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EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY – INTERNATIONAL STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON STUDYING IN AUSTRALIA.

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Introduction

Tertiary education, and business education in particular, has become increasingly 'internationalised'. That is, students appear to be increasingly willing to move country to gain their post school education. International student numbers in higher education have quadrupled since 1994 up from 35,290 in 1994 to 151,796 in 2004 (AIEC 2005). This phenomenon is not unique to Australia. Tertiary education around the world is becoming 'internationalised' that is, there is an increasing mix of domestic and international students in classes. Many Western countries including the United States and The United Kingdom provide education for foreign students. 'Foreign' education has become big business. Education is the fifth largest services export in the United States and the third largest in Australia. (Marginson 2002a).

In the period after World War Two Australia invested strongly in aid programs for emerging nations by providing higher education services. As a result international students from neighbouring South East Asian countries began to study in Australia. What they studied was the Anglo-American world view. IDP, a university owned agency that promotes Australian education overseas, still reflects this history in its name – the International Development Program, but the reality of international education has changed. The majority of international students are no longer aid assisted but are full fee paying students. They have an increasing array of destinations to choose from, in the developed and the developing world. International education is no longer a matter of aid, but of trade. Australia has recognised this and is one of four countries to have made GATS commitments in education services (Gallagher 2002). Australia and Australian universities have grown the trade in education services at a faster rate than any other country in the world (OECD 2002) and Australia is generally regarded as an aggressive exporter of education services. The number of tertiary students has doubled since 2000 (AIEC 2005), however, the concept of education as a service (or commodity) for sale

overseas, does not always sit comfortably in universities with a focus on quality learning and research. This raises many challenges.

Whilst international students may want to understand the 'Western' way of doing things, the new globalised business world cannot be ignored. The mono-cultural world view is being challenged. Many international students may not be familiar or comfortable with the processes used to facilitate learning in an Australian context. (Pincas 2001). University classrooms traditionally use a range of Western teaching and learning strategies that focus on critical analysis, oral discussion, problem solving and the possibility of multiple solutions using case studies and discussion groups that require active participation by the students, which many international students find unfamiliar. These students come with their own expectations arising from the educational practices of their communities. Their potential lack of participation in classroom activities puts constraints on classroom interaction and learning. It also means that nothing that they have to teach about their way of doing things, is learned.

The potential benefits of diversity are many. Not only do international students bring significant revenue to the university but they provide an opportunity for intercultural learning, for a sharing of knowledge and perspectives that is so important for success in today's global business environment. Yet research suggests that cultural engagement is largely unidirectional – Australian students expect international students to adjust to them, not vica versa. (cited in Marginson 2002b).

Most international students spend their time with other students who speak their language or who come from a similar cultural background. Australians are not different in this respect. Therefore many international students, who come to study in Australia, learn about Australian business practices in the classroom but gain no practical experience of what Australian business, or in fact Australians, are like.

The reality is that international students are essential to Australian university survival, both from a financial and a relevance point of view. The revenue generated by international students is essential now to many universities. No less important is the fact that Australian universities, particularly in areas such as business, must be seen to be relevant in the new global reality. Ethno-centrism must be a view of the past. Developing economies such as China, India and Malaysia are recognising the value of being an 'exporter' of education, the revenue and the influence such a role provides. If Australia is to maintain and grow its share of this vital market there is a need to understand what the prospective students of the 21st century are looking for.

Nauman (1995:iii) argues that there has been a power shift in the economy. "the power shift has occurred in economic power. Economic power has shifted from producers and suppliers of goods and services to the consumer." This holds true for Tertiary Education in the international market. There are almost unlimited opportunities available to students wanting to engage in cross border study. And information is readily available via the internet. Wilton (1998:1) argues "as customers become more sophisticated, they become more powerful, learning how to better judge the differences between competing products and companies, and demanding higher performance, service and quality and competitive pricing. Firms who fail to manage this shift in competitive and customer behaviour face the loss of customers".

There is another issue in relation to these 'customers'. Unlike many other products and services, the students spend a substantial period of time at the university – they don't simply buy a product and go. The initial reasons for joining the program, the

quality of product and service and value for money have to be sustained over the period of their program of study.

What past experience and the literature suggest is that if Australian universities are to continue to attract high quality international students, there are a number of areas that need to be understood and addressed. Prospective international students are well informed and have considerable choice of potential educational institutions. They recognise the importance of an international experience and assume that such experience will improve their employability. What this qualitative study strives to do, is to gather current international student perspectives on their international study, their motives for choosing Australia and QUT and whether we are delivering on expectations. This may provide some guidance as to what must be done if increasingly significant numbers of international students are to continue to be attracted to Australian higher education.

Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology.

International students at Queensland University of Technology are big business, earning the university \$64.8m in direct revenue in 2003 (Harding 2004). However, the university has been prudent and conservative in its approach to international education. It has not sought to build 'off-shore' delivery mechanisms but provide a quality service, integrated with domestic students. Whilst to date this has been successful there is recognition that if the university is to be a significant international player it needs to become known internationally for the strength and relevance of its connections to the rest of the world – the professions and the world of work in particular. (Harding 2004)

This paper explores one initiative, in the Faculty of Business, that gathers feedback from international students on their perception of QUT, what they want from an international education experience and how their experience meets their expectations and needs. Word of mouth is a powerful tool in marketing education and these students provide an opportunity to understand the changing requirements of the international student body. As the choice open to international students becomes greater, the more important it will be to understand their needs and expectations and to be able to offer an education that prepares students for the global work environment. This is the first report of an ongoing process of focus groups with international students from differing regions of the world. In addition to data collection, these focus groups, organised as morning teas with the Director of Internationalisation in the Faculty of Business, provide an opportunity for interaction between students and the staff responsible for their care in the Faculty. It provides a safe forum for discussion of issues of concern to them and an opportunity for them to contribute. To the students, these groups appear to indicate that the Faculty, despite its size and diversity, is interested in them, their successes and their views.

The Faculty of Business at Queensland University of Technology is one of the largest business faculties in Australia. Like other business faculties around Australia it has seen a rapid increase in international student numbers with over 22% of the 7,500 students now coming from overseas. Over the past five years source countries have diversified from the traditional markets in South East Asia. In 2004 students were received from 65 countries (Equis 2004). Whilst the traditional markets are still strong there are a number of interesting emerging markets as far a field as South America. Currently the strongest markets are China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Norway, India, Malaysia, Thailand and Germany. Given the diversity of languages and

cultures that this represents it cannot be assumed that these students have the same expectations or requirements.

The vision of the Faculty puts internationalisation at the centre – not simply in terms of student numbers but the central role the internationalised workplace has for all the students.

“Our vision is to be a destination of choice for high quality staff and students, known for our excellence in real world teaching, research and service; our deep engagement with the communities we serve; and the capacity of our graduates to work effectively in a changing and internationalised workplace.”
(QUT Faculty of Business 2004)

Methodology

The data collection approach taken was largely inductive, gathering as much evidence as possible about the topic, with nothing ruled out, using focus groups. Through the inductive process, it is possible to identify issues that have not previously been identified in the existing literature. The focus groups of students started with a general formulation of the potential issues gained from previous experience and the literature, but this was general in nature, and did not start with a theory or an hypothesis. As Miles and Huberman (1984) comments “any researcher, no matter how unstructured or inductive, comes to fieldwork with some orienting ideas, foci and tools.” (Page 27). A clear set of questions was used, but students were able to move outside of this framework where they had something they wanted to add.

Each group was drawn from students from a particular geographical region e.g. Africa, Thailand, India and China/Hong Kong /Taiwan. All students from the national group were invited, though only a small percentage responded to the invitation and an even smaller number attended.

Focus groups were chosen for a number of reasons. One of the critical issues in inter-cultural communication is that of power. (Roach & Byrne 2001, Williams 2003, Yao & Wilson 2001). As the convener of the groups, the facilitator had a number of perceived bases of power that might inhibit open discussion; ‘mother tongue’ understanding of the language, a senior hierarchical position, a prestigious position as a teacher within the institution and as the host. To offset this imbalance groups with a shared language and cultural background were chosen and the setting was as informal as possible. Questions were asked over morning or afternoon tea, in an informal setting. The facilitator did not have teaching responsibilities with the students to avoid the possibility students may feel they had to give a ‘required’ answer.

The purpose of session, to collect information that might enable the Faculty to improve the learning experience of students, was explained at the beginning of the session. The confidentiality of individual comments was guaranteed – and at no time was the identity of any individual speaker recorded. The session lasted between one and one and a half hours. Where students had individual issues that they wanted to be addressed, they met with the facilitator or the Administrator of the International Student Office (who took the notes) after the session.

Those students who attended contributed openly, though it is to be expected that only the most obvious issues would have been raised in a single meeting. The fairly

relaxed conversational nature of the groups enabled whatever issues were raised, to be explored by the other students. However, the focus groups were in many ways ethnographic in character in that the students were informed of the purpose of the groups and the facilitator had control of the process, asking questions and probing the person's responses. (Potter, page 96).

The questions included:

- Why did you choose QUT?
- What were your expectations prior to arrival?
- What has not worked out/or been very difficult?
- What has been the best part of your study?
- What can we do to improve your learning?

38 students participated in the focus groups from 4 regions, Africa (4), China/Taiwan/Hong Kong (14), India (10), and Thailand (10). Of the 38, 13 were undergraduate, 13 post-graduate and 12 MBA students. Of the 805 students invited, 38 is a small (4%) sample and can therefore be indicative only. It can, however, provide some insight in what attracted students to QUT in the first place, how this might differ from region to region and whether we meet the expectations that students come with. In a highly competitive marketplace this information can inform the way we communicate with our prospective students, and also help us provide a more effective learning experience.

Results.

The following is an analysis of the responses to the questions in the focus groups – indicating where relevant the particular region where the issue appeared significant. There were a number of comments and expectations that appear to be common across the student groups. It was also apparent that post graduate and MBA students had much clearer expectations, and were able to articulate them more cogently, than undergraduate students.

Why did you choose QUT?

The reasons why students from these four regions chose QUT fall into a number of different categories. Some appear to apply only to one region – others across the student body.

For Indian students the difficulty getting a US visa has led to prospective students looking elsewhere and to Australia in particular. QUT was also seen as affordable by this group of students.

The reputation of the institution appears to be significant across the board. Thai, Indian and African students also identified that they were looking for particular subject offerings e.g. Entrepreneurship and Public Relations. The features of the MBA program, 6 entry points, wide choice of electives, older age range and required work experience were attractive to the Indian students. Chinese, Thai and African students were attracted by the practical orientation of the programs.

Recommendation played a significant role for all the students. Recommendations came from agents, ELICOS teachers, teachers and college placement officers. Meeting QUT academics overseas also played an important role.

Pathway programs of different kinds helped students choose QUT, as did articulation arrangements with local institutions. All the regions with the exception of India identified these relationships. This may be because currently there are no articulation relationships in India, and many of the pathway programs are focussed on English language learning which is not relevant in India.

Location in Brisbane, the warm climate and city location were also important, particularly to those from warm home climates.

A fast response and offer was seen as important.

Expectations prior to arrival

African students appeared to be unaware of the international nature of the student base, and were pleasantly surprised. They had expected a totally Australian experience but felt that having the other international students was an additional bonus.

Thai students had great expectations of the social facilities that would be available, sporting, catering and social interaction options generally. The nature of a city campus, and the increased need for Australian students to work and therefore not spend a large amount of time on campus meant that these expectations were not met.

Indian students were surprised by the difference in teaching style between Australia and India. They felt the benefit of a more self directed learning regime but found it difficult to adjust. As a result, missing orientation could cause great stress and difficulty catching up. They felt that the importance of orientation should be reinforced.

What has not worked out/been very difficult

Indian students appear to have had great difficulty with agents – 5 had to go through 2 agents before their arrival at QUT.

Thai students found class sizes (post graduate) in some subjects too large and felt the lack of individual attention. They were also concerned that some units without pre-requisites were too difficult for those without prior experience in the field. They found the time allowed for examinations a challenge.

Chinese and Thai students raised a number of study related issue such as pressure during examinations and assignment times, the lack of confidence they felt and the impact this had on understanding lecturers.

Importance was placed on having access to university social activities and an opportunity to meet Australian students. They felt that these opportunities were lacking.

Best part of your study?

The multi cultural environment and international focus was valued by everyone. There was appreciation for the high quality programs with practical focus relevant to the workplace. They also valued the hard work required. This was identified as a mark of quality. They also valued the contact they had with teaching staff.

What can we do to improve things.

The areas that they identified for improvement follow on from their previous observations. They felt it important to encourage multi-culturalism and mixing of students from different countries in the classroom and socially.

They enjoyed social functions for students and staff to get together and would appreciate this to happen more often.

They felt that there could be some way of staff and fellow students supporting commencing students and helping them adjust to the new environment.

Conclusions and Implications.

This feedback offers a range of challenges. What are prospective students told? Do the brochures and agents provide an accurate picture of the institutions they are planning to attend? Are they adequately prepared for study in Australia.

International students appear to value multi-culturalism, the ability to network across the globe, perhaps more than Australian students do. Encouraging intercultural interaction will be an ongoing challenge for tertiary institutions. This includes recognising the differences in learning style and previous education experience, providing bridging programs and enabling staff to provide the interaction that many students are seeking. It may be necessary to examine the curriculum that is taught and the assumptions made about prior knowledge and well as recognising study pressures particularly around assessment. Such examination would benefit domestic students as well.

It is clear that the easier it is to enrol the more positive an image the institution projects. This is not with regard to quality and entrance standards but to do with the knowledge, skill and efficiency of those who represent the universities off shore and the speed with which applications are processed.

The students who gave feedback had chosen QUT because they believed that the curriculum and teaching and learning practices would assist them to get employment. They were looking for content knowledge that reflected the demands in the work place and processes that equipped them to transfer their learning to the employment. They are also looking for a 'campus' experience which is increasingly difficult to provide with so many students having to work part-time to support their studies.

Raising the profile of Australian institutions in particular market places is a challenge. Articulation arrangements that familiarise students with the institution long before they come appear to be one successful way, not only of making students aware of the institution but ensuring that they are well prepared. Recommendations were very significant, recommendation by teachers, peers and having access to academics in their home countries.

It is vital that institutions are clear about the nature of the learning experience that they are offering students. Not just the content, but the learning processes, the social activities, and the links to potential employment. The marketing activities cannot be divorced from the educational experience. Students share their experiences with potential students. The formal communication channels used by the universities to share the benefits of their programs need to be consistent and of high quality and communicate in terms understood by each of the markets. International students are looking at the world from a different perspective, assessing the relevance and quality to fit into a context quite different from Australia. To be successful, not only in generating income but in equipping students for their future careers, universities need to listen to students, prospective students and those on the ground in countries around the world to ensure that what is offered continues to meet emerging needs. It is the quality of the learning experience and its relevance that will best market Australian education to its international customers, and it is this that's needs to be communicated in way that that makes the choices clear.

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