Empirical Article

"It Was Difficult to Understand the System": Developing A Coordinator role to support international nursing students- A qualitative study

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Abstract

International students are an important component of the host country and universities bringing economic, social, and community contributions. International students are the most vulnerable students with challenges related to academic expectations, language proficiency, and socio-cultural integration. This study explores the challenges of international students in a Western Australian School of Nursing and Midwifery. An exploratory questionnaire (n=10), three focus groups (n=15) and a quality improvement survey (n=80) informed this study. Four themes emerged: stress in the first weeks, incorrect and/or late enrolments, lack of guidance and support, and system navigation nightmares. Other issues included: accommodation, culture shock, financial concerns, information needs, and peer support. These findings led to the instigation of an international academic coordinator role as a single point of contact and increasing resources within the university faculty provided additional support to the international students.

Keywords: coordinator, international students, student challenges, student support

Introduction

According to the OECD, international students (IS) are defined as those who have moved to another country for the purpose of study (OECD, 2021). In Australia, international students provide significant social and economic benefits to the higher education sector. Pre-Covid 2019, over 756,000 IS were enrolled in Australia with over 55% in higher education, bringing billions into the Australian economy (DESE, 2022) and contributing further to the economy through casual employment (DIBP, 2017).

International students enrolled in a nursing degree are the most vulnerable students at many institutions of higher education (Karram, 2013; Sherry et al., 2010; Tran & Soejatminah, 2018). They are at high risk of failure due to differences with teaching and learning styles of their host countries, the use of online learning technologies, meeting academic standards, and communicating with educators, peers, patients, and the healthcare team (Forbes-Mewett, 2019).

They are also at risk of exploitation and vulnerability as part of the host country workforce (Tran & Soejatminah, 2018). To support their learning in a foreign country, it is vital that IS are adequately prepared to understand academic requirements in a culturally unfamiliar environment.

Setting

This study was conducted in an Australian School of Nursing and Midwifery, which has the largest undergraduate nursing program in the state. For the past four years, international student enrolment has remained steady with approximately 15-23% of enrolments being international students. This equates to approximately 140-500 international students per year across eight nursing and midwifery courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level in the university The number of IS enrolments dropped in 2020 and 2021 because of the travel restrictions related to the Covid-19 pandemic. Some courses lead to professional registration in nursing or midwifery within Australia, and some courses contain mandatory work-integrated learning.

The research questions this project sought to answer were:
1. What challenges were encountered by international nursing students?
2. What interventions and resources could the university provide that may assist current and future international students in adjusting to the context of nursing and midwifery studies in Australia?

In this paper, we report on a research project which used the experiences of international nursing students who had just completed their first semester of study. Their insights and feedback informed the development of an International Academic Coordinator (IAC) role to support the students' transition to Australia.

Literature Review

The literature describes terms such as 'culture shock' and 'acculturative stress' to refer to emotional turmoil that may be created by transition to new cultures (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017). Change and adaptation to the higher education sector is challenging due to significant differences in teaching and learning systems and added pressures of academic success (Quan et al., 2016). Evidence highlights three key challenges faced by IS, namely academic expectations, language proficiency, and socio-cultural integration (Ballo et al., 2019; Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017).

The literature is mostly concerned with academic expectations (Bai, 2016). Pedagogical and systemic differences exist across higher education institutions and adjusting to these differences is challenging (Agostinelli, 2021; Quan et al., 2016). Further, as teaching practices and classroom dynamics may vary greatly and in Australia, there is a high emphasis on independent and self-directed learning (Foster, 2011). Assignment and assessment methods may also be unfamiliar, with essays and academic writing offering many challenges to IS (Wu & Hammond, 2011), often resulting in poor grades (Quan et al., 2016).

Language proficiency, as the conduit to academic success, is perhaps the greatest challenge for many IS (Burdett & Crossman, 2012). Many international students find their language skills are inadequate to cope with the pace of spoken English (Ramachandran, 2011). It is widely reported that standardized language proficiency tests and grammar teaching methods are inadequate preparation for international students to transition to academic skills and English language (Bai, 2016; Wu & Hammond, 2011).

Evidence suggests that most IS have never written an assessment piece in English and have not practiced English adequately before studying abroad (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017). Educational institutions do take measures to address this, but the primary focus is mainly on the development of language competency for entry requirements and completion of studies (Arkoudis et al., 2013).

Prior to leaving their home countries, there are often complex and frustrating processes to obtain visas and enrolments abroad, as well as tensions involved with leaving their communities (Caldwell & Hyams-Ssekasi, 2016). This stress may lead to homesickness (Szabo et al., 2016) and a loss of established social networks (Chavoshi et al., 2017). Upon arrival, IS need to quickly find accommodation and employment, master a public transport system, and adapt to new eating habits, weather, and social conventions. Many IS underestimate their requirements for adequate cash flow, leading to a major source of anxiety (Ramachandran, 2011). Students with higher levels of social support experience lower levels of acculturative stress and depression (Kenyon et al., 2012). Furthermore, many IS do not feel a cohesiveness with Australian society, highlighted by a lack of local friends by the end of their course of study (Gomes, 2015). Their social networks may consist of other IS (Kashima & Pillai, 2011), and they may live in a parallel society to that of their host country (Gomes, 2015).

These domains do not exist separately, but instead overlap to influence each other in both positive and negative ways. Language proficiency affects academic learning and success (Akanwa, 2015) but also communication with other staff and students, making it harder to seek help and to create friendships and social connectedness (Bai, 2016). The degree of culture shock experienced by IS is related to both scope and pace of change expected (Ecochard & Fotheringham, 2017), triggering anxiety, depression, and anger and may harm self-worth (Pickford, 2016).

Therefore, it is crucial to provide adequate support for IS to reduce acculturative stress and culture shock. Efforts have focused on recruitment and transitioning to living and learning in a new culture (Bohman, 2014), but social and institutional support needs to be flexible enough to address ongoing and emerging challenges at all stages of the experience (Arthur, 2017; Roberts et al., 2015).

For nursing students, professional clinical practice poses additional stress and cultural shock (Edgecombe et al., 2013; Koch et al., 2015). There is limited evidence available that explore IS support needs (Lin et al., 2021) or challenges in the clinical setting (Edgecombe et al., 2013; Lin et al., 2021). In this study, we explored the challenges and needs of the international nursing and midwifery students resulting in the development of the International Academic Coordinator (IAC) role, responsible for supporting their academic and psychosocial needs.

Conceptual Framework

Our study resonated with the conceptual framework described by Graham et al. (2006), knowledge-to-action (KTA) two-step process. The first step, knowledge creation, is represented by a funnel in which knowledge from research or experiences moves through it and becomes more useful and refined as it develops (Graham et al, 2006). Our research sought knowledge in stage one through open-ended surveys that informed our focus groups in stage two. At each phase of knowledge creation, the researchers adjusted activities and approaches to address the international students' needs and to gain as much information as possible to inform next steps. The second step, the action cycle, was influenced by the knowledge creation in stage one and two. This step calls for the knowledge to be actioned and problems identified to be addressed (Graham et al, 2006). Stage three in our research represents our knowledge product through the development of an International Academic Coordinator (IAC) role within the school with resources that were evaluated using the Plan-Do-Study-Act process in stage four.

Methodology

Qualitative methodologies underpinned the development of the International Academic Coordinator (IAC) role and resources. The study approach involved an inductive sequential process, where data from each stage informed the subsequent stages (Polit & Beck, 2014).

Stage 1: Initial survey with open ended questions
Stage 2: Focus group discussions
Stage 3: Development and implementation of IAC role and resources
Stage 4: Quality improvement project to evaluate IAC role.

Two separate open thematic analyses were conducted for the survey and focus group data, each undertaken by different members of the research team to enhance reliability. Key words and phrases were highlighted and coded inductively, and these codes were compared and clustered into subcategories according to their meaning (Saldana, 2009). Core themes identified were checked and confirmed by another researcher to establish credibility ((Guest et al., 2012) Polit & Beck, 2014).

Stage 1: Questionnaire

All international nursing students who completed their first semester were invited to complete a questionnaire on the challenges they faced and how they navigated the educational system in their first semester. We asked them to describe the assistance and resources that were useful and suggest additional supports.

Stage 2 Focus group

Three focus groups consisting of five international nursing students each were conducted on the university campus. Questions underpinned by themes from the initial questionnaire in Stage 1 were developed to guide the discussion. All discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed by members of the research team (NF, AG, NG, KM).

Stage 3 Development of the International Academic Coordinator (IAC) role

After questionnaire and focus group data analyses, a new role, IAC, within the school was proposed. The IAC's role, scope, resourcing, and expectations were underpinned by the student data. The IAC commenced in 2019 as the first point of call for IS for information and support.

Stage 4 Quality improvement evaluation of the IAC role and resources

A quality improvement process following the Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) (Sokovic et al., 2010) cycle was undertaken to ensure the support rendered to international nursing students met their needs Anonymised online survey was sent to all IS within the school, out of the 782 IS who received the link to complete the online survey, 86 students completed them but 80 submitted their surveys. Therefore, we analysed only the submitted surveys. The survey was mainly open-ended questions, so the free texts were thematically analysed for recurring themes on IS's top three support needs.

Ethical Considerations

Approval was obtained by the university's Human Research Ethics Committee (Approval No: 16490). Participant information and consent forms were given to all IS present at a welcome morning tea. The surveys were anonymous, and participation was voluntary. Focus group participants consented to keeping all discussions confidential and private. All personal identification materials were removed or anonymised during the transcription and data analysis. The quality improvement activities were not subject to human ethics review (Stiegler & Tung, 2017).

Participants

A total of 25 IS participated in the research. Ten students who had just finished their first semester of undergraduate nursing completed the questionnaire. Eighty percent of these students had been in Australia less than six weeks before commencing studies. A further 15 students participated in the focus group discussion.

Data analysis

As the data was of qualitative nature, thematic analysis was used to analyse them. The six steps of Braun and Clarke (2006) was followed in an iterative process. First, the authors (NF, AG, NG, KM and EA) explored the qualitative data for familiarity by reading through several times for codes and themes arising. The main codes, that is, recurring words and phrases, were merged to develop themes, which were constantly re-visited by the team members until all agreed that the generated themes were reflective of the data.

Results

Thematic analysis of the survey data identified four themes: *stress in the first weeks, incorrect and/or late enrolments, lack of direction for prior preparedness,* and *system navigation nightmares.*

Stress in the First Weeks

In describing their first few weeks in the host university and the problems they encountered, students used terms such as "*nervous", "anxious", "confused", "overwhelmed", "really tough",* "*a shock", "very frustrated"* and *"it was hard."* Students talked about the difference in local culture, the diverse cultural makeup of the university and of Australia. Many initially felt a sense of disorientation and mixed emotions toward the first week of studies:

> *"It was hard and exciting. Hard to get to know new systems and how the school worked. But I do like studying here. It's a good nursing school."*
> *"I was a bit nervous on my first week, but when I met some students and I cleared my doubts, then I was okay."*

There were issues that marred the first week experiences of the students, including enrolment problems, preparedness for study and problems with accommodation. Some students commented on the distance they needed to travel to get to the university.

Incorrect and/or Late Enrolments

The main concerns in the survey were enrolment into the wrong units, unclear enrolment instructions, attending wrong classes, and missing the first week(s) of lectures, tutorials and practical sessions. Related to this for some students was a lack of understanding of the full financial commitment of the course.

> *"Enrolled in the wrong unit, wasn't clear how to go about the enrolments. For one week, I was attending the wrong classes until I discovered this in week 2."*

However, it wasn't just enrolment issues; it was also finding the person with all the answers:

> *"It was difficult to understand the system. Get all the paperwork in order before prac [work integrated learning]. Really missed having one person to deal with, since we had a lot of questions."*

Several students commented Student Central did not know about their enrolment, nor could advise them accordingly, and so they needed to embark on a circuitous enquiry route which could take up to two weeks to resolve.

Lack of guidance and support

A further theme identified was the issue of prior preparedness and the hindrances this caused throughout semester. For some students, a suitable resolution was reached after asking friends.

> *"No contact to correct person. We ask our friends."*
> *"We got to talk to an international counsellor. Knew about it from recent students who had been through the same situation."*

There were also some positive indicators the campus structures in place were able to address students' issues.

> *"School of Nursing staff were very helpful to get them ready before prac and I tried my best to go through them as a priority."*

System Navigation Nightmares

This final theme ran through the majority of the students' comments and was largely based on problems with understanding and navigating academic processes, assessments, information technology, learning management systems and work integrated learning preparation.

"Not sure about seeking help especially with assignments."

"I face the problem mainly with the assignments. It is totally different from what I studied. In India we just study from the book and write the exam. We have some assignments but not same as we do here."

The comments reflected an overall sense of unfamiliarity with university systems in general and assessment requirements in particular. Comments such as "*everything is new", "new systems nightmare", "unaware online lectures prior to tutes", "Blackboard {learning management software] is a nightmare", "hard to get to know how things work"* all reflect the students' difficulty in understanding the system, at least in the initial stages. Of interest, only one student commented on difficulty with English, despite this being a well-known barrier to transition (Burdett & Crossman, 2012).

Responses to what activities or resources may have made the transition from home to studying at university easier included knowing how to navigate IT resources and the quality of teaching:

"[Good] teaching style and good interpersonal relationship with teacher and students."

"Availability of the computer labs. Being shown the equipment and how procedures are done before we can go for our practicums."

Stage 2 Focus Group Results

Students identified three additional themes: *accommodation issues, culture shock,* and *financial concerns*.

Accommodation Issues

Students raised issues around finding suitable accommodation, partly due to not having a rental history or references and partly a lack of awareness of what was required for rental, such as evidence of income.

"About the rent, actually they wanted a salary slip and many things and references so finally we had to show our bank accounts with the fixed deposit slips from back home. Then it was easy ... maybe more than two or three got rejected then we finally ended up with one."

Culture Shock

International students identified a distinct 'differentness' of coming to Perth. Many felt, at least initially, a sense of disorientation. While travelling to university the students noticed cultural differences, realising they had to re-think a few things:

"For me it was cultural shock in so many ways.... the way people relate to each other different[ly] ... it was a real cultural shock for me. People ignore each other… they just want their phones."

"... before I got used to the Google maps ... I asked someone how do I get to this place? ... people they don't know each other, they don't even know the places you are asking them about, and I thought those people were ignorant or something ... I realised that if you are here, you can't rely much on people to tell you how you can get to places."

Financial Concerns

Another key concern related to finding employment, both generally and in their discipline areas where there were various requirements for working certificates and other pre-requisites.

"Getting a job is not easy ... it seems when I came, I heard people saying it's takes six weeks to do an aged care certificate, but since [then] they have changed it to six months for international students. So, jobs are not as easy as we thought because we assume that since we were nurses in our country that they were going to consider that, but it seems they're not considering it anymore."

A major concern for several IS were issues with their enrolment, where after arrival needed to enrol in an extra unit, extending the duration of their course and incurring further financial impost. For some IS, there was a lack of understanding of the full financial commitment of the course.

Student Suggestions from the Focus Group
Early Information Needs

The key suggestion was early information to help prepare for the challenges they would likely face, including accommodation options, immunisations, documents needed for employment, and accommodation as well as public transport information.

"On my first day someone came with me showing me how it goes on the trains and everything since the systems are different from ours."

The learning management system (LMS) was acknowledged as containing a lot of information relevant to their course and enrolment, but initial awareness on how to access and use it were raised as problems. It was suggested IS be informed of its existence and use as early as possible, given that LMS was the primary source of course information.

"It was a lot of cultural shock because back in my country we didn't use much of space technology computers, we used more pens and textbooks ... it was as if they'd expect us to just know ... we were actually new in the industry of using computers and now we're learning how to use the computer and also learning how to grasp that information at the same time."

"You really don't understand ... but when I attended the orientation you have a bit of light because for me Blackboard [LMS} was the first time I was using it ... they would say 'go find this paper' ... [and] instead of twenty-five minutes you end up losing one hour and that was a difficult time because I'd budget my time."

Some IS felt the general orientation for all new students a little difficult to follow and suggested additional help.

"[orientation] ... it has to be [for] international students and not because they will be slow in learning ... but it was so fast it was ... she was just clicking and clicking, and I couldn't even see [what] was up there."

Preferred Modes of Accessing Information

The IS felt social media would have been a better platform than LMS to communicate and gain an understanding of all the requirements before the start of semester.

"…. one of the nursing students there had agreed to a Facebook group and I followed the details like you have to get your manual thing, your pin boards and everything, also clearance test ... so before I even started here at ... the Uni itself, I'd been running around all the areas for preparation."

Other suggestions included an online link to a web page with enrolment confirmation, information on preparing for travel to Australia, courses and units, LMS, timing of practicums, finding work, accommodation, and public transport apps. This would be delivered by personal email as early as possible.

"Yeah, knowing the pathway is important because once we know it you know okay this is what I'm going to put in and you can enroll easily."

Also, an orientation checklist of things IS may need to do was suggested such as: *when to arrive, where to go, who to see, and what items needed for classes.*

"But it would be better to get an orientation check list like that, where to collect your uniform, you need to go to co-op to do your medical ... you need to go to the staff centre because we had to ask each other."

"It could be a link such that because we get a message from [university] when you see the welcome you've been given, your enrolment been confirmed ... to see things to prepare you."

Peer Support

The final key suggestion that received widespread agreement involved peer support, such as testimonials or stories from previous international students on their experiences, how they prepared, what worked, how they overcame problems and so on. These may be in the form of videos accessible online. Some IS had already made contact with former students.

> "*Okay for me, I think I've been talking to the former students here ... they just finish[ed] and this program has been helpful ... and it's good for the international students, for their improvement in class ... so for us it has helped us, we've learnt some things here which maybe are a bit different in our country and it's been easy to learn ... we will go for our placement, so it will be easy to integrate, so it's a good thing for us.*"

Stage 3 Development of International academic coordinator (IAC) role

Following review of the challenges and barriers faced by IS, the School of Nursing and Midwifery created the IAC role to support international students socially and academically. The IAC is responsible for supporting IS to enhance the learning experience and integration into a new educational system and culture by ensuring access to the necessary information identified in the previous stages of the study.

Additionally, the IAC role includes organising an International Meet and Greet (intensive orientation and networking event for international students) and educating clinical facilitators on strategies to support IS. The IAC also shares evidence-based resources with academics within the school and university on how to effectively support IS, participates in employability workshops and shares alternative employment pathways for international students who, until February 2022 were not eligible for the graduate nurse program in Australia.

Resources Developed from the IAC Role

To support students in their transition to a new country and new ways of teaching and learning, the university has instituted compulsory academic integrity training modules for all commencing students. Despite not being raised as an issue by IS in either the survey or focus group, the school considered it a priority. Two videos were developed to support both students' work integrated learning placements and academic experiences. The first video is set in the clinical setting and features a debriefing session between an IS and a clinical facilitator after a day shift. The debrief showed elements of cultural differences between the student's home country and Australia. The second academic integrity video features a conversation between an IS and her lecturer on plagiarism. The lecturer provided more information on the meaning of plagiarism and how to avoid it. These resources are considered adjunct to the existing resources on clinical placement and academic integrity and are placed in the LMS for access.

Stage 4 Quality Improvement Survey and International Meet and Greet

An important role of the IAC is continuous quality improvement and assessment of the needs of international students. To this end, a simple survey was undertaken among all international nursing students asking to list their three top needs. Eighty (80) students completed the anonymous survey and results showed three overarching areas of concern: academic, work integrated learning, and social needs. For academic support, assistance with assignments, learning management systems, English language support and orientation to programs of study were identified. Work integrated learning placement needs included support with clinical learning, more intensive clinical orientation, adjustment in the new environment and familiarisation with clinical equipment. Social needs included employment during and after graduation, financial support/scholarships, and friendly staff throughout university.

These needs were incorporated into regular International Meet and Greet sessions (IMG). At all IMGs, experts such as career advisers, learning advisers, librarians, counsellors, student support, and clinical simulation facilitators (responsible for work integrated learning) were invited to share expectations and answer questions. Additionally, past IS were invited to share their experiences to motivate and assist students to navigate the system. The meetings also supported networking among IS and staff.

Discussion

The pressures IS experience transitioning to a new country and higher education facility are well described. Abrupt changes in social support (Bhochhibhoya et al., 2017), uprooting stress, coping and anxiety (Szabo et al., 2016) and culture shock (Belford, 2017) are common challenges when transitioning across countries and cultures. The stressors evident in the first few weeks of study seem borne out of fear of the unknown and unfamiliarity with new academic, social, and environmental factors. The scope and pace of activities needed to achieve enrolment, accommodation, employment and transport understandably contribute to acculturative stress, along with issues of seeking help and facing cultural problems (Gomes, 2015). It behooves the institution to provide suitable support right from the beginning of the student's academic journey (Akanwa, 2015).

With the development of the IAC role, IS gain earlier insight into the nursing programs offered and an overview of the expectations of studying at the university. Informed by the survey and focus group results, the role addressed what to expect on arrival, practical areas concerned with transition to Australia and support services available within the university. Also issues of clinical practice, equipment used during clinical placements and current practices used in the Australian health care setting were covered. Although there are various support services reported in the literature for international students (Martirosyan et al., 2019), to the best of our knowledge, the IAC role is the first of its kind developed to support international students' social, mental wellbeing, academic, clinical and employability needs.

Incorrect or late enrolments were originally an area of significant concern to many of the students, both in the survey and the focus group, as was prior preparedness. Even though the process of admission for IS starts prior to their arrival in Australia, the process of unit enrolment and pathway planning happens just prior to the beginning of semester. Some students experience delays in visa acceptance resulting in delay in arrival in-country. Therefore, IS sometimes missed the vital first week(s) of classes, despite a number of existing structures and support services in place to address this. All IS were encouraged to attend orientations sessions designed specifically to address student preparedness and give them a "roadmap" for enrolment and logistical information concerned with academic life. Despite this, it seems IS felt there was little direction to ensure preparedness for semester and were unsure who to approach for help when needed. Pre-departure information measures implemented by the IAC appear to have mostly addressed these concerns, as survey results show the main issues now faced are focused on academic, clinical placement and social needs.

Orientation to a new paradigm of learning is essential for academic and mental wellbeing (Ammigan & Jones, 2018). It appears the most positive outcomes of the orientations resources and support included being more familiar with enrolment, and pre-practicum equipment and procedures, accessibility and familiarity with library resources, and the computer labs, and networking with other nursing students. The IAC role continues to mature and evolve in response to the needs of new cohorts of IS. The cycle of Plan-Do-Study-Act continues, and students will be surveyed annually to assess the impact of changes to the IAC role. Future research studies may evaluate the implementation of similar roles within other university faculties and in response to changes in student migration patterns globally.

There are several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First, the sample sizes for stage one and two were small, convenience samples and may have only represented those IS seeking help or those struggling in the first weeks of being in country. Future studies should address a broader cohort of IS and consider different points in time along academic journey for generalisability of the results. Lastly, the questions used in stage one had not been previously validated among an IS cohort. Future research with large cohorts should use validated tools for IS.

Implications and Conclusion

International students have become an important component of the Australian higher education system bringing economic, social and community benefits. Three key challenges faced by international students transitioning to study in

host countries were academic expectations, language proficiency and socio-cultural integration. Structured support which differentiates between cultural groups, linguistic support and professional development of academic staff are suggested strategies to improve the educational experience of IS (Agostinelli, 2021).

This paper has described the results from a study of international students, which aimed to identify what resources could be provided to assist future international students adjust to nursing studies at an Australian university. From the qualitative data, four key themes emerged, being: *stress in the first weeks, incorrect and/or late enrolments, lack of guidance and support* and *system navigation nightmares.* These themes were elaborated on in the subsequent focus group where the themes *accommodation issues, culture shock, financial concerns, information needs, and peer support* led to the instigation of an IAC role within the university faculty. This article described some of the varied activities and resources relating to that role including video resources, social activities, academic support and ongoing quality improvement activities. We believe that the IAC role enhances the international student experience and is likely to improve the recruitment, retention, and student satisfaction within the international student cohort. More research is now required to better evaluate the impact of the coordinator role in different contexts.

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