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## Enhancing learning for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students

*H Matters, J Winter and C Nowson*

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**Abstract Objectives:** Academic staff have noted that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students have faced difficulties during their studies and in adapting to workplace experiential learning.

**Method:** To explore this issue, three focus groups were held to identify the barriers to learning faced by CALD students and to develop strategies for CALD students, academic staff and workplace supervisors to assist in the students' academic progress and skill development. The three focus groups represented academic staff, CALD students and placement supervisors in courses where workplace supervision was a requirement of the course.

**Results:** The barriers to learning were identified as difficulties with English language communication skills, including reading, writing and verbal skills; course content that was too local; extra time not being allocated to academic and placement staff to allow for the greater time commitment required for CALD students; large

tutorial groups; social isolation; discriminatory assessment, and lack of awareness of existing support services for academic staff dealing with international students.

**Conclusions:** Strategies suggested to help assist CALD students to learn included conducting introductory sessions on Australian culture for CALD students; having additional and smaller tutorial groups; having academics spend time with individual CALD students; incorporating international issues into the course content and assessment; providing support and assistance for academic staff teaching CALD students, and organising experienced CALD students to mentor their less experienced peers. Implementing the strategies suggested would require greater resources to be committed to CALD students, which may be difficult given competing demands within the university for limited financial resources.

**Keywords** students, international aspects, education, universities.

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*Correspondence*  
Jane Winter  
School of Health Sciences  
Deakin University  
221 Burwood Highway  
Burwood Victoria 3125

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## **Introduction**

Academic staff teaching in the Master of Nutrition and Dietetics course at Deakin University have noted that culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) students, who are often international students, have faced difficulties in this course over recent years. Anecdotal evidence suggests that other academic staff within the School of Health Sciences, which offers the course, have found that CALD students require an additional time commitment and often participate less in class activities. In the dietetics course, lack of communication skills and appropriate cultural knowledge have posed challenges for these students during their professional placement program in a workplace environment, which involves 16 weeks of working in a hospital setting. In the years 1999–2002, half of all international students (two out of four) undertaking the dietetics course were required to spend extra time in their placements to reach competency as defined by the Dietitians Association of Australia. This involved the international students having to stay in Australia beyond the end of their course, resulting in additional costs to the students (both personal and financial) as well as to the university.

A review of the literature indicated that international students and local students experience similar problems in their role as a student, however, as Burns (1991) noted, the problems appear to be magnified for the international students. Some of the most recurring problems appear to be difficulties with language, homesickness, and adjusting to the style of learning and teaching in Australian universities.

## ***Aims***

The aim of this project was to explore the barriers to learning faced by CALD students and to develop strategies for students, academic staff and workplace supervisors to assist in the CALD students' academic progress and skill development.

This project was funded by Deakin University through a professional development fund. Ethics approval was granted by the Deakin University Ethics Committee.

## **Method**

Three focus groups were conducted in March 2003 to explore the barriers to learning for CALD students. These focus groups represented academic staff, the CALD students and workplace supervisors. A fourth focus group of local students was also planned to determine their experience of working with CALD students; however we were not successful in recruiting sufficient local students who had worked with CALD students. The recruitment of participants for the three focus groups is explained in the following text.

### ***Recruitment of CALD students***

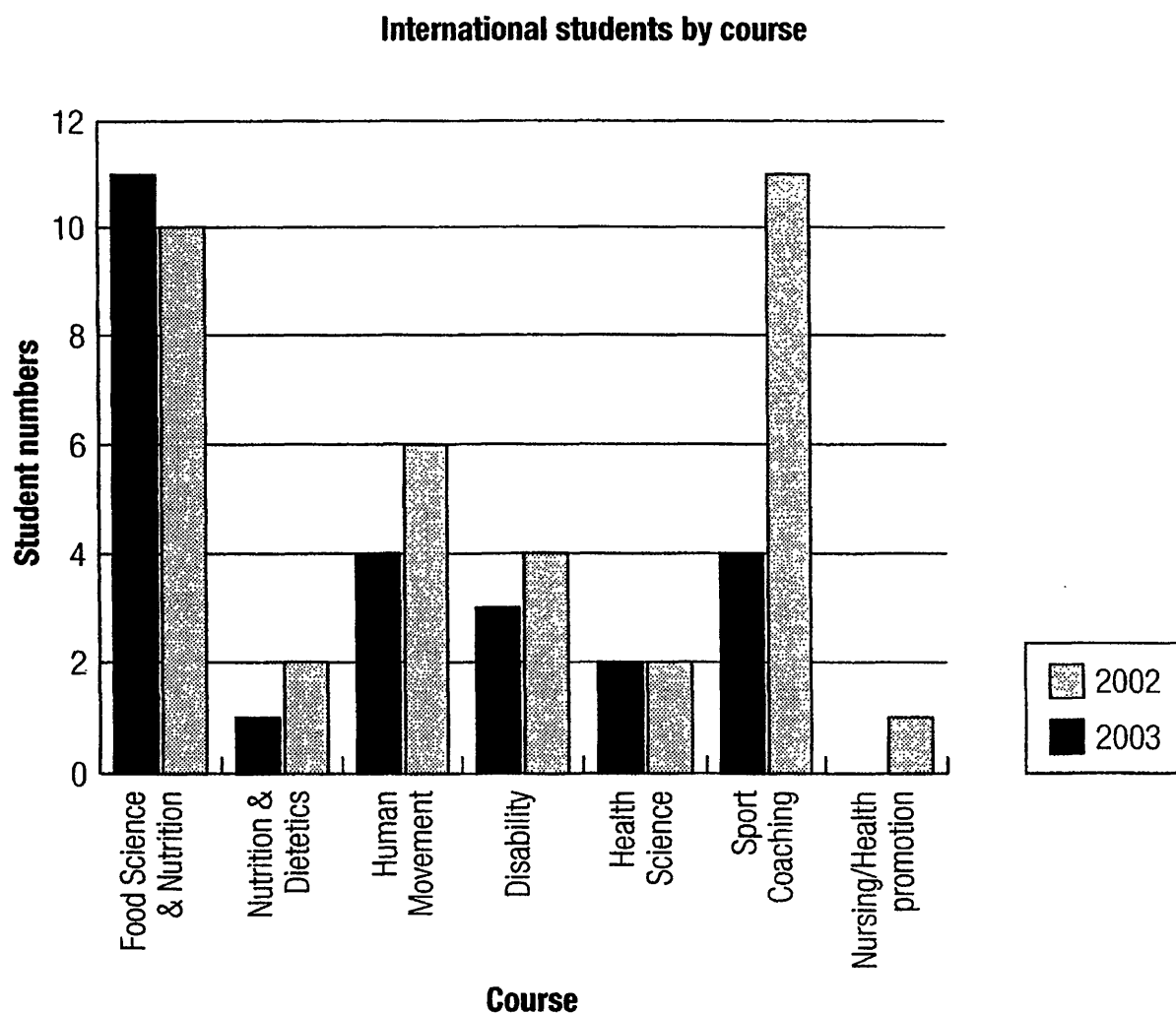
Identifying a population of students who may be affected by cultural and language issues is difficult. In 2002, the School of Health Sciences at Deakin University had 25 international students enrolled across seven different courses. This figure increased to 36 in 2003, with the greatest increase being in the sports coaching program (see Figure 1). This of course does not account for students who, although permanent residents of Australia, still face cultural or linguistic

issues when studying at university. In 2003, CALD students were recruited by a direct mail invitation to 25 out of the 36 international students enrolled in School of Health Science courses, and by making announcements explaining the focus group in a number of lectures. First year students (the remaining 11 out of 36) were not invited to participate as the recruitment occurred at the beginning of the first semester and the authors considered that the students had insufficient experience of university life to comment. Nine students participated in the CALD student focus group.

### *Recruitment of academic staff*

Forty-five academic staff who were responsible for subject co-ordination from the School of Health Sciences were invited to participate in the focus group for academic staff, which was conducted at Deakin University. Five members of academic staff (three male and two female) representing four courses (health promotion, exercise, disability and food & nutrition) attended the focus group. The academic staff were all of Caucasian/European descent and the range of experience teaching at a tertiary level ranged from two to eighteen years.

**Figure 1:** International students enrolled in School of Health Science courses at Deakin University in 2002 and 2003



### ***Recruitment of workplace supervisors***

From comments made during the focus group of academic staff, it was apparent that few courses in the School of Health Sciences had consistent work-based placements as part of their course. Disability studies and sports coaching had placement experiences but supervisory staff varied; therefore academic staff were unable to identify placement supervisors who had sufficient ongoing experience with CALD students to be able to contribute to a focus group. Focus group participants were thus recruited from dietitians who had been involved in supervising dietetic CALD students on placement from 1999 to 2002. Four dietitians who had supervised at least one international dietetics student within the past four years participated in the focus group for workplace supervisors.

A moderator's guide was prepared for the two facilitators who conducted the three focus groups. The guide included information on the purpose of the focus group, warm-up questions, key content and a summary. Some examples of warm-up and key content questions for the workplace supervisors were: 'Can you describe a challenging incident that has happened to you involving CALD students and how you resolved the situation?', 'Describe the impact of taking CALD students on placements' and 'Describe strategies you have tried that have helped CALD students learn on placement'. The methods used to conduct the focus groups are explained in the following text.

### ***Focus group – academic staff***

The focus group for academic staff was facilitated by a member of the

nutrition and dietetics teaching team. The session lasted for 90 minutes and was audiotaped. The audiotapes were transcribed and the tapes analysed to identify recurrent themes according to standard practice for qualitative research methods (Miles & Hubermann 1994). Transcribed interviews were studied for themes according to general categories. Each transcript was divided up according to the questions asked by the facilitator in the interview so that responses from each participant to like questions could be compared and contrasted. As recurrent themes emerged, these were checked against original transcripts to ensure that they were consistent with the overall intent of the data.

### ***Focus group – CALD students***

The focus group for CALD students was conducted on a Saturday morning as this was a time when students did not have to attend class. A recent graduate who had been an international student facilitated the focus group. Participants were paid \$25 for attending the 90 minute session, which was audiotaped. The tapes were transcribed and the data sorted as previously described for the academic staff focus group. All of the participants were female, from Southeast Asia and all but one were aged between 19 and 22 years. Four School of Health Science courses were represented. Students' academic levels ranged from 2nd year undergraduate level to Honours level and one of the courses included work-based placements.

### ***Focus group – placement supervisors***

A member of the academic staff who teaches in the Nutrition and Dietetics course and who also facilitated the

academic focus group, facilitated the 45-minute focus group for placement supervisors via tele-conference. The teleconference was used to reduce the interruption to the placement supervisor's work schedules, however, using a telephone rather than face-to-face interaction may have resulted in less interaction between the group members. This may explain the shorter amount of time required to gather the data from the placement supervisors; three of the dietitians worked in clinical settings and one worked in a public health setting. The conference was audiotaped by Telstra; the tapes were transcribed, and the data sorted as previously described for the academic staff focus group.

## Results

The main barriers to learning facing CALD students as identified by each of the focus groups are summarised in Table 1.

Each focus group was able to give examples of strategies that participants had used to enhance learning for CALD students. These strategies are outlined in Table 2.

## Discussion

The key barriers to learning facing CALD students as identified by the focus groups are discussed in the following text.

### *Difficulties with English language communication skills*

Many of the issues raised by the focus groups are consistent with issues raised in existing literature. Treloar et al (2000), Burns (1991) and Robertson et al (2000) note that while international

students studying in Australia do meet the university requirements for English, they often struggle to understand their Australian lecturers due to the speed of delivery; the use of slang, idioms and colloquial language and different accents. The one barrier that was identified by all three groups was difficulties with English language communication skills including written and verbal skills. Difficulties with English language communication skills impact on students' contribution to class discussions and group assignments, on their performance in some assessment tasks, and on their ability to interact with patients and staff when on placement. This was exemplified by the following comment made by a participant in the focus group of CALD students: 'I totally agree [sic] the language barrier, because for me I can hear very well and write very well but if I want to discuss something, I can't express myself, especially during tutorials' (CALD student).

University English requirements are a controversial issue. A survey by Coley (1999) indicated that there is little consistency regarding English requirements for international students. In fact, of 37 universities surveyed by Coley, there were 61 different pieces of evidence used for English language proficiency, many of which are not good indicators of university standard English.

Undergraduate applicants to Deakin University must demonstrate their competence in English by providing evidence of either:

- an overall band score of 6 or better in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) (Academic) test conducted by the

**Table 1:** Barriers to learning facing Culturally And Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students as identified by academic staff, CALD students and placement supervisors

Academic staff	CALD students	Placement supervisors
<p>CALD students experienced difficulties with English language communication skills such as reading, writing and verbal expression.</p> <p>CALD students found the course content too localised. For some students, the course content was too confronting in terms of discussion of sexuality.</p> <p>There was insufficient time for academic staff to dedicate to CALD students.</p> <p>Assessment by exams was discriminatory for CALD students, who may have required extra time to complete exams compared to local students.</p>	<p>CALD students experienced difficulties with English language communication skills such as verbal expression and with understanding the colloquial language used by academic staff.</p> <p>CALD students found the course content too local.</p> <p>CALD students indicated the tutorial group sizes were too large.</p> <p>CALD students experienced social isolation.</p>	<p>CALD students experienced difficulties with English language communication skills such as verbal and written expression.</p> <p>CALD students had a poor knowledge of local foods and culture.</p> <p>Using the same competency standards for CALD students as for local students was discriminatory assessment.</p>

local British Council/IDP Education Australia office, provided that no individual band score is less than 6 or

- a score of 213 or better in the computer based Test Of English as a Foreign Language (C-TOEFL), or a score of 550 or better in the paper based TOEFL.

From 2002 to 2003 there has been a 30% increase in the number of international students enrolled in the

School of Health Sciences at Deakin University. Although the numbers of international students enrolled in most courses are still relatively small, academic staff in the focus groups reported feeling unprepared for international students and a lack of awareness of what support services are available to assist staff and students. Academic staff in the focus group reported that CALD students require a greater time commitment, which they were finding increasingly difficult due to greater workloads.

**Table 2:** Strategies to enhance learning for Culturally And Linguistically Diverse (CALD) students as identified by academic staff, CALD students and placement supervisors

Academic staff	CALD students	Placement supervisors
<p>Provide introductory sessions to School or Faculty focussing on Australian culture.</p> <p>Provide additional tutorials.</p> <p>Provide one-to-one time and individualise teaching.</p> <p>Make assessment more relevant to future work environment.</p> <p>Provide support/assistance for academic staff teaching CALD students.</p>	<p>Provide sessions that give an Australian perspective.</p> <p>Provide smaller tutorial groups.</p> <p>Academic staff need to provide greater support for CALD students.</p> <p>Organise 3rd/4th year CALD students to mentor 1st/2nd year CALD students from the same course.</p> <p>Ensure learning materials are available for CALD students to read prior to classes.</p>	<p>Provide earlier introduction to placements (allowing CALD students to gain a greater understanding of demographics etc.).</p> <p>Provide greater focus on food related tasks to help CALD students develop an awareness of local food supply.</p> <p>Provide more one-to-one supervisor support.</p> <p>Introduce role-plays between staff/CALD students to assist CALD students with oral communication.</p> <p>Ensure potential students have appropriate English skills before selection.</p>

Placement supervisors noted that some CALD students had difficulty writing clear notes in the medical history and had problems communicating clearly to assess and counsel patients about diet. Strategies such as the provision of individual academic time for CALD students, smaller tutorial groups, mentoring from more experienced students, the provision of reading materials prior to tutorials and role plays could all help to improve English communication skills. These strategies

are time consuming and expensive. Furthermore, treating CALD students differently to local students may marginalise the CALD students.

### *Localised course content*

CALD students in the focus group noted that the unit content was often localised, which was a barrier to CALD students learning. Academic staff from the focus groups noted that they needed to ensure that unit content is internationalised to provide all students with a global



view, rather than an Australian view, of the subject area. Given the Caucasian background of the academic staff it may be that the delivery of content and the decisions about content inclusion may be innately ethnocentric. The academic staff in the focus group recognised the positive input that CALD students provide to internationalising the course content: 'They [CALD students] actually provide very interesting and diverse perspectives for our Anglo-Australian or Australian students' (Academic staff member). Some CALD students recognised the limitations of a course that is dominated by local issues, as indicated by the following quote from the focus group: 'A few of us were thinking, O.K. what's the point in taking this subject, coz it's not going to apply to us when we go back to our country to work?' (CALD student).

All three groups recognised that CALD students might have a limited knowledge of the health culture and environment in Australia, which would impact on their studies. Indeed, Burns (1991) noted that CALD students are likely to be experiencing a combination of both 'culture' and 'study' shock.

CALD students were noted on placement to be unfamiliar with local foods and eating patterns which made it hard to take a thorough diet history; a key part of a nutrition assessment. Placement supervisors noted that it was important for students to 'get in the kitchen, taste and prepare food, go to the shops and become familiar with the wide variety of foods available.' A greater focus on food related tasks that are performed in addition to the existing curricula could benefit the CALD students learning but may also be seen as

an additional burden to an already busy academic schedule.

### ***Difficulties with allocating extra time to CALD students***

Academic staff in the focus group noted that CALD students often require more work and a greater time commitment on the part of academic staff: 'If you talk to academic staff members, they would tell you that international students are so much more work, avoid them like the plague' (Academic staff member).

The CALD students in the focus group indicated they generally found academic staff helpful but felt that they were often rushed and did not have time to help students with additional questions. Placement supervisors also noted that CALD students often require greater individual supervision compared to local students: 'For us the main impact is that they [CALD students] require more support and more time...if we are short staffed and we're busier than usual then it becomes more difficult to give the student that time and I think they suffer because of it' (Placement supervisor).

### ***Large tutorial groups***

One of the CALD students in the focus group stated that she preferred tutorial groups of less than 10 and there was general agreement that large tutorial groups were a problem for CALD students. Confidence in participating in larger tutorial groups was identified as a barrier to contributing to tutorial discussion by the CALD students in the focus group. Smaller tutorial groups would be better for all students not just CALD students, but structuring these requires extra resources such as teaching time and rooms.

### ***Social isolation***

Many Health Science units have few CALD students enrolled and CALD students reported a sense of social isolation, particularly when working on group projects with local students. For example, one CALD student noted that 'I'm the only Asian in my class, so every time they do group work, there's only four of us, they'll start talking. Once I make conversation, they will answer me, then they will stop talking to me and continue their conversation...it's difficult to blend in with them' (CALD student).

On placement CALD students were noted to be shy and to often avoid asking clients questions about their social background, which resulted in a less thorough assessment on which to base the subsequent counselling session.

Cultural norms may be playing a role in the difficulties students are facing in the classroom. Students from SE Asia are frequently used to the teacher in the role of 'transmitter of knowledge' rather than the Australian lecturer who sees the lecture as a 'starting point, a stimulus for the development of students' learning according to Ballard and Clancy 1997.

### ***Discriminatory assessment***

There was some concern expressed by the academic staff in the focus group that exams are discriminatory in nature and that perhaps CALD students should be allowed extra time, as is given to students with a disability: 'I think there's a real inequity about assessments. Assignments are fine, they can work on it and I'm accepting sort of dodgy spelling, grammar, as long as they know what they're saying...but with

exams, there's some real discrimination' (Academic staff member).

Placement supervisors in the focus group noted that they sometimes faced difficulties in knowing how flexible to be when assessing competency of CALD students. For example, one placement supervisor questioned whether CALD students planning to return to their country of origin to practise dietetics needed the same level of knowledge of Australian food as local students.

### ***Lack of support services***

All of the academic staff in the focus group stated that they felt unprepared for CALD students and were unaware of what support services were available to both themselves and the CALD students.

In each of the focus groups, the participants were asked to discuss strategies that they had used to enhance learning for CALD students (see Table 2). Many of these strategies are consistent with quality teaching practices such as introducing smaller tutorial groups, initiating mentoring by experienced students, conducting individual tutorials and providing extra tutorials for struggling students.

### ***Limitations***

There were a number of limitations in this study. The first limitation is that the nine participants of the CALD focus group were all female, but 36% of the international students enrolled in School of Health Sciences courses in 2003 were male. The results may have been different if there had been a more equal gender mix. The second limitation is that the 9 participants were from

Southeast Asia; hence the results may not be applicable to students from other geographical areas. The third limitation is that full-fee paying international students could be identified from enrolment data, but CALD students who are Australian residents are harder to identify from the University student enrolment database and so were not included in this study, even though they may also have been experiencing barriers to learning.

A further limitation was the small numbers of participating academic staff. Five out of 45 academic staff who were responsible for subject coordination participated so their experiences may not represent the opinions of the entire school.

## Conclusion

The focus groups in this study identified many learning barriers for CALD students. As the number of CALD students increases, it is imperative that strategies be put in place to enable academic staff and placement supervisors, as well as the students themselves, to overcome these barriers to learning. Academic staff need to ensure that CALD students enjoy a positive and enriching experience studying in Australia so that Australian Universities maintain a good reputation overseas. The following four strategies are suggested to help enhance learning for CALD students. First, academic staff need to be encouraged to undertake professional development to enhance skills in teaching CALD students. Second, CALD students need to be encouraged to undertake an orientation program as an introduction into local culture and health issues. Third,

additional preparation of CALD students compared to local students prior to work-based placements is required. And fourth, academic staff need to offer placement staff assistance with any assessments that they are required to complete. Many of the strategies suggested in the focus group will require extra resources if they are to be implemented.

## Acknowledgments

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