Providing for the learning needs of international students

Alison Kuiper
Lincoln University, Canterbury, New Zealand
Kuiper@Lincoln.ac.nz

Caitriona Cameron
Lincoln University, Canterbury, New Zealand
Cameroc@Lincoln.ac.nz

Abstract: The recent influx of international students into the tertiary institutions of Australia and New Zealand has altered the education system of both countries. While from the beginning university and other teachers noted the need to make provision for international students, many institutions have been slow to recognise the complexity of their needs. This report presents an emerging typology to support the learning needs of international students in Australasia. The authors, an academic and a learning needs specialist, have drawn on observation and experience, their own and others, to illuminate the situation. Current literature has supplemented the analysis of their professional experience. In order for appropriate provision to be made for international students, the complexity of the situation in which they are educated must be recognised. This includes acknowledging the varying perceptions held by the institutions, both management and the administrators, the students, both international and domestic, and teaching and support staff, including those with special expertise. The typology, which will be introduced for discussion, presents the four general concerns in providing for international students' learning: language needs, exposure to different educational systems, questions of prior knowledge, and cultural issues and acculturation problems. Six academic issues related to the students' academic progress are examined in terms of actual and possible provision. The work in progress presents an analytic framework which, on completion, will enable the complexity of providing for international students to be calibrated for implementation within different institutions.

Keywords: international students; learning needs; tertiary education

Introduction

Most academics and other staff in Australian and New Zealand universities who have contact and responsibility for international students, find the tasks of catering adequately for the learning needs of these students are challenging. In addition to the considerations they have to take into account when teaching any student are those which arise because of differences of culture, language and educational background. As a teacher of communication and a staff member providing teaching and learning development, the authors of this paper have faced such situations and spent time discussing appropriate responses. In our professional roles we spend time with classes and individual students, domestic and international, and are aware of the pressures on, and within, our institutions which result from increasing numbers of students from overseas. We also work closely with other teaching staff and support staff members such as the international student officer and admissions staff. The analysis we present is thus based on our individual
experiences, which include teaching in New Zealand and overseas, on the perspectives formed on the basis of our different professional roles and on discussions with others as well as being informed by current literature. The process of consultation has made us aware of the different perspectives of the parties involved in trying to ensure that international students have their learning needs met in a New Zealand university. This report summarises the varying perspectives we have identified and our progress to date in constructing a typology of learning needs of international students that takes into account those perspectives.

**Different perspectives and perceptions**

Often only the students and their teachers are taken into account when the learning needs of international students are considered but there are many players within and outside the institution whose attitudes and competence can affect the outcomes of the learning process. We have identified a variety of groups within and outside the university (Figure 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Players within the institution</th>
<th>Players outside the institution</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management</td>
<td>Professionals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Managers</td>
<td>Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teaching academics; academics external to the classroom</td>
<td>International students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Recruiting staff</td>
<td>Teaching and learning advisers</td>
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<td>Administrators</td>
<td>International support staff</td>
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<td>Domestic LBOTE students</td>
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<td>Domestic ELB students</td>
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<td></td>
<td>General public (including, e.g. host parents)</td>
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**Figure 1. Those involved with the learning needs of international students**

The different perspectives of those involved with international students can mean conflicting discourses when the progress of the students and their learning needs are under discussion. Within our institution we have observed many such conflicting perceptions, some of which are outlined below.

1 **The management**

Under-funding of tertiary institutions continues to be a concern for those responsible for managing many institutions in Australia and New Zealand. Despite the increasing acknowledgment that international and domestic students benefit from a situation where local students are in the majority, most institutions are reluctant to cap the numbers of international students. As a result, the education provided is not that which was expected by the students. Financial constraints also mean the incoming funds may be used to ensure the viability of the institution rather than to ensure the success of the incoming students. This stance may also result from the assumption that little change is needed within the institution: it may be assumed that the responsibility for adaptation lies solely with the student or that teaching staff have the skills and willingness to cope with changes in teaching practice with minimal additional support.
2 **Teaching and support staff**

Many teaching staff perceive the issues to be primarily those of inadequate English language entry level requirements and therefore regard exclusion of students, rather than adaptation of the institution, to be the appropriate solution. For some, this may be because they share the belief that the responsibility for academic success lies largely with the individual student. For others, the lack of institutional support in coping with the challenges of an increasingly diverse student population has tempered their initial enthusiasm for innovations in teaching practice and they see a more heterogeneous student profile as compromising the maintenance of quality standards and the management of their workload. Language and learning skills advisors, on the other hand, are more likely to focus on the responsibility of the institution to adapt to the needs of students, who after all have been accepted by the institution, and to seek partnerships with teaching staff in order to meet student needs. They tend to emphasise the commonalities in needs of students and to consider that the English language deficiencies may be masking these common needs.

3 **Students**

Many international students themselves, having been told repeatedly by their teachers that their language is inadequate, are distressed at being considered to be deficient and cannot understand why this should be so when they have met the institution’s entry criteria. Because so much of the feedback they receive has focused on language, they are unaware of the impact of mismatches between their educational expectations and that of their host institution, and of the similarities between their learning challenges and those of other students. Domestic students, too, are likely to be unaware of the shared challenges and this, when combined with lack of support in developing cross-cultural communication, can hinder integration of the two groups.

**Constructing the typology**

In our institution, it has been usual to characterise the learning needs of international students largely in terms of the teaching staff’s perceptions of the students’ problems, focusing on four general concerns: language needs, exposure to different educational systems, lack of prior knowledge, and cultural issues and acculturation problems. While there is no denying the reality of these concerns, such a framework is based on the increasingly outmoded *deficit* model of students learning needs and does not take into account the multiplicity of issues that need to be addressed, nor the range of players and perspectives involved. We propose an alternative framework in which the focus is changed to that of the institution’s (and others’) responsibilities to cater for a diversity of student learning needs, a focus which is consistent with a *difference*, rather than a *deficit*, model of student learning needs. The typology to be presented in the workshop begins the process of providing a framework for use when considering the learning needs of international students which recognises the variety of issues and addresses them in an integrated way.

In this typology, six key academic issues related to the students' academic progress have been identified: pre-entry requirements, curriculum, teaching practice, academic language and learning skills development, measures to maintain quality and issues of integration. In each of the six areas, examples are given of actual and possible provisions which will help address the diversity of international student learning needs and of the responsibilities of the players involved. It is important, for example, that students and pre-tertiary providers can access accurate information about entry requirements at an early stage, when they are considering
entry to an institution or programme. These entry criteria must be carefully targeted and monitored to ensure the students have the appropriate entry level skills for specific courses. Curricula should either be matched to students’ prior knowledge and experiences, or bridging programmes provided for those who do not have that assumed knowledge. Teaching practice should be inclusive: clear expectations should be set for all students, and teaching practices should be designed to assist students to develop skills to meet those expectations while allowing for some diversity of approaches. At the same time, academic language and learning skills development should be available to all students, through orientation or transition programmes on entry, ongoing supplementary programmes, or credit courses. Where the necessary entry requirements are in place, where inclusive curricula and teaching practice are adopted, and where ongoing support is readily available, the maintenance of standards can be an expectation, shared by all staff and students. Without a clear background of this kind, measures to maintain quality become more problematic and dependent on external assessment and proctorial intervention.

Issues of integration, and whether international students acculturate to the prevailing ethos of the institution, affect not only the incoming students but also domestic students. International students will not receive the education they are seeking unless they are in an environment which is predominately that of their host country. This means they should not be in classes which are mainly composed of foreign students, that their numbers should be small enough for mixing with domestic students to be possible, and that acculturation and personal support must be available.

Adapting the institution to the needs of an increasingly diverse student population is not easy; resources and trained personnel are required. But attention to quality in all these areas will make more likely a satisfactory experience for all students.

Conclusion

We have begun the process of providing an analytic framework to address the academic issues pertinent to the learning needs of international students in a way that includes the perspectives of the range of players involved. Expansion and amendments to the framework will enhance its usefulness in enabling the complexity of providing for international students to be calibrated for implementation within different institutions.

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