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LOUISE KAKTINS
Macquarie University, Australia

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS' TRANSITION FROM PATHWAY PROGRAM TO MAINSTREAM UNIVERSITY: INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES

Abstract:

This paper is one facet of a larger research project focusing on a case study of an Australian pathway program and involving both student and teacher respondents. The first exposure to higher education (HE) is a particularly vulnerable time for many international students as they cope with challenges on multiple fronts, including their acculturation into a new academic environment. Despite prolific literature on international postgraduate students, it is this formative undergraduate stage of their academic development that has been least studied, especially within the context of a pathway program. Based on focus groups of international students who have successfully completed such a program and are now undertaking a mainstream university degree program, some comparisons are between these two educational frameworks, especially in relation to how successfully this transition is made. Key concerns raised by the students include the mismatch between the pedagogical approach operating within the pathway program and that at mainstream university, the latter proving much more challenging and demanding, and the perennial difficulties with English language proficiency at an academic level, especially the impact on students' assignments. Implications and recommendations are discussed.

Keywords:

international students, pathway programs, higher education, international education, group work, transition to university, Australia

JEL Classification: I29

Introduction and Literature Review

In recent decades, the global educational landscape has altered dramatically due to the phenomenon of international student mobility, which is occurring on a scale unprecedented in history. According to current reports (Trends in International Student Recruitment, 2017), the number of students pursuing education outside their home countries has tripled from the 1990 figure to now stand at approximately 5 million, with a predicted increase to 7 million by 2022. Notably, this dynamic trend has been spurred by Asian students seeking an English-language-based educational qualification and making up 50% of mobile students globally (ibid). Hence the popularity of educational programs in countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia is hardly surprising.

As a consequence, Australia's reliance on international students now forms a significant part of its export market, totalling AUS \$22 billion in 2016 (an increase of 17% from the previous year), which equates to 28% of the total university students in Australia (Maslen, 2017). Such a high demand for university degrees from English-language-based universities has also led to the growth of pathway programs (both commercial and non-commercial) for those international students whose qualifications – notably English language standards - need improvement prior to enrolling in mainstream university degrees. For the purpose of this paper, Andrade's (2006, p. 134) definition of "international students" will be utilised as one describing those "individuals enrolled in institutions of higher education who are on temporary student visas and are non-native English speakers (NNES)".

The pre-university pathway program, while once a relatively new type of educational offering has now become an entrenched part of the contemporary academic landscape addressing the robust international demand for higher education in Australia. These alternative programs are based on now well-established models of collaborative (symbiotic) relationships between private providers of education and specific universities, operating on the premise that the successful pathway students – those who have completed a one-year diploma in a private college - can automatically articulate into mainstream second year university to continue their degrees (Fiocco, 2006; Shah & Nair, 2013). This paper focuses on one such relationship.

The current research forms part of a comprehensive project based on a case study conducted at a commercial educational institution in Australia (de-identified as PHEP) offering higher education (HE) pathway programs primarily to international students who then potentially articulate into mainstream degree programs at the university (de-identified as Met_U) from whose campus it operates. The longer-term goal of the project is to analyse factors relating to the development of academic identity for international students and the pedagogical implications thereof. It is noted that following completion of the PHEP pathway program (which includes first year university units for which the students obtain credit towards their degree), the students articulate into second year of their university course.

While research has been done on international students' perspectives of preparatory programs such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) ones (Dooey, 2010), less has been done on students who have transitioned to a degree program and are able to furnish some comparison between their experiences in the pathway program and those in mainstream university. This paper addresses such a deficit.

Since the purported key objective of pathway programs is to facilitate the transition of international students to university, their actual experience is a matter of ongoing concern to universities and educators, informing all stakeholders of the particular challenges (faced by these students) and how these might be addressed to facilitate that transition.

Method

This paper presents one facet of a larger project investigating international students' development and progress within Australian higher education where their main springboard has been a pathway program. A comprehensive schedule of data collection has involved international student surveys, focus groups, interviews from teachers and document analysis. This paper utilises one aspect of this - qualitative data collected from three focus groups of international students.

Group_1 involved participants who were all current PHEP students (Table 1). At the time of the focus group, the participants had been at PHEP for at least 3 terms (equivalent to 9 months). Of the five, there were four males and one female. The age range was from 17 years to 20 years and they were all from different countries – one each from Russia (S1.1), the Ukraine (S1.2), Hong Kong (S1.3), Vietnam (S1.4) and Korea (S1.5). With the exception of S1.3 (whose major was computing) they were all undertaking degrees related to business, accounting, finance or actuarial studies.

Table 1. Profile of the student focus Group_1 at PHEP

ID	Gender	Current Age	Native Country	Major area of study	How long at PHEP?
S1.1	M	20	Russia	Applied Finance	15 months
S1.2	F	17	Ukraine	Commerce Entrepreneurship and Finance	12 months
S1.3	M	20	Hong Kong	Computing	10 months
S1.4	M	18	Vietnam	Accounting	3 semesters (approx. 9months)
S1.5	M	20	Korea	Actuarial Studies	14 months

Group_2 comprised former PHEP students who had successfully completed the pathway program and were currently undertaking a mainstream degree at the partner

university (Table 2). Of the three, there were two males and one female. The age range was from 20 years to 25 years, and they were all from different Asian countries – one each from Korea (S2.1), Vietnam (S2.2), and China (S2.3).

Table 2. Profile of the student focus Group_2 now at university following PHEP

ID	Gender	Current Age	Native Country	Major area of study	Current year of study at university
S2.1	M	20	Korea	Bachelor of Commerce	2 nd year
S2.2	F	20	Vietnam	Bachelor of Professional Accounting	2 nd year
S2.3	M	25	China	Bachelor of Arts (majoring in politics)	3 rd year

Group_3 comprised former PHEP students who had successfully completed the pathway program and were currently undertaking a mainstream degree at the partner university (Table 3). All four were males. The age range was from 23 years to 28 years, and they were all from Korea, with the exception of S3.3 who originated from Malaysia.

Table 3. Profile of the student focus Group_3 now at university following PHEP

	Gender	Current Age	Native Country	Major area of study	Current year of study at university
S3.1	M	28	Korea	Bachelor of Commerce	3 rd year
S3.2	M	27	Korea	Bachelor of Applied Finance	3 rd year
S3.3	M	22	Malaysia	Bachelor of Actuarial Studies	2 nd year
S3.4	M	23	Korea	Bachelor of Applied Finance and Economics	3 rd year

All three sets of focus group participants were articulate and appeared to engage in candid discussion.

The datasets were analysed on the basis of recurring patterns as well as anomalies, and then grouped thematically into broader patterns of meaning. These themes are presented and analysed in the next section.

Results

Several themes emerged from the focus groups including the challenges of acclimatising to a new educational regime, the challenges of transitioning due to the

differing pedagogical ethos of the two educational institutions (PHEP and Met_U), and the standard of English language required in an academic setting which had consequences for final grades (e.g. group work, participation marks), as well as for future employment prospects.

The participants from Group_1 all noted the new focus on becoming independent and self-reliant students, as well as being independent and self-reliant people. Most agreed that they had undergone significant changes in adapting to study in Australia. In particular, they were surprised at the substantial amount of personal effort involved in studying here (S1.1; S1.2) especially in terms of working independently (S1.2) and the focus on avoiding plagiarism (S1.1; S1.2; S1.4). S1.1 commented on the academic culture shock he experienced when the same approaches to study as he had used in his home country (e.g. a tolerant attitude to plagiarism) were simply unacceptable at PHEP. S1.2 in particular gave an in-depth assessment of her own journey to becoming an independent and self-reliant learner who expected the very best of herself and that she was now “thinking deeper” than ever before. Such progress was achieved despite extra pressure on international students in many respects. S1.4 noted the loss of familial support - “Here you go home and no-one cares – everyone in their rooms”.

For international students (Group_2 and Group_3) who had segued to the mainstream partner university, a prominent theme was the stark contrast between the pathway program (PHEP) and much more challenging mainstream university (S2.2) - “lecturers and tutors at PHEP are kind on your marks. At uni they are a bit harsh compared to PHEP” (S2.3). Understandably participants (S2.1/S2.2/S2.3) noted the extra time they had to allocate to keep up with the academic pace expected at university.

This same theme is continued in regard to the ease of obtaining good grades at PHEP, with students noting the high similarity between sample exam papers and the following final exam, leading to inflated high grades (S3.2/S3.3). In fact, one participant equated the level of PHEP with that of high school (S3.2), implying an inadequate preparatory program for mainstream university. All the students in Group_3 noted the higher and much more demanding standard at university where academics had high expectations of their students (S3.3) which had led to a substantial attrition rate in some units (S3.3) e.g. one unit dropping from 150 students to 80 students by the end of semester. One participant (S3.2) was adamant that PHEP should be much stricter and more challenging so as to align more realistically with mainstream university.

Overall, such recurring comments raise a key challenge for pathway programs – providing an authentic university experience while supporting students new to academic culture without demoralising them. Interestingly, S2.3 was able to compare the PHEP program with another one he had undertaken – a foundation program at the Australian National University (ANU) where he noted two points of difference between PHEP and ANU regarding their pathway programs – ANU had higher entrance requirements (IELTS 6 for foundation programs) and ANU had more stringent marking

procedures so higher marks (in the 70s or greater) were very rare. S2.3 equated the ANU pathway program with mainstream university, unlike PHEP which he considered of a lower standard. It is noted that most Met_U programs require an overall IELTS score of 6.5.

English language for academic purposes was of concern to all participants and is a perennial problem for international students on the whole (Samuelowicz, 1987; Zhang & Mi, 2010). This appears a key challenge for S2.3 whose Arts degree required him to write a number of significant essays. Despite being in the final year of his undergraduate degree, essay writing was still problematic. "Hardest part still is doing essays. Really a high difference when you use first language or second language. Sometimes I have to come up with ideas in Chinese and then translate in English. Locals use 2 days but I have to use a week for 2,500 essay" (S2.3). This motivated him to seek academic skills support whenever possible.

Having a good command of English was important for several other communication purposes. S1.5 indicated his biggest challenge was that his level of English needed improvement, especially as many of his subjects involved extensive written work. This same concern hindered communication with local students as there was little possibility of in-depth communication. This problem was exacerbated when international students transferred to mainstream university, where interaction with local students was unavoidable. This posed a challenge for the participants from Group_2 in units such as accounting that specified a participation mark (S2.2). That meant that international students felt disadvantaged since they could not answer the lecturer's and/or tutor's questions as quickly as the local students (S2.2) as "you must quickly answer this (a question) otherwise a local will jump in. We feel we cannot talk much in class... 'cos for me there is not enough time to think of an answer. Need time to process", so often tended to participate less overall (S2.1) which affected their final grades. S2.2 noted that in her accounting unit the participation mark was worth 10% but international students had "trouble getting this mark".

This concern regarding English language standards manifests itself in other academic activities, notably group work. All participants noted how much easier it had been to work in groups at PHEP where the majority of students were international students, mainly from Asia especially China (59%) as noted in an earlier study of PHEP (Kaktiņš, 2013). This enabled them to achieve a level of comfort in group work that was missing in mainstream university where groups might comprise both international and local students, the latter with English as a first language (L1). Naturally, this became particularly worrying where group work was part of an official assignment and attracted a single grade for the group regardless of the contribution of members – S2.1 noted one of his group assignments was worth 20% of the total mark for the unit. S2.3 explained that the stressful nature of group work had meant his grades for group work were lower than those for individually completed assignments, and concluded that he much preferred to work independently. In units such as marketing (S2.2) where there is a significant focus on group work, even attempts to get marks upgraded

were so bureaucratically tedious that this discouraged the international students from complaining even if they felt justified. Similar complaints are reflected in the attitudes of international students interviewed by Campbell and Li (2008).

Additional concerns regarding group work at university included the international students' vulnerability when other group members proved unreliable, untrustworthy or irresponsible (S2.3). S2.1, S2.2 and S3.2 explained that as international students they were highly motivated to aim for the very best grades but that some local students had very little motivation to do the same, so having high-quality group members was key to successful and constructive group work. S2.2 offered how difficult it was "for international students to work with domestic students in groups cos international students want an HD and others maybe not so motivated. At PHEP better cos you work with international students who have similar motivation".

The participants in Group_3 alluded to an improved marking criteria for group assignments at university, such that a fairer breakdown was being mandated – 50% grade for the entire group submission and 50% for individual contributions. They noted that such a system had not been enforced at PHEP.

Longer term work prospects also were noted as being blighted by weaker English language communication skills. S2.1 explained how challenging it was for international students to gain employment in Australia post graduation, especially as companies needed to sponsor international students financially should they wish to hire them. Additionally, S1 noted that the extensive rounds of interviews meant that interviewees were put under intense scrutiny in regard to their English language verbal communication skills.

Implications and recommendations

The current research reinforces the findings of other research (related to both education and linguistics) which consistently and overwhelmingly confirms that a majority of international students perceive themselves to be handicapped in regard to the standard of English language skills required for academic work (Robertson, Line, Jones & Thomas, 2000; Borland & Pearce, 2002; Sawir, 2005; Song-Turner, 2008). In fact, it is argued that the positioning of international students in regard to English is a highly significant aspect of students' progress towards taking "ownership" of English, which in turn is crucially linked with their identity formation and reconstruction (Phan, 2009). This is particularly challenging in regard to academic writing which "is only effective when writers use conventions that other members of the community find familiar and convincing" (Hyland, 2009, p. 5). In order to become members of a scholarly (or discipline-specific) community, students are encouraged to develop their own "academic voice" whilst becoming skilled at juggling an array of "voices" - other authors' "voices" as well as their own (Brick, 2011), in addition to the "voices" of those with whom they directly interact (lecturers, tutors, teachers, fellow students). Writing cohesively whilst bearing these restrictions in mind can prove enormously demanding

for international students trying to accomplish all of this in a second language (Ryan & Viète, 2009).

Such difficulties are exacerbated and interwoven with challenges for international students in their relationships with other students at university – particularly with local students. While no direct comment was made by any of the respondents in regard to discrimination as such, their overall demeanour and concerns regarding group work implied that this experience was far less comfortable and productive in comparison with group work at PHEP where all the students were international and, hence, seemed on a more equal footing with each other. Cheng (2016) writes at length about the potential discrimination that results against Chinese students within the context of group work due to a breakdown in communication between the Chinese and non-Chinese students even leading to a downgrading of Chinese students' contributions to the group effort. If as Dooley (2010, p. 185) claims "Communication across cultures is also integral to the successful completion of academic tasks at university" then this fracturing in the communication is not only unfortunate but damaging for the international students academically. Cheng (2016) recommends greater efforts to internationalise the curriculum to address some of these concerns while Dooley (2010) upholds greater efforts at cultural integration overall on campus, presumably targeting international and local students alike.

Because the pathway program of interest is essentially a de facto first year undergraduate program, albeit adjusted to target international students, one of the key issues is its capacity to provide a realistic university environment that would minimise any problems in transition to second year. Hence the greater the difference between a pathway program and mainstream university, the greater the challenge for international students. Despite this, the participants showed a preference for mainstream university:

"We study harder but enjoy (uni) better than PHEP. The content at PHEP is quite easy – always give us a sample test and then you can pass the exam – but not at uni. Less help at uni but good habit to start. Harder but better." (S2.2)

This, of course, pre-supposes that in some cases the entrance standards to pathway programs are made more demanding (as noted by S2.3) in order to attract higher-level students. It is also revealing that reference to the ANU's own pathway program (university controlled) contrasted substantially with the structure and rationale of the PHEP commercially owned institution albeit it with university connections. It is interesting that in recent years it is Met_U itself that has taken over the task of providing a university controlled international college in preference to PHEP and it may be that this change may provide greater consistency between pathway program and university proper. This is certainly a fertile area of research for the future.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated the perceptions of international students in Australia in regard to their transition from a pathway program to mainstream university and forms part of a wider project considering the development of international students' academic identities within a pathway environment. Key issues raised by the students included the substantial differences in approach between the pathway program and mainstream university and the challenges this posed for them, as well as the concerns regarding English language proficiency manifesting themselves in difficulties with written assignments and participation in for-credit group work. Greater internationalisation of the curriculum and greater efforts at university-wide cultural integration are some of the recommendations to address some of the issues. There is much potential here for future research especially in regard to the pedagogical vs commercial friction that may well arise when considering the ethos of for-profit pathway program providers and the consequences for the international students that they enrol.

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