

Going Bush: International Student Perspectives on Living and Studying at an Australian Rural University Campus

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While there is a significant body of literature concerned with the experience of international students arriving to live and study at urban university campuses, very little of this research addresses the issue of overseas students' transition to rural areas. What issues do international students face when they arrive to live and study in rural places, and how is their experience of university life different from that of their metropolitan counterparts? This paper draws on data from in-depth interviews with non-English-speaking-background students from Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, and the Middle East to identify the sorrows and successes of international students arriving to live and study at a small university campus in rural Australia. It explores how place, rurality and diversity work in combination to construct learning and life experiences at a small rural learning institution. It also examines students' connectedness with rural life and meanings, and engages with rurality as a site for educational innovation.

The lecturer strode purposefully towards me along the corridor. It was clear she had something she wanted to discuss. "Kathryn," she began, "I'm worried about the international students in my tutorial. There are half a dozen in my subject this year and I'm used to having none, or one, at most." She outlined her concerns about the students' particular learning needs and made an appeal for help. In my role as an academic skills advisor, requests from academics for student assistance were part and parcel of my day. What made this request unusual, however, was that it was the first time I had heard an academic member of staff mention the changing "face" of the campus and its resultant impact on teaching and learning. What had I been reading earlier in the day about international students? "'Get them in' is the main intention; 'look after them' comes a long way behind" (Yanhong Li & Kaye, 1998, p. 41). Was this concern a sign of something more promising? As someone with a role to play

in identifying the learning needs of students, I was acutely aware that this change in the demographic of our small rural university campus had been underway for sometime. I had, after all, been working with our newest students since their arrival, in orientation and transition activities, and identifying their English language needs. Were some of my academic colleagues now also being made aware of these students' presence on campus? The moment crystallized for me that this change was now being brought home to the rest of the campus community, signaling a move away from a past where the "average" student on campus was white and likely to be from a farming or agricultural background. Now our classrooms housed a more diverse student population, one that included international students. This was a future where we needed to understand these students' needs and perspectives, lest we condemn ourselves to doing no more than merely "getting them in."

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Introduction

The Orange campus of the University of Sydney (USO)¹ sits atop rolling hills on the outskirts of a sizeable regional centre in rural Australia. The campus was historically an agricultural college, where courses on offer reflected the needs

¹ On 1 January 2005, management of the Orange campus and its operations transferred from The University of Sydney to Charles Sturt University.

of rural farming communities, whence most students came. In 2001, a management degree was introduced at Orange. Attracted by the prestige of the University of Sydney name and a lower entry requirement, non-agricultural students from metropolitan areas began to enrol at Orange, tentatively heralding the arrival of a more diverse student population at the campus. This change was followed, in 2003, by the introduction of additional non-agricultural courses. At this point, the campus began to take on a more multicultural flavor, not least because a small number of international students began arriving to study in Orange.

This article reports the experiences of those international students arriving to study at USO: their perspectives on teaching and learning, their transition experience, and their engagement with rural life and meanings (Howley, Theobald, & Howley, 2005). In this way, we aim to explore the students' experience of engaging with a small tertiary campus that has historically been ethnically homogenous and dominated by an "agricultural" hegemony. This cultural backdrop provides a setting to explore how the campus became a vehicle for the students to connect with a rural place and associated rural meanings. The study also allows us to engage with rurality as a site for educational innovation (Moriarty, Danaher, & Danaher, 2003).

While Australian universities have actively sought international students since the 1990s (Forbes & Hamilton, 2004; IDP Education Australia, 2004; Marginson, 2002), many researchers have questioned how well tertiary institutions have catered for the needs of foreign students post-arrival. As Kennedy (1995, p. 37) suggests,

[a] great deal of effort and resources seems to be devoted to front-end issues—policy formulation, recruitment strategies and promotional activities. Yet these become peripheral if we are unable to provide a teaching and learning environment that is conducive and supportive of the people who come to study with us.

Similarly, Yanhong Li and Kaye (1998, p. 41), discussing competition for foreign students in the United Kingdom, argue that

to be successful in the competition, institutions should consider not only how to get students in, but also how to look after them well when they come in to study. Understanding overseas students' concerns and problems is essential for institutions.

This study developed out of a desire to better respond to the needs of international students arriving at USO. The project was designed to provide USO, as a small rural outpost of a much larger city-based tertiary institution, with timely information about the perspectives of international students

arriving to live and study at Orange campus. The study focuses on students' relationship to place and engagement with rural life. It is also concerned with students' perceptions of a rural campus in terms of its learning and social environment.

On the Subject of International Students

The problems that international students face in universities have been well documented in the literature. A number of studies have explored the problems that overseas students face when adjusting to the academic requirements of the Australian university system (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Burns, 1991; Mills, 1997; Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Samuelowicz, 1987). Similar studies have also been carried out in other countries. Working in Britain, Yanhong Li and Kaye (1998) have discussed the need for a greater awareness of the problems experienced by overseas students in institutions of higher education in the United Kingdom. Similarly, Al-Sharideh and Goe (1998) and Lacina (2002) have explored the social adjustment processes that foreign students face when entering American universities. Within the existing literature, however, few studies address non-metropolitan contexts and prioritize the perspectives of international students in rural tertiary institutions.

An Australian study by Ellis, Sawyer, Gill, Medlin, and Wilson (2005) is a notable exception. Ellis et al. (2005) found that a small regional university campus—in this instance, the Whyalla campus of the University of South Australia—offers international students "a learning environment with many advantages," including "enhanced access to staff" and "small classes" (p. 65). However, their study also provides insight into the perceived negatives of the rural environment. For example, students commented on the small size of the campus and the lack of facilities and entertainment options relative to larger metropolitan campuses. As one student remarked of the campus, "[it's] totally different from my 'dream university'" (p. 71).

Levy, Osborn, and Plunkett (2003) have also studied the impact of rurality on overseas students. Their examination of international students studying at the rural Gippsland campus of Monash University found that overseas students "are not all that dissimilar to the domestic cohort of school leavers in terms of background" (p. 5). Overseas students' transition issues vary markedly from those of local students, however, due to the fact that international students do not generally come to university having lived previously in regional areas. This being the case, Levy et al. (2003, p. 10) found that foreign students require "a more responsive approach to . . . their particular transition needs."

Beyond this research, scarce attention has been devoted to issues associated with the regional locality or rurality of the culture of tertiary institutions in Australia. While research concerning international students in rural and

regional universities has been carried out in Australia and New Zealand (Mills, 1997; Verma, 1995), this literature does not address the particular issues that arise as a result of rurality. Consequently, we know little about the academic and social experiences of international students making the transition to life and study in the bush. We seek to redress this void in the literature.

Place and Rurality

For international students newly encountering rural environments, place is central to understanding their experience of successfully living and studying in a new landscape. Cresswell (2004, p. 7) describes places as “spaces which people have made meaningful.” Rather than being mere geography or “simple location” (Malpas, 1999, p. 31), places function to produce and frame experience. As Malpas writes, “[t]he crucial point about the connection between place and experience is not . . . that place is properly something only encountered ‘in’ experience, but rather that place is integral to the very structure and possibility of experience” (pp. 31-32).

Drawing on Anderson’s (1991) concept of the “imagined community,” we analyze how the participants in our study engage with rural place. To do this, we rely upon Gruenewald’s (2003) assertion that “places are social constructions” (p. 626) that “produce and teach particular ways of thinking about and being in the world” (p. 627). In this sense, place has no fixed meaning but, instead, is the creation of those who reside in and experience it. Rurality is similarly posited as a theoretical construct. As Howley (2004, pp. 13-14) has said of rural meanings, “[r]ural circumstance is a setting of meanings more than it is a set of characteristics . . . The thing about such meanings is that those who mean them, make them up.” It is in this tradition of privileging what has elsewhere been termed “lay discourses of the rural” (Jones, 1995) that we engage with students’ constructions of rural place in this research. To seek to answer the question “What is rural?”, we go directly to those involved in making meaning on this topic: our participants. The students’ voices, and our rendering of them, are presented at a later stage in this paper.

A Note on Method

From a total population of 24 undergraduate students who arrived in Australia no more than three years before beginning a course at Orange, 18 students participated in this research project. The majority of students were studying for a University of Sydney management degree, with the balance of students enrolled in pharmacy and information technology courses. The majority of participants were from Asia (14), with the balance of students being from the Middle East (2) and the Indian Subcontinent (2).

Following Kvale’s (1996, p. 1) premise that “if you want to know how people understand their world and their life, why not talk with them?”, we chose interview as the primary data collection method for this project. Adopting an interpretive approach, we sought to foreground participant narratives in the research, all the while recognizing that interviews are reconstructed stories actively shaped by both researcher and participant (Scott & Usher, 1999), where results are “negotiated” and “contextually based” (Fontana & Frey, 2000, p. 646).

Interviews were conducted in English, but Mandarin was also used intermittently to clarify the responses of some Chinese students. Semi-structured in-depth interviews with individual students were conducted by two staff, each interview lasting approximately 1-2 hours. The interviews were guided by a set of questions that sought to capture the respondents’ background and pathway into study at Orange, interactions with the campus and local community, and views and narratives of education and social life at the campus. Specific questions related to the following: how students selected Orange as a place of study, whether students were aware that they had chosen to study in a rural area prior to arrival in Orange, and the students’ expectations and experiences of living and studying in a rural area and on a rural campus. The participants were asked to recount their arrival and settling in experiences, and were questioned about the adequacy of campus facilities. Similarly, students were asked to discuss their use of and satisfaction with facilities and services available in the city of Orange, and in this regard were prompted around terms like “shopping,” “restaurants,” “cinemas,” “sporting facilities,” “churches,” and “health services.” Students were then questioned about teaching and learning at USO. They were asked to describe their classroom experiences with fellow students and their relationship with teaching staff at the campus (with prompts involving terms like “availability,” “approachability,” “quality of advice,” and “cultural awareness.”) They were also asked to discuss the challenges and benefits of the Orange learning environment and to reflect on how having English as a second language had affected their experience of university life. The students were also questioned about their social networks, making friends, and their relationships with local students.

Audio-taped interviews were transcribed and analysed using a thematic clustering technique (Tesch, 1990). In the initial stages of analysis, data were labeled and segmented around the categories and patterns that appeared in the data. Memoing (Tesch, 1990) was used throughout the analytical process to develop conceptual and theoretical categories from this data. Data display (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Punch, 2005) was used to visually organize and summarize the data. Once the major themes or categories of the data had been established, a later phase of analysis involved making comparisons within these categories—comparing different

people, their views, actions, and experiences—to find and test categories and to establish the boundaries and conditions of the categories created. A framework for systematically interpreting data was applied until the researchers were satisfied that a “consolidated picture” (Tesch, 1990, p. 97) of the students’ experiences had been captured by the method of collection and analysis.

Six key categories of data arose from the analysis: (a) the reasons why the students moved to a rural place; (b) their relationship with place/the rural environment; (c) their adaptation to the social environment at USO, including relationships with local students; (d) accommodation on campus; (e) the learning environment, including relationships with staff; and (f) the Orange educational approach. These themes are discussed in more detail below.

International Student Perspectives on Living and Studying at an Australian Rural University Campus

Why Students Moved to a Rural Location

International students arriving in Orange generally completed a tertiary preparation course, or the senior years of secondary education, in an Australian capital city prior to entering the University. Participants did not have a preference for study in a rural location, but rather went “bush” because they did not meet requirements to gain admission to their higher priority course and/or university. For many students, the opportunity to gain admission to the University of Sydney, irrespective of location, was an important consideration. There was also a degree of ignorance as to the location of the campus. Many respondents did not understand the rural location of Orange campus, often believing that Orange was an outer suburb of Sydney. Two Chinese students had this to say:

The student agent [in China] told me that Orange is just an hour away from Sydney, and so I think “oh, okay, an hour is not real far away.” And then when I came here and I was, like, five hours train ride, and this so different! (Student 2)

I was staying [in a Sydney] hotel for two days to organize . . . move . . . and I ask some staff, “I want to go to Orange campus of Sydney University,” and the staff told me, “Why you go to Orange because it is so far from here?” I was so surprised . . . because I thought maybe it just take maximum of one hour altogether, and [they] just told me you have to take train first, and catch the coach . . . I thought how come it’s so far from here? . . . They said because Orange is far from Sydney. (Student 9)

This misinformation led to considerable transition anxiety on the part of some students:

First day to Orange I was so surprised because I original come from Beijing, China. It’s a big city. I never been the countryside like Orange in my life. So when I first time to . . . Orange, I really didn’t have any idea about this small town, because . . . all the new things to me. I never meet . . . people who come from countryside, and in my life I just always been the big city. It’s so different . . . When I come to the Orientation day, I saw all the student is very different than the city people, so also make me not very comfortable . . . So after Orientation day, I just went back to Sydney straight away because I want to think “how can I live in such an isolated place?” Actually, it’s very difficult for me at that time. (Student 9)

For many, “going bush” was seen as expedient—a means to an end, with the ultimate goal being transfer to a metropolitan university campus in a preferred program of study. This pathway into USO necessarily affected students’ engagement with rural life. Having a desire to be elsewhere, and a plan to move away as quickly as possible, engendered in many participants a “transitory” attitude to Orange campus.

The Rural Environment

Levy et al. (2003) suggest that international students arriving at rural university campuses undergo a “three-tiered transition” process that sets their experience apart from their metropolitan counterparts. Along with their city peers, international students in rural areas face “the shift to a tertiary institute” and a “move to a foreign country.” However, they are also faced with a third tier of adjustment: “the move to a rural environment” (p. 5). A Chinese student best describes this process:

In the first year, I was quite a bit uncomfortable with it because . . . just trees and fields around, and so it is quite different . . . from [home]. . . . But after a year I really love the environment at Orange. . . . It is very quiet here and so peaceful. (Student 2)

The majority of Orange international students come from urban backgrounds, and many initially find the rural landscape confronting. They also describe “town” as unexciting. In this sense, the Orange city centre is treated as a “mini metropolis,” to be compared (unfavorably) with cities like Sydney, rather than as a unique entity with its own merits. Engagement with the community beyond the University is minimal for our participants, irrespective of

duration in Orange. Except to shop or to enjoy the occasional recreational activity, the students rarely engage with town. Yet despite the widely held view that USO does not meet social and entertainment needs, the campus is viewed as “good for study” due to the lack of distractions—a value reported as appreciated by the students’ parents.

Social Life

As well as adjusting to a new physical environment, the international students interviewed for this study employed three common responses to the social environment they encountered at USO. While we see these categories of response as fluid to some degree, and while a small number of students appear to move easily between the categories, these responses illustrate our understanding of the strategies that international students employ to negotiate their “otherness” in relation to the dominant local culture.

Fitting in. This approach entails emphasizing similarities and playing down differences between the local student culture and that of the international student. It most often involves adopting local behaviors. In a rural setting, this commonly involves joining in with local students, “making your own fun” (as one local student put it). The strategy is perhaps best illustrated through the narrative of a Chinese student:

From my experience, first you have to step into bar, and then you have to get a beer, and then try to sit down and talk to the [local students] . . . because this is kind of their . . . culture, I think. . . . I don’t really drink, but the people in my house were having a party all the time . . . and I felt that I was being left out. . . . [So] first thing that I have [to do] to fit in is get a beer and sit down and talk to them. . . . Of course, you would not get yourself drunk. This is not what they want. They’re just being happy. . . . Get a beer then say “Where are you from? What are you doing this semester?” and then we could kind of talk. (Student 2)

Of fitting in, another student comments:

Firstly, as an Asian you don’t expect everyone to accept who you are, as you are, because they don’t understand you. You have to approach them by saying hello, but if they don’t want to answer you, or are irritated, just go away from them, find other guys. You never know sometimes, but don’t be paranoid. (Student 4)

The ability to employ this response appears closely tied to students’ proficiency in English. Students who felt unable

to converse easily in English frequently claimed to have “no [common] topic” with local students. On the whole, the fitting in response was employed by students who arrived at USO before or during the year 2003, when there were only very small numbers of international students on campus. Few opportunities to mix in culturally similar circles, and a desire for friendship, seems to have been an impetus for international students to step out of their cultural “comfort zones” and engage with local students in the Orange social scene.

Opting out through “cultural-emotional connectedness.” Cultural-emotional connectedness refers to “the students’ perceptions of feeling more comfortable . . . with peers from the same cultural background” (Volet & Ang, 1998, p. 10). Students arriving at USO in 2004 most commonly chose to “opt out” of engagement with local students. A critical mass of international students at Orange campus during 2004 seems to have meant that students could choose not to engage socially with local Australian students.

In this sense, opting out is not a rural phenomenon. It appears consistent with what Volet and Ang (1998) describe as “one of the most disturbing aspects of the internationalisation of higher education in Australia,” where growing evidence is emerging that documents “the lack of interactions between local and international students from Asian backgrounds” (p. 5). Where the path to acceptance by local students is an uncomfortable one, and where international student numbers allow it, opting out of social relationships with local students is the preferred strategy of most Orange internationals:

The main lifestyle [here] is go to pub, have drink, party. It’s quite different. Most of us don’t like this, so it means we can’t enjoy the entertainment life here. So . . . international students quite naturally they stay in a group. (Student 11)

Most activities [involve] drinking. That is not fun for me. . . . As I said, we are all one group. They are more close to me, related to me, they thinking the same. (Student 16)

It’s culture. Different cultures. Different ideas. Very different. . . . The [local students] like go to bar, pub, and they drink beers. (Student 6)

Opting out through isolation. A very small number of international students appeared unconnected socially with any of the friendship groups on campus. This appears to occur in circumstances where the student is unable to find synergy with any of the existing social groups. Whether through disability, personality or ethnicity, some students appear to be

isolated from all peer groups. The longer a student remains on campus, the more likely it is that they will trade isolation for friendship with other international students.

The Accommodation Lottery

In common with other rural campuses, an overwhelming majority of first year students at USO live in residence. For most international students this means that living and studying at Orange are inextricably linked, where success or failure in one area can affect performance in the other.

Across the sample of international students interviewed, the arrival and “settling into study” experiences were mixed. The particular residence that students were allocated to, and the composition of residents in that accommodation, had a profound influence on the quality of the “starting out” experience. This “home environment” affected the students’ social and academic adjustment. In the worst-case situations, where students felt alienated and anxious in their living arrangements, due in part to a lack of contact with other international students, motivation to study was severely affected. In more positive scenarios, students developed networks supportive of study and language improvement, sometimes with local students, but more commonly with other international students. On occasions where international students were placed in accommodation with local students and felt comfortable enough to engage and communicate, opportunities for language improvement arose:

[My] speaking skill has improved more [here] because in Sydney I had only Chinese friends all the time, and did not really communicate with Aussie people very much, only Aussie people I communicate with is teacher, so speaking skills improve here. I think because of my accommodation. . . . The people in my house is very nice and they very talkful. Sometimes, at first, at beginning, I was shy to talk but they forced me to talk. . . . No other Mandarin speakers [there]. (Student 19)

University help me communicate and build my accent better. . . . with people who don’t speak in . . . any other language to communicate, except in English, it is really helpful. Very helpful. (Student 13)

This outcome appears to be a positive point of difference between rural and metropolitan campuses. Its significance is reflected in the research of Ellis et al. (2005, p. 72), whose international students also commented on the fact that the limited numbers of fellow students from their home countries in rural universities meant that “they communicated more with Australians and people from different language

backgrounds and so of necessity had ‘more opportunity to speak English’ than may have been the case in . . . the capital [cities].”

In the Classroom

The cultural and learning experiences of international students studying in Australia have been extensively researched (e.g., Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Barker, Child, Gallois, Jones, & Callan, 1991; Beasley & Watts, 2002; Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Robertson et al., 2000), though a majority of studies only engage with metropolitan university contexts. Within this literature, however, there is recognition that the academic, cultural, social and general living issues of international students are highly intertwined and interdependent. The research also suggests that the academic adjustments that international students make are generally the most challenging and enduring, with teaching approach, classroom culture, academic expectations and classroom interactions with local students (Burns, 1991; Mullins, Quintrell, & Hancock, 1995) being common sites for anxiety. Infused with each of these challenges is English language capability, a factor influencing both academic and social transition success. As Burns (1991, p. 62) describes it, “inadequate language skills and social interaction problems interweave.”

For Orange international students, the challenges of language are predominant, particularly the capacity to understand rural accents, and the need to grapple with colloquialisms and pace of delivery, from both lecturers and local students. As in urban contexts, written English is a major issue, as international students not only have to understand the nature of academic writing, but also struggle with English grammar, spelling and meanings. The consequences for international students are returned assignments for re-presentation, and recommendations that they seek specialist academic support.

On a more positive note, the intimacy of the Orange campus was appreciated by the international students interviewed for this study, with a small student population engendering small class sizes, familiarity with administrators, and accessibility to academic staff. An educational approach emphasizing tutorials also provides a personalized education, and the students rapidly appreciate the benefits of this style for their understanding of subject matter, and the acquisition of generic academic skills.

Lectures, despite being relatively small (always fewer than 100 students), are more problematic, particularly in the commencement semester. International students struggle with the pace of lecture delivery, with accent, and the word choice of lecturers. Despite valuing the tutorial process, international students struggle with the confidence to contribute to discussion and group work:

It's actually quite hard for the international students . . . because first of all the language, and you know, the other students are, like, they can just express what is their opinion and what they are thinking in English. But for us, we . . . need more time to translate back into English. So I think this is a kind of challenge in tutorials. . . . The international students are . . . quite quiet. They [are not] really used to the discussion part . . . and so when you ask them to have discussion they will just stand there and don't know what to say. . . . It takes them some time to think and to try to explain their opinions in English. (Student 2)

For many, particularly those from Asian countries, the Australian learning environment is a challenge, as students are accustomed to a more autocratic classroom culture in their home countries where the teacher taught and the students learned. However, the more relaxed interrelationship between staff and students at Orange, along with two-way dialogue in the classroom and the casual classroom behavior of local students, is a new experience—despite most students having completed transition studies in Australia. On this topic, a student comments:

In China we are more reserved. If you have some problem you need . . . [to] up hand, stand up and ask the teacher, otherwise you seen to be impolite. But here you have more freedom, talk and ask teacher any time you like in the tutorial. If you some problem you just argue with the teacher . . . and you achieve and get marks for talking. (Student 19)

Relationships

Relationships between international students and teaching staff have a mixed report card in the academic literature. For example, a widely cited research study of international students at the Australian National University (Burns, 1991) reports student perceptions of academic staff as being uncaring and uninterested. So too, Robertson et al. (2000) observed “a shortfall in empathy” (p. 101) towards international student difficulties by University of Tasmania staff. In the same study, the student participants held the perception that lecturers gave international students less attention than local students. Mullins et al. (1995), in a study across three South Australian universities, similarly reports negative views of academic staff by international students, particularly regarding accessibility. Interestingly, studies at smaller rural campuses indicate a more positive interaction with academic staff, with accessibility and sensitivity being reported with regard to the needs of international students (Ellis et al., 2005; Levy et al., 2003).

The intimate relationship between students and teaching staff at Orange campus is particularly valued by those interviewed for this study, with students clearly appreciating this aspect of their education as a point of difference with metropolitan universities, a position not gleaned from personal experience but based on discussions with city-based international students. Academics were seen as friendly, accessible, and culturally aware:

They are like friends [here]. . . . In China the teachers just let us know you have to respect your teacher . . . the students and teacher are not in same situation, on the same level. They are different groups, different age groups. So you can only talk education things with teachers. You can ask them questions but not other things. . . . But here can talk everything. Teacher not like real teacher. They still can even make jokes with you and laughing, have lunch together. I think it is very comfortable for them. (Student 14)

I think the teaching staff are very supportive, and I've learnt a lot and very friendly, very. I think they really try to help students, spend a lot of time with the students and they were excellent. . . . Possibly they didn't understand my culture, but they're showing that they understand it. Which is appreciated. (Student 5)

The staff is good. They teach, they ask questions . . . Even [when] I go outside class time, the staff try to answer my questions. Being on-campus, being close to the staff . . . they understand you. . . . And the small [class] sizes, you have very good contact with the tutors and teachers, so it is good. Makes you understand the topics you have been doing. (Student 13)

I get more attention from the lecturers and staff. . . . I thought we were not going to get any attention but because we small group we got more attention. (Student 16)

I feel like they very kindly to international students. . . . I think they realize [our problems]. . . . I think they are very friendly and very informative, and I can talk to them any time. . . . Yes, only 30-40 students in our . . . course. I think the lecturers know everyone so it's very good. . . . they know us very personally, so it's a good thing, I think. (Student 12)

Orange campus like a small group. Everyone know each other. (Student 8)

On the other hand, developing relationships with local students is widely reported as problematic for international students across Australia, with an inability to succeed often resulting in loneliness and isolation—emotions that compound homesickness and alienation, and impacting negatively on academic adjustment and performance (Barker et al., 1991; Levy et al., 2003; Mills, 1997; Mullins et al., 1995; Robertson et al., 2000; Volet & Ang, 1998). A comparative study of three ethnic groups in New Zealand universities, for example, found that overseas students desired interaction with local students, were concerned about “social isolation,” and believed “heterogeneous classes facilitate the achievement of their personal learning goals” (Beaver & Tuck, 1998, pp. 168, 177). In the same study, however, this sentiment for integration was not shared by Pakeha students (i.e. those of European descent) who placed significantly greater value on homogenous classes and less value on “opportunities for social interaction” (p. 176).

The relationship with local students at Orange campus is often problematic for international students, who generally find it difficult to build friendships with local students. International students commonly speak of an incompatibility of values, particularly as this relates to preferred social activities. In this sense, the relationship between local students and internationals is perhaps best described as “tolerant coexistence.” On the positive side of the ledger, some students appreciate opportunities to mix closely with local students in the accommodation blocks, and speak of opportunities to mix with and learn from local students in tutorial group activities:

I think I learn the Australian accent, especially strong Australian accent, more than my friends in either Canberra or Sydney . . . Because, especially in other university campuses as well, they are mixing more international students. Yeh, much more, and so they seldom really speak in English, and they would just make friends with their home, like the Chinese or Taiwanese or whatever. But seldom make friends with the local students. But here, because there are just only a few numbers of international students, so I had to make friends with the local students, and I think I have benefited. (Student 2)

Sydney is not a very good place to learn English especially for Chinese people. I think the countryside is better for learning a language. You have to communicate in the country. (Student 19)

There are lots of local students so I must speak English. (Student 18)

Negative experiences, however, are also linked to accommodation and classroom interaction; students pointing to instances of racial discrimination, cultural indifference, suppression of “voice,” anxiety surrounding having to speak and engage, and a perception that local students do not appreciate international students as partners in group work:

When the conversation goes very fast I can understand exactly what’s going on, but when I want to give my opinion I am afraid that I will take time and then possibly the other people won’t respect that, or think that basically I’m slow. For that, I remain silent. . . . They [also] think because, without knowing me, only talking to me or seeing me, they believe because I have English as a second language so I shouldn’t be in their group. Which, it’s very frustrating. (Student 5)

Maybe I have made mistake [coming to Orange]. [I] want to try to study very hard then I can go on to the big city, [but] I just don’t want to study . . . just sleep all the time in my room, so that’s why I got very poor results for the first year, because I don’t want to stay with all the aggie [rural] students. I don’t want to speak to them, so daytime I just sleep and night-time I just start to cooking or watching TV or something like that. I feel all the difficult things in my life at that time [first year]. . . . Actually, I feel some of people in [my accommodation] . . . they still very nice, because sometimes they just want to talk with me and after a few weeks they ask “Why you always by yourself? Why you didn’t come to table to talk with us?” I thought, I just told them, because, actually, the true reason is I couldn’t speak English very well and so I couldn’t make communication, and sometimes I couldn’t understand them. And the second reason is . . . I feel difficult to sit with them together because they all talking about the agriculture things, because I didn’t have any idea about agriculture, so we don’t have similar topic. (Student 9)

Educational Approach

Concerns over language competency infuse most aspects of educational adjustment: understanding concepts and assessment requirements, fathoming local accent and colloquialisms, finding voice in tutorials, being valued as contributors to group work, and conceptually understanding content and skills in a second language (Samuelowicz, 1987; Burns, 1991; Mullins et al., 1995; Verma, 1995). In addition, the literature reports a stereotyping of the differences between western and eastern approaches to pedagogy—the Western model built on critical thinking, constructivism, and

independent learning, while eastern educational systems, stereotypically, feature authoritarian classrooms with an emphasis on memorization and regurgitation (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Robertson et al., 2000). The newly arrived international student is thus confronted with an educational culture, both at lecturer and system levels, that undervalues their prior learning experiences, taking a “deficit approach” to their skills (Samuelowicz, 1987; Vandermensbrugge, 2004) and making assumptions about a perceived approach to knowledge acquisition that is reliant on surface learning (Chalmers & Volet, 1997; Volet, 1999). In seeking help for academic problems, international students are generally unwilling to approach institutional support services, preferring to be helped by other students, particularly international students of similar ethnicity (Burns, 1991; Verma, 1995). Yet despite the adjustment challenges, generally international students succeed academically (Barker et al., 1991; Wicks, 1996 cited in Beaver & Tuck, 1998; Burns, 1991), although the academic literature does suggest poor performance levels, including subject failures, in the first year (Levy et al., 2003; Verma, 1995).

For Orange international students, the western educational approach is problematic. Critical thinking, evidence-based writing, tutorial discussion, group work, case studies, oral presentations, and having to give opinions are all new experiences for international students that do not align with their prior educational experience. These processes demand dialogue, and as such, the international student’s lack of confidence in spoken English is brought to the fore:

Because English is only second language it is difficult to study. If it is Chinese I think it is very easy, but in English I take a long time. . . . I also fear to meet them [local students]. I don’t know, I just fear to meet Australian people [so] the Chinese students seem to stick together. (Student 7)

I usually communicate with Chinese students, not local students, because language, I think. I know what they say, but I can’t express me. (Student 8)

Yet, the international student’s capacity to traverse the change of educational environment is clearly linked to academic ability, motivation, and language skills. Within half a semester, the more academically gifted and highly motivated international students at Orange describe academic expectation in terms that support their assertions that they understand what is required, and a belief that they are performing at that level. By way of contrast, another subset of students, whose academic performance is highly unsatisfactory, are characterized by a lack of motivation and an unwillingness to participate in initiatives to assist them. In between these two groups are the majority, where levels of academic ability, language capability, and motivation result

in generally modest academic performance. The majority of participants studying management, for example, failed one or more subjects in their first year.

Most participants in this study were Bachelor of Management students, the only non-rural-context degree offered by the Faculty of Rural Management. However, the degree does share subjects with the Faculty’s other rural management programs and, hence, shares the education tradition that has evolved from the Faculty’s predecessor, the Orange Agricultural College. This tradition is characterized by an education model built on praxis (Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Grundy, 1987): the linking of theory and professional practice through the integration of authentic industry and community case studies. Comparatively small class sizes have tended to foster a personalized education, with strong student-staff interaction, and a delivery model that favors tutorials and case studies. Further to this, in the late 1990s the Faculty introduced a capability development program to make explicit the embedding within curricula of generic academic skills and graduate attributes. The initiatives associated with these capabilities appear to be influential on international students, improvement in these skills being most pronounced in the first year. In this sense, this educational innovation (Luck, 2003) is the direct result of (rural) geography—the location of the campus as a “rural outpost” of the University of Sydney. As Moriarty et al. (2003, p. 135) suggest, “sometimes being on the geographical and other margins creates opportunities for exciting initiatives that are less likely to occur closer to the centres of bureaucratic surveillance.” This is certainly true of USO, where geography has enabled the development of a number of learning and teaching initiatives which may have been stymied in a larger, more regulated teaching and learning environment.

Yet while this “boutique” educational model should, in theory, provide a supportive environment for international students, the results of this study provide mixed messages in this regard. On the positive side, students express general satisfaction with their courses of study. On the other hand, students made few explicit comments about the Orange educational approach, beyond a few positive references to academic skills support and the first semester business case study, which is undertaken in small groups:

I learnt that if I want to learn something it is not only in the campus or inside a classroom. You have to go to outside world and have a look. . . . We talked to the manager of the company. . . . It’s so different, you know, because the teaching staff just teach you something theoretical, but when you have a tour and visit, they would just tell you the experience and the practical thing, so it’s much more different. (Student 2)

That's my first interview with business. So it's very, it was a new thing for me. We talked to the manager directly and asked him questions. . . . I found I'm like a university student, not a high school student. (Student 3)

This lack of awareness of “the Orange approach” may be attributable to none of the participants having prior university experience, thus leaving students with a lack of a basis for comparison. A more probable explanation is that the nuances of the Orange approach are lost in the ocean of change being experienced by those who have recently arrived, educationally, in terms of lifestyle, and most importantly, as they struggle with academic literacy in a second language.

Going Bush

Anderson's (1991) notion of the imagined community provides a useful framework for exploring how the international students in this study experienced rural life. Anderson's thesis advances the concept that we imagine the communities we inhabit; that “community” exists largely in our own minds. As Clendinnen (1999, ¶ 14-15) asks [of an assumed Australian audience]:

Think about it. What set of experiences signifies “Australia” to you? What do you directly know of it? You know your family, your friends, the people at the school, your workmates if you still have a job, the lady in the corner shop if there is still a corner shop, the people at the fruit stall, a cloud of relations, your football team, some people on radio and television. You will have travelled over bits of it, some bits often if your social or economic work takes you there. But it is still a very patchy mental map. There will be suburbs even in your home city as unvisited as Marco Polo's China.

So where is “Australia”? As Anderson makes clear in his *Imagined Communities*, it's in your mind. Nations are imaginary communities, and none the less real for that.

So too, rurality is constructed for international students at Orange. For these students, the campus is a site that connects them to an imagined rural world, where the students only need experience a slice of rural life to imagine that they then have experienced much more of it.

In their daily lives, Orange international students have limited direct contact with rural circumstance. As the majority of Orange international students were studying non-agricultural degrees, they have minimal curriculum-driven engagement with rural environments and communities. Thus, their exposure to rurality is often limited to images

of rural life—a passing cattle truck loaded with stock bound for the saleyards, a TV advertisement for sheep drench, an iconic “Aussie ute” in the student carpark—but it is these signs of rural life that provide fodder for their imagined sense of rural place.

One of the students' primary opportunities for engagement with things rural and agricultural is through contact with rural staff and students of the campus. Students from rural backgrounds, or “aggies” as they are colloquially termed, provide tentacles to the more typically rural communities of regional eastern Australia. These students represent the campus' history as an agricultural college—roots that pervade the educational and social fabric of the campus. The compact size of Orange campus dictates that international students and aggies inevitably meet in the classroom, even if these students avoid association elsewhere. For a limited number of teaching hours, at least, rural and international students meet in this space, with confluent opportunities for engagement ever present. Yet despite this propitious setting, the gulf between these student groups remains largely unbridged.

Beyond this contact, for most international students the campus is geographically isolated from the community that surrounds it. Metaphorically, for these students, it is comparable to a “gated” community: students go about their business with minimal crossing over to the immediate world beyond the boundary fences. Thus, they live in a gated rural landscape. They also typically do not leave the “house paddock” to engage with the landscape that lies beyond the boundaries of their student quarters. In this sense, their connection to rural life and meanings is largely “representational.” Their exposure to rural is constituted through stereotypical images of the “countryside”:

It's very country style . . . and farm around here . . . and cattle, horse. (Student 3)

The environment here so nature. (Student 10)

I like the landview, the view [here]. (Student 8)

Yet while many of the participants in the study spoke in admiring tones of the beauty of the landscape around the campus, none spoke of actually engaging with the landscape, of venturing into the paddocks that surround the student accommodation, or of engaging in any way with the rural environment for recreational or other purposes:

I didn't really see the rural environment—just live here on campus. (Student 16)

In this sense, the students clearly position the rural environment as something to be looked “at,” as opposed

to a place to be lived “in.” As Cresswell (2004, p. 10) explains:

Landscape is an intensely visual idea. In most definitions of landscape the viewer is outside of it. This is the primary way in which it differs from place. Places are very much things to be inside of.

Regarded in this way, many of the international students interviewed for this study engage with rurality as “outsiders” in the landscape, positioning themselves as “visitors” in the rural environment, akin to their status as temporary residents in Australia for study purposes. This positioning is similar to Orr’s (1992, p. 130) construction of “residents” and “inhabitants,” where

[a] resident is a temporary occupant, putting down few roots and investing little, knowing little, and perhaps caring little for the immediate locale beyond its ability to gratify. . . . The inhabitant, in contrast, “dwells” . . . in an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing relationship with a place.

Thus, while the international students interviewed for this study have a strong sense of having gone bush by virtue of having moved to a rural environment, their relationship to landscape and sense of detachment from place makes clear that living in a rural place does not necessarily equate to engagement with that place and its associated rural meanings. Indeed, rather than generating any meaningful attachment to rural place, the going bush experience, for our students, seems to have achieved little in this sense beyond expanding their “imagined” images of it.

Conclusion

So what are the consequences of rural for the Orange international student? For a majority of students, the success of their transition experience and their connection to place is very much affected by the fact that their move to a rural place is an expedient choice or even a mistaken one. Students who move to Orange without being fully informed as to its rural location, or who arrive with a plan to move back to an urban location as quickly as possible, necessarily carry with them an attitude to place that clearly marks them as visitors in the rural landscape. Unlike their urban counterparts, Orange international students face a third tier of adjustment when negotiating the pathway into university study—the move to a rural environment. While merely residing in a rural space appears largely unproblematic for the students, the road to being an inhabitant of a rural place is a steep one; one that the students mostly fail to negotiate. Rather, while a majority of students grow to appreciate the visual delights of the rural landscape and take away with them an

appreciation of its natural beauty, their appreciation of the landscape remains markedly “visual.” They position the rural landscape as something to be looked at, as opposed to a place to be lived in. Similarly, they largely fail to engage with rural life beyond the confines of the campus, and often even within the boundaries of the campus itself. In this sense, it is clear that a divide exists between the majority of local and international students on campus. International students express a sense of alienation from the aggie social scene, which is thought to involve the excessive consumption of alcohol. Yet in avoiding this drinking and partying culture, most international students do not mix socially with local students. While it was beyond the scope of this paper to fully explore the broad institutional practices impacting the participants in this study, the results of this research suggest that further enquiry into the hegemonic and discursive practices affecting students’ experience of university life is warranted. Despite the claims that universities make in relation to valuing and fostering student equity and diversity, it would appear that there was a gap between the rhetoric and the reality of this desire for many of the participants in this study. As Brown (2004, p. 24) comments, “a crucial element in moving diversity beyond the rhetoric to the promise that it holds is the commitment of [institutional leaders] without whose support the issue of diversity remains a circular and cyclical intellectual debate.” For USO, to do more than just “get them in” means beginning to address the issues of marginalization voiced by the participants in this study, which might involve a circumspect examination of the social and cultural practices impinging on international students’ experience of university life.

On a more positive note, at its best, going bush produces an experience rich in learning potential for international students, full of opportunity for social engagement and connection with rural meaning. While the realization of this experience was uncommon amongst our participants, it did occur in a handful of cases, in circumstances where the international student had a strong command of the English language, won the accommodation lottery, and arrived at the campus in the “first wave of immigration” to USO—before or during 2003 when there were only a small number of international students on campus. For these students, going bush gave them opportunities to engage with rural life, and to improve their language skills in circumstances that a city university could not have provided.

Overall, the outcomes of this study align closely with the results of Ellis et al. (2005); the only significant examination of rural issues and international students studying at a regional university in the contemporary Australian literature. As in our study, international students acknowledge the positives of the rural physical environment: it is clean, quiet, safe, and aesthetically attractive, once it becomes familiar. The lower cost of living in the country is also recognized, as is the lack of social distractions—a situation viewed as

being conducive to study. Educationally, the challenges non-English speaking background students confront with teaching and learning issues are independent of context, metropolitan or rural. However, the responses to these challenges do vary, with rural campuses reporting more intimate classroom environments, small class sizes and familiarity, and opportunities for educational innovation, with some tailoring of pedagogy to address international student needs. There is also more familiarity with staff, both academic and administrative, often leading to service at a more personalized level, an outcome less likely to be experienced at metropolitan campuses. Under these conditions, even if international students arrive at a rural university campus with a singular cosmopolitan purpose, it would appear that they cannot avoid some of these outcomes of rural, and a wealth of other rural opportunities, provided the circumstances open up for them to be able to engage with them.

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