

They are, he is and I am: Different adjustment accounts of two male Saudi Arabian nursing students at an Australian university

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Abstract

This paper reports on the analysis of a narrative discussion group facilitated by the author as a part of a larger study. The participants in this group were two male Saudi Arabian nursing students of a similar age, studying the same course at the same time at the same Australian university, who had chosen to be together in this group. The discussion that was recorded for this study was in response to the request to “tell me about your experiences here.” The data demonstrate that these two individuals have had very different experiences, resulting from their very different responses to the challenges of living and studying in Australia. The data support the view of scholars such as Koehne (2005) and Kumar (2005) arguing against reductionist views of international students. The paper concludes by appealing for a more holistic person-in-context approach to providing support for beginning learners in higher education.

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Introduction

A crucial dimension to the challenge of supporting beginning learners in higher education is to consider the needs and experiences of students from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. In the Australian higher education sector, this includes a large number of so-called international students. Statistics released by the governmental department Australian Education International (AEI) indicate that in 2007 there were 1,885,870 enrolments by international students from 187 different countries in higher education courses in Australia (International student data for 2007). Explanatory notes to the data caution that this figure does not represent the actual number of international students in Australia, as students may enrol in more than one course during the period; a student who attended an ELICOS course and enrolled in a Bachelor degree during the same reference period, the notes explain, would have been counted twice. Nevertheless the numbers are clearly very large and, according to AEI year-to-date statistics for April 2008, continuing to grow (Monthly Summary of International Student Enrolment Data).

Higher education providers in Australia therefore need to address the question of how to support so many beginning learners from other countries. This paper

addresses that question by first critically examining the literature relating to international students in Australia, and more recent approaches to studying international students from a global perspective. Data from a larger study conducted by the author are then presented which strongly support the view of scholars such as Koehne (2005) and Kumar (2005) that international students should not be conceptualised in reductionist terms. The paper concludes by suggesting a more holistic person-in-context approach to providing support for beginning learners from CALD backgrounds in higher education, which may be applied in any educational context. I argue that this approach is in line with the general principles of social justice in education.

Literature on international students

Early research on international students in Australia

Although there had been some earlier publications on international students in Australia (e.g., Bochner & Wicks, 1972), research increased rapidly in the late 1980s, concurrent with significant changes in Australian Government policies, especially the March 1985 ‘Policy on Overseas Students’ which opened the doors to full fee-paying international students (Back, 1989). One stream of publications sought to inform academic institutions of issues that are likely to arise with this new influx of international students. Ballard and Clanchy (1991), for instance, argued that likely problems for international students would include lack of language competence, homesickness and culture shock, gaps in background knowledge, housing problems, social relationship problems and difficulties fitting into Australian student life. Two other issues for teaching staff to consider were different expectations and behaviour of international students, and mutual stereotyping. The research method for this publication was not clearly enunciated; however, the authors state that data were drawn from their “daily experience, over many years, of working with students” (Ballard & Clanchy, p. ix).

A different perspective from that period of increased research activity focussed on student perceptions on issues of quality and ethics. The proceedings from the 9th National Education Seminar, for instance, contain a paper highlighting international students’ concerns about low standards, poor facilities, low recognition, and concerns about ethics in the marketing of Australian programs (Mahmud, 1994). The data in this instance were drawn from a number of letters of complaint received by the author.

More rigorous theory-driven research into the experiences of international students in Australia at that time is outlined in an anthology of essays published in 1989 (Williams, 1989). In that publication, Burke (1989) examined student support issues. Drawing on Bochner (1972), he outlined some of the expected roles of international students as those of student, adolescent, foreigner, ambassador and customer. He also summarised difficulties commonly experienced by international students under the headings of cultural adjustment, finances and accommodation, living independently, study-related concerns, being different (including racial intolerance and low levels of contact with Australians). This research drew upon a review of literature current at that time.

In the same anthology, Jones (1989) noted that most research on the experiences of international students in Australia until that time had been conducted using mailed questionnaires. He highlighted many problems with early applications of this

method, including poorly designed questionnaires, and poorly timed use of the instruments (e.g., during exam periods); however, an even more serious concern he raised was that many participants felt uncomfortable writing answers to very personal questions in this format. Jones concludes his survey of research until the late 1980s with a call for “a diversification in research techniques, in favour of more qualitative methods including individual or group interviews and discussions, or studies based on wide experience with overseas students” (Jones, p. 36).

Recent trends in research on international students

Generalised accounts of international student experiences aimed at providing advice to potential students and teachers continue to be published (e.g., Carroll & Ryan, 2005). Omeri, Malcolm, Ahern, and Wellington’s (2003) comprehensive review of literature on CALD students in several countries outlined eighteen educational issues, eight social issues and five personal issues that had been identified in a variety of different studies, in different contexts, using different methods. These characteristics are collected as a foundation upon which they develop strategies for meeting the challenges of cultural diversity in the academic setting.

Koehne (2005), however, argued that this kind of generalising approach fails to acknowledge that international students are individuals with unique backgrounds, aspirations and identities. Kumar (2005) also argued against reductionist discussions of international students in university discourses, in favour of recognising hybridity and syncretic subjectivity. Dewaele (2005), speaking of second language learners in general, questioned the positivist epistemology that sees language learners as static objects of study, and more specifically on the validity of studies that reduce individual human participants to “bunches of variables” (Dewaele, p. 369). All of these approaches challenge researchers to avoid the reductionist conceptualisations of international students that dominated earlier studies.

One response to the challenge to avoid reductionism may be found in Byram and Feng’s (2006) anthology of more recent research on the experiences of students living and studying abroad in a variety of different cross-cultural contexts, using a variety of different research methods. The cross-cultural contexts of the different chapters included Japanese in Britain, Irish in Japan, Chinese in the UK, Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong (and vice versa), British students in France and Danish students in various EU countries. The different data collection approaches adopted by the authors of those chapters included the use of questionnaires, interviews, journals, drawings, friendly conversations, historical documents, and elicited narratives. The chapters also employ different data analysis approaches including grounded theory, textual analysis, ethnography, narrative analysis, and Delphi technique. These innovative new research approaches in a variety of different contexts represent a promising start to answer the call of Jones (1989) almost two decades ago for more in-depth qualitative research in a variety of different contexts, and with a variety of different methods.

Social justice in education

For education providers in Australia, maintaining principles of social justice is not simply a matter of moral obligation; it has increasingly become established in policy. The Queensland Studies Authority, for example, outlined a social justice approach to education which involved challenging inequities by,

- recognising that teaching and learning should be socially and culturally responsive and inclusive
- developing an understanding of diversity within and among groups
- identifying and minimising structural barriers to access and participation
- acknowledging the diversity of students and their life circumstances, and the need for particular strategies which can enhance engagement and equitable outcomes amongst all students
- recognising and acknowledging the diverse bodies of knowledge and backgrounds of all students, including marginalised groups
- acknowledging the relationship between valued knowledge and the participation of students in society (Queensland Studies Authority [QSA], 2006, p. 1).

Seeking to adopt a non-reductionist approach to understanding the support needs of international students can help to achieve some of these objectives, particularly “understanding diversity within and among groups” and “acknowledging the diversity of students and their life circumstances.” The recommendations of this paper are based on the assumption that the concept of social justice in education involves not just understanding and acknowledging, but also practically responding to diversity in order to better support students.

Context of the study

This paper presents the data from a larger study which engage with a similar research agenda to that of Byram and Feng (2006), investigating the previously unexplored context of the experiences of male Saudi Arabian nursing students at an Australian university. At the time in which the study was undertaken, I had no professional relationship with any of the Saudi Arabian students participating in the broader study; I was a full-time student in one faculty and they were full-time students in a different faculty. Approximately one year prior to commencing this study, however, I had taught some of the participants in a preparatory English program. Both of the Saudi participants in the discussion analysed in this paper had been students in this class. Therefore they were past students with whom I had continued to maintain social contact.

For the larger study, I¹ organised and facilitated small discussion groups with male Saudi Arabian nursing students at one Australian university. This restriction in membership was both a reflection of the context – this particular university had many students who met those criteria at the time of the study – and also a reflection of my interest in exploring reductionist constructions of “international students.” I surmised that if ever there were a group of international students who ought to be very similar, it would be this group. To begin with, they all came from the same country which, at the time of this research, was represented in the popular media in strongly reductionist terms (e.g., Bendle, 2008; Crittenden & Carroll, 2008; Houghton, 2008; Kerbaj, 2008; Rowbotham, 2008). Furthermore, these students were all men and they were all studying in the same Bachelor degree at the same university at the same time. The fact that they were studying in a field traditionally dominated by women in Australia (nursing) was an extra point of interest for me.

¹ The first person is employed in order to make explicit the active role of the researcher/author as a participant in the process of producing and analysing data.

Epistemologically, I hold to the view that data is not collected but rather jointly produced (see Hollway & Jefferson, 2000). Axiologically, I endorse Appadurai's (2001) challenge to move beyond Western-centrism in research by exploring and developing culturally appropriate and socially just research methodologies in consultation with other participants². In keeping with these two philosophical foundations, I developed a technique I refer to as narrative discussion groups. This method of data production drew heavily on theories of narrative interviewing (Flick, 2002), with a view to eliciting small stories (Bamberg, 2006; Georgakopoulou, 2006). The approach also has points of similarity to the joint narrative approach of Hildenbrand and Jahn (1988, cited in Flick, 2002). Narrative interviews do not follow an interview protocol of pre-selected questions, but begin with a generative narrative question (Flick, 2002, p. 173) which is intended to empower other participants to control what they talk about, and how they do so. To avoid the power relationship implications of the word interview, and to acknowledge my participation in the production of the data, I used the expression discussion groups to describe these events.

I chose to have discussions with other participants in small groups, rather than individually, for a number of reasons. In preliminary discussions with some Saudi Arabian nursing students, it was suggested to me that it would be better to talk about issues relating to adjustment experiences in groups. The literature on Arabic culture I had read seemed to support that suggestion (e.g., Hill, Lock, Straub, & El-Sheshai, 1998). Another reason for choosing groups was my interest in exploring how small stories might be jointly constructed, and also my desire to try to disrupt the power relationships inherent in traditional interviewer-interviewee contexts by giving other participants a numerical advantage over me.

Continuing in my quest to disenfranchise myself as the powerful "researcher", I also gave other participants the opportunity to self-select discussion group membership in a variation of snowball sampling (Creswell, 2005, p. 206). I did this by inviting one male Saudi Arabian nursing student to participate and, if he agreed, I then invited him to bring along one or more male Saudi Arabian nursing student friends so that we could talk about it together. In most cases, one other participant came, giving a group of three: two male Saudi Arabian nursing students and me, a male Australian doctoral candidate. This paper presents some of the data from one of those discussion groups.

To protect privacy, the other participants are referred to in this paper by the pseudonyms "Rashad" and "Latif" – two common Saudi Arabian names, but in no way connected to the real identities of any of the participants in my study. At the time of the interview, Rashad was twenty-six, recently married, and studying in his penultimate semester towards a Bachelor of nursing degree. Latif was twenty-four, still single, and also studying in his penultimate semester in the same degree.

Data and analysis

The discussion group was recorded on a digital audio recording device and transcribed for analysis. Errors, self-corrections, pauses, laughter and backchannels

² As I hold to the epistemological position of the co-production of data, the terms 'researcher' and 'participant' are problematic for me. In this paper, I use the first person ('me' and 'I') and the term 'other participants' wherever I need to make the distinction.

were all included in the transcript. For this paper some words have been added or deleted to the transcript in an attempt to improve clarity. These editorial changes are indicated with square brackets. The data for this paper were analysed using a thematic content analysis approach (see Creswell, 2005). After multiple readings and several layers of reducing codes, I came to realise that these two participants had vastly different perspectives on several emerging themes in the discussion. In the analysis that follows, I present some excerpts from the transcript of the discussion group that highlight points of difference between the two other participants' comments during the discussion that arose from the narrative discussion prompt: "Tell me about your experiences here."

One key point of difference was in relation to going to nightclubs and bars in order to meet other young Australians. Latif begins to talk about this:

- Latif:* *Sometimes I like to go out at night and weekend with my friends to go anywhere*
- Me:* *Sure*
- Latif:* *Like even if some people, they don't like it, especially from my country*
- Me:* *Yeah*
- Latif:* *They don't like to go to [...] ³this place at night*

Later in this conversation, Latif clarifies that by "going out at night" he means visiting nightclubs and bars. Although he does not specifically state during this discussion that he drinks alcohol when he goes to clubs and bars, his admission in the excerpt quoted above that "some people, they don't like it, especially from my country" may indicate that he is referring to the consumption of alcohol which is prohibited by Saudi law on religious grounds.

He believes, however, that going to clubs and bars has helped him to get to know many Australians:

- Latif:* *Now, when I go to like big shopping [centres] at least I meet two or three people I know them from Australia from clubs from*
- Me:* *Oh really?*
- Latif:* *(laughs)*
- Me:* *That's been a good way for you to meet*
- Latif:* *Yeah*
- Me:* *other Australians*
- Latif:* *Yes.*

In these two short excerpts Latif begins to reveal his overall approach to adjustment to life as an international student in Australia, namely to try to fit in by making friends and doing things the Australian way. It seems from the excerpts

³ [...] indicates words that have been deleted. In this instance, Latif added "for" after "to", perhaps being unsure of which preposition was correct. I have left the grammatically correct "to" and deleted the word "for" to enhance clarity.

above that for Latif, making and maintaining relationships with (Australian) people in the local community is of a higher priority than maintaining the cultural/religious norms of his home community. This reading of his statements is reinforced elsewhere in the discussion. The excerpts cited above were introduced by this comment from Latif:

Really I love this place. Last time I went to Saudi Arabia I felt like homesick [for this town].

Towards the end of the eighty-one minute discussion group, Latif comes back to this theme. He says,

I am really happy in [this town]. I'm very, very happy, because I got everything I wanted, friends going out, meet lots of friends.

Clearly Latif's friendships with people in the local community bring him a great sense of personal enjoyment and satisfaction. He continues on to explain that he also believes that interacting with members of the local community is important for language learning. He states,

We have to mix with the community to learn English.

Coming back to the subject of going to nightclubs, he says,

This [is] where you got to be, this [is] the way to meet people.

Putting these segments together, it seems that for Latif it is important emotionally and pedagogically to engage with members of the local community, and one good way to do that is to go to nightclubs and bars. He sees that the need to make Australian friends outweighs any concerns he may have over going to places where alcohol is consumed.

Rashad takes quite a different approach to the subject of going to bars and nightclubs. He first raises the subject, long after Latif does, in a joking fashion. Latif had been explaining how sometimes it is very difficult to understand the Australian accent.

Latif: I can't understand nothing

Me: Yeah

Latif: Just, I say, "Yes"

Me: "Yes"?

Latif: "Yes"

Me: (laughs)

Rashad: "You want to go to bar?" "Yes".

In the context of a totally different discussion (on the Australian accent) Rashad interrupts with the joking suggestion that Latif always says "yes" when invited to go to a bar. Rashad is making a joke at Latif's expense, the implication seeming to be that Rashad thinks that Latif goes too often.

Much later again, Rashad makes another light-hearted reference to this when discussing another totally unrelated issue: the expense of travelling home to Saudi Arabia.

- Rashad: *This is one of the problems we face. But it's a little problem because we are getting a lot of salaries. We can*
- Me: *Mm?*
- Rashad: *just save*
- Me: *Save up*
- Rashad: *If we are not going to nightclub*
- Me: *(laughs)*
- Rashad: *Yes*

At one stage in the discussion I asked Rashad ⁴ whether he, like Latif, had many Australian friends. He replied,

- Rashad: *No*
- Me: *Mostly Saudi friends?*
- Rashad: *Just Saudis. I don't have Australian friends*
- Me: *So you didn't, like, particularly try to make Australian friends, or you found it difficult?*
- Rashad: *Umm*
- Me: *Are you happy without?*
- Rashad: *I am. I have Saudi's people. I like to stay with them all the time*

Making Australian friends was clearly not a priority for Rashad. Later in the conversation he indicated that he did not think meeting people at clubs was a good idea either:

[If] I came across the people who I, I know them from [...] clubs, because I know them they are drunk, anytime I will get a problem for ring them they will be awake and 'Who are you?'

Although the syntax is very awkward, Rashad is here explaining that he does not go to nightclubs, and even if he did, it would be a waste of time, because the people there would be too drunk to remember him. Rashad also discussed his thoughts on the impact that not mixing with Australians has had on his English language development.

However, if I were, if I was with the Australian family, I think it would go better, and now I think, for English the language, it's not very important to know everything. [Thanks to] IT, I [...] can do assignments, a lot of words, in my assignment. If I read again, I don't know what's mean.

He went on to try to clarify:

⁴ This was not a pre-planned question. In order to maintain the integrity of this as a discussion, it was essential for me to ask questions and provide information about myself as I would normally do in a discussion. This was an example of that kind of naturally occurring question seeking to carry the conversation forward.

So I think it's not really important for me [to achieve] ninety, ninety percent English. I think seventy percent.

Rashad believes that his English language ability would improve if he spent more time with Australians; however, he does not believe that his English needs to improve that much, and therefore he is happy to just spend time with Saudi friends and leave his English language at the level he has already achieved – seventy percent rather than ninety percent. For Rashad, making friends with Australians is not as high a priority as it is for Latif, and as a result he does not make the effort to do so.

This different approach to adjustment was evident in other dialogic episodes as well. At one point, Latif explained that he had offered us (his guests) mint tea rather than Arabic coffee, because he knew that most Australians did not like Arabic coffee.

Rashad said to Latif,

If you get married here, you will be in trouble. You should drink coffee any time you talk with your friend.

I tried to clarify the significance of being married to that statement, to which Rashad replied,

For him, maybe [he is] busy with assignments but for me I don't have any excuse

Latif responded by saying,

[that] is in Saudi Arabia. We are in Australia, okay.

Rashad insists on maintaining Saudi customs, such as serving coffee to guests, whereas Latif places a higher priority on fitting into Australian culture, in this instance by offering tea, which he believes will be more acceptable to his Australian guest than coffee. He does not dispute Rashad's point that coffee is the appropriate drink to serve according to Saudi custom; the point of contention here is whether or not Saudi customs should be maintained whilst in Australia. Clearly for Latif the answer is no.

Later, when discussing the restricted opening hours of stores in the local community, Latif, who raised the topic, says,

It's not really [a] big deal. I don't know. For me it's acceptable for this situation because I'm [in a] different country. I have to follow this.

Rashad in response says,

It's really [a] problem. No. It's a big deal for me, yeah. I want it to be open twenty-four hours like in my country.

He clarifies later,

If I am Australian, this is what I am used to but for my country, in my country, I [am not] used to that.

As the conversation progressed, the difference in their opinions on the subject adjusting to Australia became more explicit. Rashad was discussing the fact that he felt some of the subject material he was learning, particularly with relation to ethics in nursing, was a waste of time for him. The conversation continued,

Rashad: Because we are, I'm never

Me: You're never going to use it?

Rashad: Yes. Use this one because we are religious country

Me: Yeah, okay, sure

Latif: I'm always different from my students, Saudi students, 'cause I told them, "You decide to come to study in Australia. I'm sure at least you got fifty percent of knowledge about Australia before we came to Australia. We know about what they believe, what's the religion in Australia, how we can get the food, how we can get everything. If I don't like these things, just stay in Saudi Arabia."

For Rashad, it is not where you are living, but where you are from, that determines how you live. He seeks to build a support network around him, so that as much as possible, his life in Australia is similar to his life in Saudi Arabia. This includes only mixing with Saudi Arabian friends, and strictly adhering to Saudi Arabian customs, such as serving the right beverage to guests. Whilst he admits that this approach may limit his language learning potential, he values maintaining his Saudi customs and culture over the possible advantages that might be gained from seeking to integrate more fully into the local community.

For Latif, on the other hand, the exact reverse seems to be the case. He seeks to make friends with Australians; he accepts cultural differences and adjusts accordingly. This, he believes, helps his language learning, and also seems to make him happy. In his opinion, Saudi students should be aware of the differences that they will face in Australia, and should be willing to accept them. Towards the end of the conversation, he explains that he sees the unwillingness to adjust to a different culture to be a characteristic of his home culture. He explains it this way,

Latif: Because they are, we are, really difficult people to, you know, to mix with different culture. We are not easy people to lose our culture, you know. Some different country, when they come to Australia, they like to become Australian, like Australian culture, but most of the Saudi students, they, they don't like to lose their own culture, they want to be

Me: Stay Saudi?

Latif: Yes

Me: Yeah

Latif: And they don't want. They want use like for they expecting and for do everything, that's why they find it difficult when they mix with Australian friends they, you know, they hate to lose their own culture even in the meeting or something. That's why some of them they, like, they find it difficult with the study, um, they find it, I don't know, many things.

Latif was struggling to find words to express his thoughts, but his meaning seems to be quite clear. He believes that Saudi Arabian students find it difficult to adjust

to living in another culture, because they place such a high priority on maintaining their own customs, habits and beliefs. He believes that this tendency is the cause of many problems faced by Saudi Arabian international students.

Rashad does not dispute this. Rather, he explains it in terms of religious commitment. The example he draws upon is one that had previously been discussed: halal food. Even in this discussion, the difference between the two other participants was made explicit.

- Rashad: I can eat anything if I am not religious*
- Me: Sure*
- Rashad: But people, most of us don't want*
- Me: Yeah, sure*
- Latif: For me, I eat everything.*
- Me: You eat everything?*
- Latif: Except pork (laughs)*
- Me: Except pork? That's going one step too far?*
- Latif: (laughs)*

Rashad positions himself as a religious Saudi man who therefore will not eat any food that is not halal. Without explicitly saying so, he seems to be suggesting that Latif is not religious, and that is the basis of their differing opinion. Latif does not attempt to dispute this. Rather he acknowledges that he is not like the “most of us” referred to by Rashad. He eats food that is not halal. Significantly, however, he does draw the line at eating pork. The difference, then, seems to be one of degrees. Latif is not prepared to completely abandon the religious/cultural dietary restrictions of his home; however, he is prepared to accommodate to a certain extent.

Discussion

This small sample from a much larger data-base provides strong support for the arguments of Kumar (2005) and Koehne (2005) that international students cannot be conceptualised in reductionist terms. Not only are these two students alike in many demographic ways, but for the purposes of this study they self-selected membership in the discussion group. Knowing that the general topic of discussion would be adjustment experiences here in Australia, Latif chose to invite Rashad to join us in the discussion. This was not the first time I had met them together. Once previously, when I was visiting Latif in his home, Rashad dropped in for a chat. Clearly the two men relate to one another as friends. Nevertheless in terms of their priorities, values and approaches to life as international students, they differ greatly.

Based on this data, it would be inappropriate to suggest, for instance, that Saudi Arabian students do not try to mix with Australians. Clearly Latif does, and according to his own account, quite successfully. However it would also be inaccurate to suggest that Saudi Arabian students mix well with Australians, because Rashad makes no attempt to do so. Likewise, whilst it may be true that

many Saudi students struggle with differences in the opening hours for shops, it is not an issue for all Saudis. The same may be said of the availability of halal foods.

Implications

These findings have significant implications for supporting beginning international students in tertiary education. First, the findings endorse a non-reductionist approach to developing strategies for the support of international students on social justice grounds. This study has clearly shown that students from demographically very similar backgrounds can have very different approaches to living in Australia as international students, based on their unique and highly complex internal networks of attitudes, values, experiences, abilities, beliefs and convictions. To suggest that there is one strategy that should be employed for all international students is to do violence to their rights of personal agency.

For example, it may seem logical and right to suggest that all international students should try to mix with Australians in order to improve their English. As the data from Rashad demonstrate, however, not all international students want to improve their English beyond the level required to pass their courses. There are no moral or ethical grounds upon which educational institutions can insist that international students continue to improve their English beyond the level required for completing the course of study. What is more, there are sometimes other higher priorities – such as the religious convictions that keep Rashad from bars and nightclubs – that may militate against some international students mixing with Australians. To suggest that they must abandon those convictions is to impose another's values and beliefs upon them.

Second, the findings suggest that reductionist approaches are not always effective. As the data above demonstrate, Rashad holds very strong convictions, and even though his colleague and compatriot suggests that it would be better to mix with Australians, he not only resists, but he defends his resistance on religious, moral and ethical grounds. One is left with the very strong impression that Rashad has firmly made up his mind. Whilst not all international students may have the personal awareness, confidence, cultural inclination or linguistic expertise to express strong convictions so emphatically, it does not necessarily mean that they do not hold them. Strategies that come into conflict with such deeply-held convictions are not likely to be effective.

Third, reductionist conceptualisations of international students can lead to discrimination against those who differ from the norm. Rashad does not fit the expected pattern of an international student wanting to improve his English. He does not attempt to mix with Australians. This may give the impression that he is not committed to his study, and/or that he is anti-social or anti-Australian. On the basis of eighteen months of prolonged engagement with Rashad, however, I am convinced that neither of these assumptions is true. Rashad is a good student, and is passing all his courses. He plans to continue on into post-graduate study. The fact that he is neither anti-social nor anti-Australian is evidenced by the fact that he agreed to participate in this study, and is supported by my encounters with him over the duration of our acquaintance – he always goes out of his way to stop and talk to me whenever we run into each other, both on and off campus.

Recommendations

In resisting the tendency to conceptualise international students in reductionist terms, the problem of how to adequately and appropriately provide support for them as beginning learners in tertiary education remains. Providing personalised programs of support for each individual international student is clearly not viable, given the huge numbers of students involved. Whilst the implications of this analysis on a very small sample cannot be generalised to a larger population, the extent of the difference between these two Saudi students suggests the following three recommendations be considered.

1. Increased awareness of the way in which deeply-held convictions can influence students' behaviour may assist teaching and support staff to better understand student behaviour. What may seem to be anti-social behaviour may, in fact, be adherence to a deeply-held conviction that the student is not able or willing to clearly express. Providing advice that comes into conflict with such deeply-held convictions may not be helpful, and may even serve to cause further distress.
2. It is important for those working with international students to recognise that international students are not all the same. What may be a problem for one Saudi Arabian student – such as early closing hours for shops – may not be a problem for other Saudi Arabian students, let alone for students from different cultural backgrounds. Likewise, what might work for some – such as going to nightclubs to improve English – may not be viable options for others.
3. The effectiveness of student support programs might be enhanced by designing them to have enough flexibility to accommodate these differences, and also by ensuring that support personnel have the expertise and resources to be able to exercise that flexibility when required.

Conclusion

The recommendations listed above focus more on raising awareness and maintaining flexibility than upon developing structures and programs. There are two reasons for this. First, as the analysis in this paper is based on a very small sample (only two students) it is not possible to generalise the findings for structural or programmatic purposes with any degree of statistical confidence. Second – and in my opinion more importantly – the broader study from which the data are drawn was designed in response to the challenges raised by Kumar (2005) and Koehne (2005) to seek to move beyond reductionist perspectives on international student experiences in order to better understand the multiple perspectives of individual students. Clearly, this objective is quite different to the more positivist objectives of those studies which seek to create generalisable findings for the purposes of supporting policy decisions. My personal perspective is that both kinds of study are important; the work presented in this paper, however, focuses on the multiple perspectives approach which is more in line with post-structural perspectives on research (see Miller, Whalley, & Stronach, 2005).

By focussing on the development of awareness and flexibility, a more holistic person-in-context approach to providing support for beginning learners in higher education can be developed. The data analysed in this paper strongly suggest that at least in the case of these two individuals this more holistic approach to providing support will be both more appropriate and more effective. Further in-depth studies of this nature would be required to demonstrate the extent to which these findings

may be applied more broadly. Nevertheless, if the concept of social justice includes a practical response to understanding and acknowledging diversity both within and between different groups, then the data from this discussion suggest that seeking to develop a flexible approach to support is to be encouraged.

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