This is the published version

Arambewela, Rodney and Maringe, Felix 2012, Mind the gap: staff and postgraduate perceptions of student experience in higher education, Higher education review, vol. 44, no. 2, pp. 63-84.

Available from Deakin Research Online

http://hdl.handle.net/10536/DRO/DU:30044716

Every reasonable effort has been made to ensure that permission has been obtained for items included in Deakin Research Online. If you believe that your rights have been infringed by this repository, please contact drosupport@deakin.edu.au

Copyright: 2012, Tyrrell Burgess Associates
Mind the gap: Staff and postgraduate perceptions of student experience in higher education

Rodney Arambewela and Felix Maringe

Faced with conflicting pressures of student diversity, retention and demands for change in a volatile international education marketing environment, universities have become more focused on enhancing student experience as a strategic response to achieving competitive advantage. Based on an exploratory qualitative study conducted in a UK university, this article is concerned with identifying how staff and international students view the impact of university support services on student experience and argues that a convergence of staff and student views is a critical antecedent to developing positive experience and satisfaction among students. While the results indicate some convergence of perceptions around key areas of the students’ experience, the study identifies four critical gaps based on divergent views and perceptions regarding issues of the quality of the UK higher education, the level and quality of student support, English language proficiency and cultural integration. The article concludes with management implications for narrowing these gaps.

Keywords: internationalisation, student experience; postgraduate students, gaps in perception

Student experience is an area that has attracted considerable attention in the recent past amongst key stakeholders in higher education systems around the world (Asmar, 2005; Deem and Brehony, 2000; Sawir et al, 2007; Trice and Yoo, 2007; Campbell and Li, 2008; Brown and Holloway, 2008). There are two main reasons for this. First, an increasing number of students are choosing to study outside their own countries of origin. It is estimated that currently there are three million
foreign students studying in universities across the world and that this number is set to rise to eight million by 2015 (IDP, 2007). Causes of such increases in overseas study are dealt with comprehensively by Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) and Maringe and Carter (2007). Second, the growth and diversity of the student population, the varying expectations of students of their study outcomes, the impact of information and communication technology on learning, increasing acceptance of the need to prepare students for the global knowledge economy, the competitive nature of the higher education (HE) market and its impact on student recruitment and retention, have all contributed to the increasing priority given to researching positive student experience in HE (Ryan and Carroll, 2005; Trotter and Roberts, 2006). But perhaps more importantly, as Hallett (2010) suggests, there is a heightened focus on issues such as learning to learn, academic literacy and the first year experience in higher education occasioned by this expansion of HE systems across the world and, in particular, by the increasing number of overseas students studying away from their home countries.

Student experience in HE is subject to constant change, given the changing expectations and priorities of students, coupled with the transformation of student identity over time (OECD, 2002). University campuses are no longer restricted to the 18 to 21-year-olds from the privileged elite or middle-class families studying full-time, but include the ‘earning and learning’ classes of students (Van der Wende, 2002) and non-traditional and mature students enrolled in programmes delivered by different modes. Inevitably, the presence of a large number of international students from the far corners of the world has added to the cultural diversity on university campuses.

The perception that UK HE is of high standard is the key reason for its attraction as a favourite destination for international students. However, a recent national student survey (HEFCE, 2009) indicates that students’ high expectations are frequently not borne out when students arrive in the UK. There is a pressing need to resolve this discrepancy to sustain UK’s image as a quality education provider (British Council, 2004) and to develop empirical knowledge that informs practice.

Past studies have largely focused on undergraduate student experience based primarily on student perceptions of teaching and learning. Very limited research exists in relation to postgraduate student experience and the broader learning environment. Comparative studies from a staff and student perspective have also been limited to specialised topics such as ethnicity and gender (May and Bidgood, 2005), teaching and learning environment of engineering students (Nisbet et al., 2005), computer studies (Sheader et al., 1999) and employment skills (Floyd
and Gordon, 1998). This article fills a void in presenting an exploratory qualitative study of international postgraduate student experience at a UK university, analysing both staff and student perceptions. It attempts to discover whether students and staff share common perceptions regarding the problems and challenges faced by international students in UK universities. The study assumes that if staff and students hold similar views about the university support services that impact on the experience of international students, the chances of finding common solutions and ways of supporting them is greater. Conversely, if there is a great deal of divergence, the chances are that the solutions and support systems universities put in place may not be addressing the real problems and challenges those students face. The central question of the research is therefore: what differences in the perceptions of the key issues related to international postgraduate students’ experience in UK universities exist between students and staff? Based on this central purpose, the study has the following three aims:

To identify key issues related to international student experience based on perceptions of staff and students;
To analyse gaps, if any, in the perceptions of staff and students on those key issues;
To discuss the implications for universities in bridging gaps to enhance international student experience.

Theoretical and conceptual review
Student experience is a broad term that refers to all aspects of the engagement of students with higher education. An underlying assumption behind the idea is that when students’ experience of HE is positive, their satisfaction will accordingly be high (Aldridge and Rowley, 1998; Havis and Voyer, 2000). The emergence of the idea of student experience is closely linked to the marketisation of HE (Foskett, 1995) in which students are increasingly being viewed as customers and staff as service providers, despite growing discontent with what some see as a disturbing and unfortunate ‘commodification of HE’ (Gibbs, 2008).

The concept of student experience thus has increasingly been the focus of researchers. In order to operationalise such a potentially amorphous concept, a number of student experience models have been developed. For example, student experience is explored through a student life-cycle which starts from the time the student is considering to study at university, through the application and admission stages, the teaching, learning and assessment phases, graduation, and post-
qualification experience (see Maringe and Fuller, 2007 for the HEFCE student life-cycle). It is important to note that student experience of HE is not just about their academic life. Apart from failure to experience academic success, many students drop out of university for non-academic reasons such as financial problems, lack of motivation and inadequate commitment to study (Bennett, 2003). In pursuing these issues, for the reasons discussed below it was important to recognise that students’ experience in a university is a complex matter that includes at least two aspects, their academic and non-academic experiences. Smith et al (2002) and Arambewela et al (2005) found that experience with both academic and non-academic factors influence international students’ satisfaction.

**Academic experience**

The literature on student learning has been dominated by two discourses – the cultural deficit model and the cultural proficiency approach. The former is based on the assumption of the superiority of Western education systems, emanating from a post-colonial mentality of treating students from indigenous cultures as those who need training in ‘our way’ to make them civilised. The basic premise of this approach is that many international students come with learning experiences that favour rote, reproductive, surface, teacher-centred and dependent approaches inappropriate in the context of Western education systems. This has given rise to negative stereotypes (see Samuelowicz, 1987; Ballard and Clanchy, 1997), despite being challenged by more recent research (Ninnes et al, 1999; Tran, 2008). A major criticism is that the cultural deficit approach misrepresents the learning background of international students and also makes the mistake of treating international students as a homogeneous group, ignoring differences among individual students and the differing education systems in non-Western countries (Chalmers and Volet, 1997). Related to cultural deficit theories are cultural difference theories (Valencia, 1997; Oakes, 2005) based on the assumption that students’ and teachers’ experiences are shaped to a large part by the micro-elements of people’s lives and communities in which they find themselves. The problem again is that it is assumed that some of these micro-environments do not provide sufficient stimulus for learning, thus creating differences in the experience of education. Asmar and Peseta (2000) argue that both international and domestic students go through similar transition issues, be they in academic or non-academic life, although the adjustment process is much slower and more difficult for international students.

The cultural proficiency model is based on the notion of performance
and competency, focused on discrete skills that are generic and transportable across cultures. Researchers like Biggs (1987, 1996) and Chalmers and Volet (1997) argue that learners from indigenous cultures such as the Confucian cultures are not passive or rote learners, but are active participants and strive to achieve a deep understanding of course content. For example, it has been argued that repetition is a learning strategy that is incorrectly interpreted as rote learning, adopted by students from Chinese heritage cultures to internalise well-understood material and to enable accurate recall of such material. Biggs (1996) contends that, in this case, repetition becomes a deep learning strategy.

What can universities do to enhance international student experience related to teaching and learning? The literature makes it clear that teachers and university administrators must have a good understanding of the students’ learning background, expectations and aspirations in order to implement successful strategies to enhance their HE experience. Though not directly targeted at international students, many universities have developed research programmes and tools to measure student experience, engagement and satisfaction in teaching and learning that provide insights into strategies to enhance student experience among international students (Elliot and Shin, 2002). However, what is lacking in many cases is the sustained institutional commitment to provide adequate support to implement these strategies (Grayson, 2008).

The role of university teachers in enhancing the experience of international students is widely supported by many research findings. It has been argued that teachers remain the first port of call for international students in general, and that the development of trust and confidence between students and teachers helps students connect with the university. Tran (2008) and Lacina (2002) have found lecturers play a significant role in enhancing international student experience because of their close interaction and continuous dialogue with students. Universities, therefore, must ensure that lecturers are provided with adequate support and staff development opportunities to enable them to fulfil those responsibilities.

Other issues related to students' teaching and learning experience include, but are not limited to, library facilities, computer facilities, class sizes, lecture venues, lecture material, information services, recognition of prior learning, and orientation programmes. These are only some of the services with an effect on students' perceptions of their university experience and overall satisfaction (see Smith et al, 2002, Arambewela et al, 2005 for comprehensive coverage of these issues). The important message is that ensuring a positive student experience is the responsibility of all stakeholders in universities – senior administrators,
academic and non-academic staff, as well as the students themselves (Ramsden, 2008).

Non-academic experience
International students form perceptions of the quality of social activities and other administrative services available to them based on their prior expectations. Ryan and Carroll (2005) contend that most international students experience three levels of shock: culture shock, language shock and academic shock. The first two are related to non-academic experiences such as physical environment, food, transport, accommodation, availability of jobs, personal and local community relationships. These experiences impact on students’ adjustment to their new environment, socialisation, stress and anxiety that, in turn, have an impact on the students’ overall experience with the study destination (Matsuda and Gorbel, 2004). There is increasing acceptance among university teachers and administrators that culturally inclusive social events are an integral part of university life and that they can contribute positively towards the international student experience.

Methodology
The study adopted a case study exploratory qualitative approach in a single university based on depth interviews with semi-structured framework of questions (Kvale, 1996). A case study approach (Stake, 2000; Yin, 2006) was chosen for this study because it offers the opportunity to document the specific aspects, unique nature of the experiences of individual students and staff on aspects of institutional practices that the students found challenging. The research was undertaken in a UK Russell Group university (a group of highly competitive research-led universities that usually occupy the top ranks in university performance league tables). The university is located in the south of England and comprises eight faculties. The study was undertaken in the School of Education which has one of the highest ratios of international students amongst its postgraduate students. More than 80 per cent of all postgraduates in the school are overseas students form a range of countries including (in descending order) China, Asian countries, especially Malaysia and Thailand, India, Saudi Arabia and other Middle Eastern countries. The school offers a wide range of masters and doctoral degree programmes. The staff demography is, however, not as diverse as the student population, with the majority (80 per cent) being UK nationals.

The interview questions were based on the HEFCE study life-cycle model (HEFCE 2009) relating to critical aspects of students’ experience.
on issues such as their decision-making to study at a UK university; the experience with the enrolment and registration process; the induction process; the early learning phases of their programmes; assessment; and aspects of the international student support services to realise their postgraduate intentions.

Participating in the study were six postgraduate students, and four members of the staff closely associated with international students working either as teachers, advisors or administrators. The student sample comprised five doctoral and one masters students, of whom three were male and three female. There was a student from China; a student from India; two from Malaysia, of whom one was of Indian and one was of Chinese origin; a student from Thailand; and a student from the Middle East. The selection was based on convenience sampling, though an attempt was made to ensure that the students selected represented the key supply countries, as indicated above. However, to ensure voluntary participation, only those students who responded to an invitation by the researchers to participate in the study were included.

The staff interviewed had on average 15 years’ experience working with international students in roles such as the Director of International office (DIO), Faculty Teaching and Learning Coordinator (FT/LC), Student Advisor and Lecturer (SA/L), International Student Advisor and Senior Tutor for International Students (ISA/ST). Each interview lasted for approximately an hour. Two separate interview protocols were used for staff and students. Basic biographical data was captured through a short bio-data sheet that all respondents were asked to complete at the end of the interviews. The interviews were recorded with the permission of each interviewee and content analysis of the transcriptions was undertaken in order to identify common themes and issues (Krippendorff 2004). The interview transcripts were analysed by one researcher, then checked and confirmed by the second researcher before the themes and issues were finalized. The views expressed by staff and students were then compared in order to discover the convergences and divergences of opinion in relation to the quality of postgraduate student experience in the university. We undertook manual analysis of the data, as Silverman (2006) indicated this was effective for a study in which the researchers have had more direct contact with the views expressed.

**Results and discussion**

Results indicate that there are differences as well as similarities in the way staff and students perceive the various aspects of the students’ lifecycle. This is not surprising; as Hills and Thom (2005: 332) point out, ‘...students and teachers do not always see, describe the same
phenomenon in the same terms’. The shared views are mostly related to the academic services such as the overall educational quality, support for English language and writing skills and administrative services such as the availability of information for choice of study destinations, the quality of registration and the enrolment process.

Participating staff and students agreed that university academic services are of high standard and, in the case of the students, these high standards meet with their prior expectations. The supportive learning environment with the services of international tutors and academic counsellors was equally valued by both staff and students who took part in this study. However, the students expressed a need for greater relevance in the academic services to suit their postgraduate studies, for example more targeted training in English language and writing skills, critical essay writing and strategies for avoiding plagiarism in written work. This appears to be based on cultural deficit models where staff members tend to consider international students as needing some kind of educational cultural topping-up in order to equalise opportunities for learning in the higher education context. The issue of English language deficiency is problematic. There seems to be an unfortunate assumption that UK English is the standard template for all other ‘Englishes’, but despite its importance as the global language for communication, business and technology use, the notion of a standard English is impractical (McArthur 2002; Jenkins 2003).

In relation to information provision and access, the students mentioned the importance of the need for more ‘authentic sources’, or what Ball et al (2002) and Foskett et al (2008) refer to as ‘hot’ information sources, more than did staff members. These include more personalised ways of accessing information about universities through events such as open days and student ambassador programmes that are of great value to international students in their decision-making when choosing a university.

Both staff and students also agreed on the need for clarity of information and ‘hassle free’ processes designed to support student registration and enrolment. Besides the online application and registration processes, individual support and advice by academics to students in completing the process in their home country was considered very valuable. Participating students, however, feel that more could be done in relation to additional guidance on writing the research proposals and personal statements that are part of the application and enrolment process.

Some of the above findings contrast sharply with the results of earlier studies, particularly in relation to academic standards and
administrative services. For example, the finding on overall academic standard does not fully support the HEFCE (2009) survey that found major variances in the academic quality of UK HE and thus failed to meet the expectations of international students. Similarly, the finding on information support for student choice and decision making differed from the findings of Foskett (1995) and Hemsley-Brown and Foskett (1999), who suggested that the support available for information provision is inadequate and that students generally struggle to find information to help their decision making. However, caution needs to be exercised in such comparisons and generalisations, given the differences in the study contexts (the present study focused on a single university) and the limitations of the research sample.

The results also indicate the staff and students had divergent views on several aspects of student support services, including employment and career prospects and cultural adjustment. Although students at the School of Education are career-bound students, with many members of the teaching profession, students more than staff feel that there was insufficient emphasis in their studies aligned with knowledge and understanding of the global education labour market.

In summary, the analysis of the data suggests that four critical gaps exist in the perceptions of staff and students as a result of the mismatch between student and staff expectations of what the institution as an international education provider could or should offer to international students. Furthermore, it suggests that these have been exacerbated by the changing expectations of students while studying in the UK. These are discussed below.

**Gaps in perception of quality of UK HE and future career prospects**

While there was overall agreement among the students and staff that the quality of higher education in the UK is high, perceptions regarding the relevance of their HE experience to future career prospects tended to vary. The student from India, a country with a past historical link with the UK as a colonial power, appeared to retain more positive perceptions about the impact of a UK HE experience on their career prospects, as evidenced by the following comment:

‘UK reputation is important for me to build up my reputation – self-reputation for my job. The majority of people I know from my country consider a UK HE as the best in the world. America seems to be a close second though’ (Female, Indian).

In contrast, a student from China and another from the Middle East
appear to see an American HE as being qualitatively better than a UK HE as evidenced by the following comments:

‘I wanted to go to US first but could not get a visa. Then I decided to come to the UK’ (Middle Eastern, male)

‘Chinese students consider US education as superior’ (Chinese, male)

Nonetheless, having a Western HE seemed to be generally accepted by these students to be a sound basis for developing significant future careers. While students remained unclear about a direct link between the quality of education and career prospects, the staff appeared to be more optimistic about the quality of UK HE and the opportunities provided to students to further their career prospects. As the FT/LC commented:

‘...students are attracted to the UK because of its learning environment that offers interaction with highly-qualified teachers, including world-renowned experts in their chosen fields, and the opportunity for participation in well-designed education and support programmes’.

This view was shared by the DIO, who stressed that ‘the attractiveness of UK higher education is its quality perception among international students’.

While there was a convergence of views on the quality of the UK HE brand, student evaluation of the brand appears to vary, necessitating a harmonisation of perceptions about the UK HE brand especially among students from different parts of the world. Some staff members agree that there are deficiencies in academic programmes and support services that could exacerbate this divergence of opinion. For example the DIO, while defending the overall quality of the education in the university, accepted that ‘not all university support services are delivered in the most effective manner’.

Gaps in perception of purpose, quality and availability of student services

While staff maintained that international students were supported adequately with a variety of services to enhance their experience in the university, students tended to argue that the quality and the relevance of these services did not always meet their expectations. Contrary to student opinion, members of staff believed that the university provides a supportive learning environment to international graduate students.
Availability of international tutors, supervisors (advisors), language support, library facilities and social activities in general were cited as examples of supportive learning environment. Staff commented on student support services available through centralised ‘one stop shop’ student services:

‘Support for student is very much integrated than it used to be...students can access all services through “one stop shop” ’ (DIO).

A common complaint is that services are not available when needed. Two students challenged the concept of centralising university services under the ‘One Stop Shop’, as this is considered to be mainly a referral service rather than something offering immediate solutions to student problems. The time spent in securing services from there has been a concern for most of the international postgraduate students, as evidenced by the following comment:

‘I am not satisfied with the “One Stop Shop”... they do not provide information... we have to find it ourselves... I am an international student and if I have to spend time going through websites, what is the meaning of student service?’ (Female – Malaysian Indian).

There was, however, partial agreement amongst staff on the efficiency of the ‘One Stop Shop’ evidenced by the comment:

‘...it is a referral service that “stretches the chains” before students an get required help’ (FT/LC).

The reluctance of postgraduate students to seek help from the centralised service is partly for this reason.

Both staff and students agreed that the university provided a host of social and pastoral care services to students that are available on request. The students, however, argued that most of the services offered are aimed directly at either domestic or undergraduate students. This appears to confirm Grayson’s (2008) findings in Canada, where he concludes that services for international students are limited compared to those for their domestic peers. The mere existence of student services is thus not a sufficient criterion of quality, from the perspective of international students. Moreover, the historical development of HE student services intended for domestic students might still prevail, impacting on the way international students view the purpose of student services.
services in universities. This contributes to non-participation in university services by many international postgraduate students. This view was shared by staff members, who maintain that more emphasis should be given to international students, and postgraduate students in particular. According to FT/LC, decoupling of academic and pastoral care services is an issue for international students and suggests that the respective schools should take greater responsibility for these services. However, he acknowledged that such change in responsibilities would inevitably raise workload issues within schools.

The lack of family-related facilities to support the needs of spouses and children who accompany students to this country is another major concern. Muslim students also perceive an absence of religious observance facilities on campus. Some postgraduate students also express concern regarding the quality of supervision, especially in relation to the availability of supervisors when they require them:

‘Since I came here... I have personally seen my supervisor only a few times because he is always away and most of the supervision and feedback is conducted online. The idea of a campus experience which I expected is not being realised’ (Female, Thai).

In summary, while staff members expressed satisfaction with the quality of the support services, these international students were clearly not so satisfied. As direct users, international postgraduate students in the study tended to identify deficiencies on the part of the support services in terms of its availability and the needs of home and undergraduate students.

**Gaps in perception of the need and importance of English language competence and academic success**

Both staff and students agreed that proficiency in English language is a key factor for academic success. All students shared the view that language proficiency is what causes them the greatest anxiety, and would like greater emphasis on services to improve their English language skills. While agreeing that the university provides opportunities for international students to develop English language skills, student interviewees questioned the relevance of some generic training courses for postgraduate students. They believed that the major challenge they face is scholarly writing, development of their criticality and critical engagement with the literature:

‘English support is OK... but the course is very basic and not
relevant to PG students like us. While they make it clear to us that being critical is the most important criterion for postgraduate writing, there does not seem to be direct support for us to develop this way’ (Female, Malaysian Indian).

‘....our challenge is how to write... scholarly writing which is critical for our postgraduate studies, but the English training in the university is very basic... focused on grammar’ (Thai, female).

These postgraduate students think that the use of English is seen by staff as a major criterion in the assessment of their work. Morrison et al (2005) found that a key discriminator in the perceived quality of postgraduate work by academics is in the standard of the written English language. The opinion of the staff members varied on this issue. Some saw the use of good English as of primary importance, while others consider it as less important than conceptual understanding. Students’ concern on English language is evident from the following observation:

‘Rarely do we have first-class passes from among international students. Does this mean international students are not as good as home students? I think the difference is in our use of language. Despite what they say in public, it is clear to me that our grades never match those of home students because of English’ (Male, Middle Eastern).

The staff members agreed that a key source of student anxiety is the proficiency in English language and see the issue in a different light. As the FT/LC summarized it:

‘the challenge is more than talking or writing English. It is the next extra step that is important... getting 6.5 or 7 score in IELTS does not tell much about English knowledge... experience with English takes time sometimes several years with involvement in activities related to English education. Some schools however do not provide these opportunities to students...’

A comment by ISA/ST further supports the above:

‘....the language issue brings up all sort of problems... Last year I had two cases of Chinese students who were accused of cheating in exams. They lack confidence in English... so they learn stuff by heart... phenomenal memory some of them have as they reproduce stuff by heart very effectively’.
The above comment indicates a form of stereotyping of students with negative perceptions of student ability akin to cultural deficit model thinking. This is acknowledged by DIO in her comment:

‘I think some academics’ mind there is kind of deficit model they work to’.

The sentiments expressed above suggest that institutional solutions to raise the standard of English among international students do not always address the real concerns of these students. Institutions could consider different approaches that would require staff to develop a deeper understanding of the cultural and academic needs of individual students in order to make the experience of support more relevant and applicable to individual student’s needs.

Gaps in perception of the importance of cultural integration
Cultural integration was considered to be an important aspect of student experience by graduate students and staff alike. While the international students do not see this as a priority in their HE experience, the staff considered it mandatory to seek out the full benefits of an overseas education and showed greater concern for what they perceived as inadequate engagement by international students with domestic students. The majority of staff members felt it was the fault of the students who, due to their cultural background, are either reluctant or incapable of interacting with domestic students. One staff member lamented:

‘...it is a shame that you can have somebody come here for a period of three years to study and go away with little understanding of the local culture’ (SA/L).

Another commented:

‘Socially I think international students tend to stick together too much especially Chinese... and speaking Chinese all the time’ (ISA/ST).

These comments appear to be in contrast to the findings of recent studies on international students in Canadian and American universities. Zhao et al (2005) found that ‘international students are more engaged in some areas than American students and less engaged in some others’. Similarly Grayson (2008) in his study on international students in two
Canadian universities found that international students are as involved in campus activities as domestic students, however they lack the support enjoyed by domestic students. Contrary to the belief that international students avoid domestic students and shy away from local culture, this study found that international postgraduate students do make extra efforts to socialise with domestic students, but sometimes become discouraged by feeling ignored as fellow students. Nathan (2006) confirms that many students do not look to expand their social horizons and extend their experience with new and different types of students. This is common among domestic students who predominantly end up becoming close friends with students of their own ethnicity. Nathan (ibid) terms this behaviour as ‘names first, ethnicity later’.

Students maintained that most domestic students do not wish to mix with international students, despite efforts made by the latter, because of their ethnocentric attitudes. This could imply that some international students prefer to keep within the micro-environments of their supportive cultural groups and could possibly find the broader society a little threatening and not supportive of their specific needs. Some students claim that the behaviour of most domestic students indicates that they are ignorant of other cultures and very culturally insensitive. Grayson (2008), and Zhao et al (2005) support the view that, in general, international students make greater efforts than domestic students to promote cultural integration. This is reflected in the following comments:

‘...how are you going to engage with a culture if the culture is not going to accept us... it is necessary that the University provide us with opportunities to engage with culture...?’ (Female, Malaysian Indian).

‘...there are some opportunities like international gathering... but you know at the end you are going to be with your own group again... how are you going to benefit when they go back to their own group...’ (Female, Thai).

‘British students being not proactive do not bother me... I take the initiative to talk to them. They are very careful. Some of them are part-time students and they come to the lecture... some of them are teachers and they are comfortable with their own groups...’ (Male, Malaysian).

A rational outlook why such integration is not taking place was evident in three comments made by another member of staff:
‘Social life is exacerbated by the economic situation of British students, the distance they travel to universities has come down drastically compared to 1980s. Most students live at home and do not bother to hang around in university campus that much’ (FT/LC).

‘Important thing is mixing with right people the problem is that different courses attract different nationalities and in some courses you do not find any British students’ (FT/LC).

‘International students are divorced from what is happening in the university… much more active dialogue with international students is therefore necessary, that would benefit international students enormously’ (FT/LC).

One of the solutions to the problem of integration would be to promote cultural integration programmes within schools, rather than at the wider university level. Possible initiatives are regular seminars, workshops and informal gatherings where attendance of domestic students is ensured. This is a step towards promoting greater cultural awareness and appreciation among the wider university community. Some staff members, however, maintain that international students are incapable of building relations with domestic students and so keep to their own cultural groups, showing signs of cultural stereotyping. This is countered by other members of staff who propose that the university should encourage staff to develop cross-cultural understanding through regular, organised, professional development programmes.

Conclusion

Among the several findings of this study three key issues need to be highlighted. The first is what may be termed a mismatch between the support designed for undergraduate students on which postgraduate services appear to be based. The development of HE is steeped in history. The original focus of HE provision was on undergraduate training, and growth in postgraduate provision is a more recent phenomenon in many universities. Clearly, therefore, services designed to offer student support of various kinds have grown out of a past university focus on undergraduate provision. The needs of undergraduate students are different from postgraduates; hence the support services required cannot be organically designed and developed on the same template. While the services may offer excellent support for undergraduates, they are seen to fall short in relation to the different...
needs of postgraduate students. As the postgraduate populations in many universities grow and as some universities are turning to postgraduate rather than undergraduate provision, there is a need to re-examine the structures that have served well in the past, and assess the extent to which the same structures can continue to be useful given the new growth and focus on postgraduate provision in many universities.

Secondly, notwithstanding the limited size of the sample of interviewees, it was interesting to note that comments and responses made by students whose countries had a past colonial relationship with the UK tended to point to a more positive experience of HE than those from countries with no past historical links. This may be because they received basic pre-university preparation for what they currently experience in the UK. In addition, the job market and the design of home economies, largely meant to service the broader needs of the colonial master, may enable students from former colonies to be more positively disposed towards the experience of UK HE. On the contrary, students from other countries that have had no past colonial relationship with the UK appear to consider the US HE as better. This has implications for differentiated marketing and support that universities may develop and deliver to students from different parts of the world.

The third is the specific cultural needs in the provision of university services. The absence of private prayer rooms for Islamic students in this university and indeed in other UK universities is not a deliberate omission, but a fact of history. The existing provision in many universities was based on the needs of the home students for whom UK HE was traditionally meant. The fact that the international dimension of HE is increasing has significant implications for both the nature and quality of current university services. In addition, there seems to be limited cultural integration taking place in universities, thus defeating one of the key intentions of the internationalisation process in higher education. A start might be made if the notion of cultural deficit is discussed more widely in the sector and ways found to enable local staff and students to value the cultural capital international students bring to UK HE.

We identify three management implications related to enhancing the student experience.

The need for ongoing monitoring of the student experience
The annual surveys of student experience and satisfaction conducted in universities across the UK uncover a wealth of information about university performance and especially indicate areas where institutions
could enhance the experience of students. However, it can be argued that the main purpose of these surveys is to provide data which supports university aspirations to climb up the performance ladders with the enhancement of the student experience as a secondary purpose. Internal monitoring of the student experience could be done more frequently at institutional levels to provide longitudinal data sets of the quality of student experience across the study periods.

*Student and staff forums for enhancing the student experience*

Gaps in the perception of the quality of the student experience limit the extent to which appropriate interventions can be put in place to enhance the quality of the student experience. In the university in question, data collected on the student experience and satisfaction is routinely interrogated by staff and sometimes shared with student representatives at formal academic meetings. Greater value could be delivered if universities could establish higher education staff and students fora to share understandings and ideas routinely about how best to enhance the student experience in universities. These would be the ideal place to uncover the gaps that have been identified here, inasmuch as they would be appropriate platforms for sharing ideas about making qualitative improvements and managing student and staff expectations.

*Monitoring student anxieties regularly*

Studies show that international students tend to exhibit significantly greater anxiety across a whole range of their university experiences (Maringe, 2010). Such anxieties have been found to operate at various stages of the HEFCE student life-cycle. Anxious students are likely to exhibit lowered satisfaction with university interventions aimed at enhancing their experience. It is thus proposed that university departments develop instruments for monitoring student anxieties. At the university department in question, an anxiety audit, administered three times per year has been developed which has been found to be a useful element of the whole student experience effort.

The study does not purport to provide conclusive evidence about gaps in postgraduate students’ and staff perceptions of HE in the UK. What it effectively does is to signpost very clearly the aspects of student experience that require attention by all stakeholders of the university including the management, staff and also students. Finally, the study provides a useful basis upon which larger studies in a range of universities in the UK and other countries may be developed. This would further contribute to the strengthening of the international dimensions of HE in these countries.

Address for correspondence
Prof F Maringe, University of Witwatersrand, School of Education,
Division of Educational Leadership and Policy Studies, East campus,
Witwatersrand, Johannesburg RSA. Email: F.MARINGE@soton.ac.uk

References


IDP Education Pty Ltd (2007) *Global Student Mobility: An Australian Perspective Five Years on*, Sydney: IDP Education Pty Ltd


Van der Wende, M C (2002) The role of US higher education in the global e-learning market, Research and Occasional Paper Series CSHE, Berkeley: University of California

