

INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS

Students speak out about silent issues

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IN A continuing research project, a group of seven postgraduate international students met to discuss what it means to succeed in an Australian research university. We found we spoke about what we had believed were individual issues, but which were recognised by the whole group as common experiences, though as silences in the lives of international students studying abroad.

Kate Cadman and Christine Ingleton of the advisory centre for university education at the University of Adelaide, initiated the project using memory-work methodology (Frigga Haug *et al.*, 1987) which is designed to bridge the gap between theory and experience, and to explore ways in which individuals themselves participate in the process of socialisation.

In speaking of our common experiences, we are already changing awareness of some of that socialisation process.

Through our discussions, we identified several important issues that have a significant effect on our success as international students.

These are student motivation, necessary supporting situations, student self-confidence, the financial context and language barriers. These issues have received little public attention.

Therefore, they are hidden and we may call them silent issues.

Experience suggests that at least two factors affect international student motivation: the process before receiving the opportunity to study abroad and the effect of failure. It is common that in order to be able to study abroad, a person faces very keen competition. This is because there are many applicants, while the opportunities provided are very limited. Prospective students have to undergo a very competitive selection process and the competition is even greater for those receiving scholarships. Therefore, prospective international students have to prepare themselves properly.

An international student may not personally have a serious problem when facing failure in overseas study. However, when he or she has to deal with family, colleagues, their social community and work place, then huge problems arise. They may have good reasons to justify their failure. However, their families and colleagues do not care about these reasons; what they do care about and understand is only that this student failed in their overseas study.

In addition to this pressure, there is

another strong reason that motivates international students not to fail and that is the possibility of being offered a good job or afforded a work-place promotion when they go back to their home countries.

Students who are successful in the tight competition to study abroad will leave home with expectations of high achievement from their families and sponsors. International students often have no idea about their new environment and therefore necessary support becomes vital.

From our discussions, we found that a necessary supporting situation can consist of good academic and personal relationships with supervisors, relevant university support, supportive friends, colleagues and social groups and family support. All of the above support mechanisms are very important and may be recognised by the student's university.

However, they should be given more attention. It is our view that appropriate support needs to be analysed and refined by listening to the students themselves, while most existing support services and programs for international students are limited to the university's perception.

It has long been known that student self-confidence is a key factor in international student success. In our meetings,

we identified some factors that could enhance international students' self-confidence.

These are informal academic assessments, recognition from peers and superiors, good results/achievements and the development of a feeling of capability.

For example the head of the department and people responsible for the assessment of academic qualifications could give clear comments to validate the ability of international students, particularly as researchers. This would help international students be much more confident, as would recognition from peers and superiors of the effort exerted by international students in accomplishing their assigned tasks.

Even though in the early days of a research project it is very rare to get results, any small results the students achieve needs to be recognised.

Students' supervisors can also try to guide them towards achieving early good

results, since, in the early days, international students do not know the natural ways of understanding in the new environment they are working in. Therefore, they do not know how to produce the results as expected. Once international students have found their way in the new environment, they identify their goals and develop their feelings of confidence and their ability to manage their study.

Financial support is

another of the most significant issues that affects the success of international students. It can be imagined as a precious purse for international students, which if they lose, means they will face a hard time.

Usually, international students receive their financial support through three main sources: self-funding, government/employers' funding from their own countries or international scholarships.

Students who fund themselves realise that using their own or their family's money to support their long time-horizon research is a very costly investment.

They may get bank loans with high interest rates. They may sacrifice their jobs in their own countries. Consequently, they are anxious to finish their degrees as soon as they can. Students who receive government/employer funding from their own countries must entirely depend on their sponsor's funding policy.

International students have to deal with exchange rate fluctuation, financial

and economic upheaval in their home countries and possibly global financial crises.

There are some talented students who may receive international scholarships. They face fewer problems; however, they still have to cope with the time limitation of the scholarship.

The last issue we discussed is the language barrier. While academic language problems are well documented, many international students find added difficulty in communicating their real selves.

They are aware that good performance in the English language is their bridge to success and most of them have received some English education in their own countries.

However, for many, this is not enough to communicate well in a normal social or educational setting. Consequently, many of them find English a headache.

In many situations, they do not have the ability to adequately express their feelings or opinions on a certain subjects.

They usually have to leave them without discussion and this can lead to feelings of isolation, frustration and loneliness. They feel they have to exert much effort to improve their language and hope that time and social activities will gradually improve their linguistic handicap.

One important conclusion derived from our discussions is that these issues are significant in their influence on the overall success of international students.

Therefore, universities who market international education should give them more attention. Ignorance of these issues is not an acceptable alternative.

Even though these issues are silent, they are powerful and their effect is crucial.

Although international students may achieve good academic results without considering these issues, the cost of that achievement may be very high, in the form of pain, distress and loss of confidence.

For the continuing success of international education programs for both providers and students, these issues should not remain silent, but should be acknowledged and addressed.

■ This is a collaborative article based on a presentation given by the first five authors at the "Quality in Postgraduate Research: Making Ends Meet" conference at the Hilton Hotel Adelaide on Friday, April 14, 2000.



Some of the authors with staff at the Adelaide University conference