

Original Paper

Towards a Better Understanding of Australian Cultural and Social-Emotional Experiences of International Students

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Abstract

This study examines the cultural and social experiences of international students using data collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, as part of case studies designed for this purpose. The participants in this study are all full-time international students (n=30), undertaking their educational qualifications at higher education institutions/providers in Sydney, Australia, and coming from Asia, Middle East and Far Eastern countries. As part of the case studies, the individual and personal transitional pathways/journeys of the students are sketched through a four-phase progressive cycle extending from an initial algorithmic/jumbled state, characterised by a crisis situation following the feelings of excitement and high expectations, moving into an experimental phase, characterised by continued culture shock and possibly denial. The student then goes into a transitional phase, characterised by making partial accommodation and adjustments; and, finally, gets into a new algorithmic state, characterised by routinisation, relative stability, acceptance of the new state, settlement and finding of coping mechanisms to handle the new order. Furthermore, the current study considers the way the geographical and social-emotional factors experienced shape the student's individual experiences, self-concept, capacity to cope with life's new challenges and level of satisfaction with the overall experience of studying overseas.

Keywords

International students, international education, Australian educational institutions, cultural factors, cultural shock, student coping, student adjustment

1. Introduction

Australia is a regional and world leader in international education, training and research, and a partner

of choice for international collaboration. The number of international students accessing higher education in Australia continues to grow. Australia's international education sector is adaptive, innovative and globally engaged. The real value of international education to Australia is not one that only measures on a balance of payments spreadsheet per se, in as much as it simultaneously tethers with the consequential binding friendships and networks that materialise as a result. This enhances Australia's global reputation as a leader in research and education into the future. The Australian international education sector contributes to the country's economy and profile around the globe.

On the international scene, Australia represents one of the largest countries for education export after the United States and the United Kingdom (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2009). In the early 1990s, international education was a form of commodity (Lazenby & Blight, 1999), and a lucrative enterprise (Lin, 2012; Sidhu, 2006). Since the early 1990s, international education has been growing in Australia to become a main service industry (Australian Council for Private Education and Training, 2009). This has grown over the past few years. For example, in a media release held on 29 April 2016, Senator the Hon Richard Colbeck revealed that the international education sector contributes \$1 billion more to the Australian economy than what was previously estimated (Ministers for the Department of Education and Training, 2016).

Furthermore, as Universities Australia revealed in a media release held on 3 February 2017, education export earnings were at a record of \$21.8 billion in 2016. This is due to Australia's excellent reputation for high-quality university education, the country's proximity to Asia and a lower Australian dollar. In the same media release, Universities Australia further reported that the latest trade figures indicated that income from education escalated by 17 percent on 2015, and that this has been the strongest annual growth since 2010 (Universities Australia, 2017).

The purpose of the current exploratory study is to develop a better understanding and find ways in which Australian universities and other Higher Education providers can enhance their efforts in meeting the cultural and social-emotional needs of their international students. To this end, the current study explores the actual experiences of a group of international students, living and studying in Sydney, Australia, through visiting their first-hand accounts about their experiences, and the consequential impact on their individual lives, personalities and identities. Each student's transitional pathway, encompassing his or her personal journey, can be outlined through a four-phase cycle (Hellsten, 2007; Helou, 1994). This begins with their initial algorithmic/jumbled state, initially commencing with the feelings of excitement and high expectations, but ending in a crisis state. The student moves into an experiential phase where continued cultural shock and possibly denial prevails; then gets into a transitional phase where the student will eventually undertake partial adaptations; to finally end with a new algorithmic state characterised by routinisation, relative stability, settlement and acceptance of the new and current situation. International students from Asian and Far Eastern countries, studying for their diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in Sydney, Australia, undertook a series of semi-structured and in-depth interviews over a period of four months in

early 2018.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Cultural Learning and Training: From Country of Origin to Host Country

Research outcome indicate that one's social life impact on level of their satisfaction with their study experiences as an international student (Gomes, 2014). Other research studies indicate that the intention to study overseas is mainly driven by the need of international students to enhance their future career prospects, gain experience relevant to future employment, develop a better understanding of oneself, have the opportunities to gain and apply valuable and relevant knowledge and enjoy independence. In addition, further studies also indicate that reasons behind the choice to study overseas relate to the students' attainment of new views on their respective fields of study, to experience a more comprehensive practical-type educational program, form intercultural binds and networks, travel, experience a foreign culture, learn to adjust to new cultural and social norms, make use of career advice and related services, and, in some instances, gain family approval (Cross, 2006; Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Hazen & Alberts, 2006; McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001; Obst & Forster, 2007; Urban & Palmer, 2016). In addition, the benefits of studying overseas also include attaining experience in a different country, learning a new language and finding means to cope in another culture. Moreover, travelling overseas to attain higher education may lead to transfiguring cultures (Tarry, 2011). Nevertheless, it is the view here that studying overseas does not relate to the intention of total relinquishment of the home culture.

Unfortunately, it is not always the case that sufficient support is made available to international students to achieve the true purpose behind their decisions to undertake their higher education overseas; or when support is made available, it may not be sufficient or timely appropriate (Breuning, 2007). In addition to the language and learning challenges, international students may face deep rooted cultural, social, lifestyle and religious challenges that they may find hard to deal with (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Olivas & Li, 2006). This further includes gender issues and sexual values and patterns, leading to what is known as culture shock (Newsome & Cooper, 2016; Zhou et al., 2008).

As Devito (2004) explains, culture shock may be a prerequisite leading to possibly a meaningful process of reassessment and establishment of beliefs and values. This may, on the one hand, reinforce one's pledge to their home culture while simultaneously provide the means to integrate new cultural understandings with their existing cultural beliefs through cumulative phases involving crisis, recovery and adjustment (Devito, 2004; Newcome & Cooper, 2016). Challenges related to international students' cultural adjustment involve many issues including, but not limited to, their command of the English language, their perceptions of the degree of being socially accepted, the duration of study time in the host country, the extent to which they experience discrimination in the host country and how they deal with it (Constantine, Okazaki, & Utsey, 2004; Urban & Palmer, 2016, Yeh & Inose, 2003).

2.2 Experiences of International Students

International students find themselves in situations where they need to undergo many essential adjustments as survival mechanisms. This is due to the challenges faced as related to finding suitable accommodation, differences in social rules, financial hardship, emotional experiences and psychological states experienced, including stress, pressure, depression, anxiety and worthlessness (Andrade, 2006; Burns, 1991; Komiya, Good, & Sherrod, 2000; Mullins, Quintrell, & Hancock, 1995; Thomson, Rosenthal, & Russell, 2006; Urban & Palmer, 2016), boredom and loneliness, family and homesickness (Zhang & Brunton, 2007), added to the challenges necessitating associated adjustments needed due to differences in the educational systems and language.

Even though some challenges may well be due to the international student's own personal upbringing and individual circumstances, the educational institutions within the host country can assist with many issues by establishing efficient support structures that would smoothen the incorporation of the international student within campus societies and groups (Urban & Palmer, 2016). To this end, the host country's educational institutions need to develop a good understanding of their international students' personal and professional objectives. This includes their cultural, social and emotional backgrounds, experiences and challenges that they are encountering while being on their own in the host country, and as such, be able to set the support frameworks needed to assist the challenged students.

For example, an international student may, for one reason or another, expect that social support and assistance with the development of friendships and social networks should be organised, or at least supported, by their college and university staff, including their teaching faculty members, through social events organised for this purpose; nevertheless, college and university staff may think that such tasks and activities surpass their administrative and educational roles. In other words, they may believe that the development of social networks amongst students should fall on the respective students' own shoulders (Bartram, 2007; Urban & Palmer, 2016).

Culture shock may be experienced by international students when they undergo a sense of displacement, where they feel strongly disrupted for the first time in their lives, and need to adjust to foreign cultural values, norms and customs, not to mention foreign country, society, government, friends and colleagues, unlike their counterparts within the host culture (Sovic, 2008). In addition, they need to adapt to a new educational system delivered and administered in the host country's language. Such challenges, and the need for associated adjustments, may lead to various problems and situations, including seclusion and isolation, bafflement, muddling through and confusion (Thomson, Rosenthal, & Russell, 2006). These feelings may, as a result, lead to attempts at undertaking minimal interactions with their host country colleagues as a means of eliminating, or, at least, reducing possible cultural discomfort associated with such interactions. Individual differences may play a role in neutralising, or possibly balancing, such cultural challenges (Newsome & Cooper, 2016).

Many scholars in the area have tried to capture a clear understanding of the experiences that international students encounter while in the host country. For example, the main thrust of Lin's (2012) doctoral thesis dealt with answering the question as to what knowledge, resources and skills are most

important for an international student to belong at a host university in their first year of study. Furthermore, Lin (2012) also investigated the impact of the academic, social and linguistic acceptability granted by other members of the community, on the spectrum of belonging, being either in the centre of meaningful intercultural interactions, at the margin, or possibly within such encounters.

3. Method

To interpret the details presented by the participants during the series of intensive interviews relating to their experiences as international students, a qualitative method had to inevitably be selected. The sample (n=30) consisted of thirty (30) international students, consisting of fifteen (15) males and fifteen (15) female students. The research problem at hand is two-fold. First, develop a better understanding of the cultural and social-emotional experiences of international students attending Australian universities and other higher education institutions in 2018. Secondly, find ways in which Australian higher education providers can enhance their efforts in meeting the cultural and social-emotional needs of their international students.

To this end, the current study posed the following three open-ended and exploratory research questions:

Question 1: How do international students describe their adjustment to the overall Australian culture?

Question 2: How do international students describe their social interaction with people in Australia in general, and with their host country colleagues in specific?

Question 3: How do international students describe their adjustment to the use of English as the language of instruction?

3.1 Background and Sample

The participants involved in this study were randomly selected from higher education providers to achieve the sample of thirty (30) international students, whereby equal numbers of male (n=15) and female (n=15) students were interviewed. The participant students are from Asia, the Middle East and the Far East, as follows: India (n=4), Pakistan (n=3), Nepal (n=3), Jordan (n=2), Lebanon (n=2), Iran (n=3), China (n=9) and South Korea (n=4). All these students are enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate study programs in various tertiary institutions located in Sydney, Australia.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The qualitative methodology employed in the current study, namely that of the case study approach, with semi-structured, in-depth and informal interviews, provided the authors with the privilege of constructing a detailed investigation of the cultural and social experiences of the participating students. The relevant data was gathered using the students' own accounts, interpretations and stories of the personal experiences they have encountered. Participating students were interviewed at least twice over a period of four (4) months in early 2018.

3.3 Researchers and Participants Evolving Relational Patterns

This section details the processes through which the researchers engaged a part of the current study to work out their relationship with the participants over the four months interviewing period, as a means

of gaining the participants' trust, and enhancing the trustworthiness, reliability and dependability of the collected data. As part of this process, the two authors scrutinized their own biases, including their personal assumptions, and tightened their control over the possible impact that may occur given their preconceptions, race, age and gender (Alshenqeeti, 2014). The second author, who was at some stage an international student in both the United States and, later on, in Australia, led the interviews. This was declared to the participants at the start of the preliminary meeting. The authors agreed to the fact that knowing that the interviewer was at an earlier stage in life an international student herself would trigger participants to be open about their experiences and associated feeling. The interviews were held informally, in a relaxed and secure atmosphere, where the questions were open ended and semi-structured, thus, encouraging participants to freely talk, provide authentic and accurate recounts about their circumstances, and truly share their stories and self-confidences (Berry, 1999; Sutton & Austin, 2015). The salience of proper presentation and appropriate speech cannot be overemphasised during the interviewing process, being major determinants of the veracity of the collected data (Alshenqeeti, 2014; Berry, 1999).

4. Results and Discussion

The current study maps the experiences of international students coming to Australia to engage in preparing for their respective educational qualifications, from their time of arrival in Sydney, up until the time this study was conducted.

4.1 Question 1: How Do International Students Label Their Adjustment to the Overall Australian Culture?

4.1.1 International Students' Relationships with Australian Culture

Given the comments made by the great majority of the interviewed participants, they clearly indicate that they came to Australia with great excitement and high initial expectations, but the honeymoon period experienced was rather ephemeral and short-lived, as before long it was followed by a period that is best characterised by deep perplexity, estrangement, antagonism, discrimination, prejudice, foreignness and exoticism. This led to a state of disorientation, as the individual student moved from a supposedly relatively ordered algorithmic state in their respective home countries to a crisis situation (Devito, 2004; Helou, 1994, 1995, 2018).

As declared by the interviewed students, a main issue shared by nearly all participants in the current study is dealing with the financial drain as related to meeting accommodation costs, tuition fees, other educational expenses and daily living expenses. The financial burden issue pointed to in this study confirms the outcome of various other studies (Newsome & Cooper, 2016).

Another main issue relates to cultural interpretations. International students viewed Australians as being ingenuine and fake, as per their disclosed statements:

They [Australian people] are not as friendly as it is claimed to be. They [Australian people] smiled to my face, but they don't really help (Candy/Chinese).

They [Australian people] look at me [as though] I'm [I am] a burden or strange if [I] asked [a] question. They [Australian people] do not understand [that] I [am] new here [Australia] (Robyn/Chinese).

I have no experience [of the] Australian culture. Australians [are] not accepting. I live Chinese Culture in Australia (Jack/Chinese).

Another student remarked that the greetings in Australia are fake:

They [Australian people] say to me hello, how are you? When I answer about how I am, they [Australian people] don't want to listen. They look bored, as though I am saying something wrong. They can just say hello. I don't know why they [Australian people] ask how are you [me] if they don't really care. This is not nice, you know (Sajida/Indian).

The issue of individuality, family, respect, propaganda and the media were also brought up:

Australians value their alone time. They [Australian people] like to be [left] alone. They [Australian people] only mix and interact with [one] another. They [Australian people] are dry and individuals [individualistic] even with their own family. This is a sign of disrespect and rudeness. [The] Western media [is] partly responsible because of [the] mendacious propaganda and untruthful images they present about us (Hakim/Iranian).

The issue of religion was further voiced:

We [Jordanian people] have different religious values. I will not sacrifice my Islamic values to be accepted by them [Australian people]. They [Australian people] make me resent coming here [Australia] (Mahmmoud, Jordanian).

They [Australian people] pretend to be religious and go to church, but they [Australian people] do not treat us [overseas students] in [a] Christian spirit. I don't like being here [Australia]. I wish I stayed home [China] with my friends and family (Quin/Chinese).

4.2 Question 2: How Do International Students Define Their Social Interaction with People in Australia in General, and with Their Host Country Colleagues in Specific?

4.2.1 International Students' Relationships with Australian People and Local Students

Likewise, international students expressed finding it difficult to develop relationships with the Australian people and the local students. They described the Australian people and the local students that they have interacted with as being rude, remote, detached, prejudiced, racist and discriminators. The local students were described as arrogant, reserved, hostile, unhelpful, fake and unfriendly. Previous research indicates that Chinese students tend to socially mix with their own Chinese friends as opposed to Australian colleagues (Cross, 2006).

Examples of the remarks advised by the participants include the following:

I have no contact with any Australian. They do not want to interact with us [international students]. It is like I am not living in Australia (Omayyad/Nepalese).

They [Australian people] stick with one another. We [international students] are foreigners to them, and they [Australian people] always make us [international students] feel it

(Amani/Pakistani).

Oh, no, no. No Australian group members. They [local students] only work with each other.

No bother, [I] prefer [to] work with Chinese and other [international students] (Julia/Chinese).

All I [have] learnt about Australia [during the] past four months has been from other International students, not from Australians (Aisha/Indian).

Furthermore, prejudice, bias, discrimination and racism were a recurring theme in many of the participants' remarks:

Australian and Chinese [have] different cultures. [They] look different. [A] good part of [the] Australians [are] rednecks. Racism [is] in [their] blood. I am [have] yellow skin, dark eyes [and] black hair, no [not] white skin, blue eyes [and] yellow [blond] hair, [and] there [is] nothing I can do. [This] is no [not an] excuse for bias, bigotry, prejudice and narrow-mind [narrow-mindedness] (Lee/Chinese).

They [Australian people] are cold, fake, discriminative, and hostile. [They] want nothing [to do] with us [international students] (Quin/Chinese).

They [Australian people] don't want us. They want nothing to do with us [international students]. They [Australian people] just want [the] jobs and money we [international students] bring to [the] country [Australia] (Fatima/Pakistani).

Discrimination [is] not easy to spot. They [Australian people] are not open and honest.

They smile to our face, [but] discriminate [against us] behind our back (Fahda/Pakistani).

No, [there are] no bridges between us [local and international students], but thick walls (Magda/Indian).

They [Australian people] only love themselves. They [Australian people] don't want us, they [Australian people] want money. International education [is a] big industry (Julia/Chinese).

If they like themselves so much, why shouldn't we (Nourah/Jordanian).

4.3 Question 3: How Do International Students Describe Their Adjustment to the Use of English as the Language of Instruction?

4.3.1 International Students' Adjustment to the use of the English Language

As Cross (2006) explains, it was easier for students with higher IELTS scores to settle in Australia. The same study further indicated that language problems, in addition to possibly personality issues, has proved to be a major obstacle in the settlement of undergraduate students on arrival in Australia, and in making friends with local students (Cross, 2006).

Likewise, in the current study, problems in using the English language often came up as being a major barrier to reminiscent exchanges, especially with local students:

I have been in Australia [for] just four [months]. I saw them [local students] looked [look] funny [at me] when I speak [in] class. [Can] them [they] speak Chinese? (July/Chinese).

4.3.2 Other Dimensions of International Student Experiences

Given the feelings of estrangement, disaffection, hostility and isolation expressed by all participants,

without exception, it is not surprising that the great majority of the informants feel homesick:

I wish I had stayed in my country with my family and friends (Mahmmoud/Jordanian).

During the first stage, it is evident from the participants' disclosures that students have gone through a rough and uneasy phase characterised by discomfort, nervousness and anxiety about their present new situation, leading them to a crisis state. Out of the 30 participants engaged in the current study, seven students decided to go back home and drop out of their study programs. They found that the adjustments, referring to them as *sacrifices*, needed were too exhaustive, thus, decided that it was not worth the effort. The rest of the 23 students reported going through an experimental phase where denial characterised a main part of the experiences encountered. These students have persisted by staying in Australia and continuing with their respective study programs. Sixteen students disclosed that, as part of their transitional phase, they had to make partial adjustments to be able to stay in Australia and stick to their respective study program offered within the educational institution they are enrolled in. This meant that they accepted to undergo feelings of discrimination, loneliness, separation and homesickness; and, while in Australia, narrow down their socio-emotional expectations to a bare minimum, as a survival mechanism. During the final phase of routinisation and relative stability, it is evident that seven of the remaining 23 students were able to develop a stronger sense of self-identity, which assisted them in engaging with the challenging circumstances that they were facing more efficiently and efficaciously. They have learnt to trust themselves in terms of dealing with their new circumstances, and as such, attempt to satisfactorily resolve, or, at least, neutralise, arising issues and problems.

Now, I am more confident with [my] ability to deal [with] and resolve issues as [they] come up (Julia/Chinese).

I [have] become more self-dependent, self-confident and self-reliant (Lee/Chinese).

I have learnt that no one is going to help me but me (Magda/Indian).

These seven students have reported making extreme sacrifices and extensive adjustments resulting in enhancing their understanding of their self-identity to be self-reliant and survive the financial, discriminatory and ingenuine marketing and advertising challenges faced (Newsome & Cooper, 2016), and as a result, gain valuable experiences in private amelioration as they settled with a new algorithmic state. The above mentioned four stages are further elaborated on within the context of the *Reconstruction-Governance Contingency Path Analysis* (Helou, 1994), and the *Contingency Recovery Typology* (Helou, 2018), in a separate paper.

5. Conclusion

The purpose of the current study is to develop an understanding, and find ways in which Australian universities and other Higher Educational providers operating in Australia can enhance their efforts in meeting the cultural and social-emotional needs of their overseas students. To this end, the current study mapped the journey followed by 30 international students from an initial stage characterised by

excitement and high expectations, followed by a steep crisis phase, getting into an experimental stage, followed by a transitional phase, and settling in a new algorithmic state characterised by relative routinisation and stability.

Given the participants' disclosures, it is obvious that the international students in general, and the Chinese students, in particular, would like to have more socially reminiscent interactions and meaningful experiences during their period of study in Australia. This confirms previous research in the area (Cross, 2006). Accordingly, it would be helpful if universities and other higher educational institutions further support and further facilitate such student interactions, while simultaneously orienting international students for academic study. This includes organising more sporting and cultural events for them as a means of further stimulating social and cultural interactions and experiences.

One methodological criticism that could be made of this study is that the participants involved in the study were randomly selected from higher educational institutions located in Sydney, Australia. Future research could overcome this problem by involving a considerable number of international students from various higher education providers located in various other Australian states and cities, and in areas having different multicultural blends and socio-economic conditions.

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