

# International student transitioning experiences: Student voice

Sally Ashton-Hay<sup>a</sup>, Peter Wignell<sup>b</sup> and Kelly Evans<sup>c</sup>

a. Lecturer Teaching and Learning, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Southern Cross University, Gold Coast campus, Queensland, Australia

b. Research Fellow, School of Education, Faculty of Humanities, Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia

c. Lecturer Teaching and Learning, Centre for Teaching and Learning, Southern Cross University, Lismore campus, New South Wales, Australia

Email: [sally.ashton-hay@scu.edu.au](mailto:sally.ashton-hay@scu.edu.au)

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As Australian higher education institutions seek to internationalise and increase enrolments of international students, the student experience is crucial for ensuring a sustainable future via delivery of quality learning, development of English language standards and retention of enrolments. This project aimed to capture student voice in order to better understand the early challenges students face, the support they value and the adequacy of current services benchmarked against the Good Practice Principles (GPP) (DEEWR, 2009). With a focus on English language proficiency, a mixed method approach surveyed 140 students across three campuses, followed by focus groups to capture student voice and provide a current snapshot of international student experiences and perceptions. The key findings confirm that international students are challenged with writing, speaking and listening and also that they believed more opportunities to interact using English would benefit them. Another finding indicated the incongruity between prior learning experiences and basic academic literacy skills as well as technology for learning skills. The project found that although the university has taken steps towards meeting the GPP, a broader university-wide approach is needed. Recommendations include providing technology-essentials seminars; embedding opportunities in the curriculum for students to develop communication skills, cultural competence and academic literacy; and increasing collaboration between content staff and academic language and learning specialists. Academic Skills support was one of the university services most valued by international students, and they particularly appreciated team teaching by Academic Skills staff and content lecturers together.

**Key Words:** international students; first year transition; academic language and learning, English language proficiency, higher education, student voice.

## 1. Introduction

Globalisation and internationalisation are pervasive influences in higher education today. Students from a greater diversity of language and cultural backgrounds are seeking opportunities through higher education qualifications in order to ensure a future career that is competitive and transnational. As universities increasingly become internationalised (Alexander, Argent, & Spencer, 2008), the core business of delivering education is tested to meet the learning needs of diverse clients. Innovations in technology for teaching and learning continue to grow alongside moves to internationalise curriculum and to develop graduate attributes. The Bradley Report

(Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) emphasises increasing migrant populations, changed government funding models, and plans to develop ‘flow-through of students from secondary to higher education’ as well as wider participation for lower socio-economic groups. Higher education is under pressure to maintain a delicate balance between increasing and retaining enrolments, marketing for full-fee paying international students, teaching to diversity and internationalising the curriculum, all within the context of declining government funding. The importance of cross-cultural understanding and competence in teaching to diversity has never been more crucial in delivering quality learning experiences in higher education today.

By choosing to study in Australia, international students face major changes in language and culture as well as adjustment to a new learning environment. This transition experience has the potential to influence students either positively or negatively, particularly in their first year when culture shock can be more significant. The potential benefits for the student are an international degree, improved English language ability and a cultural experience. However, recent studies demonstrate that even though English as a Second Language (ESL) students may be able to meet minimum requirements for university entry, considerable effort on their part is necessary to successfully complete the majority of tertiary courses (Baik & Grieg, 2009; Birrell & Healy, 2008; Bretag, 2007; Pantelides, 1999). Basic English language skills or the lack of English language resource may cause not only frustration for lecturers (Bretag, 2007; Watty, 2007) but also for the students themselves (Ransom, Larcombe, & Baik, 2005). Song (2006) found that students who participated in content-linked programs of academic language and learning support improved their chance of academic success. The discipline-specific content-based assistance programs served to ‘accelerate academic English skills development, enhance academic performance and facilitate academic success’ (p. 434). Most Australian universities offer various forms of academic support for international students (Barthel, 2014) and have also implemented academic language assessment tests for non-English speaking students to identify those at risk and requiring more specialised support.

International student transitioning experiences are an important indicator of quality standards in education for diversity, inclusion and retention. Even with protective government standards, legal frameworks and university goals for internationalisation and equity, international students still face considerable challenges. Some of these challenges may impinge on student health and well-being, as well as overall success in university studies. Many of these challenges are well documented in the literature which will be discussed in the next section. In view of the difficulties that students encounter early in their studies, Academic Language and Learning (ALL) staff at an Australian university decided to conduct research on their own international students’ experiences, to guide their provision of academic support. This study is significant for its emphasis on student voice which highlights the perceived challenges and benefits of a higher education experience by international students and provides key information on the quality and usefulness of student services as well as the uptake or lack of uptake of such services. The study also highlighted English language proficiency and how international students cope, not only in their studies but also in Australian culture.

## **2. Literature Review**

Studies detailing the many transitioning challenges international students face are familiar in the literature. These include studies from the perspective of the student (Andrade, 2006; Novera, 2004; Sawir et al., 2012) and the perspective of the academic faculty (Andrade, 2006; Anyanwu, 2004) which indicate that ESL international students experience multiple problems with inadequate English Language Proficiency (ELP), impacting on their ability to communicate effectively inside and outside of the classroom (Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011) and adjust culturally (Campbell & Li, 2008; Sawir et al., 2012, 2008), resulting in academic stress (Phakiti & Li, 2011; Sawir et al., 2012). These challenges are exacerbated by cultural barriers and lack of language support (Campbell & Li, 2008), with lecturers reported as being “confounded by students who struggle with language” (Murray 2010, p. 1) and facing difficulties adjusting to the differing needs and characteristics of international students whilst attempting to also satisfy the academic expectations of their institution (Caruana, as cited in Leask & Carroll, 2011; Ryan & Car-

roll, 2005) and employers (Australian Education International (AEI), 2010). Increasingly, research reports concerns from both academic and prospective employers that levels of communicative competence are inadequate (Murray, 2012). According to the AEI (2010) employer perception survey, English language competency is seen as the most important factor considered when employing graduates, and yet it is also the greatest area of concern. More than 70% of employers surveyed felt that English language and communication skills should be an area of greater focus in Australian education (AEI, 2010). The early months of adjustment, referred to as the transition phase, are crucial. While ELP is a vital factor in facilitating transition to life and study in Australia (Prescott & Hellsten, as cited in Sawir et al., 2012), “proficiency is at its lowest...[and] students face the most marked challenges” (Sawir et al., 2012, p. 450).

To date, there have been few Australian studies that focus on the role of ELP in international student transition (Sawir et al., 2012), highlighting the need to further investigate students’ actual ELP and communicative competence at the time of arrival, the resultant ability of these students to adjust and the need for ELP support. Another current gap in the literature is research investigating the experience of international students as they engage with online learning, the potential challenges they encounter and the resultant need for support. It is crucial that the needs, perceptions and experiences of the international student be considered (Andrade, 2006; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Hellsten, 2008; Montgomery & Clifford, 2011) to best ensure the development of appropriate and effective models of support to both enhance the international student experience and optimise successful academic and English proficiency outcomes.

In order to meet diverse student learning needs, many universities are expanding internationalised teaching delivery with technology via online, distance and on-campus through a variety of blended modes. Students born after 1980 were commonly believed to have grown up with computers and therefore be technology-savvy (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005; Palfrey & Gasser, 2008). Prensky (2001) defined these students as Digital Natives, also known as Millennials or Net Generation (Margaryan, Littlejohn, & Vojt, 2011) while those born before 1980 are considered Digital Immigrants. Technology enhanced education has become a growing trend to appeal to digital native, net generation university students.

Despite the trend, Taylor and Newton (2013) recently found that students’ “abilities and agilities in a technology enabled environment were sometimes overestimated” (p. 56). Another study (Habib, Johannesen, & Øgrim, 2014) discovered that technology-assisted learning exposes international students’ weaker skills such as academic writing. The Habib study emphasises the importance of using technology to engage international students through the use of images, sounds and films which were less restricting. Margaryan, Littlejohn and Vojt (2011) claim that students’ expectations of learning are influenced by how their lecturers approach teaching and that students may actually have a limited understanding of how technology supports learning. Even with internationalised approaches to teaching and learning, students from non-parallel education backgrounds where technology is not used for learning may face additional challenges. A student who may be considered technologically savvy with mobile phones, social media and video games, may be less familiar with the ways to use technology for learning. Habib, Johannesen and Øgrim (2014) state the “need to open the black boxes of technology” (p. 196) and accommodate the international students’ level of digital literacy, degree of understanding of academic and administrative language and the types of technology used in communication. With the speed of change in teaching with technology, international higher education must ensure that even digital natives can keep pace.

The internationalisation of education, in its various guises, has seen continued enrolments of international students in Australian higher education institutions. In addition to the well documented adjustment challenges international students face (Anwanyu, 2004; Andrade, 2006; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Ryan & Carroll, 2005; Sawir et al., 2012; Zhang & Brunton, 2007), it is evident that ELP testing systems do not provide a reliable indication of a student’s ability to cope with the requirements of studying in English (Arkoudis et al., 2012; Picard, 2007; Sawir et al., 2012; Tananuraksakul & Hall, 2011). This means that these students may be entering with ELP lower than that reported, exacerbating difficulties (Andrade, 2006; Novera, 2004; Sawir et al., 2012), impacting their ability to adjust and resulting in academic stress (Phakiti & Li, 2011;

Sawir et al., 2012), and placing pressure on lecturers who face difficulties adjusting to the needs of international students who struggle with English (Caruana, as cited in Leask & Carroll, 2011; Murray, 2010; Ryan & Carroll, 2005). In addition, employers express a need for "...more to be done to improve the language and communication skills and work experience of international graduates to prepare them for the workforce" (Lawson, 2012, p. 2).

For these reasons as well as the wider participation agenda in higher education from under-represented groups, the transition experience has gained prominence. Gale and Parker (2014) reiterate how future research in transitioning experiences needs to take into consideration the "students' lived reality, not just institutional and/or systemic interests" (p. 747). While arguing that 'transition' is not well theorised and has been dependent upon three distinctive approaches in the literature, Gale and Parker define transition as "the capability to navigate change" (p. 737). The authors offer a typology of student transition including induction, also termed T<sub>1</sub>; development (T<sub>2</sub>) and becoming (T<sub>3</sub>). Induction typically involves sequences of adjustment and inculcation while development focuses more on the transformation of student identity. Becoming, according to the authors, "remains more a proposition, yet to be fully expressed in HE research, policy and practice" (p. 735).

Transitioning experiences require language, cultural and educational support to effectively help students navigate change. There is a wealth of literature discussing approaches to ELP support provision and while some argue it is disciplinary academics who are most influential in supporting ELP relevant to their subject (Carroll, 2005; Ryan, 2005), many authors advocate an integrative approach which sees language specialists collaborate with disciplinary academics to embed ELP support into the disciplines (Arkoudis et al., 2012; Sawir et al., 2012; Webb, 2012). Numerous case studies report on the success of an integrative model (Ashton-Hay & Roberts, 2012; Evans et al., 2009; Baik & Greig, 2009; Frohman, 2012) and reveal policy-driven institutional support and funding as essential enabling factors to allow the resources and ongoing collaborative relationships required. An important requisite is that disciplinary academics have the time and motivation to collaborate with English language specialists and potentially change aspects of their curriculum and pedagogy to make them more linguistically and culturally accessible (Arkoudis et al., 2012; Webb, 2012).

There is still a long way to go before 'best practice' becomes practicable within the formalised curriculum (Murray, 2010) suggesting that, in the interim, reliance on guidelines such as the GPP is important and that future research concentrates on making the move from theorising to identifying and testing practical solutions (Andrade, 2006) to address the challenges faced in internationalising the curriculum. These challenges involve curriculum and pedagogical design that enable both cultural and linguistic accessibility and awareness in order to achieve the desired outcomes internationalisation of education may provide. Originally funded by the Australian government, the GPP aimed to enhance best practice in academic study and English language proficiency in Australian universities. The set of Good Practice Principles (see Appendix B) responded to growing awareness of the importance of ELP for employers and the potential of international graduates to meet the skills shortages in the Australian workforce. The GPP are guidelines to identified best practice in the field and intended to inform individual university policies and practice. The GPP offer a valuable benchmark to the field because a university can rate their own policies and practices against these guidelines. The GPP have now been developed into the similar English Language Standards for Higher Education which apply to all students in the Australian Higher Education sector. This study sought to enquire into our students' experiences of transition to studying in English, and to see how these experiences relate to widely propounded guidelines for ensuring English language proficiency in Australian universities: the Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities (Department of Education Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR), 2009).

Consequently, the International Student Transitioning Experiences study sought to investigate international students' transitioning experiences at Southern Cross University by using the GPP as a framework for evaluation. Specifically, the study sought to address the following questions:

- What are the particular transitioning challenges for international students?
- Which university services are students accessing and why?
- How effectively does Southern Cross University benchmark against the Good Practice Principles (DEEWR, 2009)?

### 3. Methodology

A research design using a mixed method approach was implemented to provide a broad snapshot of the 2013 Session One international student intake and to drill down into their experiences. At that time, 16.14% of students were international from 79 countries with the majority of students coming from China, Singapore and Hong Kong. Other participants in the international student cohort were from Japan, India, Germany, France, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Taiwan, Indonesia, Bhutan, Sweden, Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Zimbabwe, and Canada.

This mixed methodology provided a broad overview as well as a more detailed picture of transitioning experiences at the university. The methodology is framed on the GPP (DEEWR, 2009) which were designed for international students and include the more current and similar English Language Standards for Higher Education (DEEWR, 2010), developed for all students from the GPP. The GPP (see Appendix B) identify known examples of best practice in higher education to benchmark against. Readers might adopt a similar method to assist reflection on the effectiveness of individual practices related to national findings about what universities should provide and where there may be gaps. The emphasis on student voice helps to benchmark how effectively these principles have been implemented in university practice from a student perspective.

Qualitative data were gathered from 140 open ended survey questions and three focus group interviews. Quantitative data were gathered on demographics from enrolment information, grade results, and self-report on English language proficiency scores across three campuses to provide an overview of three international student cohorts.

The cohorts included: 1) undergraduates; 2) postgraduates doing coursework; and 3) 2+2 students from offshore partner institutions in China and including 2+2 students completing 10 weeks of English for Academic Purposes study in the university English Language Centre. The 2+2 students complete two years of their degree in their home institution and then complete the final two years of their degree program in Australia. Since this study was undertaken, Chinese government policies have changed to 3+1 programs where students complete three years in the home institution and one year in Australia.

A survey was the first instrument used to gather data on three campuses of the university during weeks one and two. The survey questionnaire is included in Appendix A and was circulated to students in each cohort. The survey questions (See Appendix A) related to education background, IELTS scores, years of studying English, perceived level of English, perceived best and weakest English language skills, opinions on whether assistance with study would be needed, the student's intention to seek help with university support services, which programs were considered useful, and the student's planned strategies to improve English language skills. A total of 140 surveys were completed and returned by hand or electronically via email and indicate students' predictions and intentions rather than actual behaviour.

The focus group interviews took place in weeks 10-12 across three campuses and are more indicative of actual behaviours and experiences. Focus groups were convened with representatives from each cohort to elicit more information and probe student opinion. Groups of 7-12 students from each cohort and campus participated in discussions for approximately one hour and were provided with lunch and refreshments after the meeting. The focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed and circulated to all participants for consensus. The quantitative data were analysed for counts and percentages while the qualitative data were analysed for emerging themes and frequency patterns across campuses. University ethics approval and protocol were also complied with.

## 4. Findings

The emphasis on student voice highlights the perceived challenges and benefits of a higher education experience by international students and provides key information on the quality and usefulness of student services as well as the uptake or lack of uptake of such services. The project also highlighted English language proficiency and how international students cope, not only in their studies but also in Australian culture. The main findings were similar across three campuses and relate to the lack of understanding and experience with technology enabled learning; the challenges of listening and speaking skills due to insufficient academic vocabulary and cultural competence, the pace of native speech and the Australian accent; as well as the lack of academic literacy involving how to structure, format and present academic assignments. Most international students valued and appreciated university core services, especially Academic Skills support for assignments. The key findings will be analysed in this paper with recommendations for improving the equity in teaching and learning environments at Australian universities.

The findings across three campuses were remarkably similar with only minor differences and represent a broad snapshot of the international student transition experience. The survey findings will be reported first, followed by findings from the focus group discussions.

### 4.1. Survey findings

The survey provided students' views and evaluations of a variety of topics including their perceptions of their own English language skills. Table 1 shows that sixty-nine percent of respondents believed their level of English at the time of enrolment was 'average' (37%) or 'could improve' (32%). Only seven students (5%) claimed their English was 'excellent' and 22% responded that their English was 'good'. The purpose of this question was to gauge how students perceived their own English language proficiency in relation to their unit results for the session.

**Table 1.** Level of English reported by students at the different campuses and at different levels of study. (Lis = Lismore Campus; GC = Gold Coast Campus; Coffs = Coffs Harbour Campus; u/grad = undergraduate; p/grad = postgraduate.)

	Lis u/grad	Lis 2+2	Lis p/grad	GC u/grad	GC 2+2	GC p/grad	Coffs	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>%</b> N=140
Excellent	1			1	1	5		<b>7</b>	<b>5%</b>
Good	6	1	1	4	1	16	1	<b>30</b>	<b>22%</b>
Average	7	14	2	7	12		10	<b>52</b>	<b>37%</b>
Could improve	1	15	1	3	16	1	8	<b>45</b>	<b>32%</b>
Poor		2				1		<b>3</b>	<b>2%</b>
No re- sponse		1		1	1			<b>3</b>	<b>2%</b>

The majority of Gold Coast postgraduates rated their English as 'good' while most of the Chinese 2+2 students rated their English as 'average' or 'could improve'. Another survey question asked how many years students had studied the English language. Sixty-one per cent had been studying English between six and fifteen years prior to international study. The most common response was six to ten years (46%) with 15% having studied English for one to five years prior to coming to Australia.

Survey questions required students to choose their best and weakest English language macro skill. In response to best English skill, 30% listed 'reading' and 25% 'listening', while 32% responded that 'writing' was their weakest skill, followed by speaking (26%) as shown in Tables 2 and 3. The Gold Coast postgraduates rated 'reading' as their weakest skill. This was interesting because this cohort made the most errors in completing their surveys. Survey question ten

asked about a satisfactory or not satisfactory rating for English language skills and to give two or three reasons. Several postgrads wrote 'yes' but without reasons so it was not clear whether they rated their English as satisfactory or not. Another opinion question asked 'what do you expect to gain from your postgraduate study at SCU?' and again, students wrote 'yes'. When asked for a student identification number, postgraduates filled in their mobile phone number. The mistakes may have been caused by rushing to complete the survey or not reading carefully enough. If the errors were the result of misreading or misunderstanding the question, it substantiates the postgraduates' weakest language skill choice. Some students gave several responses when completing these questions so the total number of responses *N* differs slightly from the total number of students where marked with an asterisk.

**Table 2.** Best English skill reported by students at the different campuses and at different levels of study.

	Lis u/grad	Lis 2+2	Lis p/grad	GC u/grad	GC 2+2	GC p/grad	Coffs	TOTAL	% N=142*
Reading	6	12	3	4	8	3	7	43	30%
Writing	1	10	1	3	6	4	3	28	20%
Speaking	3	4		5	4	13	5	34	24%
Listening	6	7		3	11	3	5	35	25%
No response				1	1			2	1%

\* *N* is higher than the total number of students in this case because some students gave more than one response.

**Table 3.** Weakest English skill reported by students at the different campuses and at different levels of study.

	Lis u/grad	Lis 2+2	Lis p/grad	GC u/grad	GC 2+2	GC p/grad	Coffs	TOTAL	% N=151*
Reading	3	8		3	4	9	2	29	19%
Writing	8	9	1	7	10	7	6	48	32%
Speaking	2	8	1	5	13	5	5	39	26%
Listening	3	13	2	1	6	1	8	34	22%
No response						1		1	1%

\* *N* is higher than the total number of students in this case because some students gave more than one response.

Another survey question asked whether students thought they would need help with their study or assignments. Interestingly, 57% of students claimed they would need help with their study and assignments while 38% responded 'maybe' and 5% said 'no', as shown in Table 4. The 2+2 cohort responded affirmatively to this question presumably because they had rated their ELP as 'average' or could improve'. Even though the postgraduates rated their English 'good', their intention assumed a need for help with their studies. Table 1 and Table 4 compare a student perceived ELP with an intention to seek help with study and assignments.

**Table 4.** Number of students reporting that they will need help with study/assignments.

	Lis u/grad	Lis 2+2	Lis p/grad	GC u/grad	GC 2+2	GC p/grad	Coffs	TOTAL	% N=140
Yes	8	23	2	9	12	11	15	80	57%
No	1			2	1	2	1	7	5%
Maybe	6	10	2	5	17	10	3	53	38%

The next survey question asked students ‘Will you attend University support programs?’ Table 5 shows the results that 58% planned to attend support programs while 39% responded ‘maybe’ and only 3% responded negatively. A small number of students (7%) did not answer this question, causing some variation in the percentages. Again the 2+2 cohort responded positively. The survey was conducted at the beginning of the session so this question related to student intention to seek help rather than actual attendance.

Students were also asked to tick all the strategies they planned to use to improve their English language while at university. On average, each respondent chose seven options. The most popular strategies were ‘make friends with native speakers’ (71%) and ‘attend Academic Skills (AS) workshops’ (34%) and ‘AS consultations’ (31%), totalling 65%. Students also chose ‘read and research’ (64%); ‘learn new vocabulary’ (59%); ‘study before lectures’ (58%); and ‘watch TV and movies’ (51%). Only 4% of students responded ‘none, my English is good’ with half of these students native English speakers while the remaining 2% were from China.

**Table 5.** Number of students reporting that they intend to attend university programs.

	Lis u/grad	Lis 2+2	Lis p/grad	GC u/grad	GC 2+2	GC p/grad	Coffs	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>%</b> N=140
Yes	7	23	4	9	12	13	13	<b>81</b>	<b>58%</b>
No					1	3		<b>4</b>	<b>3%</b>
Maybe	8	10		6	17	7	6	<b>54</b>	<b>39%</b>
No reply				1				<b>1</b>	<b>7%</b>

Students were asked to select what kind of university help would be most useful and all options that applied could be ticked. On average, each respondent chose five options. ‘Academic Skills’ was frequently chosen (61%); ‘feedback from lecturers’ (52%); ‘AS assignment workshops’ (48%); ‘AS advice on assignment structure’ (45%); ‘clear task guidelines’ (46%) and ‘understanding marking criteria’ (44%). The frequency of student response favoured Academic Skills support in this category of most useful university help, as shown in Table 6 below.

**Table 6.** The most useful University help reported by the survey respondents.

	Lis u/g	Lis 2+2	Lis p/g	GC u/g	GC p/gr	GC 2+2	Coffs	<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>%</b>
Individual AS help	11	26	4	10	7	17	11	<b>86</b>	<b>61%</b>
Assignment workshops	6	13	1	11	10	16	10	<b>67</b>	<b>48%</b>
Advice on assignment structure	8	19	4	6	12	10	7	<b>63</b>	<b>45%</b>
Help with online technology	2	13	2	4	5	8	8	<b>42</b>	<b>30%</b>
Feedback from lecturers	5	13	3	8	10	19	15	<b>73</b>	<b>52%</b>
Clear task guidelines	8	18	4	6	7	14	8	<b>65</b>	<b>46%</b>
Understanding marking criteria	6	16	4	5	7	9	15	<b>62</b>	<b>44%</b>
Grammar workshops	5	12	1	9	5	13	5	<b>50</b>	<b>36%</b>
Social events and excursions	3	12	3	8	6	11	6	<b>49</b>	<b>35%</b>

Table 6 continued

	Lis u/g	Lis 2+2	Lis p/g	GC u/g	GC p/gr	GC 2+2	Coffs	TOTAL	%
Accommodation assistance	0	4	1	4	4	5	3	21	15%
How to live in a new culture	3	8	1	4	2	5	5	28	20%
Understanding Australian slang	4	13	1	3	5	12	5	43	31%
How to learn in a new culture	2	13	3	4	2	10	8	41	29%
What to expect at SCU	2	3	1	4	1	4	1	16	11%
Other	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	2	1%

#### 4.2. Focus group findings

During focus group discussions, students expressed a major challenge in learning with technology due to limited prior experience. Table 6 shows that 30% of students would like help with online technology, however in discussions, students elaborated further. Comments such as “We are still way back with books and pencils and things...technology is very challenging...” and “I never did do computers and send an email” or “I rarely use internet technology at home” were typical comments that demonstrated a lack of familiarity with technology for learning. Learning management systems such as Blackboard, online discussion and database research caused confusion. One student commented, “In India we never did the online study, never ever and we have never accessed internet like here.” Other students agreed “That’s the problem, like how to submit assignment, what’s Turnitin and all that.” Another difficulty using technology was “...Collaborate...I still can’t get into the thing...so it’s very difficult” and “...in discussion board...the lecturers using Australian slang”. Most focus group participants agreed that “it would be very useful if we could have one course technology session.” Although the focus group students were under 35 years of age and could be considered digital natives, they still struggled with using technology for learning.

Speaking and listening were also revealed as closely related difficulties for several reasons. One of the reasons was adjusting to English after arrival in Australia. One student described how he “can’t understand my homestay parents...don’t understand what they are saying”. Tuning in to English was a challenge confounded by the quick pace of the Australian accent with colloquial expressions. This difficulty transferred to lectures and students reported, “The first time I listen this lecture, I can’t understand anything” and another student who said, “I think I have improved a lot but now, to be honest, I still can’t understand the lecturer talk what about but sometimes I think I can understand everyone but don’t know what’s the topic, still a problem.” According to the students, the challenge improved “a little” “after a month” in a “gradual step by step” process whereby a sentence or a few more words became clearer. Another reason was related to cultural differences because “very rarely students speak in class, ask questions or have small group discuss about subject” and “we just keep silent”. In addition to cultural differences, students lacked confidence to speak in class and feared that classmates might “laugh at me if I ask this silly question” or were “just too scared to get to know people”. Pronunciation was an important element in speaking and listening because students had to “get to know how people here pronounce words” and “how to interact”. Students gave a reason as “we don’t speak English very often in China” so “some of us pronunciation is not very good” and “some person can’t understand what I say”.

Another outcome from focus group discussions was that students wanted clearer feedback from lecturers. As one student stated “The feedback is supposed to be telling you a little more...how

to answer it correctly...know how to improve.” Some students suggested if they could “see different good writing and also poor writing and comment on why it not good and why good” would be a useful strategy. This was a common strategy used in team teaching sessions targeting a specific assignment. Some students believed more collaboration between Academic Skills and content lecturers would be beneficial:

... one thing that would be helpful to academic things is if an expert from each school ... can take us for academic thing ... what's expected in our assignments...this is how assignments and lesson plans and all of that ... one from the School of Business and one from the School of Academic Skills (sic).

## 5. Discussion

The project broadly set out to investigate the international student transition experience by asking what challenges the international students faced, the services most accessed and reasons why, as well as which services were most useful to students. This discussion section will address and elaborate on these questions.

International students stated a key challenge related to using technology for learning. Although international students were familiar with smart phones, social media and digital applications for downloading iTunes, movies and video games, the “abilities and agilities” (Taylor & Newton, 2013, p. 56) in online learning environments were self-reported as lacking. The navigation of online learning management systems such as Blackboard, how to participate in discussion boards, how to access Collaborate or how to research using data bases presented clear challenges. Students were also not aware of how to access online university support resources including Academic Skills Quick Guides, Library databases and referencing guides. Another issue that arose was lack of familiarity with basic word processing skills such as how to format assignment line spacing, font styles and sizes, adjust margins or create a table of contents. As a result, many international students were unprepared to participate in technology-enabled learning environments because of a non-parallel education background.

Students believed that technology did have some benefits despite the challenges and lack of familiarity with using technology for learning. The main advantages were the ability to re-listen to recorded lectures, access power point presentations after the class and view online resources such as the unit study guides, referencing guides and Academic Skills Quick Guides, once students were aware of these resources and knew how to access them. According to students, one of the disadvantages was that technology did not offer the opportunity to clarify any misunderstanding and students believed clarification was easier in face-to-face situations.

The GPP (See Appendix B) call for: 2) “Resourcing for English language development is adequate to meet students’ needs throughout their studies”; 3) “Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment”; 6) “Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods”; 8) “International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments”; and 10) “Universities use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve their English language development activities”. Positive steps have been taken to meet these GPP practices by ensuring extensive face-to-face support on campus, online delivery and support as well as online resources for students. The student feedback has informed us that online delivery is not enough and students need support from the start. Interactive web quests and survival vocabulary activities have now been integrated into orientation programs for new international students to bridge the gap between familiar and unfamiliar technologies. The interactive web quest takes a more developmental T<sub>2</sub> (Gale & Parker, 2014) approach to orientation by requiring students to search for specific information, find their Unit Information Guide, and identify the first assessment, due date and weighting as they learn how to navigate their unit Blackboard sites. While successful in providing a basic start-up to navigate Blackboard, further steps could be taken to embed and apply these naviga-

tion skills more broadly in first year learning activities. Technology training would also ensure students are better equipped to access and engage with online learning. Steps to improve this area would better enable meeting the GPP regarding resourcing, developing autonomy, ELP and supporting distinctive learning experiences because students would have greater confidence in how to participate.

Many international students falter in accessing support mechanisms because they are not specifically informed or trained. The lack of readiness and familiarity is where the support system fails because of the assumption that students do know how to use Blackboard and access other online support resources. The assumption that international students are technologically savvy, aware and engaged is clearly an area for improvement. Instead student voices indicated confusion (“We are way back with technology in my country and when lecturer talking Blackboard, I don’t understand what is Blackboard because I rarely use technology at home”), panic (“the same same problem, like how to submit, how to go to turnitin and what’s turnitin and all that and I panic”) and uncertainty (“we never did the online study, never ever and never accessed internet like in here”) with learning management systems. Although students may be adept with using some technologies, the ways to use technology for learning and the ways to engage with learning through technology were far less familiar to the international students in this project.

A second significant finding related to the challenges international students have in speaking and listening, especially when they first arrive in Australia and “sometimes feel lost in class”. Some of the reasons for this are the time required to attune to English, the Australian accent with colloquial expressions and the fast pace of native speech. Because international students are not accustomed to speaking English in their home country, they also lacked familiarity with basic communication strategies such as what to say to whom and when and how to say it (Hymes, 1971) because they “just keep silent” in their home learning environments. Speaking skills involve cultural competence in turn taking, agreement, disagreement, interruption and seeking clarification. Discipline-specific vocabulary also presents challenges with more abstract academic vocabulary, technical language and complex theoretical concepts. It was interesting that many international students perceived their English language ability as ‘average’ or ‘could improve’, perhaps in comparison to passing an entry language test or basic conversation skills. However, the level of English required to participate successfully in higher education adds greater complexity due to discipline specific vocabulary and abstract theoretical concepts. Students seemed unable to accurately estimate their English abilities, perhaps because their course of study presented a novel situation.

Many of the students believed it took at least a month to slowly tune in to bits of conversation or lectures by recognising another word or sentence in the English language, while many students admitted they were still struggling after several months. The lack of confidence to speak in class was daunting because students felt “too shy” or feared “people can laugh at me”. Several students in focus group discussions agreed that they expected more opportunities to speak in class with small group activities to enhance their English and they were disappointed that did not happen. In the surveys, 71% of international students chose ‘make friends with native speakers’ as a strategy planned to improve English. The focus group comments and the surveys demonstrated that a majority of students desired more interaction with native English speakers.

Listening was a more silent, less recognised partner to speaking which caused barriers to effective communication. Similar sounding words were easily confused and several students remarked that they were only able to catch about 40-60% of lectures and needed to listen again to recordings. Some students expected lecturers to make more effort to help them understand the discipline content and “give more attention to the other language speaking student”. Many students agreed that a more integrated collaboration with Academic Skills and their content lecturers was beneficial.

The speaking and listening challenges link to several of the GPP as follows: 1) “Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies”; 4) “Universities ensure that the English language entry pathways they approve for the admission of students enable these students to participate effectively in their studies”; 5) “English language proficiency and communication skills

are important graduate attributes for all students”; and 9) “International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus”. The first and fourth GPP are more likely to be fulfilled when an offer of enrolment is issued and the student presents evidence of a language test score. Although it may be challenging to ensure the integrity of such scores across international borders, an Academic Language Self-Assessment is available online. Sample writing is also used at orientation to identify at-risk students early. These interventions ensure greater university responsibility for more effective participation in study and meeting GPP numbers one and four. Unfortunately, few international students take advantage of the opportunity to self-assess on the Academic Language Self-Assessment, perhaps because of the challenge with online technology already identified. GPP number five relates to graduate attributes and number nine to encouraging, supporting and enhancing English language development. Many Schools have recently revised graduate attributes regarding English language proficiency and communication skills. These graduate attributes have been mapped through programs to ensure compliance and curriculum renewal.

Although the lack of teamwork and opportunities to practice speaking English in some tutorials was mentioned as a disappointment, that case may not apply across the university. The Centre for Teaching and Learning has embedded teamwork in core curriculum and produced teamwork resources to develop student communication skills. The suite of resources is available for university implementation; however, a shared vision for a change to more interactive teaching may be required to gain greater traction. GPP number nine is also improving with a wider range of social activities on campuses although the domestic/international interaction could be further enhanced to develop cultural competence and improved communication skills.

A third significant finding was the importance of core services such as Academic Skills, academic writing support and the International Office to students. Some students were not aware of the range and extent of all available services although ‘helpful’ staff and lecturers in addition to smaller class sizes and personalised attention were appreciated. This may also indicate an advantage of a regional university with more personalised service and approachable staff due to the smaller size of the campus. Academic Skills as learning support was highly regarded and appreciated because of the “great help” in “complex writing”. Students appreciated the team teaching approaches in their units where AS and content lecturers combined to discuss and deconstruct assignment examples and offer tips. In fact, some students requested more of this kind of assistance due to its value. As one student commented, “Still on the base of AS assessment, I passed, especially me I passed.” The student need for support is extensive and it is also evident from research studies included in the literature review (Ashton-Hay & Roberts, 2012; Frohman, 2012) that an embedded, integrated approach has greater potential for success.

Despite the challenges international students face, tracking the cohort results showed a distinctive pattern. The 2+2 students on all campuses attended the most AS consultations and also demonstrated a trend toward higher results and study success when compared across cohorts. The 2+2 students achieved a 93% passing rate on the Gold Coast, 90% in Lismore, and 89% in Coffs Harbour. These 2+2 students not only passed all units of study but also attained a mixture of credits, distinctions and high distinctions even though they self-reported ‘average’ or ‘could improve’ ELP. In comparison, the postgraduates on the Gold Coast who had rated their English as ‘good’ demonstrated a patchy 36% passing rate in their units of study while none of the four postgraduates in Lismore received a fail grade although one had an incomplete. Each of the Lismore postgraduates had participated in the Intensive Academic Preparation (IAP) program for AusAid scholars and three of these students attended AS consultations and workshops. The undergraduates on the Gold Coast achieved a 64% passing rate and Lismore 60%. The results indicate that AS value-adds to student achievement.

The provision of core services relates to GPP 2) “Resourcing for English language development is adequate to meet students’ needs throughout their studies”; 6) “Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods”; and 8) “International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments”. These GPP principles are

met in practice through the provision of International Office student advisors to assist in monitoring performance and intervention strategies as required; the library which assists with information literacy, data base search techniques, and specialised research support; UniMentor, PASS and other support programs. According to the international students in this project, AS was one of the most highly valued and well regarded support services, especially in relation to writing assignments and the skills required to be successful in studies. In the surveys and focus groups, students commented on how much they depended on AS for advice and academic support. These core services support best practice for international students but still fall short of best practice due to the lack of an integrated university-wide approach for inclusive learning. The key findings point to some areas where the university has taken steps toward meeting the GPP although it is clear there is still some way to go. A well-integrated university-wide approach will encourage all levels of the university to successfully meet GPP guidelines.

## **6. Recommendations**

This study involving student voice revealed three key findings that have the potential to improve learning outcomes especially in the first year transition experience. Recommendations related to these findings will offer ways to overcome challenges and improve international student learning outcomes as a result of student voice in this project.

The first recommendation is to provide international students with the opportunity to attend a technology essentials support seminar prior to and during orientation as well as some ongoing sessions in the first three to four weeks of study. The technology essentials tutorials could be interactive, collaborative and comprise a variety of practical tasks to develop learning with technology awareness for new students from non-parallel education backgrounds. This recommendation responds to the international students' need for greater support and training with 'learning how to learn' using technology. The support and training could include areas such as navigating learning management systems like Blackboard, formatting assignments on Microsoft Word, finding relevant online support materials and understanding how to conduct data base searches. The assumption that twenty-first century students automatically know how to learn with technology is not entirely accurate because technology is less frequently used for learning in emerging economy nations.

A second recommendation is to embed speaking opportunities in the curriculum for a few minutes at the beginning or close of core unit lectures to summarise key points and consolidate understanding. Speaking tasks such as individual or team presentations could also be utilised more often in informal formative and summative problem-solving activities. This recommendation addresses the speaking and listening challenges many international students experience in using English, especially in the first 6-12 months. The adjustment was particularly difficult when combined with a fast pace, colloquial expressions, Australian content and complex discipline discourse. Students requested more opportunities to speak with native speakers and collaborate in small groups or with partners in order to develop their English communication skills and discipline vocabulary.

The third recommendation is to facilitate more collaboration between Academic Language and Learning (ALL) specialists and content lecturers to scaffold assignments, demonstrate examples of effective and less effective academic writing and present tips to meet the marking criteria as well as how to structure assignments. This recommendation responds to the international students' affirmed value of Academic Skills advice and support in their higher education study. Team teaching with both ALL specialists and content lecturers was appreciated and also requested more frequently because of the ability of ALL specialists to unpack the skills in the content. The students also wanted more feedback from lecturers to provide clearer direction on ways to improve their work.

It is through collaboration and respect for English language at the core of teaching and learning that diverse students will be supported and encouraged in their university studies to develop graduate attributes most desired by employers throughout the world. Staff development in teaching to diversity is a crucial element in meeting the strategic goals of a university, increas-

ing retention and providing best practice along government guidelines and recent research studies. Diversity contributes to a vibrant campus culture and requires a proactive university-wide approach in responding to the learning needs of students, staff and the community in order to ensure distinctive learning experiences for all students, now and in the sustainable future.

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In October 2014, The Centre for Teaching and Learning was launched. At this time, Academic Skills Development, part of the previous Division of Teaching and Learning, became Academic Skills. The updated names will be used throughout this report even though the names were slightly different during the International Student Transition Experience project.

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## Appendix A. International Student Survey

Student number \_\_\_\_\_ IELTS ; TOEFL (or other) score \_\_\_\_\_

*Please answer every question as honestly as possible.*

1. What is your first language?

\_\_\_\_\_

2. What other languages do you speak?

\_\_\_\_\_

3. Who decided you will study in Australia? (Tick ONE only)

Father	Mother	Family decision	Me
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4. Which course are you enrolled in? (Tick one)

Undergraduate	2 + 2 undergraduate from overseas partner institution	Postgraduate	English Language Centre
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5. How many years have you studied the English language? \_\_\_\_\_

6. WHERE did you study the English language? \_\_\_\_\_

7. How would you rate the level of your English? (Tick ONE)

Excellent	Good	Average	Could improve	Poor
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8. Circle your BEST English language skill. (Tick ONE)

Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening
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9. Circle your WEAKEST English language skill.

Reading	Writing	Speaking	Listening
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10. Do you believe that your English language skills are satisfactory NOW for successful university study in Australia? Give 2 or 3 reasons:

\_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_

11. How would you rate the level of your ACADEMIC skills? (e.g., writing assignments like reports and essays, researching, using references, etc) Tick ONE.

Excellent	Good	Average	Could improve	Poor
-----------	------	---------	---------------	------

12. Do you think you will need help with your study or your assignments? (Circle ONE) / YES / NO / MAYBE /

13. Which strategies, if any, are **YOU** planning to improve your English? Tick all that apply:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Study grammar</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Read books and research</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Learn new vocabulary</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Join class discussions</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Study the topic before going to lectures</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Work with my friends</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Go to ASD* workshops</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Join a study group like PASS</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Get a UniMentor</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Make an appointment for ASD consultation</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Ask the lecturer more questions</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Learn referencing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Get a part-time job</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Make friends with English speakers</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Join a local club</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Watch TV and movies</li> <li><input type="radio"/> None, my English is quite good</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Other? _____</li> </ul>
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\*ASD – Academic Skills Development

14. What kind of university help would be most useful to **YOU**? (Tick all that apply)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Individual help from Academic Skills Development</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Workshops on the assignment tasks</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Advice on assignment structure</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Help with online technology</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Feedback from lecturers</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Clear task guidelines</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Understanding task marking criteria</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="radio"/> Grammar workshops</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Social events and excursions</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Accommodation assistance</li> <li><input type="radio"/> How to live in a new culture</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Understanding Australian slang</li> <li><input type="radio"/> How to learn in a new culture</li> <li><input type="radio"/> What to expect at SCU</li> <li><input type="radio"/> Other? _____</li> </ul>
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15. Will you attend university/ study help programs? / YES / NO / MAYBE /

16. What challenges and/or problems, if any, do you expect in your study?

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17. Do you have any other comments?

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~~~~~Questions for **POSTGRADUATES ONLY**~~~~~

18. How many years since you last studied at university? \_\_\_\_\_

19. What do you expect to gain from your postgraduate study at SCU?

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## **Appendix B. Good Practice Principles**

1. Universities are responsible for ensuring that their students are sufficiently competent in the English language to participate effectively in their university studies.<sup>1</sup>
2. Resourcing for English language development is adequate to meet students' needs throughout their studies.
3. Students have responsibilities for further developing their English language proficiency during their study at university and are advised of these responsibilities prior to enrolment.
4. Universities ensure that the English language entry pathways they approve for the admission of students enable these students to participate effectively in their studies.
5. English language proficiency and communication skills are important graduate attributes for all students.
6. Development of English language proficiency is integrated with curriculum design, assessment practices and course delivery through a variety of methods.
7. Students' English language development needs are diagnosed early in their studies and addressed, with ongoing opportunities for self-assessment.
8. International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments.
9. International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus.
10. Universities use evidence from a variety of sources to monitor and improve their English language development activities.

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<sup>1</sup> For international students studying in Australia, it is a requirement of the National Code's standard 2 under the Education Services of Overseas Students Act 2000 that 'registered providers ensure students' qualifications, experience and English language proficiency are appropriate for the course for which enrolment is sought'. This requirement is also relevant to Principle 4.