The Experience, ICT Use and Communication Practices of International Students

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ABSTRACT

International students must overcome many challenges when studying abroad in a foreign country, which may lead to many of them experiencing culture shock. This experience can deprive them of important connections to friends, family and communities, that play a critical supporting role through the social capital they provide. In contrast studies of migrant communication practices show that modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) are being used to remain in touch and sustain important connections while traveling abroad. This study will explore the relationship between the experiences, communication practices and ICT use by international students.

Keywords

Research proposal, international students, experiences, ICT, communication practices

BACKGROUND AND AIMS

In Australia an internationalization agenda over the last decade has lead to an increasingly large number of international students coming to study at universities and other educational institutions. Over this time social, political and economic activities between Australia and its regional and international partners have established bridges across physical, social and cultural distances. These bridges offer accessible well trodden pathways for students to follow in search of an international education [3].

As a result international students play an important role in the Australian higher education sector, making up a significant proportion of the student population. Attracting and retaining these students has become a key priority for Australian Universities. The student experience is seen as a key indicator of success in this endeavor, as the experience of students affects the retention and sustainable enrolment of students. It has also been linked with their wellbeing and may potentially affect their academic success [8].

For students embarking on a journey in search of an international education, it will mean leaving their homes far behind, to live in an unfamiliar cultural environment. Arriving students are likely to be confronted with many challenges from geographical isolation to confronting cultural differences. This potentially overwhelming experience can result in them being 'lost in translation', experiencing what is commonly known as culture shock [9]. Students who have this experience are likely to lose touch with important social connections with friends, family and communities [7].

An international student's social network is understood to play an important role in supporting and sustaining them while studying overseas. These connections are likely to exist prior to a student embarking on their journey and can influence their decision to study overseas, their choices of what to study and where [1]. Through these social networks international students can acquire information about jobs, food and shelter, explore their new surroundings, remain in touch with cultural practices and help them to overcome many of the daily challenges that may confront them [4].

However in contrast to the view that many students will experience culture shock studies of transnational mobility are revealing that the use of modern Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) can allow migrants such as international students to easily remain in touch with their friends, family and communities while abroad. A range of technologies are often employed in strategies by migrants to maintain connections while abroad and to establish new ones [2]. The notion that technology can support distanced relationships is not new, it has been confirmed in numerous studies of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and the impact of new media on social relations over the last decade [6].

But it has also been identified that technology can have a negative impact on the sociality of international students. By re-enforcing cultural barriers and maintaining strong ties with other co-nationals the connections maintained through the use of technology can potentially limit students' opportunities to meet local people and makes settling in much more difficult [4].

The use of technology appears to have a significant impact on the experiences of international students and may prevent them from loosing connections with friends, family and communities when traveling overseas to study.

This study aims to explore the impact of technology on the communication practices of international students and the effects this has on their experiences while studying abroad.

This study will focus on international students studying in the state of Tasmania, Australia. It will use a sequential exploratory design to describe the relationships between the experiences of international students, their communications practices and use of ICT. Using the metaphor of a journey described by Brooks [1] this study seeks to capture the experiences of international students from three stages of their journeys: the lead up to their departure, their arrival and in their daily lives.

SIGNIFICANCE AND INNOVATION

A study exploring the relationship between the experience, communication practices and use of ICT by international students in Tasmania will be able to make several important contributions.

Firstly it is hoped that the methods used and developed will contribute to the multiple fields of research this study intersects, but primarily towards the study of people and technology.

Secondly the study will contribute to our knowledge and understanding of issues faced by international students in Australia and may help institutions and government agencies provide better support programs. It will provide unique insights into international student experiences in Tasmania, which stands to benefit Tasmanian education institutions and their students.

Thirdly, in Australia there is a continuing discussion about the benefits and impact of a national broadband network. The internet is an important piece in technology widely used by international students in their communication practices [4]. In Australia internet access is a significant issue for students especially in regional areas such as Tasmania [8]. Knowledge gained through this study may contribute to this discussion, providing a greater understanding of uses for the high speed internet infrastructure.

METHODOLOGY

The proposed study will be a two-phase sequential mixed method study. Qualitative data will be obtained from a representative sample of the international student population studying at the University of Tasmania, which will be used to develop a quantitative instrument for investigating a larger sample of the population over a period of time.

The first phase will explore (and generate themes about) the relationship between international student experiences, communication practices and ICT use while studying in Tasmania. Qualitative information will be gathered through focus groups with international students at the University of Tasmania. Students in their first year of study will be targeted, as experiences of departure and arrival should be fresh and on their minds.

The second phase will gather quantitative data through a survey instrument. It will be used to capture the experiences of international students over a period of time during their study in Tasmania, to explore significant findings across a larger sample of the population.

Subjects
The population of interest is international students studying in the state of Tasmania, Australia, with the sample frame being students studying at the University of Tasmania as the university is responsible for the largest population of international students in the state.

Sampling
The population will be sampled in a single-stage, with international students to be accessed through the University of Tasmania's degree programs.

Instruments
For the first phase of this study subjects will be selected randomly from the sampling frame to form several focus groups. Groups will consist of 8 to 12 participants with a sample consisting of a total of 30 - 40 subjects. Groups will be heterogeneous, and representative of the international student population.

The second phase will use a survey instrument to conduct a broad investigation across a larger sample of the population. The instrument will be fashioned from surveys used by related studies and from the results of focus groups in the first phase of the study.

QUESTIONS AND ISSUES

Choosing a mixed method, multi disciplinary approach for studying this research topic presents many challenges as well as great opportunities. It also raises many methodological questions.

Social and cultural differences clearly can influence international student's behavior, and are likely to affect their use of ICT. How can this best be taken into consideration when studying the ICT use of international students?

Sampling will be a challenge for this study. Factors such as gender, age and infrastructure may have an impact on the ICT use or communication practices how homogenous should focus groups be? Tasmania also presents a unique challenge, as the University of Tasmania has a very distributed campus, with students able to study at many sites across the state and even as far away as Sydney. This will obviously be an issue, especially for recruitment so how can it best be managed?

What are the best ways to make results from a study which is highly contextual and multidisciplinary comparable with studies in related areas? Analysis will play an important role, but this study has the opportunity to generate many different kinds of data. Should the data be limited or should that study aim to maximize it data collection scope?

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