Final Report - Learning and Teaching Investment Fund project

**Project Name:** Unpacking the global passport: transnational academic acculturation enhancement project for RMIT international students and their teachers

**Project Category:** Global Passport

**Project leader**  Barbara Morgan  
barbara.morgan@rmit.edu.au  
**Project consultant** Dr Lynnel Hoare  
lynnel.hoare@rmit.edu.au  
**Project team members** Anna Havir, Lyn Bond

Background of the project team  
Barbara has extensive experience in academic support for international students, English as a second language programs and has been a co-manager of the Learning Skills Unit in the School of Education. She has successfully instigated, developed and managed projects and project teams, the most well known project being RMIT Learning Lab [http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/](http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/)

Lyn Hoare’s 2006 PhD was an ethnographic evaluation of an offshore programme. The PhD focused on the cultural implications in a program designed and delivered by Melbourne-based lecturers working in a ‘fly-in fly-out’ model in Singapore. She commenced with RMIT in 2005 and was, at the time this project commenced, teaching in the Masters of Education (Leadership and Management) programme – teaching ‘Managing Diversity’ and also running a weekly embedded ‘study skills’ programme within the M.Ed. programme that was developed specifically for international students.

Anna also has extensive experience addressing the academic and learning needs of tertiary students as well as English as a Second Language and is an experienced writer for the web.

**Introduction - Academic Acculturation Web resource**

The aim of this project was to develop an accessible, user friendly web resource to support the academic acculturation of international students to tertiary study at RMIT University. The project developed out of successful collaboration between the embedded study skills tutorial in the Masters course that Lyn was teaching, and Barbara in her role as academic learning advisor (Study and Learning Centre). The initial needs analysis came focus group style session facilitated by Lyn and Barbara with the international students who were studying diversity management in the M.Ed. (Leadership and Management) and who also attended the weekly embedded tutorials. The student members of the focus group (who had experienced the full gamut of acculturation difficulties) were asked, essentially, ‘what do you know now that you wish you had known when you started’. The outcomes of that conversation were to form the seed of the project proposal. The students’ messages were strong, passionate and shared a lot of common concerns. It seemed obvious that the most pressing areas of need were related to the ‘different’ pedagogies and expectations that the students had experienced and not expected within RMIT. This ‘finding’ did not surprise either Barbara or Lyn, but if this group of students – most of whom were double-degree mature-aged educators themselves – had such difficulty with ‘study shock’, then it seemed a fair assumption that a resource that was designed and delivered with input from them and students with similar experiences would be useful to others, especially newly arrived international students.
**Needs Identification: Academic Acculturation Web-based resource**

The project team decided that there was a lot of potential to develop a quality learning experience for RMIT international students by improving their preparedness for academic study. The development of a website focusing on academic acculturation was proposed.

An important aspect of the website design was that it would be appealing to new international students, even those who have an offer at RMIT, prior to arrival as well as onshore. The website aimed to help the target group to develop a realistic understanding of the different pedagogical approaches and cultural assumptions of studying in Australia. The site would include mini advice segments (e.g., *vox pops* from experienced international students talking about the topics from the perspective of ‘what I have learned about learning in Australia’; or ‘what would I have done before I arrived if I had known what I knew now’ etc.).

**Study Shock at RMIT: An overview of the issues facing international students**

The rationale for the project was based on the increasing evidence that ‘study shock’ is an issue for international students. Research consistently supports interventions which make academic expectations and discourses explicit for international students (e.g., Dunn and Wallace 2006; Carroll and Ryan 2005; McLean and Ransom 2005; Leask 2004; Ramburuth 2001; Watkins 2000). International students make up a significant and growing proportion of the RMIT student community and RMIT, in line with the vast majority of Australian universities, relies on international student revenues. In 2007 international onshore enrolments comprised 20.2 percent of higher education enrolments and 8.8 percent of VET sector enrolments. Offshore international enrolments are also a significant income source, comprising 24.9 percent (including 6.4 percent for RMIT Vietnam) for Higher Education and 7.7% for the VET sector (RMIT Student statistics 2007).

Student revenues are only a part of the picture however. While the diversity of cultures within the student body provides the potential for a rich intercultural learning environment, there are also many challenges that international students and their teachers face when learning and teaching in a global context. Contemporary research in relation to transnational education (e.g., Dunn and Wallace, 2006: Hoare, 2006; Carroll and Ryan, 2005; McLean and Ransom, 2005; MacKinnon and Manathunga, 2003; Australian Vice Chancellors’ Committee, 2002; Watkins, 2000) as well as the requirements of agencies such as AUQA and the AVCC, continue to identify the need for improved support for all students, and a particular kind of support for international students.

Importantly, tertiary discourses are highly specific which means that students need to be initiated into a new academic culture involving the development of a new identity as a tertiary student (Gee, 2004). Taking on this identity involves learning new forms of communication and new belief and value systems (Hellsten and Prescott, 2004). Consequently, we find that international students talk of the transition to a ‘different learning’ which often results in a crisis of identity (Beasley and Pearson 1999; Skyrme 2007). It is argued that students who find the academic transition most difficult are those who encounter discourses and practices which are dissimilar from their pre-university identities (Beasley and Pearson 1999; Ivanic 1998;) and it is likely that – without insight and awareness - their struggle to acculturate will be interpreted as a deficiency in English skills (Gee 2004).

In order to help acculturating students overcome this ‘study shock’, Australian universities need to explicate the practices required of students in order to be successful (i.e. critical thinking, essays, reports, reflective writing). Indeed there is much agreement in the literature regarding the importance of making tertiary discourses explicit to all students (Beasley and Pearson 1999; Leask 2005; McLean and Ransom 2005; Carroll 2005 ; Carroll and Ryan 2005; Goulay 2006; Arkoudis and Tran 2007). However, unfortunately many researchers would suggest that at present Australian universities are not meeting this challenge (Ramburuth 2000; Goulay 2006; Leask 2006; Sovic 2007). Rather students are expected
to pick up the academic cultures, conventions and discourses though exposure or osmosis and in the most part unconsciously (Beasley and Pearson 1999).

The *Unpacking the global passport* project aimed to go some way toward provision of an explicit academic induction into the new and often alien learning and teaching environment found by students new to RMIT and Australian universities.

**Project description and outline of what was done**

The tangible outcome from this project was the development of an accessible website program that supported academic acculturation for international students in the learning and teaching pedagogies encountered in tertiary study in Australia. This program can be accessed at on the RMIT Learning Lab. http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lisu/content/7_IntStudentStories/00stories.htm, as previously described, includes mini advice segments (e.g., video clips from experienced international students such as ‘what I have learned about learning in Australia’) as well as content descriptions for each of the key academic areas explicated below.

Four main areas that challenge newly arrived international students were identified through a review of the literature, investigation of the websites of other universities, and from the initial student focus group. These four areas are listed below. Accompanying web content was written for each area.

- **Expectations’ of students** i.e. with the roles and responsibilities of students and teachers in Australian universities.
- **Structuring assignments** i.e. ‘the nature of tertiary discourse and writing style in Australian university settings).
- **Developing critical thinking** i.e. the nature of critique and argument.
- **Understanding referencing** i.e. academic integrity, intellectual property and the ownership of knowledge.
Eight international students were recruited and asked to reflect on issues relating to ‘What they wish they had known before they came’ in preparation for video sessions. These sessions were recorded without scripts, using students’ own words. These scripts were transcribed and then edited for the web site.

Apart from the tangible outcome that is the web site, clearly it is intended that the (currently) intangible outcomes from this project will include improved student induction to RMIT and a concomitant improvement in the students’ experiences of RMIT and their learning outcomes. The LTIF funding covered the development of the website. Further research will be conducted as a component of a Masters by project with the aim of evaluating the intended future outcomes of the project.

**Literature Review**

**Part A: Rationale for website content**

An extensive literature review, as well as reviews of other university web sites supporting international students, consistently suggested that the issues that international students find challenging in their acculturation to academic study in Australia fell shared some common themes; expectations of students, structuring assignments, understanding referencing, and developing critical thinking. A brief overview of the research related to these four themes is outlined below.

1. **Expectations of students**

**The teacher and student relationship - a case of mismatched expectations**

For both international students and their frequently ‘Western’ educators it is often a case of mismatched expectations with both parties disappointed with the environment in the classroom. From a student perspective there is concern that they are confronted with ‘do it yourself’ learning (Skyme 2007, p.1) which conflicts with the view frequently found in ‘Asian’ learning traditions that a good and effective teacher is someone who provides support and guidance rather than letting them struggle on their own (Chan 1999). For example, while there is a focus on discussion and interaction within the western classroom, Chinese teachers outside the classroom take on a more parental role and hence see it as their moral responsibility to mentor and guide students (Biggs and Watkins 1996; Ho 2001).

In classroom situations many international students feel uncomfortable voicing opinions as they perceive that this could involve criticizing others. Similarly, avoiding humiliation themselves is a priority leading to a lack of risk taking in classroom situations (Hui and Triandis 1986; Hofstede 1986). This ‘preservation of face’ - a fear of embarrassment in front of classmates and the teacher - results in many students being reticent to give their opinions and opting to keep silent in the classroom (Beasley and Pearson 1999; Chan 1999). Moreover, interrupting is often viewed by Asian learners as inappropriate and therefore rude (Volet, 1999). Indeed many Asian learners prefer to seek guidance and clarification outside tutorials and classrooms as is the cultural practice in their home countries. Unfortunately being quiet is often perceived by Western educators as passivity rather than a culturally appropriate reserve and respect (Chalmers and Volet, 1997).

**Excerpt from student video**

*From what I thought was expected of me they were quite different .. um academically .. um I suppose that’s what you mean .. they were to a greater extent from what I am used to and from what I did in my undergraduate study .. I would have my lecturer in front of me teaching .. and from the lecture I would just get most of the things whatever other reading would be mostly additional reading .. whereas what I’ve found with RMIT is that I basically have to do most of the reading myself .. It’s more like directing that they do ..*
2. Structuring Assignments

Cultural differences in writing and thinking styles

Variations in ways of thinking and structuring writing in assessment tasks are also challenging for international students as they have to learn to take on a conflicting logic system (Biggs and Watkins 1996; Connor 1996; Beasley and Pearson 1999). For example, the linear discourse structure found in ‘Western’ university writing tends to focus on presenting the main point or thesis at the beginning, followed by supporting points leading to a conclusion. In this direct and deductive structure there is no divergence from this main point and a limited valuing of background or context (Fox 1994; Connor 1996). However, students from other cultures, particularly Confucian heritage and collectivist cultures, find this structure very abrasive and unsophisticated as they have been taught to value a more circular discourse style, where there is thoughtful exposition of all aspects of a topic before coming to the main point (Connor 1996). Rather than the writer being responsible for making all the points clear, this high context structure is indirect, subtle and inductive where digression is highly valued, ‘like peeling an onion, layer after layer is removed until the reader arrives at the central part, the core’ (Shen 1989, p. 128). It is important to ‘reach the topic ‘gradually’ and ‘systematically’ instead of ‘abruptly’ (Shen 1989, p.128).

Excerpt from student video

The structure of writing over here was… er… very different

For example in our sub continent in India and Pakistan the way we are taught to structure our essays is… we don’t come to the point directly we have to develop this major build up and before coming to the point so that unless and until we don’t have that huge context coming to that point … our lecturer wouldn’t think that we have put enough effort into that, so, but over her the thing was to go bang!…go to the point directly.

3. Understanding Referencing

Cultural differences in relation to respect and deference for authorities is critical in understanding the ways in which many international students approach the task of referencing. Often this cohort is accused of plagiarizing and of copying extracts from text without appropriate acknowledgement, when a significant component of the problem lies in understanding different cultural value systems (Volet 1999; Leask 2006; Pringle, Fischbacher et al. 2008). At the heart of this issue is the fact that academic writing in ‘Western’ cultures is based around constructing knowledge through a range of sources which must be acknowledged and involves questioning received knowledge and reconstructing it through the writing process (McLean and Ransom 2005, p.48). Often international students do not understand that authors have ‘ownership’ of their own ideas and hence everyone who uses these ideas must acknowledge who owns them by referencing.

Excerpt from student video

Intellectually everybody should be aware of the need of understanding the intellectual ownership of somebody’s work …but that is not that much stressed in our country. . and we believe that if you quote somebody who has already done some work and even if we repeat that person’s words …. We are actually honouring that person…. that we are quoting his or her study ….. but the problem starts from when we don’t actually attribute that work to a particular person or particular organisation which is a by product of their efforts and we need to acknowledge that and it was a bit of er… it was an idea which I struggled with for some time …that when I came here a lot of international students also struggle with that and we can’t seem to understand why
we have to reference each and every sentence that use of any other person … and I think knowing the reasons behind doing that is more of a problem rather than learning to do it because … there is so many reference guides that you can learn to use……

4. Developing critical thinking.

Students studying in Australian tertiary environments are expected to be independent learners, which requires the ability to question and evaluate (Samuelowicz 1987; Ballard and Clancy 1991). The classroom environment is relatively informal and interactive, and students are not only encouraged but are expected to discuss and challenge ‘their texts and their teachers’ (Beasley and Pearson 1999, p.306). In this learning culture, authorities - whether they are teachers or published authors - can be disputed and their work should be critically analysed. As Ballard and Clancy (1991) among others have suggested, often overseas students may find it difficult making the shift ‘from a summary to a critical approach’ (p.54). Many students from Confucian heritage or collectivist cultures are more accustomed to receiving and memorizing rather than questioning authorized knowledge and hence are focused on finding the ‘right answer’ rather than evaluating a number of differing knowledge constructs (Samuelowicz 1987; Ballard and Clancy 1991). This respectful deference to the wisdom of authorities and the reluctance to challenge can impede the development of a critical approach (Chan 1999).

Excerpt from student video

When I recall my learning experience I think there are two points that should be adjusted for international students who come from an Eastern educational background.. the first one is reading with critical eyes.. Eastern culture emphasises to obey 'big man's sayings' ..so some of us are very willing to receive an expert's opinion than think they are ready too .. but not give our own ideas….

... I always thought that what the educationalists , the academics are saying .. that is it... and I don't have to actually ............. I don't have the capacity to actually criticise that, to add something to it, I should just believe it as such and for it was really different and er when I started writing .. I realised that there was so much that I had to say.. and that what I had to say was also important .... And it really helped me in doing my other assignments as well because it developed that kind of critical monologue within myself so it was really helpful I think.

Part B: Why target international students? The debate about difference.

Almost all students commencing their first year of a new academic programme will need to acculturate to the discourse community into which they are seeking entry. At the broadest level, that academic discourse community may be defined as the Australian higher education ‘system’. International students, in particular, face significant challenges in adapting to tertiary study in Australia because most come from countries where they will have experienced quite different learning and teaching cultures.

'Local’ students (and others who have been exposed to the learning environment in Australian secondary and tertiary education) could be expected to have acculturated to Australian education to some degree, and yet they would be expected to face the challenge of transition to university and would certainly require induction to the discourse of the particular discipline to which they seek entry. ‘Outsiders’, who may include ‘international students' and others (such as those from marginalised groups, first and second generation migrants etc.) for whom the ‘Western’ academy is likely to be entirely foreign, could therefore be expected to benefit from a phased induction to Australian tertiary learning that is acutely conscious of assumptions about familiarity.
There is significant debate within academic literature about the differences - real or over emphasised - between 'international' and 'local' students. In relation to this particular project, the authors’ anecdotal and workplace based experiences support interculturalist Milton Bennett’s proposal that denial of cultural difference is a benign but naïve stage in the development of intercultural awareness; a stage that attempts to ‘bury difference under the weight of cultural similarity’ (Bennett, 1993, p. 44-45). Bennett’s work warns that denial of difference can lead us to assume that our worldview is the same as everyone else’s. Marginson and Mollis (1999, p.55) report a similar mindset in relation to transnational education where ‘the underlying assumption is that all education systems are the same and if they are not, they should be’. This minimisation of difference is not helpful when ‘international’ students themselves are telling us that they notice a difference that does matter. Fortunately, within all the academic deliberation on transnational education and ‘international students’, one area where there is significant agreement is that this process of acculturation to the pedagogies of Australian higher education is real and challenging: and more difficult for those who – for whatever reason – come to Australian higher education with a different learning heritage. Thus, drawing on their own experiences (both research and practice-based) the authors developed this project supported by the body of research that strongly suggests that ‘international students’ expect to face significant pedagogical differences and challenges, but also that they can readily adapt to learning in Australian higher education, particularly when expectations are explicated.

**LTIF Project Activities May 2008 – January 2009**

Mid May (project was approved in early May 2008)

- Develop detailed project plan
- Literature review – research demonstrating support for programs and products in academic acculturation
- Review of ‘best practice’ programs/ resources at other universities
- Review of research into academic acculturation needs of international students

**June**

- Map content
- Design website
- Liaise with Educational Media Group

**July**

- Recruit international students and encourage them to write their own scripts
- Write draft content for support materials

**August**

- Record student advice- videos
- Transcribe transcripts
- Editing and review for each content area

**September**

- Record student advice- video clips
- Transcribe transcripts
- Editing and review for each content area

**October**
- Consultation process with key stakeholders
- Establish working party for project – Reps from Colleges, REW World Wide, Academic Development Groups

**November**
- Meet and review web site content with working party
- Review & approval by steering group
- Develop marketing plan
- Finalise possible trial groups for evaluation
- Revise and modify content
- Decide on an appropriate name
- Redesign of Learning Lab (EMG)

**December**
- Finalise design with EMG
- Design and attach online feedback survey

**January/February 2009**
- Pilot testing
- Trial with pilot groups and incorporate feedback (piloting and action evaluation having been taking place throughout project)
- Launch marketing campaign

**March 2009**
- Ethics approval for evaluative research
- Commence pilot evaluation – survey, focus group interviews
- Launch by the Deputy Vice Chancellor Jim Barber

**Evaluation of project outcomes**

1. **Improved student learning experiences, outcomes and employment opportunities**

The international Student Stories’ program has been well received by incoming international students as well as RMIT teaching staff. At this stage the value of the program is based on informal feedback (e.g., from ISAN meeting, L&T Expo, ISSG (SET) REW, Professional Development for Offshore Teaching program). However, a formal evaluation is proposed and will research the effectiveness of the resource for international students. Ethics approval is currently being sought for this research.

2. **Innovation**

‘International student stories’ is an innovative and sustainable resource to support academic acculturation at RMIT University. Our research when scoping this project demonstrated that while there are some videos on other university web sites of international students talking about their experiences, most lacked a clear and focused structure which highlighted to students the issues faced by students acculturating to foreign learning and teaching cultures. In our view and to our knowledge there was not a web based resource of this quality, clarity and focus. The RMIT Educational Media Group must also be congratulated on the design of the web site.
3. Strategic alignment

This project is aligned with RMIT’s strategic goal of ‘internationalising the curriculum’ and The Global Passport. Importantly, the intention of such policies is to build global or intercultural capabilities and clearly the diversity that international students bring to tertiary institutions like RMIT University is an important part of the internationalisation agenda. This cross-cultural web-based resource is an attempt to develop intercultural capabilities and awareness for the international student cohort by making explicit some of the differences in learning and teaching approaches in ‘Western’ universities. It does so through learning from the experiences of peers. Underpinning this intervention is an acknowledgement of the diversity that international students bring to the university.

4. University wide application

The web site resource is available to all RMIT students and staff but is targeted specifically to the international student cohort. The resource has been prominently placed on a redesigned Learning Lab so that it is easily accessible to students. The Learning Lab is a prominent link on the RMIT Student’s page and is also linked to Blackboard classrooms. The student videos are generic rather than discipline specific and hence have applicability for RMIT’s entire international student cohort. International Student Stories has been recommended to international students prior to arrival via the mates@rmit program conducted by International Student Support Services, REW and to College Dean’s of Academic Development.

5. Value for money

While it is certainly desirable to provide face to face academic acculturation programs for all enrolling international students (for example, the International Academic Preparation program conducted for AusAid students) such an intervention would not only be costly but also organisationally difficult due to the often staggered arrival of overseas students enrolling in the first year of their program. A web based program is therefore a sustainable model that can be used within existing preparatory programs (the resource has already been welcomed by the IAP program) but more importantly can be accessed by students independently before arrival as well as during or in the initial stages of a program. It is believed that this resource may indeed also help to prevent students from disappointment, disillusionment and possibly failure caused by inadequate preparedness or understanding of the learning and teaching culture of ‘western universities’.

Dissemination of project outcomes (within and external to RMIT)

1. Completed

- All members of the working party have been sent the web site resource so that they can advise their college, school, program area to recommend to the resource to students
- RMIT English World Wide will use the site in their preparatory ‘English for Academic Purposes’ programs
- 'International Student Stories' has been promoted in RMIT Update 2009 issues
- Student Services Group has been notified including the International Student Support Services
- Successful presentation of an ‘in progress’ project to Learning and Teaching Expo 2009
- Successful presentation of project to SET Portfolio International Student Support Group November 2008
- Presentation of project outcomes to RMIT’s International Students Advisory Network 17 (ISAN) February 2009-02-17 – excellent feedback
2. Planned

- Article on ‘International Student Stories’ to be written for Open Line
- Professional Development sessions planned ‘International Student Stories’ - Issues faced by international students.
- Discussions underway with RMIT Media and Communications regarding internal publicity and a possible media release
- Business College has agreed to disseminate the resource through internal networks and student groups
- DSC and Set Colleges will be approached for possible presentations and relevant internal publicity
- A launch by the Deputy Vice Chancellor Jim Barber of ‘International Student Stories’ planned for late March
- Masters by Research project involving a formal program evaluation of ‘International Student Stories’ in progress
- Paper and conference presentations planned for 2009
- International Student Stories will be profiled via external professional networks e.g. Academic Language and Learning Advisor network

Funds approved

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Funding acquitted

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Salary costs were used for backfilling

Barbara Morgan - Project coordinator 0.2 Study and Learning Centre Student’s Portfolio
Dr Lynnel Hoare - Project consultancy 0.1 School of Management Business Portfolio
Anna Havir - Team member responsible for educational design and student focus groups 0.2 Study and Learning Centre

‘In Kind’ Support

0.1 of 0.2 Anna’s involvement consisted of in kind support from the Student’s Portfolio.

Lyn Bond - Team member responsible for website consultancy 0.1 Study and Learning Centre - in kind contribution from the Student’s Portfolio

Please Note: All funds were spent as per forecasted budget except funds for marketing and launch of the web site in 2009.

It is anticipated that 2009 marketing and publicity (e.g., postcards, launch, catering and publicity) will be funded by the Student’s Portfolio.
Summary (for website) project outcomes, impacts and dissemination, (-500)

Studying in a foreign country often involves new ways of learning and new approaches to assessment tasks. This RMIT Learning and Teaching Initiative funded project has completed a web resource, ‘International Student Stories’ that aims to inform new international students about some of the adaptations they may need to make in adjusting to the academic culture of Australia. In this resource eight RMIT students share some of their experiences and provide advice to newcomers via brief video clips sharing their own stories. The site is intended to be accessible to new students and aims to present a friendly, non-threatening sharing of advice such as ‘what I have learned about learning in Australia’; and ‘if only I knew at the beginning what I know now’.

In the new web resource, international students talk about four areas that students often find new and a little difficult at first.

- Expectations about studying in Australia
- Structuring assignments
- Understanding referencing
- Developing critical thinking

The new resource can be found through an additional link on the SLC Learning Lab at:

http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/7_IntStudentStories/00stories.htm

Please take time to view some of the videos, and refer your students to this resource. For more information, and feedback, contact Barbara Morgan (barbara.morgan@rmit.edu.au) or Lynnel Hoare (lynnel.hoare@rmit.edu.au).
References


