Transition strategies for international students

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> *I've settled in, but it's a hard question because there are no methods, it's just like an ongoing thing. It's just like a transition thing – you can't say 'If you do this, it will make it better' because it is based on the individual.**

International students, who choose to pursue study in a foreign university, are among the highest-achieving candidates in most institutions. Nevertheless they experience a number of transition issues, intensified by being far from their usual supports, in a new academic culture, language and way of life. As well as adapting to the academic skill requirements of the host institution, international students must complete a successful transition to being a tertiary student in the host country. This chapter suggests practical strategies to ground the academic and social success of international students.

The importance of a successful transition

Successful transition to tertiary study is implicated in student retention and completion (for example, Levitz and Noel, 1989). Successful candidates rapidly acquire the necessary academic skills (such as academic writing, organisational skills, time management, critical thinking) that make the difference between completion and drop-out. However even before skill acquisition and mastery, successful students make an initial, firm transition to their course and their institution of choice (see for example McInnis et al., 2000). They engage with their academic endeavours and commit to completion. This is an essential step for internationals.

The major transition issues can be broadly categorised into four main concerns: academic, geographic, personal and administrative (see Table 1), with much overlap between categories.

While the geographic and personal issues facing international students are of great importance and to some degree self-evident (see for example the literature on homesickness as in 'Cultural Adjustment – A Brief Introduction', *University of British Columbia Student Guidebook* at http://www.ritslab.ubc.ca/students/adjust.html), these are not the main focus of this chapter. We concentrate on the academic and administrative factors and offer some ideas about integrating transition strategies into the curriculum and institutional systems. Finally, we offer suggestions about practicable extra-curricular programs to address the transition needs of international students.

Transition Issues and Integrated Strategies

Academic issues and strategies

All incoming students take some time to adjust to the demands of their tertiary studies, and international students are no exception. Students are concerned about the differences between high school and university level studies in terms of workload and organising their own schedule (Transition Program, 2002). The secondary environment is more likely to provide individual support for students by articulating exact task expectations in daily or weekly schedules, in addition to providing more access to teaching staff. The curriculum is more likely to be fully covered during class time, and the secondary teaching year is longer than the tertiary. The pace of

instruction at tertiary level and the implied need for reading and research outside the classroom impacts on students' workload.

> *Getting used to uni assessment was probably the hardest part for me, getting used to that sort of environment where you've got to do the research projects, read about 5 billion articles and that sort of thing.*

While many international students have previous educational experience at tertiary level, the host institution will almost certainly assume different relationships with teaching staff in such matters as how students should approach them and what students will call them. The variety of teaching contexts such as lectures, tutorials and group work will often challenge students' accustomed learning & teaching styles.

For example, students from USA and Canada may expect more regular meetings with tutors and academic advisors than is the case in most Australian settings; an Indonesian student may feel surprised by the level of argument (discussion) allowed - or even encouraged - in a UK tertiary classroom. The level of guidance provided by staff for assessment tasks and coursework assignments may also differ; students may expect teaching staff to read draft assignments before submission, or to direct them to the exact text which will supply 'the answer'. Staff may be surprised that students are not keen to follow up the reading and to test their arguments under assessment conditions.

The independent study and progress expected by western tertiary institutions can contradict an anticipated structured or more collaborative or teacher-mentored approach.
High-achieving students (as is the case with international students) who realise late that they need to do outside reading, that the amount of reading is greater than they expected, and that there is relatively little provided in terms of structure and support for assessment tasks may fail an assignment or a subject for the first time in their academic career. For many local students, there are ample opportunities to repair these lapses once they have become familiar with the new system, but for international students, a failure or low mark can have an impact on the terms of their visa and their fees; for exchange students, their grade average and the progress of their degree at their home institution is at risk.

For international students paying high fees to study overseas, the simple pressure of needing to succeed may negatively affect their progress, quite apart from the difficulties contingent upon being separated from family, friends and a familiar environment. If, in addition, international students need to pursue part-time work to support their stay, study time can be further eroded. The length of stay and visa implications then become additional pressures for students whose intellectual energy should be focussed on study.

Strategies to smooth these academic issues are founded upon clear articulation of explicit expectations of student behaviour and workload (in addition to the expectations of academic skill mastery). First, teaching staff in any department must reach agreement over what their expectations of students are (see Table 2).
It will then take even more time to ensure that all teaching staff embed these agreed expectations into their various courses. These expectations then need to be articulated and disseminated to students in various, clear and repeated ways. Some examples are:

- Induction or transition seminars convey explicit academic expectations
- An 'expectations charter' is distributed in print and electronic forms
- Expectations are included in student handbooks and course/subject descriptions
- Peer mentors or study groups discuss expectations

- Expectations are reiterated on assignment question sheets and subject/course websites
- Tutors and lecturers use a background slide explaining expectations while discussing assessment tasks
- Front line administrative staff distribute an expectations sheet to students making enquiries at the faculty/departmental office (http://www.dis.unimelb.edu.au/undergraduate/ugcurrent.html has an example 'staff-student expectations' document)
- Later year students address the class about individual responsibility and the expectations of studying in that discipline

> *It's all very well having an expert come and talk to you but you really want to go talk to someone who's roughly your age who's actually been there so you can get all the low down and dirty stuff, the important stuff you need to know.*

Another strategy is for the teaching staff to investigate the educational background of the students in their course, by enquiring of the students about their prior experience with, eg, essay writing or assessments such as problem-solving exams (see Table 3). With increasingly diverse student cohorts and growing freedom in subject choice, many current students have a very different educational profile from that assumed by the university. The cohort now encompasses global differences in experience, preparation and readiness.

For international and local students of non-English speaking backgrounds, there are language issues to be overcome in a general sense, but in looking at the internationalised tertiary education system, we should also consider other language aspects of studying internationally. All students encounter some degree of concern with academic jargon as they negotiate the complex expectations and assumptions of interacting with, whether in class or in print. Students encounter a wide variety of teaching staff who may be second-language speakers themselves, with accents, styles and backgrounds very different from their own. Even some English-speaking international students, for example, may have difficulty understanding the accents and paralinguistic features of lecturers from the host country (consider English-speaking Sri Lankan students and local Australian or British students), and the presence of teaching staff from international backgrounds can compound the matter. It is also useful to recognise that in the modern western university, *all* students are international students – part of an *international academic community* rather than a local one.

Raising awareness of the differences and celebrating the richness and diversity of the institution can underpin acceptance, tolerance and persistence in the face of misunderstandings. The diversity theme can be addressed in transition sessions, in course outlines, in institutional documents and policies as well as the classroom. Embedding awareness and acceptance of diversity in the institution's daily practices will expedite the easy transition of both local and international students.

Writing can be problematic for international students as they navigate the demands of academia in a second language. It is often assumed that it is the non-English-speaking background of the students which causes most problems. This is not the total answer. Like local students, internationals must deal with the use of sources and the compilation of academic argument as well as academic expression and citation. The use of sources for example involves culturally-specific understandings of ownership of other people's work.

Strategies to support students as they come to terms with the expectations of academic writing in the host institution include

- explicit guidelines
- published models (print or electronic)
- essay/report/assignment writing classes with academics and language services staff
- ESL credit classes
- online writing short courses
- on-call tutors who can read drafts
- peer writing mentor schemes
- academic skills services with individual appointments
- cumulative writing assignments which develop students' skills

> *They can't expect too much of the students in the first year. A lot of us are very oblivious to what's going on and we don't know what the expectations are. Some lecturers assume that we're all prepared but sometimes we're not.*

The institution's international student support services may provide resources through staff or student volunteers to assist international students with writing. Most tertiary organisations have learning skills and ESL support units. Using regular class time to address the academic expectations of written work helps to reinforce that, in many cases, understanding and complying with the academic culture of the discipline is almost as important to good marks as coming to intellectual terms with the course content.

Administrative issues and strategies

Another factor in the successful transition of international students to the host institution is attention to administrative matters. Dealing with a large institution presents problems for those new to organising their own schedules. For internationals, there are further layers of administration in pre-departure requirements, travel and accommodation arrangements, financial commitments for tuition and living, medical insurance, visa regulations etc. While their experience with such arrangements might support their progress through the administrative maze of enrolment, course and subject selection, fees, timetables and general communication with their host institution, there are often cases in which important paperwork has not been received or has not been completely understood or attended to; international students 'perceive difficulties with administration, concentrated around issues such as late mailing of advice and contradictory information' (James & Devlin, 2001: 5). Some of the more awkward situations arise when certain documents have not been sent or have gone astray (not unusual given that international students often have an address change early in their stay as they move from temporary accommodation to longer-term arrangements), and the international student does not know to expect such a document.

> *My first year was pretty difficult. Because I'm an international student, when I came, I didn't have any place to stay. I was staying with my uncle for two weeks and getting familiarised with the tram system… The main problem was getting used to the place in general. The other thing was trying to choose the appropriate subjects for myself. There was a big difficulty because I was given the wrong advice by my course adviser, they were e-mailing me but I didn't even know we had an e-mail because I was an international student and I came late and stuff like that. … If I had been in Australia my whole life, I would have known to check my e-mail every day and stuff like that. Back in Asia, it doesn't play an important part yet.*

International (and rural and out-of-town students) can find it difficult to cope with the administrative procedures of accessing timetables, booklists and assessment notices. The larger the organisation, the more difficult it can be to find the answer – or the complete answer – to their questions. Some universities have thousands of staff and students, none of whom knows all the administrative arrangements.

> *They arranged mentoring and they sent us some pamphlets but I didn't receive it. I heard from my friends and I went to check it out at the faculty and found out what I'd missed out on. I only got it when I went to look for it … It was a bit worrying at first because what happens if they send me something I need to reply to!*

Much information is provided in the orientation/pre-teaching week of the course. However, this is often missed by international students, through difficult travel or accommodation arrangements, or because they choose to avoid the expense of extra days before the course proper starts. In this way, international students can miss important leads despite comprehensive student diary and web page. The emphasis that students hear about the 'independence' of studying at university can lead them to the misinformed opinion that they have to do everything for themselves.

One strategy for ensuring that international students are informed of the full range of support services is to provide a single contact person/point in the department or faculty, in addition to the institution's international office. It also ensures that staff in the faculty/department keep up to date with the services helps the students identify more fully with their discipline. Pascarella & Terenzini (1991: 654) speak of 'reducing the psychological size of larger institutions' in order to smooth transition; international students must feel part of a smaller community within their chosen discipline. The contact can be a course adviser, administrative staffer, or a member of the teaching staff: the person should be readily available and fully informed (see example at www.edfac.unimelb.edu.au/international/studinfo/).
Another strategy is to institute regular liaison between faculty and services staff who deal day-to-day with student enquiries, and central administration. Informal meetings are suggested in addition to more formal processes as timing may be crucial to student information needs. Students undertaking subjects in a faculty other than their own, and those undertaking double degrees, can experience confusion about who to contact and what paperwork to expect and to complete. Difficulties with the administration processes involved can affect student engagement with the institution and the course. Clarity about which faculty has major responsibility for administering the degree, and in particular clear communication between the respective faculties, can help students successfully negotiate the paperwork.

Lastly, training and orientation for teaching staff should include an overview of administrative processes, especially in terms of subject enrolment and course requirements. Many students will deal directly with their tutors regarding these matters and not realise that there are many administrative processes also involved.

Extra-curricular approaches to international transition

Inclusive transition programs can address the issue of successful transition for international students. An institution which continually strives to improve its induction processes for all students will also improve induction for component populations within its student body. It is important that international students are not seen as the only ones who need an introduction to the culture of the institution, faculty and department. International students 'prefer to be treated as

equal citizens during their stay' (James & Devlin, 2001: 6). Faculties and/or departments/schools/disciplines will have their own traditions, world view, attitudes and culture, so transition activities can be tailored to the culture of the faculty as well as to student needs. This helps the students to identify with their course (thus supporting retention and success). (See Table 4 for suggested activities for these workshops)

Including all students enables international and local students to meet, mix with, learn from and exchange ideas with each other. James & Devlin (2001: 7) consider that 'perhaps the true mark of an international university is that a diverse student community is viewed as an integrated whole'; the Carnegie Foundation report into life on campus (1990: 35) states that 'a just community is a place where diversity is aggressively pursued'. Culturally inclusive transition sessions can be supported and extended by culturally inclusive teaching practices (Sinclair & Britton Wilson, 1999). Such transition sessions, including teaching staff and later year students, clearly demonstrate to students that they are welcome.

The Carnegie Foundation (1990: 35) also speaks of the dangers of treating inclusivity as a process in which newcomers are welcomed as long as they assume the characteristics of the host community. A truly international institution is one that encompasses and grows from the increasing diversity of its community. The host institution should make sure that it is oriented to its new students as well as providing orientation for the newcomers. Professional development opportunities for teaching and administrative staff should include training aimed at raising awareness and expertise in both cultural diversity and transition issues.

Complementing transition sessions with the formation of supported study groups for the duration of the first semester also helps provide social and academic support. Mentor programs form another strategy particularly suited to students from cultures where the personal relationship with a knowledgeable elder is a suitable avenue for questions and information gathering. Appropriate training for later year students and academic staff to act as mentors or study group facilitators is important in managing and evaluating quality programs.

International students recognise the importance of a faculty-based induction and find one-to-one interaction with the faculty community useful (James & Devlin 2001: 13). Another suggestion from international students is the provision of more opportunities for them to mix with students from the host country. Student success is linked with student-staff interaction, student involvement in non-study activities on campus, and peer influences and interaction (Shapiro & Levine, 1999: xii). Transition events serve as a mechanism for all these interactions and support the continuation of such community-building activities.

Conclusion

This paper has given an overview of some practical strategies to assist the transition of international students to their host institution. International students (and all newcomers) benefit from increased opportunities to engage with the institution and the course (in terms of the academic community as well as the knowledge area) and from the considered and explicit articulation of expectations. Welcoming all incoming students to the international academic community of the institution is the foundation for successful tertiary transition.

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Table 1: Examples of transition issues under four major headings: academic, geographic, administrative and personal.

Academic Issues	Geographic Issues
Different class structures	New country, new city
Assessment by group work	Studying at a regional, isolated campus
Lack of support for drafting process and other academic writing issues	Campus environment, lecture venues
Continuous assessment schedules or end-of semester exams	Housing options
Coverage of the curriculum includes out-of-class work	Travel from home and around the new city or country
Practical and laboratory work schedules and expectations	Following signs, finding way around, finding campus facilities
Use of sources and plagiarism	Transport

Administrative Issues	Personal Issues
Enrolment and course administration; for international students, pre-departure paperwork, visas, travel	Loss of support network of family and friends; making new friends; only making friends among other internationals; not meeting local students
Health care – rights and costs	How to behave at uni, what to say, relating to people of different authority
Financial issues – budgeting, working, dealing with landlords	Financial issues – part time work and study schedule; housing and share-housing
Course and subject administration, deadlines, extensions, timetabling	Diversity of university population - staff & students - culture, age, beliefs etc
Internet and email usage	Transition to adulthood
Managing personal needs such as making appointments and completing forms	What happens when reality of uni life doesn't meet expectations
Knowing who to ask and where to follow up information and requests	Lack of cultural awareness on the part of other students and staff

Table 2: Examples of academic expectations for discussion and communication by academic staff to students

Expectation question	Comments	Methods of communication
How many hours reading per week do the teaching staff gauge a student will need in order to pass their course?	Some staff find it confronting that students aim simply to 'pass' each subject while maintaining a very full schedule of non-study activities, instead of aiming for the highest mark they can achieve.	For example, in the student handbook or course guide; in lectures; in tutes
What amount of time should be spent in practical activities such as solving maths problems, making summaries, undertaking fieldwork?	This may be affected by factors such as the assessment tasks and the students' prior experience.	An estimate of time to be devoted to each subject can be calculated from its point/credit value
Do teaching staff expect to be approached after lectures, or do they prefer students to make appointments to see them in their 'office hours'?	International students in particular may need information about these cultural expectations.	Promotion of contact hours and contact points such as duty tutors through signage, web, email, student handbook
Are teaching staff willing to answer student queries through email?	Student access to email should be considered.	Made clear in lectures or on subject web page
How much reading should inform the written assignment tasks and how much of the writing should address the student's own arguments?	Issues of plagiarism and academic authority will need to be addressed.	Discussed in lectures; in tutes; in student handbook; on assignment guidelines; on subject web page
What will students miss if they do not attend every class?	Students may need to be informed of what purpose each class serves.	In student handbook; explained in class
Are any of the classes optional, or compulsory?	Clarity about implications and how to make up missed classes	In student handbook; explained in class
Can students expect to be contacted if they miss a deadline or repeatedly fail to attend lectures?	Outline of consequences and students' responsibilities in course tasks	In student handbook; explained in class

Table 3: Example areas of prior academic experience for investigation

Example survey question	Possible impact on tertiary curriculum
How much research have the students undertaken in libraries, through the internet or in the lab or field?	Expectations of research to inform assignments Understanding of the proper use of sources and plagiarism issues
What background knowledge do they have?	In particular, the use of background knowledge without referencing Use of references versus common knowledge
What subjects have they studied at secondary level and how did these inform their course choice and prepare them for the tertiary curriculum?	Students may have chosen certain subjects to achieve entry scores rather than for relevance to their chosen tertiary course
How much experience and expertise do the students have with electronic media for academic pursuits – how much support do they need for online curricula, class email discussion lists, library database search engines etc.?	Students may need to spend a great deal of time extending their IT skills at the cost of spending time with the content of the course

Table 4: Suggested activities for inclusive transition sessions/workshops

Theme	Possible activities
Taking good lecture notes Run by first year lecturing staff with varying styles of teaching, to offer advice on taking useful lecture notes.	- group discussion about experience in lectures so far - demonstration of different lecturing styles - discussion of how to cope with difficult aspects of lectures, eg lecturer speaks too fast, is boring, uses unfamiliar terminology etc - how to follow up from lectures
Participating in tutorials Run by first year tutors and later year students, to give new students clues on how to interact in tutorials.	- what is the aim of tutorials? - what makes a good/bad tutorial? – group discussion - how to prepare for tutorials
Time management Run by teaching staff or the learning/academic skills unit, with input from later year students.	- making the best use of 'free time' between classes - creating a study timetable - balancing uni, social life, part time work, sport etc.
Assessment information Run by teaching staff who are responsible for assessment.	- problems/concerns so far – group discussion - what are you being assessed on? - what does the feedback mean?
Getting help from your tutor or lecturer Run by teaching staff, to remind students they are there to help, and offer advice about how to approach them.	- how to make an appointment - ways of getting assistance: face-to-face appointment, use of email, online tutors, existence of first year learning centres, on-call tutors etc - is it okay to ask questions in lectures?