

INFORMATION LITERACY WITH AN INTERNATIONAL FOCUS

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines cross-cultural challenges faced by international students in Australia; proposes a pivotal role for information-literacy education in addressing these challenges; and presents the Australian 'Information Literacy Standards (2001)' as an effective framework for integrated curriculum design to meet the needs of all students, including internationals.

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade Australia has attracted ever-increasing numbers of international students. By the year 2000 they accounted for 10.3percent of the onshore university student population (DEST, 2000). In economic terms they currently represent this nation's fourteenth largest export (IDP Education Australia, n.d.).

The diverse cultural and educational backgrounds of these students pose considerable challenges to educators and to the students themselves. Differences in learning and communication styles between their home countries and Australia prove to be the most significant problem areas. This paper describes the key characteristics of international students studying in Australia and the challenges they face. It suggests a pivotal role for integrated, curriculum-based information-literacy (IL) education in promoting international students' personal adjustments and academic successes. The recently published Australian 'Information Literacy Standards' (CAUL, 2001), with their focus on lifelong learning, are identified as an effective framework for this holistic approach.

INTRODUCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

In the Australian context 'international student' denotes a student from an overseas country who is enrolled in an approved course, of a defined length, on a temporary study visa issued by the Commonwealth Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs. In the year 2000 there were 188,277 international students enrolled in Australia, of whom 107,622 were enrolled in university courses (IDP Education Australia, n.d.). Although the largest national groups still emanate from SE Asia (notably Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Indonesia), India and China have become significant source countries over the last few years, with Central and South America, Africa,

Europe, and the USA being projected growth areas in the near future (IDP Education Australia, n.d.). As an illustration of the resulting multicultural mix, the 2001 cohort of CQU's Brisbane International Campus included students from Bangladesh, Brazil, Colombia, Fiji, France, Mauritius, Oman, Russia, Solomon Islands, Sweden, and Tanzania, as well as Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan.

It should be noted that Australian higher-education institutions also cater for significant, increasing numbers of offshore international students (34,905 in 2000) both at overseas campuses and through distance education programs (IDP Education Australia, n.d.). The challenges associated with addressing these students' information literacy needs, however, are outside the scope of this paper.

CHALLENGES FACED BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Many problems, associated with maturation and academic adjustment, are common to international and local students alike. However, the degree to which these problems affect international students is intensified by a wide spectrum of cultural, social, financial, and economic issues (Ballard, 1987; Mullins, Quintrell, & Hancock, 1995). Naturally, the occurrence and severity of these factors vary greatly between individuals and it is important to avoid stereotypes and to recognise international students as individuals with discrete sets of aspirations and needs. By way of anecdotal illustration, the author has encountered students, with the following distinctive characteristics, from:

- West Africa, with limited IT skills, but effective study skills and English as their first language;
- Britain, with limited academic skills, but strong life skills, and English as their first language;

- China, mature age, with an undergraduate degree and professional experience, but limited English-language and information-literacy skills;
- South Korea, with excellent IT skills, reasonable English, but no knowledge of database searching or evaluation of web-based information;
- Indonesia, recent school-leaver, having attended high school in Australia, but difficulty in adjusting to higher education.

Clearly none of these individuals conform to a 'typical' international student pattern, although all are affected in some way by their cultural background.

Most international students experience some degree of culture shock – ranging from shyness or uncertainty to intense disorientation – associated with a range of language, social, and personal uncertainties (Burns, 1991; McSwiney, 1995). On a personal level, many have been shown to experience homesickness, loneliness, financial anxieties, racism, and health problems including stress (Burns, 1991). The most significant and underlying problems, identified by several studies, relate to communication, research and, study skills – with associated fear of failure, and in some cases, library anxiety. (Baron & Strout-Dapaz, 2001; Brown, 2000; McSwiney, 1995).

Communication problems (Ballard, 1987; Brown, 2000; Burns, 1991; McSwiney, 1995) are multifaceted and can include: poor comprehension and linguistic skills (spoken or written); unfamiliarity with subject-specific and academic jargon (Briguglio, 2000; Seton & Ellis, 1996); confusion with body language and social interchange. Less recognised, but of IL relevance, are difficulties associated with language structure such as: alphanumeric sequencing and QWERTY keyboards for students whose first language uses a non-Roman script (Helms, 1995; Moeckel & Presnell, 1995); Boolean searching, especially for those whose native language (e.g., Chinese) has no function words – including the conjunction 'and/or' (Zoe & DiMartino, 2000); reading and scrolling down a computer screen for people used to reading from right to left (e.g., Arabic and Japanese speakers) and in vertical columns (e.g., Japanese and Chinese speakers).

The Western academic environment is alien to many international students, since teaching and learning styles vary markedly from country to country. Asian students, for example, are often

perplexed by the informality of Australian classrooms, the livelier interactivity between students and lecturers, and the emphasis on discussion and enquiry-based learning; this contrasts strongly with their Confucian heritage tradition, based on a 'conserving attitude to knowledge', passive rote learning style, and reverence for teachers (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997; Burns, 1991). Plagiarism or neglect of referencing among international students frequently concerns Western academics, but this tendency is often a reflection of differing academic practices around the world. In many countries there is no concept of intellectual property, copyright laws do not exist (Brown, 2000). While unacknowledged verbatim reproduction of texts and lecture notes is considered a serious breach in Western academia, it is expected practice in Eastern cultures (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997).

Information technology skills may vary, depending on country of origin. While many international students are experienced computer users, others from less-developed countries may have lower levels of IT competence (Liestman, 2000). Many, including those with good practical IT skills, lack adequate vocabulary, and are unaccustomed to database searching or evaluating information from the Internet and other sources (Moeckel & Presnell, 1995; Wallin, Orr, & Litster 1998; Zoe & DiMartino, 2000).

Negotiating an academic library proves daunting for many new students, as studies on library anxiety show (e.g., Sullivan-Windle, 1993). This is often accentuated in the case of international students who may have minimal or no previous academic library experience (McSwiney, 1995; Onwuegbuzie & Jiao, 1998). In many countries open access to library shelves, and even borrowing, are unavailable to students in cultures where learning is based on set texts, or where resources are scarce, students are unused to independently selecting material for private study and assignments (Liestman, 2000); they may also be unfamiliar with catalogues and classification systems (Moeckel & Presnell, 1995). Even the role of library staff may be unclear to many who, unaware of information and educational functions, expect only administrative services (McCullagh & O'Connor, 1989; McSwiney, 1995). Moreover, some internationals will be reluctant to seek assistance from library staff fearing loss of face (Helms, 1995; McSwiney, 1995).

THE ROLE OF INFORMATION LITERACY

Problems experienced by international students are often interconnected. They may vary in nature and intensity between individuals, but often share common links to a web of information-literacy needs. The challenge to IL educators, therefore, is to develop a holistic framework that facilitates collaboration between academics, librarians, language and study skills teachers, and student counsellors.

Over the last ten years university libraries in Australia and elsewhere have shown growing responsiveness to the information literacy needs of international students. Originally, initiatives concentrated on 'information skills' and 'bibliographic instruction', (e.g., McCullagh & O' Connor, 1989; Helms, 1995; Liestman, 1992; Moeckel & Presnell, 1995). Recognition of the complex nature of international students' needs is now fostering a more integrative approach, embracing information technology and other academic support fields. Helms (1995), Seton & Ellis (1996), and Kamhi-Stein & Stein (1998) for example, suggest the importance of second language teachers in the IL process.

Baron & Strout-Dapaz (2001) advance this trend further. After reviewing the literature, they conclude: "...there is a need to synthesize the existing models, standardize pedagogical methods, and relate them specifically to international students' primary concerns: language and communication problems; adjusting to a new educational and library system and general cultural adjustments" (p.319). To support this recommendation they present a "library skills set" for international students directly linked to the American 'Information Literacy Competency Standards' (ACRL, 2000).

The US standards (ACRL, 2000) and the more recent Australian 'Information Literacy Standards' (CAUL, 2001) provide an innovative and practical framework for information literacy education. Their focus on lifelong learning and inclusive, integrated approach offer particular benefits to international students, as suggested below.

- **Inclusivity and equity:** the 'standards' represent a commitment to equality of educational goals and outcomes, and learning support for students of all backgrounds, including international students. "Information literacy is a prerequisite for lifelong learning and is

common to all disciplines, to all learning environments and to all levels of education" (CAUL, 2001, p.2).

- **Integrated approach:** the 'standards' promote a holistic approach to learning needs and outcomes, and collaboration between academics, library, IT, and learning- and language-support professionals. This is of particular relevance to international students whose difficulties, as demonstrated above, present a complex mix of cultural, communication and academic factors requiring cross-disciplinary support. "Incorporating information literacy across curricula, and in all programs and services, requires the collaborative efforts of academics, staff developers, learning advisers, librarians and administrators" (CAUL, 2001, p. 3).
- **Flexibility:** according to the 'standards', while all learners work towards the same outcomes, IL education is built on a framework capable of addressing differing needs, abilities, and prior experience. Thus, provision can be made for language- or culture-specific needs; the modular structure and transferability of skills allow students to progress at their own pace, which is particularly important to international students contending with language or minimal IL experience. "All students are expected to demonstrate all of the standards, but not everyone will demonstrate them to the same level or at the same time....The standards are not intended to represent a linear approach to information literacy" (CAUL, 2001, p. 4).
- **Relevance and educational excellence:** the 'standards' emphasis on lifelong learning and close alignment (or embedding) of information literacy in the curriculum, demonstrates their purpose and value, and encourages the acquisition of concepts and skills not readily understood by international students (e.g., independent research, critical thinking, referencing) thus enriching their educational experience and enhancing their academic success.

"Information literacy development multiplies the opportunities for self directed learning, as students become engaged in using a wide range of information sources to expand their knowledge, ask questions, and sharpen their critical thinking for still further directed learning. Achieving information literacy fluency requires an understanding that such development is not

extraneous to the curriculum but is woven into its content, structure and sequence." (CAUL, 2001, p. 3).

While all seven Australian standards are of significance, the sixth: "Understands cultural, economic, legal and social issues...and accesses and uses information ethically, legally and respectfully" (CAUL, 2001, p.17), is of particular relevance to international students. It offers a context to explore vital issues concerned with cross-cultural understanding, intellectual integrity (such as plagiarism and copyright), and Western academic traditions – within a meaningful, non-discriminatory framework.

APPLYING INFORMATION LITERACY STANDARDS TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The practicality and versatility of a standards-based approach to information literacy is reflected in the initiatives of many universities, including QUT (n.d.) and CQU (2001). Of particular relevance to international students is the "library skills set" devised by Baron & Strout-Dapaz (2001). This model interweaves the American standards (ACRL, 2000) with the communication, educational, and cultural concerns of internationals. For each standard the authors indicate "international student implications". For example, in relation to the second standard, "Accesses needed information effectively and efficiently", the authors identify the implications as,

"Communication: International students should be informed of various dictionaries, thesauri and indexes to maximise research effectiveness, especially if the research is in a new language.

"Adjustment: International students will need training to learn how information is organised in libraries. The LC or Dewey system may be very different from their country of origin. Clear descriptions of instructional opportunities and library services are essential to adjusting to the library environment" (p. 319).

The logical extension of Baron and Strout-Dapaz's model lies in targeting the standards' performance indicators and outcomes in collaborative curriculum design in a way that aligns academic content with information literacy and recognises the special needs of international students. This is a significant area for further development but, by way of simple example, a core undergraduate course in Business Communication could include components on research and communication skills. Particular international student concerns might then be addressed through the inclusion of

bilingual dictionary use in identifying search terms, or discussion of the concept of open access in libraries with relation to general information sources. There would be scope to include librarians along with other learning support professionals – perhaps language and academic skills tutors could instruct business report writing and meeting etiquette; IT tutors could contribute to sessions on formatting business documents.

Effective program planning would be needed to allow for modification or extension of activities to suit differing needs and backgrounds between and within class groups. Cultural awareness on the part of educators, especially with regard to changing class dynamics, represents another essential factor.

DELIVERING INFORMATION LITERACY TO INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The difficulties experienced by international students have been described above – but it is also important to consider the challenges to instructors on the other side of the cultural and linguistic barriers. Ballard & Clanchy (1997) allude to the frustration and confusion experienced by teachers faced with unresponsive classes, assignments consisting of reproduced texts, and interpersonal uncertainties. Their challenge lies in assisting international students adjust to Western teaching and learning styles, which may involve modifying teaching techniques and communication styles. Consideration, patience, and respect for the students' differences are key success factors, along with a conscious effort to: speak steadily and clearly; rephrase misunderstood concepts; define technical and jargon terms; reinforce verbal information with written hand-outs (allowing room for translation and notes), visual presentations (e.g., videos, PowerPoint), and demonstrations; vary delivery and allow for frequent breaks in concentration (as study in a foreign language is extremely tiring); allow plenty of hands-on practice; pay attention to positive and negative aspects of body language (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997).

Cross-cultural understanding and appropriate teaching and communication strategies are priority professional-development areas for all who interact with international students (Baker & Panko, n.d.; Briguglio, 2000). This is a topic in itself, but recommended resources include: 'Teaching International Students' by Ballard & Clanchy (1997) and 'Communicating with Asia'

by Irwin (1996); and articles by Chapple (1998); Liestman (2000); Ramzan (n.d); and Rifkin, Hellmundt, Fox, & Romm (n.d).

CONCLUSION

International students are characterised both by their cultural diversity, and by shared difficulties associated with living and studying in an unfamiliar society. There is clearly a vital role for information-literacy education in supporting international students to overcome these problems and to achieve their academic goals. The recently published Australian 'Information Literacy Standards' (CAUL, 2001) and American 'Information Literacy Competency Standards' (ACRL, 2000) represent valuable frameworks on which to develop higher-education curricula with a focus on responsive, integrated IL education for all students. Key benefits are the standards' emphasis on lifelong learning, as well as a collaborative approach that reflects the multifaceted nature of the challenges faced by international students.

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