QUT

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Indian students at QUT: Expectations and experiences

Basu, Swati
International Student Services
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia
Email: s1.basu@qut.edu.au

Akbar, Heena
International Student Services
Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane, Australia
Email: h.akbar@qut.edu.au

Abstract

India currently ranks among the top source countries for the Australian education industry and therefore, a better understanding of the concerns and challenges confronted by Indian students is essential. This study was undertaken to assess the needs and expectations of Indian students enrolled at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) that would inform the formulation of strategies to provide superior service to the current and future cohorts of students coming from India. Data collection was undertaken through surveys and focus group meetings. The findings reveal the acute need for more effective dissemination of information prior to the students commencing their programs on both academic and non-academic aspects of university life as well as the resources and support available at QUT. Usage of English in an academic setting, career related services, accommodation, and networking opportunities were identified as some of the key areas of concern by the participants.

Keywords

Indian students, international student experience, focus group.

Introduction

Australia has gained recognition as one of the world's leading providers of education and training. Students from different parts of the world have made Australia their education destination. This is the result of an innovative and effective education system. Australian qualifications are widely recognized, gaining the attention of many employers worldwide and launching many successful careers. The Australian education experience is seen as different and challenging, each year attracting to its shores hundreds of thousands of international students who wish to maximize their potential and secure their future.

In the past decade, more than a million overseas students have studied in Australia. The international student enrolment data for 2009 shows that 631,935 international students drawn from more than 100 different countries were undertaking a qualification in Australia (Australian High Commission 2010). Over one in five tertiary students in Australia were international students (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). These students reportedly chose an Australian education for several reasons: its reputation for excellence and world-wide recognition; the safety and stability of the Australian society; Australia's enviable standard of living – one of the highest in the world; and Australia's multicultural community which helps international students feel at home.

In keeping with the international student enrolment trends, the number of Indian students studying in Australia has also grown rapidly over last decade. In fact, the growth rate in Indian student numbers far outstripped the growth rate in students from most other countries. The end of year Indian student enrolment data for 2009 shows that 120,913 Indian students had enrolled to undertake an Australian qualification in that year. This suggests one out of every five international students enrolled in Australian institutions is from India. This makes India the second top-source country (after China) for Australia's international education providers. To put it in perspective, India was ranked eighth in the list of top-source countries as recent as in 2003 when Indian students accounted for less than 5% of all international student enrolments. For Indian students, Australia became the second most popular international education destination behind the United States.

Indian students find it easy to transfer to the Australian education system due to the similarity in the 10+2+3 education structures of the two countries.[1] Students can choose from a wide variety of Australian universities and education institutions to suit their specific needs and goals. Each higher education institution has its own strengths and areas of specialisation. This provides students with a wide choice of study options and access to the latest research in their chosen field. The most popular courses amongst Indian students coming to Australia are in the areas of business, information technology, engineering, and science. Although vocational education and training (VET) sector attracted by far the greatest share of enrolments among Indian students (62% in 2009), enrolments in the higher education sector also grew three-fold between 2003 and 2009 to reach 24% (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009).

There is plenty of evidence on marketing, recruitment and destination choice for tertiary education but very limited research has been done to examine the support needs of International students from India and services provided by international student support in Australian Universities. There is a continual need on the part of Australian higher education providers to be attuned to the changing perceptions and needs of international students. Any perception of decline in overall quality of education and related services can result in students becoming reluctant to select Australia as their destination and instead choosing to study elsewhere. Sometimes a single issue like security (on and off campus) can exert substantial influence in choice of destination countries, cities, and education providers. For example, incidents of violence against Indian students in 2009 and the consequent media attention had damaging effects on Australia's reputation as a safe destination for study among Indian nationals (Graycar, 2010).

The perceived needs of Indian International Students and how these are met with support services are important in their academic and student life in Universities. Understanding the overall Indian student experience in Australia, in relation to both life on campus and outside it, is critical to assess the needs of the students and identify areas of concern. This knowledge would be informative to higher education providers in devising successful strategies to provide superior service to the current and future cohorts of students coming from India. This is the overarching motivation of the current study.

Background and Aims

In keeping with the international student trends in Australia, Queensland University of Technology's (QUT) international student population has also seen steady increase in the last decade. In 2009, out of a student population of 40,000, nearly 6,700 students enrolled in QUT were international students. About 5% of these students were from India. Subsequently the number of Indian students, both in absolute and relative terms, sharply declined. This slump is not unique to QUT but is a trend reflected across all Australian education providers and is consistent with the anecdotal evidence of widespread concern among Indian students about choosing Australia as their study destination in the wake of several violent attacks reported against Indian students mainly in the southern states during 2009.

This strong interest among Indian students in Australia as an education destination in recent years has been underpinned by a perception of quality. Australia has comprehensive quality assurance mechanisms embedded in its education system at the government and institutional level as well as through professional peak bodies. To maintain their reputation as providers of high quality education experience, Australian universities need to offer robust student support services and conduct regular quality assessment of those services. This is a complex task in itself.

Whilst Western higher education institutions are academically among the best, they are continually challenged by the need to simultaneously address the cognitive, social, and interpersonal development of students (Keeling 2004). Despite the interwoven nature of learning, programs, services, and systems, support for students may remain fragmented and separate. Such fragmentation had been common among institutions in the past. However, sophisticated student affairs models and infrastructures have been found to dramatically enhance students' experience in Western colleges and universities (Chakrabarti, Bartning, & Sengupta 2009). Australian universities are no exception to this.

Student experience is not confined to what is delivered within the university campus. For international students, education involves much more than just acquiring an overseas qualification. By studying abroad, students gain valuable experience through living and working in a foreign country. These opportunities, however, come with the additional set of challenges of adjusting to changed social and cultural settings. The change in surroundings can result in feelings of disorientation and helplessness (Furnham & Bochner 1986). These feelings are possibly accentuated at times of crises, real or perceived, like the reports of violent attacks on Indian students flashed

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[1] This is based on 12 years of schooling followed by 3 years on undergraduate university education.

regularly in the media. Feelings of isolation and loneliness have also been reported by Deumart et al. (2004) among issues affecting a large proportion of international students.

There has been very little research done on Indian student experience in Australian universities in the past. Islam and Borland (2006) conduct a qualitative study with a very small sample of South Asian students in Australia which include a few Indian students. Handa and Power (2005) also research Indian students in Australia but they focus on a single aspect – plagiarism in a culturally different context. To our knowledge, the present study is the first to attempt capturing the different facets of Indian students' experience, both within and outside the university campus, using a relatively large sample size.

Table 1 presents QUT's annual new enrolment numbers for Indian students over last four years. The aggregate number for all international student enrolments is given in the parentheses for comparison. The data indicates dramatic drop in number of Indian student enrolments in 2010 from that of previous years. The overall international student numbers, however, were steady over this period. This was the background for the current study conducted among Indian students currently enrolled at QUT.

Table 1. Indian Student Enrolments at QUT

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011
Enrolments	187 (3,212)	186 (3,641)	86 (3,674)	91 (3,210)

In order to maintain its excellent reputation as a quality education provider, QUT aims to deliver very high standard of service as well as continuously improve the overall experience of the international students enrolled in its programs. The International Student Services (ISS) plays a central role in achievement of these goals. The ISS, through its multifarious activities, provides dedicated support service to international students to adjust to life and study in Australia and assist them in resolving any problems that may arise during their course of stay in Australia.

The goal of ISS is not only to provide service that meets the needs and expectations of the international students but also to enhance existing services through constant monitoring, evaluation and assessment. It is in this context, the current study was undertaken to gain a better understanding of how ISS can provide or facilitate in providing better services to Indian students enrolled in QUT. The aims of the study were as follows.

- Understand and assess needs and expectations of Indian students
- Explore their experiences
- Discuss problems, issues, and coping mechanisms
- Get feedback on existing services provided by QUT
- Seek suggestions on how to improve services

Methodology

This study involved two data collection techniques – conducting e-mail survey and focus group meetings– which were employed sequentially. Responses from the former served as the basis of more in-depth discussion in the latter. The methodology adopted in each of these stages is described below.

Survey

For the survey, responses were sought from all Indian students enrolled in QUT. Key Survey, an online survey creation tool used at QUT, was used to develop and distribute the survey questionnaire online. The survey questionnaire consisted of 14 questions seeking information on different aspects of student life and experiences. 7 of these questions offered multiple-choice responses whilst 6 questions were descriptive in nature. There was 1 question which required a 'Yes' or 'No' response. Although individual information was requested, it was not compulsory for students to identify themselves on the survey form. A total of 280 Indian students enrolled in various courses at QUT were found in the university's student database. E-mails were sent out individually to these students where the link to the survey http://survey.qut.edu.au/survey/171500/5c53/ was provided. In addition to this the survey (with the web link) was also advertised in ISS news for a few weeks consecutively. Responses from 41 students who completed the survey were downloaded from Key Survey.

Focus group

Invitations were sent out to all 280 Indian students enrolled at QUT as found in the student database. Of the 280 students, 18 registered. These students were split into two groups and meetings held on separate days to suit their convenience. Questions were asked over morning or afternoon tea, in an informal setting. Focus group evaluation form, facilitator's feedback form, and focus group interview guide were used to conduct the meeting and collect relevant data.

For the focus group, data collection approach was inductive in nature to gather as much evidence as possible with nothing ruled out. As Dalglish & Chan (2005) points out, through the inductive process it is possible to identify issues that have not been previously identified in the existing literature. Nevertheless a clear set of questions was used as a guide for orienting ideas, but students were able to move outside of this framework when and where they wished to add something of their own. Focus group discussion was centered around experiences of Indian students studying at QUT, perceived needs/concerns of Indian students, and perception of services provided by QUT and ISS.

At the beginning of the focus group session, the purpose of the session - to collect information that might enable ISS to improve its services - was explained to the participants. Complete confidentiality of individual comments was guaranteed. At no time during the session was the identity of any individual speaker recorded. The sessions lasted between one and one and half hours. Where students had individual issues that needed to be addressed, they met with the facilitator after the session. Those students who attended contributed openly on different issues, though it is to be expected that only the most pressing issues could be raised in a single meeting. The relaxed and conversational nature of the group sessions enabled students to explore the issues and spontaneously contribute to the discussions.

Sample Data

As stated before, 41 responses to the survey form were received. As shown in Table 2, the number of survey respondents was almost evenly split between undergraduate and postgraduate students. A majority of respondents (75%) were enrolled in coursework programs. However, research students were well represented with about 25% of the respondents belonging to that category.

There were 18 students who participated in the focus group meetings. There were 8 participants (7 male, 1 female) in the first meeting. The second meeting had 10 participants (6 male, 4 female). Unlike the survey, most participants in the focus group meetings were postgraduate students.

Table 2. Student Categories

Enrolment	Survey	Focus Group
	Number (Percentage)	Number (Percentage)
Undergraduate	21 (51.2%)	5 (27.8%)
Postgraduate (coursework)	10 (24.4%)	10 (55.6%)
Postgraduate (research)	10 (24.4%)	3 (16.6%)

Figure 1 presents the age distribution of survey respondents.[2] The 18-25 age group was, by far, the largest age category in the survey sample data. More than half of all survey respondents belonged to this age group. On the other hand, there were only 2 respondents above 40 years, which is about 5% of the total number of respondents.

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[2] The same data for focus group participants could not be procured as it was optional for them to provide personal information beyond a bare minimum in order to retain anonymity.
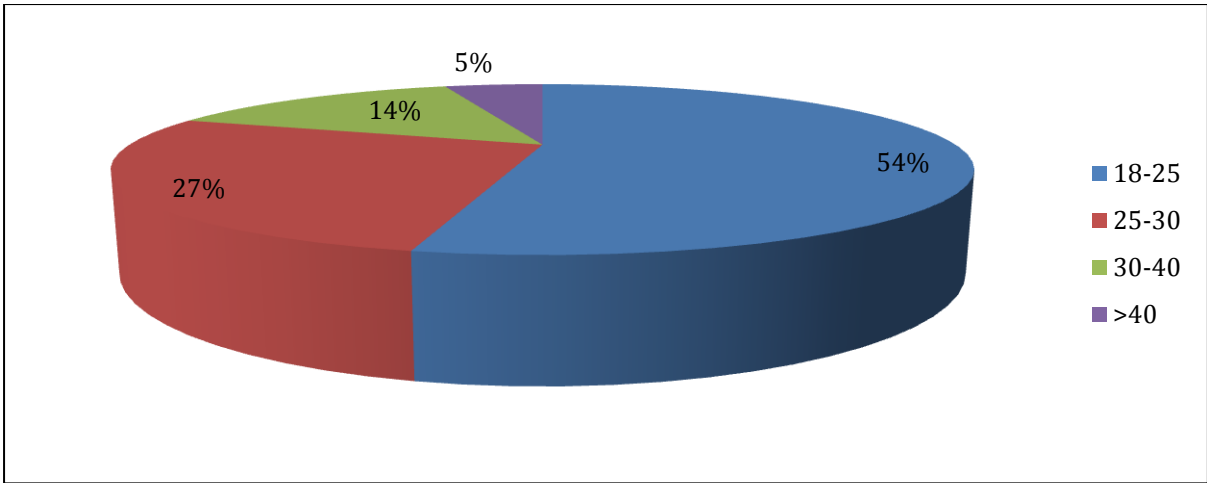
Figure 1. Respondents' Age

Within every age group except 'above 40', both undergraduate and postgraduate students were well represented as shown in Figure 2. As expected, undergraduate students vastly outnumbered postgraduate students in the youngest cohort (18-25) in the sample. For other age groups, the proportion of postgraduate students was higher.
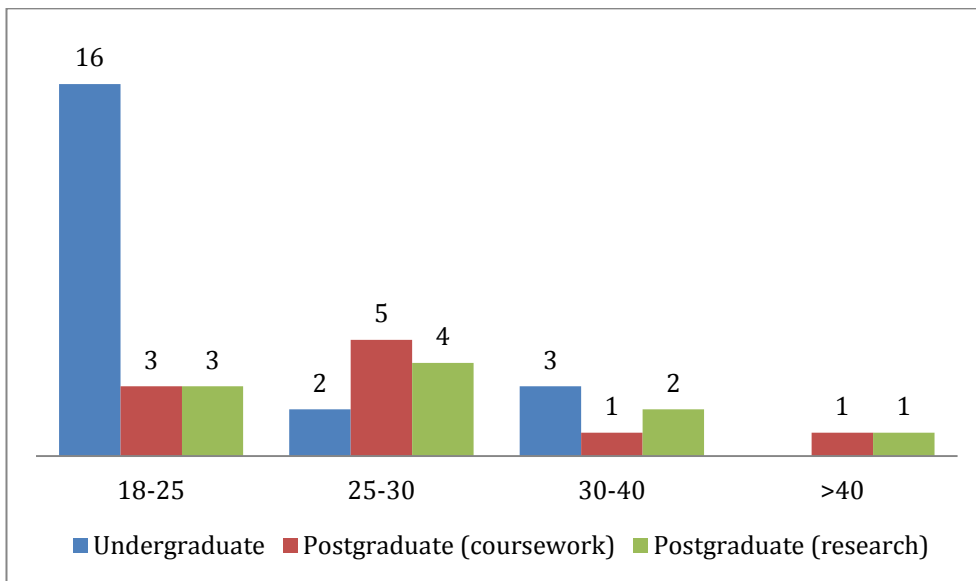

Figure 2. Age Distribution by Categories

Results and Discussion

The results of the survey and focus group meetings are presented and discussed below.

Survey

Students were asked to specify the reason(s) behind their decision to study at QUT. The responses are tabulated in Table 3. Since students were allowed to pick more than one factor that influenced their selection, the number of reasons is higher than the total number of respondents.

From the responses, it appears that reputation of the institution was the most important factor behind the students' decision to study at QUT. This was closely followed by reputation of the course and desire to study in Australia. This is consistent with the findings of Dalglish (2005). Personal and family reasons played a less

important role. The responses also suggest that financial reasons like tution fees, living costs etc appeared to have negligible infuence on choosing QUT as the institution of study.

Table 3. Reasons for studying at QUT

Reasons	No. (percentage) of Responses
To study in Australia	15 (36.6%)
QUT's reputation	19 (46.3%)
Reputation of the course	16 (39%)
Tuition fee	1 (2.4%)
To live in Brisbane city	2 (4.9%)
Cost of living	0 (0%)
Recommended by a QUT graduate	4 (9.8%)
Personal reasons (e.g. Family lives here)	6 (14.6%
Other	12 (29.3%)

Next the survey explored the issue of perception about cost living, specifically the student's expectation before arriving in Brisbane vis-à-vis what they actually confronted while living here. The responses summarised in Table 4 indicates that more than half of the respondents found that living cost to be higher than what they had expected. However, a sizeable proportion of respondents (39%) found that cost of living in Brisbane was as per expectation.

Table 4. Cost of Living

Cost of living in Brisbane	No. (percentage) of Responses
Same as I expected	16 (39%)
More than I expected	21(51.2%)
Less than I expected	0
Uncertain	4(9.8%)

Social life forms an important part of the international student experience in Australia and the survey focussed on this aspect next. Participants were asked to identify whether their friends in Australia were mainly students from their home country (India), domestic students or international students from other countries. The results shown in Figure 3 do not suggest that Indian students have any clear preference to develop friendship with any particular group. More than half of the respondents indicated that their friends were a mix of domestic and international students. From the responses, it seems equally likely that Indian students would develop friendship with other Indian students or international students from other countries.
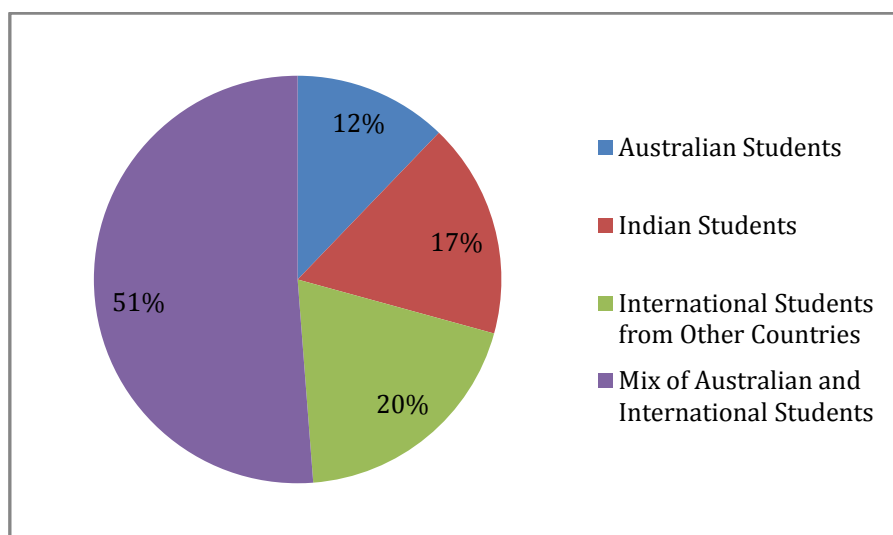
Figure 3. Friends of Respondents

Next, the students were asked to respond to the concerns and challenges they faced during the time they spent in Brisbane and QUT. The responses are presented in Table 5. Financial and migration issues appear to be the dominant concern among the respondents. Almost half of the respondents faced challenges with the cost of living issues and more than a third of the respondents cited financial concerns. Two in five respondents indicated changing migration conditions as a concern. Next in line were issues related with accommodation and food. 30% of the respondents cited accommodation as a challenging issue and 25% found the same with food. Adapting to new academic environment and study methods concerned a quarter of the respondents. Social needs like friendship needs, homesickness were also of concern to nearly 20% of the respondents. Very few survey respondents (less than 10%) indicated English language to be a challenge, which is consistent with the findings of previous research on Indian students like Deumart et al. (2004) and Dalglish & Chan (2005).

Table 5. Concerns and Challenges

Issues	No. (percentage) of Responses
English language (social use)	3 (7.3%)
English language (academic use)	2 (4.9%)
Adapting to new place	6 (14.6%)
Adapting to new/different study methods	11 (26.8%)
Financial concerns	15 (36.6%)
Food	10 (24.4%)
Accommodation	12 (29.3%)
Cost of living	19 (46.3%)
Changing migration conditions	16 (39%)
Meeting religious needs	4 (9.8%)
Feeling homesick	7 (17.1%)
Keeping in touch with family and friends	4 (9.8%)
Making new friends	9 (22%)
Relationship with QUT staff	4 (9.8%)
Other	4 (9.8%)

In light of the challenges confronted by the students, the survey also asked the participants whose support they would seek regarding their concerns. Responses are tabulated in Table 6. The overwhelming response to this question was friends within QUT and family members. More than 35% respondents mentioned about speaking to lecturers and tutors. Only 28% of the respondents stated that they would speak to an ISS advisor about their concerns. This was identical to the number of respondents who said they would speak to friends outside QUT in these matters. The results also indicated Indian students are unlikely to talk about their concern to community persons or religious advisors.

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Table 6. Discussing Concerns

If you had a concern, who would you speak to?	No. (percentage) of Responses
Family	22 (56.4%)
Friends outside QUT	11 (28.2%)
Friends within QUT	24 (61.5%)
Community person (e.g. religious advisor)	1 (2.6%)
Lecturer, Tutor	14 (35.9%)
ISS Advisor (International Student Services)	11 (28.2%)

Finally the survey asked whether they would like attend a focus group meeting to discuss the above issues further. Nearly 60% of the respondents answered in the affirmative.

Focus Group

The focus group meetings were organised to gain deeper understanding of the issues related to the Indian students' experience of studying at QUT and living in Brisbane. The objective was to understand needs, concerns, and challenges faced by these students within and outside university, assess the current level of support provided by QUT and ISS in relation to these issues, and identify specific steps that could be taken to close the gap between student requirements and services offered by the university.

The focus group meeting revealed the following concerns. Most participants raised problems that were academic in nature. However issues related to personal adjustments in a foreign environment, financial challenges also came into fore.

- English language for academic usage like completing assignments proves difficult. Level of language skills demanded is higher than what students originally expected.
- Lecturers have specific expectations and requirements from assignments but offer very general and broad feedback
- Resume writing service needs to be improved
- IELTS (related to migrating to Australia)– high fees, problem with scoring
- Proof reading service in the library is of only 15minutes which is not enough
- Temporary accommodation costs are very high
- Transport – mixed comments; considered safe but expensive and less convenient
- Safety is an issue – Indians get mugged more often because they are reluctant to report such incidents to the police. (No racial feelings, discrimination were experienced by any of the participants.)
- Hard to make friends
- Difficult to find jobs
- Lack of proactive support by QUT
- Students who are unable to cope fail – leads to depression – go back to India without seeking support

While concerns were highlighted during the meeting, a major part of the discussions revolved around what could be done to alleviate students' concerns and provide them with more support in coping with academic and living issues. The emphasis was to learn what the focus group participants thought would be helpful. Following is a list of specific steps/actions that were suggested during the meeting.

- Proper and authentic pre-departure briefings including information about coursework and level of required English language proficiency
- More information needs to be made available to parents back in India (to address concern and, at times, reluctance to send wards to Australia after media coverage about racist attacks, natural disasters)
- Giving out complimentary phone cards at arrival
- Providing arriving students with a list of cheap food and lodging options
- Providing list of vegetarian food outlets
- Providing more information about assignments - with samples provided
- Mentoring /tutoring facilities in their respective subjects. Senior students can mentor new ones in their own fields
- More information on the level of English language skills required should be covered in orientation.
- More detailed information should be provided at the Faculty orientation
- More English language support
- Free printing services for international students

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- More networking facilities by conducting meetings (like the current focus group), workshops, social and cultural events (The role of ISS was valued by most participants. One commented, "if a student ever walks in through it's (ISS) doors, we know he'll be fine"... "He'll be looked after, nurtured and supported")
- More information needs to be provided on services offered by ISS
- Discussion group meetings, forums and focus groups should be held more often with one at the start of the semester
- Meetings with police could be organised as these are very helpful in addressing safety concerns and raising awareness
- Students need to feel homely away from home: Can be achieved by providing support through people who can speak their language, understand their cultural, socio-economic backgrounds (someone who could relate to them)

The focus group also deliberated on what students themselves could do to address some of the issues they face while studying at QUT and living in Australia. The participants showed recognition of the areas where more effort needs to be put in. Some important points that emerged from the discussions are provided below.

- Students expressed the need to move around (away from their own cultural group) and mix more with students from different backgrounds
- Show a more serious attitude towards achieving their goals and aspirations
- Get more involved in sports and other co-curricular activities
- Get their priorities right
- Speak up for themselves and not suffer from inferiority complex due to living in a foreign environment
- Deal with the cultural shock effectively by opening up to people from other cultures and background
- Be more aware of the facilities and resources available to them

Implications

The analysis of the survey responses and observations at the focus group discussions has important implications for student support services. These are provided below.

a) Pre-departure briefing seminars should be bolstered by providing more emphasis on academic issues. Expected level of English language proficiency required to undertake degree programs (and to communicate socially) should be made clear. Sample of academic writing in English could be provided. More information regarding assignments typically undertaken by students (with some samples) could also be provided. Time allocated to these briefings should be increased providing representatives more opportunities for one on one consultation with the students. This could be followed up at the orientation sessions students attend after arriving in Australia.

b) Possibilities of extending Library editing service time should be explored. Resume writing and other career related services needs to be improved.

c) Accommodation is one of the most important issues for arriving students. Whilst information is available to students on bonds, lease, tenancy rules and regulations (RTO), it is not clear whether students are optimally using these resources. Perhaps students could be more strongly urged during pre-departure briefings to gain familiarity with these regulations before arriving in Australia.

d) To overcome feelings of loneliness away from home, more social networking opportunities could be provided. Group discussion meetings, workshops, seminars are very helpful if such meetings are held at the start of the semester. Mutual discussions among members help clarify issues and sharing of knowledge and information takes place. Helpful practical tips could be passed on by seniors to newly arrived students.

e) Periodic sessions could be organised with members of the police to apprise students about safety and security issues and help dealing with any potential law and order situations with confidence.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to monitor, evaluate, and assess the needs of Indian students studying at QUT. Although the study was undertaken on a small sample, it provided some insight into what attracted students to study at QUT, how well they coped after arriving in Australia and whether the overall experience stood up to the expectations students come with. This information can be useful to higher education providers to communicate with prospective students and also to help them provide a more effective learning experience.

The survey response and focus group discussions found that Indian students feel the need for more support from the university in various areas, although there was appreciation for the assistance currently offered by QUT. In terms of identifying which issues are of more concern to Indian students, the survey and focus group findings were not always consistent. For example, issues related to usage of English language in an academic setting

emerged as a major issue in the focus group meeting but it was not picked up by the survey results at all. On the other hand, migration related issues were cited as concern by many survey respondents but was not raised by any of the focus group participants. It is to be noted that in recent years QUT has established learning and language services for international students where students are provided support with language related issues in an academic context. The response of the focus group, not the least because of the small number of participants, may not be representative of the experience of all Indian students. Migration matters are inherently complex and shifting in nature and whilst the ISS organises workshops and advice sessions through an immigration agent, there are obvious regulatory limitations to what universities can offer in this area.

Overall, our findings suggest there is an acute need for more detailed information prior to students commencing their studies in Australia. In relation to Indian students at QUT, Dalglish & Chan (2005) emphasised the importance of orientation. In this study, it was apparent the students felt the need to have more information prior to their enrolment or before their arrival in Australia. This covers both academic and non-academic areas. Improvements in services to enrolled students are sought mainly in areas like academic support, career matters, low cost accommodation and provision of more networking opportunities.

One very concerning revelation was that Indian students who confronted difficulties in coping with their studies or personal life were not very likely to tap into university services like ISS for advice or guidance. The feedback suggests that Indian students are more likely to seek assistance from their family and friends. Sometimes these sources may not be reliable in terms of providing current information or appropriate referral to support services available at the university. Interestingly, Indian students who made use of support services like ISS generally had positive experiences to share. It makes a strong case for exploiting existing resources of the university better through more efficient dissemination of information among the student community.

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