

Overcoming the Challenges with an Optimistic Attitude: A Study on the Perceptions of International Research Students

Si Fan, Joanne Sin Wei Yeoh

University of Tasmania

Abstract

As one distinct student group in Australian tertiary education institutions, international students form a significant stakeholder group. Compared to the international students who are undertaking undergraduate or postgraduate course works, international research students hold more distinct characteristics. This research investigated challenges that this particular learner group face in their studies and daily life at one particular university context: the University of Tasmania. It aimed to provide insightful information and guidance not only for current and future international research students in Australian universities, but also for various educational services and relevant government agencies to provide more effective support to them. Qualitative research method was used to gain deeper insights of the issue. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants who were selected from different academic disciplines. Data were analysed by qualitative data analysis software NVivo. Constructivist grounded theory was the basis of data analysis. The findings indicated that physical health and psychological wellbeing are two dominant factors influencing international research students' study and daily life, apart from academic factors, supportive environment, and interpersonal relationships with supervisors. Coping strategies used in handling physical health and psychological wellbeing are also examined to give references for current and prospective international research students in the Australian university context.

Keywords: International research students, challenges, perceptions.

Introduction and background

International students are a significant group of stakeholders of the Australian tertiary educational sector. According to Australian Education International (2011), the enrolment of international students in higher education sector ranked the first amongst all education sectors. Compared to the statistics obtained in 2010, a 1.1% growth in enrolments volume has been observed. For post-graduate research enrolments and commencements, the growth was 13.1% and 5.0% respectively over the same period (AEI, 2011b). This condition also applied to international research students who show a significantly increment of 10% per year between 2002 and 2008 for their enrolment in Australia (Ziguras, 2008). Therefore, international research students have become a large and indispensable population group in the Australian academic discourse. Figure 1.1 indicates the enrolments of commencing international students in Australia by sectors during the period 2008-2011 (Australian Education International, 2011).

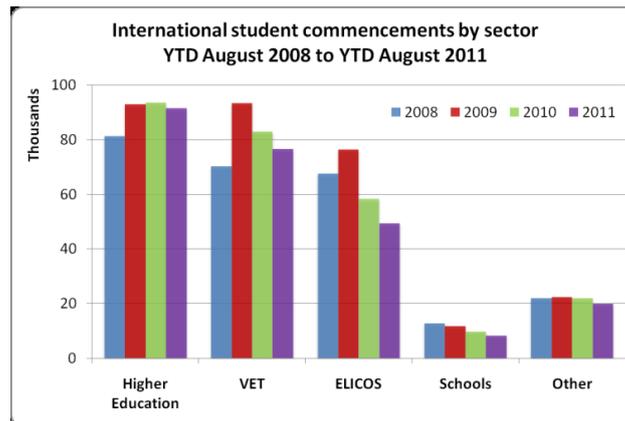


Figure 1.1. Number of enrolment of international students

International research students are contributing to this country culturally, economically, and in the research field. They are an important group in relation to cultural contact theory. They help to enrich the cultural diversity, not only of Australian educational institutions but also the Australian society as a whole. Therefore, study of this student group would contribute to the refining theoretical perspectives. Besides, international research students contribute significantly to the research productivity and reputation of universities (Ziguras, 2008). For instance, during the period from 2004 to 2006, 27% of the journal articles and 30% of the conference proceedings published at the University of New South Wales were by research students who were authors or co-authors (UNSW, 2008). The diffusion of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) graduates also help build research linkages between institutions. International research graduates returning home have the capacity to strengthen research links between Australian universities and education institutions in their own country (Ziguras, 2008).

Also, international research students make an enormous economical contribution not only to tertiary institutions but also to the nation. This student group contributes a great deal in the Australian economy. According to AEI (2011a), international education contributed \$18.3 billion in export income in 2010. Within \$18.3 billion, while the higher education sector is the largest component in export income, which contributes \$10.4 billion in 2010. Figure 1.2 demonstrates the Australian Export Income from Education Services from 2006 to 2010 (Australian Education International, 2011). According to the Australian Council for Private Education and Training (2009), international students do not only bring economic benefits for the host universities and countries, but also contribute to the labour market in Australia that demands more workforce from graduates of higher degrees, due to the reason that the current rate of completion of Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) graduates is not adequate in supplying workforce to the domestic academic labour market (Ziguras, 2008).

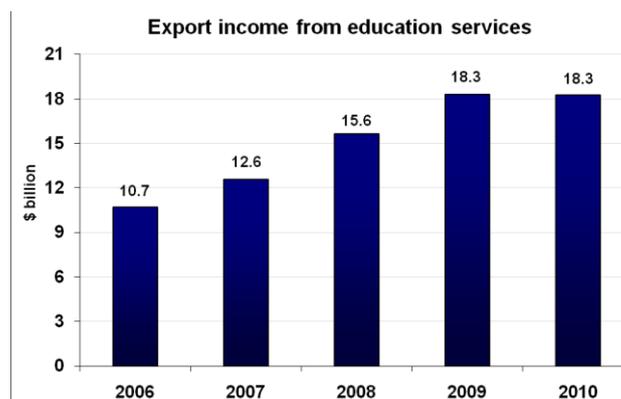


Figure 1.2: Australian Export Income from Education Services.

The above statistics indicate that international students have become a significant population group which is attracting attentions from the government, universities, and scholars from different disciplines. They bring to Australia a diversity of cultural and educational backgrounds, which can be both useful and hindering to their new life in this new environment. They require more time to adjust and adapt themselves to the new environment with a new learning and living style in Australia. It is important for the host country, especially policy makers, educators and socialists to understand how international

research students live and study in Australia to find better ways to enhance the quality of study life and wellbeing of international research students. A considerable number of researches (e.g. Fan, 2010; Ward & Masgoret, 2004) have been conducted to investigate the experiences and challenges of international students; however, there is little known about international research students' challenges and their attitudes towards the challenges and graduate research. These factors must be identified in order for the education institutions to provide appropriate assistances. Therefore, through an investigation of this area, this research provides insights for both international research students and Australian universities.

Methodology

Data collection

The goal of this study was to investigate the challenges that international research students experience in their study and daily life with an emphasis on their physical health and wellbeing. It sought to provide recommendations for a more supportive environment for both current and prospective international research students, by investigating and clarifying challenges and coping strategies in relation to their physical health and wellbeing. In this study, semi-structured interviews were conducted with ten participants who were selected randomly from different academic disciplines. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and individually. A list of ten questions was designed and adopted used as a guide. These interview questions were designed to achieve the research aims, by asking questions that required detailed and reflective answers from participants. All the data were transcribed and analysed using the constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2006), with the assistance of a qualitative data analysis software NVivo version 9.

Participants

A total of ten international research students who were studying a PhD degree at the University of Tasmania participated in the semi-structured interviews. In order to include participants with diverse backgrounds, participants' demographic backgrounds were taken into consideration. Amongst the ten participants, four of them were from the Faculty of Education, four from the Australian Maritime College (AMC) and two were from the University Department of Rural Health (UDRH). Their cultural backgrounds are including China, Korea, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Vietnam and Pakistan. The lengths of which they have been studying in the research degree were varied, ranging from less than one year to over three years.

Findings

Physical health

Physical health emerged to be a significant theme in the data analysis. The physical health of international research students is vital when they are away from their homes and families. The participants in this study saw the physical health as a critical issue. One example given by Student 1 is that "Physical health is quite important, especially for a research student. You have to have a healthy body to do your research." The participants in this research had no problem in taking care of their health in Australia. According to the interview data, the following four general issues in physical health emerged:

- Subtheme 1: Sleeping time
- Subtheme 2: Diet
- Subtheme 3: Exercise/outdoor activity
- Subtheme 4: Other concerns

Sleeping time

Within the category "Physical health", "Sleeping time" is the most important issue highlighted by participants. Adequate sleeping time is essential for research students to have energy to do their work. The following two examples are given by Student 1 and Student 8.

You must have enough time to sleep. I mean you must have adequate sleeping time. Sometimes I just want to finish a section; I didn't sleep for one night. The next day, I can't do anything. So I think it is not a good way for me to do that. So I tell myself must go to bed before 11, every night. (Student 1)

Although I am busy, I always make sure I get enough sleep, at least 6 to 7 hours a day. I am very particular about my sleeping hours. No matter how busy I am, I will always make sure at least 6 hours for sleep. (Student 8)

Diet

Other than enough sleeping time, "Diet" is an important factor in maintaining physical health. All participants in this study stressed on the importance of diet in their daily lives in Australia, while most participants had meals everyday although they did not have meals on time. It is a must to have regular meals every day, but occasionally, they skip meals due to works or research. As a Student 1 (Chinese) said, "Sometime when you are very busy with your research, you forgot to have your lunch or sometime you do, just have noodles or something light."

So, in term of health, of course, a balanced diet or not doesn't matter or affect you that much because the food here is the same, except less vegetable. Other than that, it is still OK. You can manage your diet well. (Student 5)

I make sure my stomach is full although I not really eat according to the correct time or the correct meal. (Student 8)

Exercise/outdoor activity

Apart from "Sleeping time" and "Diet", "exercise or outdoor activity" is another concern highlighted by participants. Doing exercises and various outdoor activities helped the participants to maintain their health. Yet, this is personal choice whether they want to take part in exercise or outdoor activity. The following examples are quoted from participants' interview responses.

On the weekends, I normally go bush walking; picnics, as well as aerobics with friends to keep myself relaxed. (Student 4)

I love outdoor activities, such as fishing, hiking, gardening and others. I love the natural beauty in Launceston, that's why I made my choice to further study here. Usually, I will set time for outdoor activities such as fishing once a week as well as socializing with friends. (Student 3)

I do regular exercises; I go to the gym, play badminton, tennis or squash, table tennis as well. I make sure I do exercise. I do walk sometimes, just to balance my physical and mental health. It is important to have good health in order to succeed in other things in life. (Student 10)

I would rather stay at home, listen to music or watch movie, than going out to do exercise or activities. I am not an out-going person. (Student 7)

Other concerns

During the data analysis, some "Other concerns" emerged from the participants' responses. Adapting to the weather in Tasmania is one of the concerns shown by participants, especially those new comers from tropical countries like Malaysia, Vietnam, Sri Lanka and others. Another concern is specified by a Chinese participant on the importance of eye sights for research students.

I think the problems of health arise due to changing climate. International students find difficulty in adjusting health here due to changing of weather, the climate. Till now, I can't really adapt although I have been here for 5 months. I need more time. (Student 5)

What I cannot really adapt to is the weather. It's freezing cold here. Malaysia won't have this type of temperature. Sometimes I do feel lazy to move and sleepy in this cold weather. (Student 4)

As a research student, you need to pay attention to your eye sight as well. You don't stay in front of the computer for too long. And then many students do get tired eyes easily on that as well if they work too hard. (Student 2)

Psychological wellbeing

Psychological wellbeing was discussed as another dominant theme in the interviews. There were two types of psychological problems experienced by the participants. One type of problems was related to research studies, while the other was related to people surrounding them and their home countries. It was common for research students to feel stressed in conducting research. "It is common for us as research students feel stress in studies." argued by Student 8. On the other hand, the sense of loneliness appeared when international research students are being separated from family members, peers and others. A participant who has been here for five months commented "I start to miss my home, my

working space, family members and friends when I just reach here (Tasmania). I miss them very much. (Student 5) Additionally, participants shared their solutions to the psychological problems they met. There were three categories of strategies coded from data analysis. Psychological wellbeing:

- Subtheme 1: Support from peers, supervisors and family
- Subtheme 2: Relaxing
- Subtheme 3: Special strategies

Support from peers, supervisors and family

In the interviews, it was indicated that “Support from peers, supervisors and family” were their main support pillars when they were stressed or emotionally unstable. This was confirmed by Student 1 (Chinese). Besides this, participants released their stress by mixing and socializing with friends. “Friends can lighten your day up.” said one of the participants (Student 6).

I just share my problem with them (other research students), and if I got some matter in re-search, I will share with them too. Through the conversation with other research students, you can get a lot of ideas and the suggestions from them. Besides, I do talk to my supervisor. He gives me a lot of academic support. Sometimes, they provide me a lot of encouragements or inspirations. (Student 1)

My emotions are supported by my friends, some Malaysian friends here. Now we start to have gathering for dinner every Saturday night. So once a week we meet, we talk, chat, we laugh. So, emotionally I am supported by my friends, not only from the friends from my own country, but other friends as well. I also have friends outside of my study circle. I do mix with local people. I know some Malaysian who work here, who have family here, who married and live here. So I got support from them. (Student 5)

Relaxing

Relaxing was a common strategy used by participants to release their stress and relax their mind when they face challenges in research or in their daily lives. Half of the participants used this strategy to overcome their stress. A Vietnamese participant gave the following response,

When I feel stressed or tired, I will put my things down and do other things. It is difficult for me to continue my stuff if I feel tired. I will not force myself to do something when I don't want to. (Student 7)

Special strategies

The last subtheme that emerged was “Special strategies”. These were personal strategies emerged in the data analysis. A Korean participant kept thinking positively in her life to reduce stress and avoid negative feelings. Also, one of the participants (Student 2) had a special strategy in coping with challenges and stressful periods. She liked to plan to make sure she had target, so that she will not feel aimless. Another participant (Student 5) uses a special way to reduce his homesickness when he gets home sick.

Normally, I think in a positive way although I meet problems. PhD is just a part of my life. There are much more important things in life such as my family, friends and much more. PhD is not the only happiness in my life, but I will do the best for it. (Student 3)

I feel frustrated when I feel that I have lost my direction. I don't know what I'm doing, actually. I feel like I have such a long way to go. I feel like I don't want to keep going. But planning makes me feel better because I get to know what I need to do for the next week. And I don't think too far ahead. I plan, this is the way I release my stress. I am different from other people. (Student 2)

I just read some stuff related to my country. Look at websites, my work place website, read newspapers scripts of my own language because I used to do that when I was in my home country. I do that to immerse myself so that I feel more relaxed. It makes me feel like the things that are happening are related to me. (Student 5)

Discussion and conclusion

As one of the dominant challenges faced by international research students, the physical health status indirectly influences their research study overseas. International students pay much attention to their physical health especially when they are away from home. The finding of the research reflects the lit-

erature which suggest that potential physical problems concerning international research students are balanced diet, weather, health and sleeping time (Rosenthal, Russell, & Thomson, 2006). Although the international research students in this study did not have any major issues in managing their health in Australia. Sleeping time, diet, exercise or outdoor activities and others aspects were listed as concerns to international research students, however, they can handle all aspects well. There was only one problem they face, which is the weather that is different from their home countries. The data also support the other research studies on psychological health which emphasis the stress in academic area and the sense of losing family members, peers and others. International research students faced stress in research and became "emotionally sick" when they were away from their home (Rajapaksa & Dundes, 2002; Yi, Lin, & Kishimoto, 2003). Similar to the other international research students in other education contexts, the participants in this study also identify these two issues as the dominant challenges.

To best assist this group of students in their study, this paper proposes two recommendations. Firstly, supervisors are the key to these students' success in research studies (Abiddin, Ismail, Ismail, 2011). The findings of this research suggest a positive feedback on the supervision provided to the international students'. The participants pointed out the importance of supervisors in leading them in their research journey. It is essential for supervisors to take on their responsibilities in this "cross-cultural supervision". They should be alert and sensitive to the needs of international research students which are due to cultural backgrounds and their unique status. Secondly, International research students should be well prepared before studying abroad. The findings of this study also indicated that international research students had difficulties in their research studies and adaptation to new environment. Preparations, which can be done before commencing the study, include reading more articles or books related to research to build up their research knowledge, improve their academic English writing and oral English language skills. It is also vital to be aware of potential challenges. Also, they need to be fully prepared both physically and psychologically before departing to Australia. It is vital for them to have information about the country they will study in, for example, the weather, foods, people and culture of the country. A good preparation help assure the success of international research students in both their study and their living in Australia.

References

- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- AEI. (2011a). *Export income to Australia from education services in 2010*. Retrieved from http://www.international.ac.uk/resources/50SS09_pdf.pdf
- AEI. (2011b). *Monthly summary of international student enrolment data in Australia – YTD August 2011*. Retrieved from http://www.aei.gov.au/research/International-Student-Da-ta/Documents/Monthly%20summaries%20of%20international%20student%20enrolment%20ata%202011/08_Aug_2011_MonthlySummary.pdf
- Ziguras, C. (2008). *Options for attracting research students to Australia*. Paper presented at the Australian International Education Conference 2008 http://www.aiec.idp.com/pdf/Ziguras_Fri_1030_M2.pdf
- UNSW. (2008). *UNSW response to inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities. Inquiry into research training and research workforce issues in Australian universities*. Retrieved from <http://www.docstoc.com/docs/32856246/30-May-2008-Committee-Secretary-Standing-Committee-on-Industry>
- Ward, C., & Masgoret, A. M. (2004). *The experience of international students in New Zealand: Report on the results of the national survey*. Retrieved from <http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/international/14700>
- Abiddin, N. Z., Ismail, A., & Ismail, A. (2011). Effective supervisory approach in enhancing postgraduate research studies. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 1(2), 206-217.
- Fan, S. (2010). Language shock: A challenge to language learning. *The International Journal of Language, Society and Culture*, 31, 42-51.
- Rosenthal, D. A., Russell, V. J., & Thomson, G. D. (2006). *A growing experience: The health & well-being of international students at the University of Melbourne*. Retrieved from http://www.services.unimelb.edu.au/counsel/research/growing_experience.html



Rajapaksa, S., & Dundes, L. (2002). It's a long way home: International student adjustment to living in the United States. *College Student Retention, 41*, 15-28.

Yi, J. K., Lin, J. C. G., & Kishimoto, Y. (2003). Utilization of counselling services by international students. *Journal of Instructional Psychology, 30*, 333-342.