
Influences of the Learning Environment of a Regional University Campus on its International Graduates

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Abstract

Staff and students at small regional campuses often consider them to be a learning environment with many advantages. Students can benefit from the opportunities for enhanced access to staff provided by factors such as small classes and a compact campus. International students from non-English-speaking backgrounds are one group for whom these factors can be particularly helpful in their adjustment to a new society as well as in their continuing study program. This belief is tested in the study described in this paper. Factors identified by international students as influencing their learning at a small campus situated a considerable distance from the state capital indicate strengths to be built on and celebrated and areas that call for the development of strategies to improve the quality of that learning environment. Former international student graduates were surveyed concerning their perceptions of their regional Australian university experience and the professional preparation it provided. Other Australian higher education institutions, particularly those with regional campuses, can make use of the insights gained through the study: as well as having implications for the provision of a quality learning experience and environment for all students, not only international students, they also have a bearing on international marketing strategies.

Introduction

Whyalla Campus, the only non-metropolitan campus of the University of South Australia, is situated 400 kilometres by road from the University's five other campuses

in the capital of the state. The city of Whyalla, with a population of approximately 23,000, is the third largest city in the state. The current student body of the whole University numbers over 31,000 (including offshore students); in 2004 only 600 approximately (more than half of whom were off-campus students) were enrolled through Whyalla Campus. Over the last two decades numbers of international students have grown markedly: in 1983, they represented only 1 per cent of the total student body of the University of South Australia's predecessor institutions (Radford, Ongkili and Toyoizumi 1984, p. 11), compared with over 25 per cent today (over 8000 students). While Whyalla Campus in 2004 had only seven international students – four students from Bhutan and two from China studying in the Bachelor of Business program, and one from Canada studying in the Bachelor of Nursing program – in earlier years international students comprised a significant portion of the student cohorts in Engineering and Business, with a few individuals in other program areas.

Whyalla is considered an ideal study environment for international students for a number of reasons: smaller class sizes facilitate individual attention from teaching staff; the size and nature of the campus is not so confusing to a newcomer; the city does not have the vast range of distractions from study that are found in the metropolitan area; and there is nearby, available accommodation, including on campus, so that time is not wasted on travel to attend classes. However, such opinions have not been grounded in research data. This raised the question: Do international students find these frequently expressed potential advantages of studying at a rural campus helpful to their tertiary study? As numbers of international students studying at Whyalla Campus over the preceding few years had been much lower than in the 1980s and early 1990s, it was decided to follow up the Campus's international graduates, that is, international students who had successfully completed a qualification, in order to answer this question. The study would also collect data that would contribute to international networking opportunities.

International students, acculturation and success

The presence of international students in Australian universities brings many benefits beyond the financial ones so often emphasised (Harris and Jarrett 1990, Pittaway, Ferguson and Breen 1998). These students have an important contribution to make to current aims to internationalise the curriculum (Luong, Crockett, Lundberg and Scarino 1996) and to develop in local students graduate qualities that include demonstrating 'international perspectives' (University of South Australia 1996, Morris and Hudson 1995). (For a discussion of a range of initiatives contributing to the development of this quality in Whyalla students, see Ellis and Heffernan 2002.) Hence, investigating factors perceived by former students as having facilitated their completion of Australian university study is important for finding ways to encourage more participation by

international students and greater exposure to cultural diversity by Australian students. In the past there has been also 'a degree of altruism' that has made universities 'willing participants in measures to raise levels of education and research in developing countries' (Williams 1989, p. 15), although, this discourse seems much less evident today. On the other hand, institutions have come to rely on the export of education to compensate for decreased higher education funding and therefore have economic reasons for meeting the needs of this 'market' (Brown 1996, p. 64, Mazzarol and Hosie 1997, p. 20).

Some previous surveys of international students included a focus on negatives such as students' problems in order to indicate ways in which they could be overcome (Radford, Ongkili and Toyozumi 1984, Suen 1998). While not glossing over such negatives, our study has a positive focus. In 1991, the International Students Centre of the University of South Australia surveyed all new international students to gain an understanding of their settling in to a new study and living environment and of the services and facilities needed (Wilson 1991). Similar surveys at Flinders University are summarised by Quintrell (1992). In recent years enrolment surveys of international students have been conducted by the University of South Australia, and such students have been included in the normal surveys of student satisfaction. The study described in this paper is unique in that it investigates specifically the perceptions and graduate outcomes of Whyalla Campus international students.

For any students, the transition to university can be likened to 'entering a new culture ... a community with distinctive values, behaviours, languages, hierarchies and rewards' (Ballard 1995, p. 107). While all students are grappling with the new facets of this educational environment, increasingly so as the diversity of student cohorts has widened in Australia and elsewhere (Bruffee 1993), international students have the added task of adjusting to all the newness in their total environment. In addition, as Ballard points out, they also may have to deal with lecturers' preconceptions of international students from various backgrounds, and become aware of different approaches to knowledge and to what is expected of lecturers and students (Ballard 1995, Ballard and Clanchy 1997, Hofstede 1986). The process of acculturation is complex: it is not only the way things happen in Australian universities that is new for new students, particularly international students, but each academic discipline has its own culture. Kokkinn (1998) provides a useful summary of relevant literature, along with a case study of one international student's academic acculturation.

Many resident students of diverse cultural backgrounds have found adequate support, in a host of circumstances that impinge on university study, to be a crucial factor in their subsequent success. As well as learning issues, there are requirements for personal and language support. For international students, this is no less the case: adequate provision

of support must be given within university structures as well as by individuals (Ballard 1995). A wide range of essential and desirable services are outlined by Edmond (1995). While many of these (e.g., accommodation assistance) can be provided on a university-wide basis, tertiary literacy support that is integrated into disciplines is much more effective than 'add-on' programs (Kokkinn 1998). University studies can be a source of stress for many students, but the provision of services designed to alleviate this needs to take into account the following point:

Many aspects of the stress and coping cycle are intensified, or rendered more problematic, when the person experiencing the stress is from a different culture than the one in which the stressful situations are occurring (Shupe and McGrath 1998, p. 86).

Such 'sojourners – individuals living temporarily in a culture foreign to them' (Shupe and McGrath 1998, p. 86) – are examined by Ward, Bochner and Furnham (2001) in their exposition of the psychology of culture shock. The stressful nature of the situation of international students has been identified by Suen (1998), regarding Hong Kong students in Australia and Kim (1994). Hence the positive relationships identified by many of our participants assume an even greater importance as sources of support.

The study

The purpose of the investigation was to provide information to enable a regional campus to build on its strengths and make improvements where needed so that studying there would be a rewarding experience for current and future international students. The research team consisted of current and past staff of Whyalla Campus. The study focused on graduate perceptions, satisfaction and outcomes in terms of the graduates' subsequent careers.

Aims

The study sought to:

- Discover how the graduates perceived success in relation to their past studies
- Identify the advantages and disadvantages of the regional campus for the graduates in terms of their perceptions of its learning environment
- Consider the extent to which the graduates felt that their Whyalla learning experience contributed to their attaining the attributes that are now included in the list of qualities of a University of South Australia graduate
- Identify factors for emphasis or change in order to improve the learning environment for current and future international students

- Provide data and insights that would be valuable to the University in reaching its goals, particularly Goal 7 ('To be a university recognised nationally and internationally for educating professionals, applying knowledge and serving the community') and in pursuing its international outreach. (The earlier goals and objectives were replaced in 1999 by a Statement of Strategic Intent (University of South Australia 2003), which continues to value diversity and an international focus.)

While participants were assured of anonymity in the reporting of the survey, they were also given the opportunity to express their willingness to have their names and contact details included in a list of Whyalla international alumni. A further aim of the project was to establish contacts that would facilitate graduates' networking with other international alumni and also enable Whyalla staff to retain links with them.

Procedures

Using Whyalla graduation lists and alumni records, the international students of the Campus who had graduated from 1991 onwards were identified. This starting point was chosen as it was the first year of the new University of South Australia, formed from the amalgamation of the three campuses of the former South Australian Institute of Technology with three of the campuses of the former South Australian College of Advanced Education. Potential subjects were contacted by e-mail wherever possible, with letters or telephone calls being used if no e-mail address was available, and asked whether they were willing to be part of the study. Beginning in late 1999, a survey of these former students was conducted, administered via e-mail, telephone or face-to-face during a visit by one of the researchers to graduates' home countries (mid-2000). Qualitative data from the student questionnaire responses were analysed according to dominant themes and frequencies of response. (The survey questions are included as an Appendix.)

The survey investigated the graduates' experience as students and their perceptions as graduates of the Whyalla Campus. After preliminary questions to establish a profile of respondents, questions explored: The match of the Whyalla Campus environment with their expectations; language issues; advantages they perceived for themselves and other international students in studying in Whyalla; levels of support and dealing with concerns; cultural awareness of staff; and whether the graduates would recommend study in Whyalla to family and friends. A final section asked about their subsequent work history and the extent of their satisfaction with the usefulness of their qualification. The graduates also were asked to comment on whether their studies had enabled them to acquire the personal and professional attributes that have come to be enumerated as the University's 'graduate qualities'.

The participants

The study population consisted of international graduates of either degree or diploma programs of the Whyalla Campus of the University of South Australia. Those who had graduated between 1991 and 2000 were included (62 graduates, all from business and engineering programs apart from one in nursing). The sample comprised as many of these former students as could be contacted. The 25 respondents (14 males and 11 females) were all former students of either business (20) or engineering (5) programs. Four of them had previously enrolled at another Australian university before coming to Whyalla. Two-thirds of them were from Malaysia, with smaller numbers from Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Singapore (all being countries supplying large numbers of higher education students Australia-wide, as shown in a 1997 survey: Australian International Education Foundation 1998). All had graduated with a bachelor's degree except for two associate diploma graduates. There were 22 responses regarding their subsequent careers; of these, all except the recent graduate appeared to have had steady employment, some in quite senior positions.

Survey results

Themes emerging from the survey responses relate to the extent to which studying at Whyalla Campus was similar or different from their expectations before arrival, the positive factors that, in the graduates' estimation, contributed to a satisfying study experience, difficulties and concerns, and the preparation that their studies provided for the future. All quotations in the remainder of the paper are from questionnaire responses, unless indicated otherwise. Survey responses have been numbered from 1 to 25; the number in square brackets after each quote indicates the number allocated to the response. Minor editorial changes have been made to direct quotes from written responses if necessary for clarity or ease of reading, but as far as possible we wanted the respondents to speak for themselves.

Congruence with expectations

For 19 of the 25 respondents, studying in Whyalla was very different from their expectations. Reasons given related to the small size of the campus and student body (9 comments) and the city (4), the associated quietness (5), the distance from Adelaide (1), lack of some facilities (2), numbers of overseas students (3 – 2 mentioned the lack of numbers, but 1 commented on meeting others in the region), access to lecturers (1) and friendly relationship with lecturers and other students (4; 1 respectively), and the general environment: 'I've expected rural, farming, green crops, cattle, sheep and rivers,' said one [9].

The perceived status of the campus was a concern:

Totally different from my 'dream university'. We were not enjoying what the city campus students were enjoying, e.g. facilities and atmosphere ... we felt left out! (Luckily we have got good/kind lecturers.) [23]

While smallness was an initial shock, it had its compensations:

I had expected to be in big lecture classes with hundreds of students. However, in Whyalla, it felt like studying in high school. Everybody knows each other and lectures were more relaxed. Lecturers are nice and they are approachable. [19]

In general, the responses to the question, 'Was studying in Whyalla very different from your expectations?' were more positive than the responses of three new Whyalla international students to a 1991 survey question asking them to choose from adjectives to describe their first three months at the University: all three chose 'boring', 'lonely' and 'challenging', along with one or more less negative adjectives (Wilson 1991).

Some of the comments made were revisited in speaking of the advantages of studying at the campus. Some of the factors perceived as negatives at the start were later seen as helpful features of the campus.

Studying in Whyalla

Several questions provided useful data on the Whyalla study experience: two questions related to perceived advantages of Whyalla Campus as a study environment, for the participants and for international students in general; another requested any further comments. Responses have been grouped under place, people, concerns and language issues.

The place: The Campus and Whyalla

The quietness has already been mentioned. While this was sometimes seen as a negative, for study it was an identified advantage: 'Peace and quiet, therefore a nice place for studying; not much entertainment, therefore plenty of time and able to concentrate on studies' [18]; 'small town means less unnecessary entertainment' [24]. While some facilities at the campus were not so plentiful as at metropolitan campuses, there was much less competition for them because of the lower student numbers: 'Library material is easily accessible' [1]; 'Good access to the facilities of the university as users are not many' [17]. However, a comment was also made that the library could have had more resources, particularly reference books. Hours of access to the campus

were satisfactory: 'Students were allowed to enter the university after lecture hours to complete assignment or project' [19]. One particular mention was made of the lack of a special room for Muslim students to conduct their daily prayer. The fact that student accommodation was on campus or within walking distance was a great help and saved both time and money. The lower cost of living compared with the capital city, especially with regard to accommodation, was highlighted by several of the graduates.

The people: Staff, other students and local residents

Good relationships with lecturers and tutors were mentioned many times. Developing such working relationships was helped by the small class sizes and the relatively small numbers of international students: 'more personal attention' [21]; 'lecturers knew students by their names' [19]. Lecturers were described as 'friendly and approachable' [21, 25], 'caring' [9], 'attentive to students' needs' [6] and gave 'support and understanding' [7]. Likewise, friendly relationships with other students and local residents developed, allowing the international students to learn of the 'easy life style' [25]. A couple commented specifically that they had experienced 'no racism' [9, 19], and another stated that there had been no discrimination shown by staff or students. (However, another had interpreted a lack of responses to queries as racist.) While they had expected there to be more international students in Whyalla, this became an advantage as they communicated more with Australians and people from different language backgrounds and so of necessity had 'more opportunity to speak English' [20] than may have been the case in Adelaide, the capital. (The low number of international students at a small Victorian regional university has also been identified as assisting 'with their interactions with local students and English language development': T. Barrett, e-mail communication, August 4th 2003.) Most were satisfied with the cultural awareness of staff in understanding and dealing with any issues raised with them by the students, but recognised that there were some difficulties in understanding each other:

Most staff were aware of culture differences. The other way, I too have a problem in understanding what the staff mean when they say something. I understand word by word but not as a whole [1].

They felt that most staff were 'willing to listen' [12] and 'may not know our culture fully, but ... they keep attention on these sorts of matters and make adjustments from time to time' [16]. Understanding could be further developed by staff undertaking training and reading about different cultures and religions, they suggested, as well as joining in fully with activities organised by international students.

By far the majority of respondents were satisfied with the support they had received at the Whyalla Campus. Most comments related to the 'good personal contact' [9] with

lecturers, who were described as understanding [6] and patient [16]. 'Helpful' was a description used frequently in relation to lecturers helping the students to understand concepts and the requirements of assignments and tutorial questions, organising study support, arguing a case on their behalf, and being readily available to provide assistance when required. This was facilitated by the small classes. Library staff also were praised as 'nearly excellent' [18] as 'they tried their best to help search for study materials' [13].

Concerns

While most respondents replied that they did not find it difficult to raise any matter of concern about their studies with staff, some of the comments received showed that some had difficulties in understanding: 'My first year I was not quite sure how and who to approach especially when having difficulties in understanding the lectures' [25]; 'sometimes it is very hard to understand the questions, or just don't know how to ask the questions!' [4]. Sometimes they were just too shy to ask or afraid that their difficulties might be seen as 'stupid' [17]. These problems were resolved, however, when the students became more familiar with their lecturers and classmates. The idea of having a senior student tutoring/mentoring a junior student was praised as a method of overcoming these early dilemmas. (It is interesting to note that when one endeavour was made to introduce a peer-mentoring program for all interested Business students, the only person who volunteered as a mentor was an international student.)

The respondents believed that their concerns were dealt with satisfactorily when they were confident to speak up and bring these issues to the attention of the appropriate people. Again, the approachable staff and lower student numbers facilitated this. It was considered that the staff handled students' concerns seriously, and one remarked that 'they remember our concerns and ask us if we are OK few weeks after' [16].

Language issues

Apart from negatives that were part of the initial impressions on arrival, other difficulties included language. Only two said that they had experienced no English language difficulty when they first arrived. Two commented on difficulty caused by the 'Aussie slang' they encountered (from lecturers as well as students): 'learning to understand [this] was as tough as trying to learn the subject itself' [25]. As mentioned above, language issues were also specifically mentioned (by two students) with regard to raising matters of concern. Respondents identified difficulties in suggested areas as follows: academic writing (13), conversation (10), lectures (7, one being 'only with some lecturers' [18]) and course required reading (4). As others have pointed out, such difficulties go beyond simple knowledge of English: familiarity with the institutional and local culture and with different academic conventions is also integrally involved (Ginsburg 1992, Ballard and Clanchy 1997).

A regional campus and perceived success

The graduates were asked about the contribution of the Whyalla Campus learning environment to their successful completion of university studies, their satisfaction with their qualification and its usefulness, and the qualities their program had helped them to develop.

Succeeding as a student at a regional campus

The majority of the participants believed that studying at Whyalla Campus had helped them to succeed as a student more than if they had studied at a capital city campus. Responses included mention of the easy access to lecturers and tutors, cooperation with other students, and the lack of distractions:

There are a lot of attractions (nightlife, casino, etc) in capital city, which cannot be found in Whyalla. If self-discipline of a student is not good, the student will never be able to complete the course. [24]

Because of the lack of 'entertainment after lecture hours and on weekends', said another, 'we spent most of our time studying' [19].

Satisfaction with the qualification gained

Most of the comments concerning their satisfaction with the usefulness of their qualification in employment were favourable, with graduates saying that 'it was a good head start' and 'very helpful in getting jobs':

With a degree such as Electrical and Electronics Engineering has given me wider choices of job opportunities. Able to join multinational companies which stressed on good degree. Able to communicate and mix effectively among colleagues from everywhere around the world. Build up good self-esteem. [19]

Another supported this, expressing satisfaction and commenting: 'electrical and electronic gives a wider choice compared to electrical or electronic alone. Six months compulsory work experience at BHP helps (valuable) due to international company' [3]. One of the Business students also expressed appreciation of the value of the degree: 'There is still high demand for accountants in the Asia region, and as an accountant now I receive great benefits' [16].

However, responses to the question, 'Did you expect your degree to be more useful that it has proved to be?' were mixed: Of 23 responses, 12 did not expect it to be more useful, but 11 did. Things that could have improved their satisfaction with its usefulness in employment included: more practical work experience; additional courses on

computing, management and financial matters; following the first qualification with a master's degree; and indications for prospective employers of the quality of the degree. For one it would have been improved if he/she had gained 'all credits and distinctions and worked for Big 6' [9]!

Attainment of graduate qualities

Although many of these students had graduated before the University developed its list of graduate qualities and implemented these in courses and programs, the study participants were asked whether they felt that they possessed these personal and professional generic qualities. These relate to their professional knowledge, lifelong learning, problem-solving, teamwork and autonomy, ethics and social responsibility, communication skills and international perspectives. Of 23 responses, only one was negative, with the participants agreeing that they had developed some or all of these qualities to a certain extent. The current list of graduate qualities is as follows:

A graduate of the University of South Australia:

- Operates effectively with and upon a body of knowledge of sufficient depth to begin professional practice
- Is prepared for lifelong learning in pursuit of personal development and excellence in professional practice
- Is an effective problem solver capable of applying logical, critical and creative thinking to a range of problems
- Can work both autonomously and collaboratively as a professional
- Is committed to ethical action and social responsibility as a professional and citizen
- Communicates effectively in professional practice and as a member of the community
- Demonstrates international perspectives as a professional and as a citizen.

(Graduate qualities 2001)

Regarding having the ability to use the knowledge needed to start working in their profession, one commented:

Knowledge is not that applicable especially when working in a disk-drive company. Only basic physics or electronics needed. However, we can always refer to books and notes for refresher. What is important is the creative thinking, the logic and the common sense which I strongly believe that studying overseas provides. How to trouble shoot, deal with different types of people and environment is most important. [19]

Others commented on the importance of gaining 'real life experience' [23] as well as the technical knowledge.

Concerning their readiness to continue learning for their own personal and professional development throughout their careers, some referred to further formal learning they had undertaken, the learning that occurred informally in their position, and the importance of the concept of life-long learning: 'You cannot learn 100% at the Uni. Besides engineering world changing every minute' [25] and 'This is very important for the progress of our career' [19].

Problem-solving ability was recognised as very important, but some felt that they had still to work on developing this quality, and that experience was a significant teacher. One perceived a lack of congruence between the training received and the work situation in their home country, and another acknowledged being over-dependent during university studies on lecturers and other Asian students.

Most felt that they had developed the ability to work professionally in teams as well as individually. One also mentioned developing leadership ability, and another the confidence gained: 'Feel more confident and working as a team. Information are being shared equally and no stabbing from the back. Create pleasant working environment' [19].

Most agreed that they had a commitment to ethical action and social responsibility and that this was a duty: 'As a professional person has responsible to use his/her skill/knowledge in work. As a citizen should serve the community' [12]. One interesting comment was: 'I guess maybe Whyalla is a small town and ... less affected by the material world' [17]. Perhaps it is easier to act ethically in such a situation than in the high-powered world of international business?

While some felt that they needed to work more on communication skills, most believed that they had developed these. Their importance was acknowledged: 'effective communication skills is an important factor/tool to the professional' [12]. One felt that in the less competitive environment of Whyalla 'somehow the communication method/skills are different to the real world' [17].

While not attributing it to the program itself, the majority felt that they had gained international perspectives through their experience in Whyalla:

Living in the English-speaking society helps me in picking up the English language, which is very important for people to find success in Hong Kong. And yes, it helps for international perspectives. [16]

Whyalla Campus factors that in their view had helped them to develop these graduate qualities included: The course content ‘which gained good communication skills and developed critical thinking’ [12]; ‘a network of close friends’ [9]; ‘being independent’ [6]; ‘guidance and fellowship from academic staff’ [1]; and ‘smaller campuses encourage teamwork building among smaller groups’ [5].

Whyalla Campus had a small community, we were mostly close with everybody, we knew everybody and we helped each other. It created a friendly environment. This taught us of teamwork – helping each other. The hands-on exercises developed better understanding and creative thinking that is applicable in the working environment. The 6 month industrial training opened up our minds of how and what the working environment was all about. How to deal with people, how to live by rules and regulations, how to manage ourselves professionally and fulfil other’s expectations. [19]

It is a life experience for a youth to live in different cultures and to learn skills at the same [time]. It allows us to develop ourselves, finding and establishing our characters and personality. It helps us to develop more mature thinking, so that we are better equipped for today’s changing world. [16]

Suggestions for changes that could have helped in the development of these attributes included ‘more real world case studies/experiment’ [22], work experience similar to nursing placements, ‘more dynamic lecturers’ [5] and ‘more pressure [so as to provide] the preparation to face the real world’ [17]: ‘The course is good, provided new real world information keeps being updated and put into the program’ [16]. Additional qualities that they felt could have been good to have developed from their studies included more ‘confidence/knowledge’ [25], ‘responsibility and better decision making’ [4], ‘team management’ [2] and ‘more international perspective on all subjects’ [14].

The graduates’ recommendations

While finding many pluses in Whyalla as a place to study, as outlined above, the graduates made many suggestions for ways in which the programs available at the Campus could better meet the needs of international students. Some of these are identified in the previous paragraph. It is important that these contributions be considered, as their responses were ambivalent concerning whether they would recommend (to others from their family or circle of friends) Whyalla Campus as first preference for a place to study overseas. Of 23 responses 8 were positive, 10 negative, and others were uncertain, saying for example that it ‘depends on the course

[program] taken' [25], or '50% for Whyalla; 50% for Sydney and Melbourne' [4], or 'prefer a more urban type campus' [1].

Whyalla is a very good place to study where we felt more relaxed and not too busy with the city lifestyle. However, it is not a well-known place where nobody outside Australia knows or heard about Whyalla. It was very difficult for us to find a job here because they do not really know where the place is and how powerful the degree is. Most big multinational companies here want degrees from well-known universities like University of Adelaide, Melbourne, RMIT, Flinders University etc. [19]

Negative comments related to the pace of life ('too slow for young people' [5]; 'not much choice of entertainment' [14]), some inadequacy of facilities, and lack of program choice. Positives included: 'It is a nice place to study. Lecturers know you by name. We just felt like a part of a big family' [21].

It is this aspect of their experience that appears to have been a highlight for many of the students, underlined and reinforced by their continuing contact with fellow-students and former lecturers.

Implications

The study findings confirm that factors seen by international students as facilitating their successful university study include ones that enabled their acculturation and provided a supportive framework for them in this process. The results have several implications for the future, both for Whyalla Campus and for others. These relate to curriculum development; language preparation and support; areas for staff development activities; building support networks; and marketing.

In reviewing current curricula and developing new courses and programs, the University would do well to respond to these graduates' comments concerning work experience and professional placements. To some extent this is now happening: Whyalla Campus's plan for the next few years includes the aim that such experiences will be part of every program. With regard to the need expressed for more widespread international perspectives, as university internationalisation proceeds, curriculum development will increasingly ensure that international perspectives are an integral part. A greater awareness of likely graduate destinations will also bring about a better alignment of graduate attributes and career demands and opportunities.

While all would agree that prospective international students coming to Australian higher education institutions need an appropriate level of English, it is also important

to recognise that there are almost certain to be language-related matters that will continue to need addressing and support after the students arrive. Apart from local variations of Australian English vocabulary and accents that may cause comprehension problems, there are the differing expectations concerning appropriate academic language use and oral language use (e.g., attitudes toward addressing lecturers by their given names, or readiness to ask questions in class). Not only do ways of supporting the students with pre-departure information and continuing assistance need to be considered, but staff also need an awareness of these issues.

Staff development courses and workshops can play a part in addressing these language awareness needs. Likewise, cross-cultural awareness is necessarily a component of induction and continuing staff development. However, much can also be accomplished by individual reading of useful resources such as *The Chinese Learner* (Watkins and Biggs 1996) and by a continuing willingness to participate in collegial discussions concerning improving the quality of teaching provided to international (and all other) students. Hofstede's insights into cross-cultural learning and teaching situations, involving a greater awareness of the teacher's assumptions about learning as well as awareness of the variety of the students' ways of approaching the situation (Hofstede 1986) can be drawn upon. (Chang and Chin 1999, apply Hofstede's four-dimensional model of cultural differences to an Australian context.) Staff development in the whole area of internationalisation of the curriculum, which goes far beyond the issues discussed in this paper, is also a continuing need (Leask 1999).

The place of friendly relationships in supporting the undergraduates has been remarked upon. It is to be hoped that these develop spontaneously; however, their development can be encouraged in various ways: facilitating the formation of informal study groups, encouraging staff and individual community members or community organisations to consider providing hospitality for international (and other out-of-town) students; or liaising with the student association to ensure that social events are promoted to staff as well as students. Such initiatives may be prominent in initial orientation activities, but it is unwise to regard orientation as a one-off series of events and information-provision rather than an ongoing need as new challenges arise. Other practical suggestions for enabling students from various cultural backgrounds to feel comfortable in the university setting are provided by Shaddock (1996).

While the promoting of study opportunities to prospective international markets will be reinforced by returning graduates' reporting of positive experiences, accurate information needs to be provided concerning not only the structure and standard of the programs but also about living in Australian university cities. Marketing of

programs needs to be internal as well as beyond the institution: It is crucial that Whyalla Campus features be recognised and promoted by the University. It is also essential that international markets know that Whyalla programs lead to University of South Australia qualifications and not to something lesser.

Conclusion

The information provided by this study can help Whyalla Campus to build on its strengths and make improvements where needed so that future international students will find studying there a rewarding experience, thus providing word-of-mouth promotion of the campus as a study destination worthy of consideration. This can be aided by overt support from the central administration of the University. It is important to note that strengths and weaknesses described here need to be enhanced or addressed not only for the sake of current and potential international students but also in the interests of a quality learning environment for all students that make up the diverse Whyalla student body. Although the study involved no comparison with graduates other than international ones, it is probable that opinions regarding factors such as accessibility, small classes and lack of too many distractions would be shared by others coming from larger cities to study in Whyalla. As well as curricula and teaching and learning issues, attitudinal changes in both staff and students are part of enhancing the quality of the learning environment (Morris and Hudson 1995). Expressed goals of inclusivity and international perspectives in the curriculum are only a start: Implementation calls for inclusive teaching practices and the provision of support that fosters the acceptance of diversity by students as well as staff.

In a July 2000 University brochure, *A blueprint for 2005*, the aim was expressed that by 2005 Whyalla Campus would 'have strengthened its relationships with international universities, providing distinctive educational opportunities for both local and international students.' There was still much work to be done for the Campus to achieve this and see restored numbers of international students contributing to the diversity of the Whyalla student body and internationalisation of the Campus culture, however, as yet, international student numbers enrolled at the Campus remain low. As the Vice-Chancellor said some years ago, 'We need to change the culture of the university if we are really to integrate an international approach into our core activities' (Bradley 1997, p. 3), so that '... international, intercultural practice for staff and students becomes the natural way to work, the norm' (Bradley 1997, p. 11). In keeping with these aspirations, considerable effort has been directed towards achieving such culture change through organisational and program strategies which include staff development initiatives, curriculum development, and increasing opportunities for student and staff international experiences (University of South Australia 2004). Moreover, the inclusion of significant numbers of international

students in Australian university communities cannot help but have ‘a transforming effect on the university culture’ (Brown 1996, p. 72).

The international graduates surveyed pointed out areas where they believed that the Campus had shortcomings, but also showed that generally they had warm memories of their years of study there, as evidenced by their keeping in touch with some of their former lecturers and maintaining links with fellow students. The personal attention they received in small classes, with lecturers prepared to spend extra time on their pastoral care needs as well as on their academic needs, in most cases compensated for perceived disadvantages: ‘All is more than learning knowledges and skill. It is a personal experience that I will recommend to everyone who can afford it.’ While their Whyalla studies helped the graduates to succeed professionally in their chosen careers, they also learned much about wider issues through living and working in a different cultural context that would stand them in good stead in the years ahead.

Although this paper has explored the experiences of international students of one particular university campus, the factors the graduates have identified as helping them to be successful students can point to areas of applicability to other small campuses. Apart from the advantages of small classes, the ease of access to equipment and staff and the study-favourable environment, the importance of being able to build supportive relationships between students and staff cannot be underestimated. All these contribute to an environment conducive to learning – for *all* students.

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Appendix

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR PROJECT: 'INTERNATIONAL GRADUATES OF A RURAL UNIVERSITY CAMPUS'

[Spaces for replies have been reduced or eliminated.]

Profile of interviewee:

1. Male / Female
2. Nationality
3. Year of enrolling at Whyalla:
4. Year of graduation:
5. Before arriving in Whyalla had you enrolled at another university in Australia? Yes / No
Please give details.
6. What course/s were you enrolled in at Whyalla?
7. Academic qualification/s gained from study at Whyalla Campus:

Studying at Whyalla Campus:

8. Was studying in Whyalla very different from your expectations? Yes/No
If yes, please explain how.
9. Did you experience difficulty with the English language when you arrived? Circle any of the following areas where you found it difficult to begin with:
Conversation Lectures Course required reading Academic writing
10. What advantages did you find in studying in Whyalla?
11. What advantages do you think Whyalla Campus has for international students?
12. Do you think studying at Whyalla Campus helped you to succeed as a student, more than if you had studied at a capital city campus? Yes/No
13. Were you generally satisfied with the support offered by Whyalla Campus staff? Yes/No
Please provide details:
14. Did you find it difficult to raise any matter of concern you had about your studies with staff? Yes/No
Comments, please:
15. Do you believe that your concerns were dealt with satisfactorily? Yes/No
Comments, please:
16. Did you find staff culturally aware in understanding and dealing with any issues you raised with them? Yes/No
Comments, please:
How could their cultural awareness have been improved?.....

17. Would you recommend to others from your family or circle of friends to select Whyalla Campus as first preference for a place to study overseas? Yes/No
Comments, please:
18. We would appreciate any other comments you would like to make about your study experience at the Whyalla Campus:

Since graduation:

19. Work history: places worked, other occupations, any publications
Curriculum vitae if willing (name can be deleted if you prefer)
20. Describe your satisfaction with your degree as a useful tool in your employment.
21. Did you expect your degree to be more useful than it has proved to be? Yes/No
22. What could have improved the usefulness of your degree?
23. When you graduated, do you believe that you possessed the following personal and professional qualities? Please comment:
- 1) ability to use the knowledge needed to start working in your profession?
 - 2) readiness to continue learning for your own personal and professional development throughout your career?
 - 3) ability to solve a range of problems effectively, in a logical, critical and creative way?
 - 4) ability to work as a professional in teams as well as individually?
 - 5) commitment to ethical action and social responsibility as a professional and as a citizen?
 - 6) effective communication skills as a professional and as a member of the community?
 - 7) international perspectives evident in your work and your life as a citizen?
24. What was it about studying at Whyalla Campus that helped you to develop those qualities?
25. If you feel that your studies have not helped you to acquire and use some of these qualities, can you make any comments concerning ways in which your course could have been changed in order to help you to develop these attributes?
26. What other personal or professional qualities do you think your studies have/could have helped you to achieve?

Many thanks for taking part in this research project. We are sure that your help will provide information to enable Whyalla Campus to build on its strengths and make improvements where needed so that future international students will find studying there a rewarding experience.
