An investigation of how international students experience their education in courses in higher education.

Abstract

There is a human cost to the international student journey.

Understanding international students' experience of their learning through the life cycle of their courses, from their perspectives, in their voices, is critical because of the risks involved, the human cost, the personal cost to the students and their families. There are emotional, psychosocial, cultural, professional, financial costs; there are risks to students' physical and mental health and to their personal safety (Marginson, Nyland et al. 2010). This is the human cost of the international student journey.

Contributing to the human cost paid by students is what Ryan & Carroll (2005, p.6) term, a "deficit" model, in which the international students are cast- as lacking the competence to participate effectively and succeed in a western academic context and as contributing to lowering the standards at university.

The number of mobile students, the human cost of the students' journey, the value of international students to society, the university intellectual and social experience, establishes the rationale for understanding and valuing international students' perspectives of their learning experience.

The paper reports on an ongoing study that considers the international students' experience and interpretation of teaching and learning from their perspectives.

Data was gathered representing the learning experience of 26 international, postgraduate students in three courses in Business and Education.

The examples of analysed data presented include students' written weekly journals (over a period of one semester) and extracts from interviews conducted mid and end semester. These data are explained drawing on, participant observation of lectures and tutorials and documentary analysis of course materials.

Students' experience of their learning and teaching environment are detailed in three courses; Business Communications (BC), Accounting Concepts and Methods (ACM) and Multicultural Society and Educational Policy (MSEP).By foregrounding the voices of international students, the paper presents how students engage with the concepts and theory of their courses.

Keywords

International student experience, learning, human cost, international students, transition

Introduction

More students are moving around the world for the purposes of study today than at any other time in human history. The mobility of students from their countries of citizenship to destinations abroad to embark on tertiary study, in pursuit of an international education, has rapidly escalated in the last 30 years. In 2005, 2.73 million students were enrolled at tertiary institutions away from their countries of citizenship. Of these 2.30 million (84%) were enrolled in OECD countries. (OECD, 2007 p.298).

As these numbers grow, so too does the importance of understanding how international students experience their learning. This is a need identified in the research literature which reports significant concerns regarding the international student experience. Notwithstanding this, the international students' experience of their courses within their programs remains largely under-researched. Insights gained of students' experiences can contribute to enhancement of the international student experience of their education and to the quality of teaching and learning at university and the improved intercultural awareness of local and international students.

The numbers of students taking up study away from their home countries, the human cost of the international students' journey and the value that international students bring to society and to the university learning and social experience, establishes the rationale for understanding and valuing international students' perspectives of their learning experience.

Constructions of the international student in the literature

This literature review identifies key themes in the literature on the international student experience, critiques and evaluates particular studies in terms of their focus and research methods, and argues for the need to focus on the

students' perspective of their international experience in their courses. It concludes that a crucial absence from the literature is how students themselves experience their international education. This lack of focus is complemented by a lack of methodological emphasis on research that seeks to recover the student's perspective on this experience.

In the literature on international students in higher education, several themes emerge that are particularly salient to the construction of the international student: The international student as a source of revenue; as requiring more academic support (compared to local students); as an incompetent speaker of English - a failed native speaker; as contributing to the deteriorating standards at Australian universities; as plagiarists, as passive, rote learners bereft of critical thinking skills.

A recurrent theme in the literature on international students is that of their being a source of revenue. International students are thus constructed in the literature as providing an additional source of income to universities. Tuition fees of international students "will continue to be an important revenue source" (Burns 2000, p.2), and Australia aims to capture a larger portion of this student market (Burns 2000). Confronted by a diminishing trade balance in the early 1980s, the government adopted the policy of recruiting full fee paying students from overseas to study at Australian universities. Declining government funding saw universities take up the policy to raise revenue, moving from "a traditional 'aid' to a 'trade' perspective in relation to foreign students." (Smart & Ang 1996, p. 1). That was the beginning of what has since grown into a multi billion dollar export industry. From 1991 to 2002, university revenue grew from $5.5 billion to $10.4 billion. In this time "…non-government sources of income doubled as a share of university revenue, especially through involvement in the business of international education" (DEST 2002, p. 9). Marginson (2007) cites DEST (2005) which confirms that foreign students generated $US 1.3 billion dollars to university fees in 2003 alone. "What powered this growth was the need for revenues" (Marginson 2007, p.19).

The theme of students requiring additional support (compared to local British students) is exemplified in the work of Macrae (1997). He notes that international students frequently have issues with the use of the language; the use of university facilities and with meeting academic requirements and conventions. He further points out that international students have difficulty in transiting to the academic requirements of the new learning environment, such as being unable to actively participate in seminars, lacking "self discipline"(Macrae 1997, p. 139), obtaining sufficient feedback on their progress, managing the variety of assignments required and understanding examination techniques. While this may be true for many international students, it is also true for many local students entering a large university campus for the first time to commence their academic journey. Yet, no research evidence is cited in his text to support any of his claims. These therefore amount to sweeping generalisations made of students who are from diverse backgrounds, labelled "international".

"Such [international] students" present several problems to academic supervisors. They are ill-equipped for independent learning and for undertaking "original research", to challenge authority, unable to "engage in knowledge creation" and their previous undergraduate study may not have allowed for "deep and critical reading, for practical laboratory work, or for computer use" (Brown & Atkins 1988, p. 128/129).

The theme of the international student as an incompetent speaker of English - a failed native speaker - features prominently in the literature. Birrell's (2006) finding that of all international students who have graduated from an Australian University and who have acquired permanent residency, one third of them do not have the level of language proficiency required to be admitted into the university, much less cope with the demands of being employed in professional positions in the Australian workplace, generated much debate in academia and the media. "Overall, 34 per cent of those visaed under the 880 visa subclass did not achieve the 'competent', band 6, English standard" (Birrell 2006, p. 58). Birrell (2006) has branded the new permanent residents to Australia as incompetent based on one aspect only, their inability to speak English with native speaker proficiency. Where there is discussion of students' language, it is as a deficit with respect to English. This study highlights how international students are constructed in the literature, as lacking English Language skills. This again reiterates that while various issues in respect of international students receive attention in the literature, the students' experience of their education within their courses remains a largely unresearched area. Further, an examination of international students' learning experiences within their courses, in this study could have provided interpretations of the extent to which the band 6 IELTS score is an accurate predictor of students' success at university and in the workplace.

Further, questions were raised in Birrell's (2006) study about declining standards at Australian universities for graduating students whom it was deemed, on the basis of their low IELTS scores, were not deserving of graduating. This is echoed by Bretag (2007, p. 13) who states that "Australian university education based on internationally recognised standards of academic excellence, has been undermined by a rush to recruit students who may not be adequately prepared for a new academic environment in a second language" (Bretag 2007, p. 13) International students are also seen as being unable to communicate and participate in discussions (Healy

2007, p.3). These studies reiterate that international students are constructed narrowly and negatively and that there is a void in the literature on the international students' perspective of their experience of their education in their courses. We are therefore deprived of a holistic view of the students' international experience.

The discussion in the literature of declining standards at Australian universities includes a focus on international students as plagiarists and on the lenient assessing by academics who feel that they are being pressured to "pass" undeserving students. From her study in which she interviewed 14 academics from 10 universities on plagiarism policies, Bretag (2007) asserts that because of their low English language competence, international students are frequently accused of plagiarism. The participating academic staff of her study also stated that they felt pressured into assessing students' work leniently, to overlook incidents of plagiarism and to ensure that the students passed. International students are the focus of the discussion on deteriorating standards and quality of education at Australian universities, these issues are "… subsumed within a discourse wherein the participation of international students on Australian campuses was equated with declining standards" (Devos 2003, p. 164).

Watty (2007) continues the theme of international students in relation to declining standards in Australian universities. She reports on a study in Accounting Education at Australian universities.

Fifty two per cent of the Australian academic respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that there was an improvement in the quality of students entering the subject and 36% of respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that there was an improvement in the quality of students completing the course. Further, 54% of respondents thought that standards in Accounting education had deteriorated. From this, Watty (2007) concluded that Accounting Education standards in Australian higher Education were declining. However, in this study Watty (2007) does not provide any details on what criteria are being used to judge the quality of the students entering and completing the course or to judge the standards in Accounting education. Further, if, standards in Accounting education are deteriorating as Watty (2007) claims, since when and over what period has this occurred? Some indication what high standards in Accounting education consisted of would also have made this decline in standards easier to compare and recognize. In keeping with a deficit model of students, Watty (2007) does not consider the role of government, the institution, teachers in maintaining the quality of courses and programs. Again, the students' experience of their international education in their courses is overlooked and by not considering all aspects of the students' international education experience we have only a partial, negative account of the students' experience. Watty's (2007) study also perpetuates the negative construction of international student

The question of how international students themselves experience their international education within their courses is required to obtain a complete picture of the students' international education experience, to seek the students' voice on their experience in a way that does not frame them within a deficit model.

These, then are some of the ways in which students who embark on the international experience are constructed in the literature. What is conspicuously absent from the literature is any focus on how students themselves experience their international higher education. The student voice on his/her international education experience, within his/her course is practically unheard. The students themselves have yet to be asked how they see themselves in relation to their courses and indeed the value which the students bring to the learning environment has not yet been fully acknowledged or explored.

There is, also, a growing voice within scholarly literature which has challenged these negative constructions of the international student. Kember (2000) and Biggs (1994) found that Asian students achieve high academic learning outcomes, while Biggs further questions the western theory of the qualities that make for an optimal learning environment (in terms of its physical resources, space, teacher-student ratio and teaching practice).

In contesting that international students rely on rote learning and are surface learners Chalmers and Volet (1997) refer to research by Hess & Azuma, 1991; Hollaway, 1988; Kember & Gow, 1989; Marton, Dall'Alba & Tse, 1993; Tang, 1993; and others who found that "both the students and their teachers held an underlying belief in understanding through memorisation (Marton, et al.) or deep memorisation"(Tang, 1993), that it is in fact through memorisation that a deeper understanding and learning takes place.

Chalmers and Volet (1997) point out that although students may not speak in discussions, this did not mean that they are necessarily not actively engaged in their learning. Students' own cultural beliefs about what it is appropriate to say to whom and under what circumstances as well as students' unease about their use of language needs to be considered.

The above highlights that international students' perspectives of their experience in learning and teaching have yet to be sought, therefore the need for this study.

The international student, discourse, culture and the other

Discourse can create, establish and reinforce relationships of power and domination. It " can also influence the way that people understand or think about an issue….[it] influences how we …behave…[it] influences the way we understand, experience and respond to the issue or topic". (Carabine 2001, p. 273). Yet, as Carabine(2001) is quick to point out, we are all not merely slaves of discourse, being controlled by and subservient to it. Discourses are not "'all powerful' and individuals … [its] submissive recipients" (Carabine 2001, p. 273). As its makers and shapers we should always be questioning it.

Hall (1990, p.10) points out that "In the hierarchical language of the West, what is alien represents otherness, the site of difference and the repository of our fears and anxieties."

The discourse which shrouds the international student in a 'deficit model' is not unlike that which creates the 'Oriental' as the 'other' in respect of and subject to, the West (Leask 2006).

The Orient is one of Europe's' "deepest and recurring images of the Other" (Said 1995, p.1). Orientalism according to Said (1995, pp. 2-5) is:

- The study, teaching and research of the Orient.

- The partition of the world into the Orient which is the East, the third world, the 'them' on the one side and the Occident, which is the West, developed world, the 'us' on the other.

- The Western way of having control over and dictating to the Orient, where "the relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony…"

At its core, Orientalism is simple and straightforward, easy to understand. On the one hand are the Westerners, on the other, the Orientals. The Westerners dominated, controlled and commanded over the lives, property and freedom of the Orientals, while the Orientals were subjected to the Westerners (Said 1995).

Labelling segregates and separates people into compartments, "When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end points of analysis, research, public policy…the result is usually to polarize the distinction-the Oriental becomes more Oriental, the Westerner more Western- and limit the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies" (Said 1995, pp. 45-46).

Discourses which situate people in positions of power diminish even the capacity of those without the power to judge whether to accept or reject this position as in the case of the colonial experience. Not only did dominant western colonial power brand the colonised as 'Other', but the colonised accepted the label as normal, assuming the characteristics and qualities of the label and all that it signified (Hall1990).

"The ways in which black people, black experiences were positioned and subject-ed in the dominant regimes of representation were the effects of a critical exercise of cultural power and normalisation. Not only in Said's 'Orientalist' sense, were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the west by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as 'Other'. Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed, as Foucault reminds us, by the fatal couplet, 'power/knowledge'. But this kind of knowledge is internal not external" (Hall 1990, pp.225-226).

There are some or even many who took on the persona of the 'Other' as defined by the colonised, which enabled the coloniser to seize and wield power for a long period.

A counterargument to Hall (1990, pp.225-226) is that many of the colonised understood themselves as suppressed and dominated and saw the colonised as the 'Other'. This then provided the foundation for the cultivation of national fervour and the protest movements against the colonisers to make for their (the colonisers') eventual ousting.

In much the same way, the international student is depicted as being the 'Other', the surface, rote, uncritical, plagiarising learner as opposed to the Western academic (world) which is a world of deep, thinking, critical, analysing, learning, scholars, the 'us.' This view does not acknowledge or recognise the prior learning and life experiences of international students. It is as though international students arrive here as blank slates, obliterating any connection to their lives prior to arrival here, to their identities, waiting to be written upon. "Classrooms are decontextualised from the learner's point of view when the learners' feelings, their beliefs about what is important, their reasoning and their experience are not part of the assumed context of the teacher's communication"(Young 1992, p.59).

That international students who come to our shores are mature, thinking, experienced people who also have a view on the culture in which they come to live and must contemplate how this new culture intersects with their own, is seldom expressed vociferously and strenuously.

The term 'Chinese learner' is used in the literature to refer, at different times to students from Hong Kong, Taiwan, mainland China (Grimshaw 2007) while the term 'Asian student' includes students from cultures as diverse as China, India, Japan, Korea, Vietnam. "It is apparent that there exists a harmful homogenization of nearly 3 billion people….all thrown into a single cultural basket labelled Asian" (Kumaravadivelu 2003, p. 710). The stereotyping of 'Asian' students as docile, uncritical and inactive learners and this homogenisation of students with very different experiences "seems to exist more in the minds of Western academia than in the actual classrooms of Asian societies" (Kumaravadivelu 2003, p. 710).

In constructing what the literature terms the "Chinese learner" (Grimshaw 2007, p. 300) or students from Confucian Heritage Cultures (CHC), there is a strong link between what is supposedly known about the qualities of Chinese culture (as if it were one single homogeneous entity) and the learning styles and attitudes (as if these were fixed elements) of Chinese students, teachers and researchers. (Grimshaw 2007). The implication here is that people are no more than their culture that they are walking displays of their culture and cannot be anything more than what it is presumed is known about their culture. People may or may not be influenced by their culture or be influenced by their culture in different degrees but "if we think of people's behaviour as defined and constrained by the culture in which they live, agency is transferred away from the individual to the culture itself, so that we begin to think that 'German culture believes that …'and that 'she belongs to German culture. Therefore she…" (Holliday 2005, p.18). Culture is equal to all that the person is. A person's culture does not hold dictate over their every action.

To believe that the knowledge of a single, particular group is most important and relevant to the entire world impedes discussion, "It is possible to develop a pluralistic mode of thinking through which we celebrate different cultures and identities, and yet engage in projects common to our shared humanity. Breaking away from the history of constructing a globalized totality with uniform knowledge and hierarchical community, we should envision building networks of multiple centers that develop diversity as a universal project and encourage an actively negotiated epistemological tradition" Canagarajah (2002, p. 257).

The construction of the international student is of being the "Other" and ill equipped to be successful in a western academic context.

Design of the study and analytical techniques

To address the research problem conceptualised in this study, a qualitative approach is used which "stud[ies] things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln 2000, p. 3).

The study involves a case study, in particular a collective case study (Stake 2000, p.437). A case study investigates a specific "individual, program, or event" (Leedy & Ormrod 2005, p.133) over a fixed time span. The students' experience of learning and teaching in their courses, throughout a semester, is the focus of this study.

This case study, presents a detailed account of the education experience of international students, within a particular educational setting, and seeks to be "illuminating rather than generalizable, and informative to …users who can decide to what extent they resonate with their own context, and (ii) that they raise issues for further examination by those involved in educational research, policy-makers…"(Scott 2007, p. 33).

The study is a collective case study in that the students' experiences are investigated through different postgraduate courses, thus opening the study to the potential of making "comparisons, build[ing] theory, or propos[ing] generalisations" (Leedy & Ormrod 2005, p. 133). However, Stake (1995, p.5) contends that even while a collective case study may be more representative "the use of a small sample is difficult to defend."

The study draws on certain ethnographic techniques aspects in that it examines the exchanges, interactions and relationships of a particular group of individuals taking different courses in different programs, within a particular educational setting and context. An ethnographic approach is suited to this study to obtain a deeper insights to how students understand and experience their learning within their courses. They enable the researcher to explore what meaning students bring to their own experiences, to present "multiple realities" (Cresswell 2007, p.18) of those experiences of their chosen course/s.

This study examines teaching and learning, where it actually happens, as it occurs within the students' courses, and is therefore appropriate for the use of ethnographic processes, since they "are empirical and ….[often used in] naturalistic settings. The researcher is interested in how individuals and groups behave in their own real world setting, unmanipulated by the researcher" (Breakwell et al. 2006, p.303)

The chosen site of the study is an Australian university. The participants of the study were postgraduate students taking Business (Accounting Concepts and Methods-ACM; Business Communication-BC) and Education

(Multicultural Society and Educational Policy-MSEP) courses at an Australian university and the lecturers of these courses.

A range of data sets were gathered to provide insights to how students experience their international education within their courses at university. These include the following:

Student journals of experience: Participants in the study kept and submitted a weekly account, a learning journal of their perspective on how they were experiencing their courses.

Student interviews: Student participants were interviewed, twice, once at mid semester and then at the end of the semester to describe their experiences in their courses.

Lecturer interviews: lecturers were interviewed once before the commencement of the course and once at the end of the course to ascertain what meaning the lecturer made of the course and what meaning and experience s/he expected students to have.

Observations: The investigator was an observer of tutorials and lectures for the duration of the course, analysing in - class activities, interactions and exchanges.

Document analysis: Analysis of documents such as course material, curriculum planning and review curriculum documents.

Lecturers' program and teacher SELT.

Analysis techniques of study

The analysis draws on principles of coding in grounded theory (Charmaz 2006). Qualitative coding is the initial analytic phase in the process of identifying what the data is telling us, what events are unfolding for the participants and what they may mean (Charmaz 2006). This initial coding phase remains close to the data. Citing Glaser (1978), Charmaz (2006) suggests thinking about what the data is a study of, what it is signalling, whose perspective is it from and identifying a theoretical classification for the specific datum this first step in analysis.

The data in this investigation is a study of how international students experience and interact with the elements of teaching and learning within their courses, including with lecturer, fellow students, course content, activities, materials, course assessment and feedback, online material, within a formal learning environment, from the students' perspective.

In the next phase a line by line coding, to open up the data was conducted. The analysis stayed close to the data to uncover what was happening for students and how they made sense and meaning of their learning experiences. Attention was on their descriptions of their learning experiences, students' processing of these and their use of language.

The next phase of the data analysis was focused coding. This involved integrating and explaining larger sections of data. "Focused coding means using the most significant and/or frequent earlier codes to sift through large amounts of data. Focused coding requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytical sense to categorize your data incisively and completely" (Charmaz 2006, p.57).

Using the approach outlined above the students' perspectives of their experiences in learning and teaching in their courses is investigated.

Findings: International students' goals of study

Nineteen of the twenty six students of this study explicitly expressed their goals in studying abroad in their journals of week 2. While there are variations in how students articulated their goals and where their emphasis lay, some recurring themes of their goals included improving their English Language skills, connecting with fellow students and making friends, acquiring new knowledge and skills for access to better career opportunities.

Table 1. Goals of students: Journal of week 2

Goals of students	Incidents of use in students' expression of	Numbers of students who expressed these as

	goals in Journal of week 2 (19)	goals of their study (19)
Improve English/communication	33/19	14/19
Discuss/interact/connect with fellow students and making friends	29/19	8/19
New skills	14/19	12/19
More, updated knowledge	13/19	7/19
Better career opportunities	11/19	12/19
Better quality degree/globally recognised degree	8/19	8/19
Dream	5/19	5/19

Of the nineteen students whose goals were analysed in this study, the following four are examples of how the themes in the above table are exemplified in the data.

For Yi, knowledge is the primary goal of her study abroad experience. *My goals in undertaking this program is, firstly, gaining deeper knowledge in finance and accounting.* She desires *knowledge,* a thorough understanding of the technical applications and theory offered by her chosen program. She follows her interest in taking this program. She sees her undergraduate degree as being inadequate to meet the needs of business and industry and her potential for advancement within it, in China. *I'm interested in finance which I studied for my bachelor degree, and I wish I could have a career in this field. But bachelor degree is relatively not enough to attain the requirement of this industry in China. So I decided to further my study to get a master degree.* Her parental support after her attempt to gain entry to what she perceives to be a "top" university sustains her. *I attended graduate school entrance exam for Central University of Economics and Finance, which is one of the top business universities in China, but unfortunately, I failed. However, my parents support me to study abroad to get more updated knowledge.* It provides the foothold from which she makes the decision to travel to study. She sees her study program as offering valuable knowledge which will equip her for a role in business in the future. Thus, this program holds the key to better life opportunities for her *And I found that accounting knowledge is very useful in business, so I come here to study the combined master degree of accounting and finance.* (YiBC China J2, where J2 means Journal of week2)

On the other hand, Li Mei has *travelled here for … several reason*[s]*,* this has been the fulfilment of a dream that she has nurtured, *First, this is my dream to go aboard to see something different*, to have a unique experience, one that will afford her better opportunities in fulfilling her career goals, at the same time extend her thinking about the world, giving her a *broader vision.* She feels that her undergraduate degree from her home country has limited prospects for her progress and career development and the position to which she aspires. *Second, I don't think what I learned in my college year is sufficient enough for my to undertake a job soon in the high management ranks in a company.* There is the *need* for *something more professional and I need more experience.* Yet, there is a deeper purpose to this experience. It is vital to her living out the values she holds dear, that of her independence which is directly connected to her happiness. This experience is not only for the now, for the present. It is building for the future; it is seen to bring about changes that will have a lifelong, lasting effect for her. *I hope I could get the achievement I want to graduate with …broad vision, enough professional knowledge and be able to lead my life independently and happily.* (Li Mei BC China J2)

The availability of a scholarship is the support that Rahmat needs to pursue his interest (gained from work experience in his home country) in Finance. *I choose to study abroad for some reasons. Firstly, because my provincial government has already have agreement with … University in Australia for scholarship program.* Like Li Mei, above, studying in a country away from home is the living out of a long held and treasured dream. *Secondly, it was my dream since I was in junior high school to continue my master degree abroad. I want to study abroad because I think that it will open my mind and give new experience about the international education system, ways of studying and international relationship… Before I began the course i was expecting that I can get more and new and more knowledge about finance and economic. What are finance and economics and how it change the world and influence it? How to run a good business and how decisions maker should interact with the financial and organization problems on doing business.* (Rahmat ACM Indonesia J2*).* This experience is about self-development. He looks forward to the expansion of mind, his thinking, new approaches to learning as he imbibes all that this novel international education experience has to offer. He welcomes the intellectual stimulation of engagement in Finance and Economics, global issues and exploring different opinions on the impact of business decisions on the world. He is completely receptive and responsive to the changes of his new environment, to the changes in his world, ready to test new possibilities.

Nourishing a dream since his youth, like Li Mei and Rahmat above, and having had a brief but significant experience of studying English abroad, Hiromi has a beckoning to return. *Studying abroad had been one of my dreams since I was 15. Before this time, I have been in Brisbane for 1 month in 2006. At that time, I studied*

general English in Griffith University's language school. Then, I realised that I need to study abroad again at least one year to acquire proper English language skill.

He postpones taking employment in his home country to realise his dream of studying abroad. *The reason why I chose master course is that I thought it would be beneficial for my future career. I am going to be teaching in Japan after this study, but I do not intend to be a teacher through all my life. I am still not sure, but I would like to work at university or organisation which is contributing to improvement of education for children in, especially, developing countries by making the most of experiences as a teacher. Therefore, my experiences here would be important for my future.* There is a larger life purpose for this student; he aspires to using his role as a teacher, in the future, for the greater good. In the long term, this experience is vital to fulfilling his ambition. Using the knowledge he has acquired from this study program, he aims to reach out to people. *Finally, as for my goal of this program, there are three main objectives. Firstly, needless to say, but obtaining appropriate English skills .Secondly, acquiring academic skills. Thirdly, to learn wonderfulness of the diversity from as much people as I can* (Hiromi MSEP Japan J2). For Hiromi, the desire for knowledge is not only intertwined with the need for English and academic skills, but with a long term vision for making a valuable contribution to the education of children in developing countries. He sees this study experience as the foundation from which he plans to make other decisions concerning his future. Living and learning abroad, also holds possibilities for meeting and engaging with people from other countries and cultures and for developing his understanding of them.

International students' engagement with the concepts and theory in their courses

In their weekly journal accounts, below, students describe, amongst others, how they interact with the course content, theory and concepts, course activities, materials, fellow class mates and assessment of their courses. While students engaged with their courses in different ways, the recurring themes that emerged include their learning of something new and episodes of struggle in their courses. The analysis below examines how students respond to and wrestle with teaching and learning in their courses. It charts students' engagement with their courses over several weeks. Of the 22 students whose engagement with their learning over several weeks was analysed, three narrations are presented below.

These journal entries from week two to eight of Alpana recount her experiences of the Business Communications course. Although she does not specify, in her journal of week two exactly what she has learned there is a certainty and confidence in her assertion. *I learned a lot from my first week business communication tutorial.* (Alpana BC India J2)

She is most strongly impacted by the tutorials of this course, *The most interesting ones are tutorials* where she is constantly learning something new, *as in every tutorial I learn something new and interesting to be remembered whole life through,* not only for her immediate needs to satisfy the requirements to be successful in the course but also for her lifelong learning. *I also understood the imperative meaning of plagarism and referencing and why it is important. I believe it is really good idea and I would definitely strict to it.* She feels that she now understands the meaning and significance of plagiarism and referencing. She sees these skills as beneficial and is keen to integrate them into her learning. She is aware that her learning is stretching her, making her *open all* [her] *closed pores of the brain and force me to think logically.* (Alpana BC India J4)

By week five, the emphasis of her tutor is also directing her to focus on writing and oral presentation skills. *He* [tutor] *is also making us perfect in report writing skills and oral presentation skills.* (Alpana BC India J5)

In business communication in my country there was nothing like plagiarism. We can copy other ideas and also present our own ideas. What I learned there is plagiarism is followed and it is good as we are forced to think and come with something new. She sees referencing and avoiding plagiarism skills as beneficial and is keen to integrate them into her learning. She recognises that acknowledging the sources of ideas encourages her to create new ideas and knowledge.

Her attention is also on developing critical thinking strategies and organisational skills such as time management. *As I student I have started thinking a lot and now always think critically and try to work on it as much as possible. Learned to manage with time and other skill.* (Alpana BC India J7)

As she goes through the process of completing her assessment task, she is able to directly apply the concept of swot analysis to her life. She can examine her personal strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats in any endeavour. *The course assessment was not that difficult. In fact I found it very interesting to work on. My topic was SWOT Analysis. While I was working I realised in the same way we usually check for our own strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats.* (Alpana BC India J8)

She becomes more aware of the importance of working as an active member of a team as well as working efficiently as an individual in her study. *I learned that working in teams is as much important as individual*

work. She supports other members of the team when necessary, though there is the suggestion that she may be carrying more than her share of the task for the group, *My strengths was I was covering my other members in assignments*. She needs to develop some clarity on the extent and limits of her role within a group. She also feels that group members were not supportive of each other. *Also there were not of people who were least bothered to help the other members to form their part of speech. They only focus on their part and forget rest.* She is mindful that she should make herself and her ideas more easily accessible to other group members. *I have to slow down my speech pace to let others understand what I am saying and they should understand me.* Her presentation skills, she admits can be improved as she views them as being inadequate for the labour market. Despite this, she realises that she has dispelled her fear of speaking and has grown more confident. Her thinking about the "right" and "wrong" is flexible as she becomes more open to the different ways in which other students demonstrate their learning. *Still I need to improve a lot and work hard on presenting myself according to Australian market. Earlier I was very afraid of stage fear and I realised after my work experience this stage fear has been lost completely. I speak more confidently and clearly even if I say anything wrong. But again I believe there is nothing wrong or right everyone has there own view and style of presentation and only this makes the others learn from them.* From fear to confidence, Alpana has changed as a result of engaging in her learning in this course. (Alpana BC India J8)

Alpana's narration, from week two to week eight, presents her as she engages in her course and through it becomes increasingly conscious of herself as a learner and her skills. She thinks about her learning and about her academic skills in ways she has not done before. She has valued the opportunity to do this.

In week four Shihong is engaging with her course and enjoys working on financial statements and the income statement, *For this course, I really enjoyed making the statement of comprehensive income,* yet in this week, distinguishing between cash and non-cash items and the required procedures took her four days of persistence to work out. *On my part, differentiating between cash and non-cash is absolutely a challenge. For example, "depreciation" is an expense but not a cash flow for an equipment, so we have to add it back to cash if we less it in the expense. It almost took me four days to make this procedure clear.* (Shihong ACM China J4)

In week six she is struggling to understand the accounting system and to classify four types of journals and subsidiary ledgers. *In the last week, we learned the accounting system, which was more systematical and complicated with regard to how to make financial statements. And it is a little tough for me to comprehend completely, especially classifying four categories of journals and differentiating subsidiaries ledgers. Sometimes I had to conjecture repeatedly and wrote down the right answers.* She is aware that she will need to complete an online assignment, but has not yet had the time to study it. *In addition to these academic knowledge, topic seven illustrated computerised system on making statements as well, which would be used in our assignment 2. But I just read it and had not time to operate it.* (ShihongACM7 China J6)

The primary content we learned last week was about accounting for retailing, most were easy to understand except for difference between perpetual and periodic inventory system, I had to take some time and effort to remember them exactly. She needs to expend extra time to ensure that she has a full grasp of the difference between the perpetual and periodic. *However, only if can I understand some key distinctions, I think it is easy to make income statement about retailing.* (Shihong ACM China J6)

By week nine although the concepts are not difficult to understand she has problems in controlling all the procedures and accounting applications. She decides to revise using the tutorial and workshop questions to practice these principles. *The topic nine told us about receivables and inventories, which were illustrated roughly in the previous chapter. But here we can understand them in detail. Before I attended the lecture, I also previewed some fundamental concepts and procedures with regard to calculating "bad debt expenses" and "cost of goods sold" and the like. I think these contents are not very difficult to grasp but they are a little bit troublesome to control all of them. Therefore, maybe I have to spend more time to finish tutorial and workshop exercises.* (Shihong ACM China J9)

For a first experience in doing a business course, Shihong is satisfied with her learning in this course. *This is the last week for our study in this semester, looking back for all of the courses, I think I really get a lot. It is my first time to learn something about business.* (Shihong ACM7 China J12)

For the course, I have learned so many fundamental points with regard to accounting, such as balance sheet, income statement, cash flows, inventory and so on, which at least let me understand what accounting is and what an accountant should do. And it is useful for me to study some advanced accounting courses. (Shihong ACM7 China J12)

Shihong is satisfied with her experience on this course. She now has the basic understanding of accounting principles and theory which she knows will be a strong foundation for more advanced study. She has engaged in her learning in this course. She has pursued and overcome challenges when faced with them.

Week 2 class was Debra's presentation. Her presentation was great. It was about how to do a presentation. It is really impress me and give me a new perspective because I did it in different way before. From her presentation I learn how to teach effectively without delivering a topic by explanation that is considered as a bored activity. In this case she used authentic learning approach, where the student involved directly in finding the knowledge by discussion with group members and experiencing it in front of class. I am not often used this method when I was teaching. Her presentation reminds me about that method and I will do it later when I teach my student. (Fatima MSEP Indonesia J3)

In her journal of week three (above), Fatima is not so much concerned about the content of the seminar; rather she is excited about the approach to teaching and the methodology. Rather than explaining to students how to do an oral presentation, student participated actively in groups, came up with their ideas and then shared them with the class. So a collaborative, student centred approach was taken. She compares this with her own teaching approach and thinks of ways in which she can incorporate this learning in her future practice.

Honestly, I am a little bit disappointed with the Debra' topic presentation because I already know about it. At the time I hope she will present something related to MSEP issues where through that I will get some new information about that particular topic. Yet, she is disappointed at the content, considering it familiar and known, not something new about the theory of her MSEP course. (Fatima MSEP Indonesia J3)

I really enjoy the MSEP class. I got a lot of information about other culture when presentation session. Everyone presented about their culture or education system in their own country. In week five she has enjoyed and appreciates the opportunity for students to learn from each other, to learn about their personal, lived, prior experiences from their home countries. *The topic that they present are discussed specifically and very personal experiences. We can not find such information in detail from the book. For example the information about Peranakan ethnic in Singapore, Who they are? How the culture look like?, and about the race riot in Singapore as well. So, this session really enrich my knowledge.* (Fatima MSEP Indonesia J5). There is an excitement about her learning in this course, as she realises that these individual, authentic experiences are not recorded in any book. Her knowledge has been augmented from these shared experiences.

Regarding class activity, this week was John presentation. It was about... an international school that has multicultural classes. It was interesting. I am really enjoy and I got lot the information as well even it is difficult to understand every single word that he said because he speak very fast with his strong Australian accent. She is especially attentive to and enjoys the oral presentation on a hospitality and management school in Australia, notwithstanding the difficulty in understanding. *The thing that I understand from last class session is about how the school, ... manage the policy to be adjusted to student need. Staff members work hard to meet such demand. From John's presentation I also know how the college provide better service for the student especially enhance their learning both for course subject and English.* (Fatima MSEP Indonesia J6). She taps into how the school identifies and adjusts its curriculum, programs and services to meet student needs, to enhance the students' experience and to provide improved quality in teaching practice and perhaps better learning outcomes for students.

Presentation, discussion board and research essay have enriched my knowledge. (Fatima MSEP Indonesia J12)

Overall, through this course I can improve my presentation skills, research skills, my ability to think critically, and my English skills both written and verbal communication. (Fatima MSEP Indonesia J12)

Through this course she perceives an improvement in her academic, critical thinking, written and spoken communication skills.

In engaging with the course, Fatima has reached below the surface to analyse what it is she can gain and take away from the learning activities in this course. She is evaluating her own teaching practice as she ponders how she can best adapt her new discoveries to function within the teaching and learning context of her home country and her workplace. The change for Fatima is her consciousness about her teaching practice.

Implications for Learning and Teaching

Who are our international students? The analysis presented has examined the goals of students in studying abroad and how students engage with the elements of learning and teaching within their courses.

For nineteen international students of this study, an understanding of their goals in undertaking their learning journeys evidences that they have begun to engage with their learning before they have reached our shores. Before and on their arrival at university the students have a clearly articulated vision of what it is they want from their programs and courses, who it is they want to be during and by the end of their programs. They are strong,

secure, individuals with a sense of purpose, drive and ambition. They desire knowledge; they believe that studying abroad, in a western academic context, is where they can access renewed life chances.

Of the 26 participants, the weekly journal recounts of 22 students were analysed. They were found to be highly engaged with their learning in their courses. These students have taken ownership and control of their learning. They describe peaks and troughs in their learning experiences, moments of fear, disillusionment followed (sometimes immediately) by feelings of excitement of new learning, perspectives and realisations of changes in their thinking and how they see themselves as learners.

Finding out who our international students really are is not about knowing all their exact personal life details. It is about a fundamental shift in our thinking about who our students are. It has to do with gaining deeper insights and perspectives about them. It is about having a holistic view of our students, ultimately about valuing them as complex, multidimensional (as opposed to simple and unidimensional) people with experiences in life, learning, language, culture. This is the beginning of developing richer, more meaningful relationships between lecturers and student, students and students in the learning environment. We need to acknowledge that international students come with a gamut of life experiences, and that curriculum and pedagogy can be adapted to include these experiences into the learning environment when and where appropriate.

International students are a wealth of resources, with their skills, expertise and knowledge and their diverse backgrounds. Given the opportunity there is the potential for their opinions, if expressed and heard, to make a valuable contribution to curriculum design and delivery. Rather than perpetuating this negative image of international students who study abroad, we need to be asking, "How can the classroom as a space for meaning making be a complex, hybrid space founded on diverse histories, multiple modes of representation, epistemologies, feelings, languages, and discourses that can become harnessed for productivity and regenerativity?" (Stein 2004, p.97)

International students add to our learning environment "because our classrooms are more diverse, we and our local students can learn more about how to operate in culturally diverse environments…international students can (if encouraged to do so), help home students to become global learners, competent in intercultural communication and understanding" (Ryan & Carroll 2005, p.9). It can enrich the learning experiences of all students, local and international.

In fact "by helping international students to be on an equal footing with other students [we can help them to] to learn and demonstrate their ability [their skills, expertise, knowledge, life experiences] in appropriate ways..." (Ryan & Carroll 2005, p.9). These can lead to cultivating better relationships between students and between student and lecturer. Together these enhance students' learning experience.

We can make changes in ourselves, in the way we think about and conceptualize international students and in the way in which we think about her experiences. We can change our attitudes and teaching practices. Students' needs can inform change in curriculum and pedagogy.

Conclusion

An understanding of the experiences of international students of learning and teaching within their courses from their perspectives, in their voices, presents international students as having strong goals and as engaging in their learning in their courses. Innovations in our thinking are necessary to sustain student engagement, to position them for greater academic success. International students' engagement in teaching and learning can be managed so that the students are seen as a valuable resource.

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