

**AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS
STUDYING AND LIVING IN A REGIONAL AREA**

Huay Jun Poh & Peter Townsend

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Abstract

The aim of this research is to explore the similarity and differences international students encounter while studying and living in a regional area as compared to their homeland. This study builds on both academic and lifestyle issues previously identified in research and explore the international students' experiences on their academic adjustments while living in a regional area.

The findings of this investigation identified three themes: education, finance and culture. The analysis identified that students experience some level of difficulties at an initial stage but were positively accustomed to the local settings after a period of time. Finally, these and the findings in this paper are valuable to educational institutions especially those of regional areas seeking to understand what and how international students behave and act when studying and living in a regional area. Additionally, this paper will also give prospective students an overall understanding of what to expect when they choose to study in a regional area in Australia.

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS STUDYING AND LIVING IN A REGIONAL AREA

INTRODUCTION

International students can be considered from economic, social and political perspectives. The research into international students studying abroad has become a frequently discussed topic in the Australian community (Harrison and Robertson, 2001; Shanka, Ali-Knight and Pope, 2002; Smith, Morey and Teece, 2002; Shanka, Quintal and Taylor, 2005). This is because, even with the economic downturn of some of the Asian economies during 1997, the number of international students was still rising significantly. A total of 75,536 in 1997 to a total of 85,900 international students enrolled in Australia in 1998, which indicated an increase of 13.7 percent over the year (Illing, 1998, p.2). This outcome indicated that even though an economic crisis was occurring in Asia, the number of students was still rising at this end of the century. This is an important factor to the Australian economy where income is generated from the education industry by full fee paying international students (IDP, 2005).

This research examines the similarities and differences international students encounter while studying and living in an Australian regional area as compared to their Asian homeland. Specifically, this paper sets out to uncover why international students choose to study overseas, especially in a regional area and to compare and contrast international students' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of studying and living in a regional area. In addition the study seeks to uncover the challenges that an international student experiences when transitioning from their Asian homeland culture to that of the Australian regional area and to identify the socialisation and orientation issues that aided the process of their adjustment.

International students are important source of income for both the country as well as for the institutions. Altbach and Morsy (1996) indicated that as the education industry is growing rapidly, it is common to constantly attract foreign students to study in the home country through educational marketing. As a result of this, it is essential for institutions to provide academic and administrative infrastructures to provide international students with adequate facilities in order to remain competitive in the internationalisation of educational service (Gardiner & Hirst, 1990; Altbach, 1998).

Despite the numerous studies on international students conducted in the literature, however, similar issues keep arising regarding challenges international students encounter while studying in a foreign country. Tremendous amounts of research regarding these issues have been contributed to the literature yet not many are conducted in a regional area. Therefore, it is imperative that more research should be done in the regional areas of Australia in order to understand the social ramifications of the difficulties and challenges international students encounter, while studying and living in a regional area. This is specifically valuable when these important clients are economically beneficial to both the universities and the host country.

Therefore, this present paper aims to partially fill the gap in the literature by investigating international students' perceptions and expectations while studying and living in a regional area. In addition to that, this paper could also provide upcoming students to an overall understanding of what to expect when they choose to study in a regional area, and at the same time provide universities with some implications of how to devise better support and facilities to aid international students with their transition stages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted earlier, there are numerous research conducted previously considering the issues of international students studying and living in a foreign country. This review concern the following topic; advantages of studying in Australia, difficulties and challenges international students

encounter when studying and living overseas, language barriers, student orientation program and disadvantages of studying and living overseas.

In this new millennium, people are perceived to be living in an 'information age' where the act of communicating information is multiplying and, as a corollary, peoples' consumption of information is mounting significantly (Holmes, Hughes and Julian, 2003). The essential role of education is in its reproduction of the social and cultural attributes underpinning the development of modern society. It is through education that individuals are shaped and develop different perceptions according to the culture in which the message is being conveyed (Holmes et al., 2003). Nevertheless, in many cultures, there education programs equally emphasise individual identity and developing educational levels, occupation and ultimately, income levels (Wang, 2004).

Overseas students are defined by Australian Social Trends (2002, p.3) as

Foreign visitors in Australia who hold student visas and who attend an educational course on a full-fee paying basis, although they may not be paying these fees themselves at any point over the year. In addition, students who are studying offshore or by distance education outside of Australia are also excluded from this definition unless otherwise stated.

Advantages of studying in Australia

Universities today have the objective of preparing students for their challenging future as society is now more concerned with efficiency, market orientation and instrumentalism (Holmes et al., 2003). Both parents and students themselves are prepared and willing to improve their education level to prepare for their career. Moreover, in accordance with improving future employment opportunities and career advancement, people are willing to invest time, money and effort to gain succession in the future (Wang, 2004).

The growth in international students has considerably increased over the years as more young people have become interested and want to study abroad to gain international experience, lifestyle and to learn from issues concerning the new environment. As globalisation has become more important and common today, international experience will definitely provide students with the understanding to cope effectively with the changes that are occurring over time (Koury, 2000; Townsend and Cairns, 2003).

Wang (2004) found that students were enthused about studying overseas and their intentions were linked to three types of motivations: academic, career, and experiential. The students' main intentions were to gain knowledge and improvement in their field of specialisation and for some to prepare for higher degree research. In contrast, research conducted by Willis, Kennedy and Yeap (2000) found that the main advantages of studying overseas, especially in a regional area, was high level teaching skills and the availability of lecturers. International students could see the advantage of studying in a regional area because staffs were more often available as compared to their home country (Willis, Kennedy and Yeap, 2000). This emphasis directly links to the importance of university policy with the future satisfaction of graduates.

With the increasing levels of competition in the employment marketplace, students seek to obtain the best education from the best system they can as this has an impact on their future opportunities. High prestige and university image has also influenced the choice to study overseas (Mullins, Quintrell & Hancock, 1995; Mazzol, 1994). Roa (1979) also identified that the quality of courses, range of facilities, ease of admission and university prestige are key factors influencing student's selection of overseas university. In addition, Lawley and Perry (1998) also indicated that international students choose which foreign country to study in depending on factors such as courses, country characteristics, administrative processes as well as overall costs.

Studies of Singaporeans show that students are very competitive in the education sector, striving to achieve significant results in order to gain higher social status to fit into modern society (Singapore, 2005). Due to the limited number of places offered at the local universities and with the active recruiting and innovative marketing by foreign institutions, the prospect of overseas qualifications has become feasible and attractive to students who cannot enter local universities (Smart and Ang, 1992; 1995). Therefore, both parents and children will choose alternative options when students are not able to enter local universities. As a result of this, choosing the right university with high recognition outside of the country is essential to maintain the image of their children.

International student enrolment is beneficial not only to the international students themselves but also economically to both home and host countries. Studies have identified that the government saw the potential of this new export industry over the years, while hoping that Australian universities would help Australian businesses to more effectively engage in Asia (Marginson, 2005). In the past, Australia ranked around 15th in education expenditure as a proportion of GDP as compared to other OECD countries (OECD, 1989). By 1998, this market had developed to give Australia the second highest proportion of international students (12.6%) in the OECD nations (Marginson, 2003). As noted by Gordon and Wroe (2003), in order to increase foreign export earnings, Australian institutions will be politically encouraged to teach in foreign countries, while overseas students will be offered incentives to study in Australia. Peter (1997) also supported this claim by indicating that foreign students bring positive results to output and employment in state and national economies, mainly from international students' expenditure. Mackay and Lewis (1995) also pointed out the positive outcomes for the national economy.

Research conducted by Townsend and Lee (2004) found that the markets that generate the most Australian income in the education sector are mainly from the Asia Pacific Basin, where students enrolled in an Australian degree can study either through associated institutions in their home country or study in Australia as an international student (Willis, 2005). This has helped the Australian economy to grow, as education service is still Australia's third largest services export and this can be seen in September 2004, where the total value of Australia's education exports reached \$5.059 billion (IDP, 2005). International students must also spend on living expenses and this ultimately adds to the amount of goods and services revenue in the Australian economy which is particularly beneficial (ABS, 2003). For instance, in 2000, overseas students contributed \$1.9 billion in Australian goods and services while they were in Australia. (Australia Social Trends, 2002).

International students also contribute income to the tourism industry during their course. During leisure time or holidays, international students frequently travel in the host country and indirectly become a tourist, at the same time contributing earnings to the tourism industry. In addition, international students have the potential to attract families and friends to the host country, revisiting places they have already been and thereby contributing second time earnings to the tourism industry (Townsend and Lee, 2004). Therefore, the increasing demand for Australian higher education has been very beneficial to Australia as this sector has been continuously contributing earnings to the Australian economy (Frost and Shanka, 1999; Shanka, Ali-Knight and Pope, 2002; Harrison and Robertson, 2001)

From a social perspective if a student does return to their home country, then they are familiar with the situation outside of their home country, together with the capability in managerial techniques within the diverse, international and global level (Townsend and Cairns, 2003). This view is supported by Liu (2003, p.1) who states that "with the advantage of knowing the world and our connections overseas, we're a bridge between the skilled people from China and the outside world." The need for international managers arises due to the significant increase in interactions between people from various cultural backgrounds working in international business (Funakawa, 1997). As a result, there is a need for people to challenge culturally bound mindsets and learn from other cultures in order to be successful in managing domestic work at an international level

(Ford, 1988). Therefore, this matter can be directly link to the advantages of studying in a foreign country, whereby knowledge and skills can be developed through studying abroad.

Australia has not been a homogeneous society since 1788 (Claydon, Knight and Rado., 1977). In regards to the Australian community, a diverse student population helps to foster cultural exchange and understanding among students (Avirutha, Bui, Goodstone and Reid, 2005). International students coming from a variety of different backgrounds and cultures broaden the social and cultural environment, and this creates a more diversified environment in Australia. Australia's domestic populace will encounter this diversity and adapt to this, as globalisation is increasingly common today. Thomas (1995) suggests cultural diversity is a mixture of differences and similarities in accordance with a combination of several personal, situational and organisation components. In addition to these suggestions, McInnis, James and Hartley (2000) add to the concept of diversity, including factors such as values, attitudes and expectations. Some overseas students not only contribute to Australian cultural diversity but also to the skilled labour supply by becoming permanent residents after finishing their studies (ABS, 2003).

Literature indicates that International students will be faced with challenges and experiences that they would never face while in their own culture or country (Avirutha et al., 2005; Andrade, 2006; Willis and Kennedy, 2004). Especially in today's challenging society, companies value graduates who have studied internationally as this factor increases their global reach as well as introducing them to experience in operating in a global environment. Given these benefits, it is important to examine those challenges and barriers that inhibit international student success. The following section describes some of these issues.

Difficulties and challenges international students encounter when studying and living overseas

As globalisation has redesigned the world into a smaller living place (Chen, 1999), people are brought together from various traditions and cultures in a significant manner in every part of the world. Different cultures use different interaction methods and communication strategies which lead to discrepancies in language, body language, conflict resolution, directness and closure to express one's own way of communicating (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1998). Mismanaging cultural differences can be frustrating, confusing and ineffective when studying and living in different cultures (Andrade, 2006). However, if successfully managed, differences in culture can also lead to innovative practices, better learning within the community, as well as to maintaining one's competitive advantage.

Culture is defined as "the set of values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviours and customs that distinguish a society" (Mahoney et al., 2001, p.373). Culture is a learned behaviour and it is an important element to review as this research explores the similarities and differences international students experience after leaving their homeland culture to study and live overseas, specifically in a regional area.

International student adjustment and adaptation has always been an issue (Leong and Chou, 1996). Kim (1988, p.9) definition of adaptation is "the internal transformation of an individual challenged by a new cultural environment in the direction of increasing fitness and compatibility in that environment". This definition is of significance to this study because it involves the process of socio-cultural adaptation by international students in studying and living in a foreign country.

In Trompenaars' (1993, p.165) view, "culture is the manner in which these dilemmas are reconciled, since every nation seeks a different and winding path to its own ideals of integrity." Due to the increasing interest, the literature on international student adjustment has expanded greatly in the past decades (Chapdelaine and Alexitch, 2004). Culture varies dramatically between nations and cultural insensitivity causes serious problems for individuals in different environments. One of the most significant and common phrases labelling the dilemma of cultural differences is culture shock. Anthropologist Kalervo Oberg first introduced the term culture shock and describes

it as a disease suffered by individuals living in a new cultural environment. According to Oberg, culture shock results from the loss of well-known cultural signs and symbols, causing individuals to experience anxiety, frustration, and helplessness (Oberg in Chapdelaine and Alexitch, 2004). The issue of culture shock is important to this study, because most international students experience it in some degree during the adaptation stage and it is not unusual (Burke, 1986). However, at some point of time, failure of adjustment may result in international students feeling homesick or even lonely (Rajapaksa and Dundes, 2002).

Language Barriers

Language barriers can contribute to socio-cultural adaptation and academic achievement of international students as the adjustment challenges are mainly related to English language proficiency and culture. Language differences may cause possible confusion among people from different nations (Baron and Dapaz, 2001). Several studies in the past have indicated that overseas students have problems understanding and communicating in English (Lee, 1997; Wang, 2004; Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Lewthwaite, 1996). Language is a major problem encountered by international students who come from a non-speaking English background when studying in a foreign country. Often their lack of proficiency in English causes great difficulties in their studies (Ballard and Clanchy, 1991; Lewthwaite, 1996; Lee, 1997). Wang's (2004) investigation of international students studying in America, found that students experience uneasiness and embarrassment when studying overseas. It has also been observed by Ballard and Clanchy (1991) that Asian students are known to be quiet members in classrooms who rarely participate in discussions. They conclude that one reason may be the lack of proficiency in spoken English that prevents students from speaking up (Lewthwaite, 1996; Robertson, Line, Jones and Thomas, 2000)

Similarly, writing style differences may also result in plagiarism, as students might not understand the real meaning of plagiarism, or sometimes students might lack confidence in using their own words, or even at times because it is acceptable in some cultures to copy an expert (Bamford, et al., 2002). Similarly, Beasley (1990) pointed out that international students were faced with challenges including reading and writing as well as difficulties in adjusting to the Western educational traditions that consists of independent learning, critical analysis and the linear development of ideas. These factors contribute to the reasons for failure to achieve academic success by international students (Andrade, 2006; Holmes, 2004). Although most of the studies were conducted in different universities and places the findings are remarkably similar in a variety of countries. The following sub heading will briefly explain the support program for aiding international students with their adjustment process.

Student orientation program

The notion of cultural differences in regards to knowledge, teaching methods, learning skills and values in education should be effectively conveyed and cater to the needs of the international students in order to enhance the facilitation of students learning in the host country (Aspland, 1999). The main aim of orientation programs is to help international students to gain sufficient study skills for academic purposes, as well as social skills for cultural adaptation (Townsend and Cairns, 2003). This preparation is imperative as it provides students with adequate information about all sorts of issues such as immigration rules and regulations, about the local community in general, the services and facilities that the university offers, the culture of the country and the region as well as study skills.

Factors influencing students to stay at home and study (Disadvantage of studying and living overseas)

Despite the tremendous rate of increase in international students, this does not mean that there are no restrictions or disadvantages in going abroad to study. In recent years, the numbers of students from China have had to navigate difficult visa procedures (Elliot, 2003) and students have

to meet the relatively high requirement for English language skills (Rood, 2005). These factors might cause students to opt for other options or universities in other countries such as Japan (Koury, 2000) or eventually remain in their own country to study.

Studying overseas definitely incurs higher costs as compared to studying domestically. Countries like Malaysia, for example, have a currency conversion rate of AUD 1 = Ringgit Malaysia 3.05 which shows that a high Australian dollar together with the increase in cost of living and highly-priced university course fees (Dillon, 2004) produces difficulties for students studying overseas (Bernama, 2004). Additionally, according to an IDP (2005) report, Australia has become the second-most-expensive destination for studying abroad in the English-speaking world, with an annual cost of living, in U.S. dollars, of \$9,519, ahead of the United States (\$8,989), Canada (\$8,925), and New Zealand (\$8,686). Only Britain (\$11,152) is more expensive. The average annual cost of living is far less for students in what the report calls the emerging Asian study-destination countries, including Hong Kong (\$7,081), Singapore (\$6,410), and Thailand (\$2,918).

On the other hand, research done by Willis, Kennedy and Yeap (2000) found that although the cost of living is somewhat cheaper in a regional area of Australia, compared to the city, many students did not address this positively but stressed that this was an indicator of how economically depressed the region was. The problem of this was mainly because the region was lacking entertainment centres, shopping complexes, restaurants and transportation (Willis, Kennedy and Yeap, 2000). The growing number of universities around countries like Singapore, India and elsewhere has also attracted more students worldwide, causing Australia to face tougher competition (Dillon, 2004). Many universities that have been traditionally recruiting markets for Australia have been building up their own education systems, making it more attractive for students to study by distance learning in order to get an Australian degree without even leaving home (Bernama, 2004, Willis, 2005). Therefore, this could have a significant impact on Australia in the upcoming years as those destinations move to capitalize on the growing demand among international students (Cohen, 2004).

RESEARCH METHODS

This research seeks to examine the similarities and differences international students encounter in comparison to their homeland when studying and living in a regional area in Australia. In order to meet with this aim, an exploratory research is being used. Exploratory research is useful and most suitable when the key purpose is to understand a phenomenon or problem, define the problem more precisely, or when uncertainty exists in understanding the potential phenomenon (Berg, 2004; Czinkota & Kotabe, 2001; Wisker, 2001; Neuman, 2003).

These characteristics have been fulfilled with the research objectives to:

- Uncover why international students choose to study overseas especially with a regional university campus as their choice of selection.
- Examine the similarities and differences international students encounter when studying and living in a regional university.
- Compare and contrast international students' perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of them studying and living in a regional area.
- Uncover the challenges that an international student experiences when transitioning from their homeland culture to that of the regional area.
- Identify the socialization, orientation and transition issues that international students experience in the regional area.

On the other hand, Gay (1996) states that qualitative researchers make use of a mixture of methods and data collection strategies in order to attain desirable objective of in-depth understanding of the problem under study. As a result, qualitative research is useful especially in an exploratory study in order to uncover unknown phenomena and to better develop further

understanding regarding humans' perceptions, behaviours and experiences. This is supported by Strauss and Corbin (1990) who observe that the most appropriate method used to understand human behaviour from the respondents' perspective is qualitative research.

The main method used in this research for data collection is semi-structured in-depth interview. For this research, interviewing was used to accumulate information because it can focus directly on the subject under investigation (Marshall and Rossman, 1995; Neuman, 2003). Also, due to the increasing amount of literature concerning international students, most of the research is based on quantitative research through surveys or questionnaires that information is being gathered (Rao 1976; Burke 1986; Burns, 1991). Therefore, this method of research in this present study allows for exploring in greater depth, as the phenomena of international students studying in a regional area is reasonably new.

Face-to-face interviews have been conducted in this research, allowing the researchers to adapt to the questions as necessary, clarify doubts, and ensure that the responses are correctly understood by repeating or rephrasing the questions. Additionally, by conducting face-to-face interviews, the researchers will be able to identify responses through nonverbal cues. This is of primary importance to this research as body language plays a role in describing and explaining culture differences and individual experiences (Sekaran, 1992). Not only that, the interviewers for this purpose engage in a dialogue with the participants and elicit their description and perceptions of themselves with their experiences studying and living in a regional area. As the questions were developed around themes, it enables the interviewee to expand with prompting and follow up with questions to refine an area if there are misunderstandings.

For this study, a group of ten international students from an ethnic Chinese background from various countries (Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, China) were interviewed. In order to maintain anonymous, fake names were established to the participants. After all ten interviews were conducted, the researcher compiled each interview transcript to ensure that the data was full and accurate. In addition to that, all transcriptions were read several times to eliminate any typographical errors and to remove any possible contradictions. As soon as all ten interview transcripts were read several times, the researcher began to examine each transcript individually. The aim of this is to develop or identify possible themes.

Thematic analysis can be identified as a process in searching for patterns in data that is systematic or also known as "emerging from the data" (Shank, 2002). Each transcript was then analysed manually; writing out important words, as well as cutting and pasting sentences and phrases best describing participants' responses on the questions asked in a new document. Even though there are computer programs available to manage qualitative data, however, handwritten analysis will, as a rule, be more detailed and complete than the computer analysis. This is because the computer only spots what one is programmed to look for in the words. In addition to that, Berg (1995) also pointed out that qualitative research using a computer is still in its infancy and qualitative researchers have not yet sufficiently figured out how best to use computers in their research work. In addition, Berg (1995) suggested that any computer program still involves the researcher to consider through the analytic and theoretical relationships between original conceptualizations and eventual empirical evidence. Therefore, analysis conducted manually is still acceptable and likely to be more accurate in the long run.

Even though a small sample size was used in the data collection, the aim was not to arrive at generalization but to show that a theory or interpretation is conceivable (Patton, 1990). Subsequently, this chapter has also set out ground for data analysis that sets out to identify the themes to be discussed in the following chapter.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The three main themes emerging from the interviews are: education, finance and culture. Results show that culture is a very important element of those three themes. This is because culture emerges as the most frequently referred to subject and is the main factor causing dissonance in adjusting to the local culture.

Education

The theme education will discuss on issues concerning courses, knowledge and experience as well as advantages of studying in a regional area.

According to respondents, their main intention in studying abroad was entirely due to educational factors. This is supported by Wang's (2004) findings that the intention to study overseas is specifically linked to three types of motivation: academic, career and experiential. Students may undertake their education locally but choose to study overseas because they want to experience a new environment. As indicated by one respondent "I just want to try new and different environment" (Pheniz, Hong Kong).

On the other hand, these students were aware that their future career is entirely dependent on their academic achievement. According to one respondent from Singapore, he chose to study at a specific university mainly because it is one of the top universities in Australia. "I feel that I have a better chance in Australia because at least I can go to among the top universities and also is cheaper" (Casper, Singapore). The image of where he studied was crucial to him. This is because, in Singaporean society, both parents and students are very selective and demanding when it comes to education as achieving high results and attending prestigious universities is the key to gaining social status and fitting into modern civilization (Singapore, 2005).

Despite this factor, interviewees also pointed out that they prefer to study in Australia because they wanted to gain more experience and knowledge. This includes the experience that they could never gain in their homeland specifically due to cultural differences and different environmental settings. A few students also claimed that they wanted freedom, as their home culture is too rigid and strict. According to Hofstede (1995), Chinese society is situated in the high end of power orientation and collectivism. For instance, respondents commented that they have to care for too many people, cope with different communication styles between genders as well as gain independence. Therefore, coming to Australia and living in Australia gave them the freedom to act independently as well as to move away from their previous power orientated and rigid society.

Finance

Previous studies have indicated that Chinese families spend more money on education than on housing. Most education fees and related costs are financed by students' family members (Nei, 2000). Even so, international students have to consider the costs incurred by the family. In this study, participants noted it was generally cheaper to study in Australia especially in the regional area, as they do not have as much opportunity to spend their money due to limited entertainment centres and shopping complexes as compared to cities. This was argued to be one of the advantages of living and studying in a regional area.

Culture

Participants had quite different experiences whilst studying and living in Australia. This included adjustment in regards to different social settings, access and usage of unfamiliar language, meeting different expectations both academically as well as in adjusting to the local surroundings. The result of this investigation shows that students were having challenges while trying to adapt to the local environment.

In the academic sector, students were having difficulties participating in class, understanding what the lecturer is talking about, the way lecturers convey the message as well as the difference of purposes in terms of education. These dissimilarities have in some ways contradicted how students are supposed to learn and may cause dissonance at some point

One of the key differences in the tension between the Australian cultures versus the Chinese culture evidently appears to be interdependency and the level of interaction in class. In the home country of the participants, students are being led directly by their lecturers in terms of education. According to the participants, lecturers are often more direct in the sense that lecturers provide students with all require reading materials for the subject, straight to the point as well as lecture for the entire class without any disturbance from students. Lecturers are expected to be the highly respected, source of knowledge and role models for their students. As indicated by Angle from China, "... we think the teacher is like here (pointing above) at the top. While back home most of the time, you have to obey to what the teacher said and what you can only get is the answer. Don't ask why! No reason. So you just keep quiet in the class!" While Patricia from Singapore pointed out that "I think because it is just the way that we are being brought up since young. Is like the teacher is always the highest, therefore he or she will always be correct and we never brought up in the way that we get to question".

This findings were remarkably similar to the literature such as Hofstede's (1995) regarding power distance and uncertainty avoidance, Chang (2003), Samuelowicz (1987), Ballard and Clanchy (1991), Violet and Kee (1993) and Kember and Gow (1990) where their studies concluded that in a large power distance society, such as the Chinese culture, education is highly teacher-centred. In addition to that, literature also indicated that education is highly ordered and learning represents personal wisdom from the teacher. Therefore, students are expected to listen directly from the teacher without questioning because teachers are seen to be intellectual and highly respected.

Samuelowicz (1987) found that Chinese students were having difficulties in adjusting to the local culture in terms of class participation. Similarly, Hofstede (1995) found that individuals are afraid to face unstructured situations, and Wang (2004) discover similar findings to this research where overseas students who are not used to speaking aloud in a classroom full of people encounter fear. This however is in favour with this present research where due to certain difficulties such as language, the fear to act against one social norm while students at some stage recognised the advantage of social interaction in class, yet international students did not choose to actively participate in class. Form the results, it can be concluded that international students were having difficulties in class because in their homeland and from their previous learnt behaviour, students were required to sit quietly and listen in class whilst only speak with permission in order to preserve from misbehaviour. As a consequence of this, students will face with magnificent challenge when they are expected to speak up in class like any other local students. Consequently, this will affect the learning approaches within a student. Koklo from China remarked "You can talk but maybe it is not nice to disturb the lecture", which in many circumstances in Australia, this represents and undesirable learning process for both locals and the lecturers. As supported by Cortazzi and Jin (1997), active participation by students in Australia are required and encouraged in the learning environment.

The evidence from this finding is that interviewees view education in the Australian culture to be more independent, where lecturers require students to do more independent study and researching. From the previous learnt behaviour in the student's homeland, lecturers are expected to provide answers and detailed discussion for their students (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997), this eventually contradict students' learning approach because in Australia, lecturers only provide students with the general idea and guidance. Margaret pointed out "but in here, is like basically they just give you the general knowledge and to find more in depth, you have to look up for information by yourself via net or books". As a result, international students might probably mistakenly think that the lecturer does not want to help as a whole due to different ethnicity.

On the other hand, major pull factors attracting them to the regional campus were because they can spend adequate time with their lecturers and at the same time get away from the vast amount of students in the city. Correspondingly, this was similar to the findings in a previous study where students interviewed said that one of the most favourable aspects of studying in a regional campus was because staff were often more available than at home (Willis, Kennedy & Yeap, 2000).

Language

Nevertheless, English was also one of the key problems for the majority of the participants because they were either unfamiliar with the accent and slang or because locals were speaking too fast. Apart from communication, these students were also having difficulties when all their study materials and lectures were conducted entirely in English. This is significantly different and the transition from non-English to entirely English has become the factor to their adjustment. All ten interviewees explained that they were equally having difficulties in socializing with Australians, although their initial expectation was to learn and converse more in English. These students felt more comfortable socializing with other Asian students because of language and because they had shared experience. A Chinese proverb suggests, "at home, you depend on parents whereas in the outside world, you have to depend on your friends" (Salili and Mark, 1988, p.135). This proverb is very applicable to this study because it links directly to what the interviewees were trying to explain. As shared by one interviewee, "I would like to approach people who speak Chinese, or Cantonese, like Malaysian, Singaporean and Hong Kong. Just simply because you can talk easily. Yeah, because if my English is good enough, I can share my heart with Australian people as well as Asian students. But if you really want to share deeply, then you have to find your mate from Hong Kong" (Pheniz, Hong Kong).

As suggested by Ballard and Clanchy (1991) and Bamford, Marr, Pfeiffer and Newth (2002) the lack of proficiency in English has caused significant difficulties in students' adjustment both academically and socially. Difficulties primary in English as a language encountered by these international students whether in a regional area, in the city or in other English speaking countries were remarkably similar.

Advantages and Disadvantages of studying and living in a regional area

In this research, interviewees have also identified the advantages as well as the disadvantages of studying and living in a regional area. Academically, studying in a regional area was seen as a benefit mainly because students can concentrate more on their study because it is quiet and isolated from distraction such as entertainment, shopping and jobs.

In contrast, these participants saw the regional area as a drawback for living because it was too remote and transportation was inaccessible. Previous study noted exactly the same outcome when interviewed with students from a regional campus such as the lack of transport as well as the lack of higher order services and facilities (i.e. better restaurants, theatres and also isolated from nightlife comparing from the city) (Willis, Kennedy & Yeap, 2000). Students were having difficulties adjusting to this mainly because the key cultural aspects namely: Chinese food and groceries were not available regionally and students had to travel in order to access these. From this result, it can be seen that these international students were still practicing their cultural traditions even when they leave their homeland. Therefore, this directly relates to the definition of culture indicating that "the glue that holds its members together through a common language, dressing, food, religion, beliefs, aspirations, and challenges that is learned and deeply ingrained" (Abdullah, 1996, p.3). Students were having difficulties adjusting to these factors because all ten participants originated from the city and were not used to the life in a regional area. However, these students became used to it over time.

Limitations

This research site for this study was based at a regional campus. This means that the information gathered and the conclusions reached may require further testing in other campuses. In addition, this research was limited to a small sample size to facilitate the in-depth information that was collected from the interviews. Due to the small sample size of ten participants, this study's findings are limited and may not be valid and generalisable. Therefore, replication of the study with a larger number is suggested. However, the researchers have tried to preserve validity by using a tape recorder to increase the level of accuracy in the data collection and analysis. The use of in-depth interviews and because this research is an exploratory study, it helps us understand the issues in greater depth and in context. Therefore the strength of this study is in its specific detail.

There maybe another limitation in the sense that few of the participants could not speak good English. The author nevertheless, tried addressing this limitation by translating the transcripts to their first language. Therefore, this research is reliable and accurate because the author is multilingual and this can be considered as strength for this investigation.

CONCLUSION

This research has contributed to the existing literature on international student adjustment in regards to studying and living in a regional area and has identified the emerging themes of education, finance and culture. Universities should place sufficient importance on international students adjustment and social needs, as they are a main source of income for both the country as well as the university. As other institutions both in the English speaking countries as well as the emerging Asian countries are competing for students from throughout the world, this topic is important in making Universities more competitive. Implicit within this, is that education transition programs should be planned around developing meaningful multicultural interactions within the local community in the region. This is to facilitate the development and adjustment of international students while studying and living in a regionally populated community, as compared to a city environment.

Finally, the results of this study also suggest that international students encounter various challenges while studying and living in a regional area. This has practical outcomes in the sense that when compared with existing literature and studies, it has been found that similar challenges were faced by other Asian students studying in a Western culture. For this reason, universities should try to support these students more effectively in order to increase international students' satisfaction with foreign (western) education. The effectiveness of this will result in international students valuing international education for the benefit of the next generation.

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