The transition of international students into post-graduate study: An incremental approach

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Globalisation presents a number of opportunities and challenges to education. Increased international student numbers, the wide variety of cultural and educational backgrounds of these students and the impact of differing study locations and time zones all act to increase the complexity of the educational environment.

The Centre for eBusiness and Communication, Swinburne University of Technology, Lilydale, is increasingly facing these challenges as it provides Graduate Programs to students both internationally and locally, in face-to-face and online modes.

The title of this paper has within it an inherent error. It refers to the transition **of** international students, this paper suggests that a refocusing is required to the transition **to** an internationally focused student. The 'transition of international students' implies a one-sided shift, whereas we argue that all parties within the learning environment should be equally 'international'.

This paper reports current research being undertaken at the Centre into the ways in which the Centre can best support the learning journey of students with diverse experience, needs and perspectives. It details a study of the impact of internationalisation of the student body (specifically the transition and global enculturation of international students) and the introduction of an ongoing, incremental orientation program for international students - both online and face-to-face.

Introduction

Globalisation or internationalisation are now widely used term and the concepts are having an enormous impact in many industries. The education sector is no exception (Albtach, 2002). The last few years have seen increasing numbers of students travelling to Australia to undertake their higher education. This influx of international students to Australian universities has revealed the need for) a new approach and new skills for course developers, administrators and lecturers, as well as both Australian (from either English or non-English speaking background i.e. local) and overseas students.

International students studying in Australia (predominantly from our Asian neighbours) bring with them a rich cultural paradigm that not only shapes their approach to learning, but also their expectations of lecturers, administrators and support staff. (Ballard, 1987) Very often the requirements of English language standards and other such common entrance hurdles do little to ensure that students are prepared for the vast cultural adjustment that they must make in order to succeed in the Australian education system. (Cargill, 1996)

For international students undertaking postgraduate study in Australia, the problems of cultural adjustment may be magnified by a double burden: firstly, a greater experience of the education system in their culture and secondly, expectations from Australian academics that the students be self-directed, self-motivated, critically thinking students, an emphasis that they have often not been exposed to in their prior studies. (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991, Samuelowicz, 1987)

Swinburne University of Technology's orientation programs have traditionally been developed to facilitate students' adjustment to the Australian learning environment and to provide support in English language skills. These have certainly been helpful, however, the Centre's experience suggests the provision of all orientation information at an early stage is counter-productive. It is provided before students understand its value, or in chunks too large to be absorbed usefully, at a time when students are already struggling with their new environment, both educational and more generally.

Compounding this (and perhaps even more complex), has been the introduction of on online learning technologies that allow international students to study at Australian universities whilst remaining in their own countries and cultures.

Understandably, orientation programs are inherently difficult to implement effectively online, requiring more structured and intentional feedback and monitoring techniques.

> "Convergent technologies will over the next decade provide Australian institutions significant international education and training opportunities (and in some instances, threats), both in extending their offshore delivery capacity, and in providing virtual international mobility to Australian students..." (AIEFC, 1998)

Therefore this paper draws together these observations and investigates the implementation of an incremental orientation program for International students at the Centre, using a case study approach as a means of focusing on these issues.

Current Situation

The Centre for eBusiness and Communication, Swinburne University of Technology Lilydale, provides a nested suite of postgraduate programs (Graduate Certificate, Graduate Diploma, Master) in eBusiness and Communication, to both local and international students. The programs are available in online and face-to-face seminar modes (as well as combinations of the two).

The programs emphasise flexibility, a practical, work-based approach, and a participative, collaborative multi-modal learning environment. The Centre uses negotiated learning contracts and recognition of prior learning to allow students to shape their own learning journeys. (Centre for eBusiness and Communication website, www.ld.swin.edu.au/ebusiness.htm)

The programs are designed as a set of levels, aimed to provide students with skills relevant to new business environments in a global framework that supports the application of enterprise concepts in their current and future work situations. The programs expect students to take on greater responsibility for the direction and constitution of their study as they progress, making contribution to and participating in the collaborative learning environment.

While these programs have been running for several years, no overt orientation program had been undertaken. In first semester 2002 it was perceived necessary that some form of orientation be undertaken. Later sections of this paper describe the planned approach and some initial outcomes with a group of students including overseas students and local students from a non-English speaking background.

Methodology

Methodologically we are appropriating an action research model. "Action research is a form of collective self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality or justice of their own social or educational practices" (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988)

To identify the areas of need that could be addressed in an orientation program for international students, a range of research approaches were employed including subject evaluations by the international students, written reflections on their learning experience and discussions with the academic staff who had worked with the students. "Recognising and demystifying the problems they face as learners in unfamiliar contexts is the critical first step towards improving the learning environments of international students." (Robertson et al 2000)

These methods elicited a wide variety of responses from students and staff that then allowed the formation of a draft orientation program that was further developed with the input of academics staff, staff from the International student Unit, the student Union and others.

Identifying the Issues

Student numbers at the Centre for eBusiness and Communication, both local and international, are growing as the Graduate Programs in eBusiness and Communication have become established and more widely publicised.

The intake of a new cohort of international face-to-face, seminar students at the beginning of Study Period 1, 2002 provided the impetus for this study. Staff at the Centre realised the importance of implementation of a thorough orientation program for international students as a result of learning difficulties observed whilst working intensively with the new cohort. A number of issues arose with this group of students that were highlighted by the investment of a significant amount of time in assisting the international students acclimatise to the Centre's learning approach.

The following picture illustrates some of the issues raised, as expressed by one of the Centre's International students.
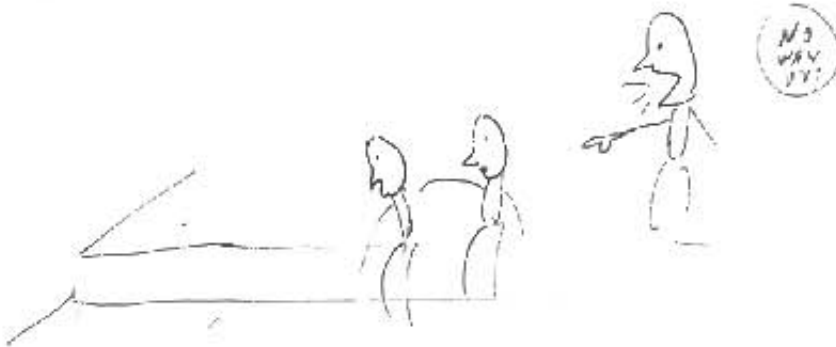

Figure 1 The International Student Experience.

The student who drew the picture shown in Figure 1, explained that the person on the left of the drawing is an International student, sitting on the edge of a precipice. Sitting next to them, with an arm around the International student is their Australian lecturer, providing support and trying to keep them from falling. In the right of the drawing is an Australian local student whose vocal, aggressive style makes the International student feel quite nervous. The "No Way Out" sign in the background emphasises the precarious position of the International student who feels that they must keep going and can't back out.

Similar sentiments were expressed in course evaluations by other international students, extracts of which are included below. Interviews with both the students and the staff who had worked with them helped clarify the areas of key importance.

> "The first time I came to the class, I felt really scared of everything. Because it was a very new experience for me to study overseas, to study with people from other countries and also to have lecturers who talk in English. It is a challenging experience for me. I need to be flexible with the new environment, including the way I'm thinking, new people, new language-English, and so many new things for me that I need to adapt with." (International student after their completing first study period, before the implementation of an orientation program.)

> "In addition, this course is asking the students to have a broad thinking of everything, but also make everything in the simple manner. It's quite difficult for me, especially with the limited language ability that I have and also the less experience that I have got." (International student after their completing first study period.)

Academic staff also had a range of experiences in working with the International students that reinforced the need for orientation as is exemplified below.

> "We spent a lot of time in class on things like managing expectations. Discussing what the students could expect of the staff and vice versa. These discussions were helpful, but needed to be repeated at several points during the study period. The other big issue was assessment, our subject outlines are designed to allow students flexibility in the assessment pieces, and to emphasise the importance of personal application and reflection. This was really hard to get across to the students. I have never had to have so many resubmissions!"

It is important to note that the class discussed above was able to incorporate orientation content, tailoring to the specific students' needs, as it was formed almost entirely of international students. However there is insufficient research that deals with classes with both international and Australian students in which the approach must be considered carefully, balancing the needs of the two groups.

The shift in student demographics also challenges staff to create appropriate learning environments that incorporate the best from both worlds. The potential for cross-cultural learning is valuable for all students in the new global economy. "... we should be proactive in creating transcultural spaces for the exchange, for the reshaping, of knowledges, in our own heads no less than in university degree programmes." (Cadman, 2000)

> "Actually, there are some more good points that I have got from the course, but the most important is I can learn a lot of things from others' experiences in the class, especially from the students who have more experiences in working place and obviously the lecturers' experiences. From those experiences I can expand or get more very good knowledge for myself and hopefully I can share those in my future working place or in my community." (International student after completing their first study period.)

The international students at the Centre recognised the need for assistance and sought clarification at points of uncertainty, sometimes displaying a seemingly inappropriate dependence on the academic staff.

> "I'm so lucky that the lecturers always be able to give any suggestion to me or students in general. " (International student after their completing first study period.)

Evidence of the disparity in learning cultures was displayed in cases of plagiarism. This was an issue that raised the academic staffs' awareness of the importance of addressing cultural learning expectations explicitly. There is information in each of the subject learning guides outlining the University's definition of plagiarism and the penalties for plagiarising. However has plagiarism was observed in the first study period, this was clearly not a strong enough message to break

across the differing cultural approach to this issue.

One student who was emailed by the lecturer after submitting a piece of assessment that contained unacknowledged material was quite taken aback, fortunately the lecturer had an awareness of the different cultural approach and the student resubmitted the assessment, very apologetically. The lecturer, in turn, was overwhelmed by the strength of the apology, which in their eyes was quite extreme given that the issue had simply been the result of a cultural misunderstanding.

Another international student who began the course before the implementation of the orientation program identified the need for assistance outside of educational issues, noting their need for "A special teacher who is in charge for overseas students, who would like a mentor, helping out the problems not just for academic but also for daily

life. For example, the accommodation, emotion, or friendship."

The adjustment issues are further complicated by a number of other factors. One of these is the requirement to move backward and forward between cultures;

- physically for students travelling home in between study periods,
- emotionally for students contacting family and friends in their home countries
- mentally for online students who are living, and often working, in one culture and studying in a another culture in the same physical location, (a strange form of telecommuting!)

Orientation Program Developed

On gathering and working through the data collected during the first study period 2002, it was realised that an initial orientation program was essential for new international students beginning the course but that this must be supplemented by an ongoing, progressive, (i.e. incremental) orientation program as the students enter each new level of the postgraduate programs. This orientation must also be delivered to both face-to-face and online international students, necessitating a multi-modal approach.

Figure 2. International Student Orientation Program Structure

Initial Orientation

At the beginning of the programs students are preparing to begin post-graduate study. They may have moved to Australia in order to study face-to-face, or may have remained in their home country to study online. Students who have left their home country to study in Australia experience a great cultural sock as the familiar social structures are no longer available; instead an entirely new environment faces them. Socialisation with other students, who have been through or are going through trans-cultural adjustment, eases this process, as they are able to discover and adapt to the differences together.

Online students are operating within their own social environment, and therefore do not experience the same range of adjustment issues.

The impact of social, environmental and educational changes for international students does differ between face-to-face and online students. Both groups require induction into the teaching and learning methodologies employed by the Centre, to ensure appropriate expectations are set.

The identified student needs on entry to the Graduate Programs necessitates the communication of a large range of concepts in the initial orientation program as well as socialisation and 'get to know you' activities. For this reason it was

decided that the initial orientation program should be residential for International students studying face-to-face with online students invited (but not expected) to attend.

The program includes three days of activities exclusively for the international students including a course overview, introduction to study skills, discussion of the Centre's learning approach, a session investigating cultural learning differences, an opportunity to explore the online resources and become familiar with the online learning platform. The program also includes interaction with other international students who have further progressed through the course as well academic, administrative and support staff, and a tour of the local region.

Graduate Diploma-level Orientation

At this point, students have completed at least three Graduate Certificate subjects, and are planning to begin Graduate Diploma subjects. The transition into this stage is challenging for students who are more comfortable with an inductive teaching style, as emphasis is now placed on independent learning, and synthesis of knowledge. Students are expected to use the learning materials provided as a basis for their own exploration and research into the topics presented. Students apply their knowledge at organisation level.

Orientation into the Graduate Diploma level subjects takes the form of a full day workshop seminar. The seminar takes a case study approach to introduce students to the analyse, evaluate, synthesise, communicate model of independent learning. Students are given an introduction to the difference between Graduate Certificate and Graduate Diploma level subjects in terms of expectations of both the students and lecturers. Students are then encouraged to apply the analyse, evaluate, synthesise, communicate model to a complex case study - working in small groups. The case study includes open-ended discussion questions.

After working in small groups, the students come back together in class to present and discuss their opinions and approaches. Following the discussion of the case study, students reflect on how they have developed as learners since commencing the course and discuss how their approach will have to evolve to succeed at the Graduate Diploma level. One student commented "So you are saying that at 500 level *(Graduate Certificate)* we are babies and you bring the learning to us, now at 600-level *(Graduate Diploma)* we are toddlers and are beginning to explore on our own." (Italics authors' addition.)

Master-level Orientation

At this point, students have completed the Graduate Certificate, at least three Graduate Diploma subjects and are preparing to begin Master level study. The challenges at this stage are to become a self-directed learner, source and use appropriate reference material with little direction and collaborate with other students and lecturers to develop their own tools and applications. Students apply their knowledge at an enterprise level.

Orientation to Master-level is increasingly student-led, in line with the change in expectations of the students' approach to learning.

Final Orientation

After completion of at least three Master subjects, the students need to gain an understanding of the requirements of an integrative project. This project requires self-management, independence and an ability to draw on knowledge built by all previous studies. Students define their own application of the principles within a flexible framework, and reflect upon their learning journey.

The distinction between earlier studies and subjects at the Master level is in terms of complexity, handling of ambiguity and not-knowing, independence of research and project management and breadth of view beyond the business unit to a multi-faceted global organisation.

Further Development

In line with a normal action research approach, in the near future, all the presentations and information provided in orientation seminars will be available in an orientation website, available to all students for reference throughout the course. Local students, international face-to-face and online students will be able to refer back to it as is necessary. This site will be used as the mechanism to orient online students in conjunction with scheduled chats and discussion boards. Important skills here are the ability to work through material off-line, think through it and then discuss it at a preappointed time with

an eCoach or other students.

The value of material presented in the face-to-face orientation program is often drawn out in group discussion, which is difficult to replicate in a chat room and discussion board. However, this is one of the specific adjustments that needs to be made by the online student, and the chance to operate within that environment outside of a subject framework will ease their transition. Additionally, a social network is given a chance to develop as all the new online students will participate and have a chance to 'meet' each other.

The online orientation will follow a similar pattern to that already described for the face-to-face orientation, covering specific areas for international students and then a more general session, taking a broader focus of online learning for all students.

The program content will vary from the face-to-face orientation, addressing the online learning environment in greater detail, helpful techniques for online learning and resources available. Material introducing physical resources such as the computer labs available to students will be removed from the program, or covered in minor detail. Experienced online students and eCoaches will be invited to assist to give practical and relevant examples.

Conclusion

The orientation program is in its infancy, however early response from students has been positive. In order to continually improve we will be conducting ongoing interviews to gauge the perceived benefit by students and staff in all modes of participation and from various cultural and educational backgrounds.

Clearly, implementing a program that simply enables international students to adjust to the Australian higher education system and the Centre's current learning approach is not an appropriate long-term goal. It is our aim to develop all students into internationalised learners and eBusiness managers. An orientation program will be a part of the process, however a more holistic approach will be required to ensure all students and staff make the shift to a trans-cultural learning paradigm.

Longitudinal analysis of student groups will be undertaken to ascertain whether the incremental approach provides significant benefit to students in making the academic leap at each stage of the post-graduate program. This research will also provide the foundation for encouraging a wider internationalisation of the Centre's learning approach.

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