

# DEVELOPING SERVICE QUALITY FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Second World War, internationalisation of Australian higher education has gone through stages of 'aid' (primarily through the Colombo Plan and, more recently AusAID) and 'trade' (the marketing of Australian university courses on- and off-shore). In the twenty-first century, Australian universities have entered a third, more mature, stage that builds on the earlier stages to constitute a more comprehensive internationalisation that involves university communities *engaging* with internationalisation as global citizens.

In the context of higher education, internationalisation is 'a process of integrating an international, intercultural dimension into the teaching, research, and service functions of the institution' (Knight, as cited in Welch 2002, p.2). This 'international, intercultural dimension' can no longer be thought about primarily in terms of accommodating international students/clients within an Australian educational context, but must be set within a 'framework of values and practices orientated towards heightened awareness and appreciation of the politics of difference as the basis for developing the necessary skills and literacies for a changing world' (Rizvi and Walsh 1998, p.11).

Such a framework does not differentiate between 'international' and 'local' students but positions both within the new category of 'global learners'. Within the global learner category, cultural difference is acknowledged but is not used to define or delimit the individual student; all students are international in the sense that they all are being educated to enter a globalised workplace. As Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, and Gurin (2002, p.361), citing General Motors, point out,

Diversity in academic institutions is essential to teaching students the human relations and analytical skills they need to thrive and lead in the work environments of the twenty-first century. These skills include the abilities to work well with colleagues and subordinates from diverse backgrounds; to view issues from multiple perspectives; and to anticipate and respond with sensitivity to the needs and cultural differences of highly diverse customers, colleagues, employees, and global business partners.

In its objective of integrating an international and inter-cultural perspective into all its activities, Curtin's International Enabling Plan recognises the value of international and intercultural engagement that is both comprehensive and holistic. Among the projected outcomes of the Plan, those most directly 'about the students' are:

- excellent teaching that facilitates learning,
- enhanced overall experience of international students, and
- an international experience for local students.

These three themes are the starting point for this paper, which will demonstrate the value of a culturally inclusive learning environment and the importance of ensuring that student support services simultaneously meet the specific needs of individual international and local students *and* facilitate their integration as global learners. In developing quality services

during the third stage of internationalising higher education, the emphasis must be on enabling engagement: engagement with learning and engagement with peers within a multi-cultural environment.

## **ENGAGEMENT WITH LEARNING**

International undergraduate students typically come to Australian universities with high expectations, well-specified career goals, and the will to work hard and succeed (Krause 2006). They look forward to the adventure of life in a foreign country and they expect to make new friends and have a satisfying social life. However, their primary objective – and that of their parents or sponsors – is to succeed academically, to achieve the qualifications necessary for a professional career. Any discussion of services to international students, therefore, has to begin in the classroom – real or virtual.

The first-year transition process is difficult for most students, but particularly for those whose previous learning experiences are significantly different from those of students entering undergraduate study through the traditional end-of-secondary-school matriculation procedure. It is not only international students who come to university from non-traditional learning backgrounds; most mature-aged students, TAFE articulants, and students from migrant, indigenous, rural, or lower socio-economic backgrounds also come to university through pathways different from the traditional matriculation route. These international and non-traditional students are no less able than their traditional school-leaver colleagues, but their transition into university often requires a greater degree of adaptation. It is vitally important that these students be supported through their early transitional difficulties because, as well as affecting their academic performance in their first-year units, these difficulties have the potential to impede their long-term development as autonomous, self-confident learners.

It should be noted here that although the attrition rate for international students is lower than for their local counterparts (Krause 2006), this does not necessarily mean international students are more successful or more satisfied with their university experience than local students, only that dropping out is less of a viable option for them (Dawson 2004). Under-performance and unsatisfactory engagement, not just attrition, need to be addressed in these students' first semester.

Effective teaching practice is crucial for addressing academic performance and engagement. A transmission approach to learning, in which the lecturer delivers and the student receives information, is clearly inadequate as a strategy for engaging students with learning. Its response to international students' transition difficulties tends to be assimilationist; lecturers whose practice is informed by a transmission approach encourage students, both implicitly and explicitly, to 'get over' their past experiences of education, to 'move beyond' their habitual way of perceiving what is expected of them as learners, and to adapt themselves to the Western learning environment (Samuelowitz 1987; CBSFLOTE Project 1999); they attempt to reduce difference, to make international students more 'like' Australian students or, more accurately, like some notional construction of the Australian student. They equate difference with deficit, and therefore seek to normalise, to reduce anomalies, and to coerce the international student into conformity with Western styles of learning. This is homogenisation not globalisation.

The effect of the transmission teaching approach on the international student, newly arrived and experiencing the early stressful stages of culture shock, can be extremely debilitating (Gudykunst & Kim 1992). In the absence of positive affirmation, these students often accept and internalise misinformed negative views of themselves as lacking in initiative, linguistically impoverished, passive or intellectually uncritical – 'spoon-fed' is a phrase frequently used by lecturers and by students. It is therefore not surprising that in approaching learning in the

new environment students might be tentative, insufficiently confident to engage fully in assignment tasks or to take intellectual risks in exploring their subject areas but, rather, concentrate on complying with the more superficial, explicitly expressed components of assignment instructions (Dawson 2001).

## **CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO STUDENT ENGAGEMENT**

A more effective approach for maximising learning not only for international students but for traditional and non-traditional local students as well is **constructivism** (Volet 1998; Biggs 1999). This student-centred approach is strongly recommended to new lecturers at Curtin and has proven particularly effective in first-year classes with a large percentage of international students (Pick, Dayaram & Ananthram 2006).

Three premises underlie constructivism: firstly, learning is socially constructed; secondly, different learners use different learning strategies; and thirdly, when learners encounter new situations they build on pre-existing internal models or schemata developed from earlier learning experiences. Together, the implications of these premises for teaching and learning, especially in a global environment, are clear: one-size instruction does *not* fit all. The related constructivist precept that learning is a process that always involves the learner in individually negotiating, rather than simply receiving, new knowledge is potentially an empowering one for international students, because it emphasises that there is no one 'right' way (the 'Western' way) to learn. Constructivist lecturers validate students' previous learning and seek to build on it (Marton, Dell'Alba, and Beatty, 1993).

For example, Chinese students typically favour learning styles based on 'deep memorisation' (Biggs 1996; Ti & Dawson 2003). This is not the dominant learning style in Australia, and often Australian lecturers have dismissed it as 'rote-learning', but, as Entwistle & Entwistle (2003) demonstrate, it can be an effective strategy for achieving 'deep' learning. In the constructivist, student-centred classroom, lecturers do encourage Chinese students to use the Western 'explore first then develop the skill' style (Biggs 1994) for the pragmatic reason that it is more suited to Australian curricula, but they also acknowledge the validity of the Chinese approach of developing skills first, then exploring; as the kung fu maxim expresses it, 'Learn to do it properly first, then logic will follow.' (Ti & Dawson 2003, p.38). In learning environments heavily assessed by summative tests and exams, Chinese students often revert to memorising model answers without necessarily moving to the exploration stage necessary for deep learning (Tang 1992; Volet 1998; Smith, Miller & Cassini 1998); lecturers of culturally diverse groups that include Chinese and other Confucian-heritage students can avoid this response from students by designing assessment tasks – such as case studies and assignments that involve problem-solving – that cannot be addressed using surface memorisation.

## **SCAFFOLDING AND REFLECTION**

'Scaffolding' is a constructivist teaching technique ideal for use in culturally diverse first-year classes. Informed by constructivism's three basic premises, this technique recognises that because international and local students, both traditional and non-traditional, come from different learning backgrounds, the lecturer cannot assume the same level or knowledge or preparedness in all students and so must articulate very clearly and in detail what students are required to do in the early tasks they are given. Then, because learning is a cumulative process, lecturers need to guide students stage by stage, ensuring that each stage has been adequately learnt before the next stage is introduced. Without this early scaffolding, students often fail to master the basics of their discipline and waste intellectual (and often emotional) energy second-guessing what is required of them rather than engaging with the learning task itself.

Scaffolding is most effective when accompanied by meta-cognitive processes through which students are guided to reflect on the learning process and on themselves as learners (Dawson & Conti-Bekkers 2002). Among the most valuable insights they gain through guided reflection is that their feelings of confusion and uncertainty, although uncomfortable, are not necessarily symptoms of inability to cope with university study in Australia. Indeed, they are experienced by all students and are often indicators of a positive shift to a more critical, sophisticated mode of thinking – short-term confusion is actually an essential stage in the learning process (Saven-Baden 2000). Classrooms in which such issues can be discussed are unquestionably the most supportive for new international students, and set them up for success. As Cottrell (2001, p.18) writes,

In many cases we will achieve more from our students if we address...how they perceive themselves as learners, and invite them to consider whether this assists or inhibits their current learning. Indeed, it is often underlying beliefs about ability and performance rather than skills or actual performance which are most influential on a student's future progress.

## **EXCELLENT TEACHING AND INTERNATIONALISATION**

It is appropriate that 'excellent teaching that facilitates learning' should head the list of Objectives in the Curtin International Enabling Plan, because learning lies at the heart of the international student's experience of university – academic success leading to employment is the key indicator of student satisfaction. The constructivist approach to teaching and learning recommended in this paper is not new, but it has new relevance in meeting the challenge of transforming students into life-long global learners. It is flexible enough to accommodate the learning needs of the constantly changing and diversifying student demographic and it does not single out international students as a deficit or 'at-risk' group but regards each student as an individual learner with an individual set of strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the collaborative student-lecturer relationship that is integral to the constructivist approach enhances students' sense of belonging to their School or Faculty and institution (Tinto, 1993) and reduces their anxiety and uncertainty, which in turn contributes to their successful transition into the academic culture.

## **CULTURAL INTERACTION IN THE CLASSROOM**

International students at Curtin have many opportunities through student organisations and campus events to meet and interact with local students on campus. However, these opportunities are not always taken up because initiating cross-cultural interaction requires a level of linguistic and social confidence that many students lack when they enter university. The classroom, on the other hand, does offer a controlled environment that enables motivated interaction.

Work in culturally diverse groups, in particular, can give students an insight into the interactions they may encounter in the global professional world they will all be entering after graduation, whether they are international or local. As Kincaid's convergence theory of intercultural communication (1988, p. 282) states, 'if two or more individuals share information with one another, then over time they will tend to converge towards one another, leading to a greater uniformity' or harmony. The 'information' that Kincaid is referring to is not superficial information about each student's cultural background. Rather, it is accumulated tacit knowledge gained through repeated interactions with others in a real-life situation. In the process of working together on an assessed project, students learn about intercultural communication and understanding experientially, within a psychologically safe environment. If intelligently guided by the lecturer, all students come to the common insight that the key to intercultural communication competence is not a detailed knowledge of a

specific culture but, rather, mastery of interpersonal communication skills, techniques, and strategies (Hoopes, 1981).

Assessed group-work is a notoriously problematic activity and therefore has to be carefully designed, enabled, facilitated, and monitored if it is to be successful. One model that has proved successful for use in culturally diverse classes at Curtin is organised around five-person semi-autonomous groups, members of which are chosen by the lecturer to maximise cultural heterogeneity and gender balance. Once assigned to a group, the individual student cannot change groups, but must keep to the original group throughout the entire semester; this ensures that each student gains first-hand experience of both the tensions and crises that occur at various stages of a group's operation and the negotiation, conflict management, and teambuilding techniques required to address these tensions and crises.

As it develops, each five-person group acquires a sense of group identity built on mutual interests and shared experiences that cuts across cultural divides in the classroom. Throughout the semester students are given scaffolded guidelines to help them build and maintain the effectiveness of their group. These include descriptions of positive task roles to take up during group discussion and positive maintenance roles necessary for the group to function effectively throughout the semester. Negative roles – such as the dominator, the social loafer, and the inhibitor – are discussed and strategies to discourage negative behaviour are devised. Students are also guided through ethno-relativist explorations of cultural issues such as high- and low-context communication styles (Hall 1976) and turn-taking conventions. The desired outcome for both international and local students as global learners is that they build up a wide repertoire of cultural protocols, retaining their own values but being able to work comfortably in culturally different environments.

For group-work (especially culturally diverse group-work) to be successful, the lecturer has to unobtrusively monitor group dynamics and intervene if necessary. Often, a major source of contention is the differential in English language proficiency between international and local students, and lecturers may need to work with students to devise ways of accommodating this differential; this always has to be handled sensitively to achieve a division of labour all group members feel to be equitable. Much of the interaction on group assignments and presentations occurs outside the classroom, in the students' own time, so it is important to equip students with strategies for managing out-of-class meetings for the most effective outcomes. Intercultural groups that function well for all members encourage informal socialisation between culturally diverse students outside group meetings. In this way, the investment a lecturer puts into designing, enabling, facilitating, and monitoring group-work pays social as well as academic dividends for both international and local students.

## **UNIVERSITY LIFE SERVICES**

The learning environment for students extends outside the classroom to include non-academic services and extra-curricular activities across the campus. If universities are serious about developing their students as global citizens, they must internationalise themselves, integrating, as Knight (cited in Welch 2002, p2) says, 'an international, intercultural dimension' into all aspects of campus life, including the social and recreational.

In 2005, Curtin restructured the student service area to bring together Counselling, Health, Student Housing, Student Learning Support, and Campus and Community Life services under the new portfolio of University Life. Linking up these disparate services at management level has ensured that staff in all five areas are familiar with the services the other areas offer and so can direct students to the specific service they require, knowing that students' needs will be appropriately met. Continuous communication and coordination between the University Life areas and between University Life and student services within Schools and Divisions, the Library, and the Student Guild's committees, clubs, and

organisations ensure that all students in need of support services have unrestricted access to services from pre-semester orientation to career and graduation advice.

In all areas of University Life, staff are trained in the principles of culturally appropriate practice and in each area there are a number of staff members with extensive experience and expertise in working with international students in Australia and overseas. With just a few exceptions, access to services is offered equally to all students without differentiation between international and local; the service each student receives, however, is specific to her or his individual needs. University Life constantly works towards developing the University's culture of diversity, inclusion, and social harmony and building a learning environment in which every learner is supported, encouraged, and given the opportunity to realise their highest potential.

The Campus and Community Life area has a special role in encouraging intercultural interactions on campus. With the help of student volunteers, Campus and Community Life staff organise many orientation, social, recreational, and charity events that attract both international and local students, and this creates valuable opportunities for students from different cultural backgrounds to interact both as organisers and as participants. Although their emphasis is on the social and the recreational, the Campus and Community Life programs do facilitate development of Curtin's graduate attributes of effective communication, cultural awareness and understanding, and an international perspective. Moreover, as in academic group-work, the convergence of students from different cultural backgrounds as participants in a real-life activity offers, as Rizvi and Walsh (1998, p.1) suggest, an opportunity to develop 'heightened awareness and appreciation of the politics of difference'.

The Student Learning Support Centre provides free, voluntary learning support programs for all local and international students, from first-year undergraduates to final-year PhD candidates. The programs are delivered as series of modules of five two-hour seminars with follow-up individual tutorial sessions, and are complemented by original instructional material, textbooks, and on-line study resources that are clear and linguistically accessible to second-language speakers. A strong student-centred ethos informs its learning support practice; its approach is proactive, non-deficit, and highly structured, with an emphasis on adding value to each student's university experience and graduate prospects.

The SLSC functions as a 'third space' (Bhabha 1993) within which students are supported not only to develop academic skills, techniques, and strategies but also to reflect on themselves as learners, define their goals, and build the motivation and resilience needed for long-term successful study. At the heart of the SLSC's philosophy and practice lies the recognition that each student's learning journey is different, influenced by their particular age, cultural background, life situation, and previous educational experiences, and by their motivations, goals, and aspirations. Each student is unique. International students report that they value being recognised as individuals as well as members of a nation, culture, or race, and they welcome opportunities to interact with other students on this individual basis. The SLSC seminars facilitate this interaction.

## **PRE-SEMESTER PREPARATION PROGRAMS**

Recognising that transition to study at an Australian university from a secondary school or from the workplace in another country is always challenging and potentially stressful, Curtin offers a three-week Introductory Academic Program for postgraduate AusAID and other scholarship holders each semester. This program begins with two days of cultural preparation, during which students' own distinct cultural identity is expressed and affirmed,

followed by orientation to the campus and its services and interactive generic skills and IT seminars. A three-day intensive Academic Gateway Program is offered to international undergraduate students to equip them with strategies for a smooth transition into the new learning environment. These two fee-for-service programs are open only to international students, but they still offer opportunities for intercultural interaction because the participants come from a diversity of cultural backgrounds. Lecturers in the programs also become more culturally aware through interaction with the students.

Pre-semester preparation programs ensure that international students begin mainstream studies equipped with an understanding of the conventions and protocols of study at an Australian university and a set of strategies for negotiating common transition challenges. Such preparation, while it does not make transition completely trouble-free, gives students more confidence in themselves and in their capacity to meet the challenges. The social interaction with other students and with lecturers gives new students the reassurance that they have at least one person on campus they can greet and talk to when semester begins. Research at Curtin (Dawson, Conti-Bekkers, Packer, and Fielder 2006) confirms that international students who participate in pre-semester programs are more likely to use services available to them and to seek help when they encounter academic difficulties; they also appear to integrate more easily with the Curtin community.

## CONCLUSION

The international experience is much more than the academic, but this paper has focused on teaching and learning because it is the core business of higher education and the service that all international students are most actively involved in. At Curtin, the Teaching and Learning Plan is closely aligned with the Internationalisation Enabling Plan; through this alignment and the ongoing project of internationalising the curriculum, the learning journey of *all* students is becoming more international.

Both teaching and learning and the University Life support services at Curtin come under tight quality control through benchmarking, accreditation, and evaluation processes. Students have many opportunities to register their satisfaction or otherwise with their educational experience and to give feedback that informs the University's drive for continuous improvement. The challenge for Curtin is to build on its success as a provider of international education during the 'aid' and 'trade' stages as it moves further into the third stage – the 'engagement' stage. It will continue to provide excellent teaching and learning and support to international and local students, but will increasingly embody and promote 'values and practices orientated towards heightened awareness and appreciation of the politics of difference as the basis for developing the necessary skills and literacies for a changing world' (Rizvi and Walsh 1998, p.11); it will engage students with their future as global citizens.

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