

## The international student's experience: An exploratory study of students from Vietnam

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*International students are an important part of today's global university sector. This paper explores, through 10 in-depth interviews, the perceptions of Vietnamese international students studying with regard to their experience of teaching and learning in Australia. The findings indicate that Vietnamese students struggle with language, assessment, and Western teaching and learning styles. Many interviewees felt that local students often lumped them together with other international students, who sometimes had no desire to befriend or work with them. The paper provides recommendations on how to improve students' experiences and adds to the current debate on international students' satisfaction, with general implications for international education.*

*Keywords: international students; student satisfaction; Vietnamese students; student experience; higher education; student voice;*

### INTRODUCTION

Where university students were once overwhelmingly local young men and women straight out of school, there are now significant minorities of students who do not fit this stereotype. Universities have realised the financial and social benefits to be gained by offering more flexible options to older students who might not be able to study during business hours, to those who are unable to access the campus due to distance, and to a wide range of students from overseas who know employers would value a degree from particular foreign countries.

There is now a growing body of research on the experiences of international students. The research, however, often sacrifices specificity for generalizability. While it is indeed true that many aspects of the university experience are similar for all international students, studies of the international student experience have progressed to the point at which it is useful to consider the experiences of students from particular regions and countries, and within particular contexts. Such research could inform policy and marketing aimed at international students from that country at an institutional or, even, federal level. The present study undertakes this endeavour by using an exploratory research methodology focusing on postgraduate Vietnamese international students studying abroad, on campus at a university in Australia.

Many studies of international students have tended to be quantitative in nature; for example using data gathered from course evaluation surveys most students administered upon completion of a subject. Gunawardena and Wilson (2012, p. 4) have drawn attention to the comparative drought of qualitative, or mixed method, material in the literature, and emphasised the benefits qualitative data, which could bring to the study of the student experience a sensitivity to culture and ability to elicit otherwise unknown concerns.

As of July 2012, 10,676 Vietnamese students were enrolled at Australian universities. Although this accounted for only 4.8 percent of international students, Vietnam was still the fourth highest source of students for the Australian international higher education market after China (41%), Malaysia (7.2%) and India (5.2%) (Australian Education International, 2013, p. 5). As the Vietnamese economy develops, and the Vietnamese government further invests in education, the demand for greater numbers of Vietnamese students to study overseas will likely increase (Le, 2014). Evidently, the enrolment of Vietnamese students in the Australian higher education sector increased to 12,300 as of November 2014 (Department of Education, 2014). In addition, the education service exports from Australia to Vietnam are on the increase. In 2009-10, the export revenue stood at \$800 million compared to \$400 million in 2007-08 (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2011). After the US and UK, Australia is the third most popular destination for international students. In the arena of international education, Australia is 'punching well above its weight'. Education and training contributed 4.5 percent of Australia's GDP, making it the ninth highest contributor (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012, p. 511), and the export of higher education was priced at \$9.4 billion for the 2010-11 financial year (p. 454).

A recent study focussing on push-and-pull factors for international students studying in Australia showed that even though Vietnamese migration agents tended to rate Australia as less desirable than the US and UK on a number of indicators, students and alumni still consider it to be more desirable than either (Lawson, 2011). Given the increasing numbers of Vietnamese students studying in Australia, there has been surprisingly little research dedicated to them. Even internationally, Vietnamese students have received little attention (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis & Sabatier, 2010; Tran, 2009). Tran (2009), and Brisset and colleagues (2010) recently examined issues concerning acculturation and psychological adjustment. However, in general, the educational experiences of Vietnamese students are unexamined. As such, this paper will explore, through series of qualitative interviews, the perceptions of Vietnamese international students with regard to their experiences with teaching and learning in Australia. The paper provides recommendations on how to improve students' experiences as consumers of higher education. The paper also adds to the current discussion on international students' satisfaction and international education generally.

## **BACKGROUND LITERATURE**

The literature review will concentrate on East/Southeast Asian students, especially those from nations steeped heavily in the Confucian culture. The paper focuses particularly on the literature related to socio-cultural adjustment, language, and teaching and learning experiences of international students. The paper's perspective is that socio-cultural adjustment is an important aspect which requires attention because it may influence students' experiences of teaching and learning.

Given the economic importance of the international student, their experience should be considered as an issue of customer satisfaction. In this sense, non-academic experiences of international students should also be considered as having a significant effect on the students'

evaluations of their investments in education. Arambewela (2010, pp. 158-159) treats this issue in the context of globalisation theory, and the “massification” of higher education. In this view, universities are seen as now being geared toward providing workers for the global “knowledge economy,” as opposed to a more traditional model where they sought to develop the student and community both socially and culturally (Rizvi, 2005). Students from developing countries, especially in Asia, are the “users” of the knowledge economy, while those in the West are the “producers” (Arambewela, 2010, p. 160). The further ramification of this is that while these students are studying overseas they are exposed to a plethora of new experiences and are subject to a shift in self-identity to a more “mobile identity” (Rizvi, 2005).

As one might expect, international students differ from local students as to what they look for in a university (Sherry, Bhat, Beaver, & Ling, 2004). Arambewela, Hall, and Zuhair (2005) found that the main factors influencing the satisfaction of international students are quality of education, facilities, the reputation of institution and their degree, possibility for better careers, and ‘the overall customer value’. Customer satisfaction operates within a “zone of tolerance” (Berry & Parasuraman, 1991, p. 58; East, 2001). In this model, there is a range of performance that customers are willing to accept. However, this zone is limited by customers’ assumptions or “passive expectations” (Oliver & DeSarbo, 1988). This was the case in a 1992 study of international students at three South Australian universities who were prepared to recommend a university even when their view of its teaching quality was unsatisfactory (Mullins, Quintrell, & Hancock, 1995, p. 209).

Some scholars have repented giving special attention to international students. Biggs and Tang (2007) prefer to consider them more holistically as part of “constructively aligned teaching and assessment” (p. xviii). Biggs (2003) divides the perceived problems international students face into three main categories: socio-cultural adjustment, language (which he leaves more or less to one side), and learning/teaching problems due to “culture”. Campbell and Li’s 2005 study of Asian students at a New Zealand university reflect this with their identification of the problems facing international students; including language and cultural differences, which creating communication barriers; unfamiliar classroom behaviours; a lack of knowledge regarding academic conventions; a lack of learning support; difficulties making friends with local students; and a lack of a sense of belonging (Campbell & Li, 2008; see also Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). As these align, somewhat, with Biggs’ three areas, it may be useful to discuss the issues surrounding international student’s experiences with these areas in mind.

### **Socio-cultural adjustment**

It stands to reason that anyone studying in another country will take some time to acculturate to the local environment. Arambewela and Hall (2007) concluded that the international student experience was decided not only by their satisfaction with their study “but also by their home life, job, relationships, security and meaningful community engagement” (p. 12), so this is a matter of no small concern. Even between relatively similar countries, such as Australia and the US, there are a myriad of tiny differences that serve to unsettle the student and help contribute to culture shock. How much larger the difference, then, when a culture is markedly different from one’s own and the language is other than your mother tongue? Hellstén (2002) found that even though international students had some notion of the Australian way of life before travelling here, they often suffered severe culture-shock upon arrival; the main cause being when behaviour contradicted that “sanctioned” back home, including such seemingly harmless behaviours as speaking in class or acting in a familiar manner with teachers.

Biggs (1996) indicates that the culture shock so often ascribed to Asian international students is based on stereotypes with assumed Confucian rote-learning styles and idol-worship of academics. In partial support of Biggs' assertion is Pyvis and Chapman's 2005 study of Singaporeans studying at an Australian university on their own soil. Even though they never left Singapore, these students studied in English and experienced Western teaching methods, and they experienced significant measures of culture shock. Focussing specifically upon Vietnamese students, a French study found that students' socio-cultural adaption could be predicted by attachment intimacy and ethnic identification (Brisset et al, 2010), but an earlier study of Vietnamese in Canada found weaker ethnic identification (Chow, 2006).

There is also a concern that international students do not mix with local students. These perceptions were subject to change after exposure to one another, however. Biggs (2003) suggests that, at least as far as in-class group work is concerned, this is a point where teachers can facilitate interaction. In the case of Vietnamese students at several universities in Australia, Tran (2009) found that, while students invariably stated their preference for integrating with local students, their behaviours usually reflected an actual orientation of remaining separate from them. They mostly associated with those of their own nationality or other international students.

### **Language**

Prior studies also discuss the relationship between international students' levels of English fluency and their academic performance, choice of courses and the level of homesickness. For example, Gunawardena and Wilson (2012) note that, even though Australian universities require international students to complete some form of language assessment to a satisfactory level before successful enrolment—such as the International English Language Teaching System (IELTS)—students often lack confidence in fluency, for spoken class participation and written expression in 'academic English'. Some have even suggested that poor confidence with language is a factor in international students choosing to study degrees where facility with English is less of a concern, such as IT, economics or science (Chan, 1999).

Beyond simple, testable English proficiency, some students find it difficult to understand Australian idiom. This was the case for students at a university in Sydney, who received little benefit from note-taking classes beyond anecdotal evidence of a continued relationship with the facilitator which they later utilised to fend off isolation (Shea, Fisher, & Turner, 2001). An earlier study of overseas students at a UK university found that among the eight statistically significant factors influencing their concerns, the strongest correlation was between English facility and homesickness (Li & Kaye, 1998).

### **Learning/teaching problems due to “culture”**

Marginson (2011, p. 587) notes the four pillars of a modern, Confucian “knowledge economy” being: 1) strong direction from the state; 2) universal participation in tertiary education “sustained by a private duty, grounded in Confucian values, to invest in education”; 3) one-shot entry exams; and 4) intense public investment in research and universities. There is a large body of literature that juxtaposes Western pedagogy with “Confucian” systems of learning prevalent in East Asia. This often leads to stereotypes of East Asian students as “surface” or “rote learners” (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Kaputin 1988; Samuelowicz, 1987). Biggs (1996) and others (e.g. Helmke & Vo, 1999; Lee, 1996) have sought to dispel this misconception, and a number of studies have pointed to the academic success which East Asian students have in the West. Marton, Dall'Alba and Tse (1993) suggested that East Asian students may have different memorising habits than Westerners but, of the two methods, they identified, “mechanical

memorising” and “memorising with understanding,” they suggested that Asian students engaged with the latter.

Nguyen (1988, 1997) identified two possible issues Vietnamese students face when studying in the West: a lack of familiarity with teamwork and a generally passive attitude. These are based on cultural issues and not necessarily due to lack of proficiency in English (Yates & Nguyen, 2012). The esteem given to education and teachers in Vietnamese culture influences traditional Vietnamese teaching and learning methods; these, in turn, contribute to the behaviour of Vietnamese students wherever they study. Phan (2001) found that Vietnamese students lacked training in critical thinking and were unwilling to question published information. The latter negates, of course, one reason for referencing sources: it would be rude to say, ‘such and such *claims* this to be the case’; it is assumed that if they said so, it must *be* the case.

It is also often asserted that international students, especially those from Confucian cultures, have difficulties understanding plagiarism and comprehending the Western system of referencing sources. It is believed that Asian cultures subjugate their own voices to those of experts so much that they would rather just use the words of those experts verbatim (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). Of course, local students at many Western universities can exhibit a similarly poor understanding of plagiarism, and Franklyn-Stokes and Newstead (1995) found that over 50 percent of students surveyed admitted to some form of plagiarism.

### **Mapping diversity among international students**

Much of the above literature refers to international students as a single group and assumes homogeneity. The relevance of this literature to Vietnamese international students remains unclear. Recently, there have been more studies examining students’ experience and customer satisfaction issues in relation to different national groups (Abdullah, 2011; Abukhattala, 2013; Bonazzo & Wong, 2007; Caluya, Probyn & Vas, 2011; Gunawardena, Wilson, Georgakis, Bagnall, 2010), particularly Chinese students (Dyer & Lu, 2010; Wang, Taplin & Brown, 2011; Clemes, Cohen & Wang, 2013).

As one might expect, these studies have highlighted considerable variation in relation to different cultural groups’ perspectives of teaching and learning, English language study and cultural adaption to study abroad. For example Gunawardena and Wilson (2012) showed that Indian sub-continent students were highly competent in English academic writing and, although English was often not their mother tongue. They felt frustrated when grouped with other non-English speaking international students, with staff had often assuming that they were weak in English.

Cultural groups of international students are naturally characterised by the strengths and weaknesses of their home education systems, by their range of competencies in English, and by their cultural values, all which impact upon how they adjust to foreign education. However, these factors are rapidly changing. Take English language proficiency, for example, which has profound influence on students’ experience in navigating university education in western countries (Biggs, 2003). Globalisation has significantly impacted the local cultures and traditions of all Asian countries, including their English language education. The high value placed on education is common to all Confucian cultures and the acquisition of English language knowledge is considered important to the economic, social and technological progress of the countries. However, the countries differ in their goals and the mechanisms followed in developing English as a second language. In her study on the impact of globalisation on English language programs in Vietnam, Hall (2008) found that the primary aim of English language proficiency amongst Vietnamese students was to gain access to information technology. This

stands in contrast to English education in, for example, South Korea, where policy and cultural values highlight the value of English for employment and economic opportunity (Song, 2011). The teaching and delivery mechanisms in Vietnam were designed to “minimise cultural intrusion in the process of second language acquisition” (Hall, 2008, p. 35) in that the curriculum, language teaching methodology, and classroom procedures were developed within the Vietnamese context. One could argue that, despite commonalities with other Confucian cultural expectations, differences can exist in how children learn and use the English language during their early years, which could have a diverse impact on their student experiences in later years. In this context, Vietnamese students demonstrate one difference from other Confucian cultures; there may be others.

The specific experiences of Vietnamese students remain largely unexamined (Tran, 2009; Brisset et al, 2010). In the remainder of this paper, we go on to consider, in detail, this group's experiences at an Australian university.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study is a survey of the experiences of postgraduate Vietnamese students at a single university in Australia, using qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The study is part of a larger project collecting in-depth qualitative information on the experiences of different international student cohorts so as to map the variation in international student experiences according to nationality and cultural background.

### **Sample and data collection**

A purposive sample (Deming, 1990) was used so that each interview could be analysed in depth and lead to “thick” descriptions for each of the concepts under study. As this was an exploratory study, a small sample size of 10 Vietnamese postgraduate international students, in a range of policy, economic and business degrees at an Australian university was obtained (n=10: eight females, two males). See Table 1 for detail on the courses that the students were enrolled in. The sample's gender balance may reflect the observation made by some researchers that female students are more likely to participate in research projects than males (Crawford, Couper, & Lamias, 2001; Dey, 1997; Sax, Gilmartin, & Bryant, 2003).

Half of students were interviewed face-to-face (a 30-40 minute interview) and another half of the students were interviewed by email (according to considerations laid out by Burns, 2010) due to participants' preferred choice. Basic demographic data was collected first. The interviewer then asked 15 open-ended questions concerning the international student experience, their expectations prior to arriving at the University, their actual experiences and suggestions for improvement. All interviews were recorded with the participant's permission; recordings were then transcribed for analysis.

### **Data analysis**

Given that a key aim of the study was to capture international students' own voices, and given the qualitative, anecdotal nature of the data, it was deemed that a thematic analysis technique would best serve the study. The notion of giving voice to participants takes much of its impetus from postcolonial theory, in which the “empire writes back” to its colonial overseers, to borrow the title of the seminal 1989 work on postcolonial literature (Ashcroft et al, 2002).

Thematic codes were determined for the responses given to each question, with sometimes multiple codes being given to a response. These were then collated and examined for overlaps, before the interviews were again reviewed with these codes in mind to see if any further data revealed themselves. Any new codes that arose were noted and reviewed in the same manner, and these make up the themes, as discussed in the results section below, illustrated with quotes. This method is in line with that outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Certain clear themes recurred throughout the participants' narratives. These themes were generated inductively from the interviews and are presented below, with the main focus being on students' teaching and learning related experience.

The findings reveal that international these students are more experienced higher education customers than was assumed. Most of the participants had prior experience of international study, and constantly drew comparisons between them and the present university (See Table 1 for details of students' profile). These comparisons were not always favourable. Participants noted their current university's venerable age, buildings and grounds as an asset, and some described it as exemplifying, for them, what a university is supposed to look like. Others noted that these factors allowed them to relax during down times, and suggested they contributed to improving their mental health. Nearly all students referred to Australia, and Sydney's climate and beautiful environment as attractions.

**Table 1: Participants' profiles**

ID	Gender	Age	Prior study	Current study	Scholarship
S1	F	31	Bachelor in International Finance (Vietnam) Master of Business Administration in Thailand	PhD (Business)	Yes
S2	F	30	Bachelor in Banking and Finance (Vietnam). Masters (Public Policy), (Fulbright Economics Teaching Program, Vietnam).	MCommerce (Banking and Finance, Management)	Yes
S3	F	33	Bachelor of Commerce (RMIT, Vietnam)	MEconomics	Yes
S4	F	28	Bachelor in International Society (Japan).	MPublic Policy	Yes
S5	F	36	Bachelor of Foreign Trade (Vietnam).	MInternational Business	Yes
S6	M	22	Bachelor of Commerce (Accounting) (RMIT, Vietnam).	MCommerce (Banking and Finance)	No
S7	F	25	Bachelor of Science in Banking and Finance, University of London, (Singapore campus).	MCommerce (Accounting)	No
S8	F	26	Bachelor of Foreign Trade (Vietnam).	MCommerce (Finance and Project Management)	Yes
S9	M	25	Bachelor of Economics, National Economics University (Vietnam)	MCommerce (Finance)	No
S10	F	29	Bachelor in International Economic	MEconomics	Yes

ID	Gender	Age	Prior study	Current study	Scholarship
			Relations Post-graduate Certificate of Applied Economics and Public Policy (Fulbright Economics Teaching Program, Vietnam).		

### Language

All participants noted concerns, to some degree, about their facility with English, and expressed the expectation that study in Australia would improve it significantly. All had, at the very least, had it assessed through the IELTS to gain admission, with the exception of one student who had studied at RMIT Vietnam (an Australian university off-shore campus). That same student expressed a genuine commitment to improving his English during study at the University. While lessons at RMIT Vietnam had been conducted in English, outside the lecture theatre he and his friends had not spoken English. He worried that the same would happen here in Australia:

Most of my friends, they study in Melbourne, but when I decided on Sydney I think that I don't want to study with my friends because when I study with them I think I would use Vietnamese a lot, and I want to use English in my daily life. So that's why I chose Sydney (S6)

Studying at the University, he felt like this anxiety was ameliorated after a few months. Not all the students took their difficulties so in their stride, however. One student wished that recordings of his lectures were available online so that he could review them at his own pace. Many participants utilised the University's various English-teaching programs, either by requirement to meet standards, as in one case, or by their own initiative. These included courses in academic writing and presentation, as well as facility with speaking more generally. The student who had studied in Japan recounted that one course helped her understand plagiarism: "referencing and citing are unfamiliar with me before" (S4).

Several students registered surprise at the extra time it took to get used to the Australian accent: "The second difficulty was my listening ability to Australian accent. I did not think that would be a barrier at first as I was quite confident about my English skill" (S7). Another student expressed the difficulties of studying Public Policy in Australia:

Unlike other courses (Economics, Business, Finance, Media), most students in my course are native English speakers. I know that I will have a lot of difficulties to study with them especially in a course that required a lot of readings and wide understanding about complex things like this one (legislative, law, international relations, politics, social welfare, leadership, public opinion). (S4)

She also expressed great frustration at the emphasis on participation marks: "I understand the problem but I cannot express it clearly before class and it's part of my personal characteristic, I don't talk much" (S4). Although she was engaged, she found active participation difficult and considered it unfair for international students to be judged to that standard. Another student was even more affected by trying to cope with studying in English: "I was so stressed that I just wanted to throw books away whenever I saw them" (S10). Students developed different ways of coping with language difficulties. By her second semester, the student just mentioned had learnt to complete course readings as soon as the list was announced, and a growing familiarity with academic terminology lead to an increased reading speed.



Another student had been fortunate to travel to English-speaking countries throughout her life, and so had had many opportunities to practice her English. She had developed the ability to not only read and speak in English but to also think in English:

Because normally, when Vietnamese students are reading, they always translate from English to Vietnamese, but I never do that, I translate English to English. So I can talk to you very well, but I don't know how to translate it into Vietnamese because I understand it, I don't know how to say it in Vietnamese. Especially academic words, I know them in English, but I don't know them in Vietnamese. (S7)

The above finding demonstrates that those students with good English facility were able to overcome their difficulties with English quite quickly. This reflects Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones and Callan's (1991) discovery that international students display good—sometimes better than local students—problem-solving abilities when it comes to personal problems such as these.

That language is an issue is not surprising. Biggs (2003) confirms that language is the most common challenge among international students, especially those from Asia. However, these Vietnamese students' experience contrasts substantially with the experience of other international groups; for example, as compared to Chinese students, the wide range of English language ability among Chinese students is influential and a strong predictor of academic achievement and social adjustment (Andrade, 2012). However Indian sub-continent students, experience much of their early education in English do not report such concerns but are more likely to feel their language abilities are underestimated by staff (Gunawardena & Wilson, 2012).

### **Teaching and learning experience**

The students in our sample seemed to be aware of Western notions about Asian students' learning styles, and some explicitly referred to these. One student noted that:

Style of study is far different from my country and even Japan's. It encourages students to take part in class more though I was too used to passive style of studying . . . especially in seminars, an interactive style of studying. I am not so confident in class discussion in seminars. (S4)

Another student had high expectations with regard to learning Western methods of study:

I expect that the way they are teaching is different to Vietnam, because in Vietnam we are passive students, not active students. They can provide us the way to self-study and how to get new knowledge, because not only what we study here is for our future, but in our future we have to self-study day-by-day. (S2)

However, not all students were satisfied with the teaching styles they discovered at the University. One student, who had no previous experience of international education but had already studied at a postgraduate level in Vietnam, noted:

The lecturer covered content very fast and not as deeply as I expected. Different from the study method that I was used to, at Master level. I studied almost everything by myself and lecturers were there just to guide, not to explain in details. (S8)

Another student was bored with the delivery of some of his lectures: "I had some units of study where the professionals hardly use their body or eye contact, or they just read the slides" (S9).

This finding challenges the stereotype of East Asian students expecting and valuing traditional transmission teaching methods, as many of the students in this study seemed to expect and prefer the more active teaching style; while one participant was surprised at how boring and superficial some lectures were. Our findings question the view that *transmission* type teaching is dominant in Asian, Confucian heritage countries, while *constructivist* teaching is dominant in the West. The OECD Teaching and Learning International Survey (TALIS) suggests that, at school level at least, teachers in Confucian heritage Korea, for example, show similar values to those of Australian teachers in relation to direct transmission and constructivist beliefs about the nature of teaching and learning (TALIS OECD, 2009, p. 99).

Furthermore, rather than the expectation that Asian students would not wish to approach or question lecturers, some Vietnamese student participants complained they were often unable to reach lecturers outside of set consultation hours.

The findings above reflect negative student experiences, which, unfortunately, can affect the possibility of either repeat business such as further study at the same institution or another institution in the country or recommendations to their acquaintances (Arambewela, 2010, p. 156). They also highlight that if Australia is to deliver high quality, progressive education, some teaching and learning practices could be revised; it is not wise to rely on assumptions in relation to home country education experiences given the dramatic shifts in education occurring across Asia and elsewhere.

### **Assessment**

When asked about assessment, most participants fixated on group assessments, perhaps indicating their anxiety surrounding having to co-operate with others in an unfamiliar language—although most study participants seemed to have had previous experience with group work itself. When asked what they thought markers valued in group assignments, most stated that it was the final product that counted, and that assessing group dynamics was something reserved for undergraduate assignments.

I feel like now, at this level, they are less involved in how you deal with the group problems and issues. That is something that they—it's not really that they don't care, but it's something that you are now at the level that you handle it. What they will look for is the final result.  
(S3)

One student discussed the problem of lazy students in team exercises, although a Commerce student noted how her faculty had sought to solve this through initiating a system of peer assessment after group assignments. One of the participants reported difficulties expressing himself in speech as compared to having the time to compose written work. Another student, who had expressed her opinion that participation marks were unfair for international students, shared what she had concluded from this: “The most valued lesson: talk as much as possible even if you are right or wrong” (S4). This anxiety around spoken English by no means dissuaded the participants from wanting to push themselves, however. It seems to be something they regarded as a necessarily difficult but valued part of Western education. One student expressed his disappointment that his course did not require him to make a spoken presentation: “I had no chance to improve the skill of public speaking as expected” (S10).

The above findings inform earlier research by Nguyen (1997) who identified two possible issues Vietnamese students faced when studying in the Western universities in the 1990's: that they were unfamiliar with team-work; and held passive learning attitudes. These findings are not evident in our study. It is evident that Vietnamese students are now more familiar with group

work but find the execution of group work in English as the most challenging element. Furthermore, there was no evidence of a passive learning style reported among these students. On the contrary, many reported active, independent study and a willingness to face challenges; although this may be a feature of their postgraduate status.

Students described strict regimes for writing papers or studying for exams, expressing the difficulty they sometimes had producing work that met markers' standards. One student noted that her teacher: "required me to write essays as smoothly as a native one" (S4). Another was dismayed at the amount of calculation her exams required her to do by hand compared to her experience in the workplace:

Until now we don't need calculators much for our work, we need more computer skills or something like that. Rather than we had to calculate like we are the computer, we are the robot in modern society. (S2)

Again, these points highlight the need for Australian academics to be mindful of the prior experiences of international students. Such reflection should be built on direct contact with the students themselves and recent international literature rather than assumptions about their home educational experience and dated perspectives. With shifts in the global economy and rapidly evolving education systems elsewhere, there is a need for Australian education academics and systems to build evidence-based practice into university teaching and learning in order to remain competitive. For example, while calculation by hand is considered important within some contexts, there is strong evidence that use of calculators can lead to substantial learning gains (Human Capital Working Group, 2008).

### **On-campus learning environment**

Students often expressed the expectation that they would be able to immerse themselves in Australian culture by associating with the locals on campus. However, many were surprised by the high number of Asian students on campus, especially Chinese.

It's quite surprising when I came to this University and it's like "Oh my god", like, almost 80 percent of the students come from China, it's weird. You know, like, I expected I could see a lot of Australians, but I see a lot of Chinese, so I have to deal with that. (S7)

Another participant noted "I expected to study with local students; however, in most of my finance subjects, I met Asian (Chinese) students only". This student was glad she had enrolled in some Project Management units, however, as it meant there were fewer international students: "if I had chosen Finance major only, I would have had very few opportunities to meet local students" (S8). This led to friction in group work, as well. More than one respondent referred to "lazy Chinese students" (S5). One student explained her difficulty when working with other international students:

The biggest problem with the Chinese students is that they normally copy and paste without referencing . . . I don't know how to say it, but they usually do that and it's very annoying to me. And I keep saying that "You need to do quotation or rephrase it, you cannot copy and paste like this." And then normally . . . they're quite lazy, they just leave you to do everything and they just say "Never mind I can just fail this assignment and then try my best for the final exam". (S7)

This student sympathised with locals not wanting to associate with international students, citing strong accents, slow reading and speaking speeds, and plagiarism as barriers to interaction. She felt that, once they saw her adeptness with English they were happy to interact with her. One

student was quite philosophical about the lack of interaction between local and international students, attributing it more to the limits of postgraduate study: "I feel like for undergrad students they have a longer time to know each other, so they actually have a stronger kind of bond" (S3).

Participants were generally happy associating with other international students, however, among whom English served as a lingua franca: "that's why it also gives me a chance to practice English every day" (S6). This sort of networking was valued and actually sought by the respondents. One said: "I can improve the capacity of doing research as well as have some kind of other opportunities for research and an academic career" (S1). The student enrolled in Public Policy found this particularly useful: "liked to have friends from many different countries so that it will be diversity in policy researchers in the course" (S4). Another was somewhat disappointed at the networking opportunities in her course, as very few students were already working in her industry.

As expected, some students experienced culture shock and loneliness upon arrival, although only three participants mentioned it explicitly. One student had expected to feel lonely, but was surprised when he did not.

I had a time to live slowly, reflect on myself and experience many interesting things as travelling around in free time, or respecting the money earned from hard-working times for a part-time job. (S10)

The above findings are supported by those found by Campbell and Li (2008) and Poyrazli and Grahame (2007) who argue that international students often have difficulties in making friends with local students and experience a lack of a sense of belonging, which is likely due to their cultural differences, communication barriers, and adaptability. Volet and Ang (2012) found this to be the case at an Australian university because both local and international participants cited cultural issues, facility with English, outside commitments and ethnocentrism as reasons they remained segregated from one another.

Interviews with the Vietnamese students made it clear that they valued: opportunities to interact in English and opportunities to mix with international students from a range of backgrounds. If these views are also those of other international student cohorts, they should be considered in relation to institutional policies where marketing and recruitment campaigns have led to a dominant national group within the international student body or within specific degree programmes.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has explored some of the deciding factors for Vietnamese international students when considering satisfaction with their student experiences, including the reputation of the country and city, and of the institution in teaching and research, as well as the physical and cultural environment surrounding it. These students want to learn Western academic methods and possibly apply them in their professional lives in Vietnam. While there is some evidence of shifts toward progressive constructivist pedagogy in Vietnam, these are often hindered by a centrally controlled curriculum and traditional approaches that dominate universities there (Tran, 2013). Nevertheless, these international students demonstrated a familiarity with constructivist approaches that influenced their expectations and experiences. They expect a lot from lecturers and university facilities, but can be equally overcome by heavy workloads and difficult group

assignments. They are ready to seek support, and some expressed dissatisfaction in relation to support from academics.

The Vietnamese international students highlighted their difficulties with English. They are anxious about their English ability, but eager to challenge themselves and actively sought to face this to various degrees. It was important for them to associate with students other than Vietnamese in order to avoid laziness with regard to English practice. Students noted concern about their inability to express understanding of course material. Thus, it was suggested that there could be a service for international students to join English-speaking clubs to practise their presentation and speaking skills and/or to have their work proofread. A proof reading service would remove one of the reasons international students plagiarise: a lack of confidence with their English writing skills.

Another interesting finding of this study is that international students are familiar with Western notions of the Asian learner and have some experience in social constructivist pedagogies; like group work. In fact, the expectation of different learning and teaching styles are often what caused the participants to study in the West: citing skills they wished to learn, such as presentation, independent learning, and logical thinking. While some students subscribed to these notions wholesale, others suggested that these distinctions between Asian and Western perspectives are meaningless, at least in relation to students who have been in an international context for some time. Participants believed themselves well versed in issues of plagiarism, and criticised other international students for poor referencing.

Students struggled with assessment, on top of which was their increased workload around studying in another language. There could be scope for allowing international students to study part-time (currently not allowed due to visa requirements). While students mostly expected this and were prepared to take it in their stride, other aspects of assessment bothered them. Apart from the student who believed participation marks were unfair for international students, another student noted his disappointment at never having to make a presentation, as this was a skill he was hoping to get a chance to work on. A banking student did not understand why students were still required to make calculations by hand during exams, when this was never done in the industry. These examples highlight the need for teaching and learning practices to be reviewed in light of research and evidence on effective practice.

A big factor influencing the participants' study in Australia was the anticipated opportunity to learn among and interact with local students. Many interviewees felt that local students often lumped them together with other international students, who sometimes had no desire to befriend or even work with them. This seemed especially true in those subjects deemed more approachable to non-English speaking students. However, most participants were extremely happy to spend their time among other international students, finding that the people of diverse backgrounds they mixed with enriched their study experience. What did surprise them, however, was the large number of Chinese international students on campus. The University should keep in mind that, while it wishes to attract many international students, one of the main attractions to those students is a high proportion of locals and a mix of different international cohorts. This is a difficult tension to manage, and universities should be mindful of this when designing course and subject offerings for international students. The tendency to offer courses in satellite campuses that suit the geographic preferences of international students may also cause dissatisfaction if a suitable student mix does not occur in these courses.

The international student experience is evolving, and our understanding of it must evolve alongside. We can no longer assume that Asian students are passive receivers of Western

education, and Western notions of their own learning styles. The students interviewed displayed a sophisticated understanding of the differences between Asian and Western education systems, and many of them had previous international and postgraduate study experience to back up this understanding.

This study did not seek to be representative of the views of all Vietnamese international students. Instead it sought to explore some of the issues of the international student experience through a series of qualitative interviews with a small sample of students. Even so, there are several factors which will limit the utility of its findings. The sample only included two males, while the balance of Vietnamese male students enrolled at the University is more like 40 percent. Similarly, the majority of participants were scholarship holders and would, no doubt, have received much more dedicated attention than other students. It remains, however, that the themes that were revealed from the data are similar to what has been identified in the literature. The findings of this study will go on to inform the modification of the project's questionnaire for use with larger cohorts of other international students from a range of different countries.

Given these limitations, we can only conclude that among the Vietnamese students in this study, there are some characteristics that contrast with other cultural groups within international student cohorts, notably: their dominant concerns regarding English language proficiency; their informed expectations regarding active, constructivist pedagogy; and their reported desires to challenge themselves in terms of English language, academic learning and socialising.

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