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The Internationalisation of Education: Implications for Student Learning and Socio-Cultural Adjustment

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Abstract

With the internationalisation of education, and more than 1.5 million students seeking education in countries other than their own, student populations and classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse. Nowhere is this more evident than in Australian tertiary institutions, which now have the second highest proportion of international students in the OECD. Whilst the trends in seeking education across national borders may be viewed as opportunities for 'wealth creation', and a burgeoning 'education export industry', there are tremendous implications for students seeking international education.

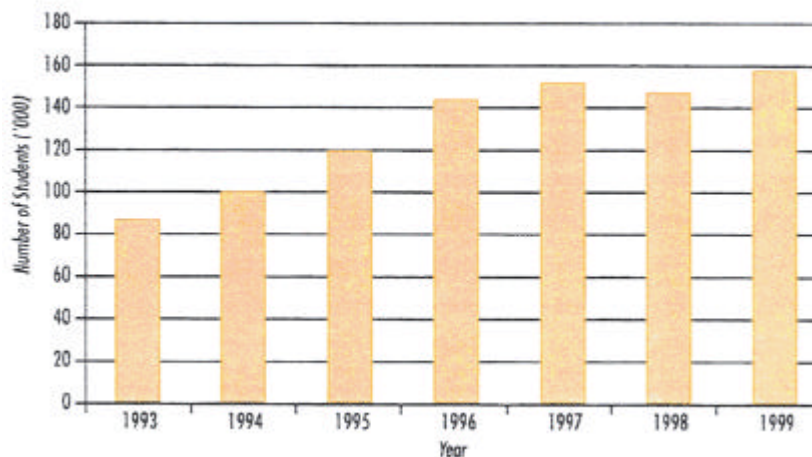
This paper focuses on issues confronting international students in acculturating to their new learning and cultural environments. More specifically it considers the dual task of overcoming 'culture shock' and 'study shock', the exposure to different learning and teaching styles, mismatches in academic expectations, and socio-cultural pressures.

The paper also discusses student strategies for coping with acculturation difficulties, support mechanisms for enhancing the international student experience, and issues of re-acculturation (i.e. re-entry into the home country). It shows a framework for addressing the needs of international students, as established in the Faculty of Commerce and Economics at UNSW. Finally, the paper makes recommendations for the provision of multiple forums for addressing the needs and concerns of international students, to facilitate effective learning and socio-cultural adaptation.

Introduction

For centuries students have travelled across borders to pursue their educational aspirations and extend their cultural experience. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO, 1997) statistics indicate that there were 1,502,040 foreign students in the top 50 host countries in the period during 1994-1995, and that international student mobility has increased by more than 300% in the last 25 years. Nowhere is this more evident than in Australian educational institutions, where numbers rose from 3,000 international students in 1986 (Department of Employment, Education and Training, 1995) to 157,843 in 1999 (Australian Education International, 1999), with preliminary figures for the year 2000 indicating a further rise of 15%. Figure 1 provides an indication of trends in international student enrolments in Australian institutions from 1993 to 1999.

Figure 1: Overseas Student Numbers, 1993–1999



Source: (Australian Education International, 1999, p.9)

The statistics may be interpreted from different perspectives. There are those who have tended to view the number of international student enrolments in terms of economic gain, referring to "boom times" and "lucrative markets" (Powell, 1994, p. 15) and "a ...cash bonzana for universities" (Contractor, 2001, p. 25). The 'Export of Education Services' is seen as a 'winner' for Australia, earning an estimated three billion dollars per year. The economic focus is not restricted to Australia alone, with similar sentiments being expressed in the UK, as illustrated in the comments of Bruch and Barty (1998, p. 21):

UK institutions want international students for two main reasons: they believe that internationalization adds educational and cultural value to the institution, and they want the cash value accruing from full-fee paying international students...within an institution, the 'theys' may refer to different personnel and offices, with some holding the first view and others advocating the second.

Others, such as Phillips (1990, p.765), draw attention to the changing nature of the classroom and the implications for teaching and learning, with a "major shift in the character of the student population, from one of primarily Anglo-Celtic English speaking origins, to one which also includes a large and increasing percentage of students who come from a NESB background". And there are researchers (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Samuelowicz, 1987a, 1987b; Smart, Volet and Ang, 2000) who have focussed on cross cultural perspectives, and the difficulties experienced by international students in acculturating to both their new learning and socio-cultural environments, a dimension that is the key focus of this paper.

It is important to note the cross cultural composition of the current international student population in Australia, to understand the nature of the adjustments that have to be made. AEI (1999, pp.11-12) statistics indicate that 84.8% of international students come from source countries in Asia, with the ten top source countries being Indonesia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Japan, Korea (South), India, China, Thailand, and Taiwan. Furthermore, the composition of these top ten source countries has remained unchanged since 1994, although the ranking has changed in this period. Other source countries are in Europe (6.5%), the Americas (3.9%), Oceania (1.7%), Africa (1.5%), with 1.6% listed as 'unknown'.

Learning and Academic Acculturation

In making the transition to their new learning environments, international students must not only contend with *culture shock*, described by Marx (2001) as "the experience of foreignness", but also with *study shock*. Burke (2001, p.1) describes study shock as "the significant differences in attitudes to knowledge and approaches to learning that exist between the student's home country and those underpinning institutions of higher education in other countries". Table 1 provides some indication (albeit in the form of generalisations) of contrasting learning styles and learning expectations between Asian and Western cultures as identified by Phillips (1990):

Table 1: Comparison of Asian and Australian Learning Styles

Asian	Australian
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rote learning is common • Non-critical reception of information • Students work hard to learn everything • Students are inclined to seek clarification • Few initiatives are taken • A willingness to accept one interpretation • Overall concepts are seen as important to understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluative learning is preferred • Critical thought is expected • Students selectively learn the central concepts as well as detail • Students are willing to seek assistance as part of the learning process • Independent learning and research are rewarded • Students are encouraged to apply general principles to specific situations and to test various interpretations • Analytical thinking is encouraged. Students are expected to support opinions with logical argument.

(Source: Adapted from Phillips 1990, p. 772)

There are concerns that comparisons such as the above tend to have limitations. Firstly, the learning styles seem to be exclusive to one group - they are not as students in both groups may make use any of the learning behaviours at some stage. Secondly, there is a suggestion that Asian students form a homogeneous group - this is not the case, as there will be cultural and educational differences across the many 'country specific' groups in the Asian Region. Nevertheless, the comparison does serve to provide an indication of the 'distance' between the two sets of learning behaviours and the extent of the academic adjustment international students from Asian backgrounds may need to make when studying in Australia. This is evidenced in the following observations of international students interviewed in studies aimed at capturing their experiences:

Before we came we were subject to a different sort of education system and we were asked to change our way of learning into what the Aussie's, or rather the higher education's way of learning is. (It is) totally different, so we have to have a very dramatic change in our way of learning.

(in Chalmers and Volet, 1997, p.95)

In tutorials, sometimes we feel dominated and intimidated, more so in the beginning. There are different expectations. We are not used to the system. We think of something but it feels stupid and not worth discussing but then a local will bring up the same idea and it is actually okay.

(in Smart *et al*, 2000, p.32)

Generally, many of us are trained in a system where you don't contribute much to class discussions, some even hesitated to ask questions from lecturers. One must do it properly, i.e. fully conscious and forever calculating (whether) to ask questions or not. Here you are encouraged to ask anything that bothers you. The drawback is related to our culture of respect to others, especially the elderly and the better qualified - but it inhibits the fullest development of oneself...

(in Ballard and Clanchy, 1984, p.12)

The last comment demonstrates the interweaving of cultural grooming and approaches to learning i.e. respect for those in positions of seniority and authority (including teachers, authors of textbooks etc.). Hofstede (1984) refers to this value dimension as *power distance*, that is, the extent to which members of a society or organisation accept unequal distribution of power, status differences and social hierarchies. His research has demonstrated that cultures vary considerably on this dimension, and, in high power distance cultures, the grooming of individuals to participate freely in questioning, criticising, analysing and evaluating the work of superiors, may be restricted. Consequently, international students who come from high power distance societies may lack the critical skills required in Western teaching contexts, and are often perceived as being passive learners and poor classroom participants (Chalmers and Volet, 1997):

I am familiar with postgraduate students. Want to learn off: reluctant to question/critically evaluate. If it is written in a journal or in a book, then it is correct and will learn it. Adjusting to critical questioning is the greatest difficulty/shock in the initial stages...

(in Samuelowicz, 1987a, p.124)

I mean, they're good students in a way, but you don't get much reaction out of them. I've given up trying to discuss different ways of approaching the problems in tutorials.

(in Ballard and Clanchy, 1991, p.2)

So far as Far Eastern (China, Japan, Korea) students are concerned, it is a truism that, raised in a conformist educational system, they are happier with memorising and reproducing information than with problem-oriented and more active teaching strategies.

(Harris, 1997, p.87)

The question arises as to - How can students and staff bridge the *learning divide*? Bruch and Barty (1998) recommend that the internationalisation of educational institutions must be accompanied by appropriate levels and types of specialist student support services and the training of staff working with international students. It is suggested that staff training also be extended to include academic staff who interact with international students in the teaching and learning context.

Socio-Cultural Adjustment

In addition to addressing their educational aspirations, international students expect to engage in intercultural interactions with local students whilst studying abroad. Bruch and Barty (1998) perceive the opportunities for cultural exchange as being one of the beneficial outcomes of the process of internationalisation. In addition, forging new friendships, developing new networks, communicating with native speakers of English, participating in local events, all assist in facilitating the process of social acculturation for international students.

However, research (Smart et.al., 2000; Ti, 1998; Volet and Ang, 1998) and anecdotal evidence suggest that students experience great difficulty in attempting the often impossible task of 'bridging the local /international student divide'. In a study that examined issues relating to social cohesion between international and local students, Smart et al (2000, p. 23) identified the expectations of international students, their desire for social interactions, and the disappointment that often ensues:

I thought that I'll have lots of local friends and have fun.

When I first came, I had the expectation to meet many Australians but did not. Only 'hi-bye' friends, not close friends.

We do not have much interaction with the locals. We would like to mix more. We are the shy sort but there are no opportunities to mix.

They divided factors that inhibit intercultural interactions on campuses into three broad categories, based on their findings: (a) cultural differences, (b) lifestyle differences, and (c) negative stereotyping and ethnocentrism. Volet and Ang (1998, pp.10-11) provide examples of perceptions of cultural differences held by both local and international students, and the preference to interact with friends who are "your own people" and of "the same wavelength":

It's like strangers. With local students, we would normally just say hi and then bye. And there may be small talk, but we are not close. We will stick to our own culture and friends and especially when you come from that country and know people from there, then you are comfortable with them.

(international student, Volet and Ang, 1998, p.10)

Being in the 'same boat' situation does help (interaction)...you feel more comfortable and secure with those in the same nationality.

(Australian student, Volet and Ang, 1998, p.11)

Ti (1997, p.160) identifies lifestyle factors such as the 'drinking and partying culture' of some Australian students as a strong deterrent to socio-cultural interactions, as the activities involved tend not to be consistent with the leisure activities and preferences of many international students. For some, the choice is simple and direct as indicated in the following comment:

They (Australians) go out. They go to pubs or this type of place. Maybe because of my family background, I do not like to go to pubs... So, if they go somewhere, I don't join them in those sorts of things.

For others who would like to participate in these types of social activities, and "experience the Aussie culture" but are afraid to do so, the issue is more complex. Take for example the fears and frustrations of this international student:

The college is half Asian but when you look at the fun 'activities', it's mainly Anglo. There's barely an Asian on the list. I kind of feel obliged to stay sober most of the time and to know what I'm doing because I know that if I get onto any of the list of party activities...there would be consequences, like among the Asians because it's kind of a like a sub-culture. You have to aware of what you're doing. That's a bad pressure, but it's something that you feel. It's about what the Asians think and you don't want to wrong them.

(international student, Winters and Lindsay, 1999, p.31)

Repeated refusal to participate in social activities often leads to the third inhibitor of intercultural interactions identified by Smart et al (2000), that of negative stereotyping and a sense of 'giving up' on any further efforts to foster integration, evident in the following comments of Australian students (p.28):

The Australian attitude is that they have tried to include the Asians in the past, and they have now given up on including them - they expect a negative response.

Some people won't interact because they are solely here to get a degree and go back home. They aren't concerned with a social life.

Clearly, there seem to be misperceptions and misunderstanding on the part of both international and local students, and a need for deeper understanding of cross cultural preferences, practices and motivations, if student integration is to be fostered. Burke (1990) advocates the setting up of formal structures to promote contact between local and international students, suggesting that without intervention, there will be the tendency for students to "stick with the familiar and comfortable". Bruch and Barty (1998, p. 27) cite similar problems in the UK, and point out that "international students encounter considerable difficulty in making social contact with UK students, while UK students complain that international students cluster together." They support the idea of institutional intervention to promote student integration as a key aspect of the internationalisation process.

Stress Related Factors

On another dimension, there is evidence to suggest that the absence of friends and supportive relationships, and feelings of isolation, add considerably to the stress experienced by international students. In a study of stress related factors impacting on academic performance, Burns (1991) found that 34% of international students nominated factors such loneliness, little contact with other students, wanting Australian friends, and a better mix in tutorial groups.

Furthermore, he found that international students experienced significantly higher levels of stress than their local Australian counterparts. More specifically, 70% of international students, and 92% of Singaporean students experienced high levels of study stress, in comparison to 26% of Australian students. Other causal factors included culture shock, study shock, inadequate English language skills, fear of failure, concern about loss of "face", and coping with family pressure. In his comparative study of the cross cultural learning styles of Asian and American

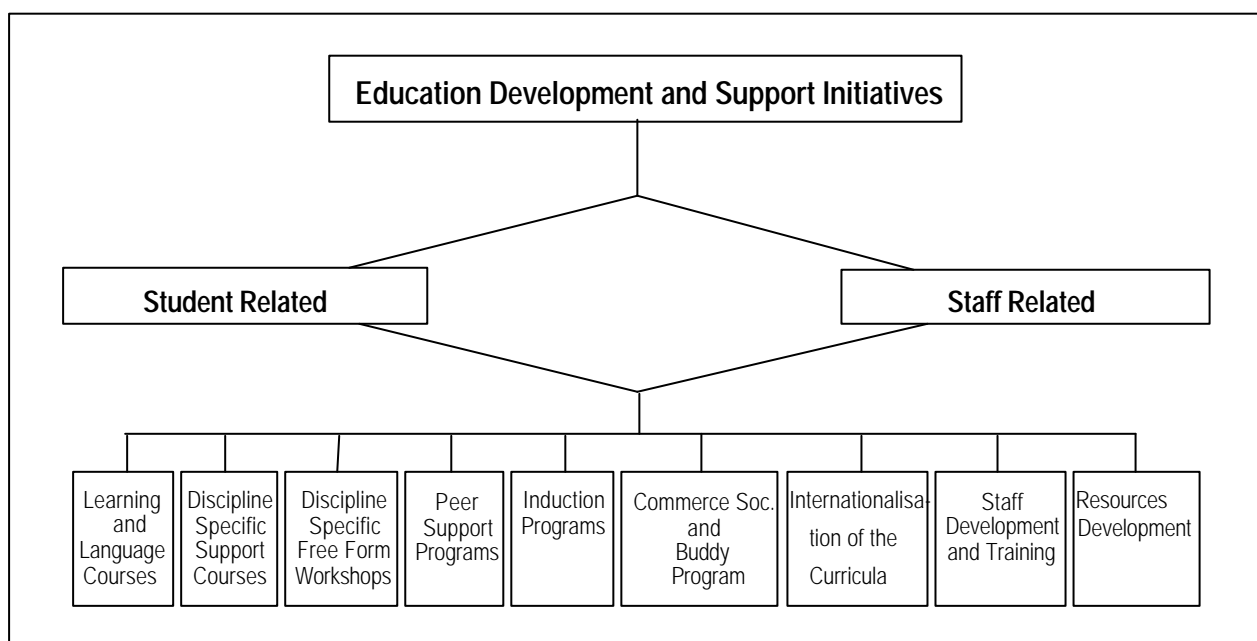
students, Wang (1992, p.28) found that "Asian-American parents set high goals for their children and pressure them to meet these expectations."

However, there seems to be a positive side to the exertion of family pressure. In her study identifying cultural differences in learning motivation, Niles (1995, pp.380-381) found that for Australian students "competitiveness and getting to the top" was a motivating factor, whilst for Asian students, "social approval" (from the family) was a stronger motivating factor. Nevertheless, the need to perform well in short time frames, in a foreign learning environment, often with limited financial resources (and consequently having to work), compounded by the need to address personal, institutional and family expectations, place enormous pressure on many international students.

Facilitating Student Learning and Academic Acculturation: A Case Study

Figure 2 provides an overview of the structured framework of support initiatives offered in the Faculty of Commerce and Economics at UNSW, to address the learning and acculturation needs of its large (approximately 6,000) and diverse student population. The Faculty has the highest intake of international student at UNSW (approximately 30%), as a result of its policy of internationalisation, with students being drawn from 50 countries of domicile, 80 countries of birth, speaking 55 languages other than English. The richness of the diversity has been accompanied by a diversity in language (English), learning and cultural needs.

Figure 2: Framework for Student Support and Development



Underpinning the model is the intention to provide students with multiple platforms and opportunities to facilitate transition into the learning culture and environment of the Faculty; to promote understanding of cultural differences in teaching and learning; to provide experience of different approaches to learning by engaging in group work,

peer learning, problem solving and interactive teaching methodologies; and to foster engagement in meta-learning i.e. learning how to manage the process of learning rather than just the content (Biggs, 1990). In addition to supporting student learning, the intention is to empower students to adapt and modify their approaches to learning as they see fit, to cope with the differing teaching styles and expectations in the Faculty and the wider context of the university. Finally, the support initiatives are offered to *all* students in the Faculty, exposing international and local students to common experiences and interactions.

The discipline specific approach to learning, language and communication support enables students to engage in the discourse of the different disciplinary streams in the Faculty (the languages of Accounting, Banking and Finance, Business Law and Taxation etc.). It also provides for a contextualised approach to the study and practice of business genres in oral and written communication, as skills development in these areas are generally linked to formal courses being studied. This approach is particularly effective in supporting the needs of international students who must gain competence in using the "discourses" of the many disciplines in the Faculty in order to succeed in their studies.

The support initiative that perhaps most effectively fosters both learning and socio-cultural adaptation is the Peer Support Program, which provides assistance to approximately 1300 students per year in the core courses of Accounting and Financial Management 1A and 1B, Quantitative Methods A and B, and Micro and Macroeconomics. Trained peer leaders are able to facilitate student learning and adaptation in a relaxed and non-threatening learning environment, a context that is welcomed by international students who may be reluctant to approach lectures for assistance. This is clearly evident in the feedback gained from participating students, as reported by Winters and Lindsay (1999, p. 15):

I don't approach lecturers with one hundred percent confidence. I generally talk to tutors. If that doesn't work, I go to the Peer Support leaders. Just talking to a lecturer or tutor, it's just a certain fear of being intimidated because of their qualifications and their authority.

I think it's part of the age thing...I just like the informal atmosphere. There's no fear of turning up and my work might get collected today or I'm going to get marked on tutorial participation...if I don't feel comfortable raising things in class I can go to the peer leaders after the class is finished. The implementation of the peer support groups has helped people get better marks and meet new people.

Other initiatives, such as the Commerce Society and its Buddy System, are run by students, with a focus on creating a sense of community within the Faculty, organising social and cultural activities, and representing student interests.

On another dimension, the model also ensures that teaching staff are also provided with support and assistance, as well as training and development, to manage the increasing diversity in their classes. Given the issues arising from internationalisation of the Faculty, the initial emphasis has been on cross cultural training, diversity management and internationalisation of the curricula.

Re-Acculturation and Reverse Culture Shock

On completion of their studies in Australian educational institutions, most students return to their home countries. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many have difficulties in re-adjusting to their home cultures and experience varying degrees of *reverse culture shock*. In reflecting on the model above (Figure 2), no provisions seem to be made for this phase, and in general, support for and monitoring of international students' performance tends to cease on completion of their studies. There is little evidence of empirical investigations into the experiences of international students once they return to their home countries.

Reverse culture shock refers to the unanticipated sense of loss and isolation that international sojourners (in this instance students) may feel during their adjustment back into their home country (Marx, 2000). The reverse culture shock experience is influenced by the degree to which the student has changed, as well as changes that may have occurred in the home country, especially with respect to family and friends. Students returning home may find that they no longer share fundamental values and beliefs with people at home, and are likely to feel socially distanced. There is a natural assumption that one is returning to a familiar environment, but Adler (1997) suggests that such an assumption blinds the individual to changes that may have occurred at home (and in the individual), making the readjustment process more stressful.

The following comments from a student, who recently returned home to Singapore, serves to indicate the impact of *reverse culture shock* and the accompanying feeling of despair:

Well, I always thought that returning back to my home country after my studies would have been a breeze for me...but it isn't. Whilst pursuing my postgraduate studies, I was fortunate to establish very close relations and contacts with six other postgraduate students. What's interesting was that none of them were from Singapore and all of them were from different nationalities. Other than our cultural differences, we related to each other well... What was difficult for me was my return to Singapore. I never really expected that I would experience reverse culture shock since I have been through the experience of being away for a long period of time. I found it hard to adjust back to the way I lived. I suppose I was used to the independence there and suddenly upon my return, my independence was taken away. I would never have thought that this would affect me...I had to get used to having everything organised for me and I didn't like it. I argued with my parents, I missed my friends terribly and wished I were back in Australia again. I never really thought that I would experience this reverse culture shock. It was a difficult time for me, but I'm slowly adjusting to the life here again. I have been trying to find a solution to the way I feel now but to no avail... Since returning home, I have never wanted more than to return to Australia and live the Australian way of life.

(Interview with P.Ramburuth, Singapore, 2001)

Paradoxically, those (students, global managers, expatriates, travellers) who demonstrate more effective skills in adapting to the host country environment and culture, experience more difficulty in the readjusting to their home environment, and often reach the lowest point on Oberg's (1960) curve of cultural adjustment (Johns and Ramburuth, 2001). It is interesting to note too, that some students report taking a more cautious approach by "not getting too involved" in the host culture, "staying

close to family", and " keeping friends of your own kind" (both on and off campus), for fear of not being able to readjust on their return home. Some take on jobs with foreign companies and their subsidiaries to keep the links with their adopted cultures (usually Western), whilst others leave home to live, study further or work abroad.

More research is warranted into the experience of international students on returning home, the extent and impact of *reverse culture shock* that is encountered, and the coping strategies used,

Recommendations

Students coming to study in Australia seek a quality educational and cultural experience. They move out of their familiar environments to participate in an international experience which can be both challenging and rewarding. Facilitating the transition into their new learning environment and educational system necessitates awareness of their needs, the establishment of mechanisms for supporting these needs, and the taking of responsibility at several levels, including institutional, staff and students levels.

Institutions need to ensure that the student transition and acculturation process is well managed to minimise stress and maximise familiarity with the requirements with the new learning culture. Whilst there is evidence of pre-departure strategies for facilitating student arrival and settling in, there is little evidence of formal strategies for facilitating student entry into their new learning environment. Academic acculturation courses offered off-shore or in distance mode will ensure that international students come better prepared for engaging in studies in a different cultural and learning environment. Courses need to be focussed (as in the model implemented by the Faculty of Commerce and Economics) and relevant to the area/s of study.

Initiatives and incentives for promoting intercultural interactions also need to be considered, if both local and international students are to gain benefits from the internationalisation of Australian educational institutions. There seems to be agreement (Burke, 2000; Bruch and Barty, 1998; Smart et al, 2000) that structured intervention may be necessary to reduce the cultural and communication barriers between local and international students.

At the staff level, organisations need to ensure that teaching staff are provided with training to teach and manage students from cross cultural backgrounds. Many find difficulty in teaching to the increasing diversity in their classrooms. Furthermore, strategies for creating culturally inclusive classrooms and curricula need to be devised. Teaching and learning expectations, assessment criteria, course requirements etc. need to be made explicit, and assumptions about student's prior learning and prior knowledge needs to be cautious and informed.

International students must also take responsibility for their learning and socio-cultural adaptation. They need to ensure they are well prepared for entry into their new learning environments, have appropriate prior knowledge and skills in the areas they choose to study, and develop competence in the language of the host country.

They need also to understand cultural differences that they may encounter and consider cultural shifts they may have to make.

In order to ensure quality learning and cultural experiences for international students, on-going investigations into their experiences, whilst studying abroad and on returning to their home-countries, are necessary.

These are but some of the issues that need consideration if educators are to enhance the experiences of international students studying in Australia, and make their learning and socio-cultural transitions more manageable and less stressful. Perhaps we should also heed the words of Smart et al (2000, p.9):

We can be justly proud of our record in attracting very large numbers of students against intense competition from the US and UK. However, we need to become much more aware of the problems faced by many of these students - and the associated opportunities for both Australian and international students to benefit from a serious addressing of these problems.

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