

Supporting International Students' Transition: Have a Chat

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Abstract

This paper will report on recent activities in the Faculty of Business and Law in Victoria University (VU), Australia, that support the transition of international students many of whom have learnt English as a foreign language in a highly formal setting and who often have limited opportunities to speak to domestic students in a social setting. The central purpose of the Faculty's activities is to engage international students in extra-curricular programs that aim to improve their English proficiency, increase their confidence and provide a common space for domestic and international students to interact. Social, cultural and linguistic support beyond the classroom is necessary for academic success and a positive educational experience. This paper particularly focuses on the Faculty's "Have a Chat" program run by the Transition officer and discusses what happens, who participates and, most importantly, what international students have to say about it.

"Because of the barriers in communication...much more talking is becoming a really necessary job for us to do" (reflection of international student, 2009)

Introduction

An average attrition rate of "more than 18% nationally" (Trounson & Healy, 2009) highlights the need for universities to support students who are engaging in new learning environments. While attrition figures for international students might be lower than for domestic students, arguably, the need to support international students in regard to language, culture and educational practices is greater. This discussion, while it touches on attrition, is more about engagement, a key deterrent to attrition. As there are multiple important transition points (Adams et al, 2010: 9) for students as well as a need for ongoing support for students as they engage with different elements of their course, the need to have a range of strategies that sustain students at different times in their study is vital. Many authors note that students may be more likely to drop out if they are without a social network at university (Wilson & Lizzio, 2008) and the need for students "to develop a sense of belonging to a group and form relationships with peers to be effective and successful learners" (Adams et al., 2010: 7) has been repeatedly mentioned in the research as well as smacking of common sense.

The Faculty of Business and Law (FoBL) in Victoria University (VU), Australia, has numerous strategies that aim to support the transition of *all* students. VU also recognises that international students may have additional transitional challenges which can significantly impact on their capacity to optimise their academic and social adjustment (Sawir, 2007). The

Supporting International Students' Transition: Have a Chat. Refereed paper.

figures for international students for FoBL have been extracted from VUSIS (VU's Student Information System). In 2010, semester 2 nearly 1600 international students were enrolled in undergraduate degrees in the FoBL in Melbourne. Hundreds more international students undertook postgraduate study or study in VU programs offshore. While students in Melbourne come from various countries including Saudi Arabia, Germany, Vietnam, Iran, Mexico, Thailand and Indonesia, most international students at VU come from China. There are also significant numbers of students from countries with a strong tradition of English language, namely, India and Pakistan. All of these groups require transitional support.

Some of VU's transitional strategies have been implemented by the FoBL's Transition officer whose brief includes Orientation activities, mentoring programs, championing Faculty-based Ambassador and Leadership programs, supporting "at risk" interventions, developing student-centric communication using Web2.0 technologies and ongoing one-to-one support. One faculty activity stands out as especially supportive to international students in transition: Have a Chat. The Have a Chat program focuses on international students and aims to improve students' English proficiency, increase students' confidence to participate in a challenging new environment and provide a common space for domestic and international students to interact. While many activities and programs run by the faculty's Transition officer aim to create the social, cultural and linguistic support essential for academic success and a positive student experience, Have a Chat has been an immediate and particular success.

Methodology

This paper draws on generalised responses of international students in two focus groups (2009, 2010) as well as a generalised overview of responses to an anonymous online survey sent via student email to international students about English language support in the Faculty of Business and Law (2010-2011). A literature review considers transition initiatives in Australia to contextualise the study. VU's approach to Internationalising the Curriculum provides an institutional context for these transition activities. Finally, the Australian government's *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities' students* (AUQA, 2009) which emphasises the responsibilities of both universities and students for evaluating, monitoring and developing English language competencies provides another important reference point for the study.

Focus groups were run at the end of 2009 (12 students) and again at the end of 2010 (8 students). Student responses from focus groups are, for the most part, generalised. Any verbatim student comments are italicised and in quotation marks. In 2009, a larger focus group initially had a mix of domestic and international students; Chinese and Malaysian students were then invited to remain for an extra session. Significantly, international students were less talkative in the mixed focus group. Some international students expressed a concern that in answering questions they felt they were "*competing*" with domestic students. In both groups (2009, 2010), international students were asked about their English language development, interacting with domestic students in team assessment and the challenges of different teaching approaches in Australia. The 2010 focus group also had students from Malaysia and China. They were asked specifically about English language support in the FoBL as well as the richness of their language context in Melbourne.

The authors concede that a lack of anonymity in the focus group data could lead to a potential positive bias in the outcomes due perhaps to the desire of students to create socially and even academically acceptable responses. The online survey, an anonymous evaluation tool, in

Supporting International Students' Transition: Have a Chat. Refereed paper.

some way serves to validate this more reflective feedback of the focus group and overcomes to a degree the expected positive bias of focus group responses despite low response rates.

Transition, Attrition and the First-year Experience

Recent figures on attrition at universities in Australia are alarming: “The total cost of attrition is \$1.4 billion and across the 38 public universities this is an average of \$36 million per university” (Adams et al., 2010: 17). Although international student attrition is lower than for domestic students, the cultural, social and linguistic reasons for disengagement and isolation, if not attrition, by many international students seriously hampers their ability to participate positively and engage successfully in academic life (Sawir, 2007). There is general agreement that attrition is a national concern. Even so, attrition fundamentally needs to be addressed at institutional, faculty and even program and unit of study levels.

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) uses universities’ attrition rates as one of many performance indicators; predictably, funding is attached to attrition. For a range of reasons, attrition rates at VU are high compared to other Australian universities. Over a 10-year period, attrition rates hovered around 25% (Gabb, 2006). Student engagement is a key factor in attrition. VU’s students typically have lower levels of engagement than peers at other Australian universities; they spend less time on campus, less time in private study and they have fewer contact hours per week (Gabb, 2006) though international students were not a particular focus of these studies. Research suggests that first impressions count: student success and therefore retention rates are largely determined by the student experience of the first year (Kift, 2008). So the first year is crucial (Gabb, 2006) and a key way to reduce attrition is to attend to the transition of students at first year. One approach is to have multiple points and methods of engagement for students as well as multiple reasons for students to engage with the university and their study.

As there are both multiple important transition points (Adams et al., 2010: 9) and a need for ongoing support for students as they engage with different elements of their course, the need to have semester- and year-long programs that can sustain students at different levels and with different roles in the course of their study is vital. Many of the “piecemeal” (Kift, 2008) activities that aim to entertain, inform and engage students may well hit some transition marks despite not being as integrated with education programs as they could be. VU’s Transition activities and resources include university-wide support such as a whole-of-university Orientation events (library tours, games, bands, information sessions) and online resources that link students to a range of services from Learning Support like “Tips for Surviving the First Four Weeks” and ongoing academic support programs that are centrally delivered. As important as university-wide support and events are, Faculty strategies for student engagement and support are also vital. As such, the Faculty runs its own Orientation activities, it operates Biz Help all year which feeds in to a range of other support initiatives, including the BizHelp Ambassador Program (forming part of both a mentoring program and a leadership program), it has its own Facebook which sees activity levels peak at Transition times and it has implemented a range of curriculum innovations (more team-based learning, more scaffolded learning activities). Importantly, and with a particular focus on international students, the faculty also runs Have a Chat. This discussion considers this inexpensive and effective program, who participates and what students have to say about it.

Supporting Transition at VU

Like most universities in Australia, VU has undertaken numerous initiatives in an attempt to address the attrition rate at first year. In particular, the university has been keen to address the concern that students have little sense of belonging (Krause, 2005) and several areas have initiated programs that employ students (Students as Staff Program; Have a Chat mentors; Professional Development student advisors), engage students in programs beyond the curriculum (Leadership Program) and support students with peers (Student Rovers in the library; PASS in targeted units). Curriculum initiatives have also been mindful of the need to engage students in assessment via team work, online and face-to-face activities. Most learning activities and assessment tasks are designed with student engagement in mind. There is general agreement that *all* students need transitional support. Importantly, it is also recognised that international students may need further support to engage with university life, different academic traditions and the community beyond the university.

Transitional support for students – however it manifests – aims to increase student retention and avoid attrition. It is generally agreed that there are links between good teaching and reducing attrition, creative use of social networking technologies and reducing attrition and developing a sense of a dynamic, supportive student community and attrition. At VU, there are a number of university-wide events and programs that support transition. However, it is also clear that faculty-based initiatives have a strong role to play in creating a sense of belonging in students, in developing a community of learners and in connecting extra-curricular activities with the curriculum. Extra-curricular activities that are outside of the formal, assessed curriculum play a crucial role in supporting the curriculum in ways that is yet unmeasured. In the Faculty of Business and Law, curriculum initiatives have embedded transitional support to students through academic literacy in the curriculum, multiple communication strategies and team-based activities. Many first year units work with Library support staff and Learning Support academics to support student transition to learning at university. However, a number of studies as well as observations in the classroom highlight the need for international students to engage – at least in the first instance – with English. Other transitional initiatives can actually backfire if students lack confidence in their English language proficiency to actually speak. Team work can be disastrous, oral presentations a terrifying experience and interactions between domestic and international students can be downright depressing for everyone. Enter Have a Chat.

Internationalising the Curriculum and English Proficiency

VU's approach to making an international university includes an internationalised curriculum, international programs, opportunities for students to undertake study offshore, an international student body and language support for international students. VU's Internationalising the Curriculum approach is based on 9 principles, the first of which is that an internationalised curriculum is "based on a respect for diversity" (Woodley & Pearce, 2007). Supporting international students to improve their English language proficiency in a collaborative, fun and non-threatening way demonstrates this respect at a deep level. DEEWR's *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities* (AUQA, 2009), especially principles 8 and 9 (International students are supported from the outset to adapt to their academic, sociocultural and linguistic environments; and International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus), are

important in relation to the Have a Chat initiative especially in relation the societal aspects of learning. The point of Have a Chat activities are social, academic, ethical and economic.

Engagement in social activities is not enough in itself to engage students. Productive learning (Scott 2005: xiii) must be an outcome of social interactions. Many international and some NESB domestic students recognise the need to further develop their English-language skills, as indeed do local so-called native speakers, as oral communication skills impact on learning across the board. Lack of English language proficiency also hinders students' ability to participate in the community more broadly. Finally, English proficiency is also a key employability skill – for students working in Melbourne who will work in teams of cultural and linguistic diversity or when students return home to work in global businesses.

Withers's introduction to the resource *Examples of Good Practice in Assisting International Students to Integrate with Australian Students and the Wider Community* (DEEWR, 2009) serves as a rationale for programs like Have a Chat: "Socially included, connected students are more able to fully explore the rich dynamic that an international education experience provides. Students expect to obtain not just an education from their education and learning provider...but also social engagement which enables them to mix with local students and the community. Programs and activities to encourage this are essential" (DEEWR, 2009). Organised programs and activities are also essential given that so many students complain that there are few opportunities to either practise English or interact with "locals".

The Australian Universities Quality Agency (AUQA) project, *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities* recognises that: "it can no longer be assumed that students enter their university study with the level of academic language proficiency required to participate effectively in their studies" (AUQA, 2009: 2). The principles emphasise that both students and universities have responsibilities to evaluate, monitor and further develop English language competencies. The 'Good Practice Principles' require universities to provide a richer English language context for International students so that they can communicate in a variety of contexts and modes.

The perceived lack of English competence of international students and, more alarming, graduates has been an ongoing issue (Ewart, 2007; Elson-Green, 2007) in Australia for nearly a decade. English language proficiency in higher education is an important quality issue in itself but is also significant due to a heightened awareness of the role of English language ability in employment outcomes and the role of international graduates in meeting skill shortages in the Australian workforce. There is also an increased recognition within universities of the fundamental nature of language in learning and academic achievement for all students (DEEWR, 2009). While later studies will consider the role of Have a Chat in enhancing employability for international students, this paper will focus rather on the role of language in learning and in socialising – not unconnected activities.

While less-than-adequate levels of English impact on some students' transition, it is also true that many international students experience a different social and educational culture in Australia. They are often lonely (Sawir et al., 2007) and can feel alienated by the communicative Western teaching methods employed in many classes in Australia. In addition to operating in an English speaking context, international students need to grapple with group work, team assessments and oral presentations as well as multidisciplinary exchanges that require language and learning skills that may be new to many.

Western pedagogies present a challenge for international students who may be unaccustomed to communicative pedagogies and who often seem disadvantaged by the English proficiency required of a dynamic, activity-based classroom. Students' anxiety about their language levels and their confidence to speak to and work with local students can be extreme. Learning activities and assessment tasks that are team-based and which require a mix of local and international students in each team can create real stress for students as do activities that involve industry representatives. Discussion, debate or Socratic teaching approaches based on communicative philosophies of teaching and learning may be unfamiliar to students from non-Western educational traditions. More importantly, students may not have proficient English language levels to successfully participate in discussion and debates. In a recent self-survey, one group of 40 international students estimated that they understood approximately 70% of the general discussions and learning activities going on in class. How do international students cope with the dynamic, busyness of the Australian classroom? Because Have a Chat emulates some classroom activities and provides a safe place for students to practice, we expect students to identify that Have a Chat has helped them to engage and succeed at university.

Have a Chat

Two questions are posed in the recent ALTC-funded report *Finding Common Ground: enhancing interaction between domestic and international students* (Arkoudis et al., 2010): "What can be done to harness the potential of student diversity? In particular, in what ways can university teaching promote interaction between students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?" (26). Have a Chat is just one example of what can be done. A low tech, highly social activity, Have a Chat commenced in semester 2 2010.

Have a Chat started as a 4 week pilot in Week 3. Interest and demand saw the program run to Week 12. The program ran every Thursday afternoon for two hours, often seeing students linger to continue socialising. Mentors were recruited through the Faculty's Facebook page and blanket emails sent to all continuing students. Eight mentors signed up to participate, with a minimum of six mentors participating each week. Twenty five students registered to attend Have a Chat with an average of 17 students participating each week. The program introduced international students to aspects of Australian culture as well as offering them a safe environment to practice English. Typical activities included becoming familiar with Australian animals, landmarks, food and the infamous Aussie BBQ. Two outings were arranged for students: to the Melbourne Zoo and a Yarra Valley tour. One student emailed: 'Thank you for giving me an opportunity to have a meaningful Sunday... today was like being with my family'. Typically, in-class sessions include group games like Guess Who, Uno, Scrabble and simple card games such as Snap. The students mentor is the driving factor with each group. Their role is to ensure a flow of conversation in English.

Students and Mentors were filmed at the beginning of the program and were asked why they joined and what they expected to get from the Have a Chat. Many cited the obvious motivation of wanting to improve their English and being able to communicate with local students and their lecturers with confidence. Local students said they wanted to meet international students. During the last two sessions participants were again filmed and asked what they had experienced in Have a Chat. As expected, most students noted an improvement in their conversation skills. What was not expected, however, was the students' enthusiasm

and confidence to become involved in other programs to further enhance their learning experience including volunteering with student and community clubs and participating in Faculty leadership programs. Two of the most important developments students identified were: the friendships between mentors and participants and the confidence to apply for and gain positions advertised with VU's Students as Staff program.

Have a Chat absolutely enacts the idea of learning being pleasurable. As perhaps we need to be reminded: "There is no rule against hard work being fun" (Ramsden, 1992: 102). Fun is a key means of engaging learners – particularly in programs that are not mandatory or *necessarily* linked to curriculum. Fun is achieved through: the students themselves, the games, a heightened sense of drama and the behaviour of the Have a Chat convener and mentors. Fun serves an educative purpose: if students are relaxed, if they feel secure, if they feel liked then they can make mistakes then they will "*be brave*" and have another go. In such a fun and social environment, students are more likely to learn to use English (Kim, 1995). Have a Chat sessions are always social and often hilarious.

Findings

Of the 8 students (6 females, 2 males) who attended the 2010 focus group from which most of these responses are drawn, all but two were from mainland China. Two female were from Indonesia. Initially, students were asked how they rated their English language levels before coming to Australia on a scale of 1 – 10. All of them said they had thought their English was "*good*". Students rated themselves at 3 (1), 4 (3) and 5 (4). Asked how they rated their English language levels in the first week of university, students responded with 3(1), 3.5 (1), 4 (5) and 5 (1). Most students, then, had to reassess their own ideas of their English proficiency when they arrived in Melbourne. One student said that "*When I was in China I was very confident but when I got here...*" and she trailed off. Another said, "*I cannot understand people. I cannot express my feeling.*" Generally, students said that they found reading and writing "*OK*" but listening and speaking were "*the big problem.*" Respondents mentioned problems with colloquialisms – "*no worries*" – and conversational English that made it difficult to interact in both social and academic settings. Students observed a "*big difference*" between academic and conversational English and several remarked on the pace of spoken English: "*locals speak very fast..like, woah....*". Attempts to communicate with locals during Orientation were described as "*very scary*" and team discussions with locals were depicted as frustrating with difficulties in turn taking – "*there was no way in*"; pace – "*we can't cut in...can't catch up*"; and assuming a passive role – "*we listen and catch their ideas*". Asked if they were translating discussion, students said yes and that this slowed the process. By mid-year, however, one student playfully boasted that she was "*dreaming in English*". Asked to describe one assessment task that involved oral communication that was difficult, most students described the horror of oral presentations: "*I want to escape*"; all agreed, however, that it was "*scary but a good thing to do*". One student also raised the important issue of differences in approach to oral presentations between Australia and China: "*in China, we write a paragraph and recite*".

Questioned about the activities at VU that they had attended to support their English language learning, 7 of the 8 participants spoke of the Have a Chat program. They liked the informality, that it was not assessed and the relatively small number of attendees. They also mentioned the support that was offered and the fact that they '*had*' to speak English during this time. They particularly enjoyed the opportunity to meet local students and to have fun

and make friends, “*good friends*”. All participants thought that the role of the Transition officer in creating the right atmosphere for learning was crucial. Some participants also mentioned the university-wide English Conversation sessions as another support to develop English language proficiency. These sessions were described as more formal and a great complement to Have a Chat. All students believed their oral communication skills in the last year and they attributed the improvement to living in an English context, “*talking a lot*”, getting a job, being friends with mentors (in Have a Chat) and joining clubs like SIFE. The need to creatively publicise events that support socialising and therefore English language development was highlighted by the comment: “*Apart from Have a Chat, I didn’t notice any other events supporting English*”. All of the students thought that the number of Have a Chat sessions should be increased as it offered stress-free chances to practise English and socialise. Notably, students also mentioned the need for Orientation to be a positive experience.

An online survey was sent to 600 international students in the Faculty of Business and Law. Of those emails, over 40 “bounced back” from student accounts that were not activated. This highlights the problem of administering surveys via student email: many students either do not activate their VU email or access it rarely. Only 11 students did the survey. They were from China, Malaysia, The Philippines and India. While this sample is clearly inadequate in order to make generalisations, student comments are nonetheless interesting and even these preliminary results suggest a reconsideration of treating international students as a single cohort. For example, there are clear differences between students from India – which has English as one of its many official languages – and China where English is less common. Accordingly, Indian students suggest that language per se is less of a problem while accents and colloquialisms just take time to get used to. A number of activities and people were identified by online respondents as contributing to English language development including Have a Chat, Student Mentors and clubs and homestay hosts. Conversely, some respondents describe very limited opportunities to speak in English for any duration: “*coles cashier - 30 seconds*”, “*7-eleven cashier - 2 minutes*”, “*personnel at student services of the university - 3mins*”, “*ask a tram driver about a place - 1 minute*”. These findings alone suggest a need to create more opportunities for students to practise English in a social setting.

Summary

Both focus group participants and survey respondents overwhelmingly suggest that more programs and activities are needed to support students’ to increase their English language proficiency and their confidence to use English socially and academically. Most respondents also stressed the need for increased opportunities to positively interact with domestic students. Many responses in both focus groups and in the online survey suggest a woefully small amount of interaction between some international students and the wider community. Many participants suggested the success of Have a Chat was that it was Faculty-specific which offered an opportunity to develop relationships with peers and simply spend time with other students who understand the challenges of particular subjects.

Conclusion

The need to provide international students with “a responsive social environment, active orientation and transition programs, the support of campus-based clubs and societies” (Long, Ferrier & Heagney, 2006) has been recognised in studies for some time. While universities may be attempting a grand integrated approach to transition, it is worth recalling that small, personal and social programs like Have a Chat play a important role in supporting transitions

Supporting International Students’ Transition: Have a Chat. Refereed paper.

for international and domestic students alike. It is also worth recalling that both the *Good Practice Principles for English language proficiency for international students in Australian universities' students* (AUQA, 2009), VU Internationalising Principles and students' comments all demand that more such programs are provided. Support for English language development needs to be social as well as academic and if it is also fun, it is more likely to engage and retain students.

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Supporting International Students' Transition: Have a Chat. Refereed paper.

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