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Article · June 2017

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It's [not] just the English:
Issues in the pre-departure academic orientation of international Masters and research students

Matthew Piscioneri,[1] Citra Amelia & Wulan Fauzanna

Bio-data: Matthew Piscioneri lectures in the *Academic and Professional Writing Department*, Faculty of Arts, Monash University. Email: Matthew.Piscioneri@monash.edu

Bio-data: Citra Amelia is Language Training Coordinator at Language Centre of Andalas University, Indonesia. She received her Masters degree in English as an International Language at Monash University, Australia. Her research interests are academic orientation for international students, language attitudes, English as an International Language, and World Englishes. E-mail: citraamelia@gmail.com

Bio-data: Wulan Fauzanna is a lecturer in English Department, Andalas University, She obtained her master degree from the Monash University, Master of English as an International Language Program and Postgraduate Diploma in Applied Linguistics from SEAMEO RELC Singapore. Her research is in Teaching English as an International language and Applied Linguistics. Email: wulanfauzanna@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper reports on research that examined the academic resources and language materials a group of mainly Indonesian international Non Native English Speaking Background Masters and Research Higher Degrees students received prior to the commencement of their degrees in Australia. Contrary to the researchers' expectations, expectations which are also often emphasized in the literature pertaining to this issue, the data pertaining to post-commencement reflections suggest that academic English language competency was not always or mainly identified by respondents as the main challenge these students faced in transition. In terms of academic orientation, for many of the respondents, issues linked to their transition that related as much to navigating a new culture of inquiry as it did to a new language of inquiry were as much if not more significant than the issue of (academic) English.

Keywords: international postgraduate students, pre-departure academic orientation, academic culture shock

Introduction

This paper reports on the findings of recent research conducted into the reflections of mostly Indonesian, international, non-native English speaking background [NNESB], Masters postgraduate and research higher degree [RHD] students on their pre-departure academic orientation needs. At the time the data was collected, the respondents were studying Masters coursework degrees or undertaking doctoral studies in an English-speaking instructional context (Australia). The paper surveys and interprets the participants' reflections on their transition into advanced tertiary study in this instructional context. The findings provide

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[1] Corresponding author.

insights to the in-country, pre-departure academic orientation needs of international, postgraduate scholarship students. Some of the various strategies these students employed privately to try and equip themselves for the challenges that lay ahead are also usefully identified. The authors suggest that these preliminary findings could encourage re-evaluation of the focus of pre-departure academic orientation programs for scholarship holders, in particular. These programs are typically provided by scholarship providers (NGOs, government agencies and institutions), but, often, are mostly devoted to ensuring participants can meet institutional language requirement indicators such as the *International English Language Testing Scheme* [IELTS] or the *Test of English as a Foreign Language* [TOEFL]. However, and in agreement with several other studies (Ryan, 2005; Carroll and Appleton, 2007; Catterall, Aitchison & Rolls, 2016; Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2016), the study's findings perhaps most usefully suggest that as their course of study advanced, participants, on reflection, also recognized that conceptual or *meta-thinking* issues presented significant challenges in terms of successful engagement with their study. As early as 1984, Ballard and Clanchy (1984, p. 1) drew attention to a form of "study shock" experienced by international students on entry to their degree programs. Carroll and Appleton (2007) also write of a type of *academic culture shock* encountered by international students: both undergraduate and postgraduate.

Background

According to the *United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's* [UNESCO] best estimates (UNESCO, 2017), in 2013, the number of international students worldwide amounted to more than 4.1 million students. An earlier analysis was undertaken by the *Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development* [OECD] (OECD, 2011). The OECD Report states that of the 3.5 million international students recorded in 2009, of the tertiary level students who were enrolled in universities outside of their countries of origin, just over half were from Asian countries. Most international students are from non-native English speaking backgrounds [NNESBs], and many are from developing countries and studying in developed countries, features which the UNESCO data also support (UNESCO, 2017).

Sometimes, but not always, postgraduate/RHD international students are recipients of a range of scholarships offered by the countries of origin, the receiving country or host institutions or an array of Non-Government Organisations [NGOs], Inter-Governmental Organisations [IGOs], or, in some instances, multi-national corporations. Many, if not most, international Masters *coursework* students are self-funded as are a much smaller number of RHD international students (OECD, 2011), although data is quite difficult to obtain in relation to this issue.

Since the late 1980s, Australian higher education has undergone major changes in terms of the composition of the student population, both local and international. For example, in the 25 years from 1989 to 2014, local student enrolments in Australian universities more than doubled (Australian Government, 2017a). The Grattan Institute's (2016) report into Australia's higher education sector suggests local student enrolments will continue to grow over the next decade. Australia also continues to be a preferred destination for many

international students and particularly so from within the Asia-Pacific Region. UNESCO data states Australia receives 6% of global flows of mobile students, placing it third most popular destination for international students after the U.S.A (19%) and the U.K (10%) (UNESCO, 2017). Recent estimates suggest at least a third of students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions are international (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). Accordingly, recognition of the need to investigate and evaluate current programs, pedagogies and assumptions relating to internationalisation continues to be an extremely vibrant aspect of the discourse of Australian higher education (Rivzi, 2004; Tran, 2011; Patel, Li & Piscioneri, 2014). In 2013, as indicated below in Figure 1, the total numbers of postgraduate and RHD international students attending Australian universities were 143,392: a figure made up of 122, 595 Masters coursework students and 20, 797 postgraduate research students.

Figure 1: International students in Australia according to course type.
(Source: Australian Government 2017b)
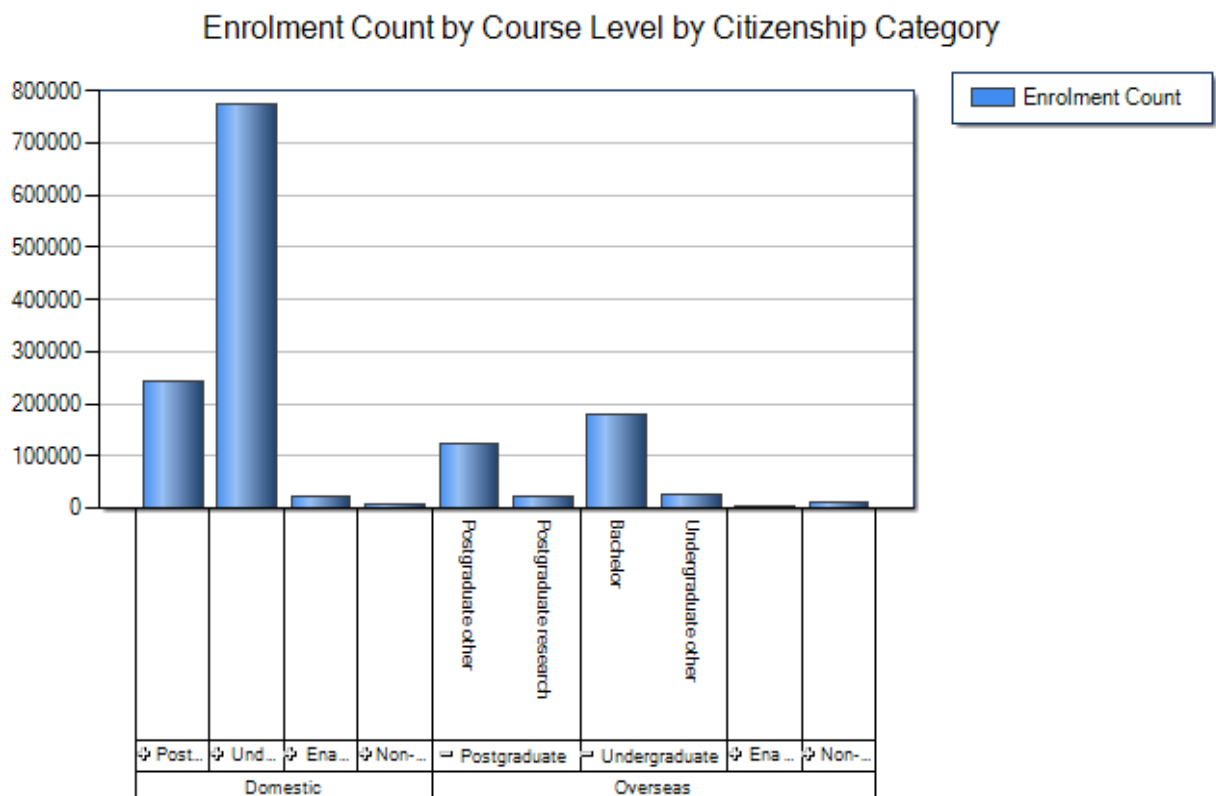
Most of these international post-graduate/RHD students, it can be reasonably assumed, have English as a second (sometimes even third or fourth) language.

Research higher degree and postgraduate study

Effective academic orientation for transitioning students at any level of higher education presents a range of challenges. This is equally the case for postgraduate and research higher degree [RHD] level students, as it is for undergraduate students. In recent years, it has been encouraging to note the continued development of a research informed postgraduate/RHD pedagogy, especially in the area of supervision studies. However, limited research has been conducted into the level and effectiveness of in-country pre-departure academic orientation

for international post-graduate and research students. Often returning to study after a break of several years, international postgraduate and RHD students from non-English speaking backgrounds and from a range of diverse educational contexts can face unique transition challenges (Catterall, Aitchison & Rolls, 2016). Yet, many of these international students – especially those in receipt of scholarships – may have attended intensive pre-departure orientation programs.

The transition into postgraduate/RHD study in a new country is difficult on several levels. There are 'everyday' challenges as well as academic cultural and linguistic issues with which students must contend (Catterall, Aitchison & Rolls, 2016; Mewett & Sawyer, 2016). In one of the author's work for several years as an academic mentor at an Australian tertiary institution, what was also sensed in this cohort is what might best be described as a degree of disempowerment, requiring the resilience and adaptability of international NNESB students at any level of study. However, the postgraduate/RHD members of this broader cohort face quite specific challenges (Manathunga, 2014). In many cases, these students have swapped roles during their period of study, often moving from being teachers to being students again, for example. Often, they have moved from a position of seniority and influence as lecturers themselves or high ranking government officials to the relatively subordinate and dependent position of a postgraduate/RHD student (Ingleton & Cadman, 2002; Brown & Holloway, 2008; Manathunga, 2014). In the *International Education Association of Australia*'s guide "Enhancing the Experience & Outcomes of International Higher Degree Research Candidates" (Nguyen, Tran & Green, 2017) supervisors are reminded of exactly these sorts of issues. In many of these cases, it is not always an easy transition. These unique transition issues are elaborated in more detail following a brief overview of the background to this discussion.

According to several studies, RHD students *in general* report isolation and disconnection from the academic systems, research communities, research cultures and social activities during their candidatures (Golde, 2000; Ali & Kohun, 2009; Wang & Moore, 2007; Ku, Lahman, Yeh, & Cheng, 2008; Sato & Hodge, 2009; Erichsen & Bolliger, 2011; Manathunga, 2014). Part-time RHD students may even experience isolation even more severely (for example: Holdaway, 1993; Johnson, 1995; Wright & Cochrane, 2000; Watts, 2008; Gardner & Bryan, 2012). A range of other earlier studies pointed out that for many RHD students, both domestic and international, poor writing and lack of training in research skills have traditionally been a real problem in doctoral programs (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Maher, Seaton, McMullen, Fitzgerald, Otsuji & Lee, 2008; Byers, Smith, Hwang, Angrove, Chandler, Christian, et al., 2014; Kamler & Thomson, 2014), although the widespread introduction of compulsory coursework units at the commencement of many (Australian) doctoral programs may be helping to address these longstanding challenges (McAlpine & Norton, 2006; Cuthbert & Molla, 2015).

For many NNESB and/or international RHD and postgraduate students, a range of specific challenges to effective and/or engaged learning can present: isolation, lack of orientation, as well as study problems. Often mature international postgraduate/RHD students are separated from very close family (partners and young children) (Bradley, 2000; Janta, Lugosi & Brown, 2014). Another source of stress is that when students do bring

members of their family with them and there are all the accordant pressures of children's and spouses' adjustment, and often difficult parenting requirements (Manathunga, 2014). It is also not unusual for a new child to be born in the country of study for an international student, again, often far from important support structures and with the challenge of navigating unknown medical systems and requirements then for registering the new birth. Finally, study abroad may be an essential part of a developing country's capacity building, certainly the case with Indonesia, and scholarship holders sponsored by their governments may experience background institutional/workplace pressures and expectations (Ingleton & Cadman, 2002; McClure, 2003; Evans & Stevenson, 2010; Manathunga, 2014), placing added pressure onto an already very stressful situation. When these accompanying 'external' factors are combined with issues of academic, cultural, linguistic (and sometimes technological) literacy, the difficulties faced by many international (and usually NNESB) RHD/PG students are significant.

Is it just the English?

For NNESB RHD/PG candidates, the linguistic expectations of study at advanced levels can obviously prove to be extremely challenging (Bunney, 2017). And, this is in spite of having achieved the required IELTS or TOEFL 'score' or successfully navigated an alternative pathway. Part of the "problem" Sawir (2005) suggests can be drawn back to an overly structural or formalistic approach to teaching English as a foreign language in what Canagarajah (1999) terms "expanding circle" domains, such as Indonesia, China and Vietnam, for example. According to Sawir:

> Traditional EFL pedagogies in East and South East Asian nations are not fully adequate to meet the need for an expanded emphasis on oral communication. The traditional pedagogies take a scholastic approach in that they tend to treat English as if it is outside the national or local linguistic environment. (Sawir, 2005, p. 567)

The most challenging transition issue self-identified by NNESB international students in the research conducted by Sawir (2005) was difficulty with (academic?) English:

> Of all the social and academic issues and problems facing international students that are cited in recent studies – differences in learning style, culture shock, homesickness, social difficulties – the problem they themselves most often refer to is difficulties with English. (Sawir, 2005, p. 569)

This finding reflects similar findings from an earlier study reported in 2004 by Novera:

> The main problems faced by the Indonesian students concern the use of academic English, and Australian academic requirements, and the lack of facilities for Muslim students. This study suggests recommendations for improvements in pre-departure training programs and degree programs in Australia. (Novera, 2004, p. 475)

Moreover, in an extensive study funded by the *Australian Learning and Teaching Council* "Strategies and Approaches to Teaching and Learning Cross Cultures" (Lu *et al*, 2010), (>1000 participants), the authors concluded: "International students should be well prepared for studying in Australian universities before they start their study. One important aspect is to have an adequate level of English skills" (Lu *et al*, 2010, p. 128).

These findings have all been important prompts for the research on which this paper reports. In much of the pertinent research, as well as anecdotally, extensive attention has been paid to the problems the cohort under examination face in terms of their competency in (academic) English. And, there is little doubt that competency in (academic) English for NNESB PG/RHD students in an English instructional/research context is extremely important. Similar concerns are also reflected in the data collected from respondents during this study. However, the data also indicate this set of concerns about English as the primary mode of communication when adapting to study in a context of English language instruction and in the facilitation of the pragmatic aspects of a student's study was most dominant *prior to departure*. On reflection -- that is during their period of study or post-commencement -- a number of the respondents also prioritized issues as much to do with academic orientation, that is adapting to a specific *culture* of inquiry, as they did to the language of this culture of inquiry. Before turning to examine the data, it is also useful to quickly overview the debate concerning variances in *learning styles* that a number of authors have pointed to as a fundamental challenge NNESB international students coming to study at either undergraduate or RHD/postgraduate level face when transitioning to a program in a country such as Australia.

Learning Styles: another transition challenge?

A theme often raised in relation to issues of academic orientation for NNESB undergraduate or RHD/postgraduate students concerns the issue of variance in *learning styles* between the cultures of the departing international NNESB student and those learning styles dominant or favoured in the cultures of the host or receiving institutions. *Learning style* in this context is understood as being a particular approach to learning that may or may not be infused or shaped by a range of implicit and/or explicit cultural practices or values. Some of the issues or aspects of a learning style might relate, for example, to a student's approach to engaging in tutorial or class room activities; to a student's willingness to question a teacher's authority; to a student's frame of analysis when dealing with the work of acknowledged experts/scholars in a field (Catterall, Aitchison & Rolls, 2016).

The debate over learning styles in higher education, particularly in relation to international students from Asian countries, has historically, and we believe unfortunately, often posited a sort of East/West divide:

Table 1. (See further Clancy and Ballard, 1984; Manathunga, 2014)

Asian/Eastern or Confucian-heritage students	Western or European Enlightenment-heritage students
- Rote or 'non-critical' thinkers - Accept/respect authority - More circular approach to a topic/analysis - May view 'copying' without acknowledgement as respectful	- Critical thinkers - Challenge/interrogate authority - More direct approach to a topic/analysis - More aware of citation conventions

• More passive participants in their learning	• More active participants in their learning

Phan (2006) makes her disquiet apparent in the title chosen for her excellent paper: "Plagiarism and overseas students: stereotypes again?". Baumgart and Halse (cited in Lu *et al* 2010) also hesitate to endorse the fairly crude and even 'orientalist' binary (Manathunga, 2014) that lies just beneath the surface of much of this particular discourse when they state:

> It is widely *accepted* that western learners are more independent, favouring deep and cultural learning and encouraged to use constructivist approaches, whereas Asian learners are more docile, compliant and good at rote memorisation associated with surface approaches to learning. However, researchers have found that Asian research students demonstrate high performance during their study in western universities, which shows that they apply both the deep approach and achieving approach in their learning. [emphasis added] (2010: 15)

Several other authors on the subject have also drawn conceptions of embedded, culturally-dependent or contrastive learning styles strongly into question (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Phan, 2006; Eaves, 2013). Marlina (2009: 7), for example, argues strongly against the notion that international students from NESBs are necessarily "'passive learners' in Western university tutorials, due to their cultural predispositions." Based on the authors' personal experiences, we have found it extremely important not to be prejudge any one student's or a cohort of students' potential, one way or another, based on assumptions relative to fairly crude and increasingly anachronistic cultural ascriptions.

And, yet, as some data from the present study shows, apart from issues related to language (everyday and academic), another significant difficulty for international students is *academic culture shock* (Ballard & Clanchy, 1984; Ryan, 2005; Bunney, 2017). Many international students come from cultural backgrounds and an education system that are significantly different from Australia's. Familiarising themselves with the university environment and the broader socio-cultural environment can be time-consuming and a daunting task for many international students when they commence their study (Catterall, Aitchison & Rolls, 2016). In the research on which this paper reports, the objective was mainly to try to gain a better understanding of *what* a group of mostly Indonesian NNESB, RHD/PG students had considered was essential to their pre-departure academic orientation and, on reflection, post-commencement what they would advise a transition student at a commensurate level as themselves.

Methodology and recruitment

The participants in the study on which this paper reports were mainly recipients of Australian government international development scholarships and in-country scholarships provided, for example, by the *Indonesian Directorate General of Higher Education* [DIKTI]. Participants were asked to conduct a 'before and after' reflection on their perceptions of their academic orientation needs. In other words, respondents were asked to recall what their pre-commencement expectations were of effective academic preparation and what, in hindsight, they considered would have been most appropriate to assist them in transition. Analysis and

discussion of these qualitative data is supported by a range of more quantitative data. To establish a picture of the main pedagogical emphasis of the in-country or pre-departure processes of academic orientation for NESB international postgraduate students, the types and foci of the academic orientation services and resources the students received in-country prior to their commencement were also surveyed.

The questions next posed to participants in the online survey elicited responses as to what resources/information *were* actually provided and what the students on reflection *would* have deemed useful, that is on reflection and after they have commenced their study program. The researcher acknowledges the limited scope of the study (63 participants from 6 countries all studying at the same institution across 8 disciplines). It is also important to note that unfortunately not *all* respondents answered *all* of the questions posed to them in a simple online survey. The authors' surmise is that some respondents chose only to answer those questions that put them least at risk of being identified, although all respondents were assured of complete anonymity at the time of data collection.

Participants in the research were students at the same institution, in a variety of disciplines, although – as the data indicates – the participants mainly were drawn from the Arts and the Education faculties. The sole data collection instrument was an online survey conducted via SurveyMonkey. According to Topp & Pawloski (2002) and Ritter & Sue (2007), online surveys offer a range of advantages such as the speed of collecting large responses within a short-time; moreover, a larger number of target respondents can potentially be gathered with a lower-cost and the response rate typically is higher than traditional modes of survey distribution and collection (de Bernardo & Curtis, 2013). There is also the capacity online to provide multimedia files to support questions or illustrate aspects of the research; and, there is a range of options choosing the type and format of the questions (Ward, Clark, Zabriskie & Morris, 2014). In terms of the question forms, automatic skipping of questions is available and it is easier to track respondents and to send reminders. Ward et. al., (2014) also point out that perhaps one of the greatest advantages of online surveys is the opportunity to download and analyse results immediately as the data is already machine readable. In terms of disadvantages, online surveys, according to Ritter & Sue (2007), can only be distributed to those who have internet access, an issue similarly highlighted by Topp & Pawloski (2002). Topp & Pawloski (2002) also suggest that online based surveys can increase the possibility that the respondents will quit answering the questions in the middle of questionnaires. Yet, perhaps the biggest drawback in the authors' experience of conducting online surveys in their applied research practice is the limited option to generate meaningful *qualitative* data and typically additional semi-structured interviews are required.

The research on which this discussion is based was always intended as a pilot study and so the extent of the qualitative data is quite restricted. However, I believe there is enough diversity in the sample to render the results and our findings worthwhile. As mentioned previously, generalization of the findings over the entire category of NNESB international postgraduate or RHD students, for example, is not encouraged. Despite a smattering of European NNESB international students adding breadth to the study, most of the respondents in the study were of Asian backgrounds: South East Asia (Vietnam, Indonesia and Philippines), North Asia (China) and South Asia (Bangladesh). Consequently, suggesting that the findings of

the present study are applicable to a majority of the cohort of NNESB international postgraduate/RHD students from these countries who are studying abroad would be imprudent.

Data

The following tables summarise background aspects of the participants in terms of their funding sources, first or mother tongue languages, discipline area and perceptions of their English language competency. All percentages have been rounded to the nearest first decimal point.

Quantitative data

Table 1: Funding sources

Q. Who provided the scholarship/financial aid you received?		
SOURCE	N = 33	%
Australian Government	11	33
Host Institution	11	33
Indonesian Government	6	18
Other	5	15

Table 2: 1st Language

Q. What is your first (mother-tongue) language/s?		
Language	N = 61	%
Indonesian Bahasa	19	31
Mandarin	12	20
Vietnamese	8	13
Japanese	6	10
European languages	7	11.5
Arabic	2	3
Other	7	11.5

Table 3: Discipline area

Q. What is your subject area?		
Discipline	N = 63	%
Arts/Humanities	19	30
Education	13	21

Business/Finance	12	19
Information Technology	7	11
Environmental sciences	7	11
Chemistry	2	3
Law/Medicine	3	5

Table 4: Status prior to commencing study in Australia

Q. Prior to commencing your degree, were you working or studying?		
RESPONSE	N = 33	%
Working	25	76
Studying	8	24

Table 5: English language competency

Q. How would you rate your English language competency?		
RESPONSE	N = 40	%
1. Very weak	1	2.5
2. Weak	3	7.5
3. Average	16	40
4. Strong	16	40
5. Very strong	4	10

31 participants identified their current level of study in Australia: seven were doctoral students, one was undertaking a Masters by Research program and 23 were enrolled in Masters by Coursework programs. When asked whether or not the primary language of instruction in their previous/most recent degree was English, 12 respondents answered in the affirmative and 20 responded in the negative. Participants were next asked if they had participated in any formal program of academic orientaion/preparation either in Australia or elsewhere before commencing their present study program in Australia. 40 responded in the affirmative and 29 responded to the contrary. Those who had responded "yes" to this question were then asked, "How important do you consider this preparation was/has been to your study/". Perhaps, a little surprisingly, and of significance to the findings drawn from this research, only 20 (50%) indicated the highest or 'Very important' grade on the 5 point Likert scale question posed to the participants. 13 (32.5%) indicated the academic orientation they had received was 'Important', six (15%) indicated 'Moderately important' and one (2.5%) indicated it had been 'Unimportant'.

The following table summarizes the types of materials the participants received prior to their commencement either from the host institution, school or department or, in many cases, the scholarship provider. Significantly, the provision of general orientation materials relating to the institution and to general life matters (*e.g.,* accommodation, visas, banking) was most prevalent. The provision of academic orientation materials (introductory readings, academic skill development resources or English for academic purposes materials) tended towards the lower end of the range.

Table 6.

Q. Which of the following materials did you receive following your enrolment/scholarship offer? N = 63		
MATERIAL/S	YES	%
1. Subject specific information (e.g. unit guides)	21	33
2. Faculty specific information	20	32
3. Clubs & societies information	15	24
4. Student support services	18	28.5
5. Introductory readings	8	12.5
6. Academic skill development materials	14	22
7. EAP materials	12	19
8. General university information	31	49
9. Living adjustment materials (accommodation, banking etc)	30	47.5

The potential significance of this data is how few participants were provided with content or academic skill development resources. The following table summarises participants' views on the materials *they believe would have been most useful for them in their courses*. 29 respondents indicated they would have liked to receive examples of assessment tasks and sample responses. 25 respondents expressed that a set of general introductory readings for their subjects would have been useful and 20 would have liked more specific readings for particular subject areas to have been made available. However, perhaps what most stands out in the data represented in Table 7 is the variation in the participants' perceptions. This variation most likely reflects the diversity of the participants' study level and academic experience. Given most of the participants were Masters by Coursework students then research preparation skills materials may have appeared to many as unnecessary. However, it should be noted that almost as many participants responded favourably to the provision of research preparation skill materials as those who thought such preparation was not required. Of particular note for the authors is the relatively subdued enthusiasm the participants displayed for the provision of pre-commencement preparation materials that related to their immersion in a potentially 'different' culture of inquiry from that they were familiar with (resources related to academic integrity, for example).

Table 7.

Q. Which of the following materials would you have deemed most useful in preparing you for your study program?		
MATERIAL/S	YES	NO
1. General introductory readings (subject specific)	25	18
2. Specific subject related readings	20	13
3. Glossary of key subject specific terms	14	12
4. Video recording of a sample lecture	10	5
5. Sample assessment tasks for subjects	29	18
6. Research methods	22	23
7. Comments from past students in a subject/program	20	15
8. Examples of effective paraphrasing	19	13
9. Material on plagiarism	18	12
10. Introduction to culture of inquiry in the discipline	14	11

However, a slightly different set of results related to the issue of orientation into a 'new' culture of inquiry were gleaned from the qualitative data obtained from the participants in the study.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The approach to the collection of qualitative data from participants was straightforward. Following the quantitative data collection questions (including the more demographic-type questions), participants were asked to provide text comments that responded to the following questions:

1. If you did not participate in any formal academic preparation programs prior to commencing your course, can you please describe what preparations you may have individually undertaken?

2. If you were asked to advise a new student in your subject/research area in terms of how best to prepare for his/her academic transition, what would be the key pieces of advice you would offer?

The reason for adopting this approach was to try and obtain, as far as possible, a set of *unfiltered* perspectives on what soon-to-depart NNESB international students had considered the main challenges that lay ahead of them. In other words, by focusing on the students who had not attended formal academic orientation programs with pre-determined curricula, a less distorted data set – albeit from a relatively small sample – could be gained that perhaps more successfully indicated the students' views. The responses were coded according to four

categories and any overlaps were acknowledged (in other words a response could suggest one or more of the coding categories):

COMMUNICATIVE: English language issues (either academic or every day) and in any of the four basic skills (reading, writing, listening, speaking)

CONCEPTUAL: approaches to study, critical thinking, familiarization with a subject's content, referencing conventions and requirements

PRAGMATIC: administrative issues, cultural awareness, lifestyle and supervisor relations

N/A: no response, unclear or irrelevant

The categories were based on the authors' extensive reading of literature relevant to this aspect of the subject. For example, almost 30 years ago, Jones (1989) identified "student finances" (p.38), "accommodation" (p.39) and "academic issues" (p.39) as central to international students' concerns whilst studying in Australia. In the same volume of essays, Burke (1989, p.75) outlined the six key "[d]ifficulties commonly experienced by overseas students" as "Cultural adjustment", "Finances and accommodation", "Living independently", "Language and communication", "Study-related concerns" as well as "Being different". Unsurprisingly, subsequent research in the field has identified a similar set of academic, pragmatic and communicative challenges faced by NESB international students whilst studying in Australia (for example: Sawir, 2005; De Vita, 2007; Rochecouste *et al.,* 2010; Lu *et al.,* 2010; Manathunga, 2014). The qualitative data from the first cohort (those who had **not** undertaken any programs of *formal* academic orientation before departure) suggested pre-departure concerns centred mainly on communicative and pragmatic issues. A quantitative summary of the responses is offered next together with a number of salient samples of the qualitative data:

Table 8. Comments from participants who undertook no formal pre-departure academic orientation as to their self-directed preparation strategies

CODE CATEGORY	N = 36 (comments)	%
Communicative	16	44
Conceptual	9	25
Pragmatic	7	19
N/A	4	12

26 participants offered a total of 36 comments in total response to the survey prompt. Some examples of the responses and coding:

Besides taken an intensive english session, I also helped my self with reading novels,and listen to english news to improve my vocabs and phrases. **COMMUNICATIVE**

learning from university web sites, ask information to Indonesian student association/mailing list **PRAGMATIC**

Actually I just read the grammar book, ask friend about Australian Academic Culture **COMMUNICATIVE/ CONCEPTUAL**

I contacted with my friends who were studying here and who had studied here for their experience and advice. I also searched the information on the internet using the University' website and the students union's **PRAGMATIC**

All participants were next asked in the survey to 'advise' a new student in terms of how best to prepare for his/her transition to life and study in Australia, what key pieces of advice would you offer? The significant difference in these pre- and post-reflections clearly occurs in the category of the 'conceptual' or issues at least partly related to what was described by one participant as the "*Australian academic culture*".

Table 7: Categorising the comments of 'advice' from all participants post-commencement

CODE CATEGORY	N = 69	%	% CHANGE
Communicative	26	38	-6
Conceptual	32	46	+21
Pragmatic	11	16	-3
N/A	--	--	-12

45 participants responded to the survey's request for comments related to this issue. Some examples of the responses and coding:

Firstly, get to know your peers and gather information on available and eligible resources, facilities.... Check out and use the resources, facilities like Library sessions on Endnotes, learning Skills......... Be persistent and consistent **CONCEPTUAL/COMMUNICATIVE**

You could only start critical thinking once you have known a lot about the unit so get to know the unit is important. **CONCEPTUAL**

Advise her/him to get detail information about their course such as subjects that would be taken **PRAGMATIC**

to read academic papers and theses **CONCEPTUAL**

De omnibus dubitandum. [trans: "Doubt Everything"] **CONCEPTUAL**

Discussion

From the analysis of the qualitative data, it is reasonable to conclude that based on the participants' comments -- 'on reflection' as it were -- there is a significant recognition of challenges posed to the participants at least as much from the what has been termed the *conceptual* areas of their study as from the *communicative* areas. This finding, however, must be considered cautiously and perhaps even rendered as a little unremarkable. Firstly, it has been presumed that the 'advice' a mid-term or near-completion student would give to a neophyte *necessarily* or perhaps *authentically* reflects the advice giver's sentiments based on his or her *actual* experience. There may be, for example, some element of 'what *should* be said'. However, the tenor of most if not all of the qualitative data collected in the study did convey to the researchers a sense of 'realness', of thoughtfulness, of sincerity. Moreover, in

the processes of coding the comments, there was an inherent ambiguity as to what exactly was the actual *issue* or *challenge* being referred to in the comment. For example, one participant offered the following insight, which has been coded solely as a communicative-type issue appears to relate to academic English in terms of style and structure:

> "*I dont know. I have difficulties in essay, so perhaps I would suggest those who are new, to get essay practices as often as they could.*"

However, the issue here could possibly be as much a 'conceptual' issue related to the student's awareness of differences in academic culture: between standard Australian academic expectations in terms of a strictly formal register as well as critical engagement with established discourses and the students' more familiar, prior academic culture that may have stressed other issues and approaches as more important in the writing of an essay. Similarly, one participant simply commented as part of his/her 'advice' on reflection

> "*critical reading skills and reference*"

This comment was coded for both the conceptual and the communicative categories of challenges.

In terms of how best to 'read' the data collected in this study, and the implications drawn from this one interpretation, one other very significant factor presents. To most seasoned academics, the *movement* in focus or concern NNESB international students (at either the undergraduate or post-graduate/research level) experience, and as they journey through their study from initial pragmatic and communicative challenges to the conceptual challenges presented by their course of study, is again perhaps not all that remarkable. In other words, what the findings of this study appear to suggest is, well, to be expected. Yet, as the title of this paper highlights, the authors' ambitions in conducting this research have always been simple. For this specific and quite 'vulnerable' cohort of students, to continue to argue that in terms of the challenges posed to these students' successful transition into programs of study in Australia (and often the case elsewhere) that 'It's just the English' is, we believe, misguided.

It is here, a significant hiatus arguably occurs in the effective pre-departure orientation of some international NNESB postgraduate/RHD students. One of the key questions which the research sought to address was 'Is (academic) English the most significant transition challenge faced by this cohort?' In terms of pre-departure academic orientation, for example, for many participants in the study, access to a range of specific academic resources was deemed more useful as their ongoing transition challenges related as much to navigating a new culture of inquiry as it did to a new or second or even third language of inquiry. We would, however, hesitate extending the validity of the study's findings either far beyond an Australian context or generalizing the findings across this entire cohort due to the relatively small sample size and the fact that most respondents were drawn from two main countries of origin (Indonesia and China).

Nevertheless, it is hoped this modest undertaking might encourage ongoing research in this area. It is something of an under-discussed area in the field of the internationalisation of higher education, as well as postgraduate/RHD studies. It is an area that has implications

for a number of different yet equally important areas of contemporary research into tertiary pedagogy: postgraduate/RHD level transition issues, postgraduate/RHD supervision and retention studies, intercultural teaching and learning strategies, tertiary language and learning studies, and, of course, a whole swathe of issues connected to the internationalisation and marketisation of the global higher education sector. It is also possible that the topic also holds relevance for the (critical) discourse of first-to-third world development through educational aid. Such an important set of interests and issues, however, mostly remain beyond the scope of the present paper.

Conclusion

At the time of writing this paper, the Australian Aid Abroad's (Australian Government, 2017c) *Australian Awards Scholarship* handbook states "Country programs may elect to provide English training to awardees in their home country or the immediate region" (p. 19). The Awards Handbook further advises "Program Areas are advised that, on average, six months of English language training will result in advancing half an IELTS point; 25 points TOEFL paper-based; 10 points TOEFL internet-based or 7 points PTE Academic" (p. 19). Significantly, a recent Australian Department of Foreign Affairs & Trade [DFAT] report on the situation in Indonesia drew specific attention to the language testing demands that typically overwhelm the pre-departure orientation programs of many students:

> The English language requirement for postgraduate study in Australia is generally 6.5 IELTS for a large number of courses at Australian Universities. The current Australia Awards in Indonesia program has a minimum eligibility requirement of 5.0 IELTS, which entitles successful applicants to up to nine months of English for Academic Purpose (EAP) training, intended to bring them up to a target 6.5 IELTS score (with no band lower than 6.0). Most participants in the nine month course have been drawn from Eastern Indonesia, in keeping with the program's geographic focus areas. *From 2003 to 2011 the results of this EAP program indicate that only 41% of participants achieved the target 6.5 IELTS* – notionally suggesting a low success rate against the fixed target of IELTS 6.5. [Emphases added] (DFAT, 2014: 19)

The 'problem' of course is that a great deal of pre-departure orientation resources, and understandably so, is funnelled towards ensuring scholarship holders fulfil the English language competency requirements set by the host institutions. Consequently, it appears that opportunities to adequately equip students to cope in a new culture of inquiry are reduced.

The 'idealized' intended outcomes of the study have always been to contribute to a more 'sensitive' response from scholarship providers as well as host or receiving institutions to the challenges faced by their incoming international NNESB postgraduate/RHD students, not only at the stage of pre-departure, but also while in transition. It was always intended the research deliver practically-oriented outcomes by encouraging a conversation that might lead to refining existing processes of pre- and post-departure academic orientation for international NNESB postgraduate/RHD students, especially those students coming to study in Australia and especially from the Asia-Pacific Region. Based on the findings from this study, the authors offer the following recommendations, firstly concerning *internal* scholarship providers (in a student's country of origin) and *external* scholarship providers (in the host

country/institution). These providers constantly need to review initial in-country pre-departure academic orientation processes so as to ensure students are engaged with keys aspects of the *intellectual* culture of their new context of study. Too often, in pre-departure orientation programs for scholarship holders, it appears the bulk of resources are devoted to ensuring scholarship holders can meet the English language requirements of the host institution: requisite IELTS scores, for example.

The second set of recommendations concerns not scholarship holders, but the full-fee paying students in the cohort under analysis, especially those at Masters course work level. Based on the results of the current research, it is clear that these students would benefit from the provision of a set of introductory academic resources from receiving institutions prior to their commencement, either pre-departure or post-arrival. Such initiatives would ideally occur at the unit or school level. Relevant discipline specific resources could address transition issues which incoming international NNESB postgraduate students face around more precise issues of disciplinary culture. With minimal effort and cost, such resources could even be provided to *prospective* Masters course work students in their countries of origin. Overall, it is speculated that such measures could help redress the 'gap' in terms of this cohort of students' abilities to adjust to the 'academic culture shock' several respondents to this study emphasized as perhaps as confronting as the challenges of academic English or more general issues of adapting to a different lifestyle.

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