

# Help Seeking Behaviour of international students: does culture have an impact?

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## Introduction

Australia has become one of the worlds preferred destinations for visiting international students who wish to study at tertiary level. According to the Australian Education International (AEI), international student commencement statistics between 2005 and 2006 have risen by 8.3%. In addition, Queensland's enrolments have risen by 6.3% during the period from 2004 to 2005.

Due to the increasing commencement numbers of international students, support and referral services from our educational providers should be recognised as not only an integrated service component which is offered to the international student population but also an important specialised area of expertise that enhances the overall student experience.

In Queensland the importance of word-of-mouth marketing is well established (Giles and Luxmoore, 2004; Mavondo, Zaman & Abubakar, 2000). Consequently it is imperative that international students have positive experiences and are willing to refer their peers, family and friends to studying Queensland. The longevity of this industry is ultimately based on positive impressions and experiences.

While there is a large body of knowledge on the teaching and learning experiences and needs of international students, there is little documented research on the either utilization of support services by international students and more specifically on the help seeking behaviour of international students in Australia.

A better understanding of these issues is crucial for industry in order to implement support services which meet identified needs. This research explores, from a student perspective, their knowledge of existing support services within a Queensland university, the challenges they faced and how they sought assistance.

## Research Methods

This research was undertaken as part of a semester masters coursework thesis in semester 1 2006 at a Queensland university. Ethical clearance to undertake the research was obtained prior to collecting the data.

This was a qualitative research project with methodologies including one-to-one student interviews, focus group interviews, the completion of a questionnaire and a follow up meeting to consolidate and clarify the information gathered that formed the body of the data.

Participants were identified through a snowballing effect where I approached my friends and asked if they could approach a mixed sample of international students

from their classes, from mixed educational domains, to participate in the research. Some of the educational disciplines included the sciences, business, education and law. Students were sourced from China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, Korea, India, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe.

Of the eleven participants, 35% were males, 65% female, and the majority was studying in Australia for the first time.

### **Material Studied**

Investigations into the role of cultural difference and how these differences influence the help seeking behaviour of the international student population group has never been conducted to my knowledge. Consequently previous literature was unavailable to provide an understanding of how the complexities of culture impacts on if or how international students seek support and advice from their provider.

Material studied followed three main themes. The first explored culture and the definitions of culture and behaviour. The second addressed the notion of stereotyping and how it should be avoided, eliminating biased influences on one's view on culture or cultural behaviour. The last theme highlighted how different cultural behaviours may influence social interactions translating to how cultural difference may influence help seeking behaviour.

Brown (2000) conveyed that no society exists without a culture and this reflects the need for culture to fulfill both biological and psychological needs which also contribute to certain behavioural patterns in human beings. Closely linked, Rogers (1988) suggested that human behaviour is embedded within culture and one does not exist without the other. Cronk (1999) consequently believed, human behaviours may be explained by stating 'culture made them do it', ignoring conflicts between explanation and behaviour, ignoring biology and over-emphasising the diversity of human cultures across the globe.

Cronk (1999) further argued that every person is unique and all of a person's behavioural characteristics cannot be accurately predicted on the stereotypical assumptions embedded within simplified definitions of culture and behaviour alone.

This research makes no attempt to 'stereotype' culture or cultural behaviours and acknowledge the individual nature of participants. However, literature provides a framework to understand common traits or behaviours and suggested how these cultural beliefs may influence individual help seeking behaviours of the international student populations within our tertiary educational environments.

In order to prove or disprove both the theoretical concepts highlighted within the literature, this research sought to establish the participants' actual help seeking behaviours. Then the research drew analysis from the literature to explain the whether participants cultural norms did in fact influence how they sought help in times of need

### **Results**

All the students were aware of at least one university service available for them. All students reported being familiar with learning support services. The majority were aware of support services for accommodation, employment and health advice. Those students who were studying for the first time were not aware of personal support

services such as welfare, student equity, financial and counselling support. These services were known to the two students who had studied previously.

The significant challenges reported by the international students in this research project were finding appropriate accommodation, finding part-time employment, understanding the Australian banking system and at times participants thought they had been treated unkindly by others due to cultural prejudice.

These experiences were made more challenging because the participants reported not knowing where to go to seek help and support or they did not have the experience or knowledge to deal with them. Additionally, the feeling of social isolation further contributed to their problems.

Section two of the research addressed the issue of how culture may influence the help seeking behaviours of the international student population group.

Literature (Alford, 1999; Chu, 1985; Fukuhara,1986) suggested that many cultures preferred to seek support from someone who was familiar to them. The participant responses also supported this theoretical concept. Almost all of the participants sought help from close friends or relatives both at home and when in Queensland.

Consequently, this form of help seeking may provide the possibility of individuals gaining information that may not be valid or reliable but also providing the possibility of the issue not being resolved at all due to seeking support from non-professionals or untrained professionals.

Finally, an individual's cultural background was proven as a significant indicator regarding 'if' international students sought help and 'who' international students sought help from. The participants also suggested that their cultural norms did prevent them from seeking help while studying in Queensland.

## **Discussion**

While this research is limited in its scope, it is however an initial assessment of help seeking behaviour of international students and the impact of culture on these behaviour.

The students' response, support by available literature, which is culture specific, emphasised the importance of reducing their embarrassment and anxiety levels when seeking help and support. They were less willing to seek face-to-face support.

It was noted by the participants that most of the help and support services offered to international students by their providers did not allow for anonymity when seeking help and support. This was seen as a deterrent and partly influenced their decision to turn to their friends or relatives for support.

Despite the push of technological advances, the participants within this research project rejected the online support services and stated that seeking help and support over the Internet was rather impersonal and often the information they discovered did not answer their questions.

The participants identified three major issues for improving the help and support services for international students at tertiary level:

- implementation of a Tertiary Student Help Line or a direct email messaging facility,
- the implementation of a student suggestion box within the campus international office that can be examined on a monthly basis that may be considered by staff as an on-going new policy implementation strategy; and
- general information given to them at their initial orientation.

The participants stated that the implementation of a telephone help line would decrease the element of personal embarrassment and preserve an individual's anonymity when seeking help and support. In turn, reducing the individual anxiety levels involved in the help seeking processes. Additionally, the implementation of a direct email facility as a support or advice tool would decrease the issue of impersonalisation as advice would be given almost immediately by a trained professional whilst still allowing students to remain anonymous.

The participants' request regarding that a 'suggestion box' be placed in the international office where the suggestions could be documented by the frequency of request, serves the purpose of updating existing service provisions allowing for improvements rather than on focusing on the help seeking behaviours themselves. However, it could be argued that the suggestion, of a suggestion box, is relevant to the help seeking behaviours of international students as the suggestions support their needs and may represent how they wish to seek help while still being able to remain anonymous.

The participants believed that little information was given to them during their initial orientation. Furthermore, they argued that specifically financial, counselling and coping strategies, essay editing and cheap accommodation information was not included.

While it was acknowledged by the participants that academic procedures and policies are important to their education, it was also acknowledged that the extra support provided by the educational institutions should be considered as equally important. The participants argued that if they had a well informed explanation of the support and referral services provided during the initial orientation, this may influence how or if they utilize these services and may alleviate some of the embarrassment of interacting face-to-face with university staff when seeking help and support.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the participants within this research project thought educational institutions could improve their provisions of support and referral services. Discussions further highlighted that problems associated with culture and cultural perceptions do not necessarily exist explicitly within Queensland universities or the tertiary educational system in general, as culture, behaviour and individualism mean being individual in any context.

However, the participants also stated that being an individual means to be unique and one cannot speak or represent the 'absolute' views for another even when the other is from the same cultural ethnicity.

Drawn from the research question, through the combination of literature quotations and the participants' responses, cultural difference does impact on if and how international students seek help and support. In addition, almost 100% of the participants confirmed that their cultural background did influence 'how' they sought help, and 'who' they spoke with when seeking help.

It is impossible to meet all international student requests, or ease the personal embarrassments or anxieties for all international students when they are seeking help or support from their provider. However, given the 'newness' of this research, there is a need to pursue on a larger and more robust scale further research on understanding mapping help seeking behaviour across sectors to better understand student needs and ensure that relevant and adequate support structures are available and accessible.

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