

The Views of International Students regarding University Support Services in Australia: A case study

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This paper reports on a study aimed at developing an improved understanding of the support needs of international students. Using a case study approach at one Australian university, a three stage data collection process was adopted: interviews with key support service providers in the university, student focus groups, and a large-scale survey. Emphasis was placed on identifying the issues that are significant to international students in terms of their study experience, the services they consider as valuable and the factors that contribute to take-up. The findings reveal that, while most respondents felt that the range of support services provided is appropriate, current services could be improved by offering a more student-centred service structure and delivery. Issues identified as influencing service use include the institutional culture, perceived importance and awareness of services, the quality of information provided about those services, ease of access, timeliness of service provision and cost.

Keywords: support services; international students; student-centred; case study method

INTRODUCTION

The internationalisation of higher education, in which Australia has been an active participant, is a global phenomenon that has been taking place over the last twenty years. For Australia, being successful in this arena has been, and continues to be, of strategic importance at many levels: not only does this sector contribute significantly to the viability of Australia's higher education sector (Bradley, Noonan, & Scales, 2008), it also facilitated the development of political alliances and diplomatic partnerships with key neighbouring countries (Gallagher, 2011; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010; Roberts & Dunworth, 2012).

The internationalisation agenda has been facilitated through stringent government regulations, which established policy guidelines for the management of all aspects of student visas, education providers, and education agents. The regulations, while facilitating the success of the sector in terms of growth, have not necessarily guaranteed satisfying experiences for international students. Research, worldwide, indicates that the experiences of international students undertaking overseas study experiences are variable.

A number of studies report low levels of student satisfaction even when institutions provide a wide range of resources and support, usually in accordance with legislated requirements (Carr, McKay, & Rugimbana, 1999; Tan & Simpson, 2008; Van Hoof & Verbeeten, 2005). Recent Australian research, by Forbes-Mewett and Nyland (2008), suggests that both the sector and the legislation fails to adequately consider the protection needs of international students from a safety, security and wellbeing context, and this has contributed to concerns about the quality of the student experience and the reputation of Australia as a provider of education.

Providing a range of services will not automatically improve the experience unless the services are provided in a way which ensures they are utilized and effective. Smith (2006, 2007) and Forbes-Mewett (2008) argue that support must be meaningful to be effective and that the provision of support services in a depersonalised, generic manner will mean they are unlikely to address the needs of students. Jou and Fukada (1995) find that those students who perceive they have a greater level of support are better adjusted than those who need support but felt they had not received it. This suggests that how the context and meaning of support is conceptualized, both at an individual and institutional level, impacts on how support is provided and, ultimately, perceived by the users.

A number of views exist about the meaning of support and support provision. These have underlying assumptions which drive the model of how services are delivered. Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) are of the view that confusion exists about how the term “support” is used. In some instances it is seen within a deficit model focused on the problems of the individual, while others view it as about the development of an appropriate culture within the organisation. Bartram (2009) describes the culture of support in the context of a holistic approach in which a nurturing environment is critical to the development of learners. Evidence increasingly suggests a framing of support service provision is needed which differs from that typically provided. In light of the rapid changes in higher education currently occurring, it is critical institutions rework how they operate so they “fit within a student’s life” rather than expecting students to “fit within how institutions decide to run their operations” (McInnis, 2004). This essentially means that institutions need to establish support of students as central to delivery, which means that institutions need to be more aware of how students think. According to Clegg, Bradley and Smith (2006), establishing such a mode of delivery requires the exploration of institutional factors as well as the cultures and contexts within which support operates.

This paper describes the findings of a survey, which was administered to international students at an Australian university. The survey was the final stage of an in-depth case study that also involved interviews and focus groups with staff and students. The analysis of the qualitative data from the initial stages, described in Roberts and Dunworth (2012), enabled the identification of key factors, which then facilitated the identification of themes and underpinned the development of the survey instrument used for the research discussed in this paper. The survey focused on understanding the support needs of international students, the services they consider as valuable and the factors (institutional, cultural and contextual) that contribute to the degree to which those services are taken up. The overall case study approach was selected as the most appropriate methodology since the design and delivery of support and support services for international students is complex, contextual and institutionally specific.

THE STUDY

The site for the research was an Australian university with a long history of enrolling large numbers of international students onshore, particularly from South-East Asia. At the time of the study, there were approximately 10,700 international students on the main campus engaged in fulltime study through accredited courses, study abroad or student exchange programs. Of the total fee revenue of the university, international students enrolled onshore contributed 21–24 per cent from 2007 to 2010, which was comparable to the university's income from the Commonwealth Government of 21 per cent (Curtin University, 2010). To assist this large body of students, the university provides a wide range of support services.

The three key research objectives for this study are:

1. Identify what international students perceive as the main issues they face studying in an overseas educational institution, and their relationship to the range and appropriateness of services provided;
2. Identify what factors enhance or inhibit the use of support services; and
3. Recommend strategies to improve the delivery of support services to international students.

The overarching case study research approach incorporated a mixed method inductive sequential triangulation process to examine the phenomena of support service delivery from the perspective of international students. Using this approach meant the data from each stage of the research was able to inform subsequent stages and validate the findings. Qualitative methodologies used in the first two stages, namely interviews and focus groups, were used to underpin the development of the essentially quantitative research method of the third stage.

The case study method is a comprehensive research strategy encompassing three key elements: design logic, multiple data collection strategies, and specific analysis approaches (Yin, 2003). As an approach, it provides “contextual understanding and meaningfulness” (Greene, 2006, p. 94) to the human experience and the circumstances associated with that experience; in this case through the examination of reported experiences of international students of support services, and the organisational and managerial context and processes which impact that experience.

Analysis of the interviews and focus groups yielded congruent data which established internal consistency. Four overarching themes about support services were identified: awareness, usefulness and use, access and barriers to use. These themes, as well as a number of sub-themes that emerged from staff interviews and student focus groups are described in more detail below. Both students and staff agreed, in a general sense, that:

- Information dissemination and promotion of services would be more effective if they coincided with the time of students' greatest need;
- A more student-centred approach to service delivery was required;
- International students faced specific difficulties integrating into their new environment from cognitive, emotional and systemic perspective; and
- As positive staff/student culture was important, with students raising this as an issue in terms of their experience of support and support service provision.

There were some disparities in views between staff and students. These related to opinions about who is responsible for issues with the services provided, with staff tending to attribute responsibility to the central university management, the information managers and, to a lesser extent, the teaching faculties. Students, however, attributed their negative views about support services directly to the providers of the service delivered; they clearly distinguished between those services which they perceived as being of greater and lesser value. Thus, students were focused on the service delivery whereas staff focused more on the service setting and any constraints within which they perceived they operated. What was evident from the analysis of the data from the first two stages of the research, and similarly found by Bartram (2009), was the importance of a positive organisational culture, which has the needs of international students as central to the provision of support and support services.

For the final stage of the research, themes and sub-themes, which had emerged from the analysis of the qualitative data, were used to identify key concepts seen as critical to the development of an environment which supported students and could be explored in a questionnaire. The concepts included: awareness, utilisation, usefulness, accessibility, importance of service, and barriers to usage. The developed questionnaire comprised ten questions, and commenced with an open-ended question asking respondents to indicate what they thought were the main issues facing international students studying in the educational institution. This set the scene and enabled participants to express their views and thoughts without any prompting. Respondents were asked to indicate their awareness of available services and to rate the usefulness of each of the 24 services offered by the university. For the services students indicated they had not used, a subset of questions asked them to select a reason for non-use from a list of options. The option of “other” was also provided. Later questions sought information about the source of students’ knowledge of support services, asked respondents to identify the five most important services, and invited additional comments about information students had received prior to arrival, how support services could be improved and respondents’ overall opinion of services. The final series of questions sought demographic information, such as age, sex, enrolment and country of birth.

Piloting of the questionnaire was undertaken in two phases. In the first phase, a convenience sample of 13 international students was asked to complete the questionnaire and to provide feedback on content, layout and language. In phase two, the questionnaire was developed as an online survey tool using a commercially available product, QuestionPro, as the delivery platform. The format was made as easy to use as possible. Modifications were made to the hardcopy layout to accommodate the online format and feedback from the hard copy pilot. In this stage, a convenience sample of 10 international students was sent an email, requesting their involvement in the pilot of the online questionnaire. The email explained the purpose of the research and the online questionnaire, including the feedback section at the end. Students were advised that involvement was voluntary, and that confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. Seven of the students completed the online survey and, as a result of their feedback, changes were made to the survey layout, instructions and questions. This process was intended to address the issue of content validity; once this had been satisfactorily established, a test-retest exercise was undertaken to explore reliability. This involved administering the questionnaire to a single group of students at two different times, two weeks apart. A group of 15 international students were involved and non-agreement in responses between the first and second survey completion were counted when the ‘degree

of usefulness' (very useful, some use and not useful) differed between the first test response and the second. Based on this, an overall agreement level of 89 per cent was achieved. This high figure confirmed that the questionnaire was sufficiently reliable and could be used with confidence.

The parameters set for the survey were that students should be enrolled and attending their course, studying internally on a full time basis, and have completed at least one semester of study. Fulltime and internal enrolment are a visa requirement for international students studying in Australia. A minimum of one semester of study would ensure potential respondents would have had opportunity to experience life as an international student, gain an awareness of the issues, have had exposure to support services provided and, possibly, have needed and utilised some available services. Students enrolled in their first semester of study were not included given they would have been enrolled for only six weeks at the time of the survey, with limited exposure or reason to use the range of support services available. Similarly, study abroad and student exchange students were excluded due to the short time frame—often less than six months—associated with their experience.

The total number of students enrolled who met the above selection criteria was 3,105 and all these students were invited to participate. At the request of the educational institution, the survey was conducted in two cohorts. A total of 1,778 students were randomly selected for the initial cohort, with the remaining 1,327 the second cohort. Table 1 details the student numbers in each cohort by faculty.

Table 1. Total International Student Numbers in each Cohort by Faculty

Academic discipline/area of enrolment	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Total number of international students
Business	956	708	1,664
Humanities	209	148	357
Health Sciences	262	172	434
Science and Engineering	351	299	650
Total	1,778	1,327	3,105

Data from the questionnaire were analysed using two different analytical packages. For the quantitative questions, the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used and for the open-ended questions SPSS Text Analysis for Surveys (STAfS): SPSS analysis provided descriptive statistics; and STAfS identified theme categories from responses to the open-ended questions and comments, and groups responses with similar meanings into these categories. Responses in each of the categories were counted and linkage patterns with other categories identified. Developing a matrix or linkage pattern allowed the detection of patterns of association (Bazeley, 2009) and, hence, a deeper understanding of the phenomena of support services provision, utilisation and importance from an international student perspective.

Four key themes emerged from the data related to support services, which are conceptually linked, as illustrated in Figure 1.

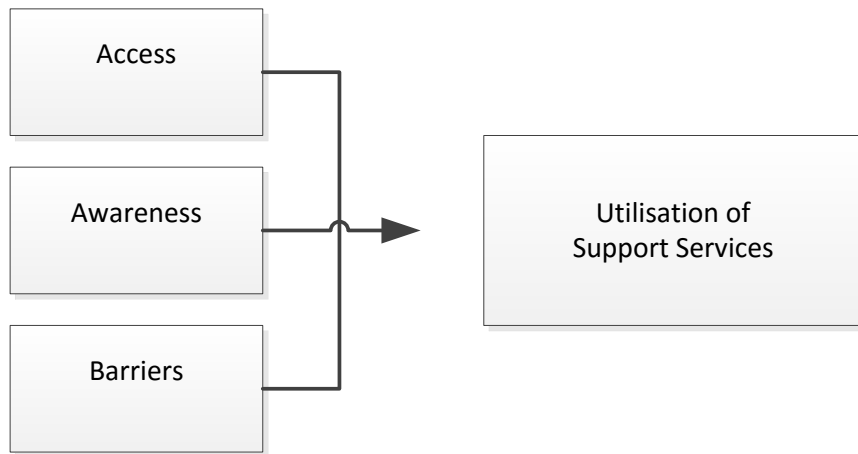


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

The data from the second part of the study, thus, led to a refinement and distillation of the key concepts, which had emerged from the first part of the study, into three overarching concepts and helped to explain the use or non-use of any given support service. In this model “access” refers to knowledge of how to go about using a particular service, as well as having that service available at a time and in a location that suited students’ perceived needs. “Awareness” is an issue where the results from the online survey were rather different from those identified by the focus groups—as described below. The theme “barriers” to use overlapped, to some extent, with the other two themes but included other factors. Aspects of this conceptual framework are further expanded through the framework used to analyse the data, as illustrated in Figure 2.

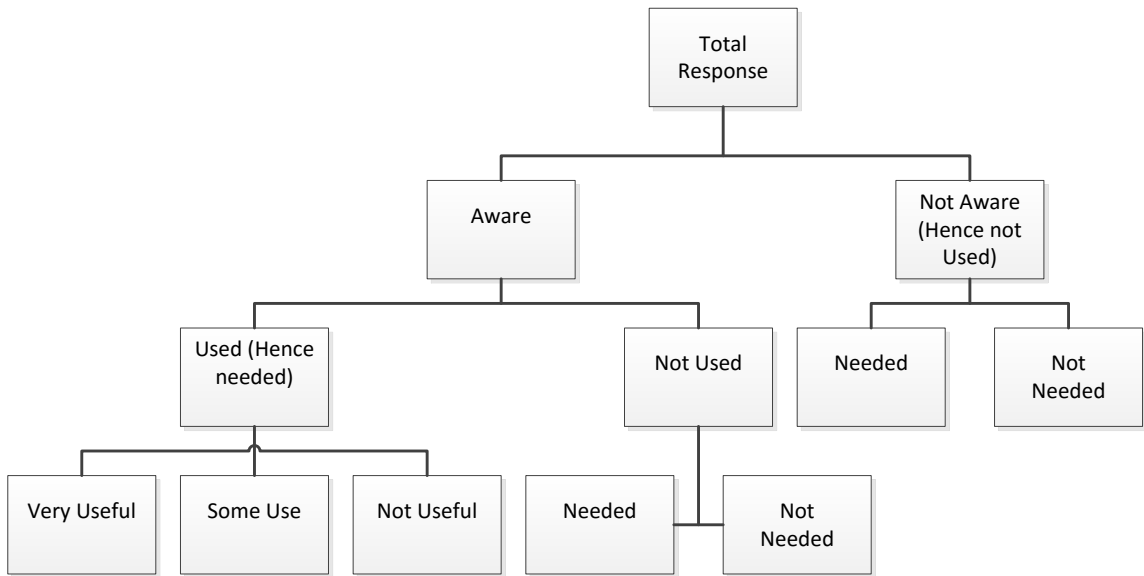


Figure 2. Framework used to Analyse Survey Data

RESULTS

The survey was at least partially completed by 395 students but 62 surveys were not included in the analysis because they did not include responses to the majority of questions. This left 333 usable questionnaires for analysis. Not all students answered every question and some questions could be given more than one answer, so the totals for any given question do not necessarily add up to 100 per cent. This is particularly the case with demographic data, which was requested at the end of the survey and was left blank by 23 percent of the total number of respondents.

Among the four academic faculties, the largest number of respondents who stated their faculty came from Business (n=101, 40%). Other respondents were from Health Sciences (n=53, 21%), Humanities (n=36, 14%) and Science and Engineering (n=65, 25%). Since the concern for this study was that a sufficiently large number of responses should be received to allow for general observations about the student population, the percentage of responses was of less importance than the actual number.

The majority of students who responded (78%) were in the age group 20-29 years and 71 percent were undergraduates.

The majority of respondents to the survey (81%) were self-funding students who relied on private means for their tuition fees. The remainder were funded through sponsor sources, such as their home government, aid agencies or through scholarship systems. Most respondents had commenced their study after 2004, with the greatest number having started in 2007. The majority, 203 (89%), had more than one year of exposure and potential opportunity to use support services provided by the education institution.

The respondents originated from a wide range of countries, 46 in total. The majority were from South-East Asian countries, which is consistent with the international student enrolment pattern for the university. Although English was cited as the most frequently spoken language (n=85, 34%), the majority of these responses were received from multiple language-speaking households. A form of Chinese was spoken as the most dominant language (n=59, 24%) of homes followed by Indonesian (n=27, 11%). Across the remaining respondents, as many as 29 different languages were spoken.

Theme results

Awareness, use and non-use of support services

The majority of students indicated a high level of awareness of the 24 support services offered, with more than 85 percent of respondents being aware of the first 12 services listed in Table 2. This finding from the online survey differed from the results from the earlier focus group phase of the study, where lack of awareness of services had been a key issue. The differences in the findings may be explained by the mode of data collection. In the focus groups, students were initially asked about support services and subsequently provided with a list of available support services while, in the online survey, all support services were identified prior to respondents being asked about their use of each service.

Only four of the services were used by 85 percent of the students who responded. A degree of “unmet need” was expressed, with the “Buddy System” identified as needed by 30 per cent of respondents. This was followed by “Sporting and Fitness Facilities”,

“Mentoring Support” and “Sporting Clubs”, each at 25 percent. Clearly, there has to be a relationship between student need, awareness and use, since students will not use services if they are unaware that they are available or it is a service they believe they do not need. For example although the “Disability” services were used by 30 percent of respondents, only 2 percent indicated they were aware of the service and needed it but did not use it; that is, the implication is that the students who needed the service were aware of the service and used it as required. What is of concern with regard to the findings reported in Table 2 is that respondents agreed that certain services were required, they were aware that the services existed, but did not use the services, thus suggesting there may be barriers to the use of the services.

Table 2. Use and non-use of support services

Service	% Used service	% Aware of service but not used	
		Needed	Not Needed
Library Service	100	0	0
Bookshop	98	0	2
International Office	95	1	4
Campus Security	89	2	9
Student Advisors Student Central	79	6	15
Student Guild	78	6	16
Careers Service	78	10	12
Health Service	77	7	16
Student Advisors International Office	70	7	23
Residential Assistance	68	5	27
International Student Societies	66	16	18
Volunteers	64	9	27
The Learning Centre	62	16	22
First Year Experience Coordinator	58	19	23
Student Equity	48	11	41
Sporting and Fitness Facilities	48	25	27
Mentoring Support	42	25	33
Sporting Clubs	41	25	34
Counselling Service	40	15	45
English Language Support	40	14	46
Buddy System	34	30	36
Disability	30	2	68
Alumni	29	21	50
Multi Faith Officer	28	10	62

Usefulness

The 11 most useful services identified by the students are listed in the Table 3. By far the most used and useful service mentioned was the “Library” (78% “very useful”).

Table 3. Usefulness of support services

Service	% Very useful	% Some use	% Not useful	N = Total number used service
Library Services	78	20	2	311
Bookshop	41	53	6	293
International Office	38	54	8	282
Campus Security	33	46	21	255
Student Guild	21	60	19	242
Health Service	42	48	10	248
Careers Service	25	59	16	220
Residential Assistance	40	45	15	220
Student Advisors Student Central	36	54	10	210
Student Advisors International Office	34	52	14	187
International Student Societies	22	57	21	171

It is unsurprising that respondents had a high level of awareness about the library, and that it was rated as being important, given the role that books and publications play in academic development, but the high level of agreement that its services are useful attests to the quality of this service. In contrast, the campus “Security Service”, which had a high level of awareness, and was considered important (as shown in Table 4 below), was not rated highly in terms of usefulness, and 10 percent of respondents, in a later question, further identified the security service as an area where improvements were needed. Similarly, awareness of the University’s international office and its services was high and the services were considered important. However, 62 percent of respondents rated their services as only of “some use” or “not useful” suggesting the need for improvement.

Importance of support services

The five most important services mentioned by students, on a frequency of mention as “most important”, are identified in Table 4. The “Library” was most often mentioned followed by “Campus Security”.

Table 4. Support Services Rated as Important

Service	How often mentioned as most important N (%)	How often mentioned as amongst five most important N (%)
Library	54(16)	153(46)
Campus Security	42(13)	103(31)
International Office	24(7)	93(28)
Health Service	22(7)	101(30)
The Learning Centre	14(4)	51(15)

The importance of these services can be seen as linked to the main issues that were identified by students in their open-ended comments, and described in Table 5. For

example, “Campus Security” was rated as an important service, perhaps because the respondents were concerned about security and safety on campus, and were worried about discrimination and racism. Similarly, the “Learning Centre” may have been identified as an important service because of respondents’ concern about language and communication as well as integration into the academic environment.

Barriers to use

Respondents who had indicated they were aware of a particular support service but had not used it were asked to identify reasons for non-use. Other than “not needing to use the service”, the most common reasons given were “did not know how to access the service” and “couldn’t find any information about the service when I needed it”. Comments provided by students under the section “Other” provided a range of additional reasons for the services not being used, with the most frequently suggested reasons being “time associated with using services” and “cost”. This may be particularly relevant for those services, such as the “Buddy System”, “Sporting Facilities”, “Mentoring Support” and “Sporting Clubs”, where respondents identified a high level of unmet need (as shown in Table 2).

Feedback on main issues

Seven open-ended questions explored, in greater depth, issues to do with support service delivery and utilisation. Of the 333 respondents, 287 (86%) made comments. The first question (at the beginning of the questionnaire) asked respondents to indicate the main issues they faced as an international student enrolled at the university. Language and communication were the most frequently mentioned (24%) with many respondents identifying multiple issues (Table 5). There were relatively strong links between issues related to “language and communication” and “integration into academic environment” and “culture”.

Table 5. Main issues faced by international students

Main issues faced by international students	Nos of responses	% Responses
Language and communication	166	24
Integration into academic environment	118	17
Culture	109	16
Social isolation	80	12
Financial	59	9
Access to services	54	8
Security and safety	35	5
Accommodation	32	5
Discrimination and racism	28	4
Total	681	100

Comments below describe the type of open-ended responses received from respondents in relation to the main issues international students perceive they face as students:

Cultural differences and English, being a second language for most international students (some prefer to be quiet, avoid interaction with others to prevent making grammar mistakes).

Language barrier and cultural shock. I think that is main issue for us being as international students to communicate with Australians. Some of us never talked in foreign language before and I think it really affects our confidence in socializing.

Culture shock, lack of social support, financial difficulty, home sickness, finding jobs especially when companies advertise for positions and then inform you upon submitting applications that only Australians are considered . . . racism.

Suggested improvements

The first of the final six questions, located at the end of the questionnaire, asked students: *If support services were to be improved at [the institution] what would you suggest?* Although 154 (46%) respondents to the survey made no comment and, of those who did respond, 16 (7%) indicated they were satisfied, 179 respondents suggested a number of strategies for improving the quality and delivery of the current services. Improvement in the quality of services (30%) was the most frequently mentioned, with safety and security specifically being identified by 15 percent of respondents. International students in the first open-ended question also identified safety and security as issues. Better promotion of (21%) and access to services (17%) were also mentioned by respondents as ways to improve the services currently being offered.

Table 6. Suggested Improvements to Support Services

Suggestions for improvements	Nos of responses	% Responses
Improve quality of services	71	30
Better promotion of services	49	21
Better access to services	40	17
Improve safety and security	34	15
Improve staff capacity to help	23	10
Satisfied	16	7
Total	233	100

Comments below describe the type of open-ended responses received from respondents in relation to suggested improvements in support service:

The provision of service is only as good as its consistent quality.

I have noticed that there are so many services provided but I was not aware of them. Therefore, its difficult for me to decide as I don't know what each support service does.

They should allow people at the international office to be well equipped to know how to advise students during orientation and not send them to and from one office only to be sent back to the international office. Have mentors for students such that they can give them support.

Support service centres should understand that students are not batons/balls. Don't just pass them onto each individual department where the student's query is not of their concern. It is very frustrating to have to move back and forth different buildings to solve different issues.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Little prior Australian research has investigated, in detail, the full range of support service provision in one university using a “whole of service approach”; taking into consideration the culture of support service provision within the institution, the legislative requirements of support service for international students, and the views of those who provide support services and those who use the services. Understanding the culture of the institution in which the services are provided has enabled a thorough examination of the potential impact the setting could have with regard to students’ experiences and perceptions of the services provided.

Main issues faced and range of services

In terms of the first research objective, identifying the major issues students consider they face, five major factors were identified:

1. Language and communication
2. Integration into academic life
3. Cultural adjustment
4. Social isolation and
5. Security and wellbeing

Strong links were identified between language and associated communication skills and integration into academic life, indicating the level of importance these issues hold for international students. They were also found to relate to social and cultural adjustment and an individual’s sense of security and wellbeing, a finding consistent with previous research (Brown, 2008; Burns, 1991; Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir, 2005; Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Poyrazli & Kavanaugh, 2006; Rochecouste, Oliver, Mulligan, & Davies, 2010; Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2007; Sawir, 2005; Wang, 2004). In relation to the range of services provided, respondents were of the view that existing services provided by the university were appropriate and for the most part sufficiently diverse to meet the majority of students’ needs based on the issues they indicated they faced.

The findings do, however, indicate underutilisation of many services (Table 2) even though students were aware they existed, with many services being rated only of “some use” or “not useful” (Table 3). The overwhelming number of comments strongly supported an urgent need to review and improve the way in which services are organised and delivered. The disparity between the views of service providers and students identified in stages one and two, and the findings of the final survey suggests the underlying context of service delivery may well be impacting the use and usefulness of services. In essence, services may well be more reflective of the position of central management rather than the felt needs of students. Smith (2006, 2007) and Forbes-Mewett (2008) suggests this has the potential to render the services as depersonalised and generic, as one would expect.

Factors enhancing or inhibiting use

With regard to the second research objective, the factors that enhanced or inhibited the use of support services from the perspective of respondents related either to environmental factors or to the way services were delivered. Enhancing factors included the range of services available, level of awareness and perceived importance of the service and whether services were offered in a student-centred manner. Factors which inhibited the use of support services were: their perceived limited usefulness as currently provided; the perceived level of assistance given by service providers; the underlying culture and context in which services were offered; and deficiencies in the quality of available information, including the promotion of services, problems with accessibility of services, and timing issues associated with the use of the service.

Developing a supportive learning culture within the university will require those factors which are identified as positively influencing the use of services, such as those provided by the Library, to be considered as the benchmark standard in any review of services. While there is little evidence to suggest new services are needed, there is evidence which supports the view that services, with the exception of the Library, are not provided in a way that is optimal for the students.

Strategies to improve the delivery of support services

The final research objective specifically focussed on the identification of strategies to improve the delivery of support services to international students. As previously discussed, Bartram (2009), Forbes-Mewett (2008), Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) and Smith (2006, 2007) all argue that, for support to be meaningful, it must be student-centred and in a culture which embraces positive student learning. Kou (2009) goes further, suggesting that, unless the strategic vision and the culture of management interrelates effectively with the staff—academic and administrative—who deliver the educational experience, then quality from a student perspective will not be evidenced in outcomes. Our research findings support the view that the majority of students value the services provided and see them as appropriate, but believe improvements in how the current services are provided are needed to improve the culture and context of support, the use and usefulness of the services provided, and to maximise their impact and effectiveness.

In summary this study has resulted in a greater understanding of the phenomenon of support service delivery for international students. It confirms that the issues which the respondents believe are most important in their experience of overseas study are related to the kinds of services they most value. However, the study also indicates that the valuing of a service in principle, and a belief in the importance of its availability, does not necessarily lead to a view that a given service, as experienced, is useful. The study reveals a disconnect between the importance of a support service and the way in which it is delivered. A key recommendation to flow from this research, therefore, supported by the participants' own suggestions of ways of improving services, is that a model of service delivery needs to be developed that is more centred on students' needs.

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