The academic acculturation experience of international students. Insights from an evaluation of the RMIT University’s ‘International Student Stories’ website

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Abstract

Often the difficulties that international students face in adjusting to study in Australia are attributed to poor language levels. However, academic and pedagogical acculturation issues are also a significant cause of miscommunication, misunderstanding and disappointment for international students and their teachers. This research project evaluates a RMIT Learning and Teaching Investment Fund project which developed an academic acculturation website for international students. The focus of the website ‘International Student Stories’ (ISS) consists of mini advice segments in short video clips from experienced international students. Their stories focus on the lessons they have learned studying in Australia around four key areas of academic acculturation. The rationale for the project and its evaluation draws on a significant body of research on the impact of cultural styles in academic transition and on increasing evidence of the difficulties international students face adjusting to study in Australia. The research employs a program evaluation methodology, utilising data obtained from web surveys and focus groups. Revealed in the research findings are the significant challenges international students face to their identities as successful learners in adjusting to new classroom environments, differing cultural styles of academic discourse, knowledge creation and attribution as well as the nature of critique. It is argued that while the ISS website is an effective, introductory resource for international students, the successful participation of international students requires that the discourses of university disciplines need to be explicitly taught within the students’ programs of study.
Declaration

This is to certify that:

- the exegesis comprises only my original work towards the Masters of Management (Research by Project)
- due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used.

Barbara Morgan
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Chapter One: Introduction

An introduction to the research project
This research project emerged from a learning and teaching project which was developed between July 2008 and January 2009 at RMIT University. The project produced a website entitled ‘International Student Stories’ (ISS), the aim of which was to support the academic acculturation of international students to tertiary study in Australia. The need for the project was supported by increasing discussion in the literature of the negative academic transitional experiences of international students. This body of research advocates for the explication of academic expectations and discourses for overseas students in particular (see, for example Watkins 2000; Ramburuth 2001; Leask 2005; McLean & Ransom 2005; Carroll 2005a).

The ISS website was developed as an intervention strategy which aimed to provide a sustainable support model for the transition of international students to Australian academic culture. The rationale for the website was therefore to better prepare students for the differences in learning and teaching approaches, for the academic challenges that they will invariably face in the first year of tertiary study.

The areas highlighted in the website were informed by the literature (Ballard & Clancy 1991; Leask 2005; Ryan & Hellmundt 2005; Carroll 2005a) and attempt to deal with core areas where students may encounter difficulties. These key academic areas are ‘Expectations of students’ which deals with the roles and responsibilities of students and teachers in Australian universities, ‘Understanding referencing’ which looks at cultural assumptions concerning the construction and attribution of knowledge, ‘Structuring assignments’ involving an explanation of the linear, writing and discourse style required for assignments and ‘Developing critical thinking’ dealing with the nature of academic critique and argument.
The website, which was launched in January 2009, can be accessed via the RMIT University’s learning and study portal, the Learning Lab. The site includes mini advice segments consisting of video clips from experienced international students, such as ‘what I have learned about learning in an Australian university’, as well as explanations of each of the four key academic areas outlined above.

This exegesis analyses evaluative research into the effectiveness of the ISS website for international students in transition. Included in the discussion is the site’s value as an acculturation strategy for the university. In so doing, the research project also provides broader insights into the academic acculturation experiences of this cohort of students, beyond an evaluation of the effectiveness of the ISS website. These insights highlight the need for university policies and strategies to more comprehensively address the needs of students moving across educational cultures. In particular this research supports literature which advocates that a key activity for academic acculturation programs for international students is to ensure that implicit academic expectations and practices are made explicit.

**Significance of the research project**

Over the past two decades international student enrolments in Australian universities have increased considerably. For example, from 2002 to 2009 enrolments of overseas students at Australian tertiary institutions grew from 228,119 students to 491,565 students. By 2009 fee-paying international students represented a $17.2 billion industry (Baird 2010) and comprised 28.3 % of enrolments in Australian universities (DEEWR 2010). At RMIT University international students make up 39% of the total student population (RMIT Pocket Statistics 2010).

It appears that Australian universities depend on the funds provided by full-fee paying overseas students, as these institutions depend on this cohort as a significant income source to support the delivery of courses across the sector. The sustainability of the business of international student enrolments is not only
important, but vital for Australia, given there is competition from countries like India and China who are investing in their own tertiary sectors (Arkoudis & Tran 2007). In fact, there is growing unease that Australia is over-reliant on foreign students as an export industry (Marginson 2009). The recent drop in international student enrolments across the country is further cause for concern.

Clearly, foreign students have delivered considerable financial benefits for universities. However, acculturating to the Australian learning and teaching environment has often been difficult and stressful for this group of students. Indeed, international students’ experience of academic transition has been discussed extensively in the literature for some decades (Ballard & Clancy 1991; Fox 1994; Connor 1996; Ryan 2005b).

Despite this body of literature, the difficulties that international students face in the transition to university in Australia are often attributed primarily to English-language levels, rather than issues of adjustment to foreign academic cultures, values and discourses (Carroll 2005; Kettle 2011). Arguably, this singular focus on student language difficulties may be at the expense of a broader focus on transitional issues. It seems that the academic acculturation needs of transitioning students are often little understood, addressed or considered (Hellsten & Prescott 2004; Ryan & Hellmundt 2005; Carroll 2005a; Ryan 2005b).

Unfortunately, many of the interventions to support and retain international students in Australian universities have originated from this language deficit approach to the academic acculturation of this cohort. The issue with this approach is that it can lead to perceptions of students as ‘the problem’ to be fixed with remedial interventions (McLean & Ransom 2005; Carroll 2005b). However, this research argues that a more positive and inclusive induction would place greater emphasis on acculturating students to the specific educational expectations of Australian universities.
Within this context, the ISS website was envisaged as an independent accessible learning resource, which could raise international students’ awareness of the socio-cultural requirements of academic study at tertiary level in Australia. The research also makes a contribution to scholarly knowledge regarding the efficacy of the online environment for international student transition.

**Aims of the research**
This study into the effectiveness of the ‘International Student Stories’ website aims to:

- evaluate the efficacy of an academic acculturation website in preparing international students for their transition to tertiary study in Australia
- explore the nature of the academic acculturation experience of international students
- assess the usefulness of the online environment as a learning and teaching resource for the academic transition of international students.

**Research questions**
The evaluation will address the following research questions.

- How effective is the academic acculturation website ‘International Student Stories’ in supporting the transition of international students to the academic culture at RMIT University?
- How could this website be improved?

**Masters of Management (Research by Project)**
A research masters which is undertaken by project aims to address the following objectives of project-based research, which are to create:

1. a more skilled and knowledgeable practitioner
2. a contribution to professional and scholarly knowledge
3. a body of work or product.

(RMIT, 2007, p. 38)
My goal at the beginning of this Masters of Management (Research by Project) was to improve as a practitioner-researcher the academic acculturation support offered to international students. This was to develop a useful and accessible website and then to evaluate its effectiveness. However, as the research evolved a parallel project emerged; that of advocacy for the transition needs of this group.

This advocacy aspect of the project was needed in response to the perceived lack of awareness of the complexity of the transition needs of this student group. Its aim was to promote awareness of the challenges international students face when adjusting to academic study. Across the institution there appeared to be little awareness that many international students have to overcome significant differences in learning and teaching cultures and that these differences in educational background need to be accommodated in both practice and policy.

I considered that the effectiveness of the ISS website would be limited if the resource was not known about or promoted at a number of pre- and post-transition entry points. In my view, the role of inclusive environments in supporting and fostering learning and language development needed to be better understood across the institution.

In 2009 RMIT embarked on an English Language Development Project (ELDP). I was concerned that given the high priority this project had received across the institution a broader focus on transition would be lost. In this environment the academic acculturation issues of the international cohort could be easily misdiagnosed as solely English-language difficulties. Rather than a practical induction into new ways of learning and new educational expectations, many students would simply be given a language test and then told to work on their English.

This narrow focus on the perceived language deficits of international students gives insufficient consideration to the importance of understanding the importance of context in learning cultures. It seemed to me that the ELDP
approach at RMIT was based on the simplistic notion that language proficiency is enough in itself to assure academic success and that students were either proficient or required remediation. This view is in stark contrast to ‘best practice’ that draws on literature which views proficiency in academic written or spoken texts as essentially situated in context (see, for example Street 2003; Gee 2004; Lea & Street 2006). All newcomers and international students especially, need to be acculturated to the genres and discourses of academic tasks (Schmidt 2005).

This is not to say that appropriate English proficiency is not important. Indeed, the Victorian Ombudsman’s Report, *Investigation into how universities deal with international students* (2011) provides strong and compelling evidence for more stringent language entry standards. However, the default perception that English language is the only issue international students experience downplays the vital role of academic acculturation programs in supporting students who come from different learning cultures. Additionally, the reality that the majority of international students are ‘English as a second language’ learners should be rationale enough for the promotion of more inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Arguably, it is more likely that international students will develop their language ability within a transition framework where they know and understand what is expected of them in higher-order acculturation literacies, such as are introduced on the ISS website, as opposed to a limited focus on competency in skills of grammar and syntax. The English-language proficiency of students at universities therefore needs to be understood not as a deficit in targeted students which is quantifiable and measurable, but as the development of communicative competence within the contexts and genres of university programs (Harper, Prentice & Wilson 2011). For example, students enrolled in a Certificate IV in Plumbing will need to learn different genres of English in their assessment tasks to students embarking on undergraduate degrees, and research students will need to learn quite different genres again.
Once students are accepted into universities their English-language development should be viewed as part of the larger issue of diversity management in which the university needs to develop clear strategies to manage and promote its internationalisation agendas. The model below\(^1\) conceptualises English proficiency as fundamentally embedded within the genres of discipline content. This model acknowledges the key role of transition in acculturating students to the literacies of the discipline in an institute-wide strategy for accommodating diversity.

![Figure 1: University Diversity Management Approach](#)

The attraction of the ELDP approach to English development may be that it provides a simple solution to what could be considered a complex issue for universities. Given the increasing diversity of student populations across the sector many students do not necessarily enroll with the requisite cultural capital to know what is expected of them in academic study. In fact, a common phrase heard by learning advisors from academic staff about students is ‘they should know how to do this!’ However, implementing programs that support staff to achieve this capability development involve a considerable shift in thinking. Initially, a shift to a greater emphasis on capabilities as opposed to the delivery of content knowledge is required. This would potentially result in greater institutional responsibility and cost.

\(^1\) This model is based on working diagrams used in the Study and Learning Centre, RMIT University.
Despite the complexity of these issues from an institutional perspective I felt that the challenges that international students face adapting to tertiary study in Australia needed to be better understood. I used the findings of the evaluation of ISS (both preliminary and final) to promote the value of such academic acculturation programs and/or resources for international students. In this body of work my goal was to highlight to various stakeholders firstly, the importance of transition for student success and retention, and secondly, that the ‘international student problem’ was not just about English. While there is much work still to be done, I feel that giving a voice to the international student experience has had some, if small, impact on many at RMIT and elsewhere. Certainly there has been much appreciation particularly from teaching staff of the insights gained from the resources and sessions I have conducted.

The portfolio accompanying this exegesis details a number of presentations, workshops, professional development sessions and publications which promote ISS and the research into its usefulness. Hopefully this work has provided greater awareness of the challenges international students face, as well as advocacy for more effective and integrated transitional support across the university.

The following diagram illustrates the development of my work as a practitioner-researcher in my Masters of Management (Research by Project). Outlined are the intersections of:

- the Learning and Teaching Investment Funded project to develop the ISS website
- the research into the website’s effectiveness (the exegesis)
- the advocacy project (presentations, workshops, professional development and publications) promoting the ISS and research findings.
Learning and Teaching Investment Funded Project
June 2008 - January 2009
ISS website

Research July 2008 to December 2011
Exegesis
Aim
How useful is the website?
How can it be improved?

- Literature review
- Primary data
- Surveys
- Focus groups

By Project
practitioner practice
Impact on university

Workplace Advocacy Project
2009
Issue
Acclutation of international students
Institution needs to change

Portfolio of work products
The website
Presentations
Workshops
PD
Publications

Figure 2: Development and dimensions of the Masters by Research (by Project)
**Structure of the exegesis**

Chapter Two is the background chapter of the exegesis as it tells the story of the development of the ‘International Student Stories’ website. Outlined are the processes and pedagogical issues involved in the development of the website as well as a rationale for why international students were targeted specifically. Chapter Three discusses the program evaluation methodology utilised for this evaluative research. This includes the rationale for the choice of a multi-method approach employing both quantitative online questionnaires for preliminary data, and more in-depth, exploratory and qualitative research via focus-group discussions. Chapters Four and Five of the exegesis examine the literature related to two key research areas for this study; academic transition within the tertiary sector and the online environment as a learning and teaching medium. The literature review in Chapter Four is concerned with issues of tertiary learning and identity in general, as well as the impact of academic acculturation on the international cohort in particular. Chapter Five appraises the literature relating to the changing and dynamic role of the digital environment for tertiary learning, with particular reference to online academic support mechanisms. Chapter Six then presents and discusses both the quantitative and qualitative results of the evaluation of the website and more broadly situates findings within the context of the university’s responsibility for the academic acculturation of international students. Finally, Chapter Seven makes conclusions and provides recommendations for future improvements and research.
Chapter Two: Background

Introduction
This chapter outlines the development of the RMIT University Learning and Teaching project on which this evaluative research is based. Firstly, the impetus for the project is described, followed by an elaboration of the development of the ‘International Student Stories’ website. Included in this discussion is the rationale for both key decisions in the project design and for the content of each of the four academic challenges presented on the site. An analysis of pedagogical issues relating to the writing of web content, as well as the production process for the video clip ‘stories’ of the international students featured on the website, are also outlined. The chapter concludes with a discussion regarding why international students were especially identified for this project.

Impetus for the ‘International Student Stories’ project
The concept for the development of an academic acculturation website for international students grew organically out of my work as an academic language and learning practitioner. In fact, a serendipitous collaboration with Dr Lynnel Hoare involving discussions with her international postgraduate students highlighted a gap in the provision of academic induction at the university. These discussions then led to a learning and teaching funding application for the development of the ISS website.

Lyn’s students’ stories of learning in a new culture were enlightening and they reported experiences representing a range of academic acculturation issues. The students proposed that an early awareness of the differences between past and present academic cultures would have been extremely beneficial at the beginning of their studies. The value of induction into new ways of learning was also found by Ramburuth (2001; 2009).
This group of international students expressed strong support for a website which dealt with transition to academic study in Australia. They were concerned that the information provided via paper-based information, usually in the form of a bag of giveaways, was not always effective. They favoured an online resource because they could access a website both pre- and post-arrival. Another advantage of a web resource was that due to the staggered arrival of international students, right up until or sometimes after their program has already commenced, the conducting of introductory face-to-face programs is operationally difficult. Needless to say centrally run transition programs for the thousands of new international students enrolling each year would incur substantial additional costs for the university.

The submission to develop the ISS website, sponsored through the university’s Learning and Teaching Investment Fund, was successful and development commenced in mid-July 2008. The project team consisted of myself as the project manager, a ‘transnational’ academic (Dr Lynnel Hoare) who had an ‘expert’ advisory and consultancy role, a project officer and an educational designer. Online development was provided by the university’s Educational Media Group.

Preliminary investigation

Initial activities involved a preliminary literature review and an audit of existing web resources available at other universities. The literature review identified key areas of need for international students studying in Australia. The audit of websites focused on content; that is, what topics were considered important as well as how the material was structured.

An important decision at the beginning was to ensure that website and video material was explicit and to the point. The project was informed by Neilson’s (1997) longstanding and highly regarded usability studies of how web users engage with websites. Consideration was also given to more recent research which suggests that people do not read slabs of text on screen (Neilson 2006).
Rather, web text is scanned using F-shaped patterns of eye movements. This means that web users read at first horizontally across the page, then down the page followed by short horizontal movements across the page, and then continue scanning horizontally downwards. Put simply, when users read a web page they focus mainly on the first section. As a result, key ideas can be readily accessed when websites are designed so that the most important information is highlighted explicitly at the beginning, followed by readable subheadings and bullet points (Neilsen 2003).

Thus, the website development was informed by emerging online research regarding the content and design of websites. Short introductory texts were written to accompany the student video clips on each of the four sections of the website. These texts were intended to be scannable using keywords, bullet points and, where appropriate, diagrams, illustrations or photos. An example of the latter is the use of photos in the ‘Structuring of assignments’ section of the ISS website.

Figure 3: Cultural discourse styles

(RMIT University International Student Stories 2009a)
These preliminary investigations of university websites did not find an exemplar site for international students across the sector. We found that the sites available for overseas students were often too long and so did not contain clearly targeted information. In our view none of the resources audited were sufficiently appealing to students or targeted to the attention spans and needs of the net generation.

**Development of the website**
The preliminary research through the literature review and web audit revealed the four main areas of difficulty for international students. The student feedback also matched very well with the recurring themes in the literature. Each area of the website was designed to include an introductory web page with accompanying student video clips in the following four key areas.

1. **Expectations of students**: the roles and responsibilities of students and teachers in Australian universities.
2. **Structuring assignments**: the nature of tertiary discourse and writing style in Australian university settings.
3. **Developing critical thinking**: the nature of critique and argument.
4. **Understanding referencing**: academic integrity, intellectual property and the ownership of knowledge.

1. **Expectations of students**
   ‘Expectations of students’ is the first area of the ISS website as it deals with the learning environment that students encounter when they embark on their program of study, specifically the roles of students and their teachers both within and external to the classroom. Highlighted in this area is the importance of independent learning as well as the expectation that students will ask questions if they do not understand.

The rationale for the inclusion of an area that examines classroom roles and behaviours was based on anecdotal evidence from students as well as the research literature (Volet & Renshaw 1996; Ramburuth 2001). These sources
indicated that adapting to new expectations in their role as students, as well as the teaching environment, was a significant challenge for many international students. Such challenges have been considered particularly problematic for those international students from more group-centred cultures when transitioning to the more individualistic, informal and discursive university settings (Roberts & Tuleja 2008).

2. Structuring assignments

The ‘Structuring assignments’ section elaborates on the nature of tertiary discourse and writing style, as what is required in oral and written assessment tasks is often not understood by many international students (McLean & Ransom 2005; Schmidt 2005). Indeed, there is some evidence that international students may be 'diagnosed' with English problems when the real issue is a lack of knowledge of how to structure their work for Australian academic requirements (Carroll 2005a). In support, Kettle (2011) also proposes that it may be all too convenient for the university community to perceive English language deficits as a student responsibility and in so doing abrogate responsibility for the development of academic writing skills.

In ‘Structuring assignments’ the student stories on the video clips are accompanied by diagrams and pictorial representations of two main cultural discourse structures for organising text. In this section the challenges of the linear, explicit and ‘to the point’ structure required for most tertiary assessments are compared with the more circular, indirect, digressive and inductive style that many international students are accustomed to (Shen 1989; Fox 1994; Connor 1996).

3. Understanding referencing

The ‘Understanding referencing’ section of the ISS website explains to students the importance of and rationale for knowledge attribution in Australian universities. The section shows how knowledge is constructed and attributed in
Australian tertiary contexts. Both video clips and the introductory content seek to make explicit the rationale for referencing in the Australian academic context. Many international students initially may lack an understanding of the importance of acknowledging ownership of ideas. Often international students are accused of plagiarising, of copying extracts from text without appropriate acknowledgement, when understanding different cultural value systems is a significant component of the problem (Volet 1999; Leask 2006; Pringle et al. 2008; Abasi et al. 2006). The section aims to provide constructive rather than the punitive messages that are often associated with plagiarism.

4. Developing critical thinking
Critical thinking is generally considered the most difficult capability in tertiary study and there is often a mystique associated with the concept. For many students, not only international students, critique is a confusing concept (Gelder 2005). However, international students who come from cultures that tend to defer to authority figures may interpret critique with being critical, and thus disrespectful of teachers and scholars.

The ‘Developing critical thinking’ section of the ISS website attempts to demystify this concept by elaborating on the skills required for analysis, critique and argument. Integral to students developing a critical approach to their studies is the ability to ask questions of authorised knowledge, including the knowledge conveyed by their teachers, and then to make evidence-based evaluations and judgements. However, overseas students may be more accustomed to respecting rather than questioning expert knowledge (Chan 1996).

The participants for video clips
Eight international students were recruited from across the university with representation from diverse disciplines (Science, Engineering to Education and Business). While the students came from a cross-section of programs, it was not possible that students selected could represent all the university’s disciplines. Nevertheless, there were some key decisions to make regarding the choice of
participants. The project team opted to have a diversity of international students even though the majority of onshore international students at RMIT came from the Asian sub-continent (RMIT University Statistics 2010). This choice was motivated from the standpoint that the acculturation issues of international students are not exclusively a problem for Asian students, thereby implying a deficit within this cohort. Certainly, feedback from the European students who participated in the videos (Hans from Denmark and Trine from Norway among others) supported the view that a range of cultures struggle with new academic requirements.

In preparation for the filming students were asked to reflect on issues relating to ‘What they wish they had known before they came to study in Australia’. To guide their preparation they were given a list of questions covering the four themes of the website. The sessions were recorded without scripts, using the students’ own words. These student responses were then edited for placement on the website.

**Why international students were targeted in particular: the debate about difference**

A persistent question asked of the project team was why this project had targeted international students, specifically, when academic acculturation should be available for all students. This issue is also addressed in the literature (see, for example, McLean & Ransom 2005; Leask 2006). In answering this question Carroll (2005a) maintains that while it is important to be explicit about academic requirements for all students, it is especially crucial for those students transitioning from different learning and teaching environments.

Ramburuth (2001) also advocates for the value of acknowledging that many international students come from different educational cultures and that it is important to make explicit to students the differences between past and present learning environments. Arguably, to assume that all students are equal beginners is to deny cultural differences and the impact these differences have on the successful acculturation to tertiary study (Gee 2004). Indeed, Bennett (1993, p.
30) maintains that ‘the denial of cultural difference is the purest form of ethnocentrism’.

Such denials of cultural differences could be said to relegate those students to the position of ‘outsiders’ or ‘the other’ when belonging to the university is bound to an understanding of the dominant discourses, knowledge concepts and tertiary literacies (MacKinnon & Manathunga 2003; Leask 2006). This failure to acculturate international students to what invariably is a new and alien learning and teaching culture, could lead to negative perceptions of this cohort as cognitively deficient or inferior learners (MacKinnon & Manathunga 2003).

An issue for the development of the ISS was this reluctance to acknowledge the impact of different educational backgrounds on transition to study. There was a resistance to explicitly targeting international students, and this was portrayed under the guise of ‘equity’ concerns and a desire to treat all students as the same. Bennett (1993) argues that underpinning this reluctance to cater for international cohorts is a naïve adherence to the values and power relations of the dominant culture. Thus, to presume similarity may be considered a denial of the fundamental tenet of intercultural communication, which is that it is ‘difference based’ (Bennett 1998, p. 3). Such attitudes by policy makers in universities may have the effect of ‘institutionalising discrimination against students from non-dominant backgrounds and privileging students from dominant groups’ (MacKinnon & Manathunga 2003, p. 99).

While it is important to acknowledge that all new students are beginners in the culture of academic study, it is clear that they are not all equal beginners (Gee 2004). Acculturation to the academic literacies and discourses required for tertiary study is needed for every student (Lea & Street 1998; Skillen et al. 1998; Leask 2005). However, local students who have been exposed at secondary level or in bridging preparatory programs to the learning environment in Australia could be assumed to have acculturated to Australian education to some extent.
International students who arrive one day and often are enrolled and in class the next, could benefit from a targeted induction to the Australian learning environment.

In proposing an acculturation resource which helps international students adapt to Australian academic culture, the aim was to develop bi-cultural understanding rather than assimilation. Adaptation must be distinguished from assimilation which is ‘the re-socialisation that seeks to replace one’s original world view with that of the host culture’ (Bennett 1998, p. 25). Instead, rather than substituting one world view for another, adaptation is about adding cultural world views leading to a bi-cultural perspective (Bennett 1998). Presumably, this perspective would be enriching to all stakeholders involved in global agendas.

**Chapter Conclusion**

‘International Student Stories’ was framed as an open and accessible website which could make a contribution to the development of hybrid understandings of cultural differences in tertiary study. The website was envisaged as a resource that could provide timely support for students embarking on their cross-cultural learning journeys. This chapter has outlined the impetus, rationale and process of the development of the ISS website. In doing so, the chapter argues for the benefits of targeting the international cohort for academic acculturation programs and resources. The following chapter discusses the methodology used for the evaluative research into the effectiveness of the ISS website.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology employed for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the 'International Student Stories' website as an academic acculturation resource for the international cohort of RMIT University. Accordingly, the rationale for utilising a program evaluation methodology, involving both a preliminary online questionnaire and in-depth focus-group discussions, is outlined. The research process for each of these methods is discussed with consideration given to the potential influence of demographic factors concerning the ethnicity and nationality of participants in the research data. The chapter concludes with an outline of the data analysis process for both the quantitative and qualitative methods, as well as the limitations of the research design.

Program evaluation methodology

As stated above, this research was concerned with the evaluation of the effectiveness of a university resource, the ISS website. While there are different approaches to evaluation, the methodology of program evaluation as outlined by Owen (1993; 2006) and Patton (1997) was used for this research project. The rationale for this approach is based on its applicability to the practical and utilitarian outcomes of a work-based project, which in this case is to inform the practice of education in a large institution.

Owen (2006, p. 9) describes program evaluation as ‘the process of making a judgment about the value or worth of an object under review’. Moreover, the criteria for assessing worth can be drawn from the stated aim/s of the intervention, the needs of the intended clients, broader policy objectives, other stakeholders as well as cost effectiveness (Owen 2006).
Drawing on the above criteria, the evaluation of ISS has implications for international students, key stakeholders and university policy. As a result, the assessment of the worth of ISS considers whether the resource:

- fulfils its intended purpose; that is, greater knowledge and awareness of academic culture in Australia via an accessible web resource
- meets the acculturation needs of this cohort of students
- provides value to the broader policy framework for international students
- meets the needs of other stakeholders (for example, academic teaching staff and support staff)
- provides a return on the investment provided by Learning and Teaching Investment Funds for the development of ISS.

An impact evaluation was chosen as the evaluative approach to be used as it is concerned with ‘what works and why’ (Owen 2006, p. 255). As the project is evaluating a completed resource, it is important to evaluate the impact of the website on end users and other stakeholders as well as providing an assessment of the value of the website.

The benefit of an impact evaluation approach is that it can provide both a summative judgement of the value of ISS as well as a formative, improvement focus. While the former is concerned with making a judgement about the efficacy and effectiveness of a program or product after development, a formative evaluation is focused on the future, on how a program or product can be enhanced. In terms of this research, formative evaluations can interrogate how academic acculturation programs can be more effective. Indeed a formative, improvement focus is critical to successful impact evaluations because as Owen (1993; 2006) has highlighted, there is little point completing an evaluation if there is no intent or ability to act on the recommendations for the future. Thus, this research is concerned with both evaluative judgements of effectiveness, but also with program improvement.
An impact evaluation can address issues related to the effectiveness of the ISS website.

*How effective is the ‘International Student Stories’ in supporting the transition of international students to the academic culture at RMIT University?* (Research question one)

Question two deals with program improvement.

*How can this website be improved?*

Clearly, the impact evaluation methodology used for this research needs to not only outline practical improvements, but also develop a clear strategy or an action plan so that any recommendations can be realistically achieved. Consequently, a key outcome is to ensure that research findings are disseminated to the Study and Learning Centre where the researcher works at the university. In addition, key stakeholders, for example university colleges and schools as well as the funding body of this project, the university’s Learning and Teaching Unit would also need to be informed.

Additionally, it is anticipated that this research will be useful in providing additional knowledge which can be acted upon to improve academic support for international students, and possibly support teaching practice across the university. This has been described by Patton as ‘instrumental use because a decision or action follows, at least in part, from the evaluation’ (1997, p. 70). Examples of the activities the researcher has been involved in to disseminate this knowledge are highlighted in the portfolio section of this Masters by Research project (see Academic Exhibits 1-9).

**Multi-methods approach**

Patton (1997) advocates for a multi-methods approach in program evaluations because qualitative and quantitative methods have both advantages and
disadvantages. Owen (1993) also maintains that any program evaluation benefits from the use of both mixed methods in the collection of data. Further, multi-methods are promoted by McMurray et al. (2004) for their potential to generalise from the research findings, thereby increasing the reliability of research data. As a result, this research has collected data that has both depth, using qualitative focus groups and interviews, and breadth, using online questionnaires.

**Method 1: Focus groups**

Focus groups were the primary method for this evaluation and have been defined as a particular type of group involved in a

> carefully planned series of discussions designed to obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, non-threatening environment

*(Krueger & Casey 2000, p.18)*

The essential feature of focus groups in contrast to another qualitative method, the interview, is that group participants influence each other by responding to the views and opinions of fellow participants. The focus-group environment needs to be relaxed and secure so that participants feel comfortable sharing their ideas and opinions with each other (Krueger & Casey 2000). To accommodate these requirements and within the constraints of an institutional setting, the researcher attempted to simulate a natural, life-like situation, so that a range of viewpoints and ideas could emerge from the group. This relaxed atmosphere facilitated a range of in-depth responses to the ISS website.

The focus-group method seeks ‘to provide insights about how people in a group perceive a situation’ (Krueger & Casey 2000, p. 83). Questioning techniques are used to probe why participants hold particular views and experiences. In the three focus groups for the ISS these questioning techniques were used not only to assess whether the site is effective in
supporting the transition of international students, but also how students have used the resource, what sections if any have been useful, as well as suggestions for improvements.

**Focus-group participants**
Group participants were chosen because they had characteristics of interest to the topic of the focus group; that is, international students transitioning to academic study at the university. Participants were recruited from targeted programs (for example, International Academic Preparation Program, preparatory English programs, college programs and courses and through internal advertising (see Portfolio Products 4 and 5). Students were also recruited through internal marketing of the research project via the MyRMIT student portal, student news sheets (see Portfolio Products 3 to 6), as well as through International Student Support Services (ISIS).

Interested students responded to the requests for participants by emailing the researcher and the sessions were arranged to suit student availability. Overall, most of the students who were interested in participating in the project were included in the focus groups, except on a few occasions when their availability did not match the availability of most of the other students.

Participants were not consciously selected on the basis of nationality or ethnicity as all transitioning international students were given the opportunity to attend. Nevertheless, the data obtained by way of the introductions at the beginning of each session indicated that the main demographic groups were representative of RMIT University’s international student population, in particular Chinese and Indian students.

The number in each focus group was also a consideration. While a good number for a focus group is six to eight participants, numbers varied across the three focus groups with 11 in one, eight in another and the third quite small with six participants. On reflection, the largest focus group was a little
unwieldy, albeit in a spirited way, which meant that the researcher had to work hard to include all participants in the conversations.

**Focus-group planning**
An important aspect of the planning for the sessions was to ensure that participants were cognisant of the context and purpose of the evaluation of the ISS website and that:

- a note taker or observer would be present
- the session would be audiotaped
- they could ask questions prior to the focus group commencing
- they could withdraw from participating at any time.

Another consideration was the need to create an atmosphere conducive to discussion. This meant focus-group sessions needed to be carefully planned, but to the participants appeared informal and conversational. Questions were designed to be ‘open ended’ with general questions presented at the beginning to encourage participants to think about the topic. Once students felt relaxed with each other and the evaluative purpose, questions could then become specific. Sessions were structured to conclude with more focused or summary-type questions and discussions.

Discussion questions followed the interview structure as suggested by Kvale (1996) and included the following types of questions, as was appropriate for the situation. However, evaluation on the four sections of the website formed the particular foci of discussion. The following lists the type of questions used in focus-group sessions.

A Introductory question
   E.g. Can you tell me about your initial impressions of this website?

B Follow-up questions
   What did you like about the site?
C Probing questions  
*Can you explain … ?*

D Specifying questions  
*What did you learn from the … section of the website?*

E Direct questions  
*What was the most useful section?*

F Indirect questions  
*How has the ISS website supported your transition … ?*

G Structured questions  
*Can you name three benefits of the ISS … ?*

(Kvale 1996, p.133)

**Focus-group sessions**

Three focus groups were conducted between May 2009 and the end of June 2009 and each of these sessions followed a set format. Prior to the focus groups students were asked to view the video clips, the explanations and graphics in each of the four areas of the ISS website. Before each session information was conveyed to students regarding the context and purpose of the research and they were advised that their feedback was highly valued. During the sessions students were encouraged to take a critical, opinionative view so that any necessary changes could be made to the website. Such direct opinions may have, at least initially, been at odds with the majority of the students’ cultural background, which often values a more indirect, tactful feedback style (Shen 1989: Fox 1994; Ryan & Hellmundt 2005; Carroll 2005b).

Each session began with an introductory part where students shared information on name, program of study as well as nationality, ethnicity or country of origin. Self-perception and identity were obvious factors in how participants viewed themselves in these sessions. For example, an ethnic Chinese living in Malaysia could identify themselves as Chinese, Malaysian or both. By giving students the
choice between country of origin or ethnicity any issues of identity could be
defused.

There was consistency in the organisation of the feedback in each of the three
focus groups. The sessions followed the structure of the website, first asking for
overall impressions and then specific views on each of the four sections of the
site. Areas of particular interest to the participants were probed for more in-depth
discussion, and all participants were encouraged to participate. Sessions
concluded with requests for additional comments and/or recommendations for
improvements. To ensure that students felt that they had been heard, they were
given the opportunity of making a final comment.

All of the focus groups were held on campus. The first and largest focus group
was impeded by not being able to demonstrate the ISS website. At the outset this
caused some confusion as students gave feedback about the university
corporate website, in general, as well as other websites. As a result, the other
two focus groups were conducted in rooms with computers, so that visuals of the
website pages could ensure the relevancy of discussion.

**Method 2: Online questionnaire**
The methodology used to recruit focus-group participants was also used for the
online questionnaire. The intention was to ensure, as far as was practical and
possible, that a broad group of incoming international students would have the
opportunity to participate. The ISS website was given multiple exposures and
marketed via student news, the student portal or MyRMIT, the International
Student Support Services as well as other Student Service Groups (see Portfolio
Products 4 and 5). The marketing of the ISS website also occurred through
dissemination from college representatives involved in the steering group for this
project. Discipline areas were also asked to highlight the site to their international
cohort. ISS was also placed as a news item on the university’s home page in
early March 2009 (see Portfolio Product 3).
The online survey was attached to the ISS website and participants elected to submit responses electronically. A university email account was set up for the research and online questionnaires were collected from this account from January until May 2009. Within this period a total of 97 surveys were received.

**Question design**
Questions were carefully evaluated to assess whether they were clear, and that the answers could provide relevant data on the impact and effectiveness of the ISS resource for the international cohort at the university. Some closed questions were used, while other questions required answer choices based on four likert scales from very useful, useful, not sure to not useful. However, respondents also had the opportunity to provide additional comments, if they wished, about areas of the website.

Questions needed to be worded in order to be accessible to the target population, given that for most international students English is a second language. As a consequence, the structure and vocabulary of questions were tested for their ease of comprehension with colleagues who were familiar with the needs of this cohort. Also reviewed was whether questions were single issue, and so not ambiguous, to prevent unreliability of responses (McMurray et al. 2004). To ensure rigour, draft questions were designed and then pilot-tested with colleagues and students.

Survey questions were structured around the four sections of the website; ‘Expectations of students’, ‘Understanding referencing’, ‘Structuring assignments’ and ‘Developing critical thinking’. While there was a space for overall comments, no specific information was sought regarding the design of the site, overall impressions, placement and marketing or recommendations for improvements. This could be considered a limitation of this survey. Interestingly, focus-group respondents were keen to give significant input in those areas.
**Demographic data and the online questionnaire**

The online questionnaire did not specifically target international students and information was not sought regarding country, nationality or program of study. Consequently it was not possible to guarantee that only RMIT University’s international student population responded. It is feasible then that some ‘local’ students also responded, especially those from non-English-speaking backgrounds, who may identify as international. However, the terms ‘local’ and ‘international’ are not easy terms or classifications to work with given our multicultural background in Australia. Whether a student perceives they are international or not is clearly not simply a visa category. In addition, data regarding nationality or country of origin is often unreliable, as residents of other countries may identify with their ethnicity, a previous country of origin or nationality. Despite this, it is reasonable to infer that overall respondents reflected the demographics of the university’s international student cohort.

**Data analysis**

**Focus groups**

The data analysis was informed by Miles & Huberman (1994) and data was organised into grids using a thematic approach involving the following.

**Step 1**: Data was recorded in focus groups and organised initially against questions.

**Step 2**: Themes /issues were identified and then refined.

**Step 3**: Themes were cross-referenced and compared across focus groups.

In keeping with the utilitarian and practice-based nature of this study, coloured highlighters were used to identify themes (Cartledge 2004).

**Questionnaires**

Quantitative data was coded and then analysed using graphs in each of the four content sections of the website. The data analysis looked at the results compiled from the two questions asked of respondents, whether the information was new and/or whether the information was useful.
**Dissemination**

The dissemination of findings and then action on recommendations is integral to the impact evaluation approach (Owen 2006). However, it is unknown at this stage whether the research findings have the authority to influence future policy. Certainly the researcher has profiled this research in a number of internal and external forums. Some key initiatives were to present preliminary findings at the Australian Technology Network Assessment Conference (see Academic Exhibit 6) as well as at the Biennial Academic Language and Learning Conference, both in November 2009 (Academic Exhibit 7).

**Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter has provided a rationale for the use of a program evaluation research design. By capitalising on the benefits of a multi-method approach, both qualitative and quantitative methodologies were used to evaluate the effectiveness of the ‘International Student Stories’ website. Within this approach Owen’s (2006) impact evaluation approach was adopted with a view to highlighting possible improvements to the academic acculturation of the international cohort, as well as potentially for the university more broadly. Informed by the literature, focus groups and online questionnaires were used as the data collection methods and research processes were outlined. The next chapter reviews the literature on transition to tertiary study in general and then focuses on research pertaining to the academic acculturation of international students.
Chapter Four: Academic transition to tertiary study – what does it mean for international students? A review of the literature

Introduction
An evaluation of an academic acculturation web resource for international students necessarily involves analysis of both the literature in relation to tertiary transition across learning and teaching cultures, as well as the effectiveness of the online environment for educative purposes. Accordingly, there are two key areas relating to research questions which will be explored in the reviews of the literature in this and the following chapter.

This chapter provides a review of the scholarly literature regarding academic transition to tertiary study. Firstly, the chapter discusses academic acculturation as a socialisation process that involves students learning to ‘play the game’ thereby raising issues linking tertiary learning with identity and belonging to the communities of practice of the university for all students. The chapter then analyses academic acculturation from an international-student perspective, an area of the research where there is limited recent literature to draw upon. This aspect of the review highlights issues concerned with the significance of cultural differences on interactions between teachers and students, approaches to knowledge and discourse structure, as well as the nature of critique. In this section the tendency to view cultural differences as a deficiency in academic capability is also discussed. Finally, the chapter explores the solutions posed for improving the academic acculturation experience for the university’s diverse student population.

Academic transition to tertiary study for all students - ‘learning to play the academic game’
The metaphor of a game is often used to describe acculturation to academic study, because this transition involves learning new rules for the new game of tertiary study. For example, all students have had to develop a range of capabilities in order to do well enough to gain entry to higher education.
However, they are often unaware of the requirements of academic assignments, referencing and critique and so transfer the rules they learnt in high school to their new academic context. This means that many students are uninformed that there are new rules for tertiary learning and as with any game it is hard for them to decipher the rules when looking on from the outside (Leask 2006). In this light, the transition to tertiary study could be viewed as confronting and challenging for all students, whether they are local year 12 leavers, return-to-study mature-age learners, local NESB or international students. This transition is often viewed primarily as the process of acquiring new academic practices, such as academic literacy skills and the formal language required for successful completion of assignment tasks.

A broader understanding views this transition as a socialisation process to a new and often alien tertiary community. This view of transition conceptualises academic capabilities as social practices which are embedded in a tertiary culture’s beliefs, attitudes, values and ways of interpreting the world (Gee 2004). Academic literacies, therefore, can be viewed as socially constructed discourses which need to be understood explicitly by students and their teachers (Ivanic 1998). Following this interpretation, study at tertiary level thus requires not just the development of ‘skills’, but more importantly involves joining a new discourse community or academy (Leask 2006). Integral to academic transition is that students learn to belong to the academic community, a process that involves embracing, understanding and adapting to what are often an unclear set of rules (Leask 2006; Sovic 2007). These perspectives of university learning as a ‘game’ with unknown rules seek not to trivialise academic scholarship, but rather to highlight the importance of welcoming novices to the often hidden cultures of tertiary communities.

**Learning, identity and belonging**

The concepts of identity and belonging are central to the understanding of academic transition. Indeed, Brown, Collins and Duguid (1989, p. 33) propose that all effective learning is a ‘process of enculturation’ as it is not possible to
learn a discipline without also taking on the identity, language and cultural practices of that area. In terms of academic literacies, this process involves not just learning academic skills (generally considered and often misconstrued to be predominantly English skills), but rather the learning of 'social languages or discourses' (Gee 2001, p. 718) These discourses are fundamentally tied to the notion of 'socially situated identities' and entail ways of being certain kinds of people, as they integrate not only specific literacies, but also behaviours, values and belief systems (Gee 2004, p. 15).

This means discourse communities are in-groups. All professional groups, disciplines, including the academic community, are 'communities or cultures' linked through complex 'socially constructed webs of belief which are essential for understanding what they do' (Brown, Collins & Duguid, 1989, p. 33). Furthermore, these communities are bewildering unless understood and viewed from within their own particular culture and discourse practices. In terms of success in university discourse communities it is difficult to develop the necessary socially situated identity as a tertiary student, including ways of writing, speaking, knowing, valuing and believing, from the position of an outsider (Hellsten & Prescott 2004).

Therefore, learning the discourses to succeed at university is about taking on a new identity as a tertiary student. Indeed, many students experience some form of identity crisis in this transition process as all students could be considered 'cultural others' seeking acceptance into the academic community (Leask 2006, p. 187). Given the diverse populations entering higher education, it is not surprising that a number of students experience identity challenges in the acculturation process to academic study. Ivanic (1998, p. 12) proposes that this is not a deficiency in the students themselves, but rather a 'mismatch between the social contexts that constructed their identities in the past and the new social context which they are entering'. In fact, Ivanic's (1998) analysis of the identity crisis experienced by mature aged students entering university as second chance
learners could be said to have some parallels with the experience of international students transitioning to tertiary study. For such marginalised groups the experience is one of entering a strange and different world with unfamiliar and baffling rules. Fundamental to this experience is acquiring a new tertiary identity required to belong and succeed in the academic context (Beasley & Pearson 1999; Leask 2006; Skyrme 2007).

For example, the academic practices required of students (i.e. critical thinking, essays, reports, reflective writing) could be viewed as a simplistic understanding of academic discourse. A more holistic view of academic acculturation would also need to consider the underpinning ‘sociological and ideological consequences’ of these practices for student identities (Ivanic 1998, p.28). In other words, learning at university is inherently a transformative experience.

**Transition to tertiary study for international students - the case for 'authentic beginners'**

So far this chapter has introduced the concept that the transition to academic study is not just about language and tertiary writing skills, as it is not possible to extract these skills from the discourses of tertiary communities and their embedded values, beliefs and power relations. Students who find the academic transition most difficult are those who encounter discourses and practices which are the most dissimilar from their pre-university identities (Ivanic 1998; Beasley & Pearson 1999).

While academic transition involves new ways of learning for all students (Skillen et al.) there is a danger in perceiving all students as equal when starting tertiary studies. Clearly, there are significant groups, and in particular international students who come from such different cultural backgrounds and so are as Gee (2004, p. 14) advocates ‘authentic beginners’ who ‘don’t know what they need to know’. This cohort comes to the university culture ‘without pre-alignment in terms of cultural values and socio-cultural resources’ that more privileged students have gained (Gee 2004, p. 15).
International students are therefore at a significant disadvantage learning the discourses of academic culture. Gee (1996, p. 8) identifies these Discourses (with a capital D) as ‘ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing that are accepted as instantiations of particular roles or types of people by specific groups of people’. Following Gee’s interpretation, learning the ‘Discourse’ can be a confronting and anxiety-provoking experience for international students because they do not have the cultural capital that favourably predisposes other students to academic study. For example, Gee (2004, p. 15) writes about the experiences of a postgraduate Korean student as an ‘authentic beginner’ despite her previous tertiary education, suggesting that she failed to progress or develop the socio-cultural identity of a postgraduate student, and as a result was considered a ‘failure’. Gee (2004) argues that a critical factor in the inability of this student to thrive or even belong was that the formula of success was not made explicit to this student, because no one taught her what she needed to know in order to become a successful postgraduate student. Such marginalisation of international students has led to the perception that the difficulties that they face as beginners are an English problem, rather than lack of awareness of academic discourse practices (Gee 2004; Carroll 2005a). Consequently, universities need to acknowledge the significance of cultural differences in the socio-educational backgrounds on international students’ academic transition.

**Differences between Eastern and Western cultures**

There is considerable literature that highlights the differences between the typical Eastern and Western approaches to education. Like any broad categories care needs to be exercised in generalising what is East and what is West, given that all societies are dynamic and therefore changing. For example, many Western education providers are operating in Eastern countries like Vietnam and China. Indeed, Louie (2005) notes the diversity in learning and teaching approaches in China in particular, thereby forewarning of the limitations of stereotypical perceptions of this country’s educational approaches.
Clearly, there are limitations when using generalisations about cultural stereotypes and care must be taken in applying such wide-ranging interpretations of cultural identity to specific persons and situations, but at the same time it is useful to use these categories in terms of this research. In the following sections of this chapter some broad cultural differences between Eastern and Western cultures are used to highlight the possible challenges international students face when adjusting to academic life in Australia. While the terms East and West are confusing, in this study East is used to signify aspects of mainly Asian cultures (this is where the majority of RMIT’s international student originate), while the term West or Western represents primarily developed English-speaking countries.

There are four broad differences between Eastern and Western cultures that have relevance for this research. Firstly, most Eastern cultures tend to be more collectivist or group-centred, which means that people are integrated in mutually supportive groups in exchange for loyalty. In contrast, members of Western cultures tend to be more individualistic and so are more reliant on self and immediate family (Hui & Triandis 1986). Secondly, members of group centered cultures are more likely to avoid ambiguous or unknown situations leading to ‘saving face’ behaviours and reluctance to take risks (Hui & Triandis 1986; Hofstede 1986). Another difference is that collectivist societies generally have a greater reverence and respect for those in authority. This means that these societies tend to be more hierarchical. As a result, there is more ‘power distance’ between authority figures (like teachers) than would be acceptable in Western cultures (Hofstede 1994). Communication patterns can also differ significantly between Eastern and Western societies. While Eastern cultures tend to favour a high context discourse style which is inductive and indirect, Western cultures like Australia communicate more directly using a direct, deductive linear style (Hall & Hall 2001). These cultural differences can impact on the academic acculturation of our international cohort and will be discussed in more detail in this chapter.
Deficit view of international students - developing a critical approach

There has been a tendency in Western universities to view the cultural differences of international students as deficits in their capability to learn at tertiary level. International students have been seen as passive rote learners with an inability to critique. This view of international students was based on misguided assumptions about Eastern educational systems. It has been proposed that in collectivist cultures, the source of the majority of our international students, generally it is difficult for people lower in authority to question those higher in authority. This would mean that in Eastern classrooms the teacher is the knowledgeable authority who must be respected rather than questioned (Hofstede 1986). These distances in status and hierarchies (or power distance) between authority figures in Eastern cultures have been discussed as impeding questioning and critical-thinking capacities (Chan 1999). In fact, there has been a tendency in the early literature to portray international students as passive, rote learners who are trained in receiving and memorising and lack the ability to question (Samuelowicz 1987; Ballard & Clancy 1991).

Such deficit views of the capabilities of international students have been criticised as mistaken, negative stereotyping (Biggs 1996), as well as implying orientalist notions of power and subservience to Western superiority (Leask 2006). The issue here is that a respectful deference to the wisdom of authorities and the reluctance to challenge, manifested in a cultural preference to be quiet and respectful in Western classrooms, is interpreted as weakness and a lack of intellectual capacity (Biggs 1996; Leask 2006). However, a predilection to typecast the thinking skills of overseas students, in particular, belies the reality that Australian students also find critical thinking difficult (Gelder 2005).

Additionally, the notion that Asian learners are rote learners has been disputed. Studies have suggested that while memorising is an important skill that is stressed within Asian education systems, it is memorising for understanding
rather than mere repetitive rote learning (Biggs & Watkins 1996; Chalmers & Volet 1997; Volet 1999; Ramburuth 2000). In contrast to the deficit conceptualization of rote learning, many Asian school learners are among the highest achievers on international ranking scales for high-order skills like mathematics (Biggs and Watkins 2001). It seems that viewing the differences in educational background as deficits between Eastern and Western systems may be based on underlying assumptions of the superiority of our own educational system.

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

This section looks at a key cultural and educational difference, which is the relationship between teachers and students within and outside the classroom. An important factor is the worth placed in group-centred cultures on preserving group-reciprocal relationships. As a result, maintaining harmony as opposed to disharmony tends to be highly valued, as is gaining approval from others and ‘saving face’ or to compromise in group situations (Hui & Triandis 1986; Beasley & Pearson 1999; Chan 1999).

Extrapolating from the above, perhaps in an Australian classroom situation many international students may feel uncomfortable voicing opinions as this could involve criticising others. This is because avoiding humiliation is often a priority for this cohort, leading to a lack of risk taking in classroom situations (Hui & Triandis 1986; Hofstede 1986 ). This ‘preservation of face’ manifest in a fear of embarrassment in front of their classmates and the teacher, may result in many students refusing to give their opinions and opting to keep silent in the classroom (Beasley & Pearson 1999; Chan 1999). Moreover, interrupting is often viewed by Asian learners as inappropriate or even rude (Volet 1999). Instead, 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 educators trained in more individualist traditions
as passivity rather than a culturally appropriate reserve and respect (Chalmers & Volet 1997).

For international students and their Australian educators, there is often a case of mismatched expectations with both parties disappointed with the environment in the classroom. From a student perspective there is concern when confronted with ‘do it yourself learning’ (Skyrme 2007, p. 1), which conflicts with a view that a good and effective teacher is someone who provides support and guidance rather than letting students struggle on their own (Chan 1999). For example, while there is a focus on discussion and interaction within the Western classroom, outside the classroom Chinese teachers tend to favour a more parental role and so see it as their moral responsibility to mentor and guide students (Biggs & Watkins 1996; Ho 2001). These different conceptions of student and teacher roles in learning environments across cultures may explain the disparity in expectations and behavior in the classroom between international students and their teachers (Roberts & Tuleja 2008).

After consideration of this body of literature it seems possible that the Western concept of identity is more likely to favour more individualistic orientations, thus valuing participation and the voicing of opinions. It also appears likely that a number of other cultures tend to have a more inter-reliant notion of self, and instead value respectful listening based on a strong and formal observance of harmony as opposed to active feedback on the part of individuals (Roberts & Tuleja 2008).

**Cross-cultural tertiary study – from ‘we’ to ‘I’**

Our concept of self is challenged by new cultural norms (Roberts & Tuleja 2008). For an international student, taking on a new identity as an Australian tertiary student can be extremely challenging. Often being yourself and giving your opinions is about finding a new socially situated self or identity in a new culture; it is about transformation and develops over time (Leask 2006). Students are asked to find their voice, give their opinion, write what they think and critically
analyse in new modes of learning that can be confronting to their sense of self as a learner (Ballard & Clancy 1991). As one Chinese student commented, learning to use the words ‘I’ and ‘self’ directly and explicitly was the most important step in critical writing (Fox 1994).

For example, an assessment task including the word ‘discuss’ has a special meaning within university discourses. Students are not just being asked to talk or write about a theory or a model, but rather to evaluate these through a reasoned argument, where they are involved in a process of questioning and analysis leading to the making of judgements (Ballard & Clancy 1991; Carroll 2005b). This greater emphasis on their individual identity as tertiary students with their own stance and interpretation of the knowledge of their disciplines can place students from more group-centred cultures under great pressure (Shen 1989; Fox 1994; Ryan & Hellmundt 2005).

It appears new learning environments can have a serious impact on overseas students’ self-esteem and self-confidence. This loss of self esteem occurs when they realise that their previous good study history and approach to learning is no longer relevant in the new learning environment (Shen 1989; Ramburuth 2000; Ryan 2005b). In fact, increasing attention in the literature has been given to the term ‘study shock’ resulting from international students experiencing a quite different and more individualised way of learning (Chalmers & Volet 1997; Ramburuth 2000; Sovic 2007).

**Cultural differences in writing and thinking styles**

Another challenge for international students concerns the structure of written and oral texts, as these styles are embedded in a particular culture’s patterns of thinking, speaking and writing (Connor 1996). These variations in ways of thinking and structuring writing in assessment tasks mean that students have to learn to take on what is often a conflicting logical system (Biggs & Watkins 1996; Connor 1996; Beasley & Pearson 1999). For example, the Western linear discourse structure focuses 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 (Fox 1994; Connor 1996). In fact, the socialisation into the logic of this structure of presenting knowledge and information is inculcated into children at a very young age when they are pressured to 'get to the point' in explanations and stories (Fox 1994).

However, as noted earlier it is likely that students from other cultures, particularly students from Confucian and other Eastern traditions, will find this structure very abrasive and unsophisticated. These students have been taught as children to value a high-context, circular discourse style, where there is thoughtful exposition of all aspects of a topic before coming to the main point (Connor 1996). This means that rather than the writer being responsible for making all the points clear, the reader is responsible for interpreting meaning in this indirect, subtle and inductive style (Hall & Hall 2001). Within this structure, digression is highly valued: ‘like peeling an onion, layer after layer is removed until the reader arrives at the central part, the core’ as it is important to ‘reach the topic gradually and systematically instead of abruptly’ (Shen 1989, p.128). Such an approach was typified by a project participant videoed for the website who commented

In the subcontinent (Pakistan and India) 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, before coming to the point ... otherwise our lecturer won’t think we have put in enough effort ... but over here the thing was that ‘bang’ – go to the point directly and then you can start explaining ...

(RMIT University International Student Stories 2009c)

For many international students the low-context structure favoured in Western academic texts, where there is a requirement that the important information is made explicit, takes considerable practice to learn (Hall & Hall 2001). This straightforward linear approach can appear illogical to those students
accustomed to a more circular style of writing. Moreover, these difficulties adjusting to writing structure are potentially compounded by the previously discussed preference of many international students for a less opinionative style. Students may also feel the pressure to voice their opinions strongly, without knowing quite how to go about this in their writing (Fox 1994; Connor 1996). Again, they are confronted with challenges to existing student identities and often taking on the Western style has transformative effects. In fact, Shen (1989), writing as an academic of his prior experiences as an international student, proposed that different conceptions of 'I' in a group-centred culture impeded his ability to write. Shen (1989) outlines how the differences in approach between individualist and group-centered cultures are apparent in writing tasks. He reveals that ‘by writing many “I” s, I was beginning to redefine myself’ and that the linear, topic-sentence structure required in Western writing forced him to take a more overt stance (Shen 1989 p.125). Other international students have talked about the effects of taking on this new style where in order to succeed they felt it was necessary to use what was to them ‘a more aggressive style that would more or less slap the reader in the face’ (Fox 1994, p. 70).

**Academic transition for international students – deficit or difference?**

Leask (2006, p. 186) proposes that ‘good pedagogy should not construct difference as a deficit’. Unfortunately, the difficulties international students face adjusting to Australian academic culture are often viewed as a deficiency in academic capability rather than a difference in educational background (Carroll & Ryan 2005; Ryan 2005; Leask 2006; Sovic 2007). Indeed, there is much discussion in the early literature on international students as passive, rote learners who lack the capacity for critical thinking and deep learning (Samuelowicz 1987; Ballard & Clancy 1991). This perception implies that these students need to be ‘fixed’ or undergo remediation, in order to be accepted into the Western academic community.
Another common deficit view is one that focuses on poor English-language skills as the primary reason why international students fail to thrive. Undoubtedly, while studying in a second language is difficult, Carroll (2005a) contends that there is too much readiness to attribute failure to a lack of language skills. Instead, Carroll (2005a, p. 36) attributes the problem to be a lack of accommodation in the teaching and learning environment because even ‘students with low language skills can survive or even thrive, if the environment is supportive’ (Carroll 2005a, p. 36). In this vein, Ryan (2005b) argues that rather than attempting to fix the student by remedial interventions, the issue is really one of bridging the gap in expectations between international students and their teachers.

Certainly, it is regrettable that ‘stereotypes have sometimes been used as an excuse for not addressing the fundamental problems of student learning at university’ (Sovic 2007, p. 1). There seems minimal understanding of the cultural identities and value systems that this cohort brings to the new environment, leading to the adoption of the deficit approaches discussed earlier. Many authors agree that these interventions could be construed as ethnocentric and misguided attempts to assimilate or colonise the international student to Western pedagogy (Biggs 1997; Beasley & Pearson 1999; Gee 2004; McLean & Ransom 2005; Leask 2006). A more proactive approach which aims to develop understanding of cultural diversity is required (Biggs & Watkins 1996; Biggs 1997; Louie 2005).

Such an approach would make explicit the differences between learning cultures so as to empower international students to understand and take greater responsibility for their own tertiary learning development (Ramburuth 2001; Arkoudis & Tran 2007).

The discussion above underlines that the academic adjustment of international students is complex and needs to be seen as part of a broader institute-wide approach to diversity. The literature on academic transition for international students could therefore benefit from a more in-depth analysis of the impact of diversity management issues on universities. Further research may also shed
light on the potential value of the acculturation literacies outlined on the ISS website, in supporting the language development of tertiary international students.

**Making the implicit explicit**

There is much agreement in the literature regarding the importance of making tertiary discourses explicit to all students (Leask 2005; McLean & Ransom 2005; Carroll 2005a; Ryan 2005b; Gourlay 2006; Arkoudis & Tran 2007; Kettle 2011). Fundamental to this argument is the view that the acquisition of academic discourses and literacies is a developmental process rather than a remedial ‘add on’ program (for example, language support) for targeted university cohorts. Underpinning this approach is the view that academic acculturation involves a ‘gradual socialisation into distinctive culture of knowledge’ (Beasley & Pearson 1999, p. 304).

Notwithstanding this body of literature there is a need for further research into how the transition to study for overseas students can be supported. Certainly, there is significant literature, arguing that differences in learning and teaching cultures need to be acknowledged and dealt with explicitly. While this research exposes the shortfalls of the current transitional arrangements, the literature lacks a sufficiently robust direction for improvements. Rather, the research is in the main silent in interrogating practical academic acculturation strategies for this cohort of students. This task is not easy, given that university teaching staff may not be aware of the transitional needs of their students. In addition they may not be confident in acculturating international students to their discipline. As such, hopefully the utilitarian nature of this project-based research into the efficacy of an online induction to academic learning can make a small contribution to the research literature.

Clearly, teachers and policy-makers need to develop an understanding, not only of what is implicit in Australian academic culture, value systems and communication, but also their understandings of international students’ cultures,
value systems and communication styles. Ryan (2005a, p. 100) proposes that ‘by
re-examining teaching and learning practices, lecturers can make changes that
are more sustainable for all students, not just international students’. It seems
that the ‘heart of the problem lies not in the student but in the teaching’ (Biggs
1997, p. 15). Above all, learning and teaching at universities must be inclusive of
all students. At an institutional level this would involve both an appreciation of the
differences in cultural approaches to knowledge, as well as the implementation of
strategies to manage the diversity of their student cohorts (Ramburuth 2001).

Chapter Conclusion
The discussion of the literature in this chapter has focused on socio-cultural
approaches to academic acculturation. The chapter has argued that the transition
to tertiary study involves a degree of personal transformation, as students
develop new ways of learning, in order to acculturate to the discourses of the
academic community. For the international cohort of the university, there is a
need to focus on the differences in learning and teaching culture between home
and host countries, thus highlighting the reality that academic transition for this
cohort can be particularly problematic. The chapter argues for the adoption of
more inclusive approaches, which acknowledge not only the significance of
cultural differences, and but also the importance of making the implicit
expectations and practices of academic culture explicit to students. Within this
context, this evaluative research project examines the value of explicating key
aspects of Australian academic culture for both students and the university. The
next chapter analyses the literature related to an important aspect of this study,
the online medium as a learning and teaching tool for tertiary students in general,
as well as the international cohort in particular.
Chapter Five: The online environment for academic transition. A review of the literature

Introduction
Online delivery is complex and means different things to different people. This mode of learning raises a multiplicity of issues given that it has been introduced to deliver information, to teach, to save the costs associated with face-to-face delivery and/or to provide flexible access to education. As such, the chapter provides a snapshot review only of online modes of teaching and resource delivery, and focuses on aspects of a broad area that have relevance for an evaluation of the effectiveness of the ISS website. In so doing, it must be acknowledged that there is a lack of current research on the efficacy of online support tools for international students.

The chapter highlights a number of reasons behind the use of online technologies in tertiary institutions, the most significant drivers being student demand for digital learning and the increasing use of Web 2.0 interactive technologies. Within this context the value of online peer-to-peer learning utilising social media tools is discussed. Also highlighted is the potential of the online environment in supporting the independent learning capabilities required to keep up in a changing and connected world. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the efficacy of online acculturation and learning support.

Student demand and the NET generation
The prevalence of information communication technologies at Australian universities has dramatically changed the way students connect with each other, their teachers and engage with learning (Krause et al. 2005). Over the last decade emerging technologies have been integrated into courses as well as course support at university. Students now access various aspects of their programs online. For example, they access material and interact in online classrooms, listen to and download podcasts, participate in blogs, research using online data bases, to name a few standard activities. It is claimed that these
technologies provide ‘convenience, connection and control’ for university students in the 21st century (Caruso & Kvavik 2005, p. 9). More recently a study by Smith and Caruso (2010) proposes that the integration of online technologies in tertiary study is dynamically evolving as cloud services such as YouTube, iTunes U, Facebook and Gmail are poised to be the next wave of applications in use in programs.

An important factor for the incorporation of these information and communication technologies has also been the changing nature and commitments of tertiary learners. Most students now need the financial assistance of part-time employment and hence spend less time on campus (Kirkwood & Price 2005). A 2004 study of the first-year experience found that the change in student patterns was due to increased time in paid employment, with students averaging 12 hours per week (Krause et al. 2005). Smith and Caruso (2010) also confirm that the gap between users and non-users of technology is narrowing with convenience cited as the major reason students value online technologies in their learning.

Another key factor promoting the online agenda is that there is a new generation of students entering university, who are products of the digital age. Consequently, there is increasing pressure to accommodate a new kind of learner, one who is proficient at receiving and processing information quickly, is adept at parallel processing and has a preference for non-linear access to knowledge and information (Prensky 2001a). Pivotal to Prenksy’s (2001a) argument is that there is a generation who are different from previous generations because they have grown up with online technologies. A study by Kennedy et al. (2008) also found that a number of students demonstrate a high level of technological usage and competence but questioned the assumption that all students were digital natives. Rather, while enrolling first-year students were generally adept with computers and mobile devices for activities like email and social media, there was considerable variation in levels of digital usage across the cohort. Noteworthy for this research was that there were no significant
differences in their online and technological usage between international students compared with local students in the Kennedy (2008) study.

In line with the argument that online is popular with tertiary students, other studies of tertiary students also confirm that the internet is the preferred method of accessing information (Jones & Madden 2002). Later Australian studies support these results with research suggesting more than 90% of students are accessing online resources for their study (Oliver & Goerke 2007). Thus it is clear that information communication technologies are permeating all areas of our students’ lives (Caruso & Kvavik 2005; Smith & Caruso 2010). Today’s students spend a considerable amount of their week, between 11 and 15 hours, online for varying purposes including education, networking and entertainment (Caruso & Kvavik 2005). Consequently, competence and capability in information communication technologies whether it is accessing and researching online, contributing to group discussions or accessing the functionality of the online classroom, is increasingly necessary for study success for all students.

However, regardless of this technological revolution, it is acknowledged that there are some students who are not as familiar with or adept at utilising these technologies in their learning (Kennedy et al. 2007; Kennedy et al. 2008). For example, international scholarship students from developing countries along with other disadvantaged groups may find these technologies new or even confronting. Nevertheless, as one AusAid student who participated in this study expressed, there is often a willingness to learn as online technologies are intrinsically interesting and add value to learning.

... there’s online stuff ... it’s very interesting ... it’s quite interesting and diverse ... for instance the online learning stuff ... some of the teaching that they do ... yeah is ... it would be like a learning blog ... some kind of a chat room and you exchange information with your classmates and your lecturer and they respond to that and you do some research ...  

(RMIT University International Student Stories 2009b)
**Is online learning effective?**
The research into the effectiveness of online learning has focused on comparisons with face-to-face teaching. Studies comparing online learning programs with equivalent face-to-face programs delivered on campus have consistently maintained that online distance students certainly achieve equivalent if not better results compared to their peers involved in face-to-face programs (Bullen 1999; Twigg 2003). Twigg’s (2003) study proposes that there is ‘no significant difference’ between online and face-to-face delivery. Furthermore, others have argued that students learn effectively in either environment provided there is quality design and appropriate adult-learning principles (Aragon et al. 2002; Williams 2002). A later study involving the combined results of multiple studies (meta-analysis) confirms that student results do not suffer as a result of an online delivery mode (Means et al. 2010). However, given the dynamically changing nature of online tools and technologies on offer, extensive and ongoing studies need to keep pace with these rapid changes.

The distinction between online and face-to-face is also changing as tertiary institutions enhance campus delivery with online supplements in hybrid or blended models (Ausburn 2004; Hiltz & Turoff 2005; Miliszewska 2008; Bonk et al. 2009). In addition, there are conflicting messages from students about online technologies. While there is a valuing of traditional face-to-face courses, students are still demanding more online delivery (Caruso & Kvavik 2005). An explanation for these contradictory messages is perhaps changing perceptions of traditional delivery. As online tools and resources are incorporated into the on-campus programs what were considered innovative additions to face-to-face learning a few years ago are now viewed as just a part of normal delivery (Means et al. 2010). Indeed, there is evidence from the meta-analysis of online studies mentioned above that these blended or hybrid teaching environments are more effective in terms of student outcomes than either face-to-face or online learning environments (Means et al. 2010).
There is debate in the literature regarding the effectiveness of hybrid or blended programs for the targeted cohort for this research project. Miliszewska (2008) argues that for international students online may not be appropriate, as it assumes considerable levels of self-direction and hence a focus on individual development rather than group learning (Miliszewska 2008). However, these assumptions of the learning capabilities of international students may also reflect stereotypical responses to this cohort. In fact, an earlier study of foreign students in New Zealand reports that international students were very keen to embrace online tools and technologies (Elgort et al. 2003). Hence, it is quite possible that international students portray similar usage patterns as other students.

The solution that accommodates cultural learning differences and preferences may be the hybrid model mentioned earlier, where internet technologies and resources support face-to-face learning (Miliszewska 2008). More to the point, it is likely that the value of online programs and resources is tied to the design, pedagogical approach and appropriateness for different student cohorts. Hence, the effectiveness of online learning, like any educational innovation, depends on why and how it is used within the curriculum (Means et al. 2010).

**Pedagogy and online learning**

The development of online learning design and theory has followed changes in pedagogical approaches to learning and teaching in tertiary institutions (O'Neil et al. 2004). For some time in universities there has been strong criticism of the transmission mode of learning. This teaching style is represented by the lecture method of delivering content based on an ‘instructional paradigm’, as opposed to a learner-centred ‘constructivist paradigm’, where ‘students may be active discoverers and constructors of their own knowledge’ (Barr & Tagg 1995, p. 9). This approach is supported by Watts (2004) in discussing the massification of university education and the increasing diversity of student cohorts, as he proposes the need for new and diverse modes of tertiary learning that go beyond mere transmission of knowledge and information. Thus, learning and teaching
has shifted away from teacher-centred approaches, to methodologies which focus on students controlling their own learning, where the role of the teacher is one of a facilitator, who shows students what ‘the criterion for academic success is’ (Watts 2004, p. 12).

Similarly, online learning has paralleled the emergence in universities of constructivist approaches (Herrington & Bunker 2002; Hobbs 2002; Huang 2002). For example, online course or resource design often exhibits features of constructivist approaches, most notably interactivity in course design, use of authentic and meaningful contexts, scaffolded activities, active learning to facilitate learner engagement as well as the promotion of online peer-to-peer learning (Shea et al. 2001; Williams 2002; Oliver & Goerke 2007; Bonk et al. 2009). As a consequence, the online environment has been promoted for some time as a medium where learners can ‘use the technology to teach themselves and others’ (Jonassen et al. 1999, p. 16). Indeed, online learning technologies have been put forward as facilitating a more learner-centred approach (Barr & Tagg 1995; Bonk et al. 2009). However, what drives these forms of online learning, whether it is the technology or the constructivist pedagogy, is far from clear. While there is an increase in the use of Web 2.0 media with students creating and sharing content via blogs, wikis, discussion boards and videos within their programs (Smith & Caruso 2010) it may be that tertiary institutions are merely capitalising on the digital tools already used by their students.

Another consideration is that the online classroom may be at odds with the expressed desire of some students, particularly those from the Asian region, for deeper relationships with educators (Volet 1999). It seems there needs to be further research into the kinds of online programs that work effectively and under what conditions. Further examination is required of what online ‘constructivist’ learning means in practice, as well as the efficacy of the approach for diverse student cohorts. A more qualified appreciation of online may be that the medium
makes available digital tools that can have the potential to add value to all programs.

**Peer-to-peer online learning**

As previously discussed the online environment is a medium where students can learn from each other. Interactivity in the form of collaborative peer-to-peer tasks is highly valued in online environments as it can offer greater connectivity between students (O’Neil et al. 2004; Hiltz & Turoff 2005; Meer & Scott 2008). For today’s students there is evidence of an increased demand for peer connectedness in online settings. For example, social media spaces like Facebook are accepted as part of most students’ social worlds (Smith & Caruso 2010). This means that Generation Y are at ease connecting with each other in virtual environments and consequently online peer-support programs are gaining momentum as an effective and sustainable support model (Meer & Scott 2008). In addition, there is also evidence that online learning is more effective when learners control their interactions with each other (Means et al. 2010). Peer learning also has the added advantage of promoting belonging and engagement to university academic culture (Krause 2006).

Services connecting students online with their peers are also being incorporated as a significant strategy for the social and academic acculturation of students to tertiary study. For example, Massey University in New Zealand supports its extensive distance cohort with virtual writing consultations utilising postgraduate students (Thompson & Hills 2005). At RMIT University the MATE’s international peer-support program is popular with international students because it provides valuable online peer advice on academic, social and practical transition issues (RMIT University MATE program 2010).

Given the potential of online peer-support models, formal and informal, operating in the tertiary sector, there is a need for further evaluation of the efficacy of the approach. An area for further investigation would be the usefulness of such programs for students from high power-distance countries. For this cohort, the
thoughts of other students may not have the authority that their lecturer’s input does, particularly in relation to assessment.

**Academic Support online - learning how to learn**
Progressively technology is seen as providing useful tools and resources for lifelong learning. Given the modern reality of employment in a global world, where no job is for life, there is increasing emphasis on self regulated learning (Volery & Lord 2000). As students are encouraged to manage and construct their learning, online technologies are considered valuable in assisting students to become more independent (Kirkwood & Price 2005: Bonk & Kim 2009).

Online delivery is particularly significant for language and academic learning units in tertiary institutions. Online resources and services are incorporated as part of learning support delivery to facilitate the development in students of metacognition, or ‘awareness of oneself as a learner’ (McLoughlin et al. 2006, p.34). As Oliver proposes ‘It is the learner who must make the most of the choices about which materials to learn and how to use them’ (Oliver 2000, p. 211).

It is therefore important to provide learning-support resources that give ‘scaffolding so that students can build on their existing knowledge or develop new learning strategies’ (Tait 2000, p. 16). Online environments may have a significant role to play, given that at present this kind of metacognition on the process of learning is generally not taught explicitly to incoming international students (McLoughlin et al. 2006). For example, Morgan’s (2006) study of RMIT’s Learning Lab indicated high levels of approval with resources targeting assessment tasks and study skills. This study demonstrated that online resources which deconstruct assessment tasks, using authentic student models, are valued by students, because these resources make explicit tacit academic requirements.
Furthermore, online technologies may be suitable to answer the needs of student diversity (Clerehan et al. 2003; Thompson & Hills 2005). Tait (2000) proposes that, in fact, the online revolution provides ‘opportunities to rethink student support’ (p. 28). The underlying rationale for this transformation mirrors the discussion earlier, namely, increased student demand for online, the greater diversity of the student population, leading to a heightened demand for learning support (Clerehan et al. 2003). In support of the e-learning agenda, Clerehan (2003) suggests that the goal in developing the Monash University online student learning portal was to extend the reach of learning support to the students who were ‘unable or unwilling to draw on face-to-face services’ (p. 6).

Certainly, the limitations of face-to-face services is a recurring issue in academic student-support discussions (Oliver 2000; Clerehan et al. 2003; Thompson & Hills 2005), as the ‘challenge is to provide academic support on a wide scale in flexible modes which all students are able to access’ (Clerehan et al. 2003, p.6). An advantage of e-learning resources and support for tertiary institutions is that online academic support can easily be integrated within course content, thereby expanding the service to many more students (Thompson & Hills 2005). For example, given the funding limitations of these kinds of services, a reality compounded by their role to support all students, a resource model of working where specific learning resources can be developed for targeted programs, may be a sustainable approach. These online technologies are promoted as facilitating ‘just in time’ activity based learning and are utilizing online collaborations via communication tools, for example, bulletin boards, discussion forums and wikis (Oliver 2000; Tait 2000; Thompson & Hills 2005).

At RMIT University, web statistics demonstrate online support resources are being accessed extensively by students. This is demonstrated by the 12.5 million hits recorded in 2009 on the university learning support site, the ‘Learning Lab’ (RMIT University 2009). This site is linked to every online classroom in the university and discipline-specific resources are integrated within targeted
programs. In addition, a qualitative study of student views and usage of this site indicated that international students are using the site just as extensively as local students (Morgan 2006). These students have expressed high levels of satisfaction with the site’s accessibility, as well as positive appraisals of the use of interactive activities, models and examples. Comments from student questionnaires have also been positive.

At any stage I have access which is great … very useful website
The tutorial were really helpful when making the transition from high school to university quality of work (Morgan 2006, p. 4)

A study by Open Learning Australia (OUA) of their distance learners trialling the online writing support product Smarthinking.com has recorded similar positive responses to online academic support interventions (Fazio & Crook 2008). Their findings maintain that online academic writing support via Smarthinking.com can be effective in addressing student satisfaction and retention levels. A significant aspect of this study was that respondents felt they had improved as learners as a consequence of the online support (Fazio & Crook 2008). However, there is an obvious qualification for these research results. Given that OUA is an online university, where students have no access to face-to-face services, it is a reasonable assumption that academic support online is likely to be considered advantageous by students.

Nevertheless, a small-scale study of the Smarthinking product conducted at RMIT in 2007 is in line with OUA’s findings. This study also recorded generally positive responses from students to the product’s online writing lab (Morgan 2007). It is clear that a major advantage of academic online support is that it can reach greater numbers of students than can any face-to-face services. This is also evidenced in the Learning Lab statistics above.
It seems that online academic language and learning resources provide a pragmatic and flexible mode of delivery for support services. However, this is not to undermine the value of a face-to-face service. Rather, like other learning and teaching programs, language and learning support appears to benefit from the incorporation of blended (face-to-face and online) modes of delivery. While face-to-face academic induction programs may be considered more valuable, the cost of implementing these programs equitably, the availability of ‘time poor’ students to attend, as well as the ever-increasing demand for quality online learning support, suggests that online has a role to play in delivering sustainable support models. However, academic acculturation programs which are situated within a discipline of study could provide an equally sustainable and potentially more effective transitional program for students.

Given the dynamically changing nature of the digital educational environments, it is early days for the research which assesses the effectiveness of online learning. While there is a tendency to herald online as the way of the future in a globalised and digital world, the educational value to students of learning online beyond merely accessing information needs to be separated from issues of cost and accessibility. In the future, there needs to be greater focus given to what is gained and what is lost in online, face-to-face and blended modes of learning for today’s tertiary learners. The evaluation of the efficacy of the ISS website may provide some insights into the value of online resource models of academic acculturation support for the international students.

Chapter Conclusion
This chapter has provided a snapshot view of the online education literature informing this research project. The changing needs of students are discussed, as is the increasing prevalence of online technologies in tertiary education. A focus of the discussion has been the use of social media tools to facilitate student-to-student interaction. Also highlighted are the capabilities of the online environment in facilitating independent learning, with particular attention paid to
the role of digital technologies in learning to learn competencies. The following chapter analyses the research findings into the effectiveness of the ISS website in offering international students some preparedness and knowledge for the cross-cultural educational experience they are embarking on.
Chapter Six: Results and discussion

Introduction
This chapter analyses findings of the research into the ‘International Student Stories’ website as an academic acculturation tool for international students. The findings discussed confirm the prevailing message of the academic acculturation literature for international students; namely, students moving across learning and teaching cultures face significant challenges adapting to ‘Western’ academic environments. As a consequence, the acculturation experience for this cohort is supported by making implicit academic expectations and practices, explicit. Also important for these findings, given that this research stems from an evaluation of the ISS website, is an assessment of the value of digital resources for the acculturation of incoming international students to Australian academic culture.

This chapter consists of four sections. Firstly, the chapter analyses the results of the preliminary quantitative study, the online questionnaire. Secondly, the qualitative data from the three focus groups is analysed and discussed. The chapter then draws on the findings of both studies to examine more broadly the significance for universities of the academic acculturation issues raised by the students. Included in this section of the chapter is an analysis of the policy pitfalls of neglect. The chapter concludes with an evaluation of the value of the online environment as a means of delivering an academic acculturation program to international students at the university.

Section One: Online questionnaire
The aim of the online questionnaire was to provide a ‘broad brush’ picture of the value of the ISS resource to international students. This preliminary data also provided a foundation for in-depth questioning via focus groups. The questionnaire addressed two key questions regarding the effectiveness of the ISS website.

- Does the ISS website present new knowledge about academic culture and practices to international students?
Is the ISS a useful academic acculturation tool for international students?

As a result, for each of the four areas of the ISS website participants were asked the following:

- Was the information new?
- Was the information useful?

The following paragraphs analyse the findings from the questionnaires (for a copy of the online questionnaire, see Attachment C of the Appendix).

**Was the information new?**
As per Figure 4 below, 65% of students considered that the information provided in the four areas of the website, ‘Expectations of students’, ‘Understanding referencing’, ‘Structuring assignments’ and ‘Developing critical thinking’, provided them with new knowledge.

![Figure 4: Was the information new?](image)

The breakdown of responses for each of the four sections of the ISS website varied, as summarised in figure 5 below.
Figure 5: ISS - Was the information new?

Questionnaires revealed that the ‘Structuring assignments’ section of the website, provided the most unfamiliar content for respondents, with 74% of responses stating that the information was new knowledge. This finding could indicate that students are unaware of the differences in discourse structure critical for success in their assessments. Another possibility is that students lack confidence in their ability at assignment writing. These results will be explored utilising focus-group data in section two of this chapter.

The ‘Expectations of students’ section of the website scored the next highest in terms of new knowledge with a 69% response rate. ‘Developing critical thinking’ had a 63% response rate, whereas ‘Understanding referencing’ was fairly evenly divided with 51% of respondents considering the knowledge contained therein to be new. This could imply that at least for some international students the referencing message has been highlighted early on in their program. On the other hand, there may be some in this cohort who already have an understanding of knowledge attribution prior to enrolment. Yet again there is also the possibility that students claim that they know it, but do not realise what they don’t know, in other words a case of unconscious incompetence.
Was the information useful?
The following graph collates the combined results for the four sections of the ISS web for the question ‘Was the information useful?’

![Graph showing the distribution of responses to the question: Very Useful (180), Useful (172), Not Sure (6), Not Useful (30).]

**Figure 6: Was the information useful?**

The results demonstrate that there was an extremely positive response to the usefulness of the ISS website with 90% of respondents reporting that the ISS web was useful (44%) or very useful (46%). As discussed above, although 35% of respondents found that the information on the site was not new to them, they still responded that the resource was useful (see Figure 6). This was an interesting finding because it seems a reasonable assumption that if the website content was not new to students, it would have limited usefulness. After consideration of the data it seems that there are three possible explanations for this result. Firstly, the respondents’ knowledge of academic culture and practices may have been incomplete; therefore, the advice on the video clips and accompanying web page explanations provided a deeper understanding. Secondly, students may have some knowledge of academic requirements, but need guidance to put this knowledge into practice. In this case the ISS website
could be a useful tool for international students, because it explicates what is required for academic success. Thirdly, a number of international students responded to the survey well into semester one and so had already had some exposure to the Australian learning and teaching environment. The reason for this result could be attributed to any or all of these or unknown factors.

The disparity between new knowledge and usefulness was most marked in the ‘Understanding referencing’ section of the website. Despite the almost even distribution of yes/no responses regarding previous knowledge of referencing requirements, 90% of responses considered this section of the website to be either useful (47%) or very useful (43%). These results could highlight that there are gaps in international students’ understanding of the referencing requirements of Australian universities. Given that the site does not teach the mechanics of referencing, rather the rationale for it, the findings suggest that international students have little knowledge of why they need to reference or even that they need to. Alternatively, international students may be aware of the requirement to reference, yet still experience difficulties (as with any new students). The impact of this finding will be further analysed in section two of this chapter.

The other three areas of the ISS website also scored high levels of student perceptions of usefulness: 93% of respondents found the ‘Expectations of students’ section to be useful (50%) or very useful (43%). Similarly, in the ‘Structuring of assignments’ section 91% of respondents valued the website (useful 46% and very useful 45%). The ‘Developing critical thinking’ section of the website was considered the most useful with 96% of respondents considering it to be very useful (60%) or useful (36%).

Concluding comments
These online questionnaire results draw attention to the fact that numbers of international students are entering universities without prior knowledge, or with incomplete or partial knowledge, of academic expectations, discourses and practices. The questionnaire also indicated quite strongly that transitioning
international students perceive the ISS website as useful in helping to explain the key aspects of Australian academic culture. During the research process, data pertaining to the ‘newness’ and ‘usefulness’ of the ISS website provided a framework to explore the acculturation needs of international students in greater depth, as a foundation for focus-group discussions. In particular, the focus groups explored the effects on international students of encountering new academic expectations, the possible difficulties students may have putting academic requirements into practice, as well as the potential benefits of explicating key areas of scholarly culture via the ISS website. The following section analyses the results of these discussions.
Section two: Focus groups - insights into the international student experience

Focus-group findings were based on discussions of the four key areas of academic culture identified on the ISS website. These discussions were planned to act as a starting point in order to gain an initial understanding of the acculturation issues and experiences of this cohort. Since the focus groups were conducted well into semester one, students had experienced some exposure to Australian academic culture before viewing the website. Thus, it was possible to ask students to 'look back' on their own transitional experiences in those early months, as a means of assessing the value of the website as an acculturation tool for incoming international students. This meant that the ISS website could be utilised as a springboard for students to explore, discuss and make recommendations around the issues impacting on their own academic transitions. As a result, the effectiveness of the website could be evaluated in the context of a bigger picture of the international student experience, as well as the university’s response to transitional issues as a whole.

This section of the chapter is informed by the socio-cultural framework, outlined in Chapter Four, which advocates that academic acculturation for international students is about socialisation to the academic community. The chapter utilises the focus-group discussions to argue that international students' identities as learners are often challenged. This is the result of the disparities experienced by students between their previous educational experiences and the expectations of Western university culture (Gee 2004).

Accordingly, this section analyses these challenges, which involve a practical dimension around assignment and citation practices, a cognitive dimension relating to perceptions of 'intellectual standing' and a social dimension concerning interacting in a new learning environment. The section then concludes by analysing the significance of these findings in relation to the
effectiveness of the ISS website as an academic acculturation resource for international students.

**Challenges in writing in culturally appropriate discourses**
The following discussion draws on the ISS website’s ‘Structuring assignments’ section and focuses on the challenges to identity international students face in writing Western academic discourse. Indeed, writing is especially important to students as it is the predominant form of assessment in universities; it is where they display their competence within their disciplines (McLean & Ransom 2005). As a result, writing plays a fundamental role in building an identity as a tertiary student and those who fail to display proficiency are likely to be viewed and/or view themselves as less capable (Henderson & Hirst 2007). For the international cohort especially, a lack of knowledge of the academic literacies required to be successful in assignment writing can impact on confidence levels and sense of self as tertiary students.

Focus-group discussions highlighted these identity issues experienced by students when learning to write the discourses required in their disciplines. Like most tertiary students, the participants in the focus groups were assessment focused (Taylor 2008). As a consequence, they were most concerned about their capability in the practical application of their studies in assessment writing. Students reported that their struggles understanding Western academic writing had the effect of diminishing their self-esteem. These difficulties impacted adversely on the students’ established learner personas as ‘good students’.

For this reason students considered the ‘Structuring assignments’ section of the ISS website to be particularly useful. They found the pictorial comparisons and video clips on the ISS website explaining the different writing styles illuminating. In particular, focus groups participants considered that a knowledge of the differences between the direct, deductive, linear approach found in Western traditions and the more explanatory, inductive style common in many other cultures to be extremely helpful when writing their assignments. Indeed, most
students reported that they were not aware that Western academic writing was structured differently from how they had learnt to write in their previous education. In support of the participants’ perspectives Schmidt (2005) proposes that for international students, learning the linear, discourse structure, where the main point or purpose is introduced quite explicitly at the beginning of an assignment and then explicated through topic paragraphs, can be difficult at first. Additionally, this linear style of writing may be counter-intuitive to students from cultures where the discourse structure is more circular, indirect and inductive (Shen 1989; Fox 1994; Schmidt 2005). One student commented that

My country … We don’t go direct to the main point, but give many background information so provide lots of information before going to the main point.

Another focus-group respondent commented that he thought the Eastern style gave the reader more awareness, and that the Western structure would be considered inappropriate in his country.

If I use this linear structure in China … it would be very impolite, it would be bad writing.

These remarks typify the experiences of focus group participants with academic writing in Australia. Their comments reveal how international students can experience conflicting values when writing in a different cultural discourse (Priest 2009). Shen (1989) describes this process of learning a new writing style as one involving new ways of thinking and considerable personal change. Intrinsic to this learning is taking on the persona and a sense of belonging to the discourse communities of the university (Gee 2004).

In this vein, focus group participants also spoke of the difficulties of changing discourses when their spoken discourse is also indirect and circuitous.
Also in the general life we use it like this for my speech ... all the time we are talking about description ... at the end we are talking about the main point.

This comment highlights the degree of identity transformation required if students are to argue, express and organise information differently from how they have learnt previously. Students reported that at least initially this adaptation involved some stress, particularly when students were unsuccessful in their assignments when their initial attempts failed to approximate the dominant discourse structures of the university.

Moreover, students spoke of being disheartened when they received bad marks in their assignment writing. In fact, many students spoke of their early months as a process of learning by trial and error. They spoke of the distress they had experienced making sense of their assignments on their own. Typical of their comments was

_I learnt the information the hard way when I came here because the learning system is different from my country ... it was entirely different here._

Given this lack of clarity regarding expected writing style it is likely that students who have been successful writers in the past face negative effects on their identities as tertiary learners, when their confidence levels plunged. These challenges can be viewed from the perspective that all writing can be considered in a sense a representation of self (Ivanic 1998) and that any given text could be considered inseparable from the writer's identity (Abasi et al. 2006).

The findings discussed above support the proposition that many international students experience challenges to existing self-concepts when adapting to the
Western linear style of writing. This is because the presentation of oneself more overtly in writing required in the linear, direct style may be particularly difficult for students who have as Roberts and Tuleja propose (2008) a less individualistic, more inter-reliant view of self. In addition, overseas students may feel like cultural outsiders because these new literacies ‘represent socially developed and culturally embedded ways of using text to serve particular cultural or social purposes’ (Henderson & Hirst 2007, p. 2). Unfortunately, initial negative critique may be perceived by this cohort, and others albeit unfairly, as confirmation of incompetence rather than problems acculturating to new discourses. In other words, students (and their teachers) may confuse a lack of knowledge of how to approach their writing tasks as a personal deficiency.

This self-perception was evident in the data from focus groups. Students reported that they began to question their own competence as learners, when they received poor marks in their first assessments. Reflecting on their lack of early progress a common theme for students was regret that they hadn’t accessed the ISS website earlier as is exemplified in the following comment.

*If I had referred to this (the website) I could have avoided a loss of marks.*

Carroll (2005a) also notes these negative effects on overseas students when former learning strategies fail to be effective in a new educational environment. In hindsight, focus-group participants pronounced that prior exposure to the ‘Structuring assignments’ section of the ISS website would have been beneficial in developing their understandings of academic writing.

Another concern for students was making sense of the feedback on their writing. Students suggested that they were often confused by their lecturer’s comments on their writing. For example, remarks on their assignments such as ‘irrelevant’ and ‘get to the point’ made little sense to them without an understanding of the linearity of Western academic writing. Furthermore, this type of feedback can be
de-motivating and promote feelings of inferiority (Priest 2009). In contrast, students spoke of the value of the ISS website in explicating cultural writing styles, thus confirming that the linear style is likely to be new knowledge to most international students.

However, students also felt that they needed more practical guidance in developing their own writing than is possible via a website. The value of models and examples of structure and paragraphs is illustrated in this student’s advice.

*It would be really helpful to have some examples … first an explanation of structure, formal explanation and then examples … with some arrows or links … this is the point we are talking about, this is the paragraph, this is the main idea, this is the supportive idea because once I have a look at examples, real essay, I have a clear idea about how it should be."

This comment underlines the importance to students of learning not only discipline content, but also the writing capabilities required for their disciplines. Schmidt (2005) also advocates that an understanding of academic discipline communities as made up of subcommunities each with their own discourses implies a responsibility on programs to initiate students into the writing conventions of their discipline. Indeed, making the features of specific discourses explicit, by deconstructing their assignment tasks, is promoted in the literature as an inclusive teaching methodology for all students (Lea & Street 1998; Skillen et al. 1998; Lawrence 2002; Lea & Street 2006).

It was clear from focus group discussions that students wanted to learn more about how to be successful in assessments. This student’s desire for explanations and teaching not only of what to do but also how to do it is supported in a 2011 study by Arkoudis and Tran. In this regard scaffolded learning tasks are a particularly useful methodology for making the steps involved in these new learning processes explicit to students. Activities which
deconstruct learning into achievable chunks are especially helpful to international students who come to their programs from different learning backgrounds. In this light, Star and McDonald (2007, p. 22) argue that by ‘scaffolding learning developmentally within programs, it is possible to assist students experiencing significant social, cultural and cognitive dissonance as they relearn how to learn, and become acquainted with the forms and expectations of academic culture’. Given this perspective, it is likely that the ISS website as a generic resource can only do so much and cannot replace induction within a program. Thus, this feedback raises questions of the role of generic as opposed to discipline-based academic acculturation, an issue which will be explored further later in this section.

Students in this study considered that the ‘Structuring assignments’ section of the ISS website was beneficial in raising their awareness of the discourse differences across cultures. In this sense it could be argued that the explanations on the website served to acknowledge and legitimise the value of the discourses they already possessed, and to counteract implicit messages that Western academic discourses are more valid. Arguably, the ISS website not only provides awareness of dominant discourses but also facilitates reflection on the impact of cultural background on learning. In other words, it is important that international students are made aware quite explicitly of the differences in writing across cultures, so that they can transition from existing understandings to new ones. In this vein, Priest (2009) cautions that if the university acknowledges only its own discourses, there is an implicit but powerful message that those who do not know them are inferior, thus enforcing the identities of marginalised groups as outsiders.

Challenges in understanding and applying citation requirements
Understanding the ‘how’ and ‘why’ of citation in academic writing also challenged students’ confidence in their ability as successful tertiary learners. Discussions on the value of the ‘Understanding referencing’ section of the ISS website reveal that students had little clear understanding of the importance of knowledge
attribution in the Australian context, specifically how to incorporate citations in their writing. For example, one student strongly stated the consensus of the group when he said

*before we started I didn’t understand about the referencing.*

Other students had only partial understanding of the significance of acknowledging the work of others, thus confirming the online questionnaire results. For example, many had no idea of the importance of in-text referencing. Instead, these students thought that referencing only involved acknowledgement of authors in a reference list at the end of their work, or just a web link within the text. This finding may explain why over half of the responses to the online questionnaire indicated that referencing was not new to them. It appears that the necessity to integrate references within the text of an assignment is not fully understood by many students.

Also important in student feedback and confirmed in the literature, was the strong, negative and punitive advice that tends to surround the whole notion of plagiarism (Schmidt 2005; Carroll 2005a). In fact, one student was distressed that if she applied the same style of referencing used in her previous education she would be accused of plagiarism.

*In my university we have referencing at the end. But during the assignment we do not mention the name of the author or any information that we pick … but we apply the same style here maybe we would be accused of plagiarism … just because we don’t understand that.*

This remark reveals that students are unaware that they need to distinguish their own comments from those of others by using referencing in their writing. This is often referred to as establishing a ‘voice’ in the writing or their own ‘authorial presence’ or identity within their texts (Ivanic 1998). Certainly, while ‘finding a
voice’ as distinguished from the ideas of others is a challenging process for all writers, it is particularly difficult for those who are novices. International students are often accused of plagiarism because they lack this experience or awareness of their role as authors (Abasi et al. 2006). As such, inappropriate referencing is more likely to be an academic literacies issue, rather than one of academic dishonesty (Chandrasoma et al. 2004).

In fact, one student shared his experiences of being accused of plagiarism when he had unknowingly failed to cite appropriately within his writing. His confessions expose the potentially damaging nature of compliance as opposed to learning approaches to plagiarism.

*I felt bad. I didn’t know why what I did was wrong … this made me feel ashamed.*

It could be said that this student’s sense of shame, resulting from a lack of citation, challenges his identity as a novice writer. However, the issue is that international cohorts are more likely to have different understandings of how knowledge is constructed (Volet 1999; Leask 2006; Pringle et al. 2008). It would seem that rather than moralising, punishing or excluding, as may be the case when the plagiarism rules of universities are enforced, the tacit rules of academic writing and referencing could be made more explicit to those who are new in the academy.

Overall, students felt that there should be more support available to enable them to learn how to integrate citations correctly in their assignments. Regrettably, it seems that there is inadequate awareness of the need to teach this fundamental capability, particularly when the consequences of not knowing why and how to reference results in poor marks, accusations of plagiarism and potentially detrimental effects on the identities of international students as novice writers.
Along these lines, Leask (2006) argues that this punitive and unforgiving approach to student plagiarism serves to legitimise the superiority of the Western university’s approach to knowledge and casts those who do not understand as outsiders. It appears that the castigatory discourse of plagiarism reveals insufficient awareness in universities of the existence of different cultural approaches to knowledge and its attribution. A more positive and proactive approach would acknowledge that knowing how to reference at university involves the learning and teaching of new capabilities.

**Perceptions of the ‘intellectual standing’ of international students**

The identities of international students can also suffer when they are perceived as non-critical thinkers. However, findings from this study reveal that the issue is rather that students are unaware of how critique works in Western discourse. In reality, the mystification of the notion of critique makes the learning of this capability extremely difficult. This means that in practice while critical thinking is presented to students in the academy as essential, what is involved is rarely explained or made explicit. This lack of clarity often leads to the stereotyping of international students, in particular, as rote learners and deficient in critical capabilities (Leask 2006). Unfortunately, a number of international students are aware of negative perceptions of their ability to analyse and evaluate, as is reflected in the following comment.

*what is that … say Asian people we just recite something. I don't think so.*

*We don't only recite but think something …. everybody knows they have to have critical thinking*

This student appeared clearly troubled by unhelpful stereotyping of international students’ academic capabilities. Leask (2006) refers to this negative typecasting of Asian learners, proposing that it is far from ‘value free’ as it encapsulates embedded notions of power and superiority. The salient point, though, is that all students find critique in academic discourse difficult (Gelder 2005), at least at
first; hence, it is unproductive and discriminatory to single out one cohort of students among others as deficient.

International students, like other students, learn critique in the Australian academy when they are explicitly taught this capability. Hence, it is important to discredit stereotypical views that position this cohort as passive, rote learners (see, for example, Biggs 1996; Volet & Renshaw 1996). Rather, there is considerable variation in an understanding of evaluative approaches and attitudes across the international cohort (Louie 2005), as there is also across the university student population as a whole. In this light, Haggis (2006, p. 526) warns of the dangers of misinterpreting a lack of understanding of the practices and values of the university as a deficiency in intellectual capability. Low socio-economic background students, among others, may also lack the cultural capital to produce the required discourses (see, for example, Ivanic 1998; Haggis 2006a; Priest 2009).

The stereotyping of international students can also occur when requests for assistance are misunderstood by lecturers as passivity and an unquestioning attitude to their studies. For example, the following comment raises the issue of conflating a genuine need for guidance with perceptions of dependency.

   I understand the work is to be done by ourselves … [i] … can't be spoon fed … but like really should get more help rather than expect them to do it by themselves.

This remark echoes the disappointment that international students often experience with what Skyrme describes (2007, p. 378) as ‘do it yourself learning’. It is evident that many students feel that they are left to flounder with their studies on their own. However, their teachers expect their students to be independent learners who do or should know how to critique. A compounding factor is that academic teaching staff may not see it as their role to teach critical-thinking
capabilities. Nevertheless, these perhaps unrealistic teacher expectations can lead to perceptions of international students as dependent and deficient. The underlying issue though is that students do not come to the university as readymade scholars, and so need support to learn these capabilities. Also implied in the above student’s request for guidance (as opposed to ‘spoon feeding’) is the distress generated by as Skillen et al.(1998) maintains the all too prevailing ‘osmosis’ attitude to learning where students are expected to pick up these high-level capabilities without support. It seems likely that there is insufficient understanding in universities that learner autonomy and positive tertiary identities are fostered, when students are taught the critical capabilities mandated for success in their disciplines.

It is important, therefore, to draw a distinction between dependency and the notion of explicit teaching. What has emerged from this research is that independent learning capacity may be difficult for all students to achieve, if they don’t know what it is they need to learn, or how to go about it. The issue discussed by students in this study was their experience of disappointment with the lack of guidance in learning how critique works in practice, particularly in the texts of their assignments. They lamented that there was little direction in regard to critical thinking within their disciplines.

_How can I impose the critical thinking, that is the problem_  

Indeed, Gourlay (2006) maintains that this lack of clarity in relation to student and teacher roles and expectations could be viewed as an inherent gatekeeping agenda within the university. In other words, there is perhaps an unacknowledged and unconscious view that their students who can’t work out or who don’t have the requisite cultural capital to learn scholarly capabilities unsupported do not belong and should not be enrolled at all. As a consequence, when students are faced with unclear expectations of critique within their
programs, they are likely to look to additional programs for guidance. This view is depicted in the following comment.

so I am thinking about whether it is possible in the future … there could be some kind of link to an active learning program … so you can develop how to do the thinking.

Others wanted practical examples which could deconstruct the processes involved in argumentation.

It (ISS website) talked about how you have to ask questions, have to evaluate and then you choose your argument, but I would prefer some examples.

A number of students also looked to the academic-support area of the university for guidance.

We need more motivation for students to go to the SLC (Study and Learning Centre) … more helpful … they should be guided to the student learning centre

Perceptions of international students as ‘remedial’
Academic acculturation via centralised programs as is highlighted in the comments above could be considered a deficit or remedial model for supporting students to new discourses and practices. Indeed, there are ongoing concerns in the literature regarding the place of additional, centralised, programs in supporting students in academic critique and literacy development (see, for example, Lea & Street 1998; Lawrence 2002; Louie 2005; Lea & Street 2006).

The issue raised in the literature is that students who seek supplementary support for academic literacies development are perceived or perceive themselves as remedial. In this light, Henderson and Hirst (2007, p. 2) propose
that the problem with additional study-skills classes and associated generic support is that these strategies are situated within a view of students as the problem, and where ‘academic literacy is constructed within discourses of deficit’. Further, this type of generic assistance pays little recognition of the importance of context that is, learning the discourse requirements of the discipline, and is based on an autonomous, skills-based approach to learning (Street 2003; Lea & Street 2006).

In practical terms, a centralised generic-skills model of academic literacy development within universities, or a remediation model of support, is also increasingly unsustainable given the numbers of students in the university from non-privileged and diverse backgrounds. Another disadvantage of ‘add on’ support is that it may have the adverse effect of shifting the responsibility for acculturation away from discipline areas and reinforce the practice that lecturers are responsible for content knowledge and not for student learning.

In contrast, discipline-specific approaches view academic literacies as not only multiple and socially situated practices, but also concerned with ‘the relationship of power, authority, meaning making and identity that are implicit in the use of literacy practices within specific university settings’ (Lea & Street 2006, p. 370). Following this interpretation, acumen in the literacies of the university endows students with a sense of legitimacy and belonging. Students as apprentice scholars, therefore, need to be acculturated and taught the capabilities required for scholarly work in their disciplines. Rather than pathologising the student as lacking in ‘skills’, with all the associated connotations of intellectual inferiority, academic literacy development can be integrated incrementally within the teaching, thereby minimising the power and privilege disparities across the student cohort (Haggis 2006b).

In addition, the process of making the literacies of critique explicit within the program can be empowering for students, as they are situated as insiders rather
than outsiders to their disciplines. In other words, developing the capabilities of critique is normalised rather than seen as an ‘add on’, remedial activity. As a result, positive self-concepts and belonging can be fostered as students learn to ‘position themselves within the debates’ of their disciplines, to find their voice, develop their ideas and an authoritative stance. This is put simply by Umbreen, a postgraduate student videoed on ISS. In the ‘Developing critical thinking’ section of the website she says that developing the confidence and the entitlement to question and comment has been empowering.

... *I realised that there was so much that I had to say. And that what I had to say was also important*  
(RMIT University International Student Stories 2009a).

In summary, the ‘Developing critical thinking’ section of the ISS website was helpful to students in providing awareness of the importance of critique. However, international students, among others, may feel marginalised and unsupported if they are not acculturated into the discourse communities of their disciplines, and when rhetorical processes are not made explicit by their teachers.

**Challenges in communicating in a new learning environment**  
International students are further challenged as they adapt to new expectations in the classroom. These tertiary classrooms are the first point of engagement for beginning students. They are the settings where beginning students meet their fellow classmates and embark on the journey of belonging to a new community. However, initially at least it may be difficult for some international students to interact effectively in the classroom. Discussions centred around the ‘Expectations of students’ section of the ISS website reveal that invariably international students can feel very much the outsider in Australian classrooms.

A significant issue for international students is that their established ‘social identities’ are contested, as they learn how to communicate in unfamiliar
classroom environments. Students spoke of feelings of disorientation and confusion, particularly in trying to make sense of the informality of teacher-student relationships. One participant from India encapsulated this feeling when she recounted

*In the classroom it was a bit of a shock ... back in India it is very formal ... like the classroom environment. You’re not supposed to eat and drink and the way you address your professor is sir or madam but here it is by your first name.*

Many of the students spoke of their experiences in more deferential hierarchical classroom settings, where greater importance is given to respecting authority figures and the maintenance of group harmony (Hui & Triandis 1986; Hofstede 1986; Beasley & Pearson 1999). As a consequence, the stress that students spoke about may be the result of applying their previously effective communication strategies with little success in the new environment (Ramburuth 2001; Ryan & Hellmundt 2003; Carroll 2005a). This meant students often found it difficult to integrate their established learner personas constructively within what seemed to them a too casual environment. For example, one student reflected on her initial difficulties adjusting to a Western classroom: ‘*I didn’t know how to talk in the tutorial.*’

Other students also spoke of their difficulties coming to terms with the nature of discussion and debate within the classroom. Students spoke of being puzzled by the confidence with which local students interrupted their teachers and the strength of their opinions. One student remarked that she felt shy speaking up in class and was concerned about saying ‘*something wrong*’, which may portray her own cultural reluctance to take risks, or perhaps a need to save face in group situations (Hui & Triandis 1986; Hofstede 1986; Beasley & Pearson 1999). Then again, her reticence might also portray a degree of intimidation in expressing her views in a new environment. Nevertheless, it would seem, at least
initially, international students’ cultural ways of behaving in group situations may impede a discursive teaching and learning style in the classroom.

What is clear in the data is that international students are unlikely to be aware of the tacit rules of discursive discourses in universities, namely that students should actively engage (Gourlay 2006). Given an integral attribute of a ‘good student’ is that they do participate and that their contributions are important, the classroom can be considered a training ground for the application of new approaches to learning.

Following this line of argument, a precursor for the development of ‘self’ and ‘authorial’ presence in writing and critique (Ivanic 1998) is that students are empowered and encouraged to clarify and develop their ideas in discussion with others. As such, a questioning approach central to the discourse of critique (Ballard & Clancy 1991) stems from this involvement in the classroom. According to Abasi, Akbari et al. (2006) the development of the identities of tertiary learners, that is, the privileged ways of thinking, valuing and behaving, occurs incrementally and is facilitated by students participating actively in the university. Thus, when international students, as one participant commented, ‘don’t talk much’ they can maintain a position as outsiders to the discourses of their disciplines. In support of this view, the 2010 ALTC Report ‘Addressing the ongoing English language growth of international students’, recommends that tutorial classes are used more effectively to facilitate the participation of international students.

Another concern is that when international students do not interact in modes expected of tertiary learners, they may be negatively stereotyped as passive and lacking in ideas (Biggs 1996; Chalmers & Volet 1997; Louie 2005). In this regard, Umbreen cautions students via a video clip on the ISS website warning that a perceived passivity in the classroom could be misunderstood as a lack of knowledge and capacity (RMIT University International Student Stories 2009b).
Such reticence on the part of international students in class and the resulting negative perceptions by their local peers could well be counterproductive in fostering intercultural relationships (Volet & Ang 1998). Further, this typecasting can inhibit one of the most valuable resources in learning, that of students learning from each other (Krause 2005).

Therefore it was not surprising to the researcher that students valued the advice in the ‘Expectations of students’ section of the ISS website and they said that this was because the advice of their more experienced peers gave them both strategies and encouragement to speak up in class. This need for reassurance and greater confidence in questioning was reflected by one student when she acknowledged to herself and other students. Yes it’s OK to ask questions, it’s OK to ask.

While the ‘Expectations of students’ section of the website provides introductory awareness and advice on interacting in the classroom, it appears there is a need for greater thought to be given to diversity management strategies within tertiary settings. In practice, this would mean classroom engagement strategies which are inclusive of all students would be part of institutional policy and thus planned and implemented in all programs. Indeed, in an era of mass education, when university teachers can no longer presume that students are aware of the values and assumptions underpinning university learning, it is timely that teaching strategies which foster engagement and a questioning approach are adopted (Leask 2005; Haggis 2006b).

The ‘International Student Stories’ website – effective and useful for academic transition?
The analysis so far, revealed through discussions of the four key academic issues presented on the ISS website, ‘Structuring assignments’, ‘Understanding referencing’, Developing critical thinking’ and ‘Expectations of students’, highlight the considerable academic acculturation challenges faced by international students. The student experiences have added depth to this study and
broadened the discussion beyond a mere evaluation of the website itself. The following analysis firstly assesses the effectiveness of the ISS website for the international cohort, and then situates this evaluation within the broader context of academic acculturation in the university more generally.

Undoubtedly, this ISS website was highly valued by the students who participated in this study. Their positive assessments are depicted in the following student examples.

*Great resources which facilitate the transition, I gained a lot from this...most international students should do this!*  

*I wish there were more stories and information like this. All units are awesome!*

However, it is clear in the findings that the main value of the ISS website is as an introductory and awareness raising resource. Notably, this was also the aim of the project from its conception.

*I think the website (ISS) is very useful but it’s like the first stage and the first step for students to get into this.*

An important advantage of the website was that it gave students knowledge of the differences in educational cultures between home and host countries. The following student comment is representative of this view.

*It (the ISS website) is helpful to understand the differences in study cultures. It is efficient to have some information about the differences between here and students from Asian countries … so that students from Asian countries can better understand how to change their learning style.*
This view is supported in the literature, which repeatedly highlights the benefits to students of awareness of cultural differences in learning (Bennett 1993; Ramburuth 2001; Louie 2005). Louie (2005a, p. 34) calls this a ‘meta-cultural sensitivity’ and contends this capability enables students to appreciate how differing values, belief systems and practices impact on their learning. Arguably, this ‘meta-cultural sensitivity’ could be central to the development of learner confidence necessary for students to gain control and responsibility for their own educational acculturation. In this vein, the ISS website was praised by students in improving their confidence levels. This student assessment is an example of this kind of feedback.

This site helps boost my confidence. It helps me do well...
It could aid me in developing a positive attitude.

Yet another student complimented the site because it encouraged motivation. He proposed that the site promoted awareness that students were not alone, because their experiences were validated by others.

It (the ISS website) gives motivation, encouragement that I am not alone, looking, knowing that others feel the same way ... so I’m just like normal people.

This data highlights the value of the ISS website as learning resource which can promote the ‘capacity to reflect and be aware of oneself as a learner’ (McLoughlin et al. 2006, p. 34) within a cross-cultural context. This is often described as a meta-cognitive and meta-cultural approach, which involves the learner understanding the processes and practices of a learning context, not just the content (Biggs 1996; Louie 2005a).

However, an assessment of the value of the ISS website needs to acknowledge the centrality of the academic disciplines in building confidence and capability in
learning for all students. This is confirmed in the data by repeated student requests for models, examples and active programs beyond what is offered on the ISS website. These requests for practical support highlight the importance to students of their teachers making the implicit assumptions and requirements of the disciplines explicit (Lea & Street 1998; Skillen et al. 1998; Lawrence 2002). As such, the findings affirm the learning of academic literacies as essentially contextualised practices, fostering identity and belonging (Ivanic 1998; Gee 2001; Gee 2004), rather than a set of generic skills taught separately from the program. Interventions like the ISS website thus have value as preliminary, preparatory induction programs.

The findings analysed in this chapter so far give credence to Haggis’s (2006) proposition that the issue of acculturation is mistakenly conceived as only a student problem, thereby underlining the associated power differentials between students and the institution. Clearly, the identity-challenges international students experience in transitioning to the university could be alleviated if there was more responsibility taken in embedding the process of learning in their programs.

In this light, it is helpful to view tertiary discourses within the academic literacies framework (Skillen et al. 1998; Street 2003; Lea & Street 2006). This framework refers to multi-literacies as situated within specific contexts such as disciplines, and argues for a shift away from a deficit view of student capabilities (Schmidt 2005; Haggis 2006b; Lea & Street 2006). Necessarily, this approach would need to take into account not only the differing cultural assumptions, world views and epistemologies of the university student population, but also the intrinsic hegemony of the institution itself (Street 2003).

The ISS website is clearly not a solution to all the transitional issues that international students face in learning how to learn in a new culture. Nor was it intended to be; rather it is a beginning. The website’s primary function is to raise students’ awareness of academic expectations in Australia. The ISS website is of
value because it provides a bridge to the real work of socio-cultural and educational acculturation, which belongs within students' disciplines of study. Within this constraint, the ISS website could be considered as highly effective in supporting international students’ journey of bi-cultural adaptation and identity transformation. On viewing the website one student declared about her studies at the university, ‘In this time I will change myself!’

Section two: Concluding comments
This qualitative study has provided valuable insights into the international student experience, which go beyond the overwhelmingly positive evaluations of the ISS website by the students. These insights from international students confirm literature which views academic acculturation as a socialisation process concerned with identity, belonging and membership in a new community (Beasley & Pearson 1999; Skyrme 2007). The analysis has revealed the challenges to existing self-concepts that international students face, when they are obliged to learn new writing and knowledge attribution practices, when their intellectual standing is questioned in the adaptation to a new style of learning and when new ways of communicating in the classroom environment are problematic. The next section of this chapter broadens this analysis by discussing the significance of these findings for the university and its teaching staff.
Section three: Academic acculturation for international students – a real issue for universities

One international student who participated in this research project reflected on her first year at university. She did not have a great year and thought about dropping out. She actually failed a number of her subjects. She spoke about how she eventually found assistance from the university’s academic support area and that she was now receiving distinctions and credits. Another student asked her what it was that helped her achieve better marks and she said quite simply, ‘I now know what they want.’

This student’s experience illustrates the significance of the academic acculturation process for international students. Underlined in her reflection is the importance of viewing academic transition for this cohort as not solely a student responsibility. Arguably this student faced considerable difficulties simply because she did not know the required academic practices. As such her experience typifies the challenges discussed in the preceding section of this chapter and are highlighted in student reports of distress, confusion and poor performance on assessment tasks. It is therefore quite probable that there are considerable numbers of international students who are identified by the university as at risk, because of inadequate academic acculturation to study in Australia. While more research is needed into the role of academic transition in international student success, the findings draw attention to the likelihood that ‘not knowing’ what is expected may be a significant causal factor in the poor performance of international students.

Thus, it seems clear that universities need to have greater understanding of the importance of academic acculturation for their international students. The damage caused to ‘excluded’ students and their families when they return to their home countries should be an issue for universities. These institutions also need to acknowledge that it is likely there are significant numbers of students whose learning and confidence levels are negatively affected by a lack of awareness or
understanding of the expectations, discourse structures, knowledge attribution and the importance of an evaluative, critical approach. In addition, given the importance of retention for university budgets, retaining students who are heavily relied on for income is simply good business practice.

Indeed, without academic acculturation programs and resources like the ISS website, most students’ learning of academic culture in Australia remains piecemeal. As a result, it is likely that a number of international students may not be fulfilling their potential as tertiary learners in Australia. It appears the predominant ‘figure it out for themselves’ approach may not be working effectively enough for either the students themselves or for the university’s business in the international education market.

At the heart of the problem could well be a lack of understanding of the cultural and socio-cultural learning and teaching differences that international students need to overcome, in order to learn effectively. Certainly, in response to the question why international students in particular were the target audience for the ISS website, the project proposal stressed the importance of acknowledging firstly, that ‘everyone’s world view is not the same’, (Bennett 1993, p. 30) and secondly, that it is important to put in place strategies which explain those differences between prior and present learning environments.

As Ramburuth advocates (2001, p. 13)

*Understanding and acknowledging the similarities and differences is the first step to diversity management, taking action to address issues of difference is the next step.*

The findings from focus-group discussions support the premise that the development of a positive learning identity necessarily involves knowledge of the dominant discourses and tertiary literacy practices. In this light, Kettle (2011)
argues that teaching practice in universities needs to proactively accommodate the academic acculturation of international students. Thus, it is likely that the consequences of ‘not knowing’ what was required could affect international students’ sense of belonging, thereby promoting feelings of exclusion, of being an ‘outsider’ in universities (Beasley & Pearson 1999; MacKinnon & Manathunga 2003; Leask 2006). This failure to acknowledge difference or diversity could even be construed as naively ethnocentric, and may portray an institution’s unthinking adherence to dominant values and power relationships (Bennett 1993). Rather, the development of a multicultural or hybrid awareness is advocated as critical for institutions engaged in internationalisation agendas (Marginson & Mollis 2000).

Unfortunately, more often than not it appears that it is up to the student to acculturate themselves to the academy. In the absence of clear institutional policy or programs in relation to the academic acculturation of international students, transitional issues are likely to be considered primarily the responsibility of students, rather than the programs in which they are enrolled. To date there appears little awareness by university policy makers of the

> need to change focus: rather than seeing students, particularly international students inability to understand as the issue rather it is our inability to explain and define (Leask 2006, p.185).

**English language competence and academic transition**
The development of English language proficiency is not the focus of this study. However, it is raised here because the default position in many universities appears to be to diagnose the academic acculturation issues of international students as English language difficulties. The findings presented in this study suggest that this is a misdiagnosis. Such deficit perceptions of students as ‘the problem’ are unhelpful. This view is expressed by Carroll (2005a), who stresses there is too much eagerness to attribute failure in the international cohort to poor language levels.
Interestingly, English competence was not mentioned as a concern by focus group participants. The experiences of participants in this study indicate that even students with high levels of English proficiency can still struggle with academic transition. This complexity in relation to academic acculturation issues is demonstrated by Siphwe and Umbreen, two postgraduate students who were videoed for the ISS website. Although these mature-age students displayed very high English language proficiency, they still spoke about the difficulties they faced understanding Australian academic culture. They noted especially struggles they experienced with the academic writing requirements.

Nevertheless, the above concerns are not intended to downplay evidence that some international students have English language difficulties. Rather, an exclusive concern with English language capability may obscure the significant educational acculturation issues that students face (Carroll 2005a). Certainly the document commissioned by the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, the ‘Good Practice Principles for English language competence for international students in Australian universities’ (DEEWR 2008), provides important guidelines for universities. However, while there is some acknowledgement in these guidelines of the significance of academic and social transitions, the nomenclature of English language competence may imply too narrow a focus on language proficiency, rather than on broader academic acculturation issues.

In support of a broader non-deficit model of support for international students, the recent ALTC report (2010) ‘Addressing the ongoing English language growth of international students’ draws on extensive research studies of international cohorts in Australia to propose a socio-cultural approach to English language throughout tertiary study. Participants in this study underlined the importance of cultural knowledge in developing and applying English successfully, as well as the need for facilitated engagement in the classroom. The report adds weight to
the findings discussed in the previous section of this chapter as it highlights the important role of acculturation into the disciplines through meta-cognition or ‘learning to learn’ strategies (Recommendation 6), as well as the need for greater awareness and responsibility taken by teachers in alleviating the stressors international students face, for example motivational issues (Recommendation 10).

While the focus of the ALTC (2010) report is on the English language development of international students, its recommendations stress the importance of universities proactively embracing academic acculturation policies for the international cohort. Notably, the report also advocates ‘embedding’ academic support within courses (Recommendation 5) as well as the development of cultural understanding by connecting new knowledge with prior experience (Recommendation 9).

Of significance was that students interviewed for the ALTC study did not favour a language-proficiency approach to the development of their English language. While it is evident that there is a need for extensive research in this area, an inference that could be drawn is that the academic literacies approach advocated in the previous section may provide the framework and context for the progression of operational English capabilities. Certainly, the experience of the researcher as a university learning advisor would suggest that a sole and narrow focus on English operational proficiency could be construed as a too simplistic assessment of the issues facing overseas students. Arguably, such deficit interpretations of the competence of the international cohort may cloud the real and distressing academic acculturation issues facing international students.

**Towards an inclusive approach**
Across the higher education sector, there seems to be little awareness of the acculturation issues facing transitioning international students. It is timely, therefore, that the issue of risk management in international education has been raised in the Baird Review, with the forewarning that ‘the sector is not sustainable
if it does not focus on improving the quality of the student experience’ (Baird 2010, p. 57). Integral to this strategy is the promotion of learning and teaching environments where international students are supported to reach their full potential. This approach would include an induction to the Australian academic culture, both pre-and post-arrival (Baird 2010).

While the ISS website could be considered an effective first step in developing understanding of the issues involved in moving across learning and teaching paradigms, findings suggest that international students would also benefit from explicit academic acculturation within their programs. In this vein, Hofstede (1986, p.316) proposes that ‘bridging the gap requires not just teaching the learner how to learn but also teaching the teacher how to teach ‘thereby improving learning for all students. This research project therefore gives credence to a role for university teachers in initiating students into the literacies and discourses of their disciplines (see e.g. Biggs 1996; Schmidt 2005; Gourlay 2006; ALTC Final Report 2010; Arkoudis & Tran 2011).

However, the challenge that universities face is twofold. University lecturers could not only lack an explicit understanding of the tacit literacies requirements of their discourses, but also may not see such explication as part of their role (Schmidt 2005). In addition, the pressures and expectations on university lecturers should not to be underestimated, particularly dealing with the increasing diversity of their students, greater workloads, casualisation (Gribble & Ziguras 2003; Watts 2004) and the massification of the sector in general (Watts 2004; James 2007). Another factor to consider is that there appears to be no shared understandings across the academic community of what it means in curriculum design or practice to develop capabilities beyond the teaching of disciplinary content (Barrie 2006; 2007). One sustainable approach advocated in the literature is a collaborative model where lecturers, language and learning advisors and academic developers work in partnership at the program level to
embed literacies development and inclusive practices (Jacobs 2007; Purser et al. 2008; Arkoudis & Tran 2011).

Further investigation into collaborative models which could support academic teaching staff with the increasing diversity in their classrooms would be valuable. The study highlights the need for tertiary providers to develop appropriate diversity management strategies and accompanying professional development programs, so that their teachers can deal with the range of student cultures and backgrounds which comprise today's university populations. For the international cohort an institutional approach, which makes the implicit rules of academic study explicit (Ramburuth 2001; Gourlay 2006; Leask 2006; Sovic 2007), could empower students to gain control of their own transition process. Such an approach would then support them to develop positive new learning identities appropriate for the Australian context. The ISS website, while evaluated as a valuable and effective support resource by students, should be considered as just one part of a comprehensive diversity management approach required to ensure quality education for all.
Section Four: The efficacy of the International Student Stories website as an online academic acculturation tool for international students

The preceding section has argued that adjusting to new learning cultures is problematic for international students, yet little acknowledged by universities. As a result, the differences between home and host cultures in education need to be made explicit to transitioning international students. In addition, the previous discussion argues that academic acculturation programs within disciplinary teaching need to be considered as part of a diversity management strategy of universities. This final section of this chapter seeks to examine research findings in relation to the efficacy and viability of the online environment to deliver academic acculturation programs to international cohorts at universities.

Online learning and international students

There is some discussion in the literature that international students, along with other disadvantaged cohorts, may not be as accustomed or proficient with online delivery (Kennedy et al. 2007). However, none of the participants in any of the focus groups questioned whether an online resource was a useful method of delivering an academic acculturation program to students. Instead, they were keen to demonstrate their ‘tech savvy’ skills, with many eager to offer advice on ways to make the ISS website more user friendly.

Focus-group participants clearly indicated that they valued the flexibility and accessibility of the online environment. A significant benefit of the ISS website was that it could be revisited at different points in their transition. Students were particularly keen to highlight that the ISS resource is especially useful because it can be accessed prior to arrival. This learner preference for flexible access to learning resources supports research, which argues that students are not only comfortable in a digital world, but also demand this medium. One reason for these preferences could be that the majority of today’s students (including international students) work part time and as a result have limited time on campus (Caruso & Kvavik 2005; Krause 2006).
However, some students also expressed a desire for additional face-to-face services. These preferences show that students value face-to-face delivery, but also expect, even demand, accessible online support as well (O'Malley & McGraw 1999; Means et al. 2010). Another view to consider is that such requests could indicate that online delivery, or indeed the ISS website in particular, is especially suitable as a medium for introductory resources to the Australian learning and teaching environment. Further to this, more in-depth acculturation support within the discipline-specific discourses of the programs is also necessary. In support of this proposition a number of students expressed views which valued face-to-face teacher intervention in addition to online support.

**Online as an active participatory space**

Of significance in the data is that a number of students proposed that the inclusion of Web 2.0 Tools (blogs, wikis, discussion boards etc.) would enhance the effectiveness of the website. These requests indicate student preferences for more active, participatory, online environments where students can facilitate their own learning. Such student preferences may also highlight the shifts happening in online learning across the tertiary sector towards more constructivist social spaces, which enable and facilitate students engaging and learning from each other (Carlson & Repman 2002; O'Neil et al. 2004; Meer & Scott 2008).

The findings of this study confirm literature which highlights the role of technologies in delivering new constructivist approaches to education (Barr & Tagg 1995; Bigum & Rowan 2004; Watts 2004; Smith & Caruso 2010). Increasingly, the interactive capabilities of the online environment are being explored to promote interactive student-to-student learning as distinct from the mere delivery of information on a website. For example, focus-group participants commented that they were keen to engage more actively online as part of their transition and proposed that a forum or a discussion board would be a useful addition to the ISS website so that they can learn from each other’s experiences.
The idea of the forum is really good. Students have any real problems well making assessment tasks or something like that they can always ask their friends or anybody else online, get the direct answer rather than search everywhere, trying to find something.

Implied in the above proposal is that some international students are familiar and competent chatting online and consider their peers as a valuable resource for their learning. Students also appreciated the advice from more experienced students contained in the video clips on the site, thus providing further evidence of the value to them of peer learning.

These student preferences are also supported at the policy level as the use of ICTs is gaining momentum as a key strategy in the delivery of learning (Krause 2006). Moreover, it is clear that relying primarily on face-to-face learning is no longer tenable in providing sufficient reach, accessibility and attractiveness to students. ICTs may also offer a sustainable support model for cash-strapped universities to accommodate the learning, teaching and support needs of the increasing diversity of the student cohort (Watts 2004).

However, support for online, whether it is a learning and teaching resource or a space for student-to-student interaction, needs to be qualified. Any perceived predilection for online learning is complex, given that students not only valued the ISS resource, but also wanted face-to-face acculturation programs. As a consequence, for the academic acculturation of international students, it is likely that ‘in program’ transitional support employing hybrid models of face-to-face and online, would be beneficial for this cohort. As such, the study raises questions concerning the depth and effectiveness of online delivery for more complex learning tasks.

Despite these qualifications, the overwhelmingly positive responses to the ISS website in both online surveys and in focus groups, demonstrate its usefulness to
international students. These findings though need to be viewed with caution, because the study also suggests that the ISS’s primary value is as an introductory resource. As such, it is early days in the investigation of the viability and effectiveness of online technologies for much needed transitional support for this cohort.

**Chapter Conclusion**

Findings in this chapter confirm the value of the ISS website for incoming overseas students. The online questionnaires established that the four acculturation areas of the ISS website were considered not only new knowledge to the majority, but also useful or very useful to nearly all students who participated in this study. Findings of focus groups added depth and understanding to the quantitative results by underlining the real and significant academic acculturation challenges to established learner identities faced by this cohort. The analysis has highlighted that these challenges are complex, as they involve a practical dimension around assignment and citation practices, a cognitive dimension relating to perceptions of ‘intellectual standing’ and a social dimension concerning interacting in a new learning environment. In so doing, the findings have established the significance of developing more inclusive and explicit induction practices within the academic discourses of the disciplines. As a result, the ISS website is evaluated as an effective ‘first step’, introductory resource, rather than a solution to all the academic acculturation issues that international students experience. Thus, it is important that university policies and teaching programs acknowledge the reality of the academic acculturation phenomena of transitioning international students and their responsibilities in making socio-cultural academic requirements explicit. The possibilities inherent in the online environment to deliver transitional support, in particular the potential of social media to provide peer-to-peer support for the international cohort, was also highlighted.
Chapter Seven: Conclusion and recommendations

The rationale for the development of the 'International Student Stories' website was based on the presumption that there is a gap in the existing transitional support for international students at the university. The ISS website was thus envisaged as an online resource, which could provide introductory advice to students about academic culture, in order to better prepare students for a new learning environment, both pre- and post-arrival. While this study has focused on an evaluation of the ISS website, in so doing the research has provided a lens into the transitional experiences of international students. Also revealed in the findings were aspects of the international student acculturation experience which require further consideration by the university.

Significance of the study as a contribution to scholarly and professional knowledge
This evaluative research project presents four major contributions to scholarly and professional knowledge in relation to the academic acculturation of international students. Two of the key findings are concerned with the effectiveness of the ISS website itself, while the third major contribution of this research looks more broadly at the value of online environments for academic transitional programs. The final and the most significant finding goes beyond the effectiveness of the website or digital environments, by providing valuable insights into the academic acculturation experience of international students.

Firstly, the research indicates that the ISS website is effective as a transitional resource in providing introductory academic guidance to international students. Findings reveal that the majority of international students have little knowledge that the Australian academic culture would be significantly different from what they have encountered in their previous education. As a consequence, international students are often ill-equipped to deal with the demands and
expectations of their new learning environment. Within this context, the ISS site is a useful resource in inducting this cohort to study in Australia.

Secondly, fundamental to the effectiveness of the ISS website is its capacity to foster in students the development of both meta-cognitive (learning to learn, through learning what they do not know) as well as meta-cultural awareness of the socio-cultural and epistemological underpinnings of academic discourses across cultures. Thus, the website could be considered to be useful in promoting learner confidence and autonomy, thereby supporting the development of independent learning capabilities. However, the ISS website is not, nor was ever intended to be, an academic acculturation program. Rather, the website provides a bridge to understanding, or a ‘first step’ in the transition to learning in a different culture.

Thirdly, findings demonstrate the appeal of the online environment, and the ISS website in particular, as a learning and teaching medium for international students. Clearly, international students are comfortable in digital environments and value the flexibility and accessibility of the ISS website. Also highlighted was the need to incorporate social media, in the form of blogs and forums, to cater to a digital generation who requires online student-to-student interaction to be a part of their learning. As such, online or blended environments may be a sustainable way forward in acculturating the numbers of international students enrolling each year. However, these learner preferences need to be qualified, given findings also suggest that any future academic acculturation programs may benefit from the inclusion of both face-to-face and online components.

Finally, the key finding of this research reveals the degree to which international students’ identities as successful learners are contested in the transition process, including the associated negative effects on learner self-concept at least initially. The study has revealed that international students are needlessly distressed by the predominantly ‘trial and error’ approach to the learning of new academic
discourses. While the ISS website provides valuable introductory advice, the resource is not a panacea for the significant challenges that international students face adapting to academic life in Australia. Rather it appears the university needs to take more responsibility for supporting the academic acculturation of their international cohort. Indeed, the research exposes the unfairness of viewing these challenges as predominantly student problems. Clearly, more needs to be done to facilitate a more positive academic transition experience for overseas students.

Notably, there is an identified need for more explicit guidance in the academic requirements within the disciplines. The research indicates that the development of positive self-concepts can be fostered when there is a more proactive approach to welcoming students into the communities of practice within the disciplines of the university. This would involve policies and practices which have the imprimatur to ensure that the discourses of assignment and citation are made explicit, the nature of critique is demystified and belonging and engagement in the classroom is cultivated. Such support could include exemplars, deconstructed models, practice activities and engagement strategies, which serve to scaffold the learning of the capabilities required within programs of study across the university. As such, this finding not only gives weight to the importance of situating the acculturation process developmentally within the discipline-specific context, but also the duty of care of the university to facilitate this process.

The way forward for students
In light of the above, a key development in improving the academic acculturation process for all students would involve changes at the policy and planning level of the university. While the ISS website is an effective introductory stand-alone resource, its effectiveness could be enhanced if it was incorporated as part of an institution-wide comprehensive diversity management plan. Such a strategy would involve transitional policies, which oblige discipline areas to explicitly induct students into the discipline-specific discourses required of students within
programs of study. In the first instance, this could simply involve a requirement that programs provide models or exemplars of assignment structure and discourse requirements, an initiative that would be inclusive of all students. As a consequence, the ISS website could be then utilised more appropriately as an introductory resource, located within a more comprehensive acculturation program.

Further, the ISS website could have added value to the university as a professional development resource, which could raise awareness of the very real academic acculturation phenomenon experienced by our international students. In this way, the resource could promote intercultural learning, as the differences in learning and teaching across cultures need not only to be made explicit to the international students themselves, but importantly to their teachers. In so doing, accommodating diversity within the university could be facilitated as a two-way process. Certainly, the portfolio component of this research project details workshops and presentations, which demonstrate the benefits of the website as a professional development tool for teaching staff. In fact, academic teaching staff often experienced moments of insight in these sessions as a result of their increased awareness of the acculturation issues faced by their students.

Indeed, the ISS resource could also serve to broaden the perception of the issues faced by international students as encompassing more than simply English language problems, and related deficit perceptions of the competence of this cohort. In this light, it could be argued that academic acculturation programs, which build a socio-cultural understanding of academic literacies required for successful transition, may provide the framework, context and community wherein English language competence can develop. In the area of tertiary language and learning, it appears that more research is needed into the nexus between academic literacies programs and English language proficiency.
While it can be concluded that the ISS website is an effective academic transitional tool for international students, at issue is how effective the site is within the broader university context. Despite the fact that the site is popular and valued by the international students, its effectiveness may be limited unless the resource is part of a more strategic, coordinated and developmental approach to academic transition within disciplines across the university. Such an approach could incorporate academic acculturation resources and programs as part of a diversity management strategy, in order to accommodate the range of student cultures and learning backgrounds across the university’s student population. Accordingly, the research draws attention to the importance of supporting academic transition for the university’s diverse student population at the policy and program levels. Rather than filling the gap in the provision of existing academic acculturation support for international students, the ISS website should be considered a first step in the process.

**Reflections: A more skilled and knowledgeable practitioner**

This project’s overall objective was to improve the academic experience of international students. However, the evaluation of the ISS website was framed as simply one strategy, within a bigger picture, which involves universities doing more to address the academic acculturation of international students. Given that the first objective of research undertaken by project is to become a more knowledgeable and skilled practitioner, an initial assessment of my learning confirms my practice-based, prior knowledge as a learning advisor working with international students. However, during the research I came to view those pre-project assessments of the ‘issues’ for international students as a somewhat superficial understanding of the issues facing both the students and the university.

Despite the fact that I work as a learning advisor with this student cohort, it became clearer to me that much of the stress, trauma and identity crisis that international students invariably experience acculturating to the university, remain either hidden or misdiagnosed by teachers, advisors, support staff and
policy makers. As a result, over the period of this research project I found myself taking on an advocacy role for the international cohort. This stance presented both challenges and insights.

A significant challenge was raising awareness of the academic acculturation issues within the institution. Particularly important was to promote understanding of academic acculturation issues as opposed to the default perception that English language is the sole problem. While the project was welcomed, even lauded in presentations across the university, still the prevailing stance appeared to reflect a predominantly deficit view of the capabilities of this cohort. Further, it seemed clear that institution-wide English language competence was considered the primary problem for students. Thus, it was difficult to push against the dominant paradigm, which viewed the problems as mainly within the students themselves, thereby failing to acknowledge the institution’s inability to explicitly induct international students into a new learning culture.

My role as an advocate for international students was done through purposeful practitioner presentations, where I sought to provide opportunities for the RMIT community to hear the stories of students on the ISS website (see Portfolio Products 1-4). As the research developed, I also presented preliminary findings in a number of university forums including RMIT University’s Learning and Teaching Expo (see Academic Exhibit 3), the Open Program, a centralised professional development program (see Academic Exhibit 5), to the broader higher-education community at the Australian Technology Network of Universities Assessment conference (see Academic Exhibit 6), as well as the Biennial Academic Language and Learning conference (see Academic Exhibit 7). All of these presentations were well received with many participants providing feedback that the sessions allowed them to view the transition of international students in a more meaningful light. However, the best examples of

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2 The Learning and Teaching Expo, the Open Program and the Australian Technology Network presentations were all done in collaboration with Dr Lynnel Hoare.
effective advocacy for international student transition is demonstrated when the ISS website, or sections thereof, are integrated within program delivery. The Portfolio (see Academic Exhibit 9) is but one example of how students’ stories from the ISS have been embedded in discipline-based transition to study.

Within my own professional community of practice, Academic Language and Learning (ALL) advisors, the research has facilitated valuable reflection. During the project I began to question whether we as a profession also are too quick to focus on grammar and syntax, rather than orientating students to different world views. Progressively, I arrived at the view that too often a diagnosis of poor language may obscure the bigger picture. I also began to question whether it was reasonable to expect students to be independent and in control of their learning, when what it is that students need to know in order to be self-sufficient learners is not always clear.

I also concluded that in a sense academic language and learning (ALL) services are too often positioned within universities as deficit services for students ‘struggling’, rather than as professional support and consultancy for programs. As a consequence, ALL consultants have in the past had little traction in influencing policy changes at an institutional level. Nevertheless, I am also encouraged by the fact that learning advisors are increasingly invited to collaborate with programs in deconstructing the literacies involved in their disciplines.

I am certainly very appreciative of the opportunity and support given to me by the university in providing learning and teaching investment funding for the development of the ISS website. However, I am also aware that this project as essentially a 'bottom up' initiative needs to be supported by ‘top down’ policies, which can more effectively deal with the range of developmental issues international students face acculturating to a new learning environment.
**Recommendations**

Based on the findings of this research the following recommendations are proposed:

- **Incorporate the ISS website as part of an institutional approach to academic acculturation for international students at RMIT University**
  
This would involve possible future policy directions, which advocate explicit teaching of the academic requirements and expectations of study in the university and could be part of a broader transition framework.

- **Incorporate the ISS website in professional development programs which deal with teaching international students**
  
The ISS website has proven to be a valuable resource for professional development of RMIT staff. The video clips in particular of international students experiences of academic culture could be incorporated in both formal and informal (program level) staff development.

- **Provide models and explicit teaching of academic discourse requirements within discipline areas**
  
Research findings suggest the ISS website, while valuable, is a generic introductory tool for the academic acculturation of international students. Discipline-specific models of assignment discourse, critical thinking and referencing could further explicate what is required of students in each program area of the university. Models which explain and deconstruct assessment requirements could also have benefits for all students.

- **Investigate use of blended models of academic transitional support**
  
The online academic acculturation could be considered valuable given its flexibility, accessibility and potential connectivity between students. However, findings demonstrate quite strongly that there may be a role for further teaching
of academic culture using a combination of face-to-face and online delivery modes.

- **Research the use of Web 2 technologies for student-to-student learning of Australian academic culture**
  The students who participated in this study proposed that the ISS website could be improved by the inclusion of Web 2 technologies, for example a blog or a forum. These ideas indicate that social media via peer-to-peer online learning could be utilised in academic transitional programs for the international cohort.

- **Research the commonalities in academic acculturation issues faced by other student cohorts in the university**
  There may be considerable commonalities in the experience of other disadvantaged groups in the university, for example low-socio-economic background and mature-age students. Research into the similarities and differences in academic acculturation experience of other student cohorts may be beneficial in informing future transitional programs.

- **Research the nexus between transitional academic literacies programs and the English language development of international tertiary students**
  The findings demonstrate that academic acculturation is a significant, but often unacknowledged, issue for international students. Further research could provide greater understanding of the potential relationship between transitional academic literacies programs and the related English language proficiency development of this cohort.

**Limitations of the research**
The limitations of this research project must be acknowledged. Key stakeholders, such as College Academic Development Groups and Pro Vice Chancellors for Learning and Teaching, were not interviewed for this project. A more comprehensive study involving these groups might have revealed a richer picture.
of the levels of awareness of academic acculturation issues across the university. Clearly, findings are therefore limited to the international student perspective.

There were also some methodological limitations. The reliability and validity of findings could be enhanced by a larger sample size in relation to the quantitative survey results. Similarly, within the qualitative findings the limited numbers in focus groups may not be representative of the extent and range of academic acculturation issues facing the international cohort, As such, this study aims only to raise issues in relation to the international student experience of the ISS website, as well as academic acculturation in general, to highlight areas for further research.

Possible bias as a practitioner-researcher must also be acknowledged. As a learning advisor with extensive experience working with international students, some preconceived perceptions of the international student experience may have influenced findings.

The evaluation of the ISS website draws attention to the problematic academic acculturation experience of international students. In the process, the study proposes the university address the resultant stress placed on international students through a range of diversity-management initiatives.
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Appendices

Attachment A: Focus group

RMIT University
Business College
School of Management

Invitation to Participate in a Research Project
Project Title: Academic acculturation to study at RMIT: A sustainable support model

Investigators:
Dr David Hodges, Senior Lecturer, School of Management, RMIT University
Barbara Morgan, Academic Skills Advisor, Study and Learning Centre, RMIT University

Dear …

You are invited to participate in the above research project being conducted by RMIT University. This information sheet describes the project in straightforward language, or ‘plain English’. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask one of the investigators.

The aim of this research is to evaluate the effectiveness of a new web resource developed for international students to support their transition to study at RMIT University. This research is being conducted as part of a Masters in Business in the School of Management. This project has been approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics subcommittee.

You have been invited to participate in a focus group (a group interview) because you are a first-year international student and have either volunteered to participate or been recommended by an RMIT staff member as someone who may be interested in participating.

We are seeking feedback from first-year international students on the web-based resource, ‘International Student Stories’ which can be accessed at http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/7_IntStudentStories/00stories.htm
This resource is specifically targeted to newly enrolling international students and consists of video clips containing advice from experienced (second year or beyond) international students advising areas of academic study they found new or different from their previous experiences in their own countries.

- Discussion questions in the group interviews aim to find out if the ‘International Student Stories’ web-resource is useful to support your transition to study at RMIT University, and
- How you think that this resource could be improved.

If you decide to participate all you are required to do is view the resource (one hour) before attending the focus group. We will negotiate the scheduling of the focus group with you and other participants at a time that is convenient for all participants. Participation in the focus group will be for one to one and a half hours. In appreciation of your time we will give you two movie tickets. Prior to the commencement of the focus group you will be asked to sign a consent form which gives us permission to use the information obtained in this research project.

We believe that there are no negative effects of participating in this project. You will not be asked to answer any question/ questions that may make you uncomfortable. All information you provide in the focus-group discussion will be confidential and no names will be recorded against the responses. However, if for any reason you did feel uncomfortable about any of the discussion or found any aspects of this research worrying you can contact Ms Barbara Morgan (9925 3600) or Dr David Hodges (9925 5932). At the interviews we will also have documents about other support services for international students at RMIT. The focus-group experience might be quite enjoyable, because it will give you the opportunity to share your experiences of the transition to RMIT University with other students and to learn from their experiences as well.

The information obtained from the focus groups will be used as part of the evaluation of the ‘International Student Stories’ website. No participant will be identified though any of the information provided and the information obtained from the focus groups will only be seen by the investigators. The only condition under which any information that you provide can be disclosed is (1) to protect you or others from harm, (2) a court order is produced, or (3) you provide the researchers with written permission. Research data will be disseminated via a master’s thesis and also in a conference paper at the end of 2009. Research data will be kept securely at RMIT for a period of 5 years upon completion of the project before being destroyed.

As a participant in this research you have the following rights:

- The right to withdraw your participation at any time, without prejudice.
- The right to have any unprocessed data withdrawn and destroyed,
provided it can be reliably identified, and provided that so doing does not increase the risk for the participant.

✓ The right to have any questions answered at any time.
✓ The right to request that audio recording be terminated at any stage during the interview

If you have any queries please contact Barbara Morgan on 9925 5188.

Yours Sincerely

Barbara Morgan
Bachelor of Arts
Diploma of Education
Postgraduate Bachelor of Education (TESL)
Graduate Diploma of Employee Relations

Dr David Hodges
PhD Education
Bachelor of Education
Bachelor of Arts
Attachment B: Plain English statement student survey

RMIT University
Business College
School of Management

Invitation to Participate in a Research Project

Project Title: Academic acculturation to study at RMIT: A sustainable support model

Investigators:
Dr David Hodges, Senior Lecturer, School of Management, RMIT University
Barbara Morgan, Academic Skills Advisor Study and Learning Centre, RMIT University

Dear …

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You have been invited to complete this survey because we are seeking feedback from international students on the web-based resource, ‘International Student Stories’. This resource is specifically targeted to newly enrolling international students and consists of video clips containing advice from experienced (second year or beyond) international students advising areas of academic study they found new or different from their previous experiences in their own countries. If you decide to participate all you are required to do complete the survey attached to the ‘International Student Stories’ website. Your consent to participate will be acknowledged if you decide to complete and submit this survey.
We believe that there are no negative effects of participating in this project. All information you provide is confidential and no names will be recorded against responses. However, if for any reason you did feel uncomfortable about any of the discussion or found any aspects of this research worrying you can contact Ms Barbara Morgan (9925 3600) or Dr David Hodges (9925 5932).

The survey information obtained will be used as part of the evaluation of the 'International Student Stories' website. No participant will be identified through any of the information provided and the information obtained will only be seen by the investigators. The only condition under which any information that you provide can be disclosed is (1) to protect you or others from harm, (2) a court order is produced, or (3) you provide the researchers with written permission. Research data will be disseminated via a master's thesis and also in a conference paper at the end of 2009. Research data will be kept securely at RMIT for a period of 5 years upon completion of the project before being destroyed.

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- The right to have any questions answered at any time.

If you have any queries please contact Barbara Morgan on 9925 5188.

Yours Sincerely

Barbara Morgan
Bachelor of Arts
Diploma of Education
Postgraduate Bachelor of Education (TESL)
Graduate Diploma of Employee Relations

Dr David Hodges
PhD Education
Bachelor of Education
Bachelor of Arts
**Attachment C: Online questionnaire**

**Student feedback survey – International student stories**
Dear student, we welcome your feedback. Please help us to improve this resource by completing the following student feedback survey.

Could you please comment on each of the four parts of this International Student Stories [http://www.rmit.edu.au/studyandlearningcentre/international_student_stories](http://www.rmit.edu.au/studyandlearningcentre/international_student_stories)

**RMIT student email address**
..................................................................................................................................................

**Expectations of students**

1. Was the information about 'knowing what’s expected' new to you? YES/NO
2. How useful was the information about ‘knowing what’s expected’?
   - Very useful
   - Useful
   - Not sure
   - Not Useful

**Structuring assignments**

3. Was the information about ‘structuring assignments’ new to you? YES/NO
4. How useful was the information about ‘structuring assignments’?
   - Very useful
   - Useful
   - Not sure
   - Not Useful

**Understanding referencing**

5. Was the information about ‘understanding referencing’ new to you? YES/NO
6. Was the information about ‘understanding referencing’ useful?
   - Very useful
   - Useful
   - Not sure
   - Not Useful

**Developing critical thinking**

7. Was the information about ‘developing critical thinking’ new to you? YES/NO
8. Was the information about ‘developing critical thinking’ useful?
   - Very useful
   - Useful
   - Not sure
   - Not Useful

Please tick the units that have been most useful to you

- Expectations of students  
- Structuring Assignments  
- Understanding Referencing  
- Developing Critical Thinking

Other comments:  

<<space for qualitative comments>>