Academic Experiences of International PhD Students in Australian Higher Education: From an EAP program to a PhD program

Jeong-Bae Son (jeong-bae.son@usq.edu.au) and
Sang-Soon Park (sang-soon.park@usq.edu.au)
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

Abstract

For the last few decades, Australia has played a pivotal role in the supply of quality education to international students and other educational industries associated with them. In the higher education sector, in particular, international PhD student numbers continue to increase. However, the limited availability of resources for the students and the lack of investigation concerning the students indicate that there is a need for both higher education providers and other related stakeholders to understand and take into account the difficulties and challenges of international PhD students and their implications in the Australian academic context. While learning a new academic culture in a new country, international PhD students meet situations where they have to deal with a range of language problems, cultural differences and personal matters. The study reported in this article explores international non-English speaking background (NESB) students' experiences with university preparation programs and PhD programs and investigates the issues they face at an Australian university with a focus on factors affecting the NESB students' academic experiences. It provides implications for the teaching of postgraduate preparation programs and the supervision of international NESB PhD students at Australian universities.

Keywords: Higher education programs, doctoral candidates, international students, cultural context, learning experience

Introduction

According to the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR, 2010), there was a 4.5 per cent increase to 335,273 overseas students from 2009 to 2010. The Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC, 2011) also reports that the total number in the international postgraduate research sector has risen steadily since 2006, and this would continue if circumstances and policies remain unchanged. During the period from 2010 to 2011, however, there was a slight decline in the number of successful visa applicants in the postgraduate research sector (DIAC, 2011). ABC Radio Australia News (2012) points out that the total number of international students studying in Australia has decreased due to "a high Australian dollar, new visa rules and violence against foreign students". It also states that the Australian Government has started to make changes to reverse the trend of international students' choice to study in Australia. From a human rights perspective, specifically, Jakubowicz and Monani (2010) argue that Australia needs responsive social policies which

"reduce racism and ensure wide human rights" (p. 1) for international students.

As the number of international PhD students in English-speaking countries is large and continuously growing, the need for improving the students' academic experience in new environments is greatly increasing (Kell & Vogl, 2010, 2012; Park & Son, 2011; Sherry, Thomas, & Chui, 2010; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011; Tran, 2011). In responding to the need, it is important to understand the difficulties and challenges the students face during their PhD study in order to offer the students better educational services. The study reported in this article investigates the difficulties and challenges international PhD students face at an Australian university. With a focus on various factors affecting the experiences of international non-English speaking background (NESB) students who have enrolled in PhD programs after completing university preparation programs, it explores the students' adjustment problems and provides implications for the teaching of postgraduate preparation programs and the supervision of international NESB PhD students at Australian universities.

International Students in New Academic Environments

A large volume of studies on international NESB students have looked at language difficulties and cultural challenges faced by the students at universities in English speaking countries. The studies discussed a number of issues such as English language problems (Bradley & Bradley, 1984; Brooks & Adams, 2002; Hellstén, 2002; Park & Son, 2011; Ramburuth, 1999), different learning styles (Ballard, 1989; Biggs, 2003) and socio-cultural problems and adjustments (Beasely & Pearson, 1999; Purdie, O'Donoghue, & Rosa, 1998). Among those issues, particularly, Sawir (2005) pointed out that English language proficiency is a key source of international students' difficulties in learning. Robertson, Line, Jones, and Thomas (2000) also emphasised that English language proficiency and other related issues are the major area of unsolved problems facing international students in Australia. In addition, Kim (2006) argued that the sufficient level of academic oral communication skills is crucial for international postgraduate students to complete their studies.

With a focus on international students' adjustment to new academic cultures, on the other hand, Mehdizadeh and Scott (2005) expressed the view that most international postgraduate students have particular difficulty adjusting to the host country's methods of study. Robinson-Pant (2009) also stated that "in the case of PhD students, adjusting to a different academic culture may also involve finding out how to do research in an unfamiliar culture" (p. 417). In an interview on Radio National, additionally, Ingram (2005) stressed that international students' ability to perform in their academic programs has a tendency to rely not only on their English language proficiency but also on their understanding of the educational culture where they undertake their courses. Similarly, Handa and Fallon (2006) argued that the most difficult academic adjustment of international students in Western university settings is the lack of their knowledge to comply with the cultural and educational requirements of their host institutions. These studies show that cross-cultural differences and academic standards in the Western university context can cause international students' problems in studying in new academic environments.

A wide range of issues on the difficulties and challenges of international postgraduate students have been also reported in the literature. Those issues include cultural conflicts (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007; Chen, Absalom, & Holbrook, 2003), international postgraduate research students' perceptions of supervision (McClure, 2005), supervisors'

responsibilities for international postgraduate research students (Knight, 1999), the importance of cross-cultural communication in the supervisory relationship (Adams & Cargill, 2003), general difficulties in thesis writing (Bitchener & Baskurkmen, 2006), pedagogical needs in thesis writing (Wang & Li, 2008), lack of motivation to learn new Western academic conventions (Cho, Roberts, & Roberts, 2008; Handa & Fallon, 2006) and critical thinking and research culture (Cadman, 2000). Findings from these studies indicate that a number of factors need to be considered in understanding and guiding international postgraduate students studying in English-speaking countries.

Through a literature review, a total of fifteen factors affecting international NESB students' successful completion of their academic programs are identified (see Table 1). Among the fifteen factors, interestingly, the relationships with supervisors, understanding of academic culture, intercultural adjustment and English language proficiency have been the most frequently discussed topics in the selected literature.

Table 1

Main factors affecting international NESB students' successful completion of their academic programs reported in the literature

Factors	Studies
Motivation to study	Chirkov, Vansteenkiste, Tao, & Lynch (2007); Kiley (1998)
English language proficiency	Andrade (2006); Briguglio (2000); Brooks & Adams (2002); Kim (2006); Park & Son (2011); Sawir (2005); Sherry, Thomas, & Chui (2010); Terraschke & Wahid (2011); Walsh (2010)
Relationship with supervisors	Adams & Cargill (2003); Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler (2007); Barron & Zeegers (2006); Cadman (2000); Chen, Absalom, & Holbrook (2003); Chiang (2003); Conrad (2003); Harman (2003); Kiley (1998); McGinty (2010); Mitchell & Carroll (2008); Myles & Cheng (2003); Walsh (2010); Wang & Li (2011)
Critical thinking	Cadman (2000)
Family matters	Harman (2003)
Thesis writing	Larcombe, McCosker, & O'Loughlin (2007); Li & Vandermensbrugghe (2011); Wang & Li (2008)
Financial support	Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir (2005); Harman (2003); Mehdizadeh & Scott (2005); Sherry, Thomas, & Chui (2010)
Use of technology	Hughes (2005); Singh & Guo (2010); Zhang & Kenny (2010)
Research support from the university	Chiang (2003); Harman (2003); Trice & Yoo (2007)
Communication skills	Kim (2006); Myles & Cheng (2003)
Future plan	Harman (2003); Ketefian, Davidson, Daly, Chang, & Srisuphan (2005); Trice & Yoo (2007)
Learning styles	Cho (2001); Novera (2004); Ramburuth & McCormick (2001)
Social life	Myles & Cheng (2003); Sheridan (2011); Sherry, Thomas, & Chui (2010)
Understanding of academic culture	Andrade (2006); Cadman (2000); Cho (2001); Handa & Fallon (2006); Jones, Farrell, & Goldsmith (2009); Kell (2010); Mehdizadeh & Scott (2005); Park & Son (2011); Sherry, Thomas, & Chui (2010); Tran (2011); Walsh (2010); Zhou & Todman (2009)
Intercultural adjustment	Andrade (2006); Briguglio (2000); Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Sawir (2005); Kiley (1998); Mehdizadeh & Scott (2005); Myles & Cheng (2003); Novera (2004); Sheridan (2011); Sherry, Thomas, & Chui (2010)

The degree of difficulty in the international NESB students' adjustment to the host culture varies from one to another. Major factors such as academic adjustment and English language proficiency can impact greatly on the students' engagement with their new learning environments and the successful completion of their studies. This implies that it is vital to provide the students with appropriate support and training to improve their academic achievement. Andrade (2006) asserted that an understanding of the students' adjustment issues should be considered as a primary concern and it is necessary to provide suitable programs and develop appropriate services for the students. She said, "Institutions cannot simply admit foreign students and expect them to adjust to life in a new country and educational system without appropriate support and programming" (p. 133). Therefore, there is a great need for developing contextually appropriate support and training schemes or systems for international NESB students.

The Study

Participants

Participants in the study were international NESB students who had completed an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program and then enrolled in PhD programs at an Australian university. A total of seven on-campus PhD students (6 male and 1 female; mean age 36, ranging from 31 to 44 years) completed a background information questionnaire and then participated in a group discussion and individual interviews. They consisted of four native speakers of Arabic, two native speakers of Indonesian and one native speaker of Chinese. The student profiles are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2
Participants' profile

Name*	Gender	Age	Marital status	Country of origin	First language	Faculty in which enrolled	Length of PhD enrollment at the time of interviews
Amel	Male	34	Married	Iraq	Arabic	Science	14 months
Darib	Male	35	Married	Libya	Arabic	Business	14 months
Hazim	Male	35	Married	Libya	Arabic	Business	22 months
Lara	Female	33	Married	Libya	Arabic	Engineering	14 months
Madli	Male	44	Married	Indonesia	Indonesian	Science	18 months
Nahar	Male	40	Married	Indonesia	Indonesian	Engineering	14 months
Chan	Male	31	Single	China	Chinese	Science	7 months

Note: * All names are pseudonyms.

Instruments

Data were collected from a background information questionnaire, a group discussion and semi-structured in-depth individual interviews. First, the questionnaire asked the participants to provide their demographic information shown in Table 2. Second, the group discussion was conducted to enable all participants as a focus group to voice their experiences they had as EAP students in the past and were having as PhD students at the time of the study. The group discussion was open-ended and responsive to what the participants said in the situation itself.

The role of the researchers was to guide and steer the discussion. Third, the interviews were conducted by a research assistant under the supervision of the researchers on a one-to-one basis to identify the difficulties and challenges faced by the students individually with the questions listed in Appendix A.

Procedures

All participants were asked to fill in a consent form and complete a background information questionnaire first. After that, a group discussion was conducted with them in a seminar room. Three weeks later, they were invited to individual interviews, which lasted about 38 minutes on average for each session. Both the group discussion and the interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed for analysis.

Results

Group discussion

All students were first asked a series of questions related to their previous experiences as an EAP student. Out of the seven students, six students indicated that they were satisfied with the EAP program because it was a good preparation for academic reading and writing for their PhD studies and helped them improve their academic skills. On the other hand, one student (Lara) stated that she had expected a lot more things including meetings with and support from teachers to successfully complete the EAP program. Another student (Hazim) added that he would have preferred the topics and activities to be related to his major to give him the opportunity to expand his vocabulary in his discipline area. Overall, five students indicated that the length of the program (10 weeks) was appropriate while two students commented that they would prefer to extend the EAP program.

The students had various difficulties at the beginning of their EAP program. Hazim said that they had difficulty speaking English with the teacher particularly when trying to express their needs and wants. He also commented that they found many other people who spoke the same first language so there was a feeling of limited opportunities to practice English with native speakers of English. Darib pointed out that students would meet more cultures to practice English with if they lived in a larger city. He also said that many Australian students do not want to do group work with Middle Eastern students. Other students generally supported this comment saying that the majority of Australian students do not want to mix with foreign students. Most students also experienced difficulty talking to other international students in the EAP program as they could not understand the other international students' English whereas two other students stated that it was easier to understand other international students than native speakers of English. There were also several suggestions for improving the EAP program. The suggestions included optional classes with Australian students and having different classes for different majors.

In a follow-up discussion on their experiences as a PhD student, all students indicated that they experienced a range of difficulties at the beginning of their respective PhD programs. For example, Amel's sponsoring government changed his PhD research area and, as a result, he had to spend time learning about a new research area. Darib admitted that he found it challenging to find a gap in the literature while Madli and Nahar responded that focusing their research topics was challenging. Also, Hazim stated that the faculty administration procedure

held up research progression while Lara confessed that the time taken to learn new software was lengthy. In addition, finding references was time consuming to Madli commenting that he changed his research topic due to the difficulties he faced in writing his dissertation proposal.

With regard to the relationship with their PhD supervisors, all students agreed that they had a good relationship with their supervisors but initially had difficulty with how to address their supervisors appropriately. They commented that in their home country they do not call their supervisor by his/her first name. Thus doing this in Australia was initially uncomfortable but most students said they were now accustomed to it. Students who experienced a great difficulty with how to address their supervisor developed ways to overcome. Nahar calls his supervisor "*Sir*" while Madli calls his supervisor "*Professor*". Lara also avoids addressing her supervisor by the supervisor's name and prefers to use an official title to address her supervisor. In the experiences of Darib and Hazim, Australian supervisors are friendly and are encouraging and supportive. All students indicated that they meet regularly with their supervisors and their supervisors are available whenever needed and respond to emails generally in a timely manner.

Darib and Hazim experienced difficulties talking to faculty staff. Hazim, in particular, commented that there was a lack of communication with faculty staff, which caused some delays in his research. However, most students commented that faculty staff responded to emails reasonably quickly. Amel and Hazim also said that they were aware of funding available from their faculties to support their research activities. However, they felt that in general funding was not sufficient enough to cover the costs. Another difficulty mentioned by Darib was the use of computer software. He commented on the lengthy time taken for the information and communication technology (ICT) services to get the software license needed in order to use for the analysis of his data.

Overall, the students were satisfied with their EAP programs. However, some students questioned the length of the EAP program and would prefer to spend more time on activities that develop their vocabulary in their discipline area in preparation for their PhD program. While most students were progressing well with their studies, they experienced a range of challenges at different points in their relative PhD program. The challenges included the selection of their research topics, the relationship with their supervisors, communication with their faculty staff members and ICT support.

Individual interviews

Out of the seven students, six students indicated that they chose Australia as their PhD study destination because Australian education institutions have a good reputation for quality whereas one student (Chan) indicated that he chose to study in Australia based on the recommendation of his friends who introduced him to the Australian university and encouraged him to come. Another reason for choosing Australia mentioned by three students (Amel, Darib and Hazim) was that Australia's national language is English. They appreciated the opportunity to improve their English language proficiency. Lara commented that an Australian qualification would significantly improve her employment opportunities in her home country. All seven students commented that there were large cultural differences between their home country and Australia. Darib and Hazim commented that differences in religion and language were the most prominent. Lara stated that the natural environment in Australia was more beautiful than her country, while Chan noted differences in population, transportation, infrastructure and leisure activities.

All students also commented that there were many differences in academic culture between their home county and Australia. Darib pointed out that technology was significantly different between his home country and Australia. He commented that lecturers in his home country used a blackboard and no multimedia support was given to students to further their knowledge outside the classroom. Amel, Chan and Hazim expressed the view that they were not required to do additional research in their home country. In Australia, however, they found that they were expected to do more independent work in and out of the classroom. They also indicated that there was no group work or classroom discussion in their home country, which differs from their experience in Australia. Despite of the differences, all students indicated that they had overall positive experiences in the EAP program. In their learning experiences, six students said that they learned many things such as how to write an essay in an academic manner and how to conduct group discussions or presentations. While Hazim, Lara and Nahar felt pressure doing the coursework in the EAP program, Chan and Madli felt that it was appropriate because they were in the program to learn.

At the beginning stage of their PhD programs, two students had difficulty finding a gap in the literature: "*The gap in the literature is not easy to explore directly ... it needs deep understanding and good literature review*" (Lara); "*Maybe the first year or the first semester it's difficult to find the gaps or how to review the research*" (Chan). Madli said that he had to learn how to communicate with his supervisor in a culturally appropriate manner, realizing that it was necessary to make appointments to see his supervisor rather than arrive at his office unannounced. Darib had difficulty comprehending readings and it took him 4-7 days to comprehend one article: "*I feel I am better than before and when I have read some papers or articles or something I spend around 4, 5 or 7 days for one article, so it is very long time*" (Darib). On the other hand, Amel had significant difficulty as a result of his government changing his research area.

During their PhD study, all students have experienced a range of difficulties. Amel and Darib commented that they had difficulty learning software required to analyse their data. Madli confessed that he had difficulty conducting experiments due to his lack of experience in the protocols and procedures needed for the experiments: "*I found the protocols on the Internet but I have no experience to do that ... fortunately my supervisor asked someone who just finished his PhD to help me to do in the laboratory and he taught me how to do my experiment and we did and now I work independently*" (Madli). Nahar had difficulty obtaining the license needed to conduct experiments and meeting his supervisor and explaining his topic: "*My experience ... when I first met my supervisor, the difficulties I found was how to explain my topic to my supervisor and without any notes ... it was difficult*" (Nahar). Four students (Chan, Lara, Madli and Nahar) said that they experienced difficulties with academic writing, particularly when preparing papers. All seven students commented that they felt their academic writing skills were still developing and their skills have improved as a result of support from their supervisors. In line with this, four students (Amel, Chan, Hazim and Lara) recommended that future international students should improve their English before arriving in Australia.

Regarding factors affecting their PhD study, Amel, Madli and Lara pointed out that critical thinking was an important skill for success in Australian universities. In relation to the relationship with supervisors, those three students also said that problems can occur between PhD students and their supervisors when they have miscommunication or differences of opinion regarding the research direction, while Darib and Hazim commented that problems

can also occur when overseas born supervisors focus overly on the students' English language skills. In addition, all students made comments on their supervisors. For example, "*It is formal but he is very helpful, yeah, I can come to ask him at any time … and he always explains for me and helps me and even refers to some resources to read*" (Amel); "*I found a good relationship with my supervisor … she is very, she is very useful … and motivates me to finish my proposal quickly*" (Hazim). Additional factors mentioned by the students include financial support (Madli and Lara) and family matters (Lara and Nahar).

Table 3 shows the results of the students' ranking of the importance of the fifteen factors mentioned earlier. Overall, motivation to study was considered the most important factor, followed by English language proficiency, the relationship with supervisors and critical thinking. This particular group of students also indicated the importance of other personal and institutional factors in the following order: family matters, thesis writing, technology use and financial support. Interestingly, social and cultural factors such as social life, the understanding of academic culture and intercultural adjustment were considered less important than other factors in the list.

Table 3
Students' ranking of the importance of factors affecting their PhD study

Respondents / Factors	Amel	Nahar	Darib	Hazim	Lara	Madli	Chan	Average points	Overall rank
Motivation to study	1	1	11	3	3	4	10	4.7	1
English language proficiency	3	7	1	6	10	8	2	5.3	2
Relationship with supervisors	4	10	4	4	6	1	8	5.3	2
Critical thinking	6	5	8	11	4	2	3	5.6	4
Family matters	12	4	2	2	2	13	6	5.9	5
Thesis writing	9	8	5	8	11	6	1	6.9	6
Financial support	15	3	15	1	1	11	7	7.6	7
Use of technology	2	13	13	9	5	7	4	7.6	7
Research support from the university	11	9	3	15	7	5	9	8.4	9
Communication skills	8	6	7	10	13	3	13	8.6	10
Future plan	7	2	14	12	9	14	5	9.0	11
Learning styles	13	11	6	7	8	10	14	9.9	12
Social life	5	14	12	5	15	15	11	11.0	13
Understanding of academic culture	10	12	9	14	12	9	12	11.1	14
Intercultural adjustment	14	15	10	13	14	12	15	13.3	15

Note: 1 = the most important; 15 = the least important.

Discussion and Conclusion

The international NESB PhD students in the study have shown interesting characteristics concerning their engagement with the Australian higher education environment. They seemed to be sensitive about the host culture and community and were able to recognize the differences in academic culture between their own country and Australia. This is similar to the findings of previous studies such as Park and Son (2011), Sherry, Thomas and Chui (2010) and Walsh (2010). The students indicated that they have had difficulties adjusting to the Australian academic context and have been developing their academic English writing skills. It was also found that moving from teacher-centred learning to student-centred learning seems to constitute a burden for the students to adapt as a critical learning process. The EAP program they completed as a bridging program turned out to be a valuable program that provided knowledge about Australian academic styles and learning approaches (cf. Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). The most difficult and important academic features they needed to develop were how to contribute and participate in group discussions (see Kim, 2006, for practical suggestions) and how to write English in an academic way (see Larcombe, McCosker, & O'Loughlin, 2007, for practical suggestions).

With regard to the difficulties they face during their PhD program, it was found that reading and writing skills should be better taken into account for the successful completion of their PhD studies. They indicated that the level of their academic writing is not good enough, but they firmly believed that they are improving gradually. All students seemed satisfied with their current supervisors. The main reasons for misunderstandings and problems that might arise between students and supervisors are primarily seen to be due to the lack of English language proficiency, which was reported as a source of conflict in Adrian-Taylor, Noels and Tischler (2007). It appears that the students had not had sufficient experience in accommodating listening and speaking skills in English in their home countries. This specific aspect supports the view that international PhD students should strengthen their spoken communication skills as well as written communication skills to prevent them from having misunderstandings with their supervisors. The results of the study also suggest that EAP programs should provide well-designed learning and teaching materials closely related to major disciplines in which students will work on through their degree programs. While studying in EAP programs, it must be necessary for the students to get to know more and better about the Australian academic culture.

Due to the small number of participants in the study, the results of the study cannot be generalized. However, they offer some implications for the improvement of international NESB PhD students' experiences at Australian universities. For the effective supervision of international NESB PhD students, first, academic supervisors need to understand that language problems are not the only factor affecting their students' studies and those various factors identified in this study should be carefully considered to enhance the students' engagement with PhD programs. The most prominent findings connected to the factors affecting the students' PhD study indicate that they are more concerned about motivation to study, English language proficiency and relationships with their supervisors and less concerned about cross-cultural issues. Also, critical thinking and family matters seem to be relatively important factors influencing their current journey in a new learning environment. This would be another interesting aspect that could be further investigated to deepen our knowledge about why and how those factors interact and to better specify the phenomena appearing from international PhD students. Second, another recommendation made by the

study is that motivation is a key to success and, consequently, international NESB PhD students need constant encouragement and guidance to have positive attitudes toward their study. Third, international NESB PhD students are recommended to develop their English language proficiency in advance since English language preparation can be regarded as one of the most significant factors affecting their higher degree study. Before coming to Australia, they should be ready to meet the minimum requirements in dealing with the tasks for completing their PhD without having language problems, including miscommunications with their supervisors. In line with this, postgraduate preparation programs need to play an important role to help the students improve their English skills. For international PhD students, finally, conducting PhD research in a new culture is not an easily feasible task. Seemingly, the difficulties and challenges they encounter would be different individually. More research should be conducted to improve our understanding of international NESB students' experiences in undertaking their PhD research in a new academic environment and offer the students a better quality of international education experience and support for their academic success.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What were the main reasons for coming to Australia and choosing an Australian university for your PhD study?
2. Would you briefly describe your personal experiences and feelings about cultural and social differences between your home country and Australia?
3. What do you think the most different aspect of academic culture you have found in Australia is in comparison with the academic culture you experienced in your home country?
4. What were you able to learn from the EAP program at this university?
5. Did you have any difficulties when you were in the EAP program? If yes, what were they? If no, why do you think you did not have them?
6. What suggestions do you have for improving the EAP program?
7. Were there any challenges in the beginning of your PhD study at this university? If yes, what were they? If no, why do you think you did not have them?
8. Do you currently have any difficulties in doing your PhD study? If yes, what are they? If no, why do you think you do not have them?
9. Do you think that you are competent in academic English writing and thesis writing? Why do you think so?
10. What do you think about your PhD supervisor's style of supervision and communication?
11. What do you think the main reasons for misunderstandings and problems that might arise between PhD students and supervisors are?
12. (1) Would you rank the following factors affecting your PhD study, in order of importance to you: English language proficiency, learning styles, communication skills, critical thinking, motivation to study, understanding of academic culture, intercultural adjustment, relationship with supervisors, thesis writing, use of technology, research support from the university, social life and future plan?
(2) Would you also tell me if there are any other factors you think important to the completion of your PhD degree?
13. What would you recommend new international PhD students to improve their study experience at an Australian university?