

# Living comfortably with diversity: International students' transition practices

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Every year, over 30,000 international students study in regional Australia,<sup>1</sup> in urban centres that lack the intercultural resources and cross-cultural literacies of metropolitan cities. The University of Southern Queensland (USQ) supports and brings together over 26,000 students studying both on campus and online, including a diverse international student population of 7,000 students. The university's enrolment of international on-campus students is the second highest in the Regional Universities Network, of which USQ is a member.<sup>2</sup> This article analyses the experiences of international students as they encounter an unfamiliar Australian culture in the context of studying in Toowoomba, the regional city where USQ has its main campus. These students' experiences of engaging, becoming familiar with and mastering new and unfamiliar cultural practices and academic literacies provides insight into the processes of acculturation that students undergo as they make their transition to life in regional Australia, both at university and in Queensland communities.

The research reported here draws on evidence collected as part of a larger research study conducted in a first-year undergraduate nursing course at USQ. The course is one of two designed to assist students to develop the literacies and practices they need to succeed as learners in their higher education studies and as nursing professionals. The study was conducted from semester 1, 2006 to semester 2, 2013. Its aim was to investigate the experiences of students over the first semester of their study at university.

This article documents the qualitative findings collected over two semesters of the larger study, which focused on international students' experiences as they made their transition to the regional community. The data were obtained through forum discussion posts as well as assignments that included students' reflections about their learning strengths and weaknesses; the strategies they used to enhance their study; their communication, cross-communication and online skills development; and their end-of-semester reflections.

The thematic analysis of the qualitative data generated findings that outline the discomfort experienced by students as they confronted the regional culture. Not only did they find the new regional culture different, but they were unprepared for the diversity they discovered there. However, the data also reveal that students' use of reflective, communicative and critical practice assisted them to engage more confidently with the new culture and community.

International students engaging an unfamiliar university culture need to make a number of intercultural transitions.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, students first need to identify their own cultural beliefs and practices, and second, need to develop an awareness of the cultural practices present in the new culture, particularly those that are unfamiliar or even at odds with their own. Many of these cultural beliefs and practices are explicit, but others are taken for granted, implicit, unconscious and hidden.<sup>4</sup> Three core elements of cultural practice are ‘verbal behaviours’, ‘non-verbal behaviours’ and ‘cultural rituals’.<sup>5</sup> Verbal behaviours include direct and indirect ways of talking, implicit and explicit language practices, expectations of language and roles, face considerations, appropriate (rather than taboo) topics of conversation, colloquialisms and idioms. Non-verbal behaviours include kinesics (body language, facial expression, eye contact, posture and gestures), proxemics (use of personal space), paralanguage (the ways we speak — for example, accent, pace, pause, pitch and volume), chronemics (the use of time), the use of silence, haptics (touch), naming and greeting, work, wellness and sickness, and grieving practices. Finally, cultural rituals relate to celebration days, birth, marriage, death and daily practices in relation to food (the ways we prepare, cook and eat), clothes and living environments. Making a comfortable transition to regional Queensland’s culture thus requires understanding the complexities and nuances of intercultural engagement.<sup>6</sup> This is a capability that the students themselves need to develop.

While some strands of intercultural research focus on competence, skills, training and effectiveness,<sup>7</sup> others argue for an engagement with the partial, contested and situated nature of language, where ‘cultural self-awareness is the first instrument we use in interpreting the world’.<sup>8</sup> This self-awareness opens up a dialogic dimension of communication that includes a critical engagement and concern for the other and their embodied knowledges and ways of knowing.<sup>9</sup> International students making their transitions to the regional community need to appreciate the interdependence between themselves and others, and develop an awareness of the complexity of real life in which interactions take place.<sup>10</sup>

Consideration must also be given to the power dimensions at play in communication, particularly socio-economic inequality and sociolinguistic competence in the use of a dominant language in intercultural encounters.<sup>11</sup> Ferri argues for an acceptance of uncertainty, in the form of responsible engagement, where the needs, beliefs, feelings, desires and interests of all are recognised and accommodated.<sup>12</sup> Students need to empower or enable themselves. Ferri, for example, suggests a capabilities approach that emphasises ‘the freedom and agency that an individual has to be and to act’, requiring people to make ethically informed choices.<sup>13</sup>

The framework used to inform the present study emerges from an integration of transition and intercultural research perspectives. It incorporates two conceptual models,<sup>14</sup> which build on Bandura’s social learning model, Mak et al.’s ‘ExcellL: Excellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership’ program and research on first-year transition.<sup>15</sup> The first model characterises the context of the regional community and university as a dynamic culture embodying a multiplicity of mainstream, and often implicit, language discourses, literacies and practices. By making these literacies and practices explicit and transparent, new international students’ transitions are visualised as processes of being familiar with, engaging, mastering and ultimately demonstrating these literacies, languages and practices. As the model can be contextualised to the specific culture or subculture being engaged, it is

Table 1: Evaluation strategies and stages in the course design

Item	Evaluation strategy	Pre-program design stage	Program design stage	Program delivery stage	Program evaluation stage
The student perspective					
1	Use of feedback from previous student surveys	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	Reflections in assignments and the portfolio			✓	✓
3	Online discussion and forum groups			✓	✓

applicable across a range of cultures and subcultural contexts, including community and university cultures.

The second model conceptualises the strategies, or practices, that students can incorporate to assist them to become familiar with and engage the new languages and literacies. These practices encompass reflective,<sup>16</sup> communicative<sup>17</sup> and critical practices.<sup>18</sup> Students who employ these practices not only facilitate their transition to the regional culture, but are also empowered to fine-tune these practices to the range of cultures they need to engage in during their professional careers.<sup>19</sup> The strength of the framework is that it moves beyond cultural binaries by placing each student, regardless of the context or culture being engaged, on an intercultural journey, and instilling in them a resilience that will enable them to apply and re-apply their practices, empowering them to meet each new challenge as it emerges in the fast-moving and complex world in which they live, work and study. The practices assist students to understand what is cultural about their own and others' understandings, including those of the community and university, and how to apply these understandings in their engagement with other individuals and cultures. The framework thus illustrates a form of 'lifelong learning' that can also be integrated into community interventions and university curricula.

## Methodology

The case study methodology included continuous evaluative processes applied during the design, delivery and evaluation cycle of the course. A standard method of evaluation and program development was used, including both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques.<sup>20</sup> While the case study's continuous evaluation cycles began in 2006, this article interrogates only the qualitative data from two cycles undertaken in 2013, in semesters 1 and 2 ( $n = 457$ ). While the larger study evaluates the course's effectiveness in assisting students to make a successful transition to university, including an evaluation of the online curriculum design and delivery using both staff and student perspectives, the focus of this article is confined to international students' perspectives as they make their transition to studying in the contexts of the regional community and university. Table 1 outlines the evaluation stages used in this smaller study.

A phenomenological approach enabled understanding of the lived experiences of students as they began to study.<sup>21</sup> In the design stage, use was made of feedback collected in previous research (Item 1). Continuous evaluation and unsolicited

feedback presented in emails and forum discussions (Item 3) were collected in the delivery stage. For this smaller study, continuous feedback was obtained principally from the assignments, including a reflective e-portfolio assignment (Item 2), in which students reflected on how they made their transition to the regional university. The course curriculum design included initial activities focused on developing students' reflections about their own approaches and expectations about the new regional culture, and subsequent activities based on their comprehension and development of their intercultural competence. These developing understandings were revealed in the forum posts and portfolio reflections.

Of the 2013 cohort ( $n = 457$ ), 67 of the participants were international students coming from cultural groups as diverse as Sudanese or Congolese refugees, students from Saudi Arabia, Nepal, Korea, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, India and Nepal, among others — that is, cultural groups largely unfamiliar with the learning and teaching practices common in the global North. These students also needed to learn how to interact with Anglophone students of equally diverse socio-cultural, geographic and occupational backgrounds within the same regional space and course.

## Results and findings

The data revealed two key themes. The first theme comprised students' views of the issues or concerns they experienced, as well as their perceptions about the diversity apparent in the student body and the community, and their unfamiliarity with the cultural context itself. The second theme related to the practices students used to help them as they strived to become more familiar with and engage these unfamiliar, and often unexpected, languages and literacies.

### Perceptions of diversity and unfamiliarity

Students' data revealed that they had not expected the community of this regional Queensland university to be so diverse:

I found it shocking that Australia is a multicultural country as Australia has got mixed cultures and is not limited to one specific culture.

When I came to Australia I was very surprised to see that Australia is a multicultural country. Many people came from different countries with different languages, different beliefs, different values and different cultures.

Students were faced with making not one cultural transition but many, and in a range of different contexts: at work, at university and in the community. This exacerbated the cultural shock they were experiencing. Oberg argues that students adjusting to a new culture often feel homesick (culture shock) because they are not yet used to the new environment and meet unfamiliar people daily.<sup>22</sup> However, students recognised that this diversity also provided opportunities to learn about other cultures, and to become more adept at intercultural communication:

There are many cultures in Australia. I have learned about Japanese, Chinese, Sudanese, Indian, Russian and Australian culture. In my country we don't have experiences like that.

They also understood that this was important for them particularly as many were hopeful of entering a multicultural work environment in a health-care context:

Here I met people from around the world like Sweden, [the] Philippines, Africa, India, Korea, China and many more at my study place. All of them speak their own language in their circle. They have different beliefs and values. It is really important in the nursing profession that we need to understand the variation of cultural aspects among different people.

Therefore, although it was unexpected, understanding this diversity was important for students, as they perceived that their clinical and work practices (54 per cent worked in aged care facilities as EENs and AINs) relied on their gaining an understanding of the different cultures they needed to engage.

Some cultural differences were immediately apparent — for example, eating practices, where an awareness of differences between one's own and others' ways of knowing was crucial:

My culture and Australian culture has many differences. First, in Australia they eat at the table with knife and fork but in my country we eat by hand and from one plate.

Cultural and community celebrations and their associated cultural practices, often associated with food, were explicitly identified as being unfamiliar. According to Mavrides, stark differences in public hygiene, traffic safety, food accessibility and quality may heighten students' sense of disconnection from the surroundings.<sup>23</sup>

This was my first 'Australian birthday party' and I was shocked with how different it was to the 'Filipino birthday parties' I go to. The whole birthday party layout, food and activities were different.

In my culture during birthdays or even for a simple family dinner with friends we prepare a banquet of food for the guests. We prepare more food than required so that by the end of the 'feast' the guest can take home some food when they leave. I consider this significant as whenever I invite my friends that are Australian and from other cultures it amazes them that we prepare so much compared to them having friends over and just having a barbecue or sandwiches. In my culture, having a lot of food prepared is normal.

Non-verbal practices, in relation to basic body practices, were explicitly identified as being unfamiliar, and students understood that these entailed contextually situated practices. The impact of each culture judging others is evidenced in this testimony:

One example that I have experienced in Australia is blowing your nose in public is fine but in my home country, this is done privately in the 'comfort rooms — CR' or toilets what you call CR here. This habit is considered to be rude and disrespectful to others.

Other explicit cultural practices identified by students as unfamiliar included patterns of address, which, to them, represented different orientations about the role and importance of status and how these are enacted in different contexts:

At university, boys and girls are together and they can call their teacher by their first name and they speak with me like their friends. However, in my country

when we call our teachers we say ‘teacher’ and when we answer a question we should stand.

Students clearly understood that this can lead to communication barriers:

It’s important to understand different cultures to avoid any conflicts and misconceptions. We have never called people older than us in India by their name and often call them sir or madam with respect. However it could be unpleasant to call an elderly Indian patient in nursing care by their name. However people prefer to call each other with their first name in Australia, which I should accept according to Australian culture.

This student’s evidence gives credence to Gale and Parker’s observations that cultural awareness includes a growing concern for ‘the other’ and their ways of knowing.<sup>24</sup> Acknowledging this diversity also shows that the student is developing a more nuanced understanding of the impact of different contexts.

Other students demonstrated an awareness of their individual beliefs when interacting in different contexts:

A problem is connected with my personality and my culture. I mean, I need time to know a person and then I will feel freer. Before it, I can’t be friendly; I will be just be polite. As for my studying and work, I am fine there because this is a different type of communication which is more official.

Others’ ways of living were also unfamiliar; however, gradations of self-awareness were evident in the recognition by some of the international students that differences in interpersonal styles could cause them difficulties, especially in less formal situations in the community:

I live with a housemate from a country near Australia. We have variety of differences in terms of lifestyle. For instance, she likes to wear their ethnic clothes, walk on naked feet and listen to ethnic music repeatedly. In my home country, we take the mealtime as an opportunity for family and friends to communicate about our work, study and daily living issues. But my housemate told me that they don’t like to talk with a full mouth and people living in their country talk during the tea-drinking time after meals. This difference between our cultures reminds me of the importance to learn about patients’ habits in their cultures and respect their customs in nursing practice.

This student relates a story about someone else feeling judged because of a perceived lack of familiarity — in this case, about language use. It is not clear whether the student was aware that others’ judged them on the basis of their behaviours just as they judged others:

A 15-year-old Japanese friend told me about how she was embarrassed by an incident at a Japanese airport where the attendant inferred that she might be intellectually challenged. She realised that it was her poor Japanese language, having only spoken in Japanese to her mother and father, so she immediately changed her speech to English with a thick Australian accent. She explained how inflection, pitch, accent and tone are very important in the Japanese language and because she looked Japanese, the attendant expected her Japanese speech to be more sophisticated. My friend chose to identify with her Australian culture to save face in an embarrassing situation.

Some cultures' sense of ritual is conveyed through their practices, which students compared with the less-formal Australian regional practices. The more secular and commodified Australian culture was a shock for some students from more religious countries:

I have been in Australia for three years, so I've seen the Easter celebration in Australia, and I would say it is quite different. Personally I do not feel that the true meaning of Easter is celebrated. It is more of eating Easter bunny chocolates and focused on family. But I guess every country is different with their culture. Coming from a Christian country and a very religious family, Easter is significant for us.

The unfamiliarity experienced by some students contributed to their reflections about more familiar festivals:

In Kerala there is a festival called 'onam', based on Hindu mythology, but irrespective of religion we, Hindu, Christian, Muslim, celebrate onam. Everybody buys new dress for the day, and we decorate our yard with flowers in different designs. The special thing is the food. We make sixteen types of vegetarian curries followed by delicious drinkable dessert. The food is not served on plates but on the leaves of the banana tree.

Some of the most confronting and overwhelming struggles experienced by students related to their unfamiliarity with verbal and non-verbal language. Language barriers may become major obstacles in creating new relationships, with special attention being paid to others' culture-specific body language signs, linguistic differences, conversation tone, linguistic nuances and customs.<sup>25</sup> Australian slang is particularly problematic:

Some people speak with a typical Australian slang making it hard for me to understand. I still don't get Australian slang.

Accents are also unfamiliar, generating difficulties for students:

I find it difficult to communicate with native speakers which may be due to the different accents.

Differences between the 'academic' English learned in language school and conversational English were a source of frustration:

I have communication problems. In language school, I studied academic English. So I feel uncomfortable when I hear a lot of slang or a specific accent.

The tone and pronunciation used further added to the verbal barriers and contributed to the unfamiliarity experienced by students, both at university and at work:

I had great difficulty in understanding the English tone of the people here and I faced great difficulty in my class and even in work.

Australian English is particularly difficult to master, even for students who are experienced in English in other countries:

Even though I have worked in other countries, communication is confusing, as the English language used here is at a fast pace and pronunciation is also entirely

different from what I have learned. During my classes in this semester, I find it difficult to grasp the lectures delivered. Not only in my studies but also in my workplace I faced the same problem.

Students' level of unfamiliarity and discomfort was apparent and acute. Language barriers may heighten students' sense of disconnection:<sup>26</sup>

I panic about communication and the communication barriers are far more serious than I expected before my arrival in this country. I thought that my English level was good enough to handle study here, but I was wrong. I am not able to follow the lecturers' speech when they talk fast and have trouble expressing my ideas clearly. When talking to some students from different cultures, their accents and my accent hinder the communication.

International students' university lives thus compound the difficulties of transitioning to living in a rural area, as their language is evaluated continuously during their studies. Language can be a significant hurdle, which is a problem that is often not clearly recognised or understood by lecturers or student peers:

Another communication problem I have is expressing what I am trying to say, especially in assignments. I have ideas that I want to develop but I can't find the words to do so.

This semester, I have not received the marks that I expected at university. Language is my main problem and challenge even though I have been taught in a number of English classes before I enrolled in this nursing. Lecturers and students speak fast and use slang.

The learning management systems used at university further exacerbated the unfamiliarity many students experienced, and represented additional significant barriers:

We have to face different studying environments. When I started my study I was not good at the digital world. I never used computers for my studies before. It is funny but I was really shocked when I saw so many computers in USQ.

I had never come across an educational system which uses computers as its main communication tool. I used to send and check email and was able to check social media like Facebook but when I got my student number and password for log-in I did not know what to do with that.

The impact of communication difficulties can be experienced both in the home and at work, demonstrating the complexity inherent in international students' transitions:

My husband and I are both from different ethnic backgrounds and both have a different mother-tongue so that we communicate in English with each other which is not our first language. So it slows our communication and sometimes creates misunderstanding and makes communication ineffective. My in-laws who are living with us sometimes cannot understand what I speak as they understand only little bit English. I worked in aged care where I worked in the dementia unit. The residents in the dementia unit sometimes do not understand what I speak to them because of their dementia condition. Some residents talk incoherently and show repetitive patterns of speech so that I cannot understand what they want to say.

Ultimately, students' cultural shock or unfamiliarity with the community and university cultures affected their capacity to study:

I am having problems in understanding and coping with the new environment and people. It is affecting my study also.

The students' testimony outlined in this section reveals their experiences as they engage a multiplicity of cultural practices — from eating, naming and religious practices to language, learning and teaching, and learning-management practices. All of these practices are subtly nuanced or fine-tuned to the culture, subcultural group or context being engaged. Transition is dependent on students' capability for awareness, not only of their own cultural assumptions and expectations, but also of those of the regional community. The next section explores how students can empower themselves to this end by using reflective, communicative and critical practice.

### Reflective Practice

In a globalised world, it is critically important that students develop themselves as ethical and responsible local citizens who appreciate the connections between the local, national and global.<sup>27</sup> The findings suggest that those students able to reflect on their intercultural capacities appreciated the relevance of this to the nursing profession:

Culture is the characteristics of a particular group of people composing of everything such as language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music, communication, dance, dress and so on. I expect respect from other cultural groups and I guess others expect the same. It is very interesting to meet people with different cultures, religions and language. In nursing, knowing about other cultures is very important. Every person on this earth expects love, respect and dignity. This greatly reflects our cultural background in front of them.

Reflection helped students to gauge their increasing capacity for developing cultural awareness. This capacity in turn provided them with insight into their own cultural backgrounds, opening them up to the notion of diversity and its impact on the ways they go about living their lives:

It is interesting to reflect on the events that are culturally significant to me. It lets me see how diverse I have become.

Students reflected on the specific practical strategies they used to overcome their language difficulties:

I always also try to learn new word every single day in order to improve my communication experiences. In addition, sometimes I cannot also understand what the lecturers say or remember all the words they use but I have my little dictionary I can write every words in order to help me to improve my communication experiences.

Both my parents are English-as-a-second-language speakers and they influence my English. When I speak to people I sometimes get my words mixed up and I have to repeat myself more than once changing my words until they sound correct.

Listening and observation are important components of reflective practice:

My pronunciation is hard for them to understand. So what I am doing now is I listen to English as much as I can, I hope that will help me.

Students identified their need to develop intercultural awareness, especially when reflecting about their future in the nursing profession. This is particularly pertinent considering that in 2011 in Australia, 33 per cent of nurses, 56 per cent of general practitioners and 47 per cent of medical specialists were born overseas.<sup>28</sup> As the students reflected:

Being nurses we should know and be aware of the differences in various cultures that we might come across to be able to understand why and how this affects the ethics and culture of the other person.

It's essential to accept everyone's cultures. It is important that as nurses we should be aware of even simple gestures and mannerisms to adapt to different cultures and practices to avoid conflict.

I'm going to do clinical practices in the hospitals so I'm going to meet many patients from different cultures. I have to respect their cultures and religions.

Students' reflective capacities allowed them to verbalise their increasing understanding of communication and its relational complexities. Ritzen argues that developing intercultural sensitivity helps students to both become more productive and be better citizens.<sup>29</sup> Students concurred by their reflections:

I think it is important for the profession to understand about the culture as it may help us to enhance our relation with the patient and have a better output in the patient's health. Moreover, knowing about patients' culture shows respect to them and in such homely environment the patient may feel more relieved.

The PowerPoint certainly gave me an idea to communicate making eye contact and to be relaxed. My concentration on voice clarity and taking pauses has improved my communication with others.

The data reveal students' appreciation of cultural diversity and the potential it holds for learning about other cultural beliefs and practices:

I cherish the lesson of respect that my Brazilian family instilled into us for culture, religion and tradition. I look forward to learning and appreciating many more cultures that I will come into contact with throughout my nursing career.

If students are better able to appreciate the interdependence between themselves and others, then they can begin to develop an awareness of the importance of cultural engagement and the complexity of real life in which interactions take place.<sup>30</sup> Gale and Parker add that reflections increase our capacity to assess our awareness of our own cultural practices realistically, and to develop a critical engagement and concern for others.<sup>31</sup>

The data reveal that students' experiences of unfamiliarity prompt them to reflect about how they can become more comfortable and confident in the new culture. Students' accounts illustrate that they are beginning to develop their reflective capacities. As Leask notes, students need to be encouraged to reflect critically on the relationship between culture, knowledge and action within their discipline.<sup>32</sup> However, it is their communicative capacities that enable them to effectively engage the multiplicity of cultures in the regional community.

### Communicative Practice

Baker and Mak<sup>33</sup> suggest that the specific communication practices of seeking help, making social contact and participating in groups are fundamental to helping students to become familiar with and engage the multiple literacies that exist in the cultural context. This section will outline the ways in which students integrated these skills into their *modus operandi*.

Students' accounts revealed the importance of *asking for help* from sources of support:

ICT service desk and my fellow students helped me to be familiar with university site.

Some Australian, Indian, Nepali, Chinese friends are good for me because they help me in improving my English.

Students also understood that they had to persevere if they were to progress:

I am working in aged care and I am having problems with the pronunciation. I may not understand what my colleagues speak to me, so I have to ask again and again.

Making social contact is an essential strategy in engaging the new culture. This student acknowledges its importance — for example, in high school groups:

When I came here in Australia five years ago, my communication skills were very limited. High school helped me a lot and talking to different people in English really built up my communication skills.

Similarly, making social contact is a proactive communication practice, as appreciated by students:

I used to live with my friends and I enjoyed each and every moment with them. I had a good opportunity to learn about their culture, food, dresses, greeting language to say 'hi and how are you?' They are very cooperative and understandable. Watching movie at home was of a great fun. I knew about the movie's story through pictures and subtitles.

Another student discussed the impetus to communicate with others as a way of making connections in the new culture:

Communication needs to be done at work or at universities or at shops or at station at anywhere and it is a way of connecting people with views and ideas.

Leask<sup>34</sup> maintains that students need to be encouraged to communicate, explore, explain, inquire and negotiate meaning across cultures, and they need to be supported in the process. They will need many opportunities to interact with each other and share knowledge, ideas and theories from multiple contexts, and to explore each other's and their own culture, conceptual systems and values. Participating in groups — for example, for national celebrations — is an effective way of communicating with each other and sharing culture:

In Kiribati communities, families and friends gather and celebrate our independence day through traditional dancing and eating traditional foods. Here in Queensland we celebrate our independence with everyone from our country plus friends and anyone who has become family to us. We perform traditional dances

and celebrate with our traditional food which are mainly seafood and with a twist of Australian cuisine.

Celebrations can also be a source of joy, and sometimes solace, for international students, helping to maintain their self-esteem and respect for each other. Maintaining independence, religious and spiritual rituals also assists students to feel more comfortable in regional Queensland:

Congolese cultural celebrations have seven different dates each year including New Year's Day, Day of the Martyrs, Labor Day, Liberation Day, Independence Day, 1st Parents' Day and Army Day. These are the dates when in all Congolese communities our hearts can open to share happiness to everyone else with different nationalities around the world.

As a Bahá'í, I celebrate Naw-Ruz which is a New Year celebration as well as eight other holy days during the year where work is suspended.

I celebrate Waitangi Day, NAIDOC week and Samoan Day which I love to celebrate as they are all part of my collective culture. These events are part of the lives of everyone I know.

Victory Day is very important for our nation because we put together all families including young and old generations. It helps to maintain national self-esteem and mutual respect.

Participating in classes and forums can also help students to feel more comfortable and confident in the academic context:

The forums posted here help me to communicate with the ideas of my colleagues and I could get an idea about the topic. Forum participation helped me to be engaged in the discussion. It was a new experience for me.

The online environment assisted some international students to feel more competent in the academic environment:

I think my communication and learning skills have been improved a lot through online studies and resources.

Students' evidence in this section on communicative practice demonstrates the benefits students receive by seeking help, participating in groups and making social contact. It also reaffirms the literature, emphasising the importance of the social and community dimensions of making transitions.<sup>35</sup>

### **Critical Practice**

The power dimensions at play in communication — particularly socio-economic inequality and sociolinguistic competence in the use of a dominant language in intercultural encounters — underpins the importance of students' use of critical practice.<sup>36</sup> For students to work effectively in the new context, it is important that they can provide (negative) feedback in a constructive way, express disagreement and say 'no'.<sup>37</sup>

Students are aware that language and intrapersonal difficulties affect their ability to make friends, lessening their capacity to succeed:

I have a lot of communication problems. I cannot do well in my assignments as well as my peer relation is very poor. Due to difference in culture and tradition, I am unable to make friends in university.

Students experienced a growing awareness that their expectations were hindering their success in adjusting — for example, by preventing them from making social contact:

I found out that assumptions and cultural expectations are my barriers in communication. Because I find it very hard to understand the topic when they are chatting I cannot join their social life.

Seeking and providing feedback are important strategies in overcoming challenges. These difficult-to-attain skills are vital for mastering the hidden assumptions and expectations present in the cultural context of regional Queensland. The following testimony provides insight into the importance, and the difficulties, of overcoming challenges:

Actually at the university, I try to communicate with peers; however, Australians speak very quickly, sometimes they break some words before they finish whole sentences. I have to ask them to repeat the sentence again which makes me a little bit shy and uncomfortable. This is the same when others are asking me to repeat what I said again because of my accent. At home, we have to shift from one language to another in our conversation to make it more comfortable for everyone as we speak more than four languages.

Still I have some communication problems such as sometimes I cannot understand the lecturer, what does he mean, so I have to ask again. This is really uncomfortable.

Students willing to seek feedback benefit from information that can assist them to adjust:

Also while talking to some native English speaker friends I find it difficult to understand as they speak so fast. However, I am trying to tell them this and it's good to learn.

Mostly I have to think of the Chinese meaning and translate to English. I sometimes didn't know how to explain when I had to communicate with my peers. Luckily, my classmates and friends have the patience to listen to me. Also, they correct me when I made some mistakes. I think a good way to cope with communication problems is to try your best to speak with someone else.

This last anecdote reveals the dynamic nature of these reflective, communicative and critical practices. The successful use of one often depends on the use of another, and when implemented together, they can be more effective in assisting students to adjust to the regional environment. For example, observation and reflection are prerequisites for fine-tuning communication practices, and communication practices rely on students' capacity to reflect and provide (appropriate) feedback about the mainstream practices operating in the regional community. These practices also depend on students' capacities to appraise not only their own cultural assumptions and expectations, but also the external and often hidden assumptions in the new culture. The capacity of students to challenge, and where possible transform, the

unhelpful policies and practices operating in the new context also relies on students' use of the communication practices of offering and seeking feedback.

## Conclusion

As temporary migrants, international students' experiences of an Australian regional university context offer important insights into cultural transition. This study found their experience to be multi-faceted and multi-layered, sometimes in surprising ways. Their testimonies reveal how everyday practices — such as terms of address, eating and bodily care — are often unfamiliar and perplexing. Interpersonal difficulties can arise from ordinary encounters, including when sharing accommodation or trying to communicate, and in relation to celebratory and religious practices.

A particularly consistent theme in the data related to the presence of multiple cultures in the regional setting and students' experiences of adjusting to this diversity. This diversity included the range of cultures present in regional Queensland, compounded by the multiple and often complex linguistic practices that were evident. Particularly confronting were the multiple language and communication difficulties in the community, including in understanding slang, and the fast pace, tone, pronunciation and accent — all of which had the effect of making students' work, communication and peer-to-peer relationships more problematic. The heavy use of online technology in the university environment further increased the variety of communication practices that students were required to engage.

It was also found that students are able to live more comfortably in a regional community when they can use reflective, communication and critical practices. These practices are dynamic and fine-tuned to the particular context or cultural group being engaged. The applicability of these concrete and specific practices for facilitating students' transitions was thus confirmed. Students' capacities to open themselves to the notion of difference and diversity was also demonstrated, thus suggesting that they were developing their lifelong learning skills.

## Endnotes

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