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Staying the Course: The importance of social and structural networks for NESB students achieving positive outcomes at a regional campus

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This paper is set within the context of an Australian regional university. The study investigates the experiences of students with non-English-speaking backgrounds (NESB), focusing on problems encountered at university. There remains an assumption among some academic and support staff that NESB students have one main problem that sets them apart from native speakers: their standard of English. There is a general lack of understanding of the effects of culture, separation from family and feelings of isolation on the physical and emotional adjustment of this cohort and on their success at university (Bartlett & Chanock, 2003).

This study identifies challenges experienced by students: linguistic, financial, cultural, academic, social and technological. There is a perception that NESB students are a homogeneous group. However, in our sample there were significant differences within the NESB respondents as recognised by Wang and Le (2006). The data highlight potential strategies for overcoming the barriers students face. Major's (2005) concept of three dimensions of adjustment assists in identifying appropriate times for intervention with both social and structural support to enhance student success. The findings and recommendations point to the conclusion that social and structural scaffolding for NESB students should be embedded in curricula where appropriate and systematically included in university processes starting before the university experience, continuing through it, and extending from it.

Key Words: Higher Education, NESB students, barriers, supports, success

1. Introduction

This research aimed to identify barriers to university success for Non-English-Speaking Background (NESB) students studying at a regional university campus. The focus of the study was to identify structural and social barriers to successful outcomes for students, and strategies that could overcome them. This group was identified for focus because they are an equity category as defined by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR). DEEWR recognises that students in these groups have been shown to experience significant disadvantage in higher education. The equity figures for NESB students at Albury-Wodonga campus, 2002–2008, show the number of commencing students enrolling was well under the state average. The retention level was higher than the state average. Success levels, indicated by completion, improved significantly in 2005 and 2006, but were still lower than other students, and lower than the state average.

Data was collected from focus groups with NESB students, academic and support staff and external agencies working with migrants (see Appendix 1).   The data were analysed to capture the experience of the respondents, to record support mechanisms already used by staff and students and identify additional support programs that could be initiated. This is the first time that the university has captured a snapshot of the regional university NESB student experience.

The literature (for example Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Bartlett & Chanock, 2003; Byram, 1997; Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Major, 2005; Pantelides, 1999; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 1995; Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000; Suen, 1998; Volet & Ang, 1998; Yang, 2002) identifies that NESB students need the benefit of both structural and social support and our study focused on these two themes. Structural support includes helping students gain explicit and implicit understanding of language issues, the dynamics of group work and intercultural competence. Social support includes establishing networks within and outside the university. All students have needs, but NESB students have specific needs such as language use and becoming familiar with cultural systems and processes. Social support may be a crucial factor in helping students achieve their academic goals.

2. Literature review

Research in applied linguistics over the last several decades has identified many factors that affect the university experience of NESB students (for example, McKay, 1984; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 1995; Tollefson, 1995), but there remains a common assumption among some academic staff that NESB students have only one main problem that may set them apart from native speakers: their standard of English. There is still a general lack of understanding of the effects of culture, separation from family, and isolation, on the physical and emotional adjustment of this student cohort (Bartlett & Chanock, 2003; Ping & Suen, 1998). There is a need, therefore, for university support structures to identify and overtly reflect the importance of both structural *and* social networks for NESB students to enable them to achieve positive outcomes.

2.1. Structural support

Successful communication is at the heart of education, by which teachers guide students to become competent learners. The goal is for *all* learners to become competent, and involves some effort in intercultural communication, including across gender, age, socio-economic and ESL backgrounds. It also needs to include a sensitivity to "differing perceptions, attitudes and interpretation" (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 2). Language can be difficult to interpret, even for native speakers, and meanings are inferred through cultural understandings. Successful communication, therefore, depends on shared assumptions and knowledge (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 1995).   If both students and staff value intercultural communication, their communication strategies are more likely to lead to positive outcomes.

Language issues are often identified by staff and students as being a major barrier to learning. NESB students may have gaps in their linguistic repertoire which cause them to modify their communication strategies, resulting in a heightened awareness of language difficulties and a corresponding loss of confidence. Learner-centred teaching, together with ESL support, may help to alleviate some of the anxiety and frustration of both teachers and NESB students alike. Bretag, Horrocks and Smith (2002, p. 59) outline specific strategies for teachers that may help NESB students to develop English language competence, such as providing explicit expectations about assessments, facilitating students' access to information in the texts and providing assistance with discipline-specific vocabulary. Hellmundt, Rifkin, and Fox (1998) suggest that teachers provide opportunities for NESB students to speak as an "expert" about their culture or experiences, and allow them plenty of time to answer questions. Beasley and Pearson (1999) found that students who were exposed to teaching strategies that emphasise language use, such as experiential activities, optional support tutorials, and multiple forms of assessment, experienced a marked improvement in their grades.

A strategy that appears to have mixed success is having students work in heterogeneous groups. There is some evidence that Australian and international tertiary students, when given the choice, tend not to mix in group work (Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000), but when they are encouraged to do so the results are positive. However, these opportunities are more likely to happen if they are deliberately "engineered as part of formal study" (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 9). Parks and Raymond (2004) note that international students tend to be relegated to subordinate roles within groups. Briguglio (2006, pp. 6-7), however, found that a simulated multinational team in a tertiary business studies class had the effect of sensitising all the participants to the role of culture in collaborative communication. The learning experience was carefully structured and emphasised the importance of listening skills, patience and understanding. Group work in this context has the ability to enhance interpersonal communication through team interactions, and to encourage "the opportunity to explore cultural and linguistic differences and different expectations and interpretations of group work" (Briguglio, p. 7). There is also the opportunity for any misunderstandings that might arise to be explored in a non-threatening way. Da Vita (2002) found that diverse perspectives helped to improve the overall marks for the groups.

Many tertiary educators feel challenged by NESB students and may not consider themselves qualified to support students' language and cultural needs. They may become frustrated by grammatical mistakes or inappropriate styles of writing, and having to spend extra time correcting them (Pantelides, 1999). Ballard and Clanchy (1997, p. 2) found that lecturers were often frustrated by perceived "weaknesses" and "poor English" in students and "the extra demands that fall upon them as teachers". This has the potential to cause ambivalence about the beneficial influence of internationalisation on higher education. Teaching staff are at the interface of these ideologies, and may experience some dissonance about their roles and responsibilities.

Cultural knowledge and assumptions are important aspects of all teacher-student interactions. When teachers and students share the same first language these aspects are often assumed to be unproblematic, although issues pertaining to, for example, gender and socio-economic factors, can still be present. With NESB students, however, cultural knowledge and assumptions by both teachers and learners may be more likely to lead to miscommunication (Wang & Le, 2006). According to Gerber and William (2002, p. 175) graduates should be able to communicate interculturally, as "cultural differences are indeed significant, especially in areas of dialogue and public participation". The intention of communication across cultures is "to create shared meanings" rather than "to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent behaviours" (Lustig & Koester, 1993, p. 58). To successfully interact, *all* participants require communicative competence which include "cognitive, affective and behavioural components" (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 3), which are able to transcend the psychological parameters of culture and are thus open to growth (Gudykunst, 1994).

2.2. Social support

Social aspects of university life can be very important for student well-being and sense of belonging. All students may initially feel lonely or vulnerable, which can impact on their studies, and universities often work hard to provide adequate and systematic pastoral and academic support.

There are many factors that influence how NESB students adjust to university life and overcome the sense of isolation from family and familiar culture. Suen (1998, p. 43) found that "loneliness due to family separation" was a recurring theme from interviewees, who "expressed feelings of depression, loneliness and helplessness", especially during their first few months at university, and felt that this affected their studies. Social activities and friendships with other students may help to relieve stress and aid cultural adjustment, and assimilation can be made easier by participation in extracurricular activities (Kauffmann, Martin, & Weaver, 1992). Universities may offer emotional support in the form of networks and "buddy" systems, where NESB students may find out about academic and social expectations, and available services, and feel less isolated (O'Donoghue, 1996). Other students of the same nationality can also be a source of emotional support. In some universities, this cohort may be sufficiently small or

distinct to be easily identified, while in others it is large and culturally diverse (Bartlett & Chanock, 2003, p. 11), but whatever the constraints or pressures of university life, social interaction can help students feel less isolated and give them a sense of belonging.

Major (2005, p. 86) highlights the "interpersonal and sociocultural challenges" in a study of Asian students in American universities, and she categorises three "dimensions of adjustment" for these students in their intrapersonal, socio-cultural and academic progress: initial expectations, dissonance and adjustment (p. 87). The results of this research show that Asian students' expectations were to remain mostly outside of the host culture as observers with no personal involvement, which the researcher calls "cultural and educational tourism". When they found this to be untenable, they retreated to "the safety net of the compatriot support system" (p. 88). In the dissonance stage, the students were in "emotional turmoil" and felt psychologically estranged and inadequate. Some considered leaving, but the "motivation and goal-setting (that) had brought some of them overseas in the first place" helped them to eventually adjust (pp. 88-89). Major's findings were that co-national support and networking help many NESB students to slowly adjust to higher education, and that these factors are far more important for success at university than linguistic proficiency (Major, 2005, p. 91). This suggests that support services which include cultural mediation and cross-cultural awareness among staff may be beneficial for NESB students.

3. Methods

This is case study research involving study of an issue explored in a particular setting (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). The study describes the social, academic and personal experiences of respondents at a rural university campus that is isolated from major cities and has a total student cohort of 1,200 of whom only 20 are NESB.

The aim of this study was to identify structural and social barriers and supports to NESB student success. The data for this paper comes from focus group discussions with a range of people at a regional campus: NESB students; academic, support and administrative staff at the university; and from external stake-holder agencies dealing with migrants and refugees: Settlement Officers and the Refugee Sanctuary Group. The study was approved by the La Trobe University Human Ethics Committee.

NESB students were identified from their enrolment data. These students were invited, by email and by letter mailed to their home, to participate in a one hour focus group discussion. To further encourage participation, posters and take-away reminder slips were put in places students congregated in such as the Student Services waiting room. Once students responded to the invitation, a suitable meeting date was negotiated. It was considered important to time the start of the project so that the data gathering period was at a time when students had been on campus long enough to feel familiar with the environment and yet were not in the busy weeks of their course. As recognition of attendance, participating students were given lunch and a $20 voucher. Financial and time issues impacted on the ability of students to attend. The focus group meetings coincided with a sudden increase in petrol prices and one student found it difficult to get to university because they could not afford to fuel their car. Three other students who were limited by time requested to respond by email. Their responses were accepted. In total 7 students (35% of the possible 20 NESB students enrolled at the campus) contributed.

The non-student participants were invited by email or through their regular meeting agenda to participate in the one hour focus group discussion. They were asked to email to indicate their willingness to participate and then a suitable meeting time was negotiated. The numbers of participants were:

Staff focus groups:	Academic staff	6
	Student Administration staff	3
	Student Services staff	6
External stake-holder focus groups:	Sanctuary Refugee Group	10
	Settlement Officers	2

Data was gathered from a total of 34 people in 7 separate focus groups.

In the focus group meetings ethics protocols were followed: the project was introduced and data storage explained, participants were given the opportunity to withdraw and were given an Informed Consent form to complete before discussion commenced. The discussion was guided by 4 semi-structured questions facilitated by a researcher. The questions were such as *Please tell me something about your experiences as a student/staff or agency member working with students; Are you aware of NESB students enrolled in tertiary study who have not completed or have withdrawn? What were the causes?* The rationale for the question design was underpinned by the desire to allow participants to cover a number of topics within the set time and discuss these without boundaries. The number of participants was limited and therefore generalisations cannot be broadly applied. However, researchers already had a working relationship with the participants and students readily contributed information that was highly personal and emotional, exposing private concerns and burdens.

The discussions were recorded and the responses were transcribed and collated into broad themes. The responses were listed and analysed to pick out main issues. Then they were grouped according to themes that emerged. The number of times an issue was mentioned was counted and, in this way, four major themes were identified. These were: academic barriers and supports (structural issues); language and cultural barriers and supports (floating between structural and social issues); and social and personal barriers and supports (social issues).

Unfortunately, the timeline of the project was delayed and the project had to span two academic years. As a result, some students had left the university so follow up focus group sessions with all the initial student participants was not possible. If further research in this area is conducted with a new cohort of students, the research team would endeavour to ensure that all the components of the research data were collected while the students were still attending university. This would enable all relevant research strategies to be used. The lack of opportunities to verify the data has limited the methodology and the conclusions that can be drawn. However, the transcripts and in situ notes and results for each focus group allowed the researchers to reflect on and study the emerging themes.

4. Discussion

In this section we present the main themes and conclusions which can be drawn from the focus group and other data. The collated responses to perceived barriers to success at university indicated two main areas of concern: a lack of both structural and social networks. Structural barriers identified include academic difficulties, level of technological expertise, and language and cultural issues. Social barriers identified include quality of social life during university study and personal factors such as financial impacts.

The following discussion is presented under themes that emerged from the focus group discussions: academic barriers, language and cultural barriers, social barriers and personal barriers. The data and themes collected from the focus group discussions are presented in Appendix A.

4.1. Academic barriers

Academic experiences varied for the participants. Some students lacked knowledge and experience of processes such as asking for extensions and understanding the format and style of various types of assignments. Not knowing "the system" in terms of extensions and resubmissions was also a barrier to their learning:

> "*It took me 6 months to understand the systems.*"
> "*I did not know you could ask for extensions.*"

Online tasks and difficulties with technology proved to be hurdles for students if they were inexperienced in using these methods for learning:

> "*I didn't know about the online quiz*".

> *"I didn't know [about] uni email. I had been here for a year and a half and one classmate said – you have student email and when we open it, 300 email."*

> *"You need to be shown four or five times."*

Some students did not have a clear idea of what was expected of them in group work, or lacked the confidence to join in:

> *"because I don't have enough [English] to contribute in a discussion with classmates."*

> *"When people tend to ask about your history and backgrounds as if they going to make certain judgements. The other thing is when someone makes assumptions about you without knowing you."*

This last comment highlights the sensitive nature of intercultural communication.

Students found group work intimidating, as their perception was that no one welcomed them in their group.

> *"Tutors could include ice-breaking activities before group work."*

University culture has the general expectation that students are proactive, autonomous learners who take charge of their own learning, but some NESB students had difficulty with this approach, and considered that they needed more direction from the lecturer. They were not confident with autonomy and self-reliance, and this may lead to feelings of frustration or depression (Searle & Ward, 1990).

Students may also have been previously educated through a teacher-centred methodology under which their expected role in the classroom would have been as passive, rather than active, learners:

> *"I think the students of NESB need to be encouraged that if you want to understand something fully, don't be afraid to ask."*

Students want tutors and lecturers to explicitly address their language needs in class and in explicit feedback on assignments.

> *"Tutors could offer more encouragement to students."*

> *"Comment on assignments could give feedback on English grammar and vocabulary."*

Academic staff members commented that they need to identify students who require assistance as early as possible, to support their learning. They considered the main barriers for NESB students are the lack of writing skills and the pressure of large assignments. They were open to the idea of giving smaller, more frequent assignments, and provided two suggestions to help students with essays: a template for essay writing, and to have "stepped submissions" such as a 50-word summary of articles, followed by an outline and then a draft. Staff also recognised that there are difficulties with group work for NESB students, but there were no suggestions of how to solve this problem. Teaching group work skills would help all students, not just NESB students.

Student Services staff identified academic barriers such as student reluctance to approach academic staff, because seeking help is perceived to be a sign of failure. Staff reported that students commented on a lack of feedback, and that more comments about their work might be beneficial. The difficulties of group work were again highlighted:

> *"Students often talk to me about how difficult it is to join in the group work. They may know all the stuff but they can't talk and they don't think people try hard enough to listen to them and understand them."*

Student Services staff also identified factors that are helpful to students, such as the small campus, the visibility of staff, and having friends. Their suggestions for improvement of support include having sufficient time to help students, following up on students having difficulties, and

working collaboratively with more academic staff to increase mindfulness of the NESB students' needs.

From the perspective of Student Administration staff, NESB students tend to support each other through peer assistance, but this may be because they do not know about administration services or how to access them. Staff suggested better marketing of support and assistance available, and social support and social events among the students, which may bring students from different year-groups together and may assist their learning.

4.2. Language and cultural barriers

Some students are proactive in developing their language and are keen to grasp opportunities to speak English:

> "*Should have more different culture friends, so, better with Aussies, speak more, better for my English.*"
>
> "*... I got local friends to spend time with, sometimes I talk with lecturers and tutors not just academic but some daily life talk.*"
>
> "*[talk] with my friends – playing poker or with footy boys, they are nice and we talk lots of slang.*"

The dominant issue mentioned by students, academic staff and support staff was the ability to understand both formal and informal language, particularly vocabulary and terminology, accents, and the use of slang and colloquialisms by lecturers:

> "*Sometimes the lecturers use slang in class and we don't really understand.*"
>
> "*The first ... month was really very hard because the accent ... was completely different.*"

At a regional campus, co-cultural colleagues may be sparse. Students need to find other points of connection, such as sports and recreational activities, on which to build networks. A major factor in successful adjustment, outlined by Borland and Pearce (2002), seems to be the amount of interaction and social support between national and international students (Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000). This is associated with lower stress levels (Redman & Bunyi, 1993) and contributes to psychological, social and academic adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990). Students in focus groups commented that those who did not speak English regularly outside the university were not as confident of their language skills as those who had more opportunities to use English. Videoconferencing was an example given in the Student Services focus group as a problematic area for less fluent students, possibly because of the use of colloquial language, or accent, if the lecturer was a non-native speaker. Group work is a vehicle for student interaction yet group work was also seen as a language barrier for students, as well as an academic one. They reported encountering communication difficulties in group situations, mainly because of a lack of confidence and fluency, and difficulties with colloquialisms and informal language:

> "*... because my English wasn't very good and my accent and pronunciation was not good so I tried to avoid asking questions*".

Cultural differences were specifically mentioned in two student groups, but were not made explicit, and may thus be attributed to several factors, such as communication problems, learning styles and difficulties with group work. Culturally, they may also expect teacher-student interactions to be a formal relationship:

> "*Sometimes [it would help] to talk about differences in other cultures*".

Students who were used to the support of a whole cultural community around them found life lonely, and not having any friends was the reason for one person dropping out of university.

NESB students are as diverse as the ESB student body and have a range of prior experience and motivations, and may have different expectations of lecturers. Some students will be proactive and ask questions:

> "*it is important to speak language of the country – make an effort, swapping between two languages is tiring and makes it harder to learn*"

> "*I found [it was important] … good communicate with lecturer is very important, they will give you some information about how to study well for each subject and how to prepare for the exam, but students have to try hard by themselves, uni is more free time, so, to have a goal for each semester is essential*"

However, others will wait to be engaged by their teacher. One student mentioned that he knew he was able to ask questions, but:

> "*was never brave enough*".

Another believed that by asking a question you showed your stupidity:

> "*Being from a different background you may not understand the teacher.*"
>
> "*maybe in other countries if you ask questions a lot they think you are dull in mind and not clever. So you don't ask questions*".

Student Services staff also noted reluctance by some students to ask for help until they were at a crisis point, whereas a problem might be more easily solved before it got to that stage. The University's student support system relies on students choosing to access the services, and some students, even those who fail, do not elect to use the Academic Skills Unit. Some of the reasons for students not using the services provided were: lack of perceived need, lack of time and lack of convenience.

4.3. Social barriers

Some NESB students felt lonely and homesick, with no sense of "community". This lack of connection made them feel shy and embarrassed and increased the difficulties they had in making new friends:

> "*not having friends is difficult. If I'm not at uni I'm just at home watching TV or sleeping. There is no community*".

In the literature review, we noted that loneliness and feelings of vulnerability can impact strongly on students unless or until they can overcome these challenges (Novera, 2004; Suen, 1998). NESB students in the dissonance stage, usually occurring in the first six weeks of semester, seek "the safety net of the compatriot support system" (Major, 2005, p. 86). At a regional campus, a local compatriot support system is unlikely, and students faced with challenges and feelings of isolation may consider leaving. If these students have built up networks by Week 6, however, this may assist them through their adjustment to higher education. The student focus groups provided insights that might inform the university support systems, suggesting buddy systems and peer mentoring involving students in their second and third year helping new students to understand university expectations could be effective ways to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Some students attempted to be proactive in making social connections but their overtures were not always successful:

> "*It was hard sometimes not a lot of people came to sit near me. Even if I sat next to someone next time they did not come back to sit next to me.*"

One student mentioned that having friends and means of transport were two factors that helped him to break down social barriers.

Academic staff recognised that students are unlikely to build new networks on their own and that the university has a role to play by providing social or sporting activities. Social networks are likely to assist in developing academic peer supports.

Student Services and Student Administration staff also suggested social support from within the local community and help from NESB students who are further along in their studies as social events might help integration and building relationships. In their opinion, the first few weeks for new undergraduates may be crucial in providing a nurturing environment. Social activities are highlighted in the literature as being helpful for relieving stress and cultural adjustment (Kauffmann, Martin, & Weaver 1992) and may help alleviate loneliness and the sense of

isolation. The importance of "knowing people" was a common theme articulated by Student Services staff, and this supports the findings of Major (2005, p. 86).

4.4. Personal barriers

Some students admitted to shyness and embarrassment about meeting new people and making friends, and lack of confidence also affected them in class:

> "It's hard for NESB Student to find a friend to talk to when they feel lonely, like, some Aussies are working, and maybe it's because of the background, so it's hard to make friends".

One student commented that it took the whole of his first year to feel comfortable in his academic and social interactions. Another problem was shyness about asking for help or asking questions in class:

> "*when I asked some students they told me – you should ask the teacher. But I'm shy so I didn't want to*".

Family issues were also nominated as personal barriers, as cultural orientations to family may be more pressing than academic success. One participant had become a father again and was finding it hard to balance all the different aspects of his life. For refugee students, family and financial issues can be very pressing: some are responsible for supporting their families and extended networks living overseas in difficult circumstances. One student considered leaving so that he could earn money quickly to send to his family, who were facing famine. The sensitive understanding of staff was instrumental in the student remaining to complete his course. Staff need students to alert them to issues that affect their studies, and university processes need to be flexible enough to cater for students' unexpected circumstances. Refugee students frequently reported that they had missed the information about Commonwealth Scholarships and had not applied for these in their first year, thus missing out on this financial support. Student Services staff commented that most institutions are not successful in reaching all students who have personal issues such as with accommodation, funding, family problems and social integration, especially if students have no peer support or mentors within their cohort.

5. Conclusions and recommendations

This research has been limited by the following factors:
- This is a small regional campus with a small percentage of NESB students, and maintaining anonymity was a challenge.
- A lack of ability to confidently draw generalisations from the data.

Nevertheless, the study has given voice to an often unaddressed student cohort. Further research to provide a point of comparison with other campuses would assist in more effective provision of pathways and supports at every campus.

The implications of the findings raise questions about the effectiveness of systemic supports provided for NESB students, and whether this support may be more efficiently targeted with present levels of funding and staffing. Student Services staff were able to highlight the main reasons for students withdrawing from courses as relating to finances, health reasons, family issues, discrimination and academic difficulties. While these problems are not relevant to NESB students only, they represent a challenge for university staff.

Successful intercultural interactions for NESB students need to be based on awareness and understanding of equity, difference, values among cultures, and viewing people from their cultural perspectives. Studies have shown that NESB students are more accommodating in their communication among different cultures than native speakers (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 8). There is a need for all ESB students and university staff to have a similar strong orientation.

Co-national support and networking among students (Major, 2005), may increase confidence and self-belief, but in a regional setting co-national support may not be available. One student commented that being forced to network with people outside their co-national group is

beneficial to their English language development and intercultural competence. Students can connect through their learning – their subject is a shared need and interest, as can be sport, pastimes and social interests.

Effective learning and teaching strategies already in place should be systematically promulgated and adopted. Appropriate strategies may include:

- facilitating sharing of good practice by academics,
- workshops to raise cultural and linguistic awareness for staff and developing intercultural communication skills,
- academic encouragement and guidance for group work and discussion sessions, including assessment of intercultural communication and competence inherent in group work,
- peer learning,
- communication and feedback from academics including the provision of advance copies of lecture notes, support materials and specialist vocabulary lists, teaching genre-specific skills, and modelling of formats and genres.

The goal for successful intercultural communication is for *all* learners to become competent, and involves developing sensitivity to "differing perceptions, attitudes and interpretation" (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 2). Students express emotion around learning – the need to feel safe, respected, to "belong" before they can take a risk to ask a question, state an opinion and become an active participant in a class. Academic staff should include activities to build social relationships in their classes early in the semester, such as recognising and exploring cultural differences as a point of value.

Online delivery modes are both helpful and problematic to NESB students. Staff can assist students to become more confident by being aware of potential barriers faced by NESB students in the use of technology. Computer classes and support for e-learning should be systematically provided. Being shown how to do something only once may not be enough for students to internalise all the concepts.

Students' English language needs include the opportunities and resources to acquire proficiency. Social activities, networks, and buddy systems may be helpful at both classroom and campus level in the first six weeks of semester. New students could benefit from communication with local students before enrolment, possibly utilising a university facilitated e-friends social networking program.

The findings and recommendations point to the conclusion that social and structural scaffolding for NESB students should be embedded in curricula where appropriate and systematically included in university processes starting before the university experience, continuing through and extending from it.
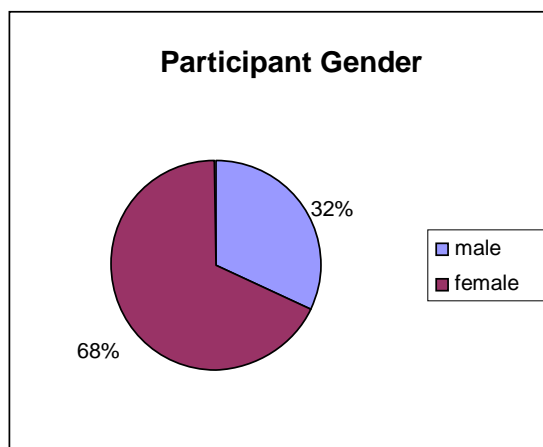
Appendix A. Focus Group Data and Themes

This appendix outlines the Focus Group participant characteristics, and the questions and themes that emerged from the discussions.
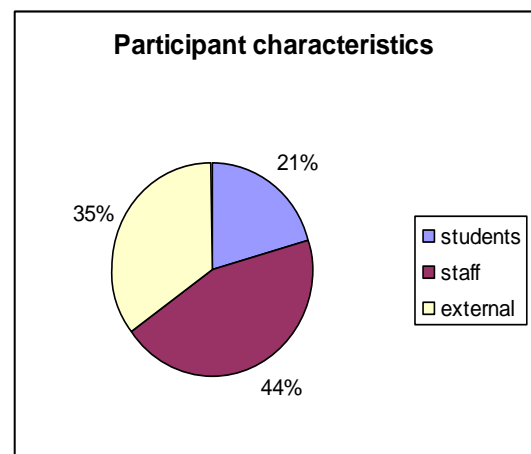
A.1. Participant characteristics

Seven focus group discussions were held and three e-mail responses were also received. The nature and the number of participants in each focus group are detailed in Table 1 and Figures 1 and 2.

Table 1. Number of participants per focus group.

Number of focus groups	Participants	Number of participants
2	NESB students focus groups	4
	NESB students e-mailed responses	3
3	Staff focus groups:	
	Academic staff	6
	Student Administration staff	3
	Student Services staff	6
2	External stake-holder focus groups:	
	Q Sanctuary Refugee Group	10
	Settlement Officers	2
TOTAL		34

Figure 1. Focus group participant gender.

Figure 2. Focus group participant characteristics.

A.2. Results

In Table 2, the results of the focus group discussions are collated into broad themes under the questions asked. The themes have been identified by how many groups mentioned each theme, rather than by the number of times each theme was mentioned in total.

Table 2. Themes emerging from focus groups.

Question 1:	Are you aware of NESB students who wish to enrol in tertiary study and have faced barriers? What are the barriers?	
	Barriers to enrolling in/going to university	**No. of mentions**
	lack of knowledge of processes and systems	4
	financial	3
	lack of support/encouragement from family	3
	no/not adequate ESL support at school	2
	not knowing about Albury-Wodonga	1
	accommodation	1
	childcare	1
Question 2:	**Are you aware of NESB students enrolled in tertiary study who have not completed or have withdrawn? What were the causes?**	
	Question 2 generated much discussion regarding the barriers faced by students during their studies. The responses are collated under the main themes identified.	
	Reasons for withdrawing	**No. of mentions**
	course too hard/academic difficulties/low English level	7
	family issues/loneliness/homesick	5
	planned to use as stepping stone/pathway	3
	financial	2
	transport	1
	Barriers at university	**No. of mentions**
	General	
	systems are different/don't know what to do	5
	finances	4
	discrimination/patronising	2
	poor public transport	2
	access to/knowledge of technology	2
	family expectations	1
	Social life	
	no friends/family/community in A/loneliness/homesickness	10
	balancing family life and roles	1
	student association not effective	1

Table 2 cont'd

Barriers at university	No. of mentions
Academic	
getting students to realise they need help/identifying students who need help early	4
group-work difficulties	3
student's lack of knowledge re systems eg resubmit, extensions	2
casual staff's lack of knowledge re systems	2
systems pressures/academic work-load	2
difficulties with assignments	1
lack of/poor feedback from lecturers	1
Language skills	
understanding language/new vocabulary & terminology	11
assumed level of competence	2
academic writing a difficult skill	1
video-lectures hard to understand	1
oral presentations are daunting	1
Cultural differences	
embarrassed/shy to ask questions/for help	5
cultural differences	2
perceptions re teacher's role	1
way of learning very different	1

Question 3:   What ways of catering for individual differences to support NESB students are you aware of lecturers/tutors/ administrators using?

Answers to question 3 included strategies used by students themselves, not only those used by staff. The strategies have been collated into broad groups by common theme.

Things that <u>have</u> helped	No. of mentions
Good communication with lecturers, lecturers who give feedback, have time for students, look at drafts	10
Student Services available on campus/ units/ Bridging Program/ chaplaincy	6
People who are helpful, explain things, tell you how to do things/designated student advisers	5
Staggered & stepped assignments/ more, but smaller assignments/ assignments marked quickly	4
Information about campus and the systems and services on campus	4
Peer mentoring/ pairing students/ study buddies	3
Good information/links to relevant readings/ explicit reading lists/templates for essays	3

Table 2 cont'd

Things that <u>have</u> helped	No. of mentions
Meeting other people/ getting to know people/ familiar faces	3
Systems in place like being able to get extensions /use dictionaries in exams	2
Opportunities for activities/ overseas study tour/sports	2
Make sure tutors have info/e-mailing 'helpful tips' to staff	2
For presentations I practiced aloud to myself	1
Having a plan on how to study	1
Unit drop-in times that can only be booked on the day	1
I could work part-time and support my family	1

Question 4: **What supports, social or structural, could Y put in place to assist NESB students to overcome these difficulties?**

The strategies have been collated into broad groups according to common themes.

Things that <u>could</u> help	No. of mentions
Building relationships/ helping students network	7
Linking students to Settlement Officers/ Settlement Officers to attend campus	6
Information, support, relationships with Humanitarian visa students/ Welcome Kit	4
Having someone to explain the systems/ procedures/ technology for me	4
Strategies for support prior to enrolment/ links with year 11 and 12 students/ info to parents	3
Better, more personal communication with students arranged by lecturers/ more time for NESB students	3
Provide extra courses/ skills, to help you continue your studies	3
Information re services available	3
Social support with local community, community groups	2
Campus webpage links/ include links in VTAC, UAC guide	2
Point of contact for students to discuss options, courses, pathways, careers counselling	2
Social activities/ having dinner together/ early in the year	2
Checking that students get what they are entitled to	1
University to provide old computers to students	1
Not being afraid to ask	1
Including communication subjects	1
Lecturers to ensure students are included in groups	1
Provide subjects you can do instead of wasting a year if you fail (nursing)	1
Provide a longer course for finding jobs with interview skills, time management etc	1

Table 2 cont'd

Things that <u>could</u> help	No. of mentions
Lecturers should be more aware of students of NESB and their needs	1
Students of NESB to get the same help as international students get (eg with accommodation)	1
Hold 'mindfulness' sessions for students	1
Having time to follow up on students in crisis or having difficulties	1
Working more collaboratively with academic staff	1
Revamp the Student Association "Hangar"	1

Question 5:	**Are there any other comments you would like to add?**
	As the focus group discussions were broad-ranging there were no additional comments from participants.

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