# Trial of an after-hours assistance hotline for international students

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# Abstract

An international student's sense of wellbeing has a major affect on their satisfaction with all aspects of their life and study experience in the host country. Australian and overseas studies show that there is a considerable gap between international students' perception of their need for help and their accessing that help. The availability and responsiveness of a variety of support services is important to the sustainability of this sector.

Nine institutions participated in a trial of an after-hours hotline for international students. The service was designed to be an extension of each institution's existing support services with diversion of their after-hours number to the call centre and with calls following protocols determined by each institution. The central nature of the data collection allowed daily, weekly and monthly reporting by seven agreed call categories to the participating institutions.

The trial started just after the start-of-year orientation period, but included the mid-year orientation. Two hundred and fifty-one calls were received in the six months of the trial, of which 26 (10 %) were related to physical health, psychological health (counselling) and security and safety, the three categories most likely to give rise to an emergency response. Seventy-eight (46%) of the 171 calls received on weekdays were received in the three hours after the office closed and 122 (77%) up to midnight. Eighty calls were received on weekends. Twenty of the 26 calls (77%) related to physical health, psychological health (counselling) and security and safety were received after 10:00pm at night and on weekends.

Added to an institution's existing services, the hotline provides certainty of assistance at any hour of the day and assists education providers to meet their duty-of-care under Standard 6 of the National Code of Practice (2007).

# Introduction

Relative to its population, Australia is a major provider of education for overseas students.  A comparison of enrolments at the same higher education level across countries (UNESCO Global Education Digest 2009) shows that in 2008, the United States had 624,474 international students and Australia 230,635. In 2009 there were students from more than 190 countries studying in Australia (Council of Australian Government 2010).

Across all education levels in Australia, the size of the international student body is increasing rapidly, growing from just under 300,000 in 2002 to over 600,000 in 2009 (Australian Education International  2009). In 2008 it was the third largest source of overseas earnings for Australia, worth $1.5b (Gillard 2009). The cultural value of the sector has enriched Australian society, contributing a traditionally friendly, tolerant, multicultural community and has improved education, research, diplomatic and business links (Baird 2010, Gillard 2009, Turcic 2008). The majority of international students studying in Australia are from the high socio-economic groups in Asia (Scott 2005 cited in Grebennikov & Skaines 2007).

*Legislative Framework*
In 2000 the Australian Government introduced the Education Services for Overseas Students Act (ESOS 2000), ESOS Regulations in 2001 and the amended (ESOS) National
Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students in 2007 (National Code 2007). This legislative and policy framework was designed to provide for a sustainable sector by maintaining the quality of the education delivered and providing adequate support services. In 2009-2010, a major review (Baird Review) of the ESOS Act 2000 was undertaken (Baird 2010). The Executive Summary of this review states that as well as the benefits the growth has brought about, 'it has also resulted in damaging pressures affecting education quality, regulatory capacity, students' tuition protection and infrastructure.'

Part D of the National Code 2007 contains fifteen standards that are legally enforceable. Standard 6 covers student support services, particularly provision of a student contact officer, a documented critical incident policy, student support services including welfare services and a culturally sensitive and age appropriate orientation. The extensive consultation for the Baird Review in 2009, two years after the introduction of the amended National Code, led the author in his covering letter to state that there is 'an urgent need to develop, implement and enforce relevant and robust solutions to address those issues outside of ESOS, including student safety, accommodation, employment, transport and health matters' (Baird 2010).

## Issues and Needs of International Students

Much has been published on the adjustment issues for international students and a common list emerges. There are differences in education systems such as expectation of independent learning, student teacher relations, plagiarism and referencing (Beaver & Tuck 1998, Cameron & Meade 2002, Ramsay et al 1999, Turcic 2008); language barriers (Beaver & Tuck 1998, Li 2006, Poyrazli & Grahame 2007, Turcic 2008); culture shock, loneliness and social isolation, family crisis overseas, pressure to do well, depression, gambling/drug/ alcohol addiction, relationship aggression or violence (Li 2006, McPherson 2008, Sandhu 1995, Sawir et al 2008); security and safety (Deumert et al 2005, Levett 2008, Nyland et al 2008, Universities Australia 2009, Trounson 2010); understanding and accessing health, welfare, legal and complaints systems (Hopkins 2007); and transport, accommodation, employment and financial hardship (Ahmad 2006, Hopkins 2007, Deumert et al 2005, Turcic 2008).

Some issues are widespread with most students reporting loneliness in a study of 200 students across nine institutions in Australia (Sawir 2008) and some, such as cultural, personal and social anxiety, can lead to disruptive levels of stress (Yi et al 2003).

## Help seeking behaviour

Research information from around the world about the help seeking behaviour of international students largely focuses on health and psychological stress (Lee et al 2009, Iwamoto & Liu 2010, Poyrazli & Grahame 2007, Yi et al 2003). Low usage of health and counselling services has been observed in domestic and international students. The reasons given by international students were they were worried the issue was not important enough; stigma; language barriers; privacy in terms of personal disclosure; and lack of familiarity with counselling (Russell et al 2008, Mori 2000, Kilinc & Granello 2003, Vogel et al 2006).

Australian research shows a gap between an overseas student's perception of need and actively seeking help and a lessening of this gap in older students or those with higher levels of acculturation (Russell et al 2007, Fallon n. d., Boldero & Fallon 1995). Two studies in Australia show a 37- 38% gap in the perceived need for medical help and acting on the need (Russell et al 2008, Fallon & Barbara 2005 cited in Russell et al 2008).

Academic achievement, depression and anxiety were listed as the top three concerns for undergraduate international students in a study of more than 500 students who sought counselling in a six year period (Yi et al 2003) and a cause for concern, expressed in other studies as well, is the negative influence of depression and stress on a student acting on their need for help (Rosenthal et al 2007, Russell et al 2008).

Some studies show age, gender and cultural background affect the issues for which international students seek help (Fallon n. d., Boldero & Fallon 1995, Lee et al 2009, Rosenthal et al 2006); while others question one or more of these differences (Russell et al 2008, Zhang & Dixon 2003).

Most international students report relying firstly on friends for help, and this usually means same-culture networks (Fallon n.d., Rosenthal et al 2006, Sawir et al 2008), and then on institution professionals (Fallon n.d.). Other professionals were seen to be the least preferred source of help and this may be because language barriers and unfamiliarity with health, welfare and legal systems mean that students have little knowledge of community services (Turcic 2008, Yi el al 2003).

Friends who have used an institution's health and counselling services were a key factor in students acting on a perceived need for welfare services (Rosenthal et al 2006).

The lack of information on the services available through institutional advertising has been noted in surveys (Grebennikov & Skaines 2007, Yi et al 2003), with one study of more than 500 students, who sought counselling help, showing that fewer than 20% heard about the service through campus advertising (Yi et al 2003).

The literature shows that connectedness and acculturation are reliable predictors of wellbeing for international students (Kilinc & Granello 2003, Li 2006, Rosenthal et al 2007, Russell et al 2008). Thus older students, graduate students and those with longer residence in the host country show higher levels of wellbeing and satisfaction with life and study. Language proficiency is also positively related to adjustment, perhaps because it is related to the speed or level of acculturation (Lee et al 2009, Mori 2000, Turcic 2008, Yi et al 2003).

Students' perception of connectedness is related to their satisfaction with all other aspects of their experience, such as living arrangements, academic achievement and physical health (Rosenthal et al 2006, Kilinc & Granello 2003, Ministry of Education 2008). Cultural stress is a negative predictor of wellbeing and a strong positive predictor of depression, anxiety and stress (Rosenthal et al 2006). Depression is a strong predictor of health interfering with study (Rosenthal et al 2006). Another negative predictor of wellbeing is perceived academic progress, relating to the pressure international students feel to succeed (Rosenthal et al 2006).

Asking-for- help, developing social and cultural contacts and building relationships were found to be positive coping strategies (Li 2006). In a survey of one third of the international students at a major university in Australia, 59% had positive connected styles of adaptation to life and study, 34 % had unconnected stressed styles and 7% distressed risk-taking styles (Rosenthal et al 2006). The authors comment that with appropriate support, the students in the last two groups could have more satisfying and productive experiences as students in Australia.

Younger students needing access to a variety of health, psychological and academic counselling services, and without a cohort of accultured friends, would seem to be the most vulnerable students in terms of not acting on their need for support services, and health and counselling services in particular.


## Best practice in support services

Part D Standard 6 of the National Code 2007 is not prescriptive in terms of the breadth, quality or performance measures for support services and does not identify best practice.

The Australian Government has funded quality initiatives to guide institutions. 'The Rainbow Guide' is a template for a handbook for international students (ISANA 2008) that meets the requirements for an orientation program and on-going information for students. Peak bodies received funding to develop critical incident policies and procedures and these can be accessed on the websites of many provider institutions, for example the International Education Unit of the Australian Capital Territory Government (an example of a critical incident plan can be found at www.det.act.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0010/48988/Critical_Incident_Management_Guidelinesp df.pdf)

The Queensland Education and Training International (QETI) taskforce funded research into best practice in provision of support services for international students (QETI 2005). The managers of student programs for international students in 28 institutions in nine countries were consulted. The research found: there was no published best practice  for support services against which (Queensland) institutions could benchmark their performance; that established networks, like the International Student Advisors Network of Australia and New Zealand (ISANA) and Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) acquire knowledge of good practice and share this information within the sector; 'significant' diversity in delivery between similar sized institutions in the same country; limited formal performance evaluation within institutions; and that the managers

'universally' believed that student services impact on students' satisfaction with their international study experience. Recurring aims listed by the institutions consulted were access to support services tailored to student needs, such as extended hours, quick response times, and counsellors having diverse areas of expertise.

## Method

### Provider of professional call centre services

The provider of the assistance call service used in the study (Mondial Assistance Australia) is a major provider of overseas student health care assistance and other 24 hour assistance services including roadside and aged care assistance. Mondial Assistance does not provide an advisory service for its clients, it provides information and referral services, the information supplied and referral services used being determined by the client.

### Selection and training of call centre staff

A three stage process was used to select the twelve staff of the call centre. Firstly assessment of written applications against defined criteria, secondly practical assessment including trial calls and role playing, and thirdly an interview by an expert panel. The focus throughout was on maturity of approach, a warm and empathetic response and an understanding of the provider's service philosophy of 'how can we help'.

The successful applicants were given two weeks training developed and delivered by experienced call centre managers. The course covered responding to a variety of call centre scenarios; adherence to offering a referral service, not an advisory service; industry-specific training in call flows and referrals; and additional training by a senior counsellor for international students. This training involved recognising calls that might signal serious psychological stress and recognising criteria for triggering a critical incident procedure.

### Service design

A panel of experts was established to determine the scope and attributes of the hotline service. The eleven members had first-hand experience in delivering student services, student support services and managing the international office of institutions. The experience on the panel covered regional, metropolitan, private and public institutions across Australia.

#### Scope of services offered

The seven categories of enquiries defined by the expert panel for the assistance hotline are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Categories and types of enquiries in each category

| Category | Types of enquiries in the category |
|---|---|
| » Physical health | »  routine and emergency medical and dental enquiries |
| » Psychological health (counselling) | »  suicidal behaviour (threatened or attention seeking)<br>»  relationship abuse<br>»  loneliness and social isolation<br>»  family crisis overseas<br>»  academic pressure to do well/poor performance<br>»  feelings of stress, anxiety or depression |
| » Security and safety | »  assault, robbery, relationship violence - on and off campus |
| » Accommodation | »  emergency, short term, long term<br>»  homestay |
| » Transport | »  airport reception<br>»  local public transport advice |
| » Basic | »  visa conditions<br>»  legal and regulatory systems including employee rights<br>»  institutional and community complaints and appeal mechanisms<br>»  referral network, knowing to whom they should speak |
| » Environmental | »  gas leak, fire hazard |

## Service attributes

The structure for the delivery of the service was defined as follows:

» Contact through redirection of the after-hours number of an institution's international office between the hours of 5:00pm and 9:00am on weekdays and on weekends, adjusted for time zone differences across Australia

» Phone answered on behalf of the institution to provide a seamless extension of institution services

» Set of agreed protocols or call flows, determined by the institution, to be followed for all calls

» Immediate alert to the institution's nominated contact in the case of a critical incident or an on-campus security or safety emergency

» Anonymity and privacy to be maintained unless a student chooses to give their name or asks for the institution to be notified of part or all of the content of their call

» Daily report to each institution on calls taken overnight and then aggregated reports at intervals that suit the institution (default to be daily, weekly, monthly)

» Ongoing consultation between the provider and institutions on the preferred list of off-campus referral services

### Period of the trial

The trial is scheduled to run for six months (February to August 2010) commencing just after the orientation period for the first semester of the school and academic year, but including the mid-year orientation period (June). This paper reports results for the first five months of the trial.

### Participating institutions

Nine institutions participated in the trial. The education level and numbers of international students are listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Levels of education and international student numbers of participating institutions

| Instituion | Levels of education | International student enrolment |
|---|---|---|
| » A | » English Language | » 1000 |
| » B | » Higher Education | » 1200 |
| » C | » Higher Education | » 1200 |
| » D | » Secondary, English Language | » 100 |
| » E | » Higher Education | » 7000 |
| » F | » Higher Education | » 6500 |
| » G | » Higher Education | » 3000 |
| » H | » Higher Education | » 1200 |
| » I | » Higher Education | » 4000 |

### Results

*Types of calls and timing of calls received*
The calls received in each category for each participating institution for the six months of the trial are shown in Table 3.

Table 3.  Number of calls by category for each institution for the period 15 February to 15 August 2010

| Instiktution | Call category | | | | | | | Number of calls |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Physical Health | Counselling | Security & Safety | Accomm | Transport | Basic | Environ-mental | |
| A | | | | 1 | | 5 | | 6 |
| B | | 1 | | | | 4 | | 5 |
| C | 4 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 9 | | 20 |
| D | | | 2 | 1 | 4 | 7 | | 14 |
| E | | 1 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 27 | 1 | 36 |
| F | | 4 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 28 | | 36 |
| G | | 1 | 4 | | 3 | 6 | | 14 |
| H | | | | | | 60 | | 60 |
| I | 1 | | | 4 | 1 | 54 | | 60 |
| Total | 5 | 8 | 13 | 10 | 14 | 200 | 1 | 251 |

The results show that the majority of the calls received were for information classed as 'basic'. That there are so few environmental calls is possibly because owners of accommodation provide their own emergency contacts. The literature shows that some enquiries in the 'basic' category can be seen as urgent by students, such as visa requirements and employment conditions and rights (legal enquiries).

Twenty-six calls (10%) were in the three categories that could, and did, give rise to an emergency or critical incident response, namely physical health, counselling and security and safety.

Table 4.  Calls by time and category between 15 February and 15 August 2010

| Time of call | Call category | | | | | | | Number of calls / % |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Physical Health | Counselling | Security & Safety | Accomm | Transport | Basic | Environ-mental | |
| 1700 – 2000 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 1 | 5 | 66 | | 78/31.1% |
| 2000 - 2200 | 1 | 2 | 1 | | | 19 | | 23/902% |
| 2200 - 0000 | | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 14 | | 21/8.4% |
| 0000 - 0300 | | 1 | | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 6/2.3% |
| 0300 - 0600 | | | | | | 3 | | 3/1.2% |
| 0600 - 0900 | 1 | | | | 2 | 22 | | 25/10% |
| 0900 - 1700 | 1 | | 1 | 3 | | 10 | | 15/6% |
| Weekend | 1 | 2 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 64 | | 80/32% |
| **Total** | **5** | **8** | **13** | **10** | **14** | **200** | **1** | **251** |

Seventy eight  (46%) of the 171 calls received during the week were received within three hours of the office closing on week nights and 122 (71%) up to midnight.  Eighty of the total of 251 calls (32%) were received on the weekend.  Of the 26 calls in the categories most likely to give rise to an emergency situation (that is physical health, counselling and safety), 20 (77%) were received after 10:00pm (and before 9:00am) and on weekends.

## Calls within the 'basic' category

The majority of the calls within the 'basic' category related to course information and campus information. The remainder covered topics such as lost and found, updates on natural disasters and legal matters.

## Single number advantages

Because all calls come through a single number and are logged against that number, analysis of call frequency and category can help institutions adjust call flow information in times of known peak demand for specific information. Examples in this trial period were, firstly, at the end of the semester increases in requests for information about time and place for examinations and what to do and how to get a medical certificate if too ill to attend an examination session; and, secondly, at the start of the semester, a rise in requests for information about the status of an enrolment and how to pay tuition fees.

Another advantage of the single number is an analysis of call outcomes that is provided to institutions. Four call outcomes are collated for the report:

» information provided

» call back required from institution

» referred to institution during business hours

» other (includes referral to a community service organisation)

This allows institutions to assess whether they are using the full capacity of the call centre to provide information and /or balance call outcomes against category of call.

**Feedback from participating institutions**

After four months, participants were asked to rate their satisfaction with seven aspects of the implementation and operation of the hotline service, using a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 the highest rating. Seven of the nine participating institutions responded. Their average rating for each question is given in Table 5.

Table 5. Participant responses to survey on satisfaction with the trial.

| Survey question | Average rating of respondents |
|---|---|
| » Overall satisfaction with level of service provided | 8.6 |
| » Efficiency of implementation and operational setting up of service | 8.3 |
| » Responsiveness to enquiries where a referral was required | 8.7 |
| » Helpfulness of the promotional material supplied to participant institutions | 8.6 |
| » How useful was the data in the aggregated reports:<br><br>a. Daily reports<br><br>b. Weekly reports<br><br>c. Monthly reports | <br><br>a. 8.8<br><br>b. 7.1*<br><br>c. 8.3<br><br>* Lowest score was 4 |
| » Degree to which hotline met participant's expectations | 7.7 |
| » How likely to recommend to another institution | 8.4 |

The average scores show a high level of satisfaction with the way the service was established, its ongoing operation and the reports received. Participants were asked to provide comments on scores under 5. There was one score on weekly reports rated under 5 and that was 'Only rated lower due to having only basic enquiries to date and limited number of calls. Not a factor of report construction, if calls increased, report would prove very useful.'

Other comments were received, most relating to start up issues. For example one comment on promotional material related to the timing of the trial and the confusion due to publication of emergency numbers in November in preparation for 2010 starters and then another number when the trial started in February. Two comments related to the need for the institution to circulate the call number more widely, 'flood the campus' and the option of 'keytags instead of cards'; and another was about the hotline needing time to 'develop and become known'.

# Discussion

On 251 occasions in the six month trial period, students either felt their issue could not wait for institution offices to open and/or preferred the format of the hotline to seek help. For the latter group of students, the hotline service falls in the middle of the assistance continuum from personal face-to-face to impersonal print or web material.

The most frequent reason given by students for not accessing help in the Russell et al 2007 study was that they were worried that their problem was not important enough; and many gave lack of information about an institution or community service, its existence, its location, fees, or how to make an appointment as their reason. Avoidance of personal disclosure and stigma prevent some students from seeking the help they need and the nature of depression and cultural and academic stress can prevent others from seeking help. The hotline provides another avenue of help for students who, for any of the reasons given above, may hesitate to access an institution's services during the day, and recognises that their anxieties do not cease when the office closes.

The Baird Review found that international students' need for information, assistance and advice is ongoing beyond the orientation program and that issues related to culture shock and welfare 'cannot be addressed by a pamphlet, a website or a brief lecture' (Baird 2010). The trial showed that the hotline, added to an institution's existing services, addresses many of the issues raised in the Baird Review. Particularly it meets the needs of students who require anonymity but who need to talk to another person about aspects of their issue not found in print material or not able to be discussed with, or answered by, friends or family.

The benefits for students with the design of this after-hours support service are having the simplicity of a single number for all after-hours enquiries; the certainty of assistance, no matter how simple or complex their problem is; the knowledge that the information they are given is authoritative (approved by their institution); that they can retain their anonymity; and that they can obtain information on how to access assistance services outside those provided by their institution.

The benefits for institutions are that they can publish a single number for all after hours assistance, even emergency responses; small and large institutions can provide referral to a wide range of expert advice for their students after hours; they can track the times and categories of enquiries to allow for adjustment and constant improvement; they know every call will be answered and logged and they will receive timely reports on the number and nature of calls received; they retain control of the content and quality of the responses by the call centre; and students will assign the responsiveness of the service to their institution.

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