

A study of ongoing programmes offered to develop intercultural awareness and communication

(University of Melbourne and University of Minnesota)

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Objective of the visits

Orientation and Welcome programmes are now firmly embedded in good practice for most UK institutions, but we do not necessarily offer continued support in helping students adjust both from a cultural perspective and in a new academic environment. A recent report from the International Student Barometer suggests that this is potentially one area where we are behind our competitors in the support we offer. The purpose of the visits was to look at the support programmes offered to help students adapt and adjust to a new environment in order to make the most out of their time at university.

Destination of the visits

University of Minnesota, February 2008

The University of Minnesota is one of the largest and most prestigious universities in the USA, ranked sixth among the top public research universities. The university has an international population of more than 4,500 students and scholars from 127 countries. The University's goal is for 50% of its students to have a learning experience abroad before they graduate.

My visit was hosted by International Student and Scholar Services (ISSS). ISSS is part of the Office of International Programmes which also includes the Learning Abroad Centre (for outgoing study abroad programmes only), the Centre for Advanced Research in Language Acquisition (CARLA) and the China Centre.

University of Melbourne, March 2008

The University of Melbourne is firmly established as a leading teaching and research university: ranked number 27 in the world by the Times Higher

Education Supplement and number 79 in the Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranking. Melbourne remains one of Australia's largest universities, both in terms of research income and expenditure. International student numbers have steadily increased with numbers exceeding 10,000 (around 25% of the student population) from more than 100 different countries.

My visit was hosted by Academic Enrichment Services (AES). AES is part of the Office of the Provost and includes the Director's Office, (which is responsible for overseeing programmes to enhance the 'Melbourne Experience'), International Student Services and Transition and Orientation as well as other support services.

Summary of outcomes

Support programmes encouraging students to engage with the University, their studies, fellow students and staff are clearly successful. In taking a proactive approach to support, at an early stage, we can minimise feelings of disorientation and isolation, potentially reducing the need for additional support and the demand on other services.

Such programmes enable students to adapt and adjust more quickly and maximise their international study experience. These programmes add value to students' time and studies abroad, encouraging it to be seen as a complete, life-changing, life-enhancing experience.

As we have seen in the UK, international students often do not see the importance or relevance of free-standing workshops on cultural awareness, and attendance is often poor. A key factor in the success of the

programmes at both Minnesota and Melbourne is that attendance is either compulsory or sessions are part of the academic timetable; this gives weight to the programmes and ensures maximum participation.

The use of online packages maximises participation and encourages students to engage with the university before they arrive. Use of real-life scenarios enables institutions to present information about a wide range of support services in a proactive, user-friendly format before difficulties arise.

Main findings

Maximising Study Abroad Programme (Minnesota)

This a compulsory one-credit module taken by all students going out on exchange/study abroad programmes. Research carried out by CARLA indicated that:

'...students intending to study abroad receive limited if any preparation to be language and culture learners/users beyond how they would normally learn in a classroom setting. ...Clearly, there is a compelling need to better prepare this large group of learners prior to their departure, so that the learners themselves and their sending institutions can fully realize the learning benefits of the sojourn experience' (Paige and Kappler, 1999).

In 1999 CARLA received funding to develop a set of interactive user-friendly materials to help students get the most out of their study abroad experience. Two guides were produced: *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Students' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use* and *Maximizing Study Abroad: A Program Coordinators' Guide to Strategies for Language and Culture Learning and Use*.

This programme was piloted in 2005/06 and launched for all study abroad students in autumn 2006. The aim is to help students adjust to a new culture by reflecting on their own experiences, raising cultural awareness and helping them to understand their own cultural values and perspectives. It provides strategies to recognise and understand cultural differences in order to build confidence in interacting with their host culture. The same structure is reflected in the section on Language Learning Strategies.

The module is delivered in two sections: the first part is taken one month before students leave Minnesota; the second is taken while the students are 'in country' and concludes with preparations for returning home.

I looked at the Culture Learning sections in more detail. The pre-departure section of the module gives a basic understanding of what is meant by culture and uses the iceberg model to highlight the seen and unseen aspects of culture. The in-country section gives some clear strategies for coping in a new culture, including understanding culture shock (the 'W' curve) and interpreting different styles of communication. Students are given examples of different communication styles and asked to comment/reflect on these in relation to their experiences abroad. The students' course book makes use of many examples from students' experiences and real-life scenarios to ensure the exercises are meaningful. The section concludes with preparations for returning home and reverse culture shock.

The module is delivered online using small interactive email study groups. It is made as relevant as possible to the students' own experiences, so they can interpret what they are learning as it happens and use it in real-life situations. Facilitators for the study groups are either members of staff or postgraduate students undertaking internships as part of their studies.

As it is a credit-bearing module it does need academic approval and some theoretical content. If it were not credit bearing it would not need to be so academically challenging.

The module is an excellent way of getting students to engage with the whole study abroad experience and to see it not just in terms of a visit to a particular country but as a complete learning experience which can have wide-ranging benefits for personal and

professional development.

Much of the information used in this module is relevant for international students arriving in the UK, to raise cultural awareness and understanding of how learning and behaviour can be influenced by an individual's culture. It encourages students to engage with their studies in a new environment and provides support and strategies for them to cope.

We hope to incorporate some of the ideas for activities and exercises into our online support package and ultimately a series of workshops offered during the first term to help newly arrived international students adapt and adjust to their new environment.

In addition we hope to use the model as a framework to develop a programme for both incoming and outgoing students between our overseas campuses and UK campuses. The aim is to eventually expand the programme to provide sessions for all exchange/study abroad students.

Online orientation programme (Minnesota)

Attendance at orientation is compulsory; students are not able to complete their registration with the university until they have completed an orientation programme. This is in part linked to immigration regulations and the requirement for the university to report/confirm students' enrolment. If students are not able to attend a full orientation programme they can complete an online, interactive session. This enables students to receive some basic information about the support services and facilities offered by the university and to understand their responsibilities regarding their visas. It also allows the university to comply with reporting requirements. The programme is available on the University's website at www.iss.umn.edu/new/ISOPBreeze/index.htm.

Having the option of an online orientation programme is an excellent way of providing basic information for students who are unable to attend events in person, such as students who arrive late or at different times in the year. Completion of such programmes could potentially be a very useful mechanism for UK institutions to ensure students have understood their rights and responsibilities with regard to their visas and immigration conditions in light of the reporting requirements soon to be in place here.

Transition programmes (Melbourne)

These are specifically designed to support all new undergraduate students as they adapt and adjust to university life. They were introduced as a direct response to the need to support an increasingly diverse student body, including international students and those from a non-traditional background. The programme was piloted in 2000 with the Faculty of Science. Since then other faculties and departments have developed their own programmes to suit the needs of their courses and their students. Transition programmes are now seen as established institutional practice. They are viewed as a resource provided by the university to help deans meet their targets in terms of retention. Each faculty has a specific budget for transition programmes.

From research carried out at Centre for the Study of Higher Education at Melbourne the transition team identified four major adjustments that new students need to make in order to succeed in their studies:

1. **Academic adjustment:** to more independent and demanding learning and assessment structures
2. **Geographic adjustment:** to a new larger campus, new travel and accommodation arrangements
3. **Administrative adjustment:** being responsible for their own administration arrangements in terms of enrolment, progress, identifying their own needs and seeking suitable assistance.
4. **Personal adjustment:** to issues which can include feelings of isolation, loss of support networks and the need to make new friends, the need to be more financially independent and the responsibility for managing their own study and other commitments.

The transition programmes were initiated to respond to these needs. The aims of the programmes are for students to meet fellow students and members of staff (both admin and teaching staff) in their faculty; to raise awareness of the new skills needed for studying at university and to introduce the support services available.

The programmes are promoted and supported by the Transition team within AES but are delivered by individual faculties. The content and format of the programmes vary but

the general principle is the same. The Transition team provides a resource kit which provides guidelines and strategies for those implementing the programme.

Programmes are not credit bearing. A typical programme consists of two or three one-hour seminars with an emphasis on student participation. In larger faculties these sessions are repeated enough times so the maximum number of students attending is not more than 100. From these sessions study groups are formed and supported throughout the remainder of the semester. Attendance at these sessions is maximised by having them specifically timetabled into the first weeks of a student's programme. The first seminars include senior/experienced members of staff from the faculty to add weight to the importance of the programme. Attendance is recorded at both the seminars and study groups.

As the focus is more on study skills and academic support, these programmes benefit from being delivered by academic staff so they can be tailored to suit the needs of different departments. Study groups are facilitated by current students, often postgraduates. They are not expected to be tutors or advisers, but to 'co-ordinate' the groups.

Alongside the Transition programmes, faculties are encouraged to run academic skills seminars which cover topics such as time management, essay writing, report writing, note taking etc.

Although clearly provided for all students at Melbourne the content and structure of the programmes is extremely relevant for support programmes provided for international students in the UK.

At the same time awareness of the need to support all students making the move to higher education is increasing in the UK. The STAR project, funded by HEFCE, is undertaking research and gathering resources in this area. In the UK, University College London (UCL) has initiated transition programmes based upon the Melbourne model as part of their Access Agreement. Further information can be found at <www.ucl.ac.uk/transition>.

To attempt to change institutional policy or for one small team to deliver transition programmes for all schools or departments is too big a task. At UCL the process started with an audit of current provision within departments and schools, to identify examples of good practice happening already. The next step was a pilot programme with a department already undertaking

similar activities with the expectation that other departments will want to take part as the programme is shown to be beneficial.

'AIRport': the Academic Interactive Resources portal (Melbourne)

This package provides a range of online materials to develop and support academic/study skills. Although it is aimed at undergraduate students any student can access the site. Gate 1 is specifically for students to access before they arrive at the University and again is aimed at helping transition. The activities are interactive, with suggested answers/outcomes. Much use is made of 'real-life' situations and scenarios to provide information in a user-friendly, accessible format.

The 'AIRport' team stressed the need for as many students as possible to be able to access the site so it is available to watch, to listen to, or to read. They also stressed the importance of using real photographs/videos clips as this can convey so much general information that is often overlooked. Gate 1 is available on the University website at <<https://airport.unimelb.edu.au/gate1/>>.

Gate 2 provides short courses designed to assist all undergraduate students with academic writing. There is a self-access essay writing course and a four-week academic writing course where students are linked to tutors in the Language and Learning Services Unit. This part of the site is only available to students at Melbourne.

Gate 3 has faculty specific resources. A new resource called the 'International Terminal' specifically for international students is currently being produced.

AIRport has been very successful. Research carried out by the AIRport team focussing on science students showed that those who had completed the faculty-specific exercises performed better in their exams.

Analysis of students accessing AIRport showed a growing number of postgraduate students using the programme (particularly the short course sections) even though it was intended for first year undergraduates. This led to the development of a new package called 'CourseWorks' covering study skills/ academic support specifically for postgraduate students. This went 'live' in February 2007, see <www.courseworks.unimelb.edu.au/>

This is an excellent resource for all students. At Nottingham we are already working on an online package to provide information and advice for students as they prepare to come

to Nottingham. A second project also underway is looking at academic support for all students in developing the skills needed for studying at university.

The information gained from both the 'Maximising Study Abroad' module and 'AIRport' will be invaluable in developing this.

General conclusions

Transition support is institutionalised practice in most universities in the USA and Australia. Academic programmes are successful because of this. They are seen as an integral part of the university's teaching and learning strategy, within the academic framework and supported by academic staff. Programmes cover both aspects of adapting to a new lifestyle within a new culture alongside study skills and academic support.

Presenting workshops in this way overcomes the problem of participation but requires support and co-operation from academic and administrative staff.

Both Minnesota and Melbourne offer leadership and volunteering programmes for international students. These enable students to develop personal leadership skills, build confidence in intercultural communications and develop a sense of global citizenship.

At Nottingham we should make more use of current students as facilitators. These are an under-used resource. International students and study abroad students are often keen to 'give something back' to the institution and to work to help fellow students. It also helps to build a sense of global community and give meaning to their international experience.