Setting Standards for International Student Support

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Abstract

The substance of this paper was delivered at the 2007 Australian International Education Conference in Melbourne, and presented as a stimulus for discussion about practical approaches to the issues of international student support management. This later version contains additional material that reflects the discussion and panel presentations at the AIEC session.

The impetus for the paper was the possible responses of providers to Standard 6 of The National Code 2007. One of the obligations, in Standard 6.6 of the Code, requires 'sufficient support personnel to meet the needs of students…' What do providers understand by this? What are our obligations to meet this specific requirement? Have we adequately defined the needs of international students? What is being done to implement this Standard?

The paper describes a small research study conducted with a number of universities and secondary schools. Staff capability, staff resources and international student services, all matters addressed in the National Code, are considered in a number of contexts. Focus is on the effective use of staffing to offer maximum opportunities for students to achieve overall success while they are studying in Australia.

Introduction

International education operations have always included international student support; models and initiatives developed over the last two decades that provide examples of good practice for professionals entering the field. The work of ISANA: International Education Association has strengthened the consistency and quality of services and programs, through research, conferences and professional development workshops, and extensive professional networking. In spite of this, we have little formal research into the effectiveness of student support, apart from periodic student satisfaction surveys, internal reviews and the observations of practitioners themselves.

In a multi-billion industry one might think that this area of 'client service' would be of greater public interest than has been demonstrated to date. It might be argued that specialised student services and programs are at the centre of international student experiences, as they link students together and have the potential to create vibrant and productive student-centred environments. Given the power of word-of-mouth marketing, perhaps we should collect data more diligently on interactions between students, staff and services, on which to base improved practices.

With the introduction of the 2007 National Code of Practice we now have more detailed guidelines about our obligations to students though support services. The Code was developed with extensive consultation with relevant bodies, but there remain questions about particular requirements and obligations, and the resources required to meet these obligations.

The Code requires that the registered provider must have sufficient support personnel (Standard 6.7), and that the 'staff of registered providers are suitably qualified' (Standard 14). The terms 'sufficient' and 'qualified' are not, however, defined in the Code itself, nor in the Explanatory Guides. These terms may be of concern to some stakeholders who prefer to employ measurement tools, such as models, benchmarks, assessment, and data collection. Others may believe that applying concrete measures is not possible, nor appropriate in such operational areas.

The inchworm theory: can we measure student support?

The theme of this paper derives from a song by written by Frank Loesser; featured in the biographical movie "Hans Christian Anderson" starring Danny Kaye. The words of the song have been used many times since, as a comment on the inadequacy of applying concrete measurement to concepts, such as beauty or areas of learning.

Inch worm, inch worm
Measuring the marigolds
Could it be, stop and see
How beautiful they are

Inchworm, inchworm
Measuring the marigolds
You and your arithmetic
You'll probably go far

Inchworm, inchworm
Measuring the marigolds
Seems to me you'd stop and see
How beautiful they are

(Chorus:)
Two and two are four
Four and four are eight
Eight and eight are sixteen
Sixteen and sixteen are thirty-two

This interpretation by Paul Gaston (1991) is typical:

> "[Danny] Kaye observes an inchworm 'measuring the marigolds' with its full length…Measurement, it would appear, can be unkind to beauty. Quantification and appreciation rarely coexist easily. Because [quantitative] measures are increasingly being viewed as a valued educational outcome in themselves, there has arisen the danger that both those within and those outside the academy may increasingly assign value to disciplines according to their ability to document easily measurable results."

Using the metaphor in the international education context, we can see that quantification cannot easily be applied to interactions, relationships, or the benefits to students of support services. Such an attempt might undervalue the long-term benefits of a study abroad experience, and the incidental or intangible effects of support programs. Perhaps we would also overlook some of the 'volunteering ethos' that is characteristic of some areas of student support, and more broadly the altruistic principles on which international education was originally founded.

International student support services are not measured in the way other aspects of the international education industry are. Business models, marketing and enrolment statistics often dominate discussion about recruitment, growth and development. With the conceptualisation of international education as an *industry*, business principles at times overshadow the significance of student support units, which neither directly generate income nor control the distribution of student fees revenue. It is left to practitioners themselves and to the visionaries among our international education leaders, to be advocates for their support programs and services.

Student support programs and services require a range of management approaches in different contexts. Practitioners skilled in one-to-one student advising across sensitive and routine matters are also involved in the management of events, networking with internal and external stakeholders, as well as undertaking professional development to update information and skills. Efficient allocation of staff, drawing on expertise from groups such as student organisations, and representation on strategic groups and committees demand good time management, and high-level operational skills.

Inchworm 1: What do previous data tell us?

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Apart from data gathered by institutions, through audits and internal processes, we do have some studies described below.

In 1999, two small studies of international student advisors were undertaken. The first, a 'Day in the Life' of advisors at RMIT,[1] gathered specific data about the routine work and individual workloads of 6 individuals who kept a diary for a month, recording all assistance-related contacts with students. It was established that, apart from regular program delivery and meetings, individual consultations with students ranged from 25%-30% of a normal day, with sometimes over five hours devoted to individual student contact. The survey included an attempt to calculate staff-student ratios by asking respondents to report their own student caseload. While little statistically significant information was gathered at this time, a range from 1:20 to 1:1200, across a number of departments and campuses was recorded.

A second survey, of ISANA Victoria members in 1999[2] explored workloads and professional development experiences. Twelve individuals in universities (including regional campuses), TAFE institutions and schools returned surveys. Eight of these considered that their work unit was seriously understaffed, and some individuals expressed concern about the conflicting pressure of fulfilling differing roles of program management and one-to-one student advising, especially during peak periods and during serious or critical incidents.

Respondents were invited to report the overall numbers of international students in their institution, their own caseload of students–how many students they were 'responsible' for– and the number of people working with them in their work unit. From this information, an approximate staff student ratio for the individuals was arrived at, and is represented below:

ISANA Victoria 1999

International students in the institution	Staff in the work unit supporting all students	Support staff – students	Students reported as being in the in the respondent's caseload
6000	17	1:353	6000
850	2	1:425	850
1300	8	1:162.5	1050 (2 responses)
150	3	1:50	50
2000	6	1:333	60 (2 responses)
20	2	1:10	20
200	1	1:200	200
16	2	1:8	16
1600	2	1.800	1200
5000	2	1:2500	1000

It was clear from this information that ratios alone did not adequately describe workload. For example, the perception of individuals being responsible for all the institution's students may point to managerial, rather than hands–on roles. The range of activities performed by each respondent, their educational sector, the proportion of time spent in program management or individual student contact, and their level of responsibility varied widely. Other considerations included numbers of students on campus, time of year, regional/city locations, and the number of support-related staff who are not necessarily in dedicated advisory roles, such as faculty coordinators or reception staff. Calculations of such a ratio will remain problematic, unless criteria are made clear.

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[1] Unpublished survey data collected at RMIT February-March 1999. Results collated and retained by the author.

[2] Unpublished survey data collected as part of regular membership surveys, ISANA Victoria branch, February 1999. Results collated and reported to members, and retained by the author.

In both the 1999 surveys individuals reported the value of network meetings as a way of sharing information and strategies to manage time and stressful interactions. Organisational support, professional development opportunities and communication with external colleagues alleviated pressure on individuals who were frequently working alone or in small units.

Another data collection at a campus-based international office in 2001 attempted to quantify student contacts and staff workloads. Student visits and queries were counted, described and analysed over a period of nine months from January to September. Roles and responsibilities were examined, and a report prepared.[3] Three full time staff handled around 6200 routine enquiries over this period. Student participation at multi-session orientation, postgraduate, and returning home programs were also recorded, adding some 1400 attendances to the programs offered. At times the workload was very demanding. For example, in single weeks in March and July, there were 289 and 301 separate student visits respectively; at the same time staff were delivering orientation programs. The variety of requests, meetings attended and staff roles required effective planning and management skills, as well as ongoing liaison with internal and external presenters and specialists.

In a broader study, Queensland Education and Training International in 2005 looked at international students programs across 28 institutions in 9 countries. Pakoa (2005) notes that this research found '…very limited formal monitoring of these services, evident by the absence of key performance indicators and other formal performance evaluation processes or procedures…' Further, that '…there are no effective mechanisms by which existing best practice are presented in the public domain.' This of course does not mean best practice does not exist, or is not measurable, but such a comprehensive study is yet to be conducted in this country.

Inchworm 2: Benchmarking in related contexts

The benchmarking process provides an excellent method for re-thinking workload and staff deployment, giving institutions measures and comparisons to use for their own improvements. McKinnon, Walker & Davis (2000) described good practice in student support as matching student needs, services that are well-integrated with academic activities, accessible and 'educative and preventative rather than deficit model remedies' (Benchmark 7.2). A later university benchmarking study (Garlick & Pryor 2004) was critical of the terminology and assertions contained in the McKinnon research, and added student admissions and student grievance benchmarking templates, but unfortunately, did not address student support services. To date, we have not seen a formal benchmarking exercise focussing on international student support, but we do have McKinnon *et al* as an important resource in this area.

A recent benchmarking study of eleven Australian and overseas universities (Ransom & Grieg 2006) analysed the type of work activities and responsibilities in language and academic skills centres. The researchers asked if the unit had 'a formula or guiding principles for adviser workload' in regard to percentages of time spent fulfilling multiple roles. Six of the institutions did not have such a workload formula. The report notes that the University of Melbourne Language and Learning Skills Unit which conducted the study:

> "…has outgrown its current workload formula of ten individual consultations per week and six hours of teaching (not including development) in light of the increased complexity of the services provided and the faculty work commissioned as fee-for-service…When this formula was devised the LLSU was one-third of its current size, with no online presence or commitment to discipline-specific and faculty-based programs." (p.15)

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[3] Unpublished data collected at Monash University, Caulfield campus, January-September 2001.

It stands to reason that as student demand and work-role complexity increases, thought needs to be given to staff capacity, and new workload models.

The current study

The current research was designed to collect relevant information about international student support programs and services, and to look at the roles and responsibilities of professional staff. The focus was not so much on student experience or enrolment data, but on the experience of support staff. Connections were drawn with institutional obligations under the National Code 2007, especially where it refers to international student service provision.

Consistent with earlier data, it is apparent that the importance of efficiency, effectiveness and multi-skilling has not changed significantly over years. Nor has the focus on student care, despite increased student enrolments, more diverse cohorts, limited resources, increased legislative obligations and communication issues associated with working across a number of locations.

The current research aimed to do the following:
- To take a snapshot of international student services and characteristics of the staff providing those services
- To examine the variety of service provision and program management across a range of institutions and sectors
- To consider the 'good practices' available to practitioners, through the sharing of information, skills and experience
- To explore the implications for institutions of the National Code 2007, specifically Standard 6 which regulates the provision of international student support services, and
- To stimulate discussion about possible models for planning and implementation of the Standard.

Participants in the study are professionals in the area of international student support services. The research ranges across all educational sectors and includes twenty-one institutions nationally. While this was a small selection of institutions, the programs and services described are offered to approximately 65 300 students across 3 sectors.[4]

A survey was developed and refined by members of the ISANA Council, to include as many areas of relevant professional practice as possible, and to represent the work undertaken in the field. Questions focussed on how support services were located and managed within organisations, the range of activities managed by individuals and work units, observations by the respondents about their own competence, and perceptions of support for their professional role.

The respondents

Surveys were distributed through the ISANA Council to individuals known to be working in student support roles. This meant that the sample was targeted, representative, and offered an efficient way to follow up results if necessary. Twenty-three responses were received from all states except Tasmania; and the ACT and Northern Territory were not represented. Fourteen of the respondents (61%) were university staff, four from schools and three from other institutions including ELICOS and Foundation Studies programs. One respondent represents a government organisation. Eleven responses were drawn from Queensland, due to assistance from Queensland Education and Training International.

The extensive range of position titles indicated a broader and perhaps collaborative responsibility for student welfare across institutions than in previous years. Only three of the

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[4] Respondents were asked to report the total international student numbers in their organisations. Some of these were study tour groups, student abroad and exchange, and perhaps other cohorts.

respondents described their position as 'International Student Advisor.' Positions included international student support managers, directors of student support, school principals and accommodation managers.

Inchworm 3: How many is 'sufficient support staff'?

The National Code 2007, Standard 6.6 requires that, 'the registered provider must have sufficient student support personnel to meet the needs of the students enrolled....' The Explanatory Guide leaves the provider to determine a response based on student enrolment numbers, types of course, student needs, as well as state and territory legislation. This independence is very important for providers who understand the complexity of their own organisations, services and staff characteristics; but where do providers source advice on these matters? A lack of definition may be problematic as a compliance issue, particularly for those institutions new to the international education environment.

We could interpret Standard 6.6 in a number of ways, given the range of conditions and the type of activities undertaken by support units. For example, one-to-one advising is considerably more labour-intensive than systematic programs, but each requires specialised skills and knowledge, as well as different staff numbers. These days, support personnel need cross-cultural communication skills, cultural understanding, event management and planning skills, knowledge of legislation–such as ESOS, privacy and child protection–and competence in dealing with compliance issues for international students. The time for professional development needed to acquire such skills and knowledge, and other factors such as the nature of the student cohort, location, communication channels and management effectiveness, will influence how many staff are sufficient at any time. All of the above might be useful criteria to develop a measure of sufficient staff levels.

Few of the current survey respondents attempted to calculate what they considered to be sufficient support staff, consistent with data described in earlier studies. Those who considered the question felt that there was insufficient guidance on this requirement, and that circumstances would vary, across the services provided, student needs, and the level of collaboration across the organisation. One school representative considered 1: 25 as a reasonable staff student ratio, and 1:300 was suggested at a university level.

Dealing with this question from a statistical perspective is not necessarily useful. Only ten respondents (43%) reported that their unit kept statistics relating to student contacts such as consultation visits and program attendances, and two had calculated a staff-student ratio – 1:1016 and 1:162 in universities. Twelve respondents (52%) considered that their numbers of student support personnel were 'sufficient', and some added the following observations:

> 'There needs to be flexibility and a willingness to invest resources depending on the situation.'

> '[Need] enough to meet student need and not see staff doing significant unpaid additional hours.'

> '…in terms of non-academic support staff we are barely managing.'

> 'More ancillary staff / budget allocation needed for peak periods.'

> 'There is often a shortfall in funding for activities that are not essential but desirable.'

These comments indicate a need to evaluate the pressure on peak period workloads, to improve the range and perhaps quality of some activities, and certainly to ensure that the commitment of staff is not exploited through unpaid work hours. In the 1999 RMIT data, "A Day in the Life", it was evident that all day program delivery, excursions and official

functions were often additional to the daily routine of the student advising and administrative role. A further study to measure actual hours worked may reveal some interesting results.

Having said this, respondents believed they were supported, or strongly supported, in their professional roles. Eighteen respondents (78%) affirmed that their managers supported their work, and only 2 respondents felt they were not supported in their role. This indicates that operations may be coherent and effective, in spite of resourcing issues, but that communication about the student support function and rationale for this support may need to be strengthened in some areas.

Variable 1: International student needs

If we find the term 'sufficient support personnel' problematic, we can at least address with greater certainty the other aspect of Standard 6.6, '…to meet the needs of students…."   The identification of student needs is a key aspect of research into student experience.

Much of this research has focussed on the transition experiences of first year students (McInnes & James 1995), and the ongoing stress and coping behaviour of students in general (Sarros & Densten 1989, Tan & Winkleman 2004). It is well understood among student support professionals, that students experience stress if needs are not met, and that they will face greater difficulties in social /academic adjustment and eventual success. This is a the principle on which orientation programs are built, aiming to provide students with skills, information and appropriate contacts to continue into formal study.

The survey asked respondents to identify the needs of students under their care. As expected, these varied widely, and included appropriate housing, social and emotional support, academic skills, cultural transition, advice on particular matters, and information. School-based respondents tended to identify personal and 'belongingness' needs. Other needs identified included: rights protection, access to cross-culturally competent staff, on-arrival support, a need for independence, socialisation skills, and practical assistance. Asked what were the three *greatest* needs of students in their institutions, respondents reported support for cultural and academic adjustment, accommodation, and language skills respectively.

In terms of management support for the professional roles included in the current survey, 13 (57%) respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their managers understood the needs of international students.

It has been proposed in related research that the transition for international students is more challenging if they lack coping strategies, or an understanding of the transition process. (Hermans & Pusch 2004). Conversely, transition is facilitated when 'personality characteristics, personal relationships and situational parameters come together …individuals tend to have more self-confidence, they tend to perceive that they have more control over stressful situations; they tend to be more persistent and assertive; and they tend to be more likely to expect success." (Tan & Winkleman 2004) Enabling students to develop coping skills through advising and programs often falls within the support professional's role, and should be seen as a preventative measure in the support of students.

Variable 2: International student support programs

The National Code (Standard 6.1) requires that institutions provide a culturally and age appropriate orientation program. The Explanatory Guide for Standard 6.1 includes a curious description of a (supposedly) culturally appropriate orientation program attendee, wherein his international student coordinator 'Mr Strummer' informs 'Jimmy',

'…that although many habits might be socially acceptable in their own countries, visitors to Australia need to be aware that some of these behaviours are considered inappropriate and perhaps illegal in Australia. For example, he told the students if they were at someone's

home and wished to smoke, it is common practice to go outside, as many Australians find cigarette smoking offensive. ' [5]

How this example can provide practical guidance is uncertain. If dealing with under-18 year old students the advice would be inappropriate and inadequate at the very least. Given that it is not customary for international students to be invited into Australian homes, what a student of any age, cultural background or educational level would make of such advice is a little mystifying.

The characteristics of 'age and culturally appropriate' programs were not directly revealed in the survey, but assumptions were made about the principles on which such programs are developed and delivered. We know, through a number of sources including websites, that institutions reliably provide targeted programs and services to meet identified student needs in a range of settings.

A list of student support programs was suggested to the survey respondents, who were asked to indicate who coordinated these programs in their institution. Most were centrally delivered through student services and international offices, with key input from student associations, language, learning and other specialist personnel, and sometimes faculties. The respondents reported their involvement in the following programs:

- International student drop in centre
- Website information about services and programs
- Pre-departure program in-country
- Orientation program
- Returning home program
- Final semester program
- Spouse/family support program
- Community links and liaison
- Student advising one-one
- Accommodation support including placement
- Cultural transition support
- Peer support/mentoring
- Student activities program/s
- Multicultural festivals
- Seminars and/or information sessions on specific issues
- Distribution of printed information on specific matters
- International student focus groups to discuss student support needs
- NLC liaison and support
- Social /informal gatherings
- Culture-specific services, eg. information on food sources
- English language – conversation

These programs are delivered in addition to student advising, academic and attendance monitoring, compliance advice, and referral to other services such as counselling, fees help, legal services, complaints processes, and student clubs.

From this information orientation was by no means the most significant program offered to students, but that a range of programs was seen to be important. Respondents noted that their most successful programs included:

- Orientation and induction

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[5] The National Code of Practice for Registration Authorities and Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students (2007) Standard 6 Explanatory Guide: http://aei.dest.gov.au/AEI/ESOS/NationalCodeExplanatoryGuide/PartD/Standard_6.htm viewed 3 October 2007.

- Celebrations and related events
- Mentor and peer support
- Academic skills and learning support
- Staff support/team-building and networking

Reasons given for the success of these programs included staff commitment, a theoretical basis for program content and delivery, and importantly, the liaison with and support from staff across other departments. One respondent noted that, 'Programs are successful because of sound professional practice and deliberate engagement with relevant stakeholders.'

In most cases respondents took individual responsibility for multiple activities indicating the time and resource management required to successfully complete these activities.

Program delivery, institutions and individuals		
Institutions delivering 18 or more programs listed	12	
Institutions delivering 10-17 programs listed	6	(5 not reported)
Respondents directly involved in 18 or more programs listed	7	
Respondents directly involved in 10-21 programs listed	16	

Variable 3: Compliance issues and conflicting roles

Compliance and student visas issues were reported by only three respondents, as being one of the three most significant issues presented by students, although sixteen respondents believed that international support staff are required to deal with compliance issues more than they were previously. Only three respondents believed they were *not* increasingly dealing with compliance.

This is of some concern for two reasons. Firstly, the responsibility for compliance-related advising, information and referral is additional to already diverse support roles, and since none of the respondents is a dedicated 'compliance officer'; this raises the question about workload. Secondly, for support personnel to be increasingly dealing with compliance in their roles, a conflict of interest may be apparent. Dunstan and Spolc (2006) observe that:

> '….almost every interaction with students where issues such as welfare, academic progress, attendance, compelling circumstances requiring sensitive handing, and other matters are discussed, attention must be paid to obligations under the ESOS Act. This means that advisers are now required to use extensive knowledge of these obligations, and balance this with the best interests of students.'

Recognising role conflict here is important. It is an issue we may see more frequently as the National Code becomes influential on our work.

Inchworm 4: Professional development and training – qualifications, information dissemination

The National Code itself does not mandate formal qualifications. In Paragraph 48 of the National Code 2001, providers were required to employ 'a suitably qualified person as a contact officer…' as part of the student support function. In the Explanatory Guide for the 2007 Code, under 'What's new', rather disturbingly we read, 'there is no longer a requirement to appoint a suitably qualified person as the international contact officer.' Do we read this as, 'anyone can do it?' or should we be reassured by Standard 14's less direct, 'The staff of registered providers are suitably qualified or experienced in the functions they perform for students.'

If we employ inexperienced staff we may have an obligation to our students to ensure they are qualified. Experience in itself may not be an adequate measure of competence. Other industries are not indifferent to the formal credentials of personnel. We would not, for example allow unqualified nursing or teaching staff to practice; nor indeed, forklift truck drivers. It may be that a higher level of staff experience and competence adds to a support unit's capacity to cope with roles and responsibilities such as case-management, liaison with decision makers in relation to student concerns, information sharing and collaboration. (Seow 2006). It is therefore argued that we need to look beyond the minimum professional standards in the support area, to maintain a robust, well informed, dependable and stable workforce.

There are positive signs that the attitude towards qualifying staff is changing. The Queensland Government, though Education Queensland International has pledged 'learning accounts' for all relevant staff in CRICOS registered government schools to undertake the Diploma of International Services, as part of a systematic staff development program. This will mean that formally qualified staff in these schools will benefit from a higher level of skill, knowledge and professional mobility. Similarly, the Queensland VET Export office has committed a number of scholarships for staff of public and private providers to undertake the Diploma. The University of Southern Queensland also support a number of staff, and The University of Queensland has committed funding to international office personnel for the program. A number of institutions in other states are likely to initiate such a commitment in the near future. Here we may have a real measure we can apply to our support units.

Variable 4: Existing qualifications

The survey respondents reported their highest formal qualifications ranging from PhD level (1) Masters degrees (6) and Bachelor degrees (12). Fifteen respondents reported having completed more than 2 formal higher education qualifications, and three reported holding 4 qualifications. In all, 45 formal qualifications were reported, and many of these were in the field of Business, Education and International Relations. Others included Psychology, Social work and Communications.

It is evident that people working in this area are highly qualified in a variety of disciplines, not necessarily in international education. They possess an active interest in pursuing higher qualifications, since they may not be required to hold such qualifications as a condition of employment. Many international student advisor positions, for instance, 'prefer' rather than mandate a university degree. In a related context, Ransom and Greig (2006) recorded a variety of minimum requirements for learning skills advisors across institutions, with some employing 'a range of discipline expertise.'

As distinct from formal qualifications, the professional development activities and events attended by the current respondents were, by and large, related to ISANA branch or national conference activities, or ESOS related briefings. No internally delivered professional development was reported although this is not to say these were unavailable. For example, critical incident training may be part of an organisation's typical responsibility and induction practices. However, a professional development survey conducted in 2004 revealed that ISANA provided 53% of events attended by the respondents, and 52% of these individuals felt they were supported in their professional development, although funding was restricted.[6]

Inchworm 5: The health check–stress, resources, support, critical incident management

Before we can conclude out thinking about whether staffing is sufficient, we should describe the impact of activities on the capacity of professionals to fulfil their roles.

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[6] ISANA Professional Development Needs Survey (2004) conducted among 119 respondents at the ISANA 15th International Education Conference, Melbourne.

Part of the survey looked at the attitudes respondents had towards their professional capability, and their experience in terms of stress, and managing stressful situations such as critical incidents. It was assumed that if resources appeared inadequate, this would correlate with high levels of stress, and the possible effects on the quality of service to international students. Surprisingly, although 61% of respondents reported 'sometimes being overwhelmed by their workload and level of responsibility', there was strong agreement (83%) that international students are given excellent support in the work unit in which they operate. It is evident that compromises are not easily made in support services, even when staff are under pressure.

In terms of resources, 52% of respondents believed the resources for international student support were inadequate, and there were comments about limitations in achieving goals, coping with peak periods, conducting research and undertaking projects. Most respondents (65%), believed that more resources would improve programs and services for international students.

The value of networks and integrated services for international students is not explored in this paper. However, it is noted that support staff, with their experience and direct contact with international students can be a valuable resource for academic staff who are working to increase the connectedness and intercultural competence of their students in an academic setting (Hawthorne 2000; Ransom & McLean 2004; Briguglio 2006), to facilitate linkages between student and community groups (McGrath & Butcher 2004), by participating in enabling cross-cultural programs (Mak, Westwood, Ishiyama, & Barker 1999), and by 'making policy recommendations addressing these issues within universities as well as to other external agencies concerned' (Chang 2005). Measuring the number of collaborations and joint projects in an organisation might give us an idea about the health of the education environment, and how mutually supportive these engagements are for people under pressure. A further study of support staff stress, resourcing and deployment would add to our understanding of these challenges.

Variable 5: Critical incidents

Standard 6.4 requires providers have a 'documented critical incident policy together with procedures that covers the action to be taken in the event of critical incident…' If critical incident management was as simple as following procedures we may not need to go further than to ensure the policy and procedure is accessible to staff. The reality of critical incident management is rather more complex, however.

One of the most stressful situations faced by staff in the international student support area is a critical incident involving international students. These are events that challenge the normal level of competency and affect a wider group, and the organisation as a whole. They are also time-consuming events and have repercussions for enrolments, progress, student visas, relationships and students' academic outcomes.

Critical incidents involving international students are often situations that may not be perceived as critical by domestic students, as they involve safety, security and individual coping mechanisms. Professional staff therefore need to be attuned to the potential for a situation to become serious or critical. Hermans and Pusch (2004) observe that, international students may experience a stressful situation if they:

> '…have been socialised in an education system that favours rote learning and memorisation as effective learning strategies, [so they] will find themselves at a loss in an educational setting where critical analysis and applying knowledge to new problem situations are essential skills for obtaining good grades. These students will

feel uncertain and insecure and experience high levels of anxiety in this stressful situation.' [7]

The survey explored the connection between staff preparedness, coping and support such a as debriefing in such incidents. Since the National Code obliges providers to have a critical incident policy in place, a question was also included asking if the location of the policy was known. The table below shows the results from this selection of questions.

Critical incident experience	
Respondents are prepared for a critical incident	83%
Respondents and their staff colleagues have had critical incident training	39%
Respondents have been involved in a critical incident	78%
Support such as debriefing is available	52%
The provider has a critical incident policy	91%
Respondents know the location of the critical incident policy	91%

Compliance obligations appear to be met by most providers who have a critical incident policy in place, but policies needs to be accompanied by sound, well-reviewed procedures, on the job preparation and, ideally, formal training. It is a little disturbing that training and follow-up support for staff involved in critical incidents appears to be undervalued.

Variable 6: Students as consumers

It is common experience among support staff that students appreciate personal contact with their advisors and support staff. If students are requesting support on a range of issues, and perhaps increasingly on compliance-related matters, we should ask the question whether optimum 'customer service' is to provide a one-stop-shop, or a range of closely linked accessible specialists. The former model may be possible in smaller institutions such as schools where one contact person filters, interprets and at least initially responds to international student issues. This might ensure an experience where every student is known, and 'accompanied' through their studies by consistent, familiar, reliable and trusted professionals.

In a large institution such a model is no longer possible, although it may be true that the international student advisors still attempt to replicate this practice. In such environments it is very likely that advisors will not know a large number of students. If we were to guarantee that all international students had not only an 'official point of contact (National Code Standard 6.5), but also high quality services and support, we may need to rethink how we structure our support services. Providing the minimum standard, simply a point of contact, would appear to be inadequate to meet demand and to ensure the high level of service that currently exists.

The principle of 'mainstreaming' international student services may address this, but a commitment to shared responsibility ought to be considered as important as efficiency. Student representation should be encouraged to ensure that students' needs and expectations, and their understanding of the learning environment are given expression; services and programs should respond to this. (Burke 2000).

Another key element of defining students as consumers is the matter of grievance resolution, a strengthened element in the National Code. Identifying students as consumers, reviewing formal grievance procedures and dealing with the possibility of increased complaints may need to be explored further. We should be mindful of the added responsibility and potential role conflict that this focus may have for support areas.

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[7] Hermans, J & Pusch, M. (2004) 'Culture Matters: An international educational perspective', EAIE Occasional Paper 16, European Association for International Education, p.49.

Recommendations

At the Australian International Education Conference, panel members and audience input offered some consolidating comments to move the discussion beyond an exploration, and into practical recommendations. The views expressed at this session are represented below. The contributions of the panel members, Liz Stinson (Deakin University), Mary Ann Seow (University of South Australia) and Debbie Clayton (Education Queensland International) are gratefully acknowledged.

Issue	Recommended action
Staff resourcing and deployment	Many more staff than specific international student support personnel assist students. These staff need to be: • Formally trained • Aware of obligations under the ESOS Act • Aware of international student issues • Actively engaged in liaison with colleagues in other areas and roles • Aware that international students are the responsibility of all staff interact with them
Staff Responsibilities	It is important to: • Collaborate on development and delivery of services and programs • Advocate at peak decision making committees for student issues • Offer opportunities for student to me assisted jointly, by a range of staff • Ensure that students' experience is as positive as possible
Student voice	Students should be engaged through: • Offering opportunities to mentor and guide other students • Consultation with student organisations • Providing feedback about services and support
Information and data	To provide better services and to be better informed we should • Collect data on student contacts • Research student experience • Use relevant research and collaborate in the research process • Evaluate activities • Identify issues and communicate these to specialist staff who can assist • Filter and sort issues to be dealt with by relevant personnel • Invest time and infrastructure in data collection • Recognise non-traditional marketing influences such as SMS, Facebook, MySpace etc which directly and instantly influence opinion about the student experience • Provide information and publicity about the quality of student support services available

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Conclusion

From this exploration, a number of comments can be made. International student support activities are well established, and the level of service and commitment to students is high, as it has been for at least a decade. Whether students recognise the influence of support services in their success is a matter which might be looked at in more targeted research. We can say that support services do play a role in providing a positive experience, assist in advising students considering withdrawal to continue their studies, and provide a safe and comfortable environment (Pomnitz & Germain 1996). It may be that retention rates are linked to support services. Quality of experience influences choice, and perhaps an institution's reputation. The part student support plays in this should therefore be prominent in further student satisfaction surveys.

Under-resourcing appears to be an ongoing issue. This gives us an opportunity to implement management strategies that take stress, peak periods, and engagement with stakeholders into account. As student enrolments increase, it cannot be reasonably argued that more and more staff be deployed to continue current practice. We can, however, consider what criteria will be included in the staff-student balance, and ensure that all staff supporting students, whether they are located in international offices, or in faculty or other units, are properly prepared and qualified to provide consistent service.

The approach to benchmarking a dynamic and complex area such as international student support services needs to be more sophisticated than measuring marigolds. More work should be done to add to our knowledge of this area, to ensure high standards, student retention and development of staff. Meeting compliance obligations should be the minimum objective, and we need to aim for educational and cross-cultural achievements in our thinking about international students, to create a healthy student support environment.

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