Perspectives of Mature Women
International Students at a University in New Zealand

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Abstract
Nine mature women international students at a New Zealand university were interviewed. All of the women were graduate students, and all but one were on scholarships. They reported using a number of different student services. Two of the most helpful were the Teaching Learning Development Unit (TLDU) and the International Centre. The students reported facing a number of challenges; the most commonly reported was dealing with academic demands. Most of the students had trouble adjusting to the student life (all but one had previously been working) and had financial difficulties supporting themselves (and often their families) on their scholarships. All of the women planned to return to their home countries, and many hoped to improve conditions there as a result of their experiences in New Zealand.

Introduction
The number of international students on university campuses has been steadily increasing in many countries, including New Zealand (Mills, 1997; Lewthwaite, 1997). This unique student population is very diverse in terms of their needs, nationality and age (New Zealand Vice-Chancellor’s Committee, 1999). Although international students and local students share many of the same concerns regarding matters such as academics, finances, and living conditions (Eng & Manthei, as cited in Quintrell & Westwood, 1994; Burns, 1991), these concerns are intensified when compounded with adjusting to a new country (Crano & Crano, 1993; Pederson, 1991).

Despite the fact that most international students receive financial assistance from their governments, families or sponsors (Pederson, 1991), many of them still have a number of financial concerns. One concern that is more exaggerated for international students than it is for local students is the cost of keeping in touch with friends and family in their home countries. For international students, this may be one of their biggest expenses and they make sacrifices in other areas of their lives, such as living in less than adequate housing, in order to afford the cost of communication (C. Wright, personal communication, May 30, 2000). In some cases, students are expected to send money home to their families, which can prove to be difficult with their limited scholarship funds.

The scholarships and financial assistance that may provide the only means by which the students could study overseas may also be a factor contributing to their stress levels. Friends, family, or sponsors often place a great deal of pressure on the students to perform well academically, and a prominent concern for international students is a fear of failure (Burns, 1991; Germain, nd; Lewthwaite, 1997). Compared to 76 local Australian students, the 133 international students in a study by Burns (1991) reported more stress symptoms. The areas in which international students experienced significantly more stress than local students were: (a) academic concerns; (b) time management; (c) language skills; (d) participation (for example, in class discussions); and (e) studying independently. Many students from other cultures (especially Asian cultures) have been accustomed to a focus on rote learning and memorization and may really struggle with the emphasis on independent and critical thinking that is present in the Western world (Samuelwicz, 1987). International students have found that there was a higher level of interaction with professors in New Zealand than in their home countries (Mills, 1997) and that this is often intimidating for them.

International students have attributed many of their academic and social difficulties to language problems (Mills, 1997). Fifty-two percent of international students in an Australian university said that language difficulties played an important or “very important” role in their experience abroad (Samuelwicz, 1987). Some students would not even go to lectures because they found it pointless to attend and would instead borrow notes. Some found it hard to participate in group discussions even when they wanted to because by the time they had translated the thoughts in their heads, the discussion had already proceeded (Lewthwaite, 1997; Mills, 1997).
Difficulties with language may be intensified by the fact that many international women students are not assertive (Athen, 1991). This is especially true for Asian females. These women may be hesitant to request help, especially from a man (Fouad, 1991), and to speak up if something makes them uncomfortable. This lack of assertiveness has been known to negatively affect their relationships with professors, landlords, and fellow students (Athen, 1991).

In general, women students tend to receive less support than men students while at the same time experiencing more stress. Evidence has shown that women who return to school have been less supported by their husbands than men mature students are by their wives (Houston-Hoburg & Strange, as cited in Norton, Thomas, Morgan & Tilley, 1998). In addition, women often feel constrained by their family responsibilities and multiple roles (Gerson, 1985; Edwards, as cited in Norton, Thomas, Morgan & Tilley, 1998).

International students must make a number of unique adjustments. The number of these adjustments can increase if an international student is a woman and is thus, more likely to experience a lack of support, role strain and additional stress. These difficulties can be compounded when the student is also a mature student, who is likely to have to adjust to being a student after time away from school, and who is also more likely to have a family. The purpose of this study was to investigate the issues faced by mature women international students and how well their needs are met by student services at a university campus.

Method

Participants

The researcher obtained names of people to contact through student services professionals working in the residence halls, the International Centre, and the counseling unit. The participants were contacted in person whenever possible, or by phone or email. Nine mature women international students were interviewed; all of whom were graduate students. In this report, pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

Measurements and Procedure

Interview questions were developed by the researcher based on the literature and on discussions she had had with student services professionals on campus.

Results and discussion

All but one of the students were receiving scholarships, and all but that one woman had been working full-time prior to studying in New Zealand. The women reported difficulties with finances such as being unable to afford clothing and gifts for their children like they had been able to when they were working, having difficulty paying for their children’s schooling in New Zealand, and being unable to afford many phone calls to friends and family in their home countries. Of the nine women, two sent money home to their families occasionally and a third did so fairly regularly. A fourth woman was on paid leave to study, so her work salary remained at home to support her family.

Two of the women lived in the residence halls on campus and two more lived on campus in flat-style housing arrangements that had four people to a flat. If all of the women had been told that they had to live in the residence halls, only one of the students said that she would prefer to live with other international students rather than living with a mix of local and international students. Four of the women had no preference. Eight women reported a preference for living with all women in their section of residence. The most commonly cited condition defining an all women’s section was not having to share a bathroom with men. This concern of sharing bathrooms was listed by eight of the nine women. All but two of the women were fine with men visiting women’s sections of residence halls, and one of these two women was agreeable to men visiting during the day but not at night.

Six women said that if they had elected to be in a women’s section of residence, they would not expect men to be living on the same floor. When asked for suggestions to improve the residence halls, one woman said that mature international students should have priority placement in flat-style
housing on campus, and another recommended that there be a floor in the halls for mature students who wanted a quieter environment.

When discussing their experiences with student services on campus, all of the students said that they had used services at the International Centre. There was only one person who had negative things to say about the Centre. This person said that she had not found answers to her questions at the Centre and that she had stopped going there for assistance. All of the other women, however, said that they had found the International Centre very helpful. The students used the Centre for help with the following: allowances, settling in, questions involving their dependents, insurance, scholarships, and general questions about the university and the country. One student said that most important role played by the International Centre was that of a "point of contact" through which students were welcomed and guided to what they would need.

Three of the students had spoken with the counselors on campus and had found them to be helpful. One of the possible reasons why counseling had not been used by more of the students was that the women were all mature graduate students; approximately 85% of international students who sought counseling at an Australian university were undergraduate students (Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones & Callan, 1991). Graduate students may be more likely than undergraduate students to be used to transitions related to university and to have support networks (such as spouses and children) present with them.

The TLDU had been used by seven of the nine participants. The popular services were seminars on how to do research (used by three people), and how to write a thesis (used by two people). One student found the service to be especially useful because it allowed her to have someone proofread her papers (English was not her first language so she found writing difficult at times). Another woman was appreciative of the help she received with referencing and attributed an increase in her academic scores to the help she had received from TLDU. Samuelwicz (1987) surveyed international students and professors at an Australian university to ask them about their perceptions of the academic needs of international students. In addition to expressing a need for assistance with research methods and thesis writing, both professors and students recommended that the following be offered: (a) training in critical and analytical approaches to learning; (b) training in study skills; (c) training in assessment methods (such as instruction in taking multiple choice exams); and (d) help with participating in group discussions. Two of the students mentioned having difficulty adjusting to the independent learning style in New Zealand. One of them said that in her home country, it was common for professors to "spoon-feed" information to students.

When asked what they found most challenging about coming to university in New Zealand, eight people said that, a law student, it was the coursework itself and living the life of a student. Beth said "Even though I speak English, it’s different if I have to speak it in class or I have to give a presentation and to talk in the legal language. I didn’t expect such a big workload." Another woman said that one of the things she has found to be very different from her home country was the accent and slang. Having family responsibilities made studying especially difficult for those who had such obligations.

A student who was in New Zealand with her husband and children has found that she has become a source of support to young students at the university who came from her home country. Although many of the students did not know who she was prior to coming to the university, they sought her out and began to come to her for academic and personal advice. Although the woman said that she enjoys helping these students, it adds extra pressure for her to do so. This situation is not uncommon. Universities in Adelaide, South Australia, have implemented an initiative that involved linking Pacific Island students with other Pacific Islanders in the area (Teasdale, 1988). The program has had a lot of success in preventing the students from feeling totally detached from their culture.

One of the main reasons to have someone from one’s home country with whom to relate is that international students often encounter a number of differences between their home countries and the
countries in which they study. In this study, all but one of the participants mentioned "culture" as a main difference between their home country and New Zealand, and four mentioned food.

In terms of culture, one participant said that she found the Kiwis to be “lacking in culture.” She said that New Zealand is a country where people drank and watched or played sports, and did not spend a lot of time communicating. She described the people in New Zealand as being friendly on the surface but not allowing anyone to see past that. An Asian woman said that the culture was very different from what she was used to in the sense that people spoke very directly and did not seem to worry too much about hurting people’s feelings.

Bochner (as cited in Pederson, 1991) claimed that two of the reasons people cite against promoting study abroad were that: (a) international students often do not want to return to their home countries; and (b) international students often return to their home countries feeling bitter because of the comparisons they make between their home countries and the countries in which they studied. In this study, however, all of the participants planned to return to their home countries. Two students said that they planned to return because it was a condition of their scholarships and another had made a similar agreement with an employer who had given her leave to study for a certain period of time. Another said that her family and a desire for a job in her home country were the reasons she was returning home. Two women said that they had a family and job waiting for them. Pam reported that she wanted to go home not only to be with her family but also to prove that what she had studied could have a positive impact on social issues (especially women’s issues) in her home country. In a similar vein, Wanda was returning because she was sent as a civil servant to learn how to improve matters in her own country. According to her, there was a lot in her country that needed improvement but that her country lacked the personnel to do what needed to be done. People from other countries who provide assistance had been bringing in their own ideas and not take into account the feelings of the people who lived there. In order to have more control over their own affairs, the government was trying to train and educate more of its own people.

Three people mentioned that one of their first concerns when they returned to their home countries would be to find a job (all of the other women had jobs lined up). None of these women had used the Career Services Office, however. Perhaps this office needs to better advertise their services to international students. Most students have many questions about the job market they are hoping to enter once they obtain their degrees. – international students are no exception. In fact, American students have reported that their needs for vocational assistance surpass their needs for help with personal and academic concerns (Bishop, Bauer, & Becker, as cited in Spencer-Rodgers, 2000), and international students place even higher importance on these needs than do American students (Lelong & Sedlack, as cited in Spencer-Rodgers, 2000). Some of the more specific concerns faced by international students who were job searching were: (a) the lack of information about employment in their home countries; (b) the difficulty in determining the academic advisors’ level of sensitivity to their needs; (c) the lack of congruence between coursework and the work experience they desire; (d) a lack of professionally trained career counselors (Walter-Samli & Samli, 1979).

Four people gave suggestions for the kind of information the university might be able to provide to ease the transition back to their home countries. One said that financial information might be useful, and another said that it would be helpful to give younger students information about interpersonal interactions. She felt that because the New Zealand culture was more open than other countries it might be challenging for young students to go home to more rigid and traditional countries. The third woman suggested that it would be useful to know where her degree would be recognized besides in her home country and New Zealand. A fourth woman said that she would appreciate someone talking about transitional issues in general. Wanda said that one of her professors had already been very helpful in preparing her to return to her home country. Her professor had asked her what she wanted to learn that would be useful in her home country and even adapted some of the course material to suit her needs.
A common theme found in this study was that women anticipated that it would be a challenge to implement some of the things they had learned in New Zealand when they returned to their home countries. One had found that, in relation to the people in her home country, people in New Zealand were very independent and mature and that young people in New Zealand were able to accomplish a great deal. She said that in her home country, people tended to be lazy, knowing that their families would take care of them. When she returns to her home country she said she would want to teach people to be more independent. A second woman believed that it would be easy to make changes in her workplace but that making social changes (such as improving conditions for women) would be much more difficult. A third woman reported that she has become more assertive while in New Zealand and that this behaviour would not be welcome where she was from, nor would some of the more independently oriented academic philosophies she had adopted while in New Zealand.

Conclusions

This study has outlined some of the main challenges faced by mature women international students at a university in New Zealand. The students expressed little interest in living with other international students if they were to live in the residence halls. Two of the most widely used services were the TLDU and the International Centre, which was a source of assistance for a range of issues. The most pressing challenge for eight of the students was academic concern; this was made especially difficult because of family responsibilities and because all but one of the students had taken time to work between their undergraduate degrees and graduate degrees. All of the women planned to return to their home countries. Due to a lack of research on this population, future investigations should explore these issues in further depth, with the goal of improving student services for these students. This research will be especially appreciated as the numbers of mature international students continue to rise.

References


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