International students have distinct needs. They come from cultures with different academic and social traditions, and daily tasks that are taken for granted by local students (e.g. teaching and learning style; developing friendships etc.) are challenging to many international students (Arthur, 2004; Butcher, Lim, McGrath & Revis, 2002; Jacob & Greggo, 2001; Mori, 2000; Yi, Lin & Kishimoto, 2003; Zhang & Dixon, 2003). Hence, it is of paramount importance that these students are provided with culturally responsive guidance and support (Luzio-Lockett, 1998) in order to assist their transition and adjustment to the host culture/community.

Since 2002, the "Code of practice for the pastoral care of international students", established by the New Zealand Ministry of Education, has come in to force. This regulation signals not only the government's determination to provide quality education and care to international students in New Zealand, but also a recognition of the unique needs of these international students. The Code states that an education provider "must be a signatory to the Code to enrol international students" (Code of Practice, 2003). Section 5 of the Code states that signatories/institutions must have a designated unit or person for

all pastoral care inquiries from international students, and the institutions must advise students of the existence and availability of such a person or unit. The Code makes it clear that institutions must provide (but not be limited to) specific services for international students. Most importantly, the Code states that "support services… must be tailored to meet the needs of international students". It is in order to fulfil the requirement of the government (the Code) that specific pastoral care/guidance roles for international students (e.g. international student advisor) have been established within institutions.

International student adviser (ISA): roles

The role of an ISA is founded on a broad commitment to fostering cultural safety and awareness within a multicultural setting. According to the Guidelines to the Code, the term "pastoral care" encompasses all aspects of safety and well being (Ministry of Education, Sept, 2003). In deed, the educational experience of international students is not limited to the strictly "academic". Whether or not these international students have a positive and successful educational experience depends largely on what happens in their personal/private space, as well as their life in general in the host community (Arthur, 2004). Therefore, the philosophical basis of the role of ISA within universities is that pastoral care/guidance is central to the total educational programme, and it endeavours to assist the individual's development in all aspects of his/her life (Milner, 1980). This broad mandate, and the fact that the ISA role is so new, means that there are many facets of this role. In this essay, this range is outlined according to several wider categories. It is not envisaged, however, that any single staff member, acting alone, could carry out this full range of services.

Advising

ISAs advise students on various issues : academic, personal , and legal. They also monitor students' academic progress and use it as an indication of the well-being of students.

The role of an ISA is different to that of a traditional counsellor (although there are some overlapping areas, and it is desirable for ISAs to have counselling training/qualification). Both roles are necessary in any given university. Like counsellors, ISAs attend to students by listening to the expression of their concerns during interview sessions.

However, counsellors work to help clients/students understand how they might best address issues that are often treated as emotional or psychological in origin. ISAs, on the other hand, are often supplying much more practical advice to international students, whose issues can be simply caused by a lack of basic information or cultural knowledge.

Moreover, unlike counsellors who rely mainly on voluntary self-referrals, ISAs actively seek out students who are in need of assistance . The practice of counselling takes place within a cultural context, and the parameters within which it operates are burdened with assumptions that are dictated mainly by European culture (Arthur, 2004; Duan & Wang, 2000). The demography of the ethnic composition among international students in New Zealand reflects a strong Asian dominance, particularly that of mainland China (Ministry of Education, June 2001; Ward & Masgoret, 2004). This is also true of universities in Australia, and these of the northern hemisphere (Arthur, 2004; Mori, 2000; Yeh & Wang,

2000; Yang, Wong, Hwang & Heppner, 2002 ; Zhang & Dixon, 2003). The needs of these students are not well addressed by Western counselling. T he focus of counselling is to facilitate and assist individuals in developing self-efficacy. The individualistic tradition upon which c ounselling practice is based often clashes with the collectivistic values (Arthur, 2004; Duan & Wang, 2000) that the majority of international student population in New Zealand hold. Besides, such a process can be lengthy at times, and the international students' stay is temporary. Given the fact that the level of acculturation within the host culture is a major determinant in non -European international students' accessing counselling servi ces (Arthur, 2004; Zhang & Dixon, 2003), the ISAs' more pro-active and direct approach provides these studen ts with alternative, and more culturally responsive (Arthur, 2004; Zhang & Dixon, 2003) care.

Education

This pro-active role is also apparent here, where ISAs act as "cultural agents" who create opportunities for meaningful cross-cultural communication and social interaction to take place among students. It has been established that building social support programmes (e.g. peer mentoring) has significant implications for promoting the academic and social development of international students (Arthur, 2004; Barker, Mak, Millman & Logan, 1998; Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama & Barker, 1999; Mori, 2000; Vong, 2002; Yang, Wong, Hwang & Heppner, 2002; Yeh & Wang, 2000). Accordingly, ISAs organise and facilitate peer-mentoring programme s for international students. In addition, ISAs plan and deliver skills-based cross-cultural communication training workshops to international students and their local counterparts. These workshops develop international students'

sociocultural competencies for success in the host culture , and a reciprocal learning relationship among various c ultures on campus is encouraged and fa cilitated (Barker, Mak, Millman & Logan, 1998; Mak, Westw ood, Ishiyama & Barker, 1999)

ISAs also plan and deliver compulsory cross -cultural communication workshops to all staff members on campus in order to help ensure the quality of services offered to international students. International students often exper ience culture shock. The greater the differences between the host cu lture and the students' culture of origin, the harder it is for the students to adapt to the new environment (Arthur, 2004; Luzio -Lockett, 1998). While various strategies have been develop ed to assist international students' transition, little attention is paid to how institutions cope with dealing with a large influx of culturally different students (Arthur, 2004). Like international students, institutions suffer from culture sh ock, too. If staff members on campus lack cross -cultural communication competency, it i s likely that the frustration triggered by cultural differences will impact on those students' international education experience negatively. In this instance, ISAs can function as "technical adviser s" to campus staff in order to e nsure a supportive and understanding campus environment for international students.

The cross-cultural experience of international students does not end on their return to their country of origin . Often t hese students have adopted various values of the host culture during their stay, and they suffer reverse culture shock when they return to their home countries (Arthur, 2004). Therefore, ISAs deliver pre -departure workshops,

preparing students for the possible challenges that they might encounter in their home countries, on their return.

Liaison

Cross-cultural transitions are often stressful, and having social support is identified as a significant coping resource and strategy for stress-management (Arthur, 2004; Butcher, Lim, McGrath & Revis, 2002). ISAs take initiative in building relationships with community groups (e.g. police, community cultural groups…etc) and organise activities or social gatherings to facilitate establishing contacts between international students and these groups. ISAs function as agents in promoting the services available to students, and in assisting them in utilizing these services.

Advocacy, research and policy recommendation

One cannot afford to overlook the power issues confronting international students. Students are in any case comparatively powerless in university structures. This is compounded for international students. Collectively, they form a subculture within the university, and there are many conflicts (or potential conflicts) that arise due to cross-cultural interactions. For example, international students lack local knowledge in various areas (academic and social) and are often disadvantaged as a result. It is the ISA's responsibility to identify systemic issues and to advocate and promote change. In addition, ISAs appreciate the impact that organisational culture has on the well-being of students. As having a sense of belonging is fundamental to one's educational experience (Collins, 1999; Kaplan & Geoffroy, 1990), it is the institution's responsibility to create an

organisational climate and culture that is positive and supportive towards international students (Arthur, 2004). Therefore, ISAs take leadership in research to identify the issues and concerns regarding international students, making policy recommendations addressing these issues within universities as well as to other external agencies concerned (e.g. immigration, Ministry of Education).

It is important that ISAs take leadership in researching international student's strengths and coping resources. Up to the present day, research on international students primarily focuses on their problems and concerns without addressing their strengths (Arthur, 2004). This creates a false perception that international students are a rather problematic group, and does not contribute positively towards raising the international students' profile within the institutions. ISAs must identify international students' strengths and recommend that resources be established within institutions to foster these strengths and create a proactive, cultural-diversity celebrating atmosphere, as opposed to a reactive and problem-based one.

Challenges

A pastoral-care conscious institution involves the whole community in implementing its pastoral goals (Best *et al*, 1995; Collins, 1999; Kaplan & Geoffroy, 1990). In other words, pastoral-care involves cooperation and team work, and it requires strong leadership and initiative from within the institution. In New Zealand, although the Code requires that institutions provide pastoral-care to all international students, ISAs are confronted with

difficulties at a structural level (e.g. resources, funding, organisational culture) as a profession.

The Code of Practice reflects the national policy maker's recognition of international students' pastoral-care needs, and its attempts to ensure that these needs are met in New Zealand institutions. However, the assumption that institutions are rational and will adopt suggestions proposed by organisations outside the institutions is, in fact, problematic (Stoll, 2000). Staff members on campus carry beliefs, values, and biases that are reflective of the host culture, and these elements have a strong impact on how they respond to the proposed initiatives (Stoll, 2000). For instance, issues such as prejudice, racism, and resistance towards viewing international students as having different needs in comparison to their domestic counterparts within the institution all make it difficult for ISAs in their quest to create a multicultural climate within the institution. Moreover, it has been suggested that institutions pay little attention to personal/emotional aspects of international students' overseas education experience, and there is a lack of initiative within institutions in organising provision for a facilitating and supportive climate for these international learners (Luzio-Lockett, 1998). Whether or not the universities in New Zealand are establishing pastoral-care support to international students in accordance with the spirit of the Code remains unclear.

Like all pastoral-care professionals, ISAs need to clearly understand their own competence, education, training and expertise. This indicates the need to recognise the limitations of their competence and qualifications so they can make appropriate referrals

when necessary. Unlike counsellors, who have a well-established and recognised professional body (e.g. NZAC) and training programmes, there is no such professional body available to ISAs. The only professional body for ISAs in New Zealand (ISANA: International Education Association) was formed in 2001, and it has no authority in accreditation. This has significant implications. First of all, lacking a recognised professional training programme implies a difficulty in standardizing and monitoring the quality of ISAs (e.g. code of ethics for ISAs). This undermines the authority and credibility of ISAs within institutions, and so their ability to advocate for change. Lacking a monitoring body also makes it challenging to define the role and responsibilities of ISAs, although it can be argued that ISAs have more control in developing and defining their roles this way. ISAs risk taking on an unrealistic workload out of their good will as helping professionals, and experience burnout as a result. Although it is a compulsory requirement that pastoral-care personnel/unit be established within institutions, there is no staff-student ratio specified. Consequently, the well-being of ISAs, as well as the students that they are responsible for, is largely dependent upon on the level of commitment to international students' welfare in the institution, as well as the constraints (e.g. finance/budget) on staffing of individual institutions.

Some ISAs are further challenged by the possible conflict of interest due to their dual roles as pastoral-care advisers for students and as teaching staff. Many pastoral-care personnel are appointed on an ad-hoc basis (Haas, 1969). Staff members who occupy both teaching and pastoral-care roles within the university risk unintentionally sacrificing the pastoral advising role due to pressure from their academic role. Further, such dual

roles raise the question of trust and power issues between students and staff. For instance, teaching roles inherit the power and the responsibility to discipline. This requires staff to report on students, which clashes with the support role, in which confidentiality is of paramount importance. Meanwhile, confidentiality is an extremely significant determinant for many international students' utilization of pastoral-care services (Arthur, 2004; Vong, 2002). This conflict between the roles places ISAs with dual roles in a difficult position. In addition, teaching staff are perceived as having a high degree of authority and therefore much less approachable by students from certain cultural background (e.g. Chinese) (Arthur, 2004). Such a perception may prevent certain groups of students from accessing pastoral-care services.

Apart from the structural challenges, ISAs need to confront their own cultural biases. They need to examine their own assumptions regarding culture, and expand their understanding about issues regarding cross-cultural adjustment, communication, and transition (Arthur, 2004). Unexamined biases may hinder or even harm international students' pastoral-care experience. Pastoral-care professionals have been confronted with the issue of acting as agents of social control as well as social change for decades (Best *et al*, 1995). ISAs must constantly reflect on their own practice and avoid acting as agents of assimilation and strive to create a reciprocal cultural exchange climate that is based on respect towards all cultures. Wherever and whenever possible, ISAs should upskill their cross-cultural competency through training programmes in order to maintain a high professional standard.

Conclusion

The international education experience needs to be perceived holistically. As people in transition, international students require guidance and care that are responsive to their unique needs. A supportive campus environment is vital to help facilitating international students achieve their academic and personal goals and development in a foreign culture (Arthur, 2004; Luzio-Lockett, 1998). The educational experience of international students is not purely cognitive. Academic achievement depends on personal, social, and emotional factors. It is the institution's obligation to create an encouraging and safe environment fostering personal, social, emotional and so academic development (Luzio-Lockett, 1998). It is also important that the kind of guidance /pastoral-care and support offered should be appropriate to a cross-cultural environment (Arthur, 2004; Luzio-Lockett, 1998). The role of ISAs aims at bridging the gap between the current available support within the university (e.g. counselling) and the pastoral needs of the culturally different international students. Not only do ISAs have responsibilities towards the support and growth of individual students, they also aid and promote cultural change at an organisational level. Collins points out that the nature of pastoral care defies rigid definition, and that there seems to be no end to the quest to establish a sound pastoral care system (Collins, 1999). Regardless of this, ISAs should remain positive towards their profession and continue to engage with and advocate for international students. In doing so, ISAs will always have the power to redefine their roles and to better serve the needs of international students yet to come.

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