

Staying the Course:
the importance of social and
structural networks for NESB students achieving
positive outcomes in a regional campus

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This research aimed to investigate ways of identifying barriers and pathways to university for NESB students studying at a regional university campus. The focus of the study was to identify structural and social barriers, and strategies that could address these, for this cohort of students. The following methods were used for gathering data: qualitative data from focus groups and an online Language Experience Survey, and quantitative data from the Student Equity Report, La Trobe University (LTU, 2008) on NESB equity group access, participation and success. The qualitative data was collected from NESB students, academic and support staff and external agencies working with migrants. The data from the focus groups and online survey were analysed to capture the student experience, to record support mechanisms already used by staff and students and identify additional study and social support that could be initiated. This is the first time that the university has captured a snapshot of the regional university NESB student experience. It is suggested that further research be conducted to explore regional NESB student experience at other regional campuses of La Trobe.

The literature identifies that NESB students need the benefit of both structural and social support and our study focused on these two themes. Structural support includes explicit and implicit understanding of language issues, the dynamics of group-work and cultural understandings. Social support includes establishing networks within and outside the university. All students have particular needs but NESB students have specific needs such as language use and becoming familiar with cultural systems and processes. Our findings confirm that these two aspects of the university experience are important especially for NESB students who may not have the knowledge of the systems required for successful study. Social support may be a crucial factor in helping students achieve their academic goals.

A final comment about support is that new NESB students may not have co-cultural support in the regional area, but the study suggests that there are opportunities for students to develop satisfying regional connections, which assists language development.

It has become apparent through this research that at our campus we have a small cohort of refugee students which, based on the current refugee intake to our region and the Department of Immigration and Citizenship policy, is likely to grow. Therefore further strategies, including orientation, beginner computer classes, provision of information and clarifying the role of the Refugee Contact Person, are required.

The findings indicate that NESB students' English language skills can be enhanced by staff sensitivity and by social activities, networks and buddy systems. It would be beneficial if social activities and the development of networks could commence at least at the start of the academic year, possibly even before, when new students are feeling most uncertain about the new university environment and its systems.

Other findings indicate that some learning and teaching strategies already in place at the university are proving to be beneficial for NESB students. These effective strategies could be more systematically promulgated and adopted. Academic fostering of such learning strategies as group-work and discussion sessions should be emphasized, and simple strategies put in place, such as advanced copies of lecture-notes and modeling of formats and genre. The need for systematic support to familiarize NESB students with technologies such as e-learning was also highlighted, as was the need to be aware that students may need to be shown something more than once before they are proficient or internalize all the concepts of technology they are not familiar with. These strategies would benefit all students at the university.

Currently there is recognition of the importance of educating global citizens, including exploring cultural difference as a point of value. On a regional campus all students can benefit from the international flavour NESB students add, as they do not have as much opportunity to mix with people of culturally diverse backgrounds as on metropolitan campuses.

The findings and recommendations point to the conclusion that social and structural scaffolding for NESB students should be embedded in curriculum where appropriate and systematically included in university processes starting before the university experience, continuing through it, and extending from it.

INTRODUCTION

This is an exploratory research project aiming to investigate ways of identifying barriers and pathways to university and of supporting NESB students studying at the regional campus of La Trobe: Albury-Wodonga. These students were enrolling at a regional campus in a geographical area where the numbers of new migrants are low and the likelihood of students being able to link with co-cultural networks in the local community is correspondingly low. The research aimed to explore the student experience of being at university; this is the first time the university has taken a snapshot of regional university NESB students' experience. This project was funded by a Higher Education Equity Support Program (HEESP) grant and focused on the experience of students with Non English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB). The reason this NESB group was identified for focus is that they are an equity category as defined by Department of Education, Science and Technology (DEST) that includes either Australian citizens or permanent residents who speak a language other than English at home *and* who have been in the country for less than 10 years. DEST recognises that students in these groups have been shown to experience significant disadvantage in higher education. The NESB equity category does not include international students; but their issues are often similar to NESB students. However, the experiences of international students with English as a second language have been included in this research.

The Equity figures for Albury-Wodonga campus, 2002 – 2008, for the cohort of NESB students shows that the levels of commencing students enrolling at the campus was well under both the target and the state average over the 5 year period. The patterns of retention and success for these students showed a high degree of variation over the five year period, but in 2006 the students at Albury-Wodonga campus had a higher level of retention than other students, and slightly higher than for this group across the University. The retention level was greater than the state average, and slightly above the target. Success levels for NESB students at Albury-Wodonga improved significantly in 2005 and 2006 but were still less than other students, and less than the state average and the target.

The Student Equity Report (La Trobe University 2008) makes the suggestion that these figures indicate a need to:

- investigate the potential NESB student population in the Albury Wodonga catchment area, and determine whether there are any barriers to university entry for this group of students
- consider additional study support initiatives for this group of students.

The research has found that the NESB student cohort at Albury-Wodonga is certainly not heterogeneous, and the range of experience students have prior to commencement and pathways they take to university are highly individual. There has been a growth of refugees in the student cohort, and there is a likelihood that more refugee students will enrol in the future.

The results of this research and information gained about barriers and support needs, will be presented to pertinent University bodies including Campus Academic Development Committee, Albury-Wodonga, with the aim of developing pathways and support mechanisms for NESB students at this campus of the university.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research in applied linguistics over the last several decades has identified many factors that affect the university experience of NESB students (for example, McKay, 1984; Scollon & Wong Scollon, 1995; Tollefson, 1995), but there remains a common assumption among some academic staff that NESB students have only one main problem that may set them apart from native speakers: their standard of English. There is still a general lack of understanding of the effects of culture, separation from family and isolation on the physical and emotional adjustment of this student cohort (Bartlett & Chanock, 2003; Ping & Suen, 1998). There is a need, therefore, for university support structures to identify and overtly reflect the importance of both structural *and* social networks for ESL undergraduates and postgraduates to achieve positive outcomes. Structural support includes access to English as a second language (ESL) programmes and specialists, where attention is paid to the processes involved in reading and writing, analysing and synthesising. It also includes thoughtful presentation of material by lecturers, such as printed notes, clear definitions of specialised terminology, and appropriate study and reading strategies, even though students may appear to have competent English skills (Bartlett & Chanock, 2003). Social support includes networks and groups where NESB students have a sense of belonging, either for study or social purposes.

Structural support

Successful communication is at the heart of education, where teachers guide students to become competent learners. The goal is for *all* learners in the group to become competent, and this involves some effort in intercultural communication, including across genders, age, socio-economic and ESL backgrounds. It involves a sensitivity to “differing perceptions, attitudes and interpretation” (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 2). Language is ambiguous by nature, even for native speakers, and meanings are inferred through cultural orientations. Successful communication, therefore, depends on shared assumptions and knowledge about the world (Scollon & Wong Scollon, 1995). If both students and staff value intercultural communication, their communication strategies are more likely to lead to positive outcomes.

Language issues are often cited by both teaching staff and students as being a major barrier to learning, and many studies have been undertaken to identify and target this area. NESB students may have gaps in their linguistic repertoire, for example, that cause them to modify their communication strategies, resulting in a heightened awareness of language difficulties and a corresponding loss of confidence. Learner-centred teaching, together with ESL support, may help to alleviate some of the anxiety and frustration of both teachers and NESB students alike. Bretag, Horrocks and Smith (2002, p. 59) outline specific language strategies for teachers that may help NESB students to develop English language competence, such as providing explicit expectations about assessments, facilitating students’ access to information in the texts and providing assistance with discipline-specific vocabulary. Hellmundt, Rifkin and Fox (1998) suggest that teachers provide opportunities for NESB students to speak as an “expert” about their culture or experiences, and allow them plenty of time to answer questions. Beasley and Pearson (1999) found that students who were exposed to learning strategies that emphasise language use, such as experiential activities, optional support tutorials, and multiple forms of assessment, experienced a marked improvement in their grades.

A strategy that appears to have mixed success is the use of heterogeneous group work. There is some evidence that Australian and international tertiary students, when given the choice, tend not to mix in group work (Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000), but when they are encouraged to do so the results are positive. However, these opportunities are more likely to happen if they are deliberately “engineered as part of formal study” (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 9). Parks and Raymond (2004) note that international students tend to be relegated to subordinate roles within groups. Briguglio (2006, pp. 6-7), however, found that a simulated multinational team in a tertiary business studies class had the effect of sensitising all the participants to the role of culture in collaborative communication. The learning experience was carefully structured to provide support, rather than just arbitrarily grouping people to cooperatively solve a problem, and participating students emphasised the importance of listening skills, patience and understanding. Group work in this context has the ability to enhance interpersonal communication through team interactions, and encourages “the opportunity to explore cultural and linguistic differences and different expectations and interpretations of group work” (Briguglio, p. 7). There is also the opportunity for any misunderstandings that might arise to be explored in a non-threatening way. Da Vita (2002) found that diverse perspectives help to improve the overall marks for the groups.

It is clear from the literature that NESB students need a range of support strategies.

Literacy needs, for example, range from acquiring fluency in reading and writing in various genres, to specialist vocabulary building and cultural understanding. Many tertiary educators feel challenged by NESB students and may not consider they are qualified to support students' language and cultural needs. They may become frustrated by grammatical mistakes or inappropriate styles of writing, and having to spend extra time correcting them (Pantelides, 1999). This has the potential to cause ambivalence about the influence of internationalisation on higher education, as the university aims for internationalisation to achieve interaction and mutual understanding between and within cultures through its teaching, research and service functions (Yang, 2002), and the rise of globalisation in business and commerce has highlighted successful communication as critical (Phatak, Bhagat, & Kashlak, 2005). Teaching staff are at the interface of these ideologies, and may experience some dissonance about their roles and responsibilities. Ballard and Clanchy (1997, p. 2) found that lecturers were often frustrated by perceived "weaknesses" and "poor English" in students and "the extra demands that fall upon them as teachers".

Cultural knowledge and assumptions are important aspects of all teacher-student interactions. When teachers and students share the same first language these aspects are often assumed to be unproblematic, although issues pertaining to, for example, gender and socio-economic factors, can still be present. With NESB students, however, cultural knowledge and assumptions by both teachers and learners may be more likely to lead to miscommunication (Wang & Le, 2006). In an increasingly globalised world, there are expectations placed upon all tertiary graduates to be successful communicators in their field of study, and this includes intercultural sensitivity. According to Gerber and William (2002, p. 175) they should be able to communicate interculturally, as "cultural differences are indeed significant, especially in areas of dialogue and public participation". Effective intercultural communication, therefore, requires successful interaction through a shared set of patterns among all the participants.

At the tertiary level, there is a general lack of knowledge and skills for effective intercultural awareness and understanding, which should be acknowledged as pertaining to all participants, not just the NESB students (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 2). The intention of communication across cultures is "to create shared meanings" rather than "to create dissimilar interpretations and expectations about what are regarded as competent behaviours" (Lustig & Koester, 1993, p. 58). To successfully interact, *all* participants require communicative competence which include "cognitive, affective and behavioural components" (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 3), which are able to transcend the psychological parameters of culture and are thus open to growth (Gudykunst, 1994). Globalisation in business and enterprise, and the marketing of education to international students, do not seem to have incorporated a transformation of teaching and learning to develop "a culturally literate, interculturally capable society in Australia" (Trevaskes, Eisenchlas, & Liddicoat, 2003, p. 10). Intercultural communication, therefore, needs to be developed across learning and teaching with all participants, and the curriculum itself needs to be internationalised, at a deep level, as a 21st century skill (Briguglio, 2006).

The teacher's pedagogical practices are an important component of successful learning, and it is the teacher who must look critically at whether his/her strategies are perceived to be inclusive for all participants. Teaching critically is to work with students in their struggles over language, knowledge and culture. Pennycook (1994) argues that critical pedagogy is based on "a desire for social change" (p. 297) that mutually benefits both education and society, and considers that teachers are not just concerned about knowledge and truth, but also about ethics and "the need to struggle against inequality and justice" (p. 298). Thus, critical pedagogy works towards transformation by creating new forms of knowledge and curriculum through student culture and knowledge. Central to this postmodern view is the notion of student voice within language, education, change and inequality. Wang and Le (2006, p. 8) consider that successful intercultural interactions "must be based on understanding of equity, acknowledging differences in values and beliefs among cultures, and viewing people from their cultural perspectives". Academic English in an internationalised institution may need to take account of these foci, and recognise that cultural differences within the classroom include age, ethnicity, gender, class and other power systems together with ESL and English as an International Language (EIL) issues. As a world language, English is shared and represented by native speakers and non-native speakers alike and, according to Searle, "as teachers, we seek to grasp that same language and give it a new context, to decolonise its words, to demystify its meaning ...to make it truly *common*" (Searle, 1983, p. 68).

Social support

Social aspects of university life can be very important for student well-being and sense of belonging, and this support may be a crucial factor in helping students to achieve their academic goals. NESB and international students may initially feel lonely or vulnerable which can impact on their studies, and universities often work hard to provide adequate and systematic pastoral and academic support. This may take the form of induction processes, or providing relevant information, but these rarely include support systems that will cover every health or pastoral need for NESB and international students. These students face many challenges: adjustment to new ways of doing things; isolation from family, friends, familiar culture and environment; anxiety about workloads, study and 'fitting in'; and coping with the stress and trauma of academic and social life. There is a perception that NESB students are similar in their physical and emotional circumstances, but they should not be viewed or treated as a homogeneous group.

There are many factors that influence how NESB, and international, students will adjust to university life and overcome the sense of isolation from family and familiar culture. Suen (1998, p. 43) found that "loneliness due to family separation" was a recurring theme from interviewees, who "expressed feelings of depression, loneliness and helplessness", especially during their first few months at university, and felt that this affected their studies. Novera (2004) suggests that international students can achieve success if they are able to quickly adjust to both the demands of academic work and the social and cultural environment. Social activities and friendships with other students may help to relieve stress and aid cultural adjustment, and assimilation can be made easier by participation in extracurricular activities (Kauffmann, Martin, & Weaver, 1992). Universities may offer emotional support in the form of networks and 'buddy' systems, where NESB students may find out about academic and social expectations, available services, and feel less isolated (O'Donoghue, 1996). Other students of the same nationality can also be a source of emotional support. In some universities, this cohort can be small enough or distinct enough to be easily identified, while in others it is large and culturally diverse (Bartlett & Chanock, 2003, p. 11), but whatever the constraints or pressures of university life, its potential for social interaction can help students feel less isolated and give them a sense of belonging.

Major (2005, p. 86) highlights the "interpersonal and sociocultural challenges" in a study of Asian students in American universities, and she categorises three "dimensions of adjustment" for these students in their intrapersonal, socio-cultural and academic progress: initial expectations, dissonance and adjustment (p. 87). The results of this research show that Asian students' expectations were to remain mostly outside of the host culture as observers with no personal involvement, which the researcher calls "cultural and educational tourism". When they found this to be untenable, they retreated to "the safety net of the compatriot support system" (p. 88). In the dissonance stage, the students were in "emotional turmoil" and felt psychologically estranged and inadequate. Some considered leaving, but the "motivation and goal-setting (that) had brought some of them overseas in the first place" helped them to eventually adjust (pp. 88-89). Major's findings were that co-national support and networking help many NESB students to slowly adjust to higher education, and that these factors are far more important for success at university than linguistic proficiency (Major, 2005, p. 91). This suggests that support services which include cultural mediation and cross-cultural awareness among academic staff may be beneficial for NESB students.

Anxiety about English skills and different learning environments can bring about a lack of social confidence (Ballard & Clanchy, 1997), but universities need to work with NESB, and international, students to bridge the cultural divide and facilitate their social, cultural and academic integration. This strategy will have the added effect of fostering the 21st century skills of global understanding, acceptance of diversity and development of *all* students. There is some evidence that email usage and e-discourse is breaking down the barriers to social interaction among NESB students and native speakers of English, and closing the gap between NESB students and teachers (Kress, 1997). E-discourse has the ability to create social change because it can include previously marginalised groups and serve some of the "relational needs" of students (Hartman, Lewis, & Powell, 2002, p. 24). This new type of relationship is referred to as "postmodern – uncommitted intimacy" by Moran and Hawisher (1997, p. 90). Some of its benefits include the loss of accent in student voice, no need to negotiate turn taking, and unlimited time to construct sentences. Virtual space can accommodate the voices of the unrepresented in a cultural milieu where participants are free to construct themselves in neutral territory (Ma, 2000). Perceived disadvantages may be that the loss of extra-linguistic cues, such as facial expressions and gestures, may potentially create a breakdown in communication, and teachers are no longer able to maintain a certain distance from their students.

E-discourse can be considered a creative solution that may encourage mixing among native speakers and NESB students, both through the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities, which has the potential

to encourage closer relationships among the participants through cross-cultural learning and friendships (Volet & Ang, 1998). NESB students may prefer using email because they consider it to be less confronting than face to face interaction (Bloch, 2002), and they can compose in their own time. However, Stockwell (2004) notes that non-native speakers may be unaware of communication breakdown and, in these instances, might not have strategies to deal with the situation.

Conclusion

Internationalisation of the higher education sector has been steadily growing for the last few decades (AVCC, 2005) and this, together with globalisation and Australian migration policy over many years has changed the profile of Australian universities. The major difficulties experienced by NESB, and international, students can be categorised as linguistic and cultural adjustment, and these factors impact on educational performance (Borland & Pearce, 2002). One major factor in successful adjustment seems to be the amount of interaction and social support between national and international students (Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000), which is associated with lower stress levels (Redman & Bunyi, 1993) and psychological, social and academic adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990).

NESB students are a diverse group with a wide range of experiences, and include a growing cohort of refugees on this campus. They may be struggling with challenging educational, financial, familial, social, health and settlement issues which can affect concentration, comprehension and performance. Teaching staff are often only aware of educational and linguistic issues in their classrooms, and may need to gain more knowledge and understanding of students under pressure. Teachers face the problems of not only students' language competence and successful classroom interaction in various modes, but also sensitivity to their own competencies in teaching effectively for diversity (Borland & Pearce, 1999). Teachers and students now operate in culturally diverse environments, and departments may need to look at how they can develop good practice among colleagues, programmes and modules in order to deliver quality programmes that are inclusive for all students. Pedagogical issues include the recognition of diversity, the valuing of different perspectives, sensitivity in language use and clear explanation and coaching about assessment tasks.

Changes in the student population, however, affect everyone working in higher education, including student support services (Warwick, 2006). Specialist ESL services seem to be readily accessed by NESB students, for example, but these are not always able to provide specialist support in particular disciplines. Liaison among the various university sectors, therefore, is important for the achievement of a more integrated university community built on the richness of cultural diversity (Briguglio, 1998). The literature suggests that NESB, and international, students struggle to find their 'place' within the university context and are most likely to feel supported by those most able to share their values and experiences. Student support services may be able to build on the natural shared experiences of these students by expanding their horizons to include quality social interactions with other cohorts within the system. It is particularly important to assist students to foster new networks in the first 6 weeks of a new semester. Understanding of the stages of the NESB student life cycle indicate that students move during this time from what Major (2005, p. 86) terms 'cultural and educational tourism' to the realization that their expectations are untenable and they face "emotional turmoil" and feel psychologically estranged and inadequate and look for co-cultural support. In a regional campus setting co-cultural support is not always likely to be available locally, so building networks with other cohorts in the system is essential and can be an enriching, cross-cultural experience. The ESB students are also new and have not formed networks, so the first six weeks is an optimum time to run activities that bring NESB and ESB students together to encourage network-building.

METHODOLOGY

This small pilot qualitative study aimed to use an interpretive research framework which provides the opportunity to describe the meaning of the social, academic and personal experiences of the individuals under study. The research team decided on this methodology because we wanted a snapshot of student experiences at a rural university campus in terms of cultural, social and academic experiences from the points of view of the students themselves and of teaching and support staff. The data was collected by three means: focus group discussions with NESB students, university staff and members of the community working with NESB clients; an online survey of NESB students, and quantitative statistics on participation, access, retention and success of NESB students at Albury-Wodonga campus in 2007.

The data was collated, and an interpretive paradigm was used to establish themes that would provide a picture of the students' university experiences. Sustained reflection gave us the opportunity to study the themes.

Focus groups

The data was gathered by holding focus groups and from e-mail responses given by those unable to attend a focus group.

Potential participants were selected on the basis of either being a NESB student or being a member of staff or an external worker or community group working with NESB clients. These people were sent an e-mail outlining the research and inviting attendance at a focus group. Three responses were received from persons who wished to participate but could not attend a focus group. E-mail responses from these 3 were accepted.

Focus group participants were asked a series of questions which served to guide the group discussion which was facilitated by a researcher. The discussion was recorded and the responses were transcribed and collated into broad themes.

Unfortunately the timeline of the project was delayed and the project had to span two academic years. Some students had left the university so follow up focus group sessions with all the student participants was impossible. If we were to duplicate this study with a new cohort, we would make sure that all the components of the research data were collected while the students were still attending university. This would ensure that all relevant research strategies could be used. The limited opportunities to verify the data has flawed our methodology, but the transcripts and insitu notes and results for each focus group allowed sustained reflection time for the researchers to study the emerging themes.

Online language experience survey

The online survey, designed to elicit student comment on their language experience while at university, was adapted from Suzanne Fegan's (Language and Academic Skills [ESL] Unit, La Trobe) language experience survey. Participants were students who had registered with the *English Language Unit: English as a Second Language (ESL)*. The 19 students registered with the Unit were invited by email to respond to an online survey that was open from 1 May to 10 June 2008. This period was chosen because it is in the middle of semester 1 when courses are well underway but examinations have not begun. Eight students (42%) elected to participate. We were aware that the sample size means that generalisations can not be assumed. Nevertheless the students' responses provided qualitative data giving an interesting snapshot of experience and comment from a cohort that is seldom heard.

Thirteen questions were provided in four sections: personal, English language use, the use of university services and other comments they would like to make. The survey aimed to be open and to allow students to comment freely. But because all the respondents had English as a second language, sentence-starters were provided, sometimes with a Likert scale or other such options. Opportunities to add comment were given whenever possible under each question.

Quantitative data

The third type of data collected, quantitative statistics on participation, access, retention and success of NESB students, was gathered by the University Management Information Unit (see Appendix 1). The data was collated from students who indicated on their enrolment form that they spoke a language other than English. Participants were not required to identify themselves by name. Nevertheless, maintaining anonymity on a small campus is a challenge for the researchers.

Conclusion

This student cohort is from a small campus so naturally the number of participants is limited and therefore generalisations cannot be made. There were 42 (8 participants in online survey, 34 participants in focus groups) participants in total and because some students left during the study we were not able to capture further pertinent information from them. However, researchers already had a working relationship with the participants and it was felt that discussions could be frank and open fairly quickly because of this relationship. Students readily contributed information that was highly personal and emotional, exposing private concerns and burdens. The three methods of data collection gave us sufficient information to provide us with a snapshot of a cross-section of students' experiences at university.

RESULTS

The results of the collected data from focus groups, the online language experience survey, and quantitative data are presented below. All student written or verbal comments are quoted verbatim.

Focus groups

Participant characteristics

Seven focus group discussions were held and three e-mail responses received.

No of focus groups	Participants	No of participants
2	NESB students focus groups	4
	NESB students e-mailed responses	3
3	Staff focus groups;	
	▪ Academic staff	6
	▪ Student Administration staff	3
	▪ Student Services staff	6
2	External stake-holder focus groups	
	▪ Murray Valley Sanctuary Refugee Group	10
	▪ Settlement Officers	2
TOTAL		34

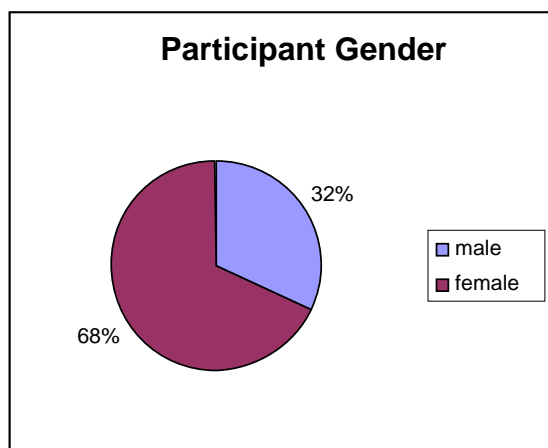


Figure 1: Focus Group Participant Gender

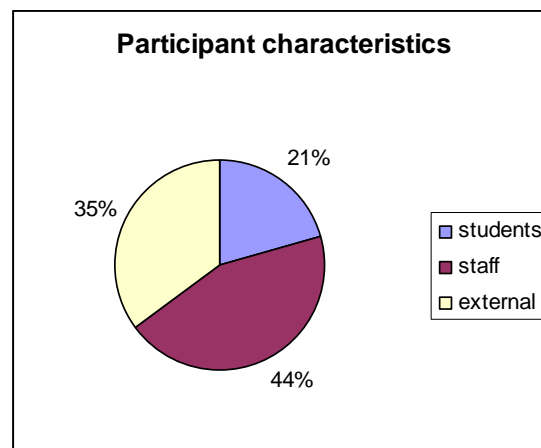


Figure 2: Focus Group Participant Characteristics

Results

The results of the focus group discussions are shown here collated into broad themes under the questions asked. The themes have been identified by how many groups mentioned each theme, rather than by the number of times each theme was mentioned in total.

Question 1: Are you aware of NESB students who wish to enrol in tertiary study and have faced barriers? What are the barriers?

Barriers to enrolling in/going to university	No. of mentions
lack of knowledge of processes and systems	4
financial	3

lack of support/encouragement from family	3
no/not adequate ESL support at school	2
not knowing about Albury-Wodonga	1
accommodation	1
childcare	1

Question 2: Are you aware of NESB students enrolled in tertiary study who have not completed or have withdrawn? What were the causes?

Reasons for withdrawing	No. of mentions
course too hard/academic difficulties/low English level	7
family issues/loneliness/homesick	5
planned to use AW as stepping stone/pathway	3
financial	2
transport	1

Question 2 generated much discussion regarding the barriers faced by students during their studies. The responses are collated under the main themes identified.

Barriers at university	No. of mentions
General	
systems are different/don't know what to do	5
finances	4
discrimination/patronising	2
poor public transport	2
access to/knowledge of technology	2
family expectations	1
Social life	
no friends/family/community in AW/loneliness/homesickness	10
balancing family life and roles	1
student association not effective	1
Academic	
getting students to realise they need help/identifying students who need help early	4
group-work difficulties	3
student's lack of knowledge re systems eg resubmit, extensions	2
casual staff's lack of knowledge re systems	2
systems pressures/academic work-load	2
difficulties with assignments	1
lack of/poor feedback from lecturers	1
Language skills	
understanding language/new vocabulary & terminology	11
assumed level of competence	2
academic writing a difficult skill	1
video-lectures hard to understand	1
oral presentations are daunting	1
Cultural differences	
embarrassed/shy to ask questions/for help	5
cultural differences	2
perceptions re teacher's role	1
way of learning very different	1

Question 3: What ways of catering for individual differences to support NESB students are you aware of lecturers/tutors/ administrators using?

Answers to question 3 included strategies used by students themselves, not only those used by staff. The strategies have been collated into broad groups by common theme.

Things that <u>have</u> helped	No. of mentions
Good communication with lecturers, lecturers who give feedback, have time for students, look at drafts	10
Student Services available on campus/ ESL/ LASU/ Bridging Program/ chaplaincy	6
People who are helpful, explain things, tell you how to do things/designated student advisers	5
Staggered & stepped assignments/ more, but smaller assignments/ assignments marked quickly	4
Information about campus and the systems and services on campus	4
Peer mentoring/ pairing students/ study buddies	3
Good information/links to relevant readings/ explicit reading lists/templates for essays	3
Meeting other people/ getting to know people/ familiar faces	3
Systems in place like being able to get extensions /use dictionaries in exams	2
Opportunities for activities/ overseas study tour/sports	2
Make sure tutors have info/e-mailing 'helpful tips' to staff	2
For presentations I practiced aloud to myself	1
Having a plan on how to study	1
ESL/LASU drop-in times that can only be booked on the day	1
I could work part-time and support my family	1

Question 4: What supports, social or structural, could La Trobe put in place to assist NESB students to overcome these difficulties?

The strategies have been collated into broad groups according to common themes.

Things that <u>could</u> help	No. of mentions
Building relationships/ helping students network	7
Linking students to Settlement Officers/ Settlement Officers to attend campus	6
Information, support, relationships with Humanitarian visa students/ Welcome Kit	4
Having someone to explain the systems/ procedures/ technology for me	4
Strategies for support prior to enrolment/ links with year 11 and 12 students/ info to parents	3
Better, more personal communication with students arranged by lecturers/ more time for NESB students	3
Provide extra courses/ skills, to help you continue your studies	3
Information re services available	3
Social support with local community, community groups	2
Campus webpage links/ include links in VTAC, UAC guide	2
Point of contact for students to discuss options, courses, pathways, careers counselling	2
Social activities/ having dinner together/ early in the year	2
Checking that students get what they are entitled to	1
Lecturers to ensure students are included in groups	1
University to provide old computers to students	1
Not being afraid to ask	1
Including communication subjects	1
Provide subjects you can do instead of wasting a year if you fail (nursing)	1
Provide a longer course for finding jobs with interview skills, time management etc	1
Lecturers should be more aware of students of NESB and their needs	1

Students of NESB to get the same help as international students get (eg with accommodation)	1
Hold 'mindfulness' sessions for students	1
Having time to follow up on students in crisis or having difficulties	1
Working more collaboratively with academic staff	1
Revamp the Student Association "Hangar"	1

Question 5: Are there any other comments you would like to add?

As the focus group discussions were broad-ranging there were no additional comments from participants.

Online language experience survey

Section 1: Participant characteristics

The data indicates that participants come from a range of backgrounds and are likely to have a range of experiences. They are not a homogeneous cohort. The factors they have in common are: having English as a second language, moving to a regional campus study environment, not being 'local' and their area of study. The figures below illustrate the responses to questions asked in the online survey.

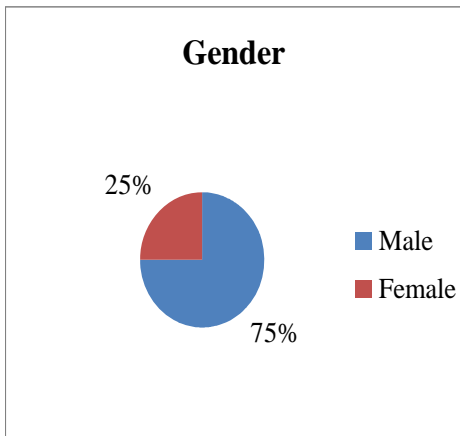


Figure 3: Gender balance of participants

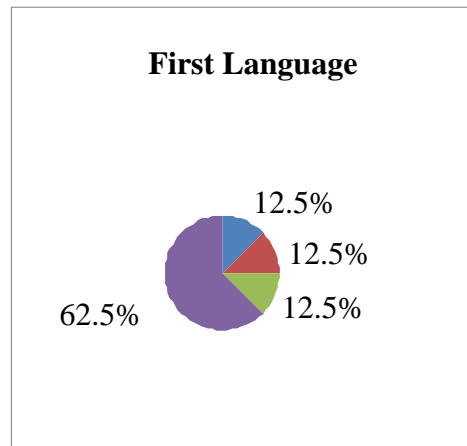


Figure 4: First language of participants. Language backgrounds have been withheld to protect anonymity of participants. Four different languages are represented.

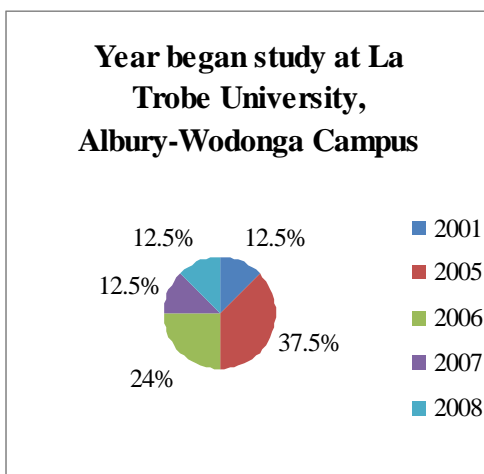


Figure 5: Year participants began studying at La Trobe University, Albury-Wodonga Campus

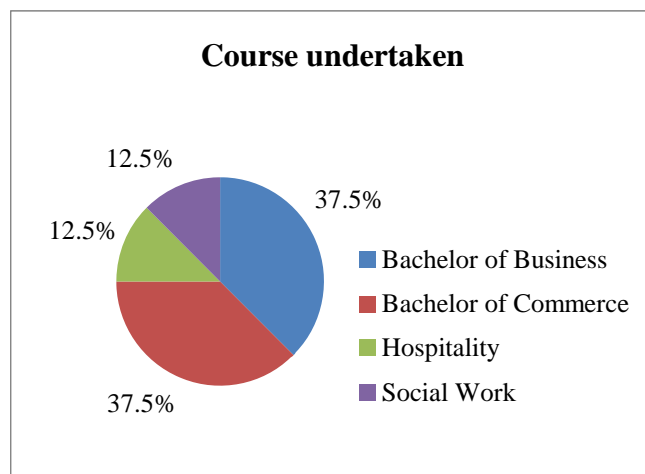


Figure 6: Courses undertaken by students

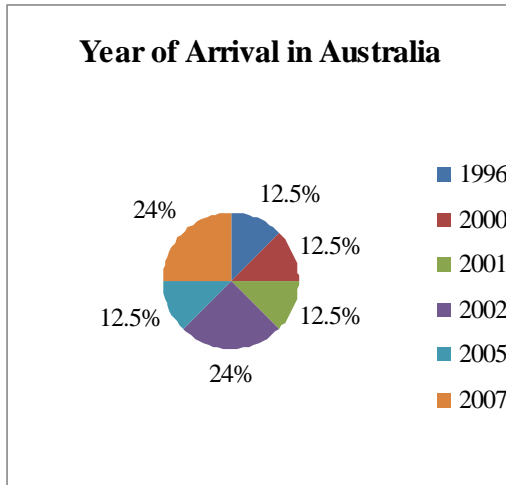


Figure 7: Year of arrival in Australia

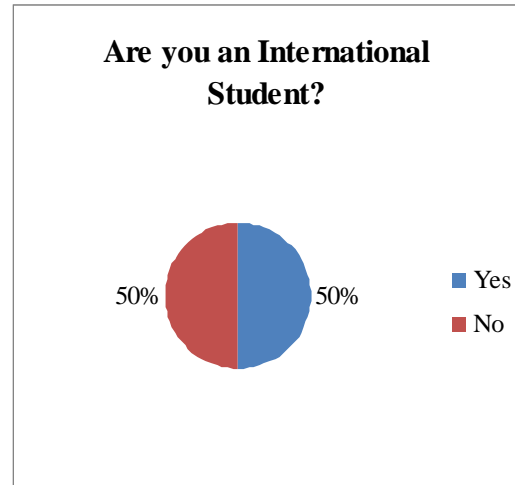


Figure 8: Percentages of students enrolled as International students or other

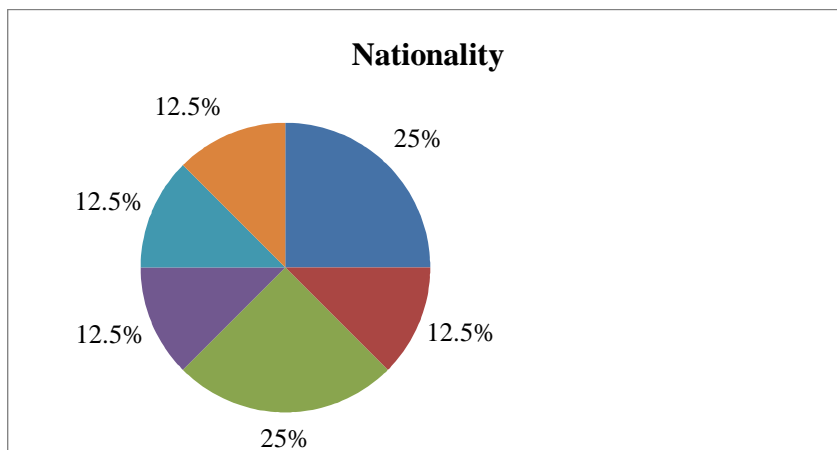


Figure 9: Nationalities of participants. Nationalities have been withheld to protect anonymity of participants; the largest groups are Australian and Chinese. The other nationalities are from Africa and Europe.

Reason for coming to Australia

The intention of this question was to find out why international students chose Australia as a destination for study. Only international students were asked to answer. However, all participants answered this question and the answers are reported.

Participants' reasons for coming to Australia, in order of importance were:

- to obtain a degree from an Australian University
- Improve English language skills.

Of lesser importance was:

- to travel in Australia and become familiar with the culture
- Because friends and family were studying here.

Other reasons for coming to Australia illustrate the wide range of reasons that bring students to the campus and the very different life experiences students bring with them. It is noted that for some students their journey is directed by choice, while others are influenced by factors, such as civil war, beyond their control.

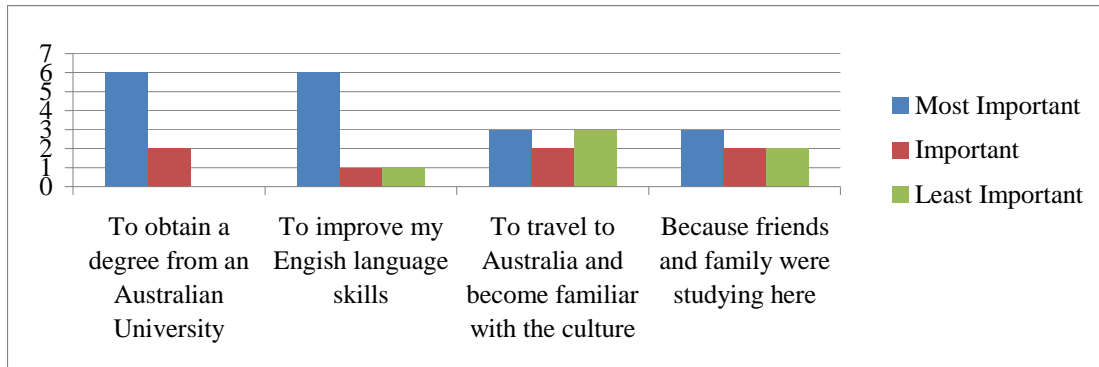


Figure 10: Reasons for coming to Australia rated by most important, important and least important. (Vertical axis = the number of responses)

Other reasons

- To change character
- Immigration
- Stable government and better job prospects
- To stay in Australia and make a better future for my family
- Was going to USA but 9:11 changed my plans, so I'm here
- Came under the humanitarian program for resettlement due to insecurity and civil war in my country.

Section 2: Questions about speaking English

Students were asked how much English they spoke each day at university. They all (100%) reported that they spoke English each day, and most students spoke English for more than 30 minutes each day. Informal reporting from larger universities is that some students speak English infrequently because they have co-cultural colleagues to speak with. It appears from responses that students in this cohort have a range of opportunities to speak English at university but feel that tutors could support their language development more.

How much English do you speak on an average day at University?

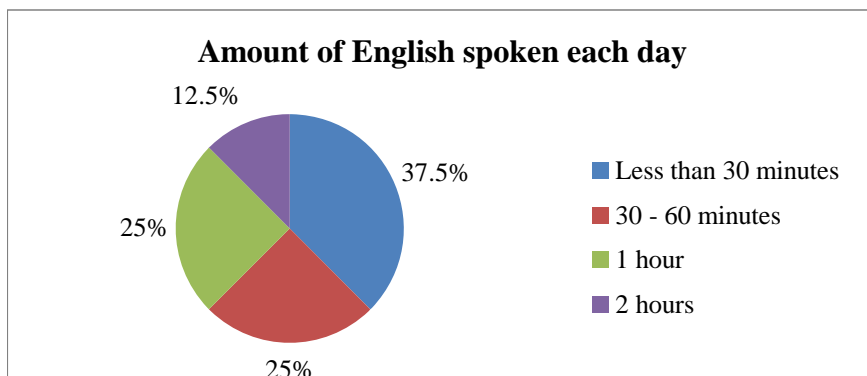


Figure 11: Amount of English spoken each day
NB: No further comments were made on this question

Where and with whom do you speak English with most at University?

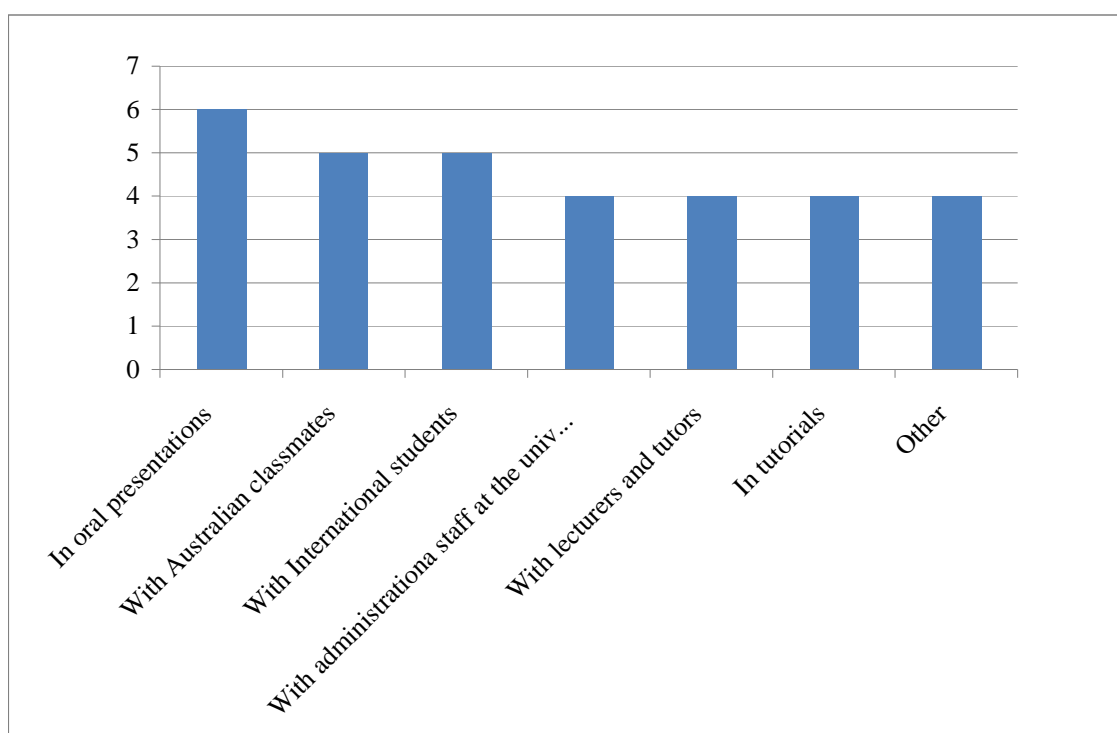


Figure 12: Where and with whom students speak English around University (Vertical axis = the number of responses)

Are you satisfied with the amount of English you practise each day at university?

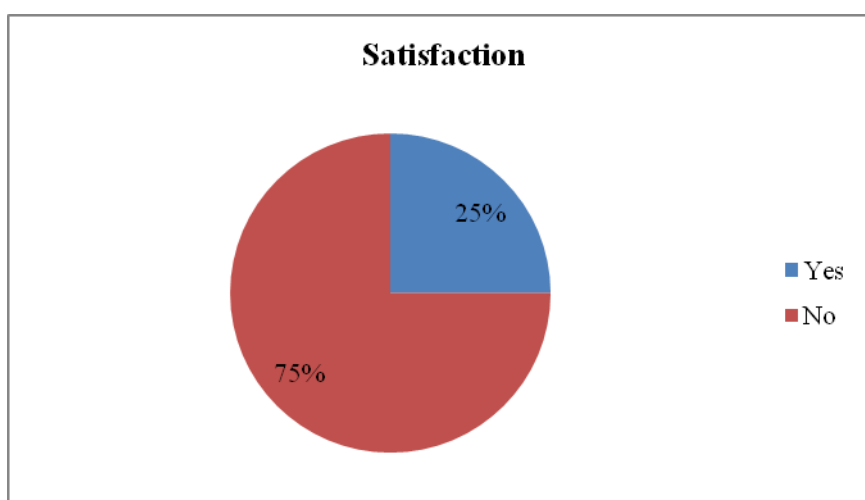


Figure 13: Percentages of participant's satisfaction/dissatisfaction with amount of English spoken at University

Researchers noted that the intent of this question, to find out if students were content with the length of time they spent speaking English at university each day, was misunderstood by most participants. Some respondent's answers showed they felt dissatisfied with their ability to communicate at the level they were wishing to. 75% of participants were not satisfied with the amount of English they practice each day at University. They provided reasons indicating they had problems contributing to discussion, felt unable to cope with university systems, could not make others understand them and wanted more friends from other cultures to speak with to improve their English. A student clarified their dissatisfaction by explaining that they felt that their student colleagues and lecturers could not

easily understand them. This comment is from a student whose English is proficient; he/she has an accent and it is possible that some listeners are unaccustomed to accents and are unable to make accommodations. The comment may, therefore, reflect on the listener's ability as much as the speaker's. 25% were satisfied with the amount of English they spoke – providing reasons such as speaking English all the time, having Australian friends and plenty of assessment..

Reasons for satisfaction or dissatisfaction:

- Because i don't have enough to contribute in a discussion with class mates
- Can't handle university study system
- I dont know why. I gues its because students are too busy with their iPods, mobile phones..ect..mySpace.etc..there are not enough activities such as sport and other fun things.
- i want to speak more for improve my english
- Make other to understand
- should have more different culture friends, so, better with aussies, speak more, better for my english
- Yes – a plenty of assessment
- Yes – English is the only language I can communicate with. Sometimes I forget my Language
- Yes except when family contact me I speak English. All my friends are Australian
- Yes I got local friends to spend time with, sometimes I talk with lecturers and tutors not just academic but some daily life talk.

Do you speak English socially outside University? If you do, please indicate where.

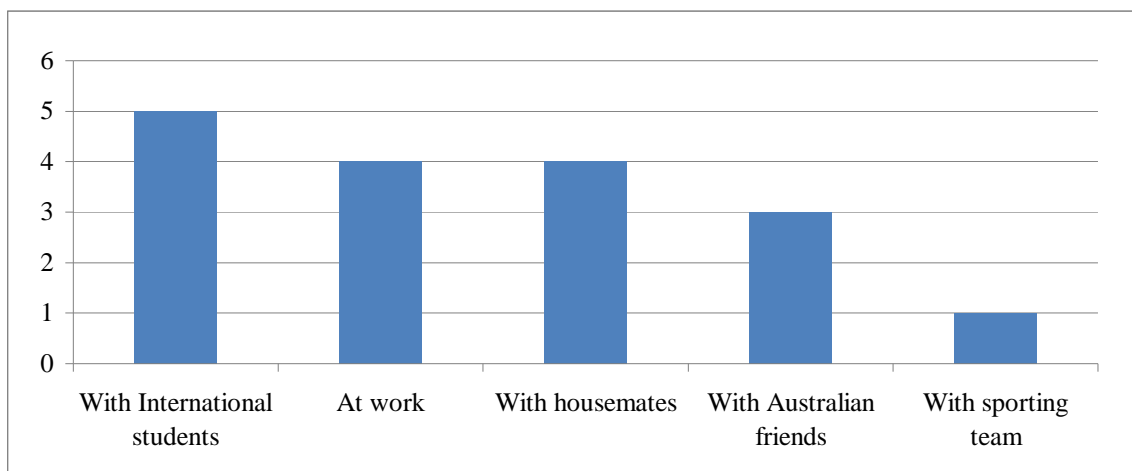


Figure 14: Where participants speak English socially outside of University (Vertical axis = the number of responses)

Other comments on speaking English outside of University:

- No one to speak my language with , so speak English
- Everywhere all the time
- With my friends – playing poker or with footy boys, they are nice and we talk lots of slang.
- At home
- speak with the landlord
- “not much” (speaking outside uni).

Students' responses provided a snapshot of opportunities to speak English socially outside University. They reported they spoke with: international students (62.5%); Australian friends (62.5%); housemates (50%); sporting team (37.5%); work colleagues (12.5%).

Other comments such as:

'No one to speak my language with, so speak English' and 'speak everywhere all the time',

suggest that students, because they do not have co-cultural friends locally, speak English most of the time. These responses support the view that students have a range of opportunities to speak English in networks outside the university. The comment:

'with my friends – playing poker or with footyboys, they are nice and we talk lots of slang',

supports the view that this student is satisfied with their social network. It appears students have a number of different vehicles through which to integrate and speak English.

Where do you enjoy speaking English the most?

- Enjoy with your friends online and at home who understands you and taking it easy
- Everything
- fun
- with aus student in uni
- with aussie friends, and international friends
- With the English Language Unit
- I enjoy every single minute talking in English.
- pubs and clubs (work) normal conversation everywhere with friends, it is important to speak language of the country – make an effort, swapping between two languages is tiring and makes it harder to learn at home, with Australian friends.

Where do you enjoy speaking English the least?

- Depend which skills that I have learned before
- fun
- When people tend to ask about about your history and backgrounds as if they going to make certain judgements. The other thing is when someone makes assumptions about you without knowing you.
- Work.

Section 3: The University role in developing student language skills

What could the University do to help your English Language skills?

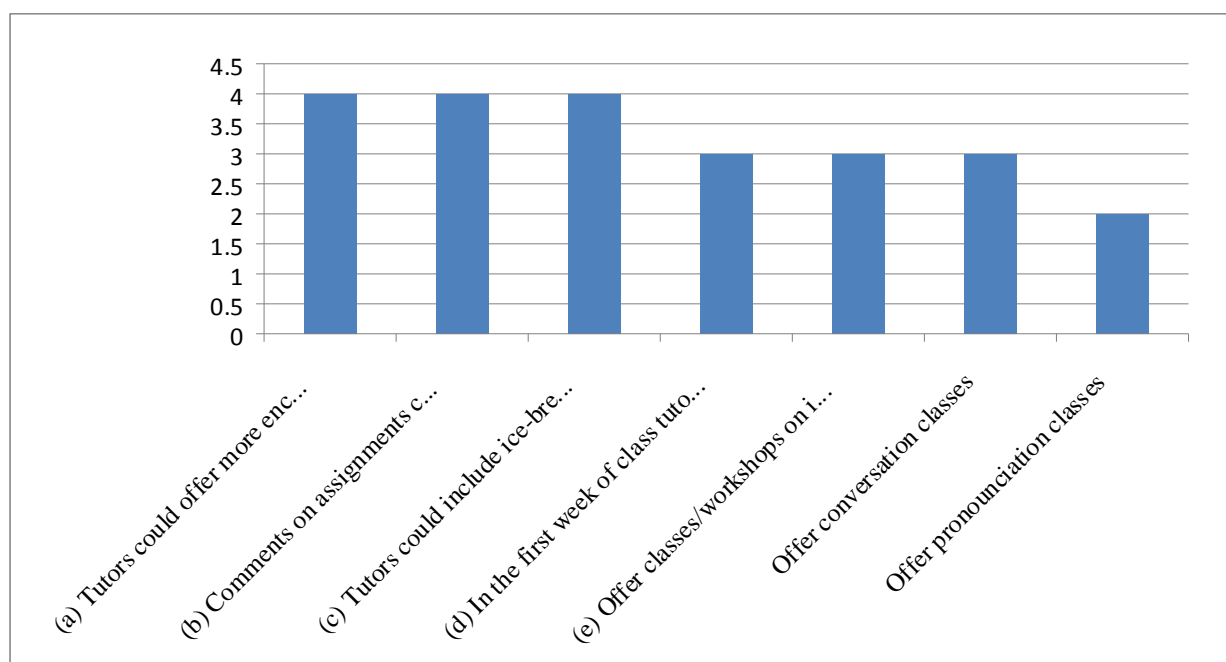


Figure 15: Participants suggestions for the University to help their English language skills
The above comments are reproduced in full, below:

(a) Tutors could offer more encouragement to students (b) Comments on assignments could give feedback on English grammar and vocabulary (c) Tutors could include ice-breaking activities before group work (d) In the first week of class tutors/lecturers could do activities to help classmates get to know each other and feel comfortable (e) Offer classes/workshops on informal English eg. Slang.
 (Vertical axis = the number of responses)

The higher frequency responses selected by students are all strategies that tutors, rather than the *English Language Unit*, could implement. This could indicate that students want the language development to be embedded in the subject.

Do you attend the English Language Unit?

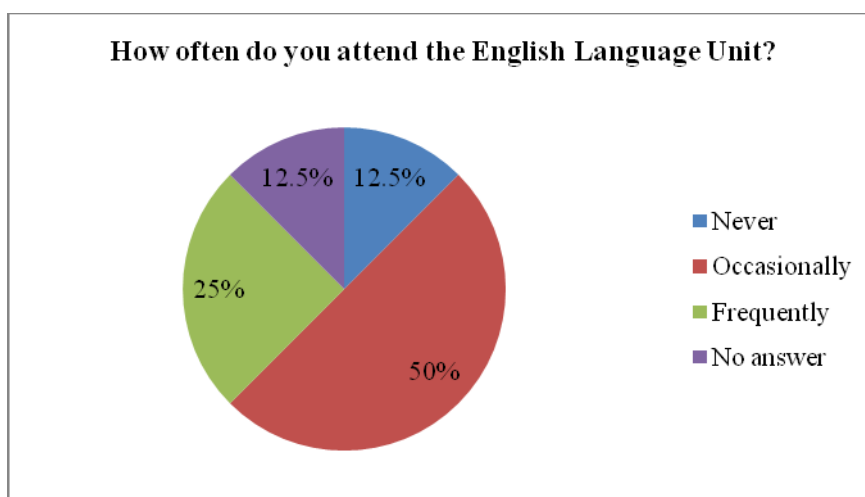


Figure 16: How often participants attend the English Language Unit

It is noted that one student reported never attending the *English Language Unit*. This is possibly explained by the fact that this student is an international student and may have registered with the unit *just in case s/he needed to use it*.

What sort of English Language Unit activity do you find useful/not useful/not appropriate?

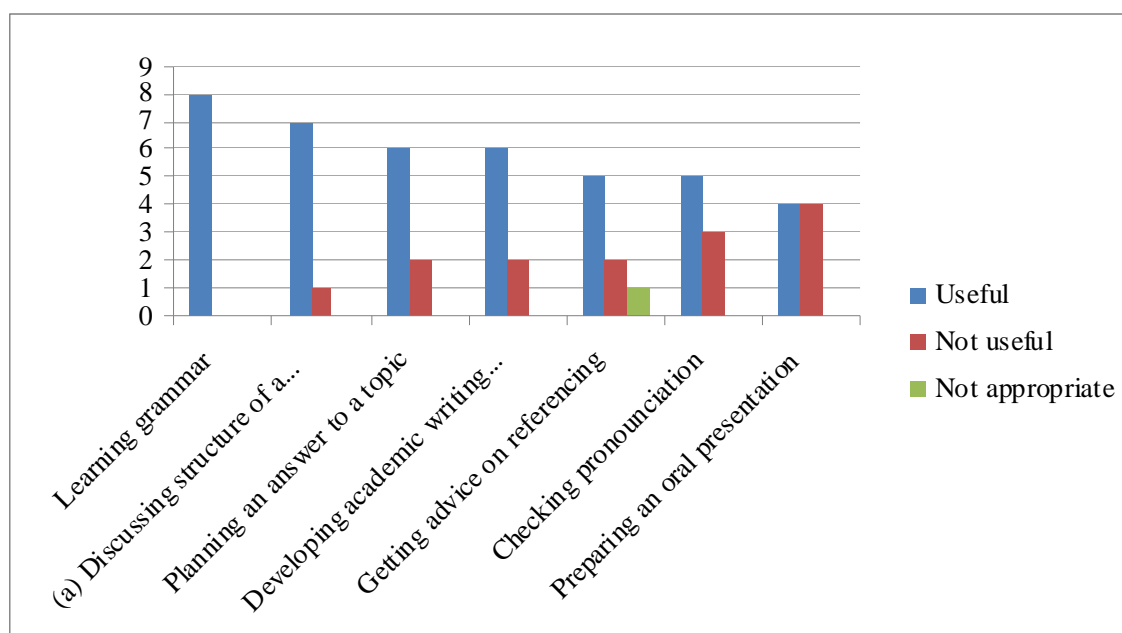


Figure 17: English Language Unit activities found useful, not useful or not appropriate by participants.

The full wording of (a) is "Discussing structure of an assignment"

(Vertical axis = the number of responses)

Comments from students:

- The timing of the ESL unit is not enough and not flexible as well. But still its better than nothing. It will cost the uni if time is extended and someone else is hired then students have to pay higher fees. So back to the square one again.
- But students are here to learn,
- its also going to be better if the ESL unit can get help student with content search and topic relativity.
- we need more than three to be satisfied with the service.

Do you attend the Academic Skills Unit?

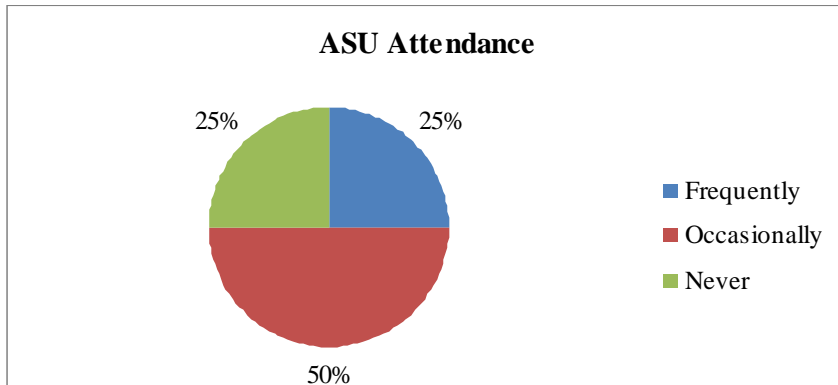


Figure 18: How often participants attend the Academic Skills Unit

Student Comments on why they do or do not go to the ASU

- I am good at what I do
- I don't have enough time to go to the ASU.

What sort of Academic Skills Unit activity do you find useful/not useful/not appropriate?

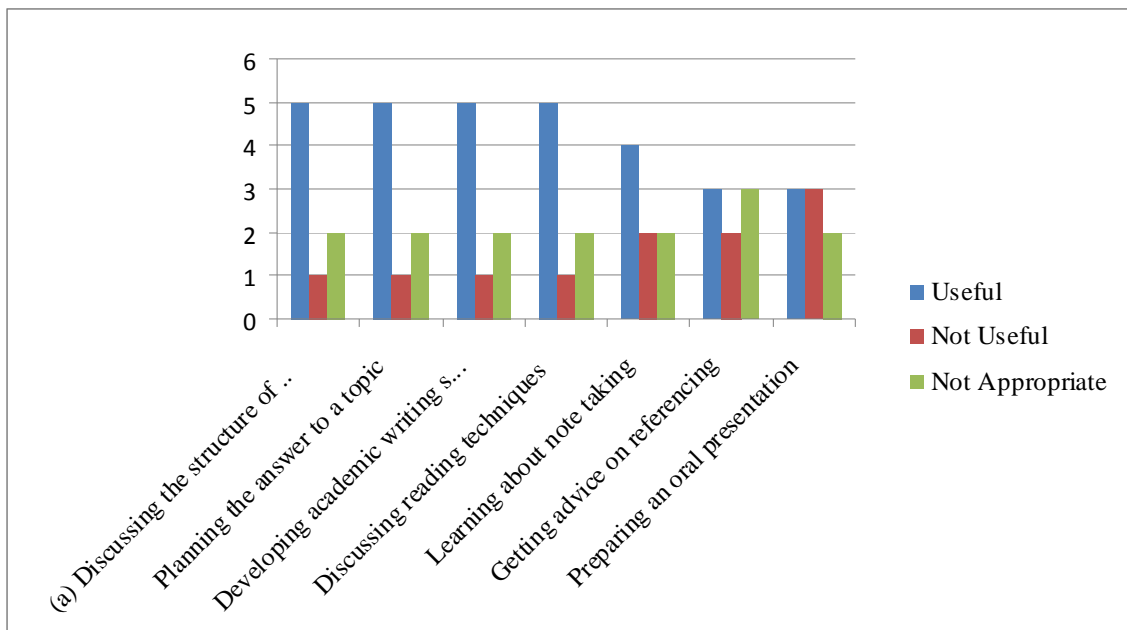
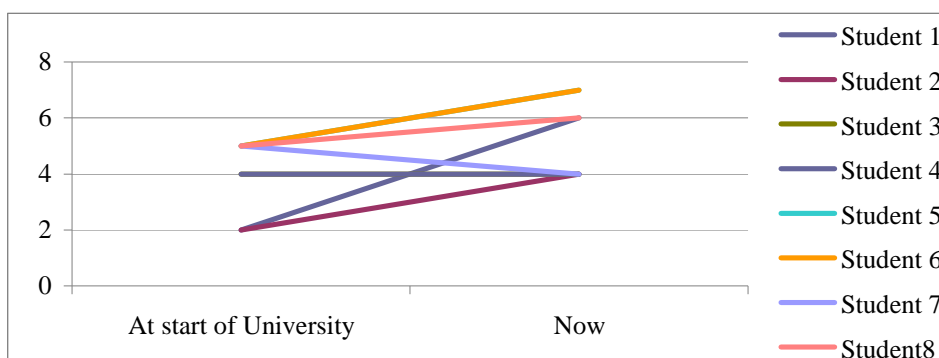


Figure 19: Academic Skills Unit activities found useful, not useful or not appropriate by participants
 The full wording of (a) is "Discussing the structure of an assignment"
 (Vertical axis = the number of responses)

Please rate your confidence level with using English (1= low 7=high)



NB: No rating for now from Students 3 and 4

Figure 20: Students confidence ratings in their English language skills from when they started university until now.

(Vertical axis = confidence level)

It is noted that 4 students have increased their confidence level with using English. One student increased their confidence by 4 points, from 2 to 6. Two students did not report their confidence level 'now', so have been recorded as a level line – no increase or decrease. One student reported reduced confidence; this may be explained by the fact that s/he was a recently arrived refugee in their first semester of study. They are likely to be coming to terms with academic requirements and may feel surprised at the level of language required. A table of linked patterns across this cohort is reported below.

Reason for not using the ESL Unit

Do you have a friend who has English as their second Language and does NOT use the English Language Unit? If you do, we are interested to know the reasons students have for not using the English Language Unit. Please indicate possible reasons below.

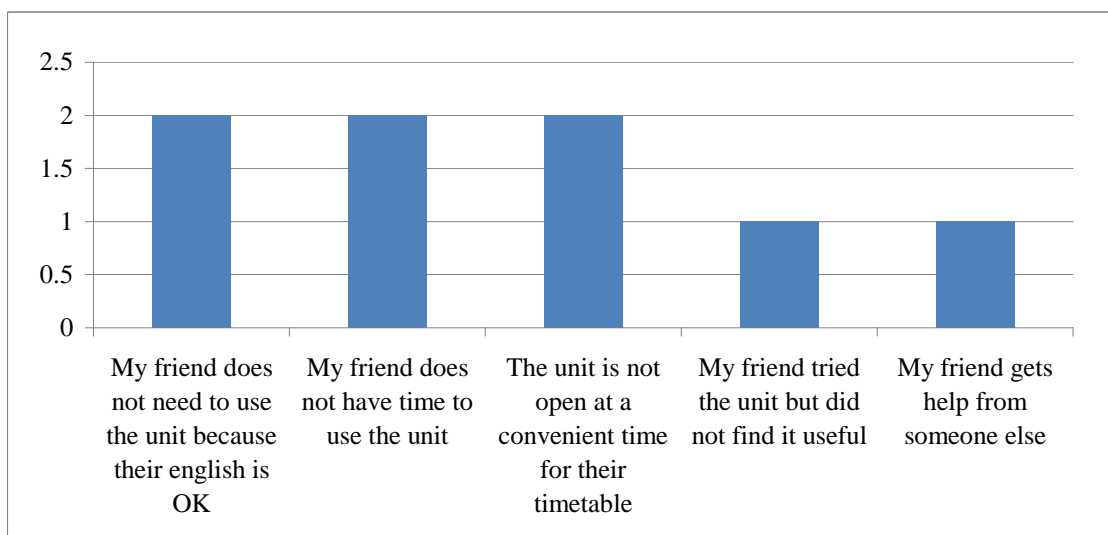


Figure 21: Reasons for participants' friends not using the English Language Unit (Vertical axis = the number of responses)

Student comments:

- They use the ESL unit.

Linked Patterns across the cohort

Ordered according to amount of English spoken at University each day, ranging from highest to lowest: student 1 spoke English the most and student 7 the least.

Question asked	Student 1	Student 3	Student 2	Student 8	Student 4	Student 5	Student 6	Student 7
Amount of English spoken each day at University	120 minutes	60	60	30 - 60	30 - 60	Under 30	Under 30	Under 30
Satisfied with the amount of English spoken	yes	no	no	yes	no	no	no	no
Attends English Language Unit	never	occasionally	occasionally	frequently	No answer	frequently	occasionally	occasionally
Attends Academic Skills Unit	never	occasionally	never	occasionally	frequently	frequently	occasionally	occasionally
Confidence rating for English language since starting university	Start at 5 Now at 7 Up 2 places	Start at 4 No answer for now	Start at 5 Now at 7 Up 2 places	Start at 2 Now at 6 Up 4 places	Start at 4 No answer for now	Start at 5 Now at 4 Down 1 place	Start at 5 Now at 6 Up 1 place	Start at 2 Now at 4 Up 2 places

The level of satisfaction reported by the students appears to be not directly related to the amount of English spoken or the students' level of confidence.

Section 4: Final open comment option

Question 13: Do you have any other comments related to English at University?

- It is the best
- More oral presentations, less marks attached to it. More gathering activities. ESL unit or the uni can join the digital age of mySpace, youtube, facebook etc..where the young people spend most of their times apart from studies.
- One staff is not enough for the English academic skill unit
- Open formal classes to allow international student to be learning

Conclusion

There is recognition from the majority of participants, including staff, students and outside agencies, that learning is an emotional issue and that a sense of belonging is helpful to student learning. The results show that the NESB students are actively involved in managing their own learning, and seek to use various strategies to achieve this. There seems to be agreement that there is value in the university's provision of social and structural supports. The researchers recognise that this survey is flawed in that some of the questions are ambiguous and some categories are not comparable. If the survey is used again it needs to be edited in the light of this pilot survey.

DISCUSSION

This small study has sought to explore the experience of NESB students studying at a small, regional campus. The aim was to identify the structural and support networks provided within the University for NESB students, in order to discover a clear picture of how these networks contribute to their learning experiences. The study also sought to identify those that could be provided in the future. This discussion represents the results of the questionnaires and interviews with individuals who participated in this research with academic and support staff, with a selection of NESB students and with outside agencies such as the Murray Valley Sanctuary Refugee Group.

The collected responses indicated four main themes emerging from perceived barriers in attending university: academic difficulties, which also included levels of technological expertise; language and cultural issues; quality of social life during university study; individual personal factors such as financial impacts.

Academic barriers

Academic experiences were varied for the participants of this study. The NESB students, particularly students who were refugees and had not been to school in Australia, had a general lack of knowledge and experiences about processes, such as asking for extensions and understanding the format and style of various types of assignments. Not knowing the 'system' in terms of extensions and resubmissions was also a barrier to their learning:

*'It took me 6 months to understand the systems'
'I did not know you could ask for extensions'.*

Online tasks and group work proved to be hurdles for students if they were inexperienced in using these methods for learning:

'I didn't know about the online quiz'.

Students also reported difficulties learning to use technology:

*'I didn't know [about] uni email. I had been here for a year and a half and one classmate said - you have student email and when we open it, 300 email.'
'You need to be shown four or five times'.*

Some students did not have a clear idea of what was expected of them in group work, or lacked the confidence to join in:

*'because I don't have enough [English] to contribute in a discussion with classmates.'
'When people tend to ask about your history and backgrounds as if they going to make certain judgements. The other thing is when someone makes assumptions about you without knowing you.'*

These students may have been previously educated through a teacher-centred methodology, where their expected role in the classroom would have been as a passive, rather than an active, learner:

'I think the students of NESB need to be encouraged that if you want to understand something fully, don't be afraid to ask.'

They found group work intimidating as their perception was that no one welcomed them in their group. University culture has the general expectation that students are proactive, autonomous learners who take charge of their own learning, but some NESB students had difficulty with this approach, and considered that they needed more direction from the lecturer. These students were not confident with autonomy and self-reliance, and this may lead to feelings of frustration or depression (Searle & Ward, 1990). Confidence in the ability to communicate and learn is an important aspect of successful educational experiences. NESB students may feel discouraged if they consider that teaching staff are not addressing their learning problems. Feedback from the online language experience survey suggests that students want tutors and

lecturers to explicitly address their language needs in class and in explicit feedback on assignments. The highest frequency options selected were:

'Tutors could offer more encouragement to students'
'Comment on assignments could give feedback on English grammar and vocabulary' and

'Tutors could include ice-breaking activities before group-work'.

Academic staff members commented that they need to identify students who require assistance as early as possible, in order to support their learning. They considered the main barriers for NESB students as being lack of writing skills and the pressure of large assignments. They were open to the idea of giving smaller, more frequent assignments, and there were two suggestions to help students with essays: to provide a template for essay writing, which may facilitate better skills, and to have 'stepped submissions' such as a 50-word summary of articles, followed by an outline and then a draft. Academic staff also recognised that there are difficulties with group work for NESB students, but there were no suggestions of how to solve this problem or any comment about the difficulties many English speaking background (ESB) students encounter when they have to work in groups. Clear expectations about group work such as discussion about group dynamics and processes would help all students not just NESB students.

Student Services staff identified several issues for NESB students which could constitute an academic barrier, such as the diffidence of students to approach academic staff and a sense that seeking help is a sign of failure. The academic work load was also seen as a barrier to successful completion. There also seem to be mixed feelings among NESB students about the approachability of academic staff, as communicated to Student Services, and there is a perception that asking questions might 'shame' the teacher. Students communicated to support staff that there was a lack of feedback from lecturers, and that more comments about their work might be more beneficial. The difficulties of group work was again highlighted:

'Students often talk to me about how difficult it is to join in the group work. They may know all the stuff but they can't talk and they don't think people try hard enough to listen to them and understand them.'

Student Services staff also identified several factors that are helpful to students with their academic work, such as the small campus and the visibility of staff, and having friends, and their suggestions for improvement of support included having time to help students, following up on students having difficulties, and working more collaboratively with academic staff.

From the perspective of Student Administration staff, NESB students tend to support each other through peer assistance, but this, in their view, may be because they don't know about administration services, or how to access them. The staff suggested some strategies that might be beneficial for students, such as better marketing of support and assistance available, and social support and social events among the students. In their view, opportunities for social events and general socialising may bring students from different year-groups together and this may assist their learning.

Language and cultural barriers

The most frequently selected reason, in the online survey, for students coming to Australia was:

'To obtain a degree from an Australian university' and
'to improve English language skills'.

It appears from the student feedback that some students are proactive in developing their language and are keen to grasp opportunities to speak English:

'Should have more different culture friends, so, better with aussies, speak more, better for my english.'
'... I got local friends to spend time with, sometimes I talk with lecturers and tutors not just academic but some daily life talk'.

The single dominant performance issue mentioned by students, academic staff and support staff was the ability to understand both formal and informal language, particularly vocabulary and terminology, accents, and the use of slang and colloquialisms by lecturers:

'Sometimes the lecturers use slang in class and we don't really understand.' *'The first ... month was really very hard because the accent ... was completely different.'*

The online survey results indicate that students have a range of opportunities to use English both at University and outside. The most frequent places students reported speaking English outside university was:

'with international students, at work and with housemates'.

In a regional setting, while a student share household may include a number of NESB students, it is common for a NESB student to be the only speaker of his/her language, so English is likely to be the common language. One student reported speaking English:

'with my friends – playing poker or with footy boys, they are nice and we talk lots of slang'.

At a regional campus having co-cultural colleagues is unusual. Students need to find other points of connection, such as footy and poker, on which to build networks. The literature review noted the major factor in successful adjustment outlined by Borland & Pearce (2002) seems to be the amount of interaction and social support between national and international students (Smart, Volet, & Ang, 2000). This is associated with lower stress levels (Redman & Bunyi, 1993) and contributes to psychological, social and academic adaptation (Searle & Ward, 1990). Students commented in focus groups that those who did not speak English regularly outside the university were not as confident of their language skills as those who had more opportunities to use English. Videoconferencing was an example given in the Student Services staff focus group as a problematic area for less-fluent students, possibly because of the use of colloquial language, or if the lecturer is a non-native speaker. Group work is a vehicle for student interaction, and the online survey indicated that speaking *with Australian class mates and with International students* were likely opportunities for NESB students to speak English at university. Yet group work was also seen as a language barrier for students, as well as an academic one, as they reported encountering communication difficulties in these situations, mainly because of lack of confidence and fluency, and difficulties with colloquialisms and informal language:

'... because my English wasn't very good and my accent and pronunciation was not good so I tried to avoid asking questions'.

The student feedback from the online survey indicates that over the period of their study some students gain confidence in their language level, while occasionally others lose confidence.

Cultural differences were specifically mentioned in two student groups, but were not made explicit, and may thus be attributed to several factors, such as communication problems, learning styles and difficulties with group work. Culturally, they may also have had particular expectations of teacher-student interactions as being a formal relationship:

'Sometimes [it would help] to talk about differences in other cultures'.

Students who were used to the support of a whole cultural community around them found life very lonely, and not having any friends was the reason for one person dropping out of university.

NESB students are as diverse as the ESB student body. The online survey demographics give a snap shot of the range of backgrounds and experiences of the NESB participants: nationalities nominated as Australian, Australian/Afghan, Chinese, Congolese, Hong Kong Chinese and Swedish; language backgrounds from Swedish, French, Dari to the largest cohort - Chinese; with a length of stay in Australia ranging from 9 to 1 year; reasons for coming to Australia included a wide range of personal circumstances:

'to change character'
'immigration'

and influences by external factors beyond the student control:

*'was going to USA but 9:11 changed my plans, so I'm here'
'Came under the humanitarian program for resettlement due to insecurity and
civil war in my country'.*

Clearly these students have a wide range of prior experience and motivations to study. They may have different expectations of lecturers and, while some students will be proactive and ask questions:

*'it is important to speak language of the country – make an effort, swapping
between two languages is tiring and makes it harder to learn'
'I found [it was important] ... good communicate with lecturer is very important,
they will give you some information about how to study well for each
subject and how to prepare for the exam, but students have to try hard
by themselves, uni is more free time, so, to have a goal for each
semester is essential',*

others will wait to be engaged by their teacher. One student mentioned that he knew he was able to ask questions, but:

'was never brave enough'.

Another believed that by asking a question you showed your stupidity and also shamed the teacher:

*'Being from a different background you may not understand the teacher.' 'maybe in other countries
if you ask questions a lot they think you are dull in mind and not clever. So you don't ask questions'.*

This orientation to learning can be noted across the student body except perhaps the concept of shaming the teacher as Australian interactions tend to favour directness. Student Services staff also noted this reluctance by some students to ask for help until they were at a crisis point, whereas a problem might be more easily solved before it got to that stage. The University has a student support system that relies on self-service in that students chose to access the services. It is interesting to note that some students, even those who fail, do not elect to use the *English Language Unit (ESL)* or the *Academic Skills Unit*. The online survey attempted to find out why students do not use the services provided – lack of perceived need, lack of time and lack of convenience were selected most frequently but feedback was low on this question and results were inconclusive.

Social barriers

NESB students mentioned missing their family and the lack of friends at university. They had feelings of loneliness and homesickness, and a lack of 'community'. This lack of connection made them feel shy and embarrassed and increased the difficulties they had in making new friends among the other students:

*'not having friends is difficult. If I'm not at uni I'm just at home watching TV
or sleeping. There is no community'.*

In the literature review, we noted that loneliness and feelings of vulnerability can impact strongly on students' studies unless or until they can overcome these challenges (Novera, 2004; Suen, 1998). Regional NESB students, like the students in the dissonance stage in Major's (2005 p.86) study, usually occurring in the first 6 weeks of semester, seek "the safety net of the compatriot support system". At a regional campus there is likely to be no local compatriot support system so students faced with challenges and feelings of isolation may consider leaving. It is helpful if these students have built up networks by week 6 to assist them through this adjustment to higher education. The student focus group provided insights that might inform the university support systems, suggesting buddy systems and peer mentoring involving students in their second and third year helping new students to understand university expectations. These may help with feelings of loneliness and isolation and also cross over into academic support. Some students are proactive in making social connections but their interlocutors were not receptive:

*'It was hard sometimes not a lot of people came to sit near me. Even if I sat
next to someone next time they did not come back to sit next to me. So that
was a barrier'.*

One student mentioned that having friends and means of transport were two factors that helped him to break down social barriers but when he became a father again he found it hard to balance his roles of student, friend and father.

Teaching staff noted that social isolation can put students at a disadvantage, and suggested strategies such as peer mentoring, pairing students to work together, study buddies and social and sporting activities as a way to break down barriers. They thought that the student association was not effective in this regard, and opening hours were not sufficient. Facilities such as a campus gym may be a vehicle for developing social networks, but costs, such as Gym fees, may be prohibitive for many students.

Student Services staff and Student Administration staff provided suggestions for student strategies that they feel have worked, and might assist successful integration by NESB students. These include social support from within the local community and help from NESB students who are further along in their studies. They also considered that social functions and events might help integration and building relationships. In their opinion, the first few weeks for new undergraduates may be crucial in providing a nurturing environment where help can be given. Social activities are highlighted in the literature as being helpful for relieving stress and cultural adjustment (Kauffmann, Martin and Weaver 1992) and may help alleviate loneliness and the sense of isolation. The importance of 'knowing people' was a common theme that was articulated to Student Services and this supports the findings of Major (2005 p. 86).

Personal barriers

Some students admitted to shyness and embarrassment about meeting new people and making friends, and lack of confidence also affected them in class:

'It's hard for NSB Student to find a friends to talk to when they feel lonely, like, some aussies are working, and maybe it's because of the background, so it's hard to make friends, I reckon'.

It took a while for them to overcome this. One student commented that it took the whole of his first year to feel comfortable in his academic and social interactions. Having no computer or internet connection outside university was difficult for some students, particularly refugees, and one solution was to write assignments at home and then type them at the university. Another problem was the 'loss of face' that some students feel about asking for help or asking questions in class:

'when I asked some students they told me – you should ask the teacher. But I'm shy so I didn't want to'.

Family issues were also nominated as personal barriers, as cultural orientations to family may be more pressing than academic success. For example, one participant had become a father again and was finding it hard to balance all the different aspects of his life. For refugee students family and financial issues can be very pressing, some are responsible for supporting their families and extended networks overseas living in difficult circumstances. One student considered leaving his course so that he could earn money quickly to send to his family who were facing famine. The sensitive understanding of staff in this circumstance was instrumental in the student remaining to complete his course. University processes need to be flexible enough to cater for students' unexpected circumstances and staff need to be aware of the burdens some students carry.

Academic staff commented that both group work in class and academic writing style seem to be personally difficult for some students, and these problems seem to be linked to cultural and language issues. They also noted that shyness and 'face-saving' might also be factors, and considered that some students were under pressure from family expectations.

Student Services staff noted that lack of confidence in speaking and listening can often be more daunting for students than reading or writing, because speech has to be processed immediately. They also observed that some students feel there is a stigma attached to asking for help as people might think there is 'something wrong with you.' Student Services considered that most institutions are not successfully reaching all students who have personal issues such as accommodation, funding, family problems and social integration, especially if students have no peer support or mentors within their cohort. The Student

Services focus group discussed the issue that first generation migrants may find finances a struggle, and it is not uncommon for studies to be suspended in these cases. Refugee students reported carrying great family financial responsibilities. It was also reported that they had missed the information about commonwealth scholarships and had not applied for their first year.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has identified issues concerning NESB students at a small regional campus. Academic and cultural adjustment, approaches to learning, language difficulties and personal factors form part of their interactive experiences at university. They require particular forms of assistance in order to be academically and socially involved in university life. The implications of the findings raise questions about the effectiveness of systemic support systems provided for NESB students, and if this support may be more efficiently targeted with present levels of funding and staffing.

The student cohort is never homogeneous, whether there are NESB students or not. All students have particular needs, and their strengths and weakness have to be acknowledged. There are cultural factors in play in every interaction with students, academic and support staff, at every lecture and tutorial, and in every submitted assignment. These may include gender, socio-cultural and family issues that may help or hinder students' progress. However, NESB students, including refugee students who have not been through schooling in Australia, have additional factors that affect their progress, such as language use and becoming familiar with cultural systems and processes.

Successful intercultural interactions for NESB students need to be based on awareness and understanding of equity, difference, values among cultures, and viewing people from their cultural perspectives. Studies have shown that NESB students are more accommodating in their communication among different cultures than native speakers (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 8), but there is a need for all ESB students and university staff to have a similar strong orientation. Academic expectations for students need to be clearly stated across all student groups, without assumptions being made about student skills and aptitudes. Cultural aspects may be particularly important in university relationships because they are often unexamined factors that may affect interaction in learning and teaching. Social activities, networks and buddy systems may also be of value for academic success. One strategy, discussed in the literature review, is co-national support and networking among students (Major, 2005), which may increase confidence and self-belief. There is a tendency to seek compatriot support, but in a regional setting co-national support may not be available. However, other points of similarity are evident; students can connect through their learning – their subject is a shared need and interest, as can be sport, pastimes and social interests. One student commented that being forced to network with people outside their co-national group is beneficial to their English language development and intercultural competence.

Academic and support staff can assist students to become more confident at university by becoming more aware of the barriers that NESB students may face. For example, more support for e-learning and peer learning, communication and feedback from academics were all mentioned by NESB students in the data. More cross-cultural awareness among academic staff may also be beneficial, and simple strategies for this can include providing advance copies of lecture notes, support materials and specialist vocabulary lists, teaching genre-specific skills, and modelling of formats and genres. Staff may also need to become more aware that being shown how to do something only once may not be enough for students to internalise all the concepts.

Student Services staff were able to highlight the main reasons for students withdrawing from courses as being about finances, health reasons, family issues, discrimination and academic difficulties. While these problems are not all only related to NESB students, they represent a challenge for all university staff. Social and structural supports should therefore include strategies that span a timescale which starts before enrolment until completion and job seeking.

Recommendations

The results of this study are based on a small sample of NESB students at a regional university. The following recommendations are made:

Further research

The findings from this study would benefit from further research drawing from samples across all regional campuses of the university. An extension of the project to collect NESB student experience from all regional campuses would be helpful and should include collection and consideration of quantitative data on:

- student intermission or withdrawal in terms of the time in semester these events tend to occur;
- the demographic of the student catchment area to investigate the potential NESB student population in the catchment area, and determine whether there are any barriers to university entry for this group of students.

This quantitative data, together with the online English language experience survey and focus group discussions would provide an overview of regional student experience, including insight into the pressures and benefits NESB students experience from studying in regional settings. This data would provide a point of comparison to the metropolitan campuses and would assist in more effective provision of pathways and supports at every campus.

As noted previously, in the discussion section some of the reasons for student withdrawal were related to health and family issues, finances, academic difficulties and discrimination. These present a general challenge for university staff because although NESB students have these difficulties, they are also evinced by many students across the campus. It is therefore important that there are social and structural supports in place for these students, even before enrolment.

Learning and teaching strategies

Findings indicate that some learning and teaching strategies already in place at the university are proving to be beneficial for NESB students. These effective strategies could be more systematically promulgated and adopted. For example, consideration could be given to ways to facilitate sharing of good practice by academics, workshops could be used to raise cultural and linguistic awareness for staff and to develop intercultural communication skills. Academic encouragement and guidance for group work and discussion sessions, including assessment of intercultural communication and competence inherent in group work, may also be beneficial. Peer learning, communication and feedback from academics were all mentioned by NESB students in the data. Simple strategies can include providing advance copies of lecture notes, support materials and specialist vocabulary lists, teaching genre-specific skills, and modelling of formats and genres.

Successful intercultural communication is a part of current learning and teaching. The goal is for *all* learners, NESB and ESB, to become competent, and involves developing sensitivity to “differing perceptions, attitudes and interpretation” (Wang & Le, 2006, p. 2). Students express emotion around learning – the need to feel safe, respected, to ‘belong’ before they can take a risk to ask a question or state an opinion and become an active participant in a class. Academic staff should include activities to build social relationships in their classes early in the semester. This should include recognising and exploring cultural differences as a point of value and interest which is essential in the education of global citizens.

Investigation into strategies and opportunities for NESB learning and teaching at tertiary level across Australia should be undertaken to assist the university in targeting its resources in the most effective way. Focus on resources compiled by Association for Academic Language and Learning (AALL) would be a useful first step. Secondly, in line with the university review of the provision of academic support across the university, additional study support initiatives for this group of NESB students should be considered. The additional support should reflect the student suggestion that effective support should be flexible, available at point of need, embedded in subjects as far as is practical and include the option of online resources.

Online delivery modes

Findings indicate that online delivery modes are both helpful and problematic to NESB students. Academic and support staff can assist students to become more confident at university by becoming more aware of the barriers that NESB students may face using technology. For example, Beginner Computer classes and support for e-learning should be systematically provided. Staff may also need to become more aware that being shown how to do something only once may not be enough for students to internalise all the concepts.

English language development

Findings indicate that NESB students’ English language needs include the opportunities and resources to acquire proficiency, and an understanding by academic staff of NESB students’ strengths in English and intercultural awareness. Social activities, networks, and buddy systems may be helpful at both classroom and campus level in the first six weeks of semester. New students could benefit from communication with local students before enrolment. An E-friends program, mirroring the *Student Life E-friends* pilot program begun in semester 1, 2009, could be developed to facilitate this.

Refugee students

Findings indicate that refugee students have particular needs – the Australian education system is likely to be new to them. They would benefit from an orientation similar to the program international students have access to, including a document that provides information and contacts of people who can offer advice and support. (see Appendix 2).

The role of Refugee Contact Person should be reviewed and clarified, particularly regarding the facilitation of pathways to entering university and on-going support to refugee students as they study.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Non English Speaking Background (NESB) Student Data, Albury-Wodonga
Student Equity Report 2008, La Trobe University: Equity and Diversity Centre,

Appendix 2

New Arrival Kit