CURTIN UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

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NON-ENGLISH SPEAKING BACKGROUND (NESB) STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR LINGUISTIC AND EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

NESB students' perceptions of their linguistic and educational needs and the availability of support structures to meet such needs are crucial to their improvement in academic performance and success in the tertiary system. While a number of surveys have been undertaken at Curtin University to gauge NESB student satisfaction with their courses and university services, it was felt that in-depth interviews with a small group of students would provide a more detailed picture of student needs.

Eighteen NESB students, both local and international, were interviewed in some depth for this project. While the results indicate a high level of satisfaction with academic and other services provided by Curtin, they also point to some very clear areas for improvement. In particular, students indicated they require: various forms of English language support; encouragement to help them to mix more with Australian students, both in order to learn about Australian culture and to become more proficient in English; and staff who are more attuned to their linguistic and cultural needs and who can better provide for them.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

1. INTRODUCTION

A number of surveys have been undertaken at Curtin University to gauge NESB/ international student satisfaction with their courses and with university services (for example, the Experiences of International Students Survey, 1996). Several staff have also undertaken research into the needs of NESB and international students, particularly at the post-graduate level (Chung 1995; Hall 1996; Parker, Kirkpatrick & Kisane, 1997). It was felt, however, that in-depth interviews with a small group of first and second year NESB students would provide some useful information from the students' perspective and a more detailed picture of student needs at the undergraduate level, thus supplementing existing information.

1.1 PROJECT OBJECTIVES

The aim of this project was to consult a small number NESB students in order to ascertain:

1   their perceptions of their linguistic, cultural and educational needs in the tertiary context, and

2   how well they felt Curtin University was meeting such needs.

1.2 DATA GATHERING

A memo was sent to all Heads of School requesting the assistance of staff in identifying a number of students to participate in the study. This information indicated that students would be required to participate in a brief focus group meeting and to take part in an interview. As an inducement, participating students would be given a small book-voucher.

As a result, a number of students were referred to the researcher. The focus group meeting proved to be too difficult to organise due to limited and different times of availability of students. It was therefore dispensed with and individual interview times were arranged.

The bulk of interviews took place in September/ October 1997. Before their interviews, students were asked to complete a brief questionnaire asking for their personal details. The questionnaire also sought information relating to country and language of instruction for primary and secondary education and contained a brief English language self-rating scale (see Appendix 2). Interviews, which were semi-structured, lasted for between 30 and 55 minutes (see interview questions in Appendix 3). All interviews were taped and later transcribed and analysed.

1.3 THE SAMPLE

In all, 18 students were interviewed for this project. The group consisted of 12 females and 6 males in their first, second or third year or undertaking post-graduate studies at Curtin University. Originally it had been intended to include only first and second year students. However, several third year and post-graduate students contacted the researcher indicating they were willing to be interviewed. Some of these third and fourth year students had in fact been at Curtin for under two years, having completed several semesters or a full degree overseas in other tertiary institutions. Moreover, several of them also claimed, probably with some justification, that they could speak more authoritatively about their needs than could first year students who had been here for just over a semester. It was therefore decided to include those who were willing to participate, irrespective of their year of study or length of time at Curtin.

The group thus comprised 2 students in their first year, 11 students in their second year, 2 students in their third year and 3 post-graduate students. The students came from a number of different schools across the university, as follows: 9 from different sub-schools of the Curtin Business School, 1 from Social Sciences, 1 from Marine Sciences, 1 from Mechanical Engineering, 1 from Art, 1 from Design, 1 from Pharmacy, 1 from Nursing, 1 from Public Health and 1 from Exploration Geophysics.

The largest group (11) of NESB students was of Malaysian nationality, with 3 NESB Australian students, 1 Taiwanese, 1 French, 1 Russian and 1 Indonesian. Students had been in Australia from as little as 3 months to 13 years and all were bilingual, with 8 speaking three or more languages.

The characteristics of the group are illustrated in Appendix 1.

2 FINDINGS OF THE PROJECT

The findings of this project, based on analysis of the questionnaires and interviews, are reported under the three following headings:

- English language issues
- Cultural issues
- University services and university support.

2.1 ENGLISH LANGUAGE ISSUES

Students were asked questions relating to their English language needs, including:

- whether they had any special English language needs
- whether they felt they could use support (and what sort of support)
- whether they were able to ask for and obtain support within their school or elsewhere in the university.

All except three students indicated they could use some support with English language. Those who did not require support included one NESB Australian student who has completed most of her schooling in Australia and one Malaysian student who has grown up using English as a first language. The students who said they could use support mentioned need for it in all four macro skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, with speaking and writing being given the highest priority.

Students who reported they needed to improve their speaking skills indicated they did not always feel competent enough in their speech to be easily understood by local staff and students:

> *"For me, sometimes, when I speak in English, I need to think, I need to mix sentences in my mind… to see if the grammar is correct, the correct sentences, past tense or future tense. That's why I'm a bit slow in speaking … and in classes, sometimes, I feel I want to express my ideas or give suggestions to the tutor but I couldn't because I need time to think and see if this is the correct way of saying* [it]." [no 7–]

– this number refers to the student number indicated in Appendix 1.

A student who experienced problems with reading indicated that she found reading in English time-consuming and difficult:

> *"I think I know English.. it's just that when it comes to studying it, reading it, I take some time to absorb it… to absorb what the text-book is saying. Because, you see, sometimes the text-book is very long-winded….I don't know what's really the problem. I know it takes me a while to do my homework."* [no 14]

For another student the problem is becoming familiar with the language of different disciplines:

> *"We do different subjects, like psychology,* [and that's] *a different sort of language to what we are used to."*   [no 17]

Students who have difficulty with comprehension find it hard to follow in lectures and tutorials:

> *Sometimes I cannot catch up with what the lecturer says and I've lost everything… A mass lecture is quite difficult … Overheads, we sometimes try to copy them.. but they are taken off too quickly and we can't copy everything. Copy and listen at the same time.. that's difficult."* [no 15]

As for writing, apart from a concern to write in "grammatically correct" English, a more subtle need was expressed as follows:

> *"…and not just* [assistance with] *writing, but expressing myself in intellectually mature language, in academic language. Because sometimes, that's what I think is a bit difficult for non English-speaking people   … to make a distinction between, for example, between academic language, non-academic language and slang."* [no 2]

A self-rating scale which students were asked to complete as part of the questionnaire produced the following results for the four macro-skills

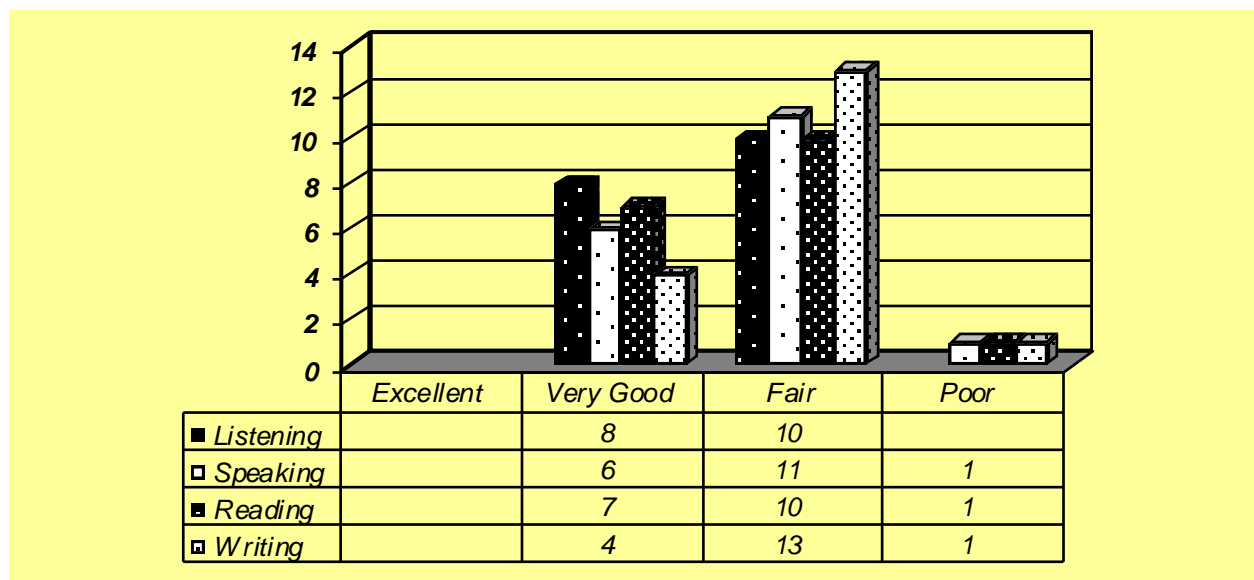|	Excellent	Very Good	Fair	Poor
■ Listening		8	10	
□ Speaking		6	11	1
■ Reading		7	10	1
□ Writing		4	13	1

Figure 1 Student self-rating on macro-skills in English

Although there are limitations to self-rating scales, in that individuals may have a different understanding of the descriptors, it is not surprising that writing is the skill that is ranked lowest and therefore, presumably, the one that poses the most difficulty for students. On the whole, the researcher would have agreed with the self-ratings, at least insofar as she was able to judge listening and speaking skills from the interview, except with perhaps two students whom she would have rated higher on the scale. There seemed to be no correlation between length of stay in Australia and self-rating on the macro-skills, nor was there any obvious correlation between self-rating and gender.

Apart from assistance with all four macro-skills, other English language needs reported by students included help required with note-taking, with reading of specialist texts, with essay writing format and with thesis editing.

Several students said that they could comprehend formal registers of language (e.g. in lectures) more easily than more casual registers. For this reason they sometimes had difficulty in tutorials following Australian students who, according to them, spoke 'slang' (but who may have been speaking in informal registers). They also perceived 'Australian' students as speaking faster and less clearly than lecturers and tutors.

> *"When students are responding to the tutor, that's the difficult part to get, because they speak very fast and they don't speak up… and sometimes, because of their accent, we couldn't get what the person was saying, so we just pretend we know."* [no 7]

A few also mentioned that they needed time to become familiar with the Australian accent and with operating in English when they first arrived, although they had different opinions about how long this might take, ranging from a week to six months.

2.1.1 OTHER LANGUAGE ISSUES

Students were asked whether they had access to study skills support. Several mentioned that this was available through their school and they had found it helpful. Of the international students, about half were unaware that studies skills classes were offered through the International Office and that they were free of charge. Those who had availed themselves of these classes in the past generally found them useful, although two students found them "too general".   One student mentioned that international students would be unlikely to want to attend study skills courses on their own and that they would be much more likely to attend such courses if they could find a friend to accompany them:

> *"Even if they know of such a program, they would be reluctant to join. It's the personality… because students of some Asian countries, they like to stick together…It's just that if you can find a couple of people to go, they will generally all of them go or you wouldn't find one going…. It's more of a courage thing, I suppose"* [no 5]

Two students described the sort of support they wanted as help with 'the grammar', indicating the need for perhaps more individualised support, while one student said she would prefer more 'role play' which she felt would help her with spoken English:

> *"Courses where we can practice English… Like we have a small classroom with a tutor and a few students to interact, to have conversations, role play… that would be good."* [no 7]

Several students believed that the best way to improve their English was to mix more with local students, but said they found this difficult for a variety of reasons (this issue is discussed in greater detail in the next section). One student said that she and her Malaysian friends had made a strict rule for themselves to speak English always, but, not surprisingly, found it difficult to keep to this arrangement when all students in the group were speakers of Malay.

Finally, several students spoke of their frustration when they felt unable to express certain more complex ideas fluently in English:

> *"I want to contribute during the tutorial… I got an idea inside me that I want to get through, but the problem is I don't know how to express it, in a way. The problem with us from overseas…. I speak for myself… we tend to think in our native tongue and when we speak, sometimes, we can't put our thoughts into words. We sort of can't speak up.. We've got the idea, we want to contribute but we don't know how to express it. That's the problem, I think."* [no 8]

2.1.2 LECTURES AND TUTORIALS

Several questions asked students to consider how well they felt they coped in lectures and tutorials insofar as language issues were concerned. They were also asked what sorts of things they found particularly helpful. Not surprisingly, the sorts of things that students indicated as 'helpful' make for all round good teaching.

In regard to lectures, students were asked what sorts of lecturing styles/ techniques they found particularly helpful and easy to follow. Students indicated that they found practical examples which illustrate theoretical aspects particularly useful. Other things which were considered helpful included:
- use of overhead transparencies (which are not whipped away before students have time to copy from them), and
- lecture notes or lecture outlines.

The following comments by students illustrate these points:

> "[Good lecturers] *provide examples to make it easier for us.. maybe make jokes where you can remember. Yeah… like ... use overheads"* [no 11]

> *"The lecturers who I prefer are lecturers that when they are presenting they make sense to you…they explain things in a sensible manner, in a logical manner… explain things which the students can understand, they can imagine. And they give you examples, if examples help. And they try to present it in a manner that the students can grasp the concept… it's the language itself* [that they use]." [no 5]

Students reported that in many cases they were already receiving this sort of lecture support. Other useful things were: very detailed unit outlines; lecturers who spoke slowly and clearly and did not use 'slang'; and lecturers who had 'good teaching skills':

"[It would be really helpful for students] *to get more experienced lecturers and for some lecturers to be more approachable, understanding, and very good in teaching skills.*"
[no 4]

On the other hand they found mass lectures very difficult to follow and a few lecturers difficult to understand. They also require assistance with some academic skills/ concepts. For example, one student indicated that she did not know what was required for a literature review. Upon asking other Australian students, however, she found that they also were unsure of what was required.

Tutorials were of more concern to students, many of whom said that they found it very difficult to participate in them fully. Generally, students indicated that they were reluctant to take a more active part in tutorials because:
- they were used to being 'spoon-fed' in their previous schooling system
- they were shy about speaking up
- they felt their spoken English was not as fluent as that of 'Australian students'
- they were not used to the Australian tutorial system.

One student put it thus:

"Participation-wise, there is a tendency amongst Asian students, myself included, not to be that vocal during tutorials. Maybe it's because of the difficulty we have in speaking English… perhaps it's also the culture. Back home we're not really used to voice out.. to be more vocal in the formal setting of a tutorial……We find that we are not used to that sort of environment…. being vocal in class" [no 5]

Another student expressed it like this:

" The way and style of teaching and corresponding with the tutors [here] *is very different.. because we tend to be spoon-fed back home. So when we go to class* [here] *we just sit and write notes and copy notes but we never tend to interact with the lecturer. But the tutorials here.. there are higher expectations… Like, they expect you to sort of .. like.. consult them and, you know, be more open in class and speak up. But back home, it's like everything is just spoon-fed so .. there's nothing much to ask and.. we tend to feel shy. It's difficult for us, you know… I'm facing this problem"* [no 9]

Because of the above reasons, when students had genuine questions, they would tend to first try to work the problem out for themselves and/ or contact the tutor or lecturer either after the lecture or at some other time:

"Although I don't understand, I wouldn't go straight to the lecturer, because for me, I prefer to go home and learn myself first and try to explore it and then, if you still don't understand it, then you approach the lecturer.. that might be a more appropriate way". [no 4]

"For me it's not easy [to participate in tutorials]. *I think I prefer just to listen to what people say …When a lecturer asks a question, I wouldn't be the first to answer. I wait for other people to answer and then…. Except if I disagree with it and I don't understand what it is, then I also prefer to stay back later to approach the lecturer instead of, you know, raise my hand and ask".* [no 13]

Another student said she would find it difficult to ask questions during a lecture but not during a tutorial:

> *"I would ask during a tutorial or after a tutorial.. I feel more confident to ask then. There is a set hour* [to see the tutors]… *other than that it's very difficult to catch them."* [no 18]

It is therefore particularly difficult for such students to seek help from sessional tutors who are not often on campus or do not have an office where they can be contacted.

Although most lecturers and tutors were considered approachable by students, almost all reported that a few lecturers were hard to approach or had a reputation of being hard to approach. They felt that in some instances lecturers or tutors had been curt and unhelpful in cases where they [the staff] had had difficulty understanding a student's English. Several students indicated that they don't like to approach lecturers in any case and that they make every effort to work things out for themselves before doing so. However, when they go to see academic staff, they do expect them to be understanding. This is not always the case:

> *"The more approachable the lecturer or the teaching staff is the better the students are. I came across one lecturer, if you ask him a question, he will answer back and that's it and he takes his papers with him and he turns his back away… If you go to his school you feel like he wants to chase you away. And you feel like the moment he finishes with your question you've got to go, can't stay long. That's really the annoying thing. And we've got another lecturer, it's really like chalk and cheese. You ask him a question and he will tell you anything that he thinks you might need in future, so this is really helpful. If you have really good teaching staff, students can spread out.."* [no 4]

It should be said that many students also commented that generally, staff were very helpful. Three students reported that staff were prepared to look at assignment outlines or drafts to make suggestions for improvement before students progressed too far with their assignments.

2.1.3 SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

Many students reported that there is not enough mixing in tutorials between international students and local students. They did not know how to improve this situation, but some indicated that their teachers were structuring activities that would encourage more mixing of students:

> *"Some of them* [Australian students] *want to mix with you…others can't be bothered. I don't know why…it's… that's really what happens in tutorial groups. They sit apart, each group sits together… white hair with white hair, dark hair with dark hair…"* [no 4]

Several students indicated that their school ran a mentoring system, especially for students in their first study year or in their first year on campus. Although one girl reported that she actively sought out a mentor from the same background, another student thought that mentors should all be 'Australian' so that NESB/ international students would be forced to speak more English and thus improve their English language skills.

Two students reported that working in 'mixed' teams on projects was a very useful experience which encouraged mixing but was also beneficial academically, allowing students to learn from different perspectives and different points of view:

> *"I like the teamwork as well. We sometimes have an assignment as a team.. four or five people. I think it's one of the best points. Because to be understood and to understand at*

all, you have to speak, just to convince others. You have to express your opinions, you can't be shy and not say anything…. And when you meet people from another culture, overseas people - I mean from Indonesia or even France - they have a very different way of thinking. It's a good way to learn about another culture… they feel… they react in a different way". [no 3]

One student complained that lectures which finished at 5.00 or 6.00 were too late, and meant that, with the travel involved, she would not reach home much before 7.00 or 8.00 p.m. Since she also worked some nights, this reduced her available study time.

Finally, two students said that lecturers and tutors should be made more aware of the language and other needs of NESB students:

"Well.. I think that maybe sometimes a lecturer finds it difficult to explain to a person who is not really from an English speaking background. And if the student doesn't understand what the lecturer is saying they [the lecturers] *can't do anything to help…"* [no 14]

One student put the point more strongly:

"Well, like I say, they want more international students to come to study here, but they should think how they take care of international students. It's not just get them into university. Do they think about what a lecturer will feel and what a student will feel? What local students will also feel? Yeah, I feel the school should think about this more, not just getting students in." [no 6]

2.2 CULTURAL ISSUES

Students were asked if, being from a different cultural background, they felt comfortable and supported on the major Curtin campus. Two students felt they were not supported as much as they could be, with 10 saying they felt quite comfortable and 6 indicating that they were very comfortable. The following comment is typical of students who felt comfortable at the university:

"I've got no problem with that [being an Indonesian student in an Australian university] *since I came down here… I'm willing to mingle with anybody and people are willing to mingle with me so… it's pretty good".* [no 12]

For another student the situation was not so clear-cut:

"Generally I feel comfortable [at Curtin] *but … I've not had a direct experience but I've heard of students being treated like ….being patronised by authority figures…administration, housing…just that little bit, you know…They think you are more like kids. Yeah, I've heard this kind of thing".* [no 10]

Asked whether they had ever experienced any racism, two students reported that they had: one student reported that an 'Australian student' had called out unwarranted insults to her and a friend about 'Asian students', while another reported what she perceived as racist bias from one lecturer.

Responses from other students indicated that they did not perceive any racism at Curtin:

"I feel comfortable. I didn't feel or meet any racism….I've heard that they [Australians] *are very friendly… I think they are very helpful."* [no 1]

However, there were undertones of some minor concern with the cross-cultural situation. Although most students reported that they had not experienced racist incidents themselves and felt Curtin was a culturally harmonious place, more than half said that friends of theirs had reported experiencing some racism or felt that some lecturers were biased against 'Asian' students.

"I think it's alright…just that sometimes what I heard friends say is that 'this lecturer is a bit biased towards Australian students', yeah. But I think.. I'm not sure… that's why I try not to be influenced by what my friends say. But sometimes, it's obvious that some of the tutors, they prefer to talk to Australian students. " [no 13]

A number of students also felt that although Curtin was culturally harmonious on the surface, there were undertones of things not being quite as positive as might appear. The comments of several students illustrate this point well:

"Well.. I can say that [Curtin is a culturally harmonious place] *because I didn't see and didn't feel any signs of racism or discrimination here. But… I felt sometimes that maybe I was better treated than some Asians, maybe because of my European background… I don't know why but… When, for example, I am using some library facilities and next door to me an Asian student is using library facilities… sometimes I feel that if I don't understand something the staff is more enthusiastic to help me, but if he or she does not understand something it's more….. but again, it's not explicit……"* [no 2]

"I think it [tutor bias] *would be in the way we were treated, like… in tutorials … interaction, basically. But usually it's not strong outright, you don't really feel it outright…like it's quite subtle. So sometimes, like, you're not sure whether there's a hidden message or we are paranoid or something like that, so it's a bit difficult to judge, you know?"* [no 10]

One student reported that she realises that Australian lecturers may appear more friendly to Australian students because *"Australian students are more open and friendly"*. For example, she said she would find it extremely difficult to compliment lecturers on items of dress or to make jokes or speak to lecturers on a more casual basis as some local students are able to do:

"Maybe it's because the way we talk confuses them [lecturers] *or the way we talk is, like, very slow and sometimes you can't get what they say. And so you find that during a mass lecture or discussions they prefer to talk to Australian students. And when there's free time they always joke with them but not with us … so …. But for us it's really, we don't know how to joke with them as well. Sometimes I really don't know whether it's because of his attitude or our attitude.. We are shy, most of us."* [no 13]

Almost all students decried that fact that there was not enough mixing between students of different nationalities and particularly that international students were not learning very much about the local culture. The following quote illustrates this fact very well:

"I find that the international students stick to themselves and the locals stick to themselves and there's not much mingling and I find that… It's sad, because for me, I come all the way here and I don't get to mix as much with Australians… And it seems as if I'm just in another land but in Malaysian culture, so I don't get any, like, any experience. So it's a waste to come all the way to Australia and not experience the culture fully, you know, so we should encourage mingling. We find it hard to approach the Australians in case, maybe, you don't know what to say….. You can say a few words and you don't know how to continue….. They probably find it the same, you know…" [no 10]

Students felt that if NESB and local students were left to their own devices, not much mixing would take place. They thought that the University should encourage students to mix by:

- promoting more mixing between overseas and local students in university housing
- having a mentor scheme between local and international students (these already exist in some schools)
- organising more cultural activities where such mixing could occur:

> *"I find that the reason why we come all this way to Australia is to see a different culture, to live in a new environment and to do things that we don't normally do back home. In other words, to experience something new.   And it would be quite wasteful if you were to come here and not be able to get this sort of experience to bring back home. So one thing that Curtin uni could do is to get students from NESB more involved in activities.. for example, the Curtin Volunteers, the Mundjah…that's the sort of activities that would generally draw them to try and experience things".* [no 5]

So far as cultural support is concerned, then, both in relation to supporting the student's first culture and in helping students to learn about the local culture, it was felt that the university needs to be more active. These findings are strongly supported by Nesdale and Todd (1993), Volet and Ang (1996) and by Hawthorne (1997), who indicates that what she terms 'cultural cleavage' or 'cultural enclosure' (ie the lack of interaction between local students and overseas NESB students) is fairly common in Australian universities.

2.3 UNIVERSITY SERVICES AND UNIVERSITY SUPPORT

Students were generally very happy with the quality of education they were receiving at Curtin. They thought Curtin was a good university and there was a positive assessment of Curtin's services for students:

> *"I'm very happy with what's going on* [at Curtin] *and with what's been offered to me until now. I think Curtin has made a lot of improvement forward in the five years since I've been here."* [no 12]

Library services and availability and accessibility of computers were rated as particularly good. Other services/ qualities which were rated as good, useful or helpful included:

- counseling services
- services offered by the International Office
- contacts with industry and business
- career advice service
- availability of E-mail for students
- supportive staff
- the natural setting of Curtin.

The comment of one student captures some of these positive qualities:

"I think Curtin is a very good university.. it's very nice. I think one of the best points about this university is the nature, the green paths, the trees… it's very important. You feel in a really good mood when you see a lot of trees and birds and things like that… And I think it is a culturally harmonious place… Because in [the student's home country] *universities we have a lot of racism, lots of graffiti. Here it's fairly good because Perth is quiet and it reflects, I think, the city".* [no 3]

There were, however, some suggestions for improvement. The following issues were mentioned several times:
- the need for more up-to-date equipment and better buildings in some areas
- the lack of a swimming pool and the limited number of sporting facilities available
- the need for a greater variety and better quality foods on the Bentley campus
- the need for more parking
- the fact that it was not possible to study European languages at Curtin (this issue was raised by two European and two Asian students).

Other issues included the following:

- the need for better security at night
- the need for more student advisers located within schools
- the need for courses to teach students how to use and evaluate Internet sources
- the need to teach more languages which would allow students to go to primary sources in languages other than English for research purposes
- the need for Curtin to explore education markets in places other than Asia
- the fact that some international students cannot attend their own graduation ceremony because it usually takes place in the year after their studies are completed [this matter has since been rectified].

However, of more concern than improved services, perhaps, were some NESB student perceptions that they were not very strongly supported by the university. The answers from two students to the following question speak for themselves:

Q: "As an NESB student, do you feel supported at this university?"

A: *"Not really, because what we do is, we just go across,*[from university housing] *attend our lectures, attend our class, do our work. If we have problems we ask friends and that's it…. Yeah.* [no 14]

A: *"Sometimes not… Concerning my course, I go to the unit coordinator or the tutors… But apart from that I cannot find too much help."* [no 15]

Several fee-paying students said that they sometimes felt they were wanted only for their money. There was a feeling that on top of paying their initial course fees, there were lots of extra charges for all sorts of other things, which they felt should have been covered by their fees. There was also a feeling that students should not always be left to their own devices and be forced to find out things by trial and error for themselves:

"I talked to several students and one of them said to me 'I have the feeling that I have to beg for everything.. please show me this and please show me that, and where is this and where is that'. Because, for example, only recently I found out that I could use the computer centre in the Library, that I can borrow CD Roms and all that stuff, so there's so many

opportunities within the university, you know, but you have to use Gestapo methods. You have to ask people and after that you get answers". [no 2]

One aspect which was sometimes overlooked, particularly in regard to international students, was the time they needed to become familiar with bureaucratic processes or 'systems' within the University. This was an issue, for example, in regard to learning how the library functioned and what services were available, and in regard to computers:

> *"Well, the main problem when I came here was that I found myself in an absolutely different system of education and the funny thing is that everybody expected that I know everything already."* [no 2]

Another thing which took time was becoming acquainted with Australian attitudes and behaviour in the University context which might be quite different to what was expected of students in their home country. For example, one student explained that in his country of origin students would not be admitted late to a tutorial, would not come to class barefoot and would not consume food in class.

Another student also made the point that perhaps local staff and students should be better prepared for having NESB international students in their midst:

> "[If you wanted Curtin to be truly international] *probably you would educate the locals, students and staff, about other cultures, about how they behave, about their way of life. The other thing is ask people from those other cultures to participate more".* [no 4]

It also became evident during interviews that there is a need to disseminate more information about services in a variety of formats and on an ongoing basis, since orientation programs, by themselves, are obviously insufficient. For example, some students in their second year were not aware of the availability of counseling services and of study skills support and religious support available to them.

Finally, one student concluded that she was happy that someone was taking the time to find out about NESB students' needs:

> *"I'm very happy to know someone like you is doing this…It's a good thing the school wants to know something. I feel that's great. And it feels good that you care about what we think, yeah. I feel very happy to know this and I did want to see something happen afterwards.. not just the school say, oh, OK, they have lots of problems."* [no 6]

3 FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As we can see from the above, although NESB/ international students are generally fairly happy with the sort of education they are receiving at Curtin and with the university's services, some areas for improvement have been quite clearly identified. Perhaps none of the issues raised is new and indeed, individual staff and some schools have, in recent years, implemented creative curriculum and other support strategies to assist international and local NESB students (Kulski & Brown, 1997; Bell & Jenkins, 1997). However, it is clear that much remains to be done as the university continues to pursue its goal of internationalisation. Action is required particularly in the following inter-related areas:

- providing better English language support for NESB/ international students.
- developing staff and students with the aim of creating a comfortable cross-cultural, international community
- internationalising Curtin campuses

3.1 PROVIDING BETTER ENGLISH LANGUAGE SUPPORT FOR NESB/ INTERNATIONAL AND OTHER STUDENTS

The issue of English language support has been quite well researched in the Australian and Curtin contexts (see, for example, Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Guthrie, 1994; Latchem, Parker & Weir, 1994; Parker, Kirkpatrick & Kisane, 1997).   The trend at Curtin has been to opt for 'communication in context' support, which makes sound linguistic sense. It is also the sort of support which students indicated they preferred, some of them finding studies skills courses "too general".   However, only some schools at Curtin are offering such support, according to the students interviewed.

Information is also required at Curtin on just how confident academic staff feel in catering for the linguistic needs of NESB students and what courses/ opportunities there are for them to improve their skills in this area. Comments made by several students during interviews implied that when academic staff were unable to explain things in a way that would be more accessible to them, they went for the tried and true method of 'repeat and repeat it louder' or simply became impatient. The situation is thus stressful for both student and staff and is one that needs to be addressed more seriously as Curtin continues to increase its international enrolments and thus its NESB population.

As well, linguistic support which is available through studies skills courses offered by the International Office needs to be better and more widely publicised. In this regard, questions of perceived inequity were recently raised with the researcher by local English-speaking background students about the study skills courses offered through the Student Guild, for which students are required to pay, and those offered by the International Office, which are free to international students.   Upon closer analysis, it would seem that communication skills support should be available to all students who require it and the logical locus of responsibility would seem to be the Office of Teaching and Learning.

Students in this study also indicated the desirability of individual or small group extra-curricular tutorial support. This is something that, with the involvement of local volunteer students as 'tutors', could be tried in university residences, in the first instance, and would supplement

mentoring schemes that are already operating in some schools. It might provide the sort of one-to-one linguistic support that some NESB students indicated they required and it could also encourage desirable closer interaction between local and international students.

Finally, it would seem that there is a need to convince NESB/international students that since they are studying in a language that is not their first language, English-language support is something they should actively seek and access wherever available and that this in no way reflects on their academic ability. It may also be necessary to clarify for them that coming from an education system which has used English language as a medium of instruction does not necessarily mean that they will experience no difficulties with Australian English or with English language use in the Australian tertiary context. Just what sort of approaches might be more successful in this regard is not clear, but some comments offered by students indicate that they might be more open to advice from other senior/ more experienced international students. A study by Todd and Nesdale as reported by Maslen (1997) would seem to support this.

3.2 DEVELOPING STAFF AND STUDENTS WITH THE AIM OF CREATING A COMFORTABLE CROSS-CULTURAL, INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY

Both local staff and students need to be better prepared to operate in an 'international' atmosphere, the former to be better equipped to cater for the special needs, particularly linguistic needs, of NESB/ international students and the latter to be more open to interaction with international students.

In regard to staff, some professional development is available in the cross-cultural area and in internationalising the curriculum. However, for a variety of reasons, including perhaps time pressures, the numbers of staff who avail themselves of these opportunities is small. Some staff, particularly those involved in off-shore teaching, feel, perhaps with some justification, that they have accumulated sufficient experience to make them sensitive to cross-cultural issues. Others, perhaps with less justification, feel that it is up to students to cope. For example, one student said of lecturers:

> *"They think their main duty is.. like.. to come to the lecture and give the lecture; then besides that we don't have any direct interaction with them."* [no 8]

Perhaps the rewards for staff to become more professionally developed in these issues need to be greater. A positive step is the university's new policy for off-shore teaching (yet to be ratified), which includes a requirement for staff to demonstrate cross-cultural awareness prior to departure. Skills, activities and projects contributing towards internationalisation may also need to receive greater formal acknowledgement and recognition by the university. For example, during Cross-Cultural Education Week in 1997, a staff prize was awarded for a project which encouraged cross-cultural student interaction (through structured activity) as part of a unit assignment. Such a prize should perhaps be available annually. Other incentives could be positive weighting, for promotional and other purposes, of activities which promote internationalisation.

In regard to students, there is a need for more creative solutions that will encourage mixing between local and international students, both through the curriculum and through extra-curricular activities. Neither local nor international students are taking full advantage of the cross-cultural learning and friendships that the Curtin environment offers. Students in this study indicated that, left to their own devices, very little would change. Research by Volet & Ang (in press), Hawthorne (1997) and Nesdale and Todd (1993) would seem to support this, indicating that proactive intervention is necessary to facilitate intercultural acceptance. Some staff are already structuring classroom learning to encourage cross-cultural interaction. However, this is something that needs to be taken on by all staff at the

university. University residences would seem particularly well-placed, in the first instance, to implement extra-curricular activities that could have a more long-lasting effect.

3.3 INTERNATIONALISING CURTIN CAMPUSES

The University has recently commissioned a report on aspects of community life at Curtin. The sorts of future directions indicated in the *'Curtin Community Life Project '* report would, if implemented, go a long way towards addressing some of the needs raised by students during these interviews. The report advocates a strong need on campus for "a more *vibrant* and *integrated* community". The development of such a community can be greatly enhanced if both staff and students build on the richness offered by cultural diversity on campus.

If Curtin is to become a more international university then visible things on its campuses, such as food, will need to be more varied. Staff and students should not need to go off-campus to sample a variety of international dishes. A place or places of worship for the different religions represented on campus would be available. The study of languages, European as well as Asian, could be more relevant to all students. The delivery of some units/ courses in other languages is another aspect that could be explored if Curtin is to become a truly international university.

The cultural life of the university will no doubt be richly enhanced in future through the recent opening of the John Curtin Gallery, whose early exhibitions indicate that it will seek out art works and artists from all over the world. Other cultural ventures on campus should contribute to and reflect the university's multicultural aspects.

Most importantly, students, the largest and arguably the most important component of the Curtin community, need to be aware of and to share in the university's vision and mission (which is not currently the case). The advantages for all members of the Curtin community of the university's international thrust should be familiar to and appreciated by local as well as international students. This may require extra-curricular programs and initiatives, but it is an important element which would be well worth the effort.

Finally, the university needs to make more of its cultural and linguistic diversity and to promote it as the positive force that it can be. Certainly for some students this is an added attraction:

> *"I think Curtin is great because it brings together people from different nationalities, different cultural backgrounds… people with different opinions, different characters, personalities, everything…..If I had to go to a place where everything was quite monotonous, even the people, I wouldn't like it. The diversity here, the variety makes it more interesting, fascinating to come to."* [no 16]

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