EXPECTATIONS AND REALITY – INTERNATIONAL STUDENT REFLECTIONS ON STUDYING IN AUSTRALIA

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INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- International student numbers in higher education have quadrupled since 1994 up from 35,290 in 1994 to 151,796 in 2004 (AIEC 2005)

- Education is the third largest export in Australia

- The majority of international students are no longer aid assisted but are full fee paying students. They have an increasing array of destinations to choose from. International education is no longer a matter of aid, but of trade.
INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

• Whilst international students may want to understand the ‘Western’ way of doing things, the new globalised business world cannot be ignored. The mono-cultural world view is being challenged.

• Many international students may not be familiar or comfortable with the processes used to facilitate learning in an Australian context.

• These students come with their own expectations arising from the educational practices of their communities.

• Their potential lack of participation in classroom activities puts constraints on classroom interaction and learning. It also means that nothing that they have to teach about their way of doing things, is learned.
INTERNATIONAL MARKETING

• There are almost unlimited opportunities available to students wanting to engage in cross border study and information is readily available via the internet.

• Wilton (1998:1) argues “as customers become more sophisticated, they become more powerful, learning how to better judge the differences between competing products and companies, and demanding higher performance, service and quality and competitive pricing.”

• Unlike many other products and services, the students spend a substantial period of time at the university – they don’t simply buy a product and go. The initial reasons for joining the program, the quality of product and service and value for money have to be sustained over the period of their program of study.
UNDERSTANDING STUDENT NEEDS

• This presentation explores one initiative, in the Faculty of Business at QUT, to gather feedback from international students on their perception of QUT, what they want from an international education experience and how their experience meets their expectations and needs.

• Word of mouth is a powerful tool in marketing education. We need to understand the changing requirements of the international student body.
FACULTY OF BUSINESS AT QUT

• The Faculty of Business at QUT is one of the largest business faculties in Australia.

• Like other business faculties around Australia it has seen a rapid increase in international student numbers with over 22% of the 7,500 students now coming from overseas.

• Over the past five years source countries have diversified from the traditional markets in South East Asia. In 2004 students were received from 65 countries (Equis 2004).

• Given the diversity of languages and cultures that this represents it cannot be assumed that these students have the same expectations or requirements.
METHODOLOGY

• The data collection approach taken was largely inductive, gathering as much evidence as possible about the topic, using focus groups.

• Each group was drawn from students from a particular geographical region e.g. Africa, Thailand, India and China/Hong Kong /Taiwan.

• All students from the regional group were invited, though only a small percentage responded to the invitation and an even smaller number attended.
METHODOLOGY

• One of the critical issues in inter-cultural communication is that of power. As the convener of the groups, the facilitator had a number of perceived bases of power that might inhibit open discussion; ‘mother tongue’ understanding of the language, a senior hierarchical position, a prestigious position as a teacher within the institution and as the host.

• To offset this imbalance, focus groups with a shared language and cultural background were chosen. Questions were asked over morning or afternoon tea, in an informal setting.
METHODOLOGY

• The purpose of groups, to collect information that might enable the Faculty to improve the learning experience of students, was explained at the beginning of the session.

• The confidentiality of individual comments was guaranteed.

• There was an observer who took notes.

• Those students who attended contributed openly, though it is to be expected that only the most obvious issues would have been raised in a single meeting.
METHODOLOGY

- 38 students participated in the focus groups from 4 regions, Africa (4), China/Taiwan/Hong Kong (14), India (10), and Thailand (10).

- Of the 38, 13 were undergraduate, 13 post-graduate and 12 MBA students.

- Of the 805 students invited, 38 is a small (4%) sample and can therefore be indicative only.

- It can, however, provide some insight into what attracted students to QUT in the first place, how this might differ from region to region and whether their expectations were met.
RESULTS

Why did you choose QUT?

• For Indian students the difficulty getting a US visa has led to prospective students looking elsewhere and to Australia in particular. QUT was also seen as affordable by this group of students.

• The reputation of the institution appears to be significant across the board.

• Thai, Indian and African students also identified that they were looking for particular subject offerings.

• Chinese, Thai and African students were attracted by the practical orientation of the programs.
RESULTS

Why did you choose QUT?

• Recommendation played a significant role for all the students.

• Pathway programs of different kinds helped students choose QUT, as did articulation arrangements with local institutions.

• Location in Brisbane, the warm climate and city location were also important, particularly to those from warm home climates.

• A fast response and offer was seen as important.
RESULTS

Expectations prior to arrival

- African students appeared to be unaware of the international nature of the student base, and were pleasantly surprised.

- Thai students had great expectations of the social facilities that would be available, sporting, catering and social interaction options generally.

- Indian students were surprised by the difference in teaching style between Australia and India. They felt the benefit of a more self directed learning regime but found it difficult to adjust.
RESULTS

What has been very difficult?

• Indian students appear to have had great difficulty with agents – 5 had to go through 2 agents before their arrival at QUT.

• Thai students found class sizes (in some subjects) too large and felt the lack of individual attention.

• Chinese and Thai students raised a number of study related issues such as pressure during examinations and assignment times, the lack of confidence they felt and the impact this had on understanding lecturers.

• Importance was placed on having access to university social activities and an opportunity to meet Australian students. They found this difficult.
RESULTS

Best part of your study?

• The multi cultural environment and international focus was valued by everyone.

• There was appreciation for the high quality programs with practical focus relevant to the workplace.

• They valued the hard work required. This was identified as a mark of quality.

• They valued the contact they had with teaching staff.
RESULTS

What can we do to improve things?

• Encourage multi-culturalism and mixing of students from different countries in the classroom and socially.

• Would appreciate more social functions for students and staff to get together.

• They felt that there could be some way of staff and fellow students supporting commencing students and helping them adjust to the new environment.
QUESTIONS RAISED.

- Do the brochures and agents provide an accurate picture of the institutions they are planning to attend?

- Are they adequately prepared for study in Australia?
CONCLUSIONS

• International students appear to value multi-culturalism and the ability to network across the globe, perhaps more than Australian students do.

• Encouraging intercultural interaction will be an ongoing challenge.

• It is clear that the easier it is to enrol, the more positive an image the institution projects.

• The students were looking for content knowledge that reflects the demands in the work place and processes that equip them to transfer their learning to employment.

• They are looking for a ‘campus’ experience.
IMPLICATIONS

• Institutions need to be clear about the nature of the learning experience that they are offering students. Not just the content, but the learning processes, the social activities, and the links to potential employment.

• The formal communication channels used by the universities to share the benefits of their programs need to be consistent and of high quality and communicate in terms understood by each of the markets.

• International students are looking at the world from a different perspective, assessing the relevance and quality to fit into a context quite different from Australia.
THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION

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