A Pilot Study into International Students’ Academic Culture: The Context of Indian Business Students in an Australian University

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the influence of home country academic culture on the performance of international students in their studies. The focus was on Indian international students studying business courses in an Australian regional university because 61% of its students are international and majority of them come from India. The paper describes a pilot study employing a narrative inquiry approach to provide a better understanding of international students’ academic culture. Three main academic cultural gaps were identified from the students’ narratives: (1) annual teaching versus semester teaching scheme; (2) lack of familiarity with writing assignments; and (3) lack of familiarity with the Australian accent.

Keywords: Academic culture; student learning; higher education; international students; student satisfaction; narrative inquiry
Introduction

The academic problems faced by international students pursuing higher education are discussed in a number of studies (Johnson 2008; Barron 2006; Asmar 2005; Leder & Forgasz 2004; Meiras 2004; Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas 2000; Ninnes 1999) that have identified a number of learning and teaching issues. For example, some learning challenges faced by international students identified by Robertson et al. (2000) are, difficulty in understanding colloquial language, high tuition fee, and psychological feeling of isolation. In a New Zealand university study, Johnson (2008) finds that international students are not able to comprehend lectures because they come across different English accents and teaching styles from lecturers who have migrated from other countries to New Zealand to take up teaching jobs. From a study of the first-year international students at five Australian universities, Leder and Forgasz (2004) have delineated loneliness, language competence, and lack of familiarity with the new academic milieu as the challenging issues faced by the students.

This paper posits that a significant source of international students’ difficulties is due to the need to unlearn the academic culture of institutions where they come from and to learn the new academic culture of institutions where they have travelled to study, crossing their country borders. Biggs (1999, p. 123) stated that:

"Learning / teaching problems due to ‘culture’. In short, the cultural background of many international students is thought to make it difficult for them to adapt to the style of tertiary teaching adopted in the host country. In particular, many international students are too teacher-dependent, too uncritical of material they have been taught, prone to rote memorization; they misunderstand the cardinal sin of plagiarism, and lack knowledge of the genres of academic writing.....How to cope with this is the problem, if it is a problem.”

Although cross-cultural assimilation issues have been raised in the literature (Barron 2006; Meiras 2004; Lacina 2002), there is a lack of research studies exploring the issues from the student perspective. In order to address this gap, this paper involves a study using narrative inquiry to examine the reasons and obstacles that explain how international students have failed to assimilate to the academic culture in a foreign setting.

The concept of academic culture in tertiary institutions

Student learning at tertiary institutions is a complex process that is influenced by several factors such as lecturers’ approaches to teaching, students’ approaches to learning, student support, learning capabilities, curriculum, assessment, and prior learning experience (Paavola, Lipponen & Hakkarainen 2004; MacLellan 2001; Knowles 1975). This process becomes even more complex for international students as they commence their courses in a different academic culture that exists in the host educational institution abroad (Campbell & Li 2008). In this paper, ‘university academic culture’ is described by drawing parallels with the concept of ‘organisational culture’. Schein (2004, p. 17) defines the concept of organisational culture as:

"... a pattern of shared basic assumptions that was learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.”

Academic culture in universities can be described as ‘a pattern of basic assumptions’ shared by academics, administrators, and students that has helped them in ‘solving their problems of external adaptation and internal integration’ in the past. As these assumptions, values, and beliefs have worked so well, they are not only maintained, but are also taught to the new members as ‘the correct way to perceive, think, and feel’ in dealing with problems relating to their intellectual activities such as teaching,
learning, assessments, research, and administration. Drawing from the Social Identity theory (Ashforth & Mael 1989), the academic culture is preserved, regenerated, and communicated through a process of socialisation. An implication of this theorising to an international student arriving for the first time at a university abroad is that he or she may fail to understand and learn the academic culture prevailing in the university due to inadequate socialisation. When the student is confronted by academic problems and challenges such as, for example, how to write a research essay, it is likely that, in the absence or lack of the ‘correct’ understanding of the academic culture, he or she might apply their earlier held assumptions, values, beliefs, and approaches that had given them stability, consistency, and meaning (Schein 2004) in their past student career while dealing with their academic ambiguity and conflict in their home country institutions. Due to the possibility of inherent differences in the academic cultures between their home country and host country academic organisations, the learning approaches adopted by international students are likely to be inconsistent with the learning expectations of their teachers.

Context and significance of the study

A number of students from South Asia, in particular from India, pursuing further studies in an Australian regional university’s franchised metropolitan campuses were found to be at risk of failing to meet course progress requirements (see The National Code 2007, page 21 for an explanation of ‘failing to meet course progress requirements’), by the Academic Progress Committee (APC) in the School of Business at the university for a period of about two years (2007-08). This was observed in spite of the fact that these international students had come from educational institutions and universities of good standing in their home countries, and more importantly they were given formal and informal academic support and counselling by the university and the administrators of the franchised metropolitan campuses. These observations were further explored by both authors over a long period through their interactions with many international students, in particular with Indian international students, both ‘at risk’ and ‘not at risk’ students, with the main focus on their academic problems and issues. These issues were discussed with a number of Business lecturers in the regional university to gather their perceptions of international students’ learning approaches and styles (Kolb, Osland & Rubin 1995; Marton & Saljo 1976). Due to the sensitivity of data, neither the student performance statistics nor the percentage of ‘at risk’ Indian students compared to the total number of international students enrolled in the university have been provided in this paper. This study is not focused on the statistics, and the main objective is to explore why a sizable group of international students are at risk of failing to meet course progress requirements despite the university offering them access to formal and informal academic support such as research skills workshops, academic referencing workshops and English language support.

The interactions and reflections gained through this study have resulted in a belief that the educators in this context have unnoticed the existence of an academic cultural gap prevailing among international students, as the existing academic support practices do not seem to have reduced this gap. The reason why this pilot study has focused on Indian international students is that this regional university has a significant proportion of international students in its current total student enrolment (i.e., around 61%) (Department of Education, Employment, and Workplace Relations 2008) and among this international student cohort, a large percentage consists of Indian students. Furthermore, this regional university adheres to the ‘National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2007’ (The National Code 2007). In particular, Standard 10 in this Code requires the university and its partner program providers to systematically monitor students’ course progress and counsel students who are at risk of failing to
meet the course progress requirements. The university has also been interested in high quality delivery of their academic support programs. In addition, the results of such a research study could unravel certain common learning obstacles faced by international students in general. Addressing such issues could have far reaching benefits to Australian higher education sector, as international students form a major source of revenue to all universities in Australia (DEEWR 2008) and as worldwide competition for international students is increasing (McCormack 2007; Hall & Zuhair 2005). Therefore, the prime objective of this paper is to conduct a qualitative study that could shed some light into understanding the academic challenges and issues faced by Indian international students who are pursuing their undergraduate and graduate business courses in the university.

**Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this research project is to conduct a qualitative pilot study in order to investigate the academic experiences and problems faced by Indian international students studying business courses at the franchised metropolitan campuses of this university. Its findings would assist the university and more specifically its School of Business in designing an effective and inclusive pedagogical approach for the international student cohort and a more focused student counselling and support service for its international students hailing from South Asia. In particular the objectives of the research are to investigate the following:

- What are the learning difficulties faced by Indian international students?
- Why do they face those difficulties?
- Does any difference in their previous curriculum expectations in the Indian educational institutions and the current Australian curriculum expectations make adverse impact on their learning?
- Is their learning approach, which they had practiced in India, compatible with the teaching approach provided in Australian higher education portals?
- How does the likely existence of stress experienced by Indian international students due to a possible difference in ‘academic culture’ (between India and Australia) inform the university academics, counsellors, and administrators with regards to reviewing their existing teaching/ learning strategies and international student support programs?

**Understanding Student Learning Experiences**

There is a general consensus in the literature that students from higher education exhibit a number of different approaches to learning. Effective learners rely on four different learning models such as, concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation (Kolb, Osland, & Rubin 1995). In general, there are two main levels of processing that take place in learning (Marton & Saljo 1976):

a) Surface-level processing, where the student has a ‘reproductive’ conception of learning which means that the student is adopting a rote-learning strategy; and

b) Deep-level processing, where the student is directed towards intentional content of the learning material or comprehending the principle, facts or problem situation given in the learning material.
FIGURE 1
Factors that Impact on University Student Learning

Surface-level processing does not help in applying knowledge for real world situations, especially in the Business studies. In this context, a pilot study was conducted through preliminary feedback sessions with the international Indian students studying undergraduate and postgraduate programs in the university’s School of Business. A majority of the students reflect their learning towards situations like exams, tests, assignments and projects that form their assessment modes. Memorising for assessments was the common approach exhibited by these students. In general, this appears to be similar to the reports of common learning approaches that have been adopted by many students (Boud 1995). However, informal feedback collected from these Indian international students indicates that their university learning is typically impacted by multi-faceted factors that are both internal and external in nature. The interactions between Indian international students lecturers, course coordinators and academic progress committee members have resulted in the development of a framework that might explain the students’ academic difficulties.

This is represented in Figure 1 which highlights the relationship between student learning and the various influencing factors. While most of these factors could be observed as common to all university students, one factor stood apart among the international Indian students during the interactive preliminary feedback sessions conducted for the study (see excerpts provided in Table 1). These students seem to be strongly influenced by their previous learning patterns which they had relied upon for many years during their primary and secondary schooling. This is consistent with the
notion that students have ‘prior learning experiences’ and the need to understand the relationship in the first instance (Atkins 1995; Knowles 1975).

From the formal and informal discussions with Indian business students, it became apparent that unlike the observations reported in previous studies, these students’ academic difficulties were not necessarily originating from their English language competencies, campus support, social life, work-study load nor teaching styles. Rather, the predominant factor was their inability to grasp quickly the new and different academic expectations in Australian higher education institutions and how they failed to adapt to appropriate academic demands.

Research Methodology

A qualitative approach was adopted to conduct the investigation in order to gain a deep and comprehensive understanding of the complex problem of student learning. Narrative research ‘keeps company with’ interpretative qualitative studies, in which stories are used to describe human actions. Narrative researchers treat narrative, whether oral or written, as a distinct form of discourse (Clandidin & Connelly 2000). Narrative inquiry enables narrators to tell the stories of their (educational) lived experiences and the habitual notions they have formed through experiencing specific institutional, organisational and/or discursive environments (Gubrium & Holstein 2005). According to Chase (2005, p. 658), the narrative approach highlights narrators’ ‘identity work’, ‘as they construct selves within specific institutional, organisational, discursive and local cultural contexts’. Narrative inquiry was considered appropriate for this investigation as it focuses on the how and the what and the why of the lived experiences, which in this case was concerned with the unfolding discussions held with the international students. Accordingly, using narrative inquiry is directed at understanding and elucidating the meaning of students’ experiences as they live their educational lives in Australian tertiary settings. As a pilot study, the narratives were collected through a time-restricted and structured interview process, where respondents narrated their experiences and related events individually.

Qualitative Data Collection and Analysis

Eligible participants were broadly defined as Indian international students who were studying undergraduate and postgraduate business courses at the three campuses of the university. Since this study is seeking to gain insight into the educational experiences and problems encountered by international Indian business students, semi-structured interviews along with open-ended guide questions were administered. The guided questions were designed to explore issues underpinning the learning experiences and problems faced by international Indian business students. The primary overarching research question was: "What are the factors that impact on the success (or otherwise) of international students studying business courses in an Australian setting?"

Table 1 provides the demographics of seven students who participated in this pilot study. Their narratives were collected, transcribed and the main issues were identified. Table 2 provides the extracts of the student narratives related to these prime issues. While understanding the students’ perceptions of learning, it is also important to consider the lecturers’ perceptions of student learning as they could have different expectations (MacLellan 2001). Hence, in this pilot study, preliminary feedback sessions with Business lecturers were conducted to gather their perceptions of student learning. Table 3 provides a summary of feedback obtained from Business lecturers, indicating the existing competency levels possessed by these students in their assessment tasks. By analysing the student narratives, certain patterns of the
academic cultural gaps indicated by these students were identified and they were classified under the three main categories as given below:

**Academic cultural gap 1 - Shift from annual teaching scheme to semester scheme**

The first finding is the gap that exists in students’ inability to understand how short a semester would be when they start their studies (See the student comments in Table 2). This is because the semester scheme is not predominantly followed in tertiary institutions in India. Most of them have the yearly scheme that culminates with final written exams. Therefore, the students may have difficulties adjusting themselves to the fast-pace of semester-based teaching.

**Academic cultural gap 2 - Unfamiliar with writing assignments**

Almost all students have reported difficulty in doing their assignments (See the student feedback in Table 2). Even though tertiary education is not new to most of these students (based on demographics given in Table 1), it was identified from the narratives that the students have not written research assignments in their previous courses in India.

**Academic cultural gap 3 - Unfamiliar with accent**

The third critical issue is a lack of understanding of the course and teacher expectations (See the student comments in Table 2 and the lecturer feedback in Table 3). This is related to unfamiliarity with the accent of some of the foreign lecturers teaching in the university.  The students may require more time in adjusting to the accent as well as in understanding the requirements in writing and presenting their assessments critically.

Overall, the main gap was identified as the lack of the students’ skills in getting adapted to Australian academic culture within a short period of time of a fast-paced semester. The students need to realise that the Australian academic culture puts more emphasis on deep learning and critical thinking rather than rote learning, and have to quickly equip themselves with these skills. On the other hand the university is also required to act rigorously in bringing out the cultural change as an induction programme, because at an individual level, academic failure even in some assignments during the first semester demoralises the students (See the student comments in Table 2). Also, the students may be facing internal resistance to change their learning style and this may require counselling strategies to be embedded within suitable 'Bridge the Gap' programmes in order to facilitate the necessary change in their academic perceptions and learning styles. These programmes could be embarked even before the semester starts and could be offered as an ongoing exercise as well. Finally, the lecturers need to provide more clarity in their course delivery, assignment requirements, feedback mechanisms and cultural (academic) expectations besides providing avenues for improving their new skill sets.

**Table 1**

*Demographics of the respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Name</th>
<th>Campus</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Level of the course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M. Com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M. Com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B.Com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M.B.A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M.Com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>M.B.A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>M.B.A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2

Extracts of Student Narratives from the Pilot Study

Academic Cultural Gap 1: Shift from annual curriculum to semester curriculum

Student C in campus A doing Masters: In India, we used to have exams after a year...we had to study four or five subjects at the maximum for my bachelor degrees...students get plenty of time to study, but it’s not like that here....The 12 weeks time for study is really less.....less time for one semester for four different subjects for a Masters course.

Student P in campus A doing Masters: A 12 week period to complete a subject is not that easy....with the work and the studies it’s not that easy....the time pressure is enormous.

Student A in campus A doing Bachelors: Over there (in India) we’re dependent on the parents so we don’t have any other time pressure, but over here we’re very independent and we’ve to manage everything, so there’s pressure.

Student B in campus B doing Masters: In India, the pressure actually starts when you come close to (annual) final exam.....in fact, my whole first semester I was just crying....

Student D in campus M doing Masters: ...time duration is too short.

Student J in campus M doing Masters: We’ve to submit a lot of group assignments, but most of us work here....so given that kind of time and to prepare these assignments it’s a problem because you’ve to cook yourself, you’ve to live, you’ve to shop, you’ve to study, you’ve to work, which isn’t what we’re used to back home.

Academic Cultural Gap 2: Unfamiliarity with writing assignments

Student C in campus A doing Masters: Assignment was a horror for me when I was in the first semester....horrifying thing was how to do research.

Student P in campus A doing Masters: In India not every subject has an assignment or presentation.....assignments are not that easy....you know the writing skills.

Student AP in campus A doing Masters: My first assignment was so bad...all the mistakes came out from referencing. In India, we’re used to study the notes (given by lecturers)....we’ve never been through assignments. ...but it took one semester to know how to use it (the assignment) in order, what to put in and what not to put in.

Student B in campus B doing Masters: Well, to me the assignment was new because we didn’t have anything like working on your individual assignments. ...but group assignment gets little difficult because if one person doesn’t put in effort....

Student D in campus M doing Masters: In India, we don’t do assignments, so doing assignments and the structure and the format, even basic thing in the assignment...there’s problem.

Academic Cultural Gap 3: Unfamiliarity with foreign accent

Student C in campus A doing Masters: Last semester we got four teachers, three of them foreign origin; all four are foreign origin for me. One teacher was from Cambodia and we’d to face a problem with the accent.

Student B in campus B doing Masters: Very difficult to even grasp what the lecturer is trying to communicate....inability to understand what’s being said....if the lecturers can slow down a little to the pace they say.

Student D in campus M doing Masters: I feel ashamed because of the language problem....The accent, not the language, that’s the problem.

Student J in campus M doing Masters: We don’t even understand what they’re telling us because we’re not used to the particular language that they use here; it’s very different from what the English used in India.

TABLE 3

Summary of Lecturer Feedback from the Pilot Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment Tasks</th>
<th>Learning Skills</th>
<th>Existing Student Competency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Essays</td>
<td>Analytical, Articulation, Writing skills</td>
<td>Low – Moderate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short Answer / Problems</td>
<td>Memorising, Reading, Numerical skills</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case Studies</td>
<td>Analytical, Critical thinking</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Write-up</td>
<td>Critiquing, Researching, Referencing</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Summary of findings and future directions

In general, the pilot study revealed that the students found it difficult to overcome the internal resistance to change to the different academic expectations in the university. Any academic failures in the first semester (that accounts for the first four months from their arrival) were found to diminish their self-efficacy, and for some students, it resulted in a series of failures. They also suffered from guilt as they had a high academic track record in their home country institutions.

This pilot study provided some evidence that the Indian business students had experienced certain academic cultural gaps (Table 2) which in turn lead to low competency levels in certain tasks (Table 3), as compared to their prior learning experiences. These students were quite weak in critical thinking and writing skills with the given time pressures of a semester system. Conversely, the lecturers did expect these students to participate in critical thinking and engage in learning by applying their analytical skills to business situations that are discussed in classroom and assessment exercises. The lecturers’ teaching strategies were based on the premise that they could engage the international students to make use of a set of learning skills to cope with the academic demands and objectives in Australian universities. Unfortunately, in doing so, some factors were ignored, such as, how much influence does the academic culture of their home country still play a role; how deeply ingrained are the students’ past learning behaviours; what were their learning expectations in their home countries; and have the lecturers adapted their expectations from such students realistically. In other words, it makes more sense to explore the link of antecedent educational experience towards how they go about undertaking their studies in Australia and their course success or failure.

The future research could extend this pilot study by examining a larger pool of international students from many other campuses in Australia as well as offshore and those undergoing other disciplines of study as well. This would facilitate us to perform additional cross checks and verification of the three main academic cultural gaps that were identified in this pilot study. It is believed that themes and sub-themes across disciplines would emerge from such studies and these would provide suitable inputs to the lecturers and administrators for proposing suitable ‘Bridge the Gap’ programmes and to channel the resources more meaningfully.

Conclusion

The pilot study was conducted using a narrative inquiry as a qualitative method to explore the learning difficulties faced by Indian international business students within a higher educational setting in Australia. The primary focus of the approach was to investigate the influence of prior academic culture (prevailing in home-country institutions/universities) on the learning behaviour and academic performance of international students. By using narrative inquiry, the past and present educational experiences and future aspirations of participating Indian international students were captured through their own ‘life stories’ in order to provide a better understanding of the experiences of international students.

The three main cultural academic gaps identified suggest that the university’s resources should be focused on providing support in these areas where arguably they are most needed. This could also assist lecturers and academic administrators in understanding the learning and teaching issues that are unique to international students. More importantly, the findings may be valuable in determining future policy decisions to address the appropriate means for providing quality education to international students.
This research approach is not limited to the academic problems faced by Indian international students who are studying business courses in an Australian university as reported in the paper. The narrative inquiry has the potential to be applied to international students from other ethnic backgrounds, and could be extended to other disciplines of study within the university sector.
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