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Insights from Academics Teaching International Students in Australia

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Insights from Academics Teaching International Students in Australia

Abstract

Australia continues to be an attractive destination in the world for international students. For higher education institutions to remain globally competitive there is a need to deliver high quality teaching and learning programs and adequate support structures. This paper forms part of a wider study on improving work placement for international students, their mentors and other stakeholders at Deakin University (Australia) and adds to the body of knowledge on international students as seen through the eyes of academic staff. It explores the lived experiences of seven academics as they navigate what is required of them when teaching international students in teacher education programs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, we used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as an analytical tool to code and analyse our data. Some of the challenges, dilemmas and opportunities are discussed under three overarching themes (Academic staff teaching experiences, Perceptions of navigating the Australian Cultural Context, and Staff valuing student opportunities). Based on the findings, we offer recommendations for higher education institutions to consider for academic staff when supporting students (international and local) from diverse cultures and languages.

Keywords

International Students, Teacher Education, Academic Staff, Interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Case Study

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Insights from Academics Teaching International Students in Australia

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Australia continues to be an attractive destination in the world for international students. For higher education institutions to remain globally competitive there is a need to deliver high quality teaching and learning programs and adequate support structures. This paper forms part of a wider study on improving work placement for international students, their mentors and other stakeholders at Deakin University (Australia) and adds to the body of knowledge on international students as seen through the eyes of academic staff. It explores the lived experiences of seven academics as they navigate what is required of them when teaching international students in teacher education programs. Drawing on semi-structured interviews, we used Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) as an analytical tool to code and analyse our data. Some of the challenges, dilemmas and opportunities are discussed under three overarching themes (Academic staff teaching experiences, Perceptions of navigating the Australian Cultural Context, and Staff valuing student opportunities). Based on the findings, we offer recommendations for higher education institutions to consider for academic staff when supporting students (international and local) from diverse cultures and languages. Keywords: International Students, Teacher Education, Academic Staff, Interviews, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Case Study

Introduction

Australia prides itself as the 3rd most popular destination in the world for international students, boasting more than 1200 institutions offering more than 22000 courses (Australian Government, 2018a). According to the Australian Education Network (2017), a quarter of enrolments at higher education institutes in Australia are international students. Between 2016 and 2017 Australian universities experienced an increase of 15% of international student enrolments (Australian Government Department of Education, 2018). International students are “considered to be an overseas student if you’re not an Australian citizen, Australian permanent resident, New Zealand citizen, or holder of an Australian permanent resident humanitarian visa” (Australian Government, 2019a). International students choose Australian institutions because of their international reputation, status, cost, career options, and qualifications as they are highly recognised and regarded internationally (Australian Government, 2015; Harryba, Guilfoyle, & Knight, 2012; International Education Advisory Council [IEAC], 2013). In 2016, the Australian Government conducted an International Student Survey that reported very high results of satisfaction though only 25% of students responded. From these results 93% reported satisfaction with the expertise of the lecturers; 90% found teaching and learning strategies innovative, and overall 93% found general support

services were highly satisfactory (Australian Government, 2016). Many students select Australia because of the high standard of living, and with the prospect of gaining permanent residency (Australian Government Department of Education, 2019; Rouse & Joseph, 2019; Yang, 2007). Melbourne in particular is a popular city to select as it has been voted the most liveable city in the world (Calhoun, 2016).

Much has been written about the challenges international students face as they come from around the world to a new country to study (Nguyen, 2011; Obeng-Odoom, 2012; Ross, Ta, & Grieve, 2019). While adjusting to a new university context, they have to adapt to a new country, culture, language and social environment (Mahmud, Amat, Rahman, & Ishak, 2010; Pham & Tran, 2015; Presbitero, 2016). Many suffer from homesickness and have difficulty transitioning to tertiary education (Joseph & Rouze, 2017; Mesidor & Sly, 2016; Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002). International students are especially confronted when Western university education systems of learning and teaching vary significantly to what they experienced in their home country (Bista, 2019; Yu & Wright, 2016). This imbalance for international students results in low self-esteem which may be coupled with the financial concerns (Mori, 2000; Murff, 2005). Studies have shown that students from Asian countries have a “teacher directed approach” to their learning (Hui Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011; Wong 2008). Many feel overwhelmed when faced with a “student-centred approach” to teaching and learning, resulting in a greater “incongruence between their expectations and experiences of university life” (Khawaja & Dempsey, 2008, p. 31). Thus, universities are challenged to modify their teaching styles to accommodate international students (Bovill et al., 2016), and are expected to show an understanding of international students’ competences and independence (Freeman & Li, 2019).

When international students undertake work experience (field experience), Gribble identified that “one size does not fit all.” She found international students lack knowledge of “the local labour market and workplace culture and [have] limited networks.” She points out international students may feel disadvantaged when taking “Work Integrated Learning (WIL).” Therefore, she suggests they “require tailored programs and support services in order to create a level playing with local students” when undertaking WIL (Gribble, 2014, p. 2). If international students undertake WIL then higher education institutes are called to provide students and staff with support structures that equip them to have the necessary skills, knowledge, and understandings. As students and staff may come from different cultures, it is important for all parties to have intercultural understanding. Hence we need to understand “what it means to be cultural agents [as staff and students] and the ways in which we learn and pass on the shared knowledge, values, and behaviours that connect us” (Hunter & Pearson 2015, p. 1). Australian universities have internationalisation policies and strategies and the Education Services for Overseas Act 2000 (ESOS) which establishes the “legislative requirements and stands for the quality assurance of education and training institutions offering courses to international students who are in Australia on a student visa” (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2018). All these policies and strategies focus on high quality provision for the international student.

The policies discussed above do not address the need for university staff to be prepared in ethical perspectives and understandings regarding international students and interculturalisation. Interculturalisation promotes understanding and forbearance which opens up avenues of diverse perspectives in the individual’s cultural context (Abdallah-Preteille, 2006). Positive engagement between people may result in a successful intercultural exchange that can be transformative for student and staff. Abdallah-Preteille (2006, p. 176) argues that teachers must “adapt their instruction to meet the needs of linguistically and culturally diverse students, respecting each individual, learning and collaborating in an increasingly diverse interconnected global society.” In a recent study, Jin and Schnieder (2019) found that whilst universities welcome international students, they point out the uncertainty about how to

accommodate and support “students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (p. 84) as “faculty behaviors can shape these students’ experiences both positively and negatively” (p. 85). In addition, they felt “how faculty perceive and respond to international students in their own classrooms has received little research attention” (p. 96).

The authors (Dawn and Kay) are academics working at two different universities in different States in Australia. Dawn (Author One) is formerly from South Africa (an international academic), she works at Deakin University (Melbourne), and Kay (Author Two) is Anglo-Australian. Kay works at Griffith University (Brisbane) and since 2004 has worked closely with international students across a number of programs in education in her role as Director of Internationalisation. This paper forms part of our wider study called *Work placement for international students’ programs* (WISP). Work placement is a term used when students undertake professional field work experience (practicum) as part of their study. The WISP project was undertaken between 2015-2016 across six Australian universities, encompassing a number of disciplines: Education, Business, Engineering, Occupational Therapy, Psychology and Speech Pathology (see Barton & Hartwig, 2017a). The wider WISP study aimed to:

- Identify current procedures and practices in relation to work placement and associated assessment for international students in the discipline areas of business, education, engineering and health in participating institutions.
- Identify and understand challenges, concerns and successes for international students, their mentors (i.e., those people who are responsible for assessing and working with students during their placement) and coordinators (i.e., those people responsible for the coordination of placements, at both universities and workplaces) prior to, during and after the students leave.
- Develop and apply a working model of effective practice around internationalisation, workplace socialisation and reflection. This model will be used in support materials for current and prospective international students, their mentors, coordinators and relevant university staff. (Barton & Hartwig, 2017b).

For this paper, we focus on some of the challenges, dilemmas and opportunities academics experienced whilst teaching international students at one site (Deakin University) where Dawn works and Kay was one of two Chief Investigators on the wider study (WISP) (see Barton & Hartwig, 2017a). We draw on data at the end of the study in 2016. At the time of the study (2016), Deakin University had over 53,000 students and 8000+ international students. Within the School of Education, international students undertaking the Master of Teaching (Early Childhood) (MTeach EC) program (course) remains the highest number. According to the LIVE the future 2020 Agenda, the university has grown in number “with over 61,000 students, Deakin has almost 13,000 international students and its English language Institute (DUELI) is the second largest university English language centre in Australia” (Deakin University, 2020a, p. 5). The university attracts students from “South Asia, China, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Latin America, Europe, Malaysia, Vietnam, Pakistan and Singapore.” Offering programs in four faculties in the areas of “the arts, science, sport, nutrition, architecture, business, law, medicine, optometry, engineering, nursing, allied health, psychology and teaching” (Deakin University, 2020a, p. 5). The university is ranked in the top 1% of universities globally, boasting employability, innovation and inclusiveness and has been ranked first for ten consecutive years in the State of Victoria for student satisfaction (Deakin University, 2020b). These may be reasons why international students choose to study at this university though their international numbers are low. The MTeach (EC) program still attracts

the highest number of international students within the School of Education to date. As one case study, a limitation in itself, generalisations to other higher institutions, international students or staff cannot be made. Our paper contributes to the wider body of research on academic staff teaching international students at higher institutes. While universities provide support structures for the students, we argue that there needs to have similar support structures and training in place for academics working with local and international students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Methodology

This qualitative study investigates the lived experiences of academic teaching staff in higher education. According to Burns (1998), “only qualitative methods permit access to individual meaning in the context of ongoing daily life” (p. 292). In this way, we capture our participants’ understandings of the phenomenon and the educational context regarding teaching international students (Vagle, 2018). As a qualitative method, these experiences of the participants are important to capture as they may inform the future of teaching international students in the higher education settings. Having gained ethical approval to undertake the wider project, our qualitative case study (Grossoehme, 2014; Stake, 1995) focuses on academic teaching staff working with international students within the Master of Teaching (MTeach) program at Deakin University. Educational case study methodology according to Yin (2009) allows for a limited number of individuals as the subjects of the study. Case study methodology is a way to understand and illuminate the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It can be particularistic, descriptive, and heuristic (Merriam, 1998). Case studies are valuable for policy settings and reflection on human experiences (Stake, 2000). According to Denzin and Lincoln (2000) qualitative research involves the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials which include case study, personal experiences, and interviews as they “describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives” (p. 3). This study makes use of all these – case study, personal experiences and interviews – that are all interconnected. Further, Burns (1998) confirms that the case study is valuable in its own right and is often the best possible source of description of unique material. Interviews according to Burns (1998) is a verbal interchange, where an interviewer tries to elicit information, beliefs and opinions from another person. Using interviews in this study allowed the participants to express their thoughts in a valued way and allowed them the opportunity to detail issues and challenges that arose in their classrooms.

Participants

While the School of Education has approximately 106 full-time academic staff, not all members of staff teach in the various programs. Some hold other portfolio positions such as full-time researchers or are Heads of Department within the school. Only those who taught international students within the MTeach (EC) program were contacted via email inviting them to participate in the WISP project. From 12 teaching within the MTeach (EC) program, seven teaching staff volunteered to be interviewed. They were emailed the Plain Language Statement and Consent form which outlined the research project, its purpose, and procedures. A research assistant (RA) was employed to undertake all interviews. The WISP project was funded by the Office of Teaching and Learning from the Australian Government (2014-2016). It is standard practice to employ a RA for large scale projects in Australia. The RA is Anglo-Australian, and she was chosen because of her experience teaching international students. She previously taught in twelve different countries such as China, Vietnam, India, Turkey, Germany, Luxemburg, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan for 20 years. During that time, she was teacher

and examiner in the International Baccalaureate programs overseas. In Australia, she worked for 20 years in Adult Multicultural Education, and she had a wide range of experience with multicultural education. She completed her PhD in 2008 which focused on Migrant Women in Australia. The RA was highly recommended by the Centre for Research in Educational Futures and Innovation in the faculty as she had the previously undertaken qualitative research with them. She had the skills and experience to undertake the interviews at Deakin University for the WISP project.

Data Gathering and Analysis

Interviews serve as an effective way to gather data in a case study (Eatough & Smith, 2006). It allows the interviewer to explore and understand the phenomenon whilst the interviewee converses about the meaning of the experience (van Manen, 2016). Once the academics agreed to be interviewed and consent forms were signed, a suitable time was arranged for the interview to take place on-campus by the RA. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, they were audio recorded (with permission) and professionally transcribed. The semi-structured interviews were conversational in manner giving participants the opportunity to express their views in lengthy conversation (Giorgi, 1977; Lauterbach, 2018). Questions included: Have you worked overseas? What languages do you speak? What proportion of international students do you have in your class? Do you feel international students need support? What do you think are some of the special needs international students may have?

We employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to analyze and code the interview data (Biggerstaff, & Thompson, 2008; Clarke, 2010). Research has shown that interviews are considered ideal for IPA, they explore the lifeworlds and perceptions of interviewees (Callary, Rathwell, & Young, 2015; Gill, 2014; Smith, 2017; Smith et al., 2009). IPA employs phenomenology and interpretation (hermeneutics) to explore the lived experience and perception of the participants (Joseph, 2014). Both authors read and re-read the interview data independently and coded the data from the academic teaching staff (Alase, 2017; Larkin & Thompson, 2012). They met in-person and also through online communication using Zoom as a platform to discuss their coding before bracketing the data into overarching themes, see Table 1 (Lauterbach, 2018; McNarry, Allen-Collinson, & Evans, 2019; Willig, 2017).

Table 1
Themes

Initial Coding	Emergent Themes	Overarching Themes
Writing	Understanding the task	Academic staff teaching experiences
Preparing Assignments		
English Language	Proficiency Levels	
School Environments	Challenges in a new context	Perceptions of navigating the Australian Cultural Context
University environment	Intercultural understanding	Staff valuing student opportunities
School environment		
Sharing culture		
Multilingualism		
Local students	International students a resource	
Intercultural exchanges		
Different perspectives		

The analysis included identifying themes from the interview data. Vaugh and Turner (2016, p. 50) found “coding along themes and topics can help to highlight priorities and provide focus to the process of analyzing qualitative data.” The themes were coded under broad headings and then refined under three main headings. Miles and Huberman (1994, p. 58) describe the broad headings as “a provisional start list” that then progresses to “revising or defining codes” to structure the codes that best represent the data. They believe that codes are efficient data-labelling and data retrieval devise. Direct quotations are used from the interviewees to illustrate our findings (Rees & Johnson, 2007; Spillane, Meaney, & O’Donoghue, 2018).

Findings

From the seven academics that were interviewed, three were born in Australia and the remaining four came to live and work in Australia (two from England, one from Iran, and one from Germany). Five of the interviewees were female, and two males. Their ages ranged between 30-60. Most were mid-career academics. Our findings are discussed under three overarching themes that emerged from the data: Academic staff teaching experiences, perceptions of navigating the Australian cultural context, Staff valuing student opportunities

Academic staff teaching experiences

It was apparent from all the academic teaching staff that international students struggled to understand how Australian university structures work. It did not matter whether they were under-graduates or post-graduate students, Interviewee One felt “they're young kids, most of them are 22/23 years old, coming out to a foreign country” which presents a range of trials and tribulations. Interview Seven recognised that studying in a new place “can be a little overwhelming” for international students. As an international academic formerly from Europe, she recognised the difficulties international students face and suggested “university and school teaching staff show a lot more openness” towards international students. Interviewee Six was formerly from England, he felt “understanding how the classes work” was a challenge for some of his international students which in some ways is no different to international staff who start out to teach in an Australian setting. One way of getting his students to learn about the Australian context was to have open discussions in class about himself initially adjusting and learning a new system of higher education. Interviewee One an Australian academic pointed out that “academic staff are not always aware of the demands on students” in relation to their work or family life. From her years of teaching international students, she observed that “there are a lot of attitudes around international students” in regard to their language proficiency, for example offering a critical voice to academic readings and discussion. Interviewee Six found the international students “could not cope with the Australian education system at all” as they had previously experienced something different in their home country. This continues to be a major dilemma, as Interviewee Four identified “they may be disconcerted by individualised learning or differentiated learning.” In their home country Interviewee Seven felt that may not have been exposed to “following quite a lot of teaching strategies.” Both these interviewees identified that the pedagogies and strategies used by academics in Australia can be varied and diverse. For an international student who has only experienced teacher centred rote learning, these diverse ways of teaching and learning can be confronting.

All interviewees found that international students to a larger extent had difficulties in writing as English was not their first language. Interviewee Three, an Australian academic, found “language is often an issue. Even if you're saying they need a certain level to come into the course, it seems that for some of them it's still an issue, particularly with academic writing

and also academic conventions and expectations.” For Interviewee One this was a major issue because:

Many of them have gone through a local university structured English language learning and they're supposed to come out with the required IELTS, but they don't, because I've had students that have been on this course for six months who have then had their IELTS retested after six months and are coming in below what we would have expected them to come in with in the first place.

Compounded by language issues, Interviewee Two, an experienced academic from Iran found the international students had difficulty “organising and connecting their thoughts together to express themselves.” Although this was problematic, and “extra help is always available whenever they need it.” He found that “not every international student has a problem in their writing ability.” For many international students writing reflectively was a new approach. Interviewee One found “they don't know how to write reflective journals and they don't understand the concept of narrative reflections. They also don't understand the meaning of the word critique, they think it's being critical.” In her observation, she found it problematic when assessments were marked and they did not get high marks because they “see themselves as quite a failure and quite embarrassed because they're used to getting distinctions and high distinctions and then they get a pass.” It was apparent for Interviewee Four that “students had language issues” and did not “have the vocabulary for the kinds of professional technical language” they required for the teaching profession and MTeach course. This was a major challenge for international students as Interviewee One found with her international students “they don't understand the academic English that is needed, because the jargon in education is so specialised that when they get their translator out it does not make sense...They're shell-shocked.” For some international students, Interviewee Four found they “get a lot of support from their own language group. For instance, the Chinese students formed some kind of online group with students from other universities” which enabled them to network and talk to each other.

When working with international students who have difficulty in understanding the language and university structure Interviewee Seven felt “a super sense of frustration for staff.” This sentiment was shared by Interviewee Four who remarked that “a massive amount of money in terms of staff time and effort is needed for just that small group of students” she felt helping the international students is like “a sort of Band-Aid.” The situation worsened when it came to assignments because students were not acquainted to writing “unusual assessments like reflective writing... or a report.” Interviewee Five said he found international students have “particular needs,” so he set up a system where “I don't do all the talking, but we're listening, we're talking, we're discussing. That's a Western construct” which he felt would help the international students understand about assessments and become acculturated into the Australian university system. This was because the majority of international students come from Asian countries. In some of those countries, students are more familiar with the writing of examinations than writing an assignment as a formal assessment. The submission and grading criteria are often a new experience and misunderstood concept. Interviewee One explained “students do not always understand the extension system [for a late submission for an assignment]. If they lose marks for small delays in submission, the consequences are severe and disproportionate.” This then has implications for their study and work visas which is not always clearly understood by international students or their parents. The Australian Immigration Department will issue a student visa based on the length of time the university indicates for the completion of the program of study. Any extension on this time can be very costly for the international student.

Perceptions of navigating the Australian cultural context

All interviewees acknowledged that there is a need for cultural sensitivity to be considered when working with international students. Academics recognised that the Australian culture presents many challenges for international students as it is different to the world, they are familiar with in relation to culture, processes, and education systems. Interviewee Three felt that “there needs for cultural accommodation on all sides” where the university, students and staff are open and mindful of changes and challenges that may be encountered. Interviewee Seven explains that “we need to help these international students to understand how things work in Australia” and at the forefront of all collaborations there must be “a lot more openness from universities and schools and teaching staff.” Having international students in an Australian classroom provides an intercultural perspective to the teaching and learning environment. Interviewee Seven identified “schools see international students as a resource and maybe, actually working through different ways of doing things might actually be enriching.”

International students go through a multisocialisation process in that they have to socialise into a new country and then into a new university setting which is further intensified when they go on school placement. It is no surprise that most international students feel pressured and stressed navigating through all these different contexts. Interviewee Four found when students go on placements there is a lot of different socialisation processes that these international students have to navigate. She felt “the culture of a school and the kind of professional expectations may also be somewhat ah, it’s not transparent to them.” Domestic students may feel confident to offer help in the after school sports program for example, whereas international students “can be seen as lacking because they may not take the initiative” according one academic. This sense of disconnect may be due to some international student’s lack of understanding of taking initiatives to participate more fully when on placement that is beyond their required hours. Schools “keep an eye” out for students who show initiative as possible future employees at the school. Interviewee Five pointed out in the Australian cultural context “people [international students] need to understand this cultural interchange slightly differently.” By having discussions with his students, he tries to explain “about how things work in very different environments, and that includes different environments in Australia, and different environments world-wide.” While this may be explained, some international students are familiar with seeing a teacher in front of the class as this is something they grew up with and cannot cope with different ways of teaching. Interview Six pointed out that one of her international students “could not cope with the Australian education system at all...[he] did not think there was teaching happening in the class as the teacher was not out the front delivering content.” His past experience closed him into a narrow view of how teachers use the space to deliver content.

The notion of socialisation in the school classroom is a major issue for international students as many of them come from non-Western countries and the style of education and teaching is very different. Hence, some students did not recognise the different styles of teaching as being productive and did not believe that learning was taking place. Interviewee Seven commented that this type of teaching was seen as “just playing games all the time, this is not good teaching!” Some interviewees said they suggested strategies to assist students in understanding the new culture. For example, Interviewee Two proposed that “international students stay with a family, with an Australia family.” In her opinion this experience will enculturate international students into having “some sort of intercultural relation.” She added that she has “seen students who used to stay with Australian families, they’ve told me that. So, I think that’s an advantage.”

The question remains whether higher education institutes can work with recruiting agencies to operationalise such opportunities for students. Interviewee Two was unaware of any opportunities being put in place for such experiences. He maintained that in “Australian culture, there’s certain standards that you need to maintain, like language ones. But I think also people need to understand this cultural interchange is slightly differently.” University staff and school staff in education settings outside of the university need to be culturally sensitive, flexible and mindful when hosting international students. Often, they do not understand how to manage and deal with international tertiary students whilst on placement. Often misunderstanding manifests into a dislike of hosting students as Interviewee Five points out:

some of them [school staff] will tell you they're culturally sensitive and yet they have no clue and others that will tell you that they're not having any more international students unless they can speak English properly because I'm sick to death of them and they take too much work.

Interviewee Five explained that coming from a different background can assist in this understanding:

I've come from VET [Vocation Education and Training], I've come from TAFE [Technical and Further Education], where we had high numbers of international students and we had the flexibility I've also spent most of my life teaching in the Western suburbs, so I don't know whether I have a different kind of knowledge, virtual backpack that means I do it differently or what. I don't know what or whether its people don't have an understanding or - I don't know it is.

Recognizing and acknowledging that there are differences in cultural backgrounds can assist all involved. Interviewee Two acknowledged that “we always give them support. Because sometimes, you know, they come from a different cultural background, especially for the writing or here in Australia there is a different education system they are not used to when they start with education.” Immersion in local communities was seen as a positive move for international students. Interviewee One stated that “we encourage international students to immerse themselves in their local communities so they can develop English language skills. Conversational English is ‘of paramount importance’.” Interviewee Five further explained she does a lot of group work by dividing the students into groups. In this way she felt “they all learn from each other, one of the things I particularly have to do is to get the students to understand that they don’t know everything and that they have a lot to learn from each other.”

Looking after international student’s wellbeing is just as important as offering them academic support. Interviewee Two pointed out “international students are very much in need of recreational opportunities – excursions and so on. They are away from their families and need a variety of social experiences” in this way they may also meet more friends and adjust to Australian culture which can positively impact on their sense of wellbeing.

Staff valuing opportunities

All staff interviewed found having international students in their class most insightful as they themselves have not visited all the countries or regions where their students came from for example regions in: Mainland China, India, Iran, Italy, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia. Staff valued the chance to talk to the students to learn more about their countries. Interviewee Two from Iran found in talking to international students “they [the students] stay with local families where they are contributing to intercultural relations.” Local families are

what he refers to as Australian families. He added “in my home we have frequent visitors from different cultures, and we negotiate meaning through our cultures.” This interaction has also enlightened him in his own understanding with people from other parts of the world. Often, he would have conversations with Dawn (Author One) who is formerly from South Africa about living and working in Higher Education in Australia. Through conversations and interactions academics can learn from each other as they share about culture and diversity in relation to their different countries and perspectives.

Interviewee Six found placing students in “small groups before a larger group discussion, for example, [worked well]. I think this really helps with learning ‘reflection’ skills.” Some of the international students are hesitant to participate so placing them with a local student in class helps the local student learn about the international students’ language, region, and culture and the international student gains more confidence. Interviewee Seven comes from a European country, she felt “having international students in a cohort opens up topics like inter-cultural understanding and international communication as they are seen in practice in a multi-cultural classroom.” She strongly believed “schools should use international students more as a resource than they currently do.” She felt their first-hand knowledge of the place would be inciteful and informative to teachers and school students. This sentiment was echoed by interviewee Three an Australian academic, who confirmed that International students often undertake a placement “where there is a high Chinese/migrant intake.” She shared that “one Chinese student did an internship [work placement as part of her program] of 10 weeks at Glen Waverley with a non-Chinese mentoring teacher. The student was very useful to the centre, translating material into Chinese for the families for example. The internship was a great success.” The student went beyond what was expected of him during his placement which the university highly valued and so did the school. Working with staff and parents whilst on placement enhances the reputation of the university.

This was similar to Interview Five’s experience who came from England, he felt while “international students are regarded by their lecturers as a resource they welcome ‘any opportunity’ to communicate in English.” He also pointed out that “there is limited interaction between the local and the international students in their university courses.” He added “greater involvement between them ‘cannot be forced’.” This could be as Interviewee One pointed out “international students can find it very difficult to understand local students because of the locals’ use of colloquial language.” It is beyond this paper to comment further on this aspect why international students do not readily mix with local students. Interviewee Seven observed in her classes that “some domestic students can be dominant in their classes, and feel they need to ‘help’ international students understand local ways rather than learning from the international students. It can be a bit patronizing.” She felt “valuing international students experiences and being open to new understandings is important in universities.” As she herself has an Asian and European cultural and linguistic background, she strongly felt “these institutions [universities] can be places where different ideas, understandings and resources would create new synergies.” All students, domestic and international, should be valued as equals who can share their individual experiences and differences.

Interviewee Four a local Australian found because there is a mix of local and international students in the class means “there is a real richness in discussion and deconstruction.” It leads to a critical analysis of teaching events and draws attention to things that domestic students take for granted. She strongly felt “it is powerful for domestic students to have intercultural exchanges around teaching, learning, children, creativity and management.” In the school setting particularly, academic staff found that mentor teachers are interested in exploratory dialogue and found things like multilingualism a wonderful asset the international students have as they “value add to the setting.” Interviewee Four said it was “wonderful to have international students because we can all become too comfortable, so to

have people question things from a different perspective is very refreshing, and very good for everyone.” Staff felt that having international students in their classrooms meant there was an opportunity for them and their students to have diverse, respectful and meaningful discussions. Learning from each other is a powerful asset in any classroom setting. This intercultural dimension enriched the learning space in the higher education context and is also advantageous in school settings when international students go on work placements.

Discussion

This study provides a snapshot of perceptions and understandings of seven academics teaching a cohort of international students at one Australian university as part of the wider WSIP project (Barton & Hartwig, 2017a, 2017b). This case study provides valuable information for the higher education sector and contributes to a growing body of knowledge about international students through the eyes of academic teaching staff. Previous studies have investigated academics perceptions when teaching international students (Adachi, Tai, & Dawson, 2018; Baker, Hunter, & Thomas, 2016; Kingston & Forland, 2008; Trede, Bowles, & Bridges, 2013; Trice, 2005). These studies have mostly examined lecturers’ perceptions on challenges for teaching international students. This paper is informed by the lecturers’ perceptions and offers strategies identified by them for the higher education section when hosting international students.

The international students in the study referred to in this study by the academics were in the MTeach (EC) program, they came from Mainland China (11), Taiwan (1), Hong Kong (1), Singapore (2), Malaysia (1), India (1), Iran (1), Italy (1) and United Kingdom (1) (Joseph & Rouse, 2017). Their previous experience of study in their home country was vastly different to what they experienced in Australian tertiary settings. International students enter programs like the MTeach expecting to have successful outcomes because they pay twice the fees of local students in Australia. This situation places a certain level of stress on staff to work with international students and to also be culturally sensitive to their needs. This is an important aspect for Australian universities at large if they want to remain globally competitive. Universities are accountable to ensure that international students are adequately prepared and supported to live, study and work in Australia. This is also supported by the ESOS Act (Australian Government, Department of Education, 2018) whereby all universities must comply. Often international students who do not have sufficient academic and social support about life, study and work in Australia feel isolated. They do not do as well academically which impacts on their sense of wellbeing (Ling & Tran, 2015). They may have been high achievers in their home country, but the challenges they face in a new country and university can impact on their achievements.

While cultural adjustments can be confronting, universities are responsible to train staff to be culturally aware and sensitive when working with students from other countries (Tarozzi, 2014). Academic teaching staff noticed many international students do not feel comfortable “asking questions” or “being asked for their opinion” as teaching in many overseas countries such as China, India, Vietnam is generally teacher centred where students are taught through a textbook and rote learning. Many international students find it difficult to embrace the casual conversation style with academics, they believe this is irreverent. One effective strategy to help students talk was a “team-teaching approach” in which students were placed in groups to discuss weekly readings. One academic referred to this “as a jigsaw technique where the students move from group to group explaining the reading and the teacher moves between them.” In this way talking in smaller groups with their peers and the lecturer helps international students learn to communicate their ideas, and speak in English with confidence (Bartram,

2007; Carroll, 2002) They also gain trust and support in smaller groups and have the opportunity to make new friends in the class.

As tertiary academics, we acknowledge that the “cultural interchange is slightly different” when teaching students from other countries and argue that academic and professional staff need to develop suitable knowledge, skills and understandings when teaching and or dealing with students (local and/or international) from “diverse cultural backgrounds” (Walton, Priest, & Paradies, 2013, p. 182). Nevertheless, while academics often work in a time poor environment, they often find themselves in multiple informal roles when teaching international students (stand-in parent, counsellor, nurse, employment advisor, visa and course enrolment advisor, accommodation advisor, local travel advice, social coordinator and friend), which places a further strain on their time. Although the university offers student support services for international students, students often build a relationship with their lecturer and feel safe to share experiences and concerns about studies and life and ask questions. Invariably when speaking to the lecturer about their program of study, they often think of the lecturer as someone they can trust and someone who can assist them “with everything.” International students do lack family support and friends in the new context they find themselves (Joseph & Rouse, 2017), as a “duty of care,” staff assist students as best they can, or they direct them to where they can gain some assistance.

Staff are also mindful not to be dismissive of students as they have a right to complain to the university about them, or may provide negative feedback about the program, university, or country through surveys or social media. Students undertaking the MTeach program are training to become teachers hence academics ‘model’ how to be helpful so that international students have some skills in knowing how to deal with students at school when in distress when on placement or in their future classrooms. While 80,000 international students came from Asia to Australia in 2019, (Department of Education, 2019), academics do not give special treatment to international students, rather, all students are seen as equal.

When undertaking the MTeach program, academic staff said international students found it challenging to undertake “massive amounts of readings.” They found this “perplexed” them as “English is not their first language.” Added to this stress, staff felt that international students were overwhelmed with different tasks they had to undertake in the program (for example, contributing to discussions in-class and also online discussions, undertaking role play in class, engaging in critical writing). It seemed that “students are better at straightforward assignments such as ‘describe the history of the Montessori method,’ rather than ‘unusual assignments,’ like making a mind map, or reflective writing or the ‘ethnographic’ and essay proved to be difficult.” One way to help the international students understand what to do as one academic explained was to “create PowerPoints with meaningful visual material” so it was easier to for them to follow, she add “but not all teachers do this.” While the international students did not fully understand “academic writing conventions and expectations,” academics in the study found this to be similar for some domestic students. Many students may not have written a formal essay prior to undertaking the program in any language, let alone one in English! Academics recognised that international students found the lecturer’s way of talking, accents, humour and the use of local examples unfamiliar to them and they lacked family and friends to support them (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Joseph & Rouse, 2017, Walters, 2012). Although the academic teaching staff felt international students worked hard, this did not always translate into good grades (Holmes, 2004). In order to help them, a strategy that worked was “to provide the students with details of the assignments and guidelines in advance [at the start of the semester].” In this way academics could work closely with the international students to ensure they understand the requirements of the assessment task. Having said that, academics found that the English language overall was a major challenge for international students despite them having passed the required IELTS test for Australia. While recent studies have shown

that English language is problematic for international students in Australia (Barton & Hartwig, 2017a; Haugh, 2015; Ling & Tran, 2015), not much has changed to effectively manage and bridge the gap. The university provides additional English language support structures, to “ensure international students maintain adequate English language proficiency throughout the duration of study to prepare graduates for work experience and employment opportunities” (IEAC, 2013, p. 4). With the MTeach (EC) Interviewee Six said the university “has provided extra two hours classes for the early childhood students with role plays” these workshops teach students about “how to talk to a parent and a supervisor and so on ...because they don’t have the skills to negotiate things with supervisors and to sort out problems.”

While some international students lack English verbal skills, academics said many students found “critical writing” most challenging as they had to provide a different perspective which included their own insights. This aspect was similar to an earlier study undertaken in Australia by Arkoudis and Tran (2010) where universities need to develop strategic plans that incorporate academic language and writing skills for international students. Staff in this study offered one-on-one help to assist international students with drafts of their assignments. They spoke of encouraging students to take advantage of the academic support services offered at the university for international students (Carroll, 2002). Academics felt it was their responsibility to “get them to the required standard” as some students do not seek help from the library or support services (Harryba et al., 2012). This in turn adds to their workload. Therefore, more tailored programs to fully support international students in their studies may be more realistic and helpful (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Gribble, 2014). At Deakin University, mentor staff and play workshops were specifically offered to support international students in the MTeach program (Joseph & Rouse, 2017). The play workshops were designed as many of the students in the cohort were international and not familiar with early childhood settings. The academic taking the workshops said this was done to “familiarize “students with the language and practices of child rearing in an Australian setting.” Many of the students “had little to do with babies and children they need to learn things like how to talk to children and how to play with them.” The workshops provide opportunities for students to practice their communication and language skills and build their confidence as they prepared for the work placements. As part of the MTeach program students undertook workshops in a customized classroom setup in order to familiarize them with an Australian classroom. Since undertaking staff interviews in 2016, the university continues to develop more ways to help and support international students to succeed in their studies and to enjoy their stay in Melbourne (Deakin University, 2020c).

From this study, four of the seven academics interviewed including Author One, are formerly from other countries, they recommend that international academics and professional staff like international students are also given support from their institution to assist them in adjusting to their new work environment (Brown 2008; Walters, 2012). In addition, we recommend local and international staff undertake diversity training that adequately equips them to teach and work with international students and staff (Joseph & Johnson, 2019). The human aspect of what international students “bring to the table is minimized” (Bista, 2019, p. v), therefore universities need to offer opportunities for international students to engage with local students and the local community so that all concerned may learn from the rich and diverse range of language and culture. While this “multisocialisation process” may take time, international students may begin to understand the expectations of their new environment, new culture, and new institution (Barton & Hartwig, 2017b). Whilst international students may be faced with pressure from home to excel in their studies (McCrohon & Nyland, 2018), teaching staff have a “duty of care” to ensure that every student (local and international) feels safe, confident and respected in their classroom. When such a teaching and learning environment exists, it produces a positive environment where all students feel they have the opportunity and assistance to succeed.

We recommend staff undertake international research and global placements which may enhance their perspectives about international students. We also recommend cross-faculty engagement especially those faculties with large numbers of international students where staff may offer peer mentoring programs as a way to improve academic standards and social networks. There is a need for further research to be explored across higher education faculties in relation to Australian academics and professional staff upskilling their knowledge about diversity, inclusion, intercultural and cross-cultural understanding. We agree with Tran and Pasura (2019, p. 539), that international students in higher education are to be recognised “as partners on a more equal basis in the construction of transnational knowledge, skills and competencies” than merely being contributors to the higher education economy. As well, universities need to consider “greater nuance in service delivery... [that] could result in a more comprehensive approach to internationalisation, diversity, social and cultural inclusion to better support students” (Jones, 2017, p. 933). By having well informed university staff (academic and professional), international students in higher education will enjoy quality experiences during their studies in Australia. In this way, Australian universities can be placed at the forefront of educational reform and change when working with international students in teacher education programs.

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