

International students expectations and motivations

Shana Krishnan

The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
shanakrishnan@gmail.com

Zora Vrcelj

The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia
z.vrcelj@unsw.edu.au

***Abstract:** This study addresses the stereotypes surrounding international students (Samuelowicz, 1987; Watson, 1999) and their motivations behind and expectations of tertiary level study. A large and comprehensive quantitative survey of students was undertaken across various faculties at the University of New South Wales. This paper reveals in particular the reasons why international and local students study, their motivations for study and their expectations of teachers and of gaining a university education. The study finds that common stereotypes may be misleading and that there are many similarities between the needs of international and local students.*

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate international student expectations and motivations. International student recruitment is of paramount importance for many educational institutions in Australia. International fee-paying students are essential both as a means of generating income and as a means of adding diversity to the student body. However more research should be done to consider the needs of these students once they are studying at Australian institutions and if and how their needs are different to those of local students.

Literature in this area focuses on how and why international students chose particular institutions (Nowak, 2000; Pimpa, 2005; Chen, 2007). In Chen's paper a synthesis model is developed to explain their decision-making process, while a push-pull model is used to understand the strengths of and relationships among various factors that influence the choice of a country, institution, program, and city. Unlike these studies, the purpose of this paper is to analyse what motivates Asian and local students to study at university and what they expect from their educations.

Methodology

A quantitative study is undertaken in which a large sample of The University of New South Wales students are surveyed on their motivations for study and the expectations they have of their teachers, university assessments and their future job prospects. The survey was pretested and checked for validity. Considerable attention was given to ensuring that the constructs of variables under investigation were correctly and adequately performed through the questions included in the survey. Multiple indicators to operationalise each variable were used to improve the reliability and the validity of the survey. The questionnaire is divided into four major parts:

- Decision and expectations about university – reasons for deciding to study at university, for choice of program and course of study;
- Perceptions about university life – learning approach, expectations of teachers, value placed on marks, preferred assessment, perception on benefits/disadvantages of learning in a

culturally diverse university, perceived benefits of higher education, and attitudes towards higher education and work;

- Expectations about post-university life – plans after graduation, perception of preparedness for work, perception of employers' expectations, and estimate of self-worth after finishing;
- Student background – in terms of education, culture, age and gender.

Survey data are analysed by SPSS to ascertain whether there are differences in motivations and expectations according to cultural background.

Results

The sample consisted of 1803 valid cases. There was roughly equal distribution of males and females in the cohort, although males were less represented (see Table 1 below).

The cohort came from a varied cultural background. Tables 1 and 2 below reflect the distribution of all students and of international and local students across different backgrounds and cultures. Cultural background was ascertained by analysis of students' own descriptions of their cultural background or ethnic identity, which they were asked to define in five words or less. Where there was insufficient or not useful information in this section, responses to other questions such as language spoken at home and with friends or country of birth were utilised to characterise the students.

Table 1: Gender representation and international and local students

	Sex				Origin			
	Female	Male	Missing	Total	Local	International	Missing	Total
Count	907	764	132	1803	1111	544	148	1803
%	50	42	7	100	62	30	8	100

Table 2: Cultural background

Origin	Western	Asian	Indian	European	Other	Missing	Total
Count	587	765	66	130	67	99	1803
%	33	42	4	7	4	10	100

The students were characterised into the following groups:

- Western – where reflected in cultural description, language spoken with family and friends is English, country of birth is in a Western country such as Australia, New Zealand, United States, Canada or UK.
- Asian – where reflected in cultural description, language spoken with family and friends is an Asian language, or if English is not a first language and student was born in an Asian country such as China, Japan, Singapore, Malaysia or Indonesia.
- Indian – where reflected in cultural description language spoken with family and friends in a sub-continental language, or English is not a first language and student was born in a sub-continental country such as India, Sri Lanka, Pakistan or Bangladesh.
- European – where reflected in cultural description language spoken with family and friends in a European language, or if English is not a first language and the student was born in a European country.
- Other – students that did not fit into the above categories. Descriptions included Jews, Arabs or Latin-Americans for example.
- Invalid – for those who failed to give enough information for the above.
- Asians and Westerners were the most prevalent amongst the cultural backgrounds identified in the cohort. Together they constitute over 70% of the cohort (Table 2).

Another variable was created to identify international students and local students. If schooling prior to UNSW was not in Australia and nationality was not Australian, respondents were deemed to be international students. Local students were selected when their prior schooling was in Australia and they had lived in Australia for at least four years. Sixty-two percent of the cohort are local students, whilst 30% are international students.

When the information on study status (international or local) and cultural background were put together it became obvious that the dominant groups are (Table 3): local Western students (30%), local Asian students (20%) and international Asian students (22%).

Table 3: Study status and cultural background of cohort

Origin	Local Western	Local Asian	Local Indian	Local European	Local Other	International Western	International Asian	International Indian	International European	International Other	Missing	TOTAL
Count	536	352	41	95	54	48	398	24	33	13	209	1803
%	30	20	2	5	3	3	22	1	2	1	1803	100

The cohort was at a variety of stages in their tertiary education. There was a concentration of students who were relatively new to their degrees. The cohort consisted of students from a large range of faculties. However significant proportions come from Commerce & Business (17%), College of Fine Arts (16%), Engineering (15%), Medicine (15%), Law (12%) and Arts and Social Sciences (12%).

Many questions in the survey asked respondents to rank a preset group of alternative answers. The data were analysed ‘horizontally’, by studying the distribution across ranks of each single answer. For further simplification, the ranks were accorded scores and the scores were averaged for each alternative answer so as to give a clear and single indication of student preferences or choices. The analysis focused on the responses to the following questions of the survey:

- A: Reasons for going to university
- B: Reasons for choosing program of study
- C: Reasons for choosing present course
- E: Learning stimulants
- F: Motivators for studying at university in terms of knowledge and skills; social benefits
- G: Expectation of teachers approach and methods; classroom climate
- H: Non-academic responsibilities of teachers
- K: Perceived benefits of getting good grades
- O: Perceived benefits of higher education in terms of knowledge gained, work and life skills developed.

a) Reasons for studying at university

Students were given a number of potential explanations which could be a reason for studying at university and were asked to rank their relative importance. The top three reasons for studying at university for both international and local students are: to create a range of interesting job opportunities, to develop intellectual potential and to find a high paying job.

The diagram below illustrates the key differences and similarities between international and local students’ reasons for undertaking a university education. Whilst both international and local students generally list the same reasons, international students appear to put greater emphasis on career objectives (to find a high paying job, improve job prospects, to get a promotion), further study (to gain skills for postgraduate study) and social pressures (family pressures and peer pressure). Local students appear to emphasize the joy of learning, developing intellectual potential and creating a range of interesting job opportunities.

Figure 1 below reveals that international students place a greater emphasis on future career prospects as a reason for undertaking university studies. Asian international students in particular placed a greater emphasis on this as a reason for undertaking university studies (mean=1.46) compared to local western students (mean= 0.45). Local Asian students also ranked this higher than local western students (mean=0.74).

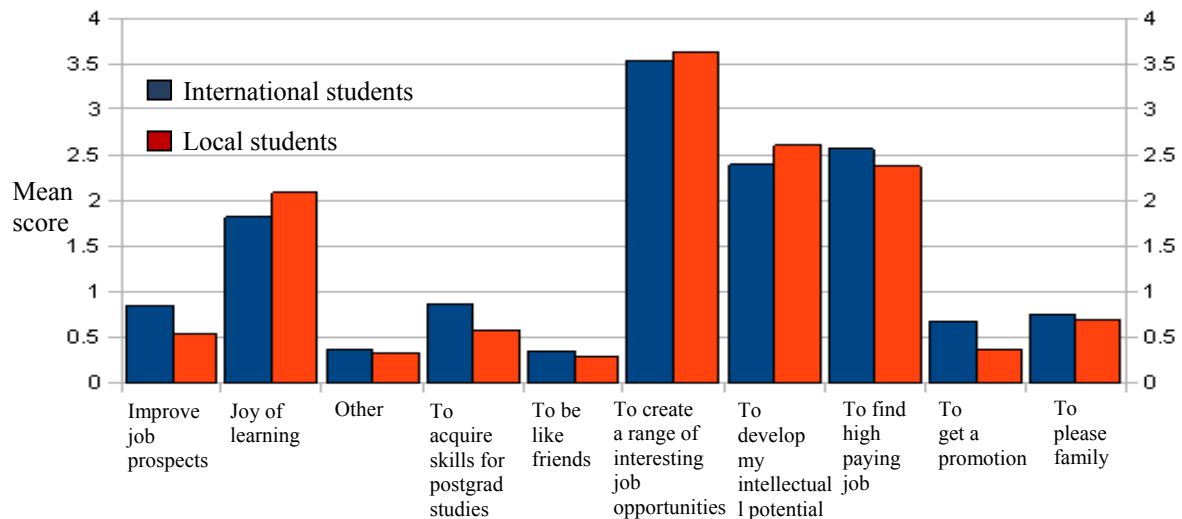


Figure 1: International and local student reasons for studying at university

When considering respondents from Built Environment, Commerce and Economics, Engineering, Law and Science faculties, responses are similar to those of UNSW as a whole. There is a slight variation within the most important objectives of studying at the university for the Arts and Social Science, COFA and Medicine where students place developing intellectual potential and satisfaction from learning new things above monetary awards (getting well paid job).

b) Program of study

Students were given a number of potential explanations which could be a reason for picking their program of study and were asked to range their relative importance. The top three motivators for choosing a particular program of study were: personal interest, relevance of program to job or career, the good reputation of the faculty, interesting program description and having met the qualifications required for the program.

Local students seem to put greater weight on personal interest and relevance to job or career when selecting a program of study. On the other hand, international students put proportionately more weight on whether they met the requirements for the course (this could include language requirements), recommendations of peers, the reputation of the faculty and program descriptions.

c) Selection of courses

Students were given a number of potential explanations which could be a reason for selecting particular courses to study and were asked to range their relative importance. The three most important considerations were: personal interest, relevance of the course to job or career and interesting and comprehensive program descriptions.

However when comparing the motivations of international Asian, local Asian and local Western students, some differences are apparent. In choosing courses, local students place more emphasis on personal interest and relevance of the course to their careers. The international Asian students place more importance on other reasons, recommendations by other students and an interesting and comprehensive course description.

d) Stimulation of learning

Students were asked to rank in what situations they were most stimulated to learn. For both international students and local students the top three factors were: a friendly class atmosphere, the provision of good lecture notes and entertaining classes, as illustrated in Figure 2 below.

Both local and international students believed that a friendly class atmosphere was the most important factor. Local students put much greater emphasis on entertaining classes and a bit more emphasis on being encouraged to ask questions in class. International students put greater emphasis on a friendly class atmosphere, good lecture notes and following example from teachers. Both international and local students ranked independent research and teamwork roughly equal.

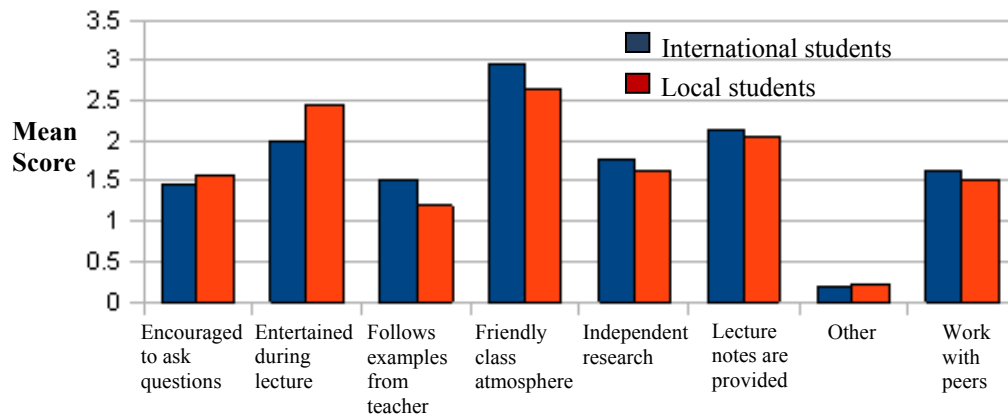


Figure 2: Factors that increase stimulation for learning - international and local student perspectives

e) Aims while at university

Students were asked what their main aims were at university and were asked to rank a given set of alternatives. Both international and local students answered that the aims of great importance while at university are to: gain knowledge required for future career, get good grades and develop capacity for independent learning.

When asked whether getting good grades was important the majority of both local and international students responded 'yes'. In fact, a greater percentage of local students believed that good grades were important, as can be seen in Table 4 below.

Table 4: Are grades important? – International and Local student responses

Type of student	Yes	No	Missing
International	85% (437)	14% (71)	2% (8)
Local	89% (963)	9% (100)	1% (15)

For the majority of students who did consider that grades were important, the following diagram represents which factors the students considered contributed to the importance of grades. The main reasons were that higher grades were a reward for effort, were a reflection of capability and reflected learning. International students placed greater emphasis than local students in believing that higher grades lead to a higher paying job and because their families expected them to, as shown in Figure 3 below.

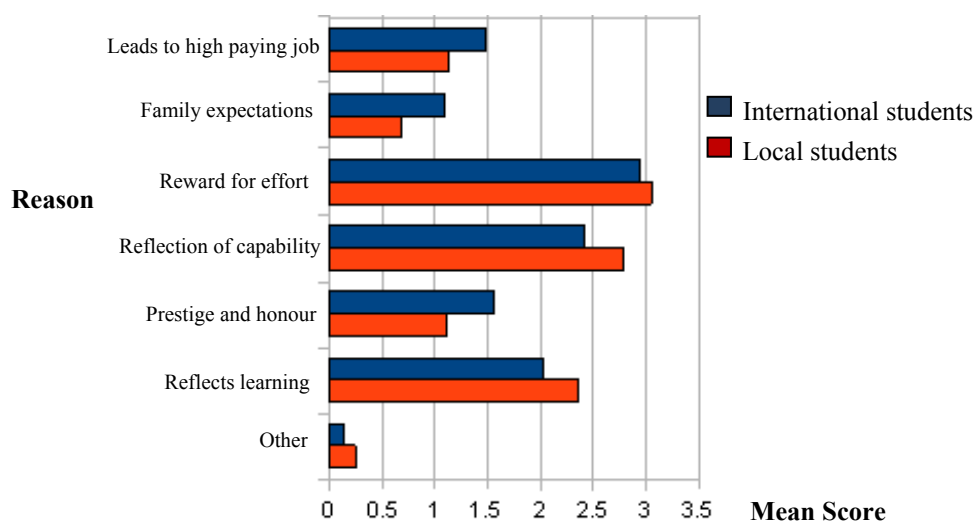


Figure 3: Reasons why grades are important

f) The perceived gains of studying at university

The students were asked to rank what they considered to be the gains of having a university education. Generally students thought they sought to gain: practical work skills, effective communication skills and critical analysis skills. Local students put more emphasis on these factors than international students. International students put more emphasis on: the use of technology, teamwork and understanding oneself. International students expect to gain team work skills from university whilst local students believed they sought to gain more from independent learning (Figure 4).

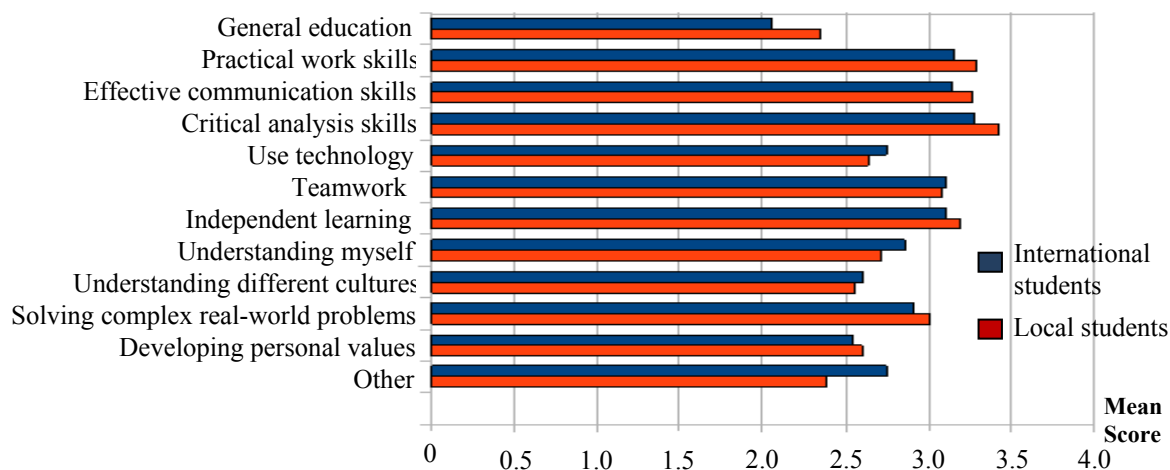


Figure 4: International and local student view on the gains of studying at university

Conclusion

The results illustrate that most students, regardless of their cultural diversity, generally undertake university studies for the same reasons. They go to university to widen their horizons for the future and develop themselves intellectually. There were minor differences in that students of Asian background prioritised finding a higher paying job over developing their personal intellectual capital, but the differences were small. By far the most cited reason for undertaking a particular program of study was due to the personal interest to the student. Thereafter, more international students or those from an Asian background cited the reputation of the faculty as a deciding factor, whereas Australian students were more likely to think about the relevance of the program to study to their future or present career. A recurring tenet in the findings is that recommendations by fellow students and family expectations are an important factor in the decision making process of international students as well as eligibility into courses. There is no evidence to suggest that international students do not have a deep motivation to learn. Along with local students they believe that the gains to be made at university are in skills development. These findings show that stereotypes of Asian international students can be misleading (Samuelowicz, 1987; Watson, 1999). Generally speaking, Asian international students are fairly similar to local students in their motivations for and expectations of university education.

References

- Chen, L.H. (2007). East-Asian students' choice of Canadian graduate schools. *International Journal of Educational Advancement*, 7, 271–306.
- Nowak, R. (2000). *Culture-shock: a study examining the transitional experience of international tertiary students at an Australian university*. WA: Bentley.
- Pimpa, N. (2005). A family affair: the effect of family on Thai students' choices of international education. *Higher education*, 49 (4), 431.
- Samuelowicz, K. (1987). Learning problems of overseas students: Two sides of a story. *Higher Education Research and Development*, 6, 121-134.
- Watson, D. (1999). Loss of face in Australian classrooms. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 4(3), 355-363.

Copyright © 2009 Remains the property of the author(s). The author(s) assign to AaeE and educational non-profit institutions a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author(s) also grant a non-exclusive licence to AaeE to publish this document in full on the World Wide Web (prime sites and mirrors) on electronic storage and in printed form within the AaeE 2009 conference proceedings. Any other usage is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).