



A RESEARCH REPORT

on

**THE PSYCHO-SOCIAL NEEDS
OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS ENROLLED IN
DEGREE and DIPLOMA COURSES AT
ACU NATIONAL, MACKILLOP CAMPUS, NORTH SYDNEY**

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Regular members during the life of the project

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2.0 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Research rationale and objectives

During 2006 and 2007, between 50% and 55% of students enrolled at ACU MacKillop campus at North Sydney were international students. The percentage of international students at MacKillop campus has steadily increased during the years from 2004 to 2007 with an overall increase of 20% occurring between 2004 and 2007. In addition to the increasing percentage of international students, there has been an expansion of the number of home countries from which international students came. In 2004 there were 48 home countries represented, and in 2007 there were 62 home countries ensuring that the MacKillop campus is indeed very multicultural.

The research project was designed to identify the psycho-social needs of international students enrolled in degree and diploma courses at MacKillop campus and to locate ways in which ACU National MacKillop campus can improve the response to the identified needs. The research is an example of a whole-of-campus project.

Literature review

An extensive Australian and overseas literature review was completed and it was possible to draw links between these research results and other relevant research, particularly those from Australia. The literature has a broad coverage of psycho-social needs such as experiences of loneliness and isolation, sense of belonging, cross cultural and religious issues, factors involved in well-being and adjustment and general financial and other stressors. What is less covered in the literature are issues of abuse and risk, child care/parenting matters and resilience factors which are all very relevant when looking at the psycho-social needs of international students.

Participants and research methodology

International students enrolled in diploma and degree courses at MacKillop campus were invited to be involved in the research. There were 71 participants made up of 48 international students and 23 key stakeholders. Key stakeholders represented all areas of the campus, including academics, senior and general staff plus several students holding key representative positions. International students representing seventeen countries, were enrolled in diploma, undergraduate and postgraduate courses from the Schools of Nursing, Business and Informatics, and Environmental Science at MacKillop campus.

Data was collected through individual interviews and some focus groups. Qualitative research methodology was used to ensure that the voices and stories of participants were heard. Using grounded theory methodology, the data was analysed to reveal five core themes of identified needs of international students. International students' resilience was mapped and this formed an inspiring part of the research data. Participants were also invited to contribute their ideas and suggestions for improving the University's response to these needs.

Results

The research results are significant in that a number of areas were identified as core psycho-social needs of international students. Five core themes emerged from the research data. These were personal and interpersonal issues; meeting basic needs; risks to psychological and physical well-being; organisational and campus issues with each theme further sub-divided into related substantive codes. A fifth core theme was developed around international students' resilience.

Personal and interpersonal issues

One of the most significant aspects of the results was that a majority of international student participants and key stakeholders rated experiences of loneliness, isolation, lack of connectedness and belonging as the highest psycho-social need of all. The two largest Australian University studies conducted by Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia (2007) and Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2006) reported similar results. For MacKillop campus and for ACU National, there is a strong need to implement recommendations outlined in Section 7.0 that work towards reducing experiences of loneliness and isolation amongst international students whilst increasing a sense of connectedness and belonging on campus.

Work/life/study balance stress was also rated highly by more than half of international student participants and key stakeholder participants reflecting the many demands on international students' lives. There was awareness that this balance can sometimes be precarious leading to increases in experiences of stress. Similarly challenges in communication and language were also rated by more than half of both participant groups as being a significant issue for international students especially in relation to the impact on social connections and friendships as well as on academic performance. The pressures to succeed from self or others along with academic issues were also identified as significant needs adding to the already mentioned personal and interpersonal issues.

All key stakeholders rated cross-cultural issues such as culture shock, grief and loss and reduced supports experienced by international students as a major psycho-social need of international students, whilst less than half of international student participants talked directly about this.

Meeting basic needs

Paramount in this core theme was the issue of financial needs which was rated by more than half of all participants as being a significant issue. International students clearly spoke of constant financial stress and worry and of the related impact on health and on academic performance whilst key stakeholders referenced the cumulative burden of financial stress on students' health and well-being. The lack of transport concessions for international students was another identified need, as was accommodation, employment and navigating cultural differences such as food and 'Aussie culture'.

Risks to psychological and physical well-being

This research mapped issues of risk across a number of domains and found that less than half of both participant groups were concerned about the personal safety needs of international students. Personal safety needs included risks of possible assault, robbery and safety on the streets of Sydney; experiences of exploitation; discrimination on campus; health concerns, both physical and psychological and childcare and parenting issues. One of the strengths of this research is that it has had a strong focus on areas of risk to psychological and physical well-being.

MacKillop campus / organisational issues

The need for better facilities and improved resources including staff resources was identified by more than half of all participants as major issues. More than half of all participants identified many positive experiences of support on campus. In addition to this, transitional issues in adjusting to University in the first year were identified by the majority of key stakeholders as being of high importance which was supported by the international student participants who were enrolled in second or third year.

Less than half of key stakeholders and a minority of international students saw staff cross-cultural communication issues as important.

Stories of resilience

Given the two researchers had a high commitment to hearing stories of resilience it is no surprise that listening to ways in which international students survived and kept going to achieve their goals was a high priority. Both key stakeholders and international students were well able to notice personal resilience and reflect on what influenced the ability to keep going in spite of significant difficulties, bringing a contribution to the literature in this area. The fact that many international students do adjust and graduate is indeed a testament to their amazing efforts against considerable odds.

Summary of results

These results illustrate the core psycho-social needs of international students and as such they can inform the way in which the University continues to respond to these needs. The results are linked directly to the research recommendations made in Section 7.0 and as such are an important contribution to enhancing the University's response to international students. Participants gave many ideas and suggestions (Section 6.3) for improving the University's response to the identified needs and these have also informed the recommendations.

Recommendations

Section 7.0 contains twenty four recommendations which are divided into two groups: those that inform policy and those that inform campus activities. Of particular importance is the recommendation for immediate funding of a continuing dedicated Mentor Program Co-ordinator position at MacKillop campus to develop, implement and co-ordinate systems of mentoring in order to increase a sense of belonging & social interaction on campus and to assist in the reduction of experiences of loneliness and isolation. Nine of the research recommendations have already been implemented across both groups which illustrate the commitment of MacKillop and ACU National to embrace suggestions for improvement in response to meeting the psycho-social needs of international students. Sustaining this effort will be vital to address the remaining recommendations.

Conclusion

This research has significantly contributed to identifying the psycho-social needs of international students at MacKillop campus and has informed the way in which ACU National responds to meeting these needs. The findings from the MacKillop research may extend to all other ACU National campuses and can inform their responses to meeting the needs of international students on their campuses. There are suggestions for further research with this focus so that learning around these issues can continue. The research objectives were achieved and have significantly contributed to knowledge and understanding of the psycho-social needs of international students enrolled at MacKillop campus. Most importantly, the research was conducted in an inclusive and respectful way, and hopefully will enhance the overall well-being of international students enrolled at ACU National.

3.0 INTRODUCTION

3.0 INTRODUCTION.

The purpose of this document is to report on the ACU National Ethics Committee approved research project conducted from August 2006 to December 2007 on the psycho-social needs of international students enrolled in degree and diploma courses at ACU National, MacKillop Campus, North Sydney. This report will provide information about relevant literature, participant demographics, research methodology, analysis of data and results obtained. It will make recommendations that are designed to improve and contribute to the psycho-social well being of international students enrolled at MacKillop Campus, with potential for application across all ACU National campuses.

- ACU National is a public Catholic university with five campuses across the eastern states of Australia. MacKillop campus is based at North Sydney; this campus is very close to the Harbour Bridge and the busy Sydney city centre and is a popular destination for international students.
- Because the campus is small (total student body numbered 3,068 in 2007) and offers Diploma and Degree (both undergraduate and postgraduate) courses in Nursing, Business and Informatics and Environmental Science, the MacKillop campus provides an attractive opportunity for many international students. ACU also provides flexible English Language Programs and Diploma Pathways for international students (ACU National 2008a).
- ACU National has an affordable fee structure for international students (ACU National 2008a) which can also be an attraction to prospective international students.

ACU National has endorsed and ratified a Strategic Plan for Internationalisation: 2008 – 2012 which “establishes specific strategies to further the internationalisation objectives of ACU National. It formulates strategies to implement relevant policies, bring into strategic context a number of projects already in train, and identify new objectives, policy and procedural framework, projects and targets” (ACU National, 2008b,p.3). The Strategic plan for Internationalisation will strongly inform the University’s response to the needs of international students over the next four years and will guide the pro-active response to meeting the needs of international students.

The ACU National Mission Statement has relevance to this research as illustrated by the following words that embrace the well-being of all students, including the psycho-social needs of international students.

The University's inspiration, within 2,000 years of Catholic intellectual tradition, summons it to attend to all that is of concern to human beings. It brings a distinctive spiritual perspective to the common tasks of higher education....The University explicitly engages the social, ethical and religious dimensions of the questions it faces in teaching and research, and service. In its endeavours, it is guided by a fundamental concern for justice and equity, and the dignity of all human beings. Australian Catholic University has a primary responsibility to provide excellent higher education for its entire diversified and dispersed student body. (ACU Website)

3.1 PROJECT RATIONALE

During 2006 and 2007, between 50% and 55% of students enrolled at ACU MacKillop Campus at North Sydney were international students. The percentage of international students at MacKillop campus has steadily increased during the years from 2004 to 2007 (see Table 2.1) with an overall increase of 20% occurring between 2004 and 2007. In addition to the increasing percentage of international students, there was also an expansion of the number of home countries from which international students came (see Table 2.1). In 2004 there were 48 home countries represented, and in 2007 there were 61 home countries ensuring that the MacKillop campus is indeed very multicultural.

Table 2.1 ACU MacKillop Campus Statistics

(Source: ACU Statistical Digest and Statistics Unit)

	2004	2005	2006	2007
Number of international students enrolled at MacKillop campus	798	1,203	1,418	1,683
% of total student body	35.3%	47.4%	50.9%	55.0%
Number of home countries represented	48	59	61	62

Table 2.2 Comparison of % and Number of International Students enrolled at all ACU Campuses in 2007 (Source: ACU National Statistics Dept.)

CAMPUS	MacKillop	St Patricks	McCauley	MSM	Signadou	Aquinas	Virtual
Percentage	55.0%	16.3%	12.7%	4.3%	1.1%	0.6%	0.3%
Number of international students	N = 1683	N = 754	N = 345	N=137	N = 8	N = 3	N = 3

Given the statistics in Tables 2.1 and 2.2 there is no doubt that MacKillop Campus stands apart in ACU National in terms of having a significantly higher percentage of international students on campus which inevitably impacts on all aspects of university life. It also demands culturally sensitive and appropriate responses to identified needs. The research project was seen to be one way to hear about the needs of international students and to develop recommendations for optimum responses. The entire MacKillop community embraced the research, and it can be seen as a whole of campus project.

In late 2005 the ACU National Dean of Students (Associate Professor Tim O’Hearn) was very keen for research to be conducted on the psycho-social needs of international students at MacKillop campus, especially in light of the statistics presented in Table 2.2. Associate Professor O’Hearn was also interested to research ways in which ACU National, and more specifically the MacKillop campus could improve the response to meeting the needs of international students on campus. A research project was seen as the most appropriate way to achieve this using qualitative research methodology.

It seemed very appropriate that Student Services undertake the research project given that this unit is connected with enhancing the well being of all students on campus. As such, the MacKillop Counselling Service through one of the counselling staff took up the responsibility of leading the research, and in August 2006 the ACU National Ethics Committee approved the research proposal.

3.2 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

1. To research the psycho-social needs of international students enrolled in Diploma and Degree courses at ACU National, North Sydney Campus.
2. To conduct the research in such a way as to support international students to have the opportunity to identify and articulate their psycho-social needs.
3. To enhance the University’s response to the psycho-social needs of International students on campus.

For the purpose of this research international students are defined as being people who are admitted to Australia for study purposes and have a student visa. International students are not permanent residents of Australia. International students on this arrangement are called on-shore students and have a fee paying structure each semester. International student participants in this research needed to be enrolled at ACU National MacKillop campus in degree or diploma courses on a student visa. The research project did not include those students from overseas who are in Australia on humanitarian visas and studying at ACU National as this cohort has a different legal status from the international students on student visas.

3.3 PROJECT TEAM

The Research Reference group was formed from key stakeholders across the campus and met regularly to provide valuable input to the research (see Acknowledgements – page 3). The principal researcher, Judy Wright (Counsellor in Student Services) worked on the research from July 2006 to April 2008, and the student researcher Melinda Gollan worked between July 2006 and December 2006 under Ms Wright’s supervision.

3.4 TIMEFRAME

The research project was approved by the ACU National Ethics Committee for a timeline of July 2006 – August 2007. However an application was successfully made to the ACU National Ethics committee to extend the research to December 2007 to allow for more international student participants to be interviewed. In order to complete the final research report another extension was given to April 2008. As the principal researcher only joined ACU National in January 2006, she was ineligible to apply for any of the ACU National research grants that require three years of employment at ACU National, or other grants such as the ANZSSA (Australian and New Zealand Student Services Association) which requires membership of two years to be eligible for funding. A recommendation to respond to this situation is included in Section 7.0 of this report.

4.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Introductory statement

When we drew the parameters for the literature review we set out to compile a current and comprehensive yet manageable text. Consistent with this aim we have excluded works published pre 1995. Our review is by no means exhaustive. We used a broad lenses approach which unpacks the primary circulating themes offering a cross sectional overview of research into the psycho social needs of international students. Primary attention has been given to research undertaken within the Australian context. Works from Europe, New Zealand and the US have been referenced as supplementary sources. A majority of the literature review was completed during the key stakeholders interviews and prior to the international student interviews, with further literature being reviewed after the participant interviews were all completed. Findings from the literature review informed the development of questions asked for both the key stakeholder and international student participant interviews.

The earliest published research on the needs of international students within the Australian context emerged in the 1980's. In the most part this research was initiated by academic skills unit staff with concerns "about the loneliness experienced by many international students." (Smart, Volet and Ang, 2000, p.13). More recent scholarship reflects a growing awareness of the broad scope of material, socio/cultural and psychological factors which impact on the quality of life of international students.

Our project has been informed by Dr Jennifer Carpenter's 2004 report to the ACU Institute for the Advancement of Teaching and Learning entitled The teaching and learning of international students at ACU: issues and strategies. Carpenter's report was based on interviews with key stakeholders mainly working at MacKillop campus and reviewing current literature. In addition to thoroughly examining the academic learning needs, it also addressed some of the social-cultural issues, and recommended strategies for ACU National's response. This included:

- "Continued support for international students' orientation week
- Encouraging interaction with local students
- Peer-pairing programmes
- Staff development to include awareness of challenges facing students
- Introduction of an international student adviser
- Providing for spiritual needs" (Carpenter, 2004, p. 14)

Carpenter's (2004) recommendations are useful in providing a context for the present research, and in mapping the historical resonance of issues and the progress and impact of responding to such identified strategies.

Whilst most literature gives useful recommendations and ideas to universities around improving their response to the international students perhaps the most powerful message comes from Butcher and McGrath (2004) who promote the notion of a proactive rather than reactive response as being essential for Universities to meet international students' needs. Butcher et al. (2004) define a pro-active response as "anticipating students' needs and potential problems, articulating and addressing expectations, providing education and information and enhancing well-being" (p. 548) across academic and social domains. These writers maintain that pro-active pastoral care programs can be used to address the gap between expectations and experiences, including the areas of University marketing and funding.

Zhang (2002) rightly cautions us to critique simplistic, homogenising definitions of international students which conceal the myriad of differences which present intra and inter culturally. Nevertheless whilst taking care to avoid concealing and/or subsuming difference with unitary explanations, the exercise of exploring the needs of international students is important if only to flag areas of potential contestation, negotiation and difference which may cause difficulties. Consequently, mindful of these tensions it was with caution that we searched for thematic linkages and attempted to synthesise the literature into a cogent and representative work.

Several projects incorporated the voices of a range of international students using quantitative methodology (Rosenthal, Russell and Thompson, 2006; Deumert, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia and Sawir, 2005) achieved large and most inclusive sample groups. Other studies also using qualitative methodology have results delimited by small sample sizes. Dalglish (2005) had 38 students participate whilst Smart, Volet and Ang, (2000) had eight international students participants. The data collection approaches using qualitative methodology of these smaller mentioned studies supported the development of “thick descriptions” (Punch, 1998, p.192) through the use of focus groups and open style interviews.

Most problematic when looking for themes with transferability to international students generally are the many studies which focus on sub groups of international students (Asmar 2005, re Muslim students; Novera, 2004, re Indonesian students; Choi 1997, re Korean students; Ahmad 2006, re Indian students and Volet and Tan-Quigley, 1999 re south East Asian students. What is important about these specific country / population focus studies is that they raise important issues in relation to cultural / religious beliefs and the students’ needs. Asmar’s study (2005) contrasted domestic and International Muslim student’s course experiences. Responses were collated from Muslim students across 13 Australian university campuses and findings refute views which posit “cultural difference [as] a problem located largely among international students” (p.11).

Ahmad’s study looked at the need for improved marketing to prospective international students in India to increasingly reflect reality so that expectations on arrival are not disparate from what is experienced (2006). Dalglish and Chan (2005) report frequent mismatches between what international students expect their experience of studying in Australia will be like with the realities. Zhang’s (2002) study whilst confined to Chinese international students still highlights broad areas of need which are likely to have relevance for many international students. Choi’s use of grounded theory is a reaction to the strictures of predominant quantitative projects on international students which have been based on surveys and questionnaires. Choi’s research design facilitates a reading of more nuanced subject perspectives.

Personal and Interpersonal Issues:

Sense of belonging or connectedness and experiences of loneliness

Within Australian university environments this is a paramount theme that emerged from Rosenthal et al. (2006) research findings. Core to Rosenthal et al.’s conceptualising of connectedness is knowing that there are persons who are accessible, caring, active listeners who are able to help when required. Rosenthal et al. (2006) concluded that “a strong sense of connectedness is fundamental to students’ well-being” (p.5). 53% percent of international students in their study reported feeling that they do not belong at

university to any significant extent. On a more positive note the longer that students spent enrolled at university the more connected they were reported to feel.

The design and scope of this project adds weight to the results. A sample of one-third of the international student population at the University of Melbourne was targeted in 2005 with a 44% response rate (979 students). The breakdown of demographic variables recorded for the total international student population (with the exception of ratios for gender) was mirrored in the survey cohort. A primary aim of the project was to garner subjective international student views on their bio-psycho-social well being to underpin interrogation of claims and suppositions made in recent literature of increased levels of anxiety, stress and depression amongst international students. The survey instrument Rosenthal et al. (2006) used was a questionnaire which was limited by the strictures of predetermined scales which precluded spontaneous and expansive responses. Nevertheless the broad range of questions positioned across the primary measures of perceived experiences of connectedness, cultural stress, abuse, anxiety, distress, general stress and general health and well being form a substantive platform for further investigation.

International students frequently complain of a lack of opportunities for meeting domestic students (Dalglish and Chan, 2005). This theme was comprehensively explored by Smart et al. (2000). Together the studies reveal both Australian and international students report little inter-cultural interactions. This was reportedly of much greater concern to the international students whose expectations for high levels of interaction with local students were seriously disappointed. Smart et al. (2000) reported all international students they surveyed at Murdoch University related that even though they had spent at least one year in Australia, they had not made one Australian friend who they could write to upon returning home. The students rightly viewed this as a missed opportunity for the whole university. The factor students most often selected as prohibitive to interactions was 'cultural differences' (Smart et al. 2000).

Because of little commonality of interests, students reported engaging in conversations cross culturally as problematic. Examples of cultural impediments to social engagement were "differences in sporting interests and lifestyle." (Ti, as cited in Smart et al., 2000, p.24). Volet and Ang (1988) along with Smart et al. (2000) relates that international students viewed "the 'boozing culture' of Australian students" (Smart et. al., p.24) as a serious impediment to closer relations between the two student groups. Smart et al. found many international students critical of universities holding separate orientation processes for domestic and international students. It was strongly asserted by the students this practice encouraged separation, and moreover denied valuable opportunities for making friends cross culturally.

McInnes, James and McNaught's research (cited in Smart et al. 2000) supports this standpoint. McInnes et al. concluded that friendships created in orientation time were likely to be sustained through commencement of classes. As a consequence "if international students had made friends only with international students during orientation and locals only with locals, then they tended to work together when lessons started and the chances for interaction between the two groups would diminish further" (Smart et al. 2000, p.28). Further Smart et al. (2000) found in the most part international students perceived it was the university's responsibility to facilitate and promote their interactions with domestic students both inside and outside the classroom.

Volet and Ang (1988) strongly encourage that the attitudes and behaviours of local students towards cross cultural interaction is under researched in Australia and needs attention to increase understanding and change. The suggestions for further research (Section 6.6) in this report includes a recommendation that research is needed into the experiences and needs of local students at MacKillop campus around cross cultural interaction, supporting Volet and Ang's (1988) suggestion. Paulusz (2004) reports that in a qualitative research project 'identifying and providing culturally relevant support services to international students' (p.1) conducted at Deakin University, the "most significant aspect of the results was the need of international students for both social and academic interaction with their peers and integration into the community" (p. ii) and this also extended to a sense of connectedness with staff. Paulusz asserted that the degree of connectedness experienced by international students impacted on their "studies, emotional well-being and attitudes to Australia." (p. 29). This links directly with the results obtained from this research and as such is an important point.

Some of the effects of a lowered sense of belonging or connectedness can heighten a sense of loneliness experienced by international students highlighting the importance of developing strategies to foster connection and social interaction on campus. Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia (2007) conducted an extensive qualitative research study of 200 international students from nine universities in Victoria, Sydney and Queensland, focusing on international student experiences of loneliness. This research is significant in that it constitutes the most major research conducted with this focus in Australia to date. Experiences of loneliness operate over several domains - personal, social and cultural loneliness (Sawir et al. 2007) with research results showing that 65% of international students interviewed identified that "they had experienced loneliness or isolation in Australia" (p.11), and that experiences of loneliness in international students can be expected.

Sawir et al. (2007) draw on Hofstede's distinction between individualistic and collectivist cultures as being an important factor in understanding social and cultural loneliness and the need for local and international students to work to develop 'bonding' relationships across the collectivist and individualist cultural contexts (Sawir et al. 2007, p 24). Sawir et al. also promote the idea that it is both the local and international student populations that will need to move towards each other with "mutual respect" (p. 26) so as to facilitate a strengthening of meaningful bonds. Marginson's reading of contemporary research suggests "foreign students are required to adjust to Australians rather than vice versa" (2002, p.22). Such research illuminating local students perspectives on cross cultural exchanges are negligible. Smart et al.'s (2000) project was a reaction to this dearth of material. They argue this absence of knowledge delimits considerations of "[t]he mutual role of local students in social encounters...[and] the characteristics of the local environments which may inhibit interactions between the groups." (p.15). This silence reinforces dominant discourses which label international students as problematic.

Asmar (2005) asserts it is commonplace for international students to be seen "as requiring extra attention, if not remediation of 'deficits' and that stereotypes of them as 'problems' persist" (p.1). Devos (2003) conducts an analysis of the discursive construction of the international student and concludes that a discourse in Australia was established in 2001 that set up international students as "the other and as the problem for declining standards in universities", rather than reduced funding for example (p.165).

This is an important idea to consider, particularly in relation to the increasing internationalisation of the tertiary sector in Australia.

Suggested strategies to build a sense connectedness and belonging.

Mentor / peer support programs

Researchers almost always report that students want peer support through organised mentor systems on campus and that mentoring / peer support programs work to enhance student's confidence, social interaction, learning and an increased sense of connection and belonging to the university community. Review of the literature shows that the majority of mentor programs in universities have appointed Co-ordinator positions to develop and market the program to students and staff, to plan and provide regular training and support, and to organise, co-ordinate and develop the entire Service in partnerships across campus. In some universities mentors are students who volunteer and receive university certificates or other means of acknowledging their contribution, whilst in other universities student mentors are paid an hourly rate. Mentees are usually students who volunteer to be in the program. Mentor relationships can be a one-off arrangement whilst others involve a regular weekly / fortnightly or monthly meeting lasting over a variety of times. Most of the mentor programs involve face to face contact though there are some e-mentoring programs (Barrett-See and Grove (2007); Boyd (2006); Cook and Wilson (2004); Dearlove, Farrell, Handa and Pastore (2007); Devereux (2004); Dewart, Drees, Hixenbaugh and Thorn (2006); Glaser, Hall, and Halperin (2006); Hellsten (2002); Purdey and Taylor (2003).

Hellsten (2002) promotes student mentoring programs as “being effective and a low cost strategy implemented at the ‘grass roots’ level” (p. 12) that can offer the international student support and guidance from current students at the university. Purdey and Taylor (2003) assert that the “ability of international students to engage with domestic students and the wider community depends on.... active programs to integrate students with locals; buddy / peer programs..... and cultural activities on campus to celebrate diversity” (p. 4). This adds weight to the notion that universities have a role in developing programs / activities that foster opportunities for social interaction amongst all students. Krause (2005) reiterates the abundance of research that attests to the benefits of mentor / peer support programs in universities, and that enhance and build a sense of belonging and connection.

Dearlove et al. (2007) describes a peer mentoring program at UWS (University of Western Sydney) which has been running since 1995. Though the peer mentoring program at UWS is predominantly geared to academic and learning achievement, other outcomes such as improved social interaction amongst students involved in the program is achieved. Dearlove et al. refer to the fact that “peer mentoring has only ever been given minimal funding” which has meant that “co-ordination has always been part of a Learning Adviser's job” (p.26). Dearlove et al. raise this point as being one of the challenges at UWS and it is a point very well considered. Cook and Wilson (2004) describe a successful pilot peer mentor program for first year students from non-English speaking backgrounds that was implemented in 2005 at Monash University Gippsland campus, whilst Devereux (2004) reports that a mentoring program for international students at the University of Canberra had high rates of satisfaction for both the local student volunteers and the international students involved in the program. Devereux (2004) also notes that there were gains for the campus community around the inclusiveness and social tolerance modelled in the program.

The Macquarie University Mentor Program (2007) is geared towards new students settling in to University life with mentor support. One quote from an International student who engaged in the Macquarie University mentor program as a mentee says. *“I found the mentor program very useful...it just made the transition to uni a little less daunting”* (Mentors@Macquarie website – Information and Registration form). All of these programs add weight to the usefulness of mentor programs in supporting social and community connection with strong outcomes for international students. This is further strengthened by Glaser et al. (2006) who report on an extensive peer mentoring programs at the University of New South Wales involving 500 mentors with 1200 first year students (mentees) with evaluations showing that “the program has a positive effect on transition to university, sense of belonging to the university community, retention and skill development” (p. 4).

Barrett-See and Grove (2007) describe a movement in the University of New South Wales mentoring program towards a shift from “positional leaders to leadership efficacy in any student which incorporates aspects of ethical leadership, teamwork, self leadership, self renewal and sustainability” (Slide 15). Boyd (2006) promotes the social support theory as a useful way of understanding the success of peer mentoring programs in that connecting students through planned social interaction can provide support with positive outcomes. For international students who may be inhibited from engaging and mixing socially due to cultural and communication issues these reports on peer mentoring programs show the benefit of peer mentoring as a structured supportive system in facilitating connection and belonging.

Given the current advances in technology and the wide usage of the internet by university students there are some innovative developments around e-mentoring systems that are interesting and important to review. Boyd (2006) reports on a student mentoring program at the University of South Australia that has Web components in addition to personal mentee/mentor meeting time with positive outcomes reported for students involved in the program whilst Dewart et al. (2006) report on an on-line e-mentoring scheme from the University of Westminster, England. Dewart et al. (2006) maintains that there is particular value in developing on-line e-mentoring systems where the student population is large, diverse and geographically spread.

Evaluations over a 4 year period showed that this e-mentoring scheme was rated as being a positive experience by mentors and mentees with benefits for both groups. The authors locate the e-mentoring scheme in a context of universities working to engage students through providing supportive networks and enhancing student retention. Toonan (2007) supports the notion of building on-line supports for students given at ACU National. In the ACU National Counselling Service web based self- help tool for managing stress that was developed in March 2007 there has been a “hit- rate of 12,500 from a student population of 13,000 across three states and a territory” (p.1) indicating that university students are responding to web based systems and resources at a high rate. This provides vital evidence that university students are responding well to web based systems of support and future planning of services, including mentor / peer support services need to keep this in mind when considering the range of options for such services. Additionally it would be useful if research could be conducted on international students’ use of web based support services and the satisfaction and fit of such services for this cohort.

Community engagement programs

Gresham (2003) writes about the interaction between international students at the University of Newcastle and the local community in what Gresham describes as a volunteer community engagement project that has been successfully running since 1997. The linking of volunteer community members with international students to offer connection, friendship and “everyday support” (p.33) has been evaluated as providing both the volunteers and the international students with increased understanding, closer ties between cultures, having fun, providing opportunities to practise speaking English and building relationships with positive outcomes for both groups. Gresham (2003) and both groups of participants emphasise the importance of having a dedicated Co-ordinator of the program. Sawir et al. (2007) also promotes the idea of building connections beyond the University and linking students with local communities to reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Other programs and strategies

Dawson and Conti-Bekkers (2002) address culture shock in their Curtin Pathfinder Program at Curtin University of Technology in an effort to both normalise experiences of culture shock and to work towards students understanding their responses with movement towards “social growth” (p. 3). The Pathfinder program is a six week cultural / study skills facilitated transition program for international students offered early and designed to show a useful and respectful response to international students at a predicted time of stress in order to enhance their ability to manage. This concept is useful in that it illustrates a way to respond to both the needs of international students and to the issues around the ‘first year transition’ both of which are critical issues.

Further support for the early response to international students comes through Sawir et al.’s (2007) comments that “it is essential that universities resource student servicing and classroom strategies adequate to help students with personal and social loneliness, especially in the early stages” (p. 23). Mak (2000) writes about the EXCELL (EXcellence in Cultural Experiential Learning and Leadership) program that is designed to enhance socio-cultural competence and in so doing increase international students sense of well being and increase their cultural knowledge, social skills and confidence. The program has been used in universities in Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom with evaluations showing achievement of the program’s goals to the benefit of international students and is another useful model to be considered. Borrett and Zysk (2007) conducted a very well attended ‘Relationships and Friendships across Cultures Forum’ for commencing international students as part of orientation activities at the University of Adelaide which addressed healthy relationships and friendships using a panel of international students in second and later years. The idea of such a forum is another creative way to reach international students on a topic that is of importance.

Communication issues – English as a second language

The links between confidence in speaking and understanding English and social interaction are well established in the research. Batrowicz (1999) in concert with Asmar (2005) invites us to broaden our lens when considering the needs of international students to include needs of Australians from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB). Both authors cite many commonalities of needs shared by these groups. Such as difficulties with English not being a first language (together with the challenges this presents for tutorial participation), obstacles to participation in general university life and accessing services. They argue that the sheer volume of students presenting with important

socio-cultural and linguistic needs as a consequence of this more inclusive approach demands universities taking affirmative action to support both international and NESB students.

Paulusz (2004) reported that international students commented on English as a second language increasing their difficulty in managing academic learning and performance, and in gaining cultural understandings. This added a very significant dimension to the links between communication and social interaction. Sharrouf (2004) and Carpenter (2004) see language differences as potentially being obstacles to inter-cultural communication, and can increase an international students' sense of isolation. Sawir et al. (2007) conclude that "none is more important an issue than assistance with learning English, a vital, ongoing condition of survival and academic success" (p. 23). Some of the challenges associated with communicating in the English language were stated by many participants in the MacKillop research project as being significant impediments to successful social interaction and linking with associated reduced sense of belonging and connection on campus.

Balance between study and other domains of life and associated stress

Key findings of Rosenthal et al. (2006) included that around 50% of their respondents stated attaining negligible or nil balance between study and all other domains of life. Further it was reported that respondents felt less balance in lives which was directly related to diminished feelings of coping with study load. Strong linkages were reported between perceived life-world equilibrium, levels of coping, and levels of academic advancement. These factors were said to productively interact so anxieties were found to be further exacerbated by immense pressure felt to meet family expectations.

Stress about the need to achieve was acknowledged by a large proportion of students "very much or most of the time" (Rosenthal et al., 2006, p.41). Of particular interest is the conundrum underscored by this work that whilst social interaction with Australian students is not common, the lowest subjective measured levels of cultural stress were clearly linked to the greatest degree of social interaction with Australians. This is of interest because it supports the notion that to develop systems that support social interaction to occur between local and international students contributes to reducing experiences of cultural stress. Sawir et al. (2007) stress that "the single most important element in strategies for providing a better environment for international students is to improve their relations with local students." (p. 26).

Financial pressures

Rosenthal et al. (2006), Sawir et al. (2007); Paulusz (2004); Carpenter (2004); Bradley (2000); Mori (2000) all address the serious impact of financial pressures and income insecurity for many international students with major effects of stress and worry. From many studies on international students' issues, financial concerns repeatedly appear as a high priority issue. The psychological and academic ramifications can be very significant. Rosenthal et al. (2006), whilst citing considerable numbers of international students with serious concerns about the adequacy of their financial supports, relate worry over finances is 'positively' and 'significantly' linked to the extent of student depression, anxiety and stress. Butcher and McGrath (2004) challenge the "perception (in New Zealand) that all international students are wealthy (or at least their parents, as fee payers, are wealthy)" (p. 540). This is disputed by research that shows that some international students in New Zealand "are wealthy but many are not" (p 540) and that the impact of

financial stress can extend over many areas of an international student's life. These perceptions of international students being wealthy in New Zealand anecdotally are also current in Australia as evidenced by comments made by a number of international student participants saying in this research that they feel many others have the view of them as "cash cows".

Lantz (2005) links both financial pressures and issues of risk in the research conducted on tertiary female students working in the sex industry in Victoria which includes five international students in the research participant cohort numbering forty. Lantz's results showed that the "reasons for entering the sex industry were predominantly driven by financial need" (p.389) to pay fees and complete study, particularly for the international students. Lantz also noted that international students often had to work in the illegal sex industry which exposed them to increased personal risk and exploitation. Lantz also reported on the pressure students felt to hide their sex industry work from friends and others which in turn led to additional personal stress and isolation with reduced opportunities for support. Lantz's research is very important as it is the "only qualitative research in Australia that specifically explores the lives of students working in the sex industry" (p.386). This research also provides important information about the experiences of international students in response to financial pressures and adds weight to similar information collected in this MacKillop research project.

Issues of risk, sexual safety, general safety, abuse, discrimination and exploitation

Unfortunately, there appears to be a gap in the literature around mapping international student experiences of abuse or exploitation. Butcher and McGrath (2004) refer to the mental health issues international students are perceived to experience in New Zealand but credit this phenomenon to negative media reporting which adds to the stress international students can experience. Bradley (2000) relates risk of poor mental health in situations where international students are exposed to high degrees of stress and pressure from academic, social and economic sources in research conducted at the University of Hull, United Kingdom.

In addressing the mental health concerns of international students attending an American college campus Mori (2000) identifies a higher risk of mental health issues for international students given the many additional sources of stress these students experience. Seah (2007) from the University of South Australia likens the transition of international students to Australia as experiences of grief and loss (loss of family/ friends/ culture/ familiar things) with significant impact on international students' well-being and psychological health. Rosenthal et al. (2006) draw attention to the results of their study at the University of Melbourne that showed that international students recorded "slightly elevated levels of depression, anxiety and stress" (p.4). Given the experiences of loneliness and homesickness that many international students report (Sawir et al. 2007; Van Tilburg, Vingerhoets and Van Heck (1996); Rosenthal et al.(2006) and the cultural, academic, personal, social and financial challenges faced, mental health issues are very relevant for this cohort of students, and for universities looking to respond to reduce such stressors.

Bradley (2000) promotes global citizenship thinking as a way to embrace responding to the needs of international students in caring and supportive ways. In the same way, Davies (2006) encourages the notion of global citizenship which incorporates "social justice; rights and culture and cultural conflict" (p. 5) as ways to understand diverse

communities and, as Devos (2003) contends, lessen the “process of ‘othering’ international students” (p.163). This has significance in working to reduce experiences of discrimination on campus and other excluding practices.

Other risks can include exploitation in regards to pay rates in work situations, untenable demands by employers, poor training and sexual harassment in the workplace (Deumert, et al. 2005) housing rental conditions and physical and verbal abuse. Participants in the Rosenthal et al. (2006) study reported “perceived experiences of physical abuse 2.9%, sexual harassment 8.4%, verbal abuse 28.8% and exclusion 46.7%” (p. 3). Butcher and McGrath (2004) report instances of international students reporting experiences of discrimination which is relevant to a similar focus in this research.

Other research reports that many international students are sexually active and have limited access to education about sexual health (Rosenthal et al. 2006; Borrett and Zysk 2007). In the Rosenthal et al. (2006) research, 38% of international students reported being sexually active with only half saying they used sexual protection. Sexual safety is an important issue for the physical and psychological health of all students especially international students who are new to Australia and perhaps new to sexual freedoms and possibilities not previously experienced. Borrett and Zysk (2007) at the University of South Australia invited a local sexual health service to provide information on sexual health to students in association with a relationships and friendships across cultures forum.

There is almost no literature on the needs of international students who are parents so little is known about child care issues or how being a parent (with children in their care or where children have been left in the home country) impacts on international student and on their general sense of well-being. This links directly with this MacKillop research where we have has a strong focus on the needs of international students who are parents with some useful ideas for responding to their needs emerging.

Resilience and coping

Looking at resilience in relation to international students is an important issue yet this is another area in the literature where a gap exists. Saleebey (2006) comments that resilience research attests to “the discovery that resilience is a ‘self-righting’ capacity for healthy growth and development – even in the face of challenges” (p. 198). Drawing on resilience studies in working with children and families, Saleebey (2006) promotes the vital importance of environmental protective factors, including “building community and proving opportunities for participation and contribution” (p. 247) as critical supports for the strengthening of resilience. As an extension of this, Saleebey (2006) also refers to “community resilience” (p. 246) as being in relationship with individual resilience. This latter idea is vital to university communities where the opportunity strongly exists to create a supportive, caring and inclusive community with benefits to students.

Rosenthal et al. (2007) comment that the majority of international students in their study reported that their “approaches to coping and adaptation were positive and effective” (p. 2). Wang (2007) conducted research focusing on resilient characteristics of international students studying in the United States of America and concluded that “resilience had the greatest effect on adjustment” (p.1). Wang’s research is interesting in that it is unique in its focus on resilience and the variables that influence this. Wang promotes the idea

(amongst other ideas) that universities provide some facilities to assist international students to assess their own levels of resilience in order to increase it, as well as providing role models from others. This research and its “recommendations to universities, international students and to campus policy makers” (p.19) is significant when thinking about ways to respond to international students to support the strengthening of resilience in order to support maximum opportunities for adaptation.

Sawir et al. (2007) reported that of the students who identified as having feelings of loneliness, “88% turned to personal or social networks, 10% became immersed in activities and 15% drew on personal resources” (p.16) . These coping strategies are also linked with using support services at university and elsewhere. Sawir et al. noted that some students managed through a comfort with “personal solitude” (p. 19) including calling on religious beliefs. Students mentioned contact with home (family / friends) as being part of their personal resource which locates the support network within a global context. Noticing ways in which international students cope is an important aspect to understanding the survival and adaptation process.

Sawir et al. (2007) also refer to a number of international students who indicated in that study that they had not experienced loneliness. Several things were in common with these students. These included “starting off well, having family nearby, having good social networks and having personal characteristics such as busyness or extroversion” (p. 21). This is supported by Butcher (as cited in Butcher and McGrath, 2004) who noted that some international students interacted readily and easily with others showing personal resilience and adaptation in situations of change. These research results are consistent with the results obtained in this MacKillop research and gives vital information about aspects of resilience and adaptation that can be important in responding to the psycho-social needs of international students.

SUMMARY OF LITERATURE REVIEW

There is little doubt from the literature that there are definite links between feelings of connectedness and a sense of well-being and that universities play a significant role in working to provide a sense of community where connection and belonging can occur. Given that it is also well established that international students will experience a sense of loneliness across a number of dimensions (personal, social and cultural) the literature strongly promotes that universities take active steps to work towards programs that enhance and build experiences of inclusion and connection in order to enhance international students' adjustment and coping.

The literature gives many examples of how to build connectedness on university campuses through the planning and funding of mentor / peer programs (as one example) to facilitate and support quality social interaction between international and local students. Lacina (2002) in addressing the needs of international students comments that the "social environment is one important aspect of the university experience that should not be ignored" (p. 26). The literature has a broad coverage of the issues of loneliness and isolation, sense of belonging, cross cultural and religious issues, particular cultural groups' needs, factors involved in well-being and adjustment and general financial and other stressors. What is less covered in the literature are issues of abuse and risk, child care/parenting issues and resilience factors, all of which are important areas for further focus and research.

On the ACU National Web/International students site it is stated that "we offer international students on all campuses the opportunity to mix with Australian students to ensure that they have a truly 'Australian' experience". All of the relevant reviewed literature promotes that just providing campuses where there is a mix of international and local students is not enough. In fact at MacKillop, where 55.0% (2007 figures) of the student population is international a pro-active response such as a funded mentor program seems essential to contribute to building a sense of connection and social-cultural interaction alongside other strategies. Devereaux (2004) comments that "Universities have much to gain from peer support programs, but to be effective such programs need to be adequately resourced" (p.7). This is an important message.

5.0: METHODOLOGY

5.1 RESEARCH DESIGN – QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODS

The use of qualitative research methodology was the preferred approach given the importance of the social and cultural context of participants, and the focus of the research study overall. Qualitative research design was also used because of the high value placed on hearing the stories and experiences of international Students. Using personal interviews or focus groups supported this to happen, and ensured that the voices of International students would be heard. This research approach is respectful of the social and cultural experiences of International students and supports the making visible what might be less noticed. In this way some important issues / needs can be named. A similar approach was used with the key stakeholders, who were all also individually interviewed. As participants were to be interviewed, application was made to the ACU National Ethics Committee for approval with all associated matters addressed in relation to participant rights around informed consent (see Appendix). At all times, respectful research practice was applied to all contact with participants. Participation was voluntary, and a participant could withdraw at any time.

5.2 RESEARCH METHODS

Grounded theory is a qualitative research methodology. It uses categories drawn from participants themselves and then through thematic analysis codes these to represent core themes after comparing interviews and focus group content. Grounded theory also looks for causal relationships and fits things into a basic frame of generic relationship, supporting useful analysis of the information to occur. In this way, a final set of themes can emerge.

Grounded Theory methodology underpinned the way we collected and analysed the interview data. Punch 1998 gives a clear explanation of the three tiered levels of ‘open’, ‘axial’ and ‘selective’ coding which are essentials of grounded theory as co-originated by Glaser and Strauss 1967 cited by Punch. These concepts are reframed as ‘substantive codes’ or the inceptive classifications of data; ‘theoretical codes’ which are categories of connectives which join the first order codes and ‘core codes’ “which [are] the higher-order conceptualization[s]” (Punch, p.210) of the analysis. Sarantakos 2005 cites (Strauss and Corbin, 1998) as the authors of the concept. In grounded theory saturation point occurs when no new information is provided by participants. In this research, this occurred in both participant cohort groups indicating that sufficient data in relation to the research focus had been collected with the core codes substantially developed. Sarantakos sketches ‘theoretical saturation’ as the point at which there is no fresh ideas emerging.

The inductive design of grounded theory demands the minimal use of strictures and also the setting aside of preconceived ideas [as far as is practicable] (Alston and Bowles, 2003). The aim of researchers using this method is to support the emergence of authentic themes and patterns without pre-conceiving them. The data collected become the building blocks to shape a narrative around a specific area of social reality. Rigid data collection strategies which pre-empt what will be discovered, then delimit any findings further through prescribed categories are to be avoided. Yet some general parameters must be set lest uncontextualised findings result which have no substantive meaning. Accordingly we developed some general open ended questions to direct participants’ attention to consideration of needs of international students.

We remained open to revision of our questions as interviews progressed to support participants offering their most expansive and nuanced responses. Further this reflexive strategy was designed to galvanize thematic by crafting a space to further expound responses around key issues which arose though never leading the replies. The use of non directive probes was held as a supplementary option if required to encourage amplification and clarification of responses. (Alston and Bowles, 2003). To aid consistency of delivery of interviews the student researcher conducted almost all of the key stakeholder interviews whilst the principal researcher conducted almost all of the international student interviews. Whilst the chosen methodology allows for flexibility and evolution of data collection methods as patterns emerge any changes and adaptations made were kept congruent with the research topic. Questions were always asked in the same order. Serious attempts to maintain consistency of the researcher's demeanour and interviewing style across meetings were made within a respectful and engaging approach.

Focus group methodology is a social research tool characterised by 3 main factors : a group interview, a social, semi public context working to achieve information about combined local perspectives. Focus group methodology includes reporting on themes based on words spoken by participants. It is a supportive and respectful methodology that fits well with the subject group in this research – international students. Several focus groups were held. However, the majority of international students were interviewed individually.

Recruitment of international student participants included advertising through:

- Development of an identifiable research flyer that was used over the life of the project (see Appendix 1) and was visible around campus.
- International Office emailed out flyers to all International students enrolled in Degree and Diploma courses at MacKillop. It was not appropriate for the principal researcher to have access to student emails, so to maintain ethical practice International Office took responsibility for emailing students.
- In addition to the above email role, International Office also sent at a later date specifically targeted emails with the research flyer to students from unrepresented cultural groups (e.g. African, South American and European students) inviting them to participate with good results.
- Regular announcements were made to students at the School of Nursing Common times and at some lectures.
- Other strategies included:
 - 'Word of mouth'.
 - Students told their friends about the research
 - Staff also put up the flyers around campus
 - Student Services staff told international students about the research project and flyers were available in the Student Services waiting room.

In order to acknowledge the student's involvement in the research, an 'ACU National Certificate of Participation' was given to students. Initially we provided food for focus groups, but quickly decided that this was too much effort given the other facilitation and documentation tasks, so we introduced the ACU Certificate idea instead. Many international student participants commented that they liked receiving an ACU Certificate as they planned to add it to their Curriculum Vitae.

5.3 PARTICIPANTS DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

A total of **71** interviews were conducted with:

- 23** key stakeholders
- 48** international students

5.3a) Key stakeholders (KS)

Key stakeholders represented both academic and general staff at MacKillop, including senior and managerial staff and encompassed the whole of campus. Also included were a small number of students who held key positions on campus. It was decided to keep these student interviews within the key stakeholder group.

A total of twenty three key stakeholder interviews were conducted. Key stakeholders volunteered to be part of the research, signed consent forms and were interviewed for approximately one hour. The ACU MacKillop staff component included senior staff from ACU National Management; staff from the International Education, ACUcom, Student Services staff, academic staff from the Schools of Business and Informatics and Nursing and representatives from Campus Operations, Student Centre.

A decision was made not to collect specific demographic data from the key stakeholder group, other than the identification of the position held. This decision was based on the concern that to gather any further demographic data may identify the participants. However, it is known that a large number of the key stakeholder cohort had been at MacKillop for over 5 years, whilst a smaller number of others had been on campus for more than 10 years. This background formed the context for the key stakeholders' responses, providing valuable information and comment.

All key stakeholders said they welcomed the opportunity to participate in the research project. They expressed serious interest in the needs of international students and related their hopes that their input would make a contribution to improving our understandings of the needs of international students at ACU. All key stakeholders indicated a willingness to participate in further discussion on the needs of international students if required to support developing our best possible responses.

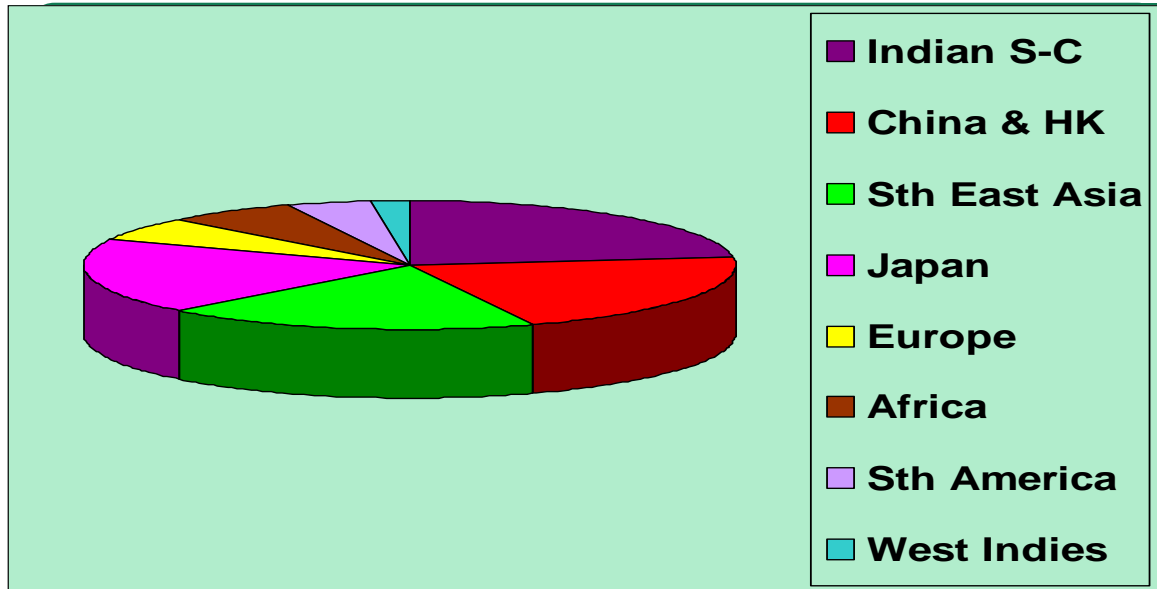
5.3b) International students (IS)

Following the recruitment drive participating international student were asked to read and sign the research information sheet and the consent form, after which they were given a list of questions designed to support the analysis of demographic data (see Appendix 10.4). Analysis of the international student responses has resulted in the following demographic information.

Table 5.3bi: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT - HOME COUNTRY

Demographic Data

IS Home Country: Representing 17 countries



Home Countries represented in the research

Indian Sub Continent:	India; Pakistan; Bangladesh; Nepal
South East Asia:	Thailand; South Korea; Indonesia; Malaysia
Europe:	The Czech Republic; Germany
Africa:	Kenya; Uganda
South America:	Brazil
Japan, China and Hong Kong	

(Note: ACU National statistics show that students have identified Hong Kong as their home country on formal enrolment at ACU National)

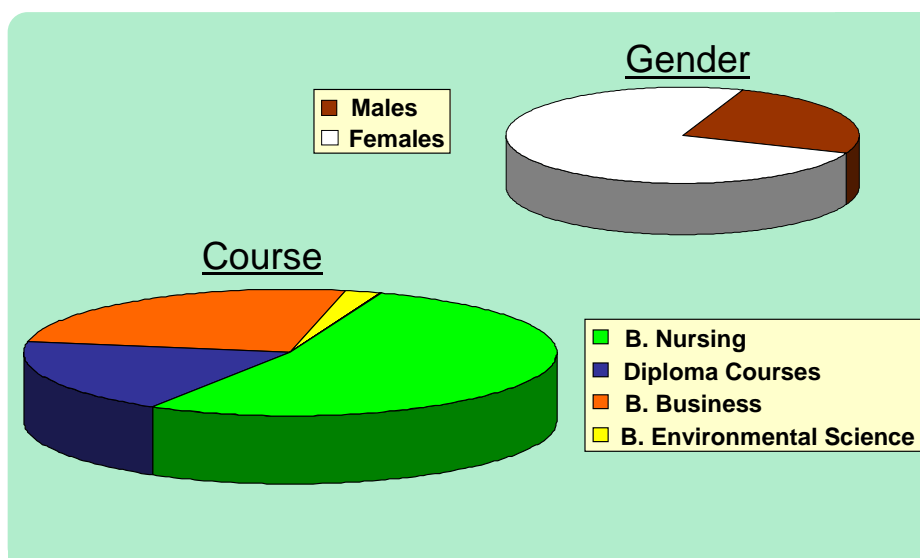
Comment

The grouping of home countries was necessary for the graph representation. International students participating represented 17 home countries or 28% of all student home countries represented on Campus. It was pleasing to have 17 home countries represented in the research, as it gave a good diversity of experience. The representation was consistent with the enrolment numbers at MacKillop with China and the Indian sub-continent being the biggest groups.

Participation in research can be influenced by factors such as a student's ability to speak English or his or her perceived confidence in speaking English; an understanding of / confusion about research and what participation means; confidence at coming along to be interviewed and being asked questions especially when the researcher is unknown or from a different culture than their own.

Table 5.3bii: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT - COURSE AND GENDER

Participant Demographic data



Comment

The School of Nursing is the largest School at MacKillop with the highest number of International students. The increased representation in the research of students enrolled in the School of Nursing is consistent with this. There are more female International students enrolled at MacKillop campus than male students, so the higher representation of female students in this research is consistent with this figure. (Source: ACU Statistics Department).

5.3biii: INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS - AGE

Age	Number = 48
Under 19	1
20-30years	31
31-40years	9
41-50years	6
51yrs +	1

Comment

The majority of the participants in this research were aged between 20 and 30 years and this is consistent with the overall student population at MacKillop.

5.3biv: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT - YEAR OF COURSE ENROLMENT

Year of Course	Number = 48
1 st year	21
2 nd year	14
3 rd year	13

Comment

The majority of international student participants were in their first year at MacKillop giving a good insight into the first year experience. Adding to this is the wonderful contribution from the 2nd and 3rd year students as they often looked back on their first year experience from the reality of being in 2nd or 3rd year. This gave rich comments on the 1st year experiences and strongly enhanced the research.

5.3bv: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT - ENROLMENT STATUS

Course Enrolment Status	Number = 48
Diploma	11
Undergraduate	32
Postgraduate	5

Comment

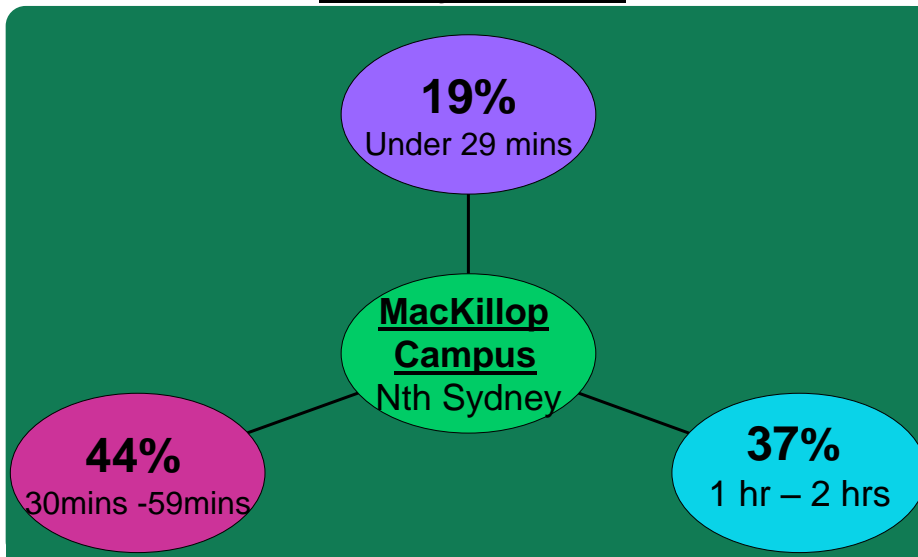
This breakdown is a fair representation of the student population at MacKillop. It is pleasing that five out of 48 international student participants were postgraduate students. Of these five, all were male, Indian and enrolled in the MBA in the School of Business and Informatics. There were no female postgraduate students in the research even though there are female postgraduate students in the School of Nursing.

5.3bvi: INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TRAVEL ONE WAY TO MACKILLOP

IS travel to Uni: one way only



Safety Issues



Code for Diagram: Number = 48 international student participants
 19% = 9 students
 44% = 21 students
 37% = 18 students

Comment

MacKillop Campus is located in an expensive area of Sydney and the rents close to the Campus in the North Sydney area are very high. As a consequence many students live in the western suburbs of Sydney which is quite a distance away from the Campus and travel to and from the University by bus, train and on foot. The Campus timetable goes from 8am to 8pm.

Of the 18 students (37%) who travel one way for between 1 and 2 hours, 15 were female. Safety issues were raised as a concern predominantly by female international students who linked this to the timetable and the long distances they were travelling (see Section 6.0 Results: Core Theme 3: Risks to Personal Safety). These participants said that this often meant that they were walking home at 10pm or later after having travelled on buses and /or trains increasing their sense of risk.

“Travelling raises personal safety issues” (IS)

The data relating to one way travel to university may well be similar for many other Universities around Sydney given the high rent closer to the city. Students reported living further away for cheaper rent and in some situations for the support of their own cultural community.

5.4 DATA COLLECTION and ANALYSIS

DATA COLLECTION

Using grounded research methodology, individual interviews were held with all of the key stakeholders (23) and also with 37 of the International student participants. There were two focus groups held covering eleven students in total, six students in one, and five students in the other. At all of the interviews, similar questions were asked of participants and handwritten detailed notes taken of the participants' responses were taken.

There were no audio taped recordings made of the interviews for several reasons:

- Extremely limited resources both in time and money to transcribe the recordings
- Acknowledgement that International students' confidence in speaking English may have impacted on their willingness to be taped-recorded which could have then reduced the participant response rate.

All these factors meant that a decision was taken by the researchers to document as much as was possible as the participant was speaking whilst still maintaining meaningful engagement. This does appear to have succeeded as a large number of both key stakeholders and international student participants told the researchers at the end of the interview that talking about their experience and giving ideas was a very positive experience for them.

ANALYSIS

Following the interviews, the data collected was numbered to de-identify participants and the data was then analysed according to the principles of grounded research methodology (see Section 4.2). Using categories drawn from the participants themselves a process of thematic analysis enabled coding to occur around core themes after comparing interviews and focus group content. Both researchers engaged in discussion and a process of cross correlation, and in this way a final set of core and substantive codes emerged.

Given the sample size, a frequency analysis was completed according to the numbers of times participants mentioned issues that fell within the substantive codes. This is reflected in this document through use of the following words and number frequencies:

There were 48 international student participants and 23 key stakeholders.

All participants:	(48/48 and 23/23)
A majority:	(36-47/48 and 17-22/23)
More than half:	(24-35/48 and 11-16/23)
Half of participants:	(24/48 and 11/23)
Less than half:	(12-24/48 and 6-11/23)
A minority :	(0-11/48 and 0-5/23).

Quotes that illustrated a theme have been used to bring depth to the analysis and to the results, and to keep alive the original intention of supporting the participant voices to be heard.

6.0 RESULTS and DISCUSSION

6.1 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Five core codes or themes were identified from participants' responses.

NUMBER	CORE THEME
1	Personal and interpersonal issues
2	Meeting basic needs
3	Risks to psychological and physical well-being
4	Organisational / campus issues
5	Stories of resilience

Comment:

These themes emerged from both the key stakeholder and the international student participants with both groups clearly articulating what became the core themes. The fact that there was a resonance across these core issues between both participant groups suggests that there is a high degree of understanding of the major issues involved.

Some of these core themes are reflective of the literature, such as personal and interpersonal issues and meeting basic needs whilst organisational / campus issues and participant ideas were particular to MacKillop Campus. Risks to psychological and physical well-being and stories of resilience became core themes in that both key stakeholder and international student participants frequently referenced risk and survival and resilience issues.

Both the principal and student researcher carried a strong interest and commitment to hear stories of resilience which no doubt sharpened our listening for such comments and /or stories when they occurred. Additionally, adding the question about how international students managed when things became difficult gave opportunities to hear stories of resilience and survival. In terms of an interview process the inclusion of stories of resilience may have contributed to many participants from both groups expressing satisfaction with the interview process.

“I have enjoyed talking about all this” (international student)

“I feel good that ACU wants to hear what we have to say” (international student)

“I feel pleased to make a contribution to these important issues”(key stakeholder).

In order to fully expand on each of the five themes each core theme has been subdivided into substantive codes to allow a detailed analysis and discussion of results. In addition to this, the frequency rating by key stakeholders and international student participants has been analysed and converted into percentages, allowing a comparative view to occur. Section 5 of the report provides detailed feedback and discussion of the results obtained.

CORE THEME 1

6.1a PERSONAL and INTERPERSONAL ISSUES

SUBSTANTIVE CODES	INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IS: N = 48	KEY STAKEHOLDERS KS: N = 23
Experiences of loneliness, isolation, lack of connectedness and belonging	36	19
Life / work / study balance stress	30	13
Communication / language issues	29	16
Pressure to succeed (self / others). Academic issues	26	11
Cross cultural issues eg culture shock, grief and loss, reduced supports)	20	23

These 5 substantive codes were grouped under the core theme of ‘personal and interpersonal issues’ and provide a wide scope across the issues. In analysing the data, there was an obvious grouping of what we called personal issues which sat within a relational interpersonal context. These issues particularly relate to the personal well-being of international students across a number of personal experiences and dimensions, and as such they have considerable significance in identifying the overall psycho-social needs of international students.

Experiences of loneliness, isolation, lack of connectedness and belonging

Experiences of loneliness, isolation, lack of connectedness and belonging	IS: N = 36/48	KS: N = 19/23
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There are several aspects of importance in the majority response rate of international students and key stakeholders to this issue. Although this research sample is small it can be said that the results appear to be consistent with the Australian literature on this issue. Sawir et al. (2007) recorded that 65% of international students identified as experiencing loneliness or isolation, and Rosenthal et al. (2006) reported that 53% of international students experienced not belonging at university. Key stakeholders consistently linked international students experiences of loneliness to “grief and loss” of established close personal contacts. In addition the loss of solace, surety and positive affirmation that comes from inhabiting a language and culture which such familiarity as to “feel at one with” was outlined. International students talked easily about loneliness, isolation and a lack of connectedness and belonging and were well able to identify this as an important issue.

Strong mutual intercultural engagement is a frequently reported expectation of international students and an important reason for international students coming to this university is said to be to “have the Australian experience.” Expectations are said to include active socio-cultural engagement and particularly making friends with local students. Much disappointment is likely if these expectations are not fulfilled.

International student quotes

“Loneliness - my biggest one. I had never felt lonely before.”
“I still have days when I feel lonely” “Loneliness for home and family”
“Separation from partners, children and family”
“I felt lonely very much, and it was worse in the beginning”
“I felt loneliness, especially in the beginning when I didn’t know anyone”
“I feel very lonely during the holidays”
“It’s hard to mix. I don’t have too much confidence to talk to local students even though they are friendly”
“In the beginning it would be nice to meet someone from my country as in the beginning I was so anxious and unsure how I’d go”
“I live in an apartment here. In my village, everybody knows everybody”
“It helps when the local community helps outside of Uni”
“We don’t want to socialize with people from our own country”
“When I felt homesick, then I got busy”
“Loneliness reduced by the Internet” and “Writing to a friend on the Internet helps”

- Key stakeholders reinforced the profound impact of separation from family and loved ones for overseas students.

Key stakeholder quotes

“International students can have “deep seated personal loneliness, a hole in the heart, the Chinese may say – a shadow on their heart”
“Homesickness is a significant issue for many American students”
“It can be extremely lonely”
“Here without parents”
“Mature aged students (often) come with separation issues”
“Not wanting to worry family at home with difficulties experienced in this country was mentioned by most key stakeholders as intensifying international students’ sense of loneliness”

- Sense of connectedness and belonging on Campus

In this research, the majority of participants made links between international student experiences of loneliness, isolation, lack of connectedness and belonging with the 2007 MacKillop student population profile (45% local and 55% international students) in that opportunities to mix and connect are limited. The majority of international students expressed loneliness as sadness intensified by difficulties making meaningful interpersonal connections. Several key stakeholder respondents relate that some international students feel sole responsibility to make connections with the university community. Moreover an appreciable number of key stakeholder respondents depicted a body of local students generally not making any substantive effort to engage with

international students. Some went so far as to outline an international student experience of “feeling excluded” from the university community. This sentiment is further reflected in comments such as “no one talks to us” (IS).

A mirror of this sense of isolation in informal social exchanges was related to carry across to experiences participating in academic life. A fairly constant commentary was made by key stakeholders on a dearth of mixing of local and international students not only socially but also in tutorial groups. As a consequence some statements were made that international students strongly sensed local students did not want to join with them in tutorial groups. A report was made of some “local students [becoming] angry” when international students were included in their group. There has unfortunately been no research into the views of local students about being enrolled on a campus such as MacKillop and there is room for such research to be conducted.

On the ACU Website / International student / Why Pick ACU there one of the reasons provided is that ACU offers “international students on all campuses the opportunity to mix with Australian students to ensure that they have a truly 'Australian' experience” (ACU Website). It will be one of the recommendations from this research that such a statement needs to be strengthened by providing dedicated funding to the development of structures to support the mixing of international and local students through such programs as mentor systems, which would further enhance the mixing that occurs through other settings (classes and tutorials; campus groups and informal gatherings). The following quotes from participants further expand the issues involved in developing friendships and connections on campus at MacKillop.

“I feel like I’m not at an Australian university” (IS)
“Most of my friends are all from China. Actually I don’t know too many local students” (IS)
“I’d like to meet Aussie people” (IS) and “I’d like to meet local students” (IS)
“Hard to connect with local students as they have their own life and friends” (IS)
“The local students don’t engage with us. Maybe they feel that ACU is their Uni” (IS)
“I can’t connect” (IS)
“Some domestic students don’t want to mix” (KS)
“I know that there’s an invisible wall between the local and international students and I’d like to break it” (IS)
“Lots work extremely hard to fit in. They (the international students) see this as their duty, they don’t see us (the locals) as having to adapt to them.” (KS)
“Connecting with the Australian community, with the University community is critical” (KS)

Comments were made by a significant number of key stakeholders that “international students are not getting the Australian experience we promised with such a large percentage of overseas students on campus.” Further many key stakeholders highlighted the need for substantial “one on one contact” between international students and university staff until they become settled. Potentials to accommodate this need are seriously compromised by the high international student to staff ratio at ACU which can then add to feelings of loneliness. There is sound evidence that increased feelings of

connectedness and belonging on campus can contribute to adjustment of international students and as such this is a very important issue.

An additional factor of some significance emerged in the Literature review around the expectations prospective international students receive from marketing and recruitment drives and the degree of match with the reality experienced. The literature tells us that where the match is wide then the impact on a sense of connectedness can be intense. As one international student said, “honest advertising / promotion from Uni to overseas students is very important”.

- A minority (11 out of 48) of international students did not identify as having experienced loneliness, isolation and these students said that they did have a sense of connectedness and belonging. It is interesting to note that these eleven students seemed to have several things in common:
 - a family member / relative living in Sydney
 - a good command of English
 - a strong intention to mix with local students
 - an outgoing personality

“Having family here can lock them in for emotional support” (KS)
“Having a partner from home here with me reduces...loneliness definitely” (IS)
“If you come with a mindset to meet others with a different background then you will” (IS)
“I feel accepted warmly by the other students and lecturers” (IS)
“If you don’t put your self out there, you remain isolated” (IS)
“I’m the type of person who finds it easy to mix” (IS)

There is no doubt that University campuses have an important role in fostering connectedness and in building a sense of belonging for all students. However, there are also wider circles of support that can positively impact on international students’ lives such as church communities and cultural social groups which together with an inclusive and caring campus community can enhance the general sense of well-being of international students.

Several students spoke positively of the Sections system that was in place in the School of Nursing at MacKillop from 2004 to Semester 1 in 2006. As one international student said, the “same group of students in Sections (in the School of Nursing in 2006) helped me to make friends and feel settled. Because of this we have a sense of belonging” whilst a third year final international nursing student commented that “the friends I made in the ‘Section group’ in first year have lasted me for all my time”. In the same way, funded structured mentor/peer programs can also enormously assist in building connections and a sense of belonging on campus, especially in situations where there are disparate groups such as the student cohort at MacKillop.

Life / work / study balance stress

Life / work / study balance stress	IS: N = 30/48	KS: N = 13/23
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More than half of all participants made comments that reflected a considerable imbalance for international students between work, study, family and leisure pursuits. In the literature review reference was made to one of the Rosenthal et al.'s (2006) key findings that 50% of their respondents stated attaining negligible or nil balance between study and all other domains of life. The impact of this stress has been reported as being particularly significant in terms of study. Even when leisure or group activities are available, time to engage in them can be restricted due to work commitments. As one international student said, "I am time poor".

International student quotes

"At school full time [you] work to support yourself [you have] no rest... no balance [you get] overwhelmed."
"Life / work / Uni pressure is high"
"We (international students) know it is going to be very hard"
"There is the problem of time and balance of study, uni, work, personal and relationship time"
"There's not much time to do everything – wash, cook, work, study, uni."

Key stakeholders quotes

"No time for extra activities"
"Many international students have two jobs as well as study"
"Their stress is enormous"
"Financial stress ...travel, fees, rent...limits social possibilities"
"Work load overwhelming...gruelling study regimes"

Being supported to engage socially to encourage mixing particularly with local students is an oft expressed need. This need unfortunately clashes with the busy schedules described for international students. Several respondents underscored this tension by relating that while "social activities are not well attended by international students" "work commitments" were often given as the reason. Cost was said to be another factor prohibitive of attendance. Nevertheless "more opportunity to mix with local students" and more social activities to be provided is still a consistently reported need calling for well thought out strategies. Discussion of this issue is inter-linked with financial pressures experienced by international students and with events that are culturally appropriate.

Communication / language/ academic challenges

Communication / language issues	IS: N = 29/48	KS: N = 16/23
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The closeness in response rates for this theme shows that more than half of both participant cohorts see this issue as important and being linked to other core themes. A typical key stakeholder comment was “many international students are conscious of their English competency and hesitate to speak out” hindering making friends. This notion is supported by international students saying that “communication can be a barrier to making friends” and “lack of English makes me nervous”. Another illustration being the statement that international students “feel they can’t express themselves” and that “English can be a communication barrier” indicating opportunities to form close connections were seriously compromised by limits to translating feelings. Likewise challenges interpreting slang and discerning degrees of seriousness in spoken language were offered as obstructing ‘adult to adult’ engagement.

More than half of the international students in this research reported that speaking English as a second language was a big issue that impacted on their social interactions, their sense of confidence and their academic performance. Many international students suggested ideas for opportunities to practice speaking English through ‘movie and other groups’ on campus that might also involve local groups in shared interest activities. See Section 6.3 of this document for details. These quotes from international students back up the key stakeholder assertions that communication difficulties can have wide ranging effects.

International student quotes

“The hardest thing is communication”
 “The education system is totally different”
 “At home, we read a lot and learn by heart whereas here, we learn by practice and engage in discussion”.
 “If we speak we are worried if our English is right or wrong”
 “Sometimes communication is hard as I don’t understand especially Aussie slang”
 “Speaking English is harder when stressed”
 “I was very timid and didn’t speak out when I first came to Australia. Now I’m more confident and I’ve learnt from my mistakes”

Pressure to succeed (self / others) / Academic issues

Pressure to succeed (self / others) / Academic issues	IS: N = 26/48	KS: N = 11/23
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Pressure to succeed was listed as a significant stress by more than half of international student participants and half of key stakeholders with a fairly close rating between the two groups. Eleven key stakeholders reported strong links between considerable anxiety to achieve academically and compelling desires to fulfil family expectations - “family honour and pride” (key stakeholder). Also of consequence is reported international student guilt about family ‘sacrifices’ that have been made. Further pressure to succeed

was explained as being due to visa requirements to maintain a full time study load, the high cost for full feeing paying students and the ramifications on both if there is academic failure. Moreover obtaining permanent residency was listed as an often held goal of overseas students adding more pressure to succeed. “Gruelling study regimes” (key stakeholder) were listed by many as the result of all this academic pressure to pass. It was reported that many students were “overwhelmed [by study demands and] worried about not coping” (key stakeholder).

More than half (26 out of 48) of the international student participants reflected all of the aspects of this issue, with particular emphasis on “doing this for my family” (international student). There were many comments from international students that resonated with this quote. In some cases family pressure was experienced as both a personal pressure and a reason to keep going (see resilience quotes – Core Theme 6.1e). International students and key stakeholders both talked about the consequences of failure and the many layers of meaning that involved.

One key stakeholder noted that it is “more serious for international students if they fail ... price involved... need to maintain a full time load ... face saving... often don’t know why [they failed]” with additional impact on their student visa status in Australia. International students readily commented on the pressure to succeed for themselves and for others, particularly family back home. The constant work/life/study balance stressors plus the pressures to succeed positions the international student in a difficult situation. The fact that many international students do succeed and graduate is indeed a testament to their amazing efforts against considerable odds.

Academic issues were not the principle focus of the research which was rather to give an overview of the psycho-social needs of international students. Further the academic sphere for international students has been reported on extensively in previous research papers. Nevertheless the centrality of academic issues to university life in general has led us to provide a summary of course related issues which were reported by key stakeholders and raised to a lesser degree by international student participants.

Academic challenges when English is not the first language, understanding academic expectations and regulations and a special need for support with understanding written assessment tasks replete with academic jargon was highlighted. Further, help with conversational language was another oft expressed need particularly for nursing students and support with fluency in clinical, professional and interpersonal communications was emphasized. Tutorial participation was presented as fraught with difficulties, as many overseas students are not familiar with this form of learning, and assessment tasks based on tutorial participation and presentation was presented as potentially disadvantaging to international students. In addition consideration for “how you learn culturally” was reported by some key stakeholders as necessary.

Cross cultural issues eg culture shock, grief and loss, reduced supports

Cross cultural issues (eg culture shock, grief and loss, reduced supports)	IS: N = 20/48	KS: N = 3/23
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There is a considerable difference between the frequency of key stakeholders and international students on this issue. This seems to highlight the high awareness that all

key stakeholders have of the cross cultural issues that they perceive international students experience, and that they have heard about first hand from these students. On the other hand, less than half of international students' talked about their reduced supports and the cultural adjustments needed but to a considerably less degree than the key stakeholders. This could be simply a question of language rather than experience or it may also be about the difficulties in talking directly about issues such as grief and loss or reduced supports in a research interview situation.

Key stakeholders talked of international students often having 'no family support' here and "a social network [that is] quite reduced" and "a great sense of loss of day to day kindness and connectedness and support that was present at home". As well, other key stakeholders referred to a great sense of loss of day to day kindness and connectedness and support that was present at home "not talking in terms of counselling but more day to day things you might chat with your mum about over a cup of tea." Another key stakeholder named this as "cumulative stress" from culture shock, experiences of grief and loss and reduced supports which can all effect a person's sense of well-being.

One international student said that "when you leave your normal environment you try to be yourself, but find that you may not fit in, then, if you make an effort to change you don't feel like yourself...you don't feel like you are being true to yourself" whilst another said "hard to work out what to do... it's all so different". Several other international students commented that "when something happens at home, like a death of a relative it is very hard" and that "family back home don't know what you are going through". These quotes highlight some of the realities of cross-cultural issues that international students can experience and how this, along with other stressors can then impact on an international student's performance and well being at University.

These quotes also give strength to the need for University campuses to build a community and to provide varied levels of support to enhance well-being and a sense of connectedness, especially due to the known levels of reduced social support for international students. In addition a sense that international students are particularly vulnerable when things go wrong was reported by key stakeholders as a result of reduced social supports. They may be managing but "if things go wrong academically or personally then they can strike serious problems." Crises in their home country ranging from family to national scale issues are also reported as leaving international students feeling particularly isolated and lonely for the same reasons.

International students in second and third year commented that things became easier the longer they stayed in Australia and University as they began to make friends and build support, whilst a key stakeholder reflected that "stages of how long they have been here are important to the level of coping". In the literature review, reference was by made to collective and individualistic cultures and the considerable differences in these cultural models across social and supportive domains. Where an international student comes from a predominantly collective culture the experience of moving into a predominantly individualistic culture can be quite profound. To then experience campus life as lacking an identified and inclusive community can have significant effects, as one international student commented "University in my home country has strong social connections". This adds further strength to the need for University's to build community in pro-active ways.

CORE THEME 2

6.1B MEETING BASIC NEEDS

SUBSTANTIVE CODES	INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IS: N = 48	KEY STAKEHOLDERS KS: N = 23
Financial needs (see quotes below)	31	16
Transport issues	27	6
Accommodation (rent/housing)	17	17
Employment issues	7	7
Navigating cultural differences eg life skills, ‘Aussie’ culture, different food	13	10

Meeting basic needs is an important theme in that if basic needs are not met, then other aspects of a person’s life can be considerably compromised. This is not new information. Financial, transport, housing and employment issues are important to international students, and can contribute large amounts of stress to this cohort. We have added ‘navigating cultural differences’ here, given that international students mentioned this in relation to many of the other issues in this core theme.

Financial needs

Financial needs (see quotes below)	IS: N = 31/48	KS: N = 16/23
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Financial pressure was listed by more than half of all participants as being a “primary” reason for “huge” stress. This stress was exacerbated for at least one international student by the seemingly commonplace misconception that “assume[s] you come with massive amounts of money.” Several comments were made by both key stakeholders and international students that international students feel they are objectified as “cash cows.” A key stakeholder’s comment that “many have borrowed money to come here and think they can work to pay for everything” highlights the financially challenging almost impossible position in which international students can find themselves. As a consequence of this international students related a fear of jeopardizing their status if they let anyone know they experienced financial hardship. “Poverty” is an uncompromisingly stark word chosen to reflect the severity of the situation for some.

Several key stakeholders commented that “I have come across one student living on \$14 a week for food” and that “some are living hand to mouth.” Many international students talked about how “there is always financial pressure”, and that “I worry about finances all the time”, and that “money and time are big issues”. A picture was drawn of a considerable amount of international students “working extraordinary hours day and night just to put food on the table”, and at times “needing to keep whole families alive as well as studying” especially for mature-aged international students. As one international student said, “I have to work more than the allowed 20 hours per week, otherwise I wouldn’t be able to manage.”

Many international students were credited with holding down two jobs as well as studying full time. The cumulative burden of paying full fees, academic expenses, “the high cost of living here”, “no transport concession”, along with regulatory limits to the amount overseas students can work in Australia were given as reasons by key stakeholders for basic health standards becoming compromised. In this context, all financial issues are important. As one international student said, “the ACU student diary was free, now it is \$4.00. This is bad” whilst another said that the “photocopying fee in the Library is too high”. The fact that ACU National has had a fee instalment scheme in place for some time was mentioned by many participants as a positive financial help to them.

In the literature review, the research by Lantz (2005) at several universities in Victoria highlights that “students in Australia are entering the sex industry as a pragmatic response to increasing education cost” (p. 385) and that for international students the “sex industry is considered one of the only lucrative employment options for them” (p. 398). In this research, a minority (three out of 48) of international student participants mentioned the “thought of doing prostitution to pay the fees” or that they knew of other international students who “do prostitution to get money for fees” or “who worked in a strip club because of the higher pay” when talking about financial stress. This information is important in that it tells us about financial hardship and possible responses to relieve the stress as well as highlighting increased issues of risk and vulnerability.

Since October 2007, the \$500 personal re-payable ACU National loan has been extended to include international students in the application criteria. This change occurred due to one of the international student participants drawing the principal researchers’ attention to the exclusion of international students from the essential criteria for this loan. The fact that ACU National could reverse the criteria to make it inclusive of all students within a very short time is evidence of both the achievement of research outcomes and the University’s good will to implement positive change. One international student suggested having a \$200-\$300 fund to be spent on the betterment of international students, using the money to subsidise the cost of textbooks”. Another idea was a food cupboard on campus for students in financial needs (see Section 6.3). Whether these or other ideas can be considered, continued dialogue about reducing financial stressors on international students is vitally important in the University sector.

More than half (31 out of 48) of the international students in this research commented that financial concerns were a high priority for them, and this issue was usually mentioned first in response to the question about what needs they had. The results on the degree of financial needs are consistent with other Australian literature on this issue, and tells us that beliefs that international students are ‘well off’ or ‘financially fully supported by others’ is not the case for more than half of the international students in this research.

Transport issues

Transport issues	IS: N = 27/48	KS: N = 6/23
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In NSW international students have no eligibility for fare concessions on public transport. More than half of the international students in this research mentioned this issue as a concern, and time and time again said that they were confused as to why they did not receive transport concessions, adding that the lack of this burdened them with increasing financial worry.

International students consistently commented that “we need to have student travel concessions”. “Transport concessions would help reduce the financial costs”. International students responded to this issue at higher rates than key stakeholders which is not surprising and in the international student community this is a very high issue which no doubt impacts on financial and general well-being. As another international student said, “international students don’t get any travel concessions or discount, and that makes me very angry”. As the MacKillop campus requires that most students travel by public transport the cost of this is a regular drain on their finances.

Six out of 23 key stakeholders mentioned this issue, perhaps reflecting an awareness of how little things have changed, or will change around obtaining transport concessions for international students in NSW. There has already been significant lobbying from many sources for international students to receive transport concessions without success. Perhaps the results from this research will add weight to the financial issues that international students face, and help to disrupt any myths that they are all financially well off, even wealthy.

Accommodation matters (rent / housing)

Accommodation (rent/housing)	IS: N = 17/48	KS: N = 17/23
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A majority of key stakeholders rated this issue higher than international students, perhaps reflecting an overview of the tight housing/rental situation in Sydney and a real awareness of the difficulties that can be experienced. The principal researcher conducted most of the international student interviews in the second half of Semester 1 and during Semester 2 when many international students had located rental accommodation so this time sequence may have reduced the intensity of accommodation as an issue for international students.

Nevertheless, the rent crisis in Sydney does constitute a real concern for students, and continues to push students, particularly international students out to the western suburbs increasing travel time and associated risks with this. A majority (17 out of 23) of key stakeholders mentioned the possibility of international students “needing to change accommodation regularly and the unsettling effect of this on them” and the overall “difficulties in finding suitable accommodation”. A majority of key stakeholders also commented that international students can have vulnerability in that “landlords can take advantage” and that “exploitation in housing can occur”.

Less than half of international student participants commented that they “need to have supported accommodation like a Uni House for at least one Semester” and that there are difficulties experienced “when we don’t have a credit or rent history and we don’t have bond money”. These international students also referred to the extensive travel time to and from this campus when they have to live in western Sydney for cheaper rent and the impact of this on their lives.

This is not an easy issue to address. MacKillop campus is located in the busy North Sydney business area and rental accommodation is high on the North Shore. Often new international students initially use a home-stay arrangement and then move on to shared accommodation. International Office provides accommodation information and conducts workshops during orientation with information about tenancy rights.

Employment issues

Employment issues	IS: N = 7/48	KS: N = 7/23
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A minority of international students identified career support as an important issue and this may reflect that 73% of international student participants were enrolled in 1st and 2nd year where less of a focus on employment can occur. Less than half of key stakeholders saw this as an important issue. At the time of the research project during 2006-2007 there was no career adviser position at MacKillop or across ACU National. However, late in 2007 funding was provided for a Careers Adviser position to be created on each ACU National campus for the 2008 academic year. As such, MacKillop campus received career resourcing for three days per week which is a most welcome addition to support all students, and especially international students who are predicted to be high users of this Service. As one international student commented, “it is hard to get a job, and I’d like Uni to help with careers and part time work”. With the new careers adviser position in place, this can now happen with hopefully increased advice about rights and safety at work

Navigating cultural differences eg life skills, ‘Aussie’ culture, different food etc.

Navigating cultural differences eg life skills, ‘Aussie’ culture, different food	IS: N = 13/48	KS: N = 10/23
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This issue was included because of the links between navigating cultural differences and basic needs. Such issues as food, life skills and Aussie culture all constitute fairly essential skills for survival. Less than half of international students made comments about the food at the campus canteen, urging that the campus canteen cater for a “variety of cultural and dietary needs” and that it be “less expensive”. During 2007 a new purpose built kitchen was built in the student common area with access to boiling water, sink, cupboards and microwaves in response to international students needs voiced during the research.

Less than half of international students spoke of differences in dress, food, language, transport, customs, the Australian ‘casual’ culture, ‘life skills’ including using ATM’s, travelling on public transport, becoming “street-wise” (Aussie slang for noticing risk and reducing harm). Less than half of key stakeholder participants referenced the need for international students to gain “technical skills for bookings on line which can be daunting” and “gaining social skills about how things work” whilst an international student said, “We need to know what to know to survive”.

Aussie cultural differences international students also noticed included a “beer drinking culture”; a culture that makes direct eye contact in contrast to “in my country we don’t make direct eye contact as this is seen as being rude and not friendly” and in terms of speaking to each other, one international student said that “affectionate terms are too intimate here. Everyday Aussie talk says ‘hey love’ but this is too intimate for me”. These small examples really illustrate how much an international student can be confused or unsure in navigating cultural differences, and how this lack of confidence can impede communicating and linking with others.

CORE THEME 3**6.1c Risks to psychological and physical well being**

SUBSTANTIVE CODES	INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IS: N = 48	KEY STAKEHOLDERS KS: N = 23
Personal safety concerns (assault , robbery)	13	9
Experiences of discrimination on campus	9	1
Health concerns (physical and psychological)	6	11
Childcare and parenting issues	5	4
Exploitation (e.g. Work, rent, sexual safety)	1	7

Risks to psychological and physical well being became a core theme largely due to overall frequency of participant comments on this issue. Though the literature talks less about risks, it is very useful to see risk as a core theme with even more focus possible on what makes up that risk across a number of domains. There are obvious cross links with issues involved in core theme 1 with a suggestion that there is increased risk where the experiences of loneliness, isolation, lack of connectedness and belonging are significant.

Interwoven into key stakeholder comments about loneliness, and reduced psychological supports several key stakeholders spoke of a vulnerability of international students to exploitation and harm. These respondents make a strong connection between social isolation and increased vulnerability. One key stakeholder related that experiences of isolation can lead some students to develop an “enhanced sense of trust” in their own communities. They told at times this trust had been exploited by “real estate agents and tax agents when “they relied on their own group”. Another key stakeholder related that for international students with “no adult confidant [at hand] often friends give bad advice.”

A tentative link was made by one key stakeholder to international students potentially entering into unsatisfactory close personal relationships due to loneliness. The existence of “massive social problems” was reported by another key stakeholder again with links made to isolation. This participant listed domestic violence, depression, and suicide threats as some examples. Very worrying was the comment made that international students “do not seem to know their rights in this country” in regards to domestic violence. Other harms reported by key stakeholders included international students encountering gambling problems, sexual health concerns including unprotected sex and unplanned pregnancies. Key stakeholders again made connections to international students having reduced levels of social support. In addition a sense that international students were particularly vulnerable when things go wrong was reported as a result of reduced social supports.

Personal safety concerns (assault, robbery)

Personal safety concerns (assault , robbery, domestic violence)	IS: N = 13/48	KS: N = 9/23
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Personal safety concerns are not only the domain of international students as many local students share similar concerns. Thirteen out of 48 international students raised the issue of risks to personal safety with many making links between the distance they lived away from campus, and the University timetable that runs from 8am to 8pm. As outlined in Section 5.3bvi, 18 international students reported travelling one way to University for between 1 and 2 hours, and of this group 15 were female. Safety issues were raised as a concern predominantly by female international students with some being very concerned about the risk of sexual assault. International students commented that this often meant that they were walking home at 10pm or later after having travelled on buses and /or trains and then needing to walk some distance to home which they felt increased their sense of risk.

One female international student commented that she is “travelling for 2 hours each way and I am fearful of being attacked late at night on my way home”. Another female international student commented that “travelling raises personal safety issues” whilst another said that she was “pleased that my lectures end at 5pm as I am concerned about safety issues”. Other international students talked about the risk of general assault and “being scared to go out at night” for fear of being assaulted. One international student said that she was “very scared of drunken guys assaulting her and getting hurt or robbed”.

Nine out of 23 key stakeholders predominantly spoke of this issue in terms of the vulnerability of international students to domestic violence and sexual harassment or abuse. At least three key stakeholders told stories of women international students who were survivors of domestic violence and or are “not feeling safe in accommodation” yet not knowing what to do about this. This gives rise to the concern that international students are most likely unaware of their legal and personal rights in Australia or that they do not have the knowledge of where to turn to for support. The role of Student Services on campus is vitally important in these situations.

The ACU National website /international students promotes to potential international students that ACU National will provide a “safe and secure community environment” Given the undefined scope of what this statement means it is quite a statement to make without some qualification and a recommendation has been made to this effect (See Recommendation Section 7.0).

Experiences of discrimination on campus

Experiences of discrimination on campus	IS: N = 9/48	KS: N = 1/23
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In the literature review reference was made to Devos’ (2003) conclusions that a discourse in Australia was established in 2001 that set up international students as “the other and as the problem“(p.165), ideas that can have relevance to instances of discrimination on campus. In the research interviews, discrimination was recorded in situations where the participant mentioned that discrimination had been part of their experience on campus or that they were concerned about the issue of discrimination.

A minority (one out of 23) of key stakeholders expressed concerns that international students experienced considerable stress from perceived negative attitudes of staff and students whilst a minority (nine out of 48) of international student participants talked of experiences of discrimination on campus which included “discrimination from some local students, from some other international students and from some staff”. There were several comments about how international students heard local students saying that “there are too many Asians around here” and about hearing local students “saying negative things about the Chinese students” whilst a number of other students commented about their experience of “racial discrimination from some other international students” saying “it’s not so serious, but it made it a bit hard for me. It helps when there are 2 of us from my country”.

Within this minority of international students, a number commented that they thought discrimination they had experienced was “subtle discrimination/ racism”. For example, it is said to others but within hearing distance that “oh, there’s so many international students taking our places”, and “it is because of international students that everything’s a mess”.

As part of responding to this concern several international students promoted the need to manage differences on campus, through Orientation and by staff taking an active role in responding to and managing any signs of discriminatory behaviour. In addition to this, these comments though in the minority are important and can inform policy decisions on compulsory staff cross cultural training at ACU National. (See Section 7.0)

Health concerns (physical and psychological)

Health concerns (physical and psychological)	IS: N = 6/48	KS: N = 11/23
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International students can experience physical and psychological health concerns. Less than half of key stakeholders talked about this issue, drawing attention to the broad range of health problems including several mentioning the “residual costs” associated with seeking medical attention keeping some international students from obtaining much needed help. Comments were made about concern that international students may not tell anyone when they are sick not only for concern about financial ramifications, but also out of “fear of authorities’ with the last thing they want is for anything to get back to their parents that anything is wrong” plus the “stigma of mental health and potential impact on visa’s”.

These key stakeholders also referenced the cultural differences in that “for many this is the first time that they are allowed to drink [and] may be exposed to drugs” with potential impact on health issues. Sexual health issues were also raised by key stakeholders with comments made about how many international students’ seem to have a general naivety in this area with reported instances of “unprotected sex” and “pregnancies” with major health ramifications for students. The links with the literature are strong and reflect other research that international students are sexually active and have limited access to education about sexual health (Rosenthal et al 2006; Borrett and Zysk 2007). In the Rosenthal et al (2006) research, 38% of international students reported being sexually active with only half saying they used sexual protection.

Sexual safety is an important issue for the physical and psychological health of all students especially international students who are new to Australia and perhaps new to sexual freedoms. Six out of the 48 of international students expressed concern about their health issues, and these comments related mainly to physical health and the worries about the cost of health care, especially ambulance and dental care. “Dental care is very expensive so I just put up with the pain as long as I can” and “health problems are a big issue for international students. The health system is different. It’s hard to know whether to go to a GP or the Hospital. The cost is high and overseas insurance doesn’t cover it all. If an international student lives on her own it is shocking because no-one will know that she is sick”.

Other international student participants mentioned concerns about their general well-being when talking about the effects of experiences of loneliness, isolation and homesickness, whilst some key stakeholders talked about psychological health issues including “fears depression” and the fact that some international students are “basically refugees [just don’t have official] status.” with multiple issues of trauma and special needs. Other key stakeholders mentioned the hesitation they had noticed in international students around mentioning any mental health issues for fear of ramifications around their student visa.

This raises several issues for the campus. In responding to international students’ psychological needs, resources need to be readily available, adequate and culturally appropriate. An obstacle to responding to such emotional challenges is the oft reported issue that the concept of counselling [a service which is on offer] is not necessarily culturally transferable. One student said “in my country I had never heard of a counsellor.” It is indeed positive that 58% of the students who accessed the MacKillop campus Counselling Service in 2007 were international students with many students saying seeing the counsellor’s photos around campus and hearing from the counsellors at orientation supported them to access counselling.

Childcare and parenting issues

Childcare and parenting issues	IS: N = 5/48	KS: N = 4/23
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There is almost no literature on the needs of international students who are parents so little is known about child care issues or how being a parent impacts on international students sense of well-being. This research had five international student participants, all female, who identified this as an issue with comments of “it is hard to balance all he demands including the family ones when we have children” and “childcare or a nanny can be hard to find and costly and after-school care too” with general comments about the need for affordable childcare being “desperately needed” with hopes that the university might assist with this. Managing childcare responsibilities around a timetable that runs from 8am to 8pm can have its challenges for students who are parents and supporting this group to be pro-active around their childcare needs fits with the ACU National policy on childcare.

Within this group of five students were several students who said that they had to leave their children behind in their home country in order to study in Australia. Participants commented on this situation included naming the enormous personal challenges in having to do this such as including feelings of significant guilt and grief leaving children behind. One international student summed it up when she said that “my 2 children are with my family in my home country – it is hard” whilst a key stakeholder commented that “international students who have had to leave children in their home country also have big issues”. These issues are in addition to many other issues already mentioned in this report.

Childcare and parenting issues affect both international and local students and can be a platform for joining students across shared issues. One key stakeholder suggested that “international students with children are often invisible and face big challenges” whilst an international student commented that being a student at University “helps my daughter – it motivates her to do well at school” and another suggested that it “would be good to have a group for parents on campus”. As an outcome from this suggestion, a support group for students who are parents at MacKillop campus was started in Semester 1, 2008, facilitated by Counselling and Mission Engagement staff from Student Services. The first gathering was very well attended by both local and international students and the following scenario illustrates the benefit of such gatherings on Campus.

One international student in the support group commented that she was having trouble finding child-care for her 14 months old child. A local student responded by asking the international student where she lived. It turned out that the local and the international student live in the same suburb in outer western Sydney. The local student said she knew of a brand new child-care centre that had just opened in their area and was currently looking for children under 2 years of age. The local student offered to meet with the international student and take her to the childcare centre as the international student seemed confused about where it actually was. The 2 students exchanged phone numbers and as they were leaving the group I could hear them arranging a time to meet the next day. Neither of these 2 students had met before the ‘students who are parents group’.

Not only does this group address child-care and parenting issues, it also provides structured supportive opportunities for social interaction between local and international students. It is hoped that more research will be done on the needs of international students who are parents.

Exploitation (e.g. work, rent, sexual safety)

Exploitation (e.g. Work, rent, sexual safety)	IS: N = 1/48	KS: N = 7/23
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Key stakeholders were much more alert to this issue than were international students and this supports the notion that international students generally have a reduced sense of risk and a lack of knowledge about exploitation. The one international student who did address this issue commented on a work exploitation situation whereas key stakeholders referenced exploitation across a number of areas from “friends giving bad advice” to “marketing ... advertising tricks ... hire purchase” which have been traps for some unsuspecting international students. Seven key stakeholders referenced situations of financial exploitation where international students had lent their saved University fee

money to friends / acquaintances / family only to be left in a position of not being repaid with obvious major financial ramifications. As well, these key stakeholders were aware of “financial, emotional and sexual exploitation of international students from others (employers / workmates/ landlords)”.

They reported stories of international students not feeling happy or safe in housing, and “entering into unsatisfactory personal relationships for security” and “being open to exploitation from their own communities which then impacts on their sense of trust” was also mentioned. What this tells us is that generally international students do not know their rights or the Australian legal system and that they are a vulnerable group to exploitation. The University can play a role in increasing awareness of personal and legal rights and in general aiming to enhance the protection of international students.

CORE THEME 4

6.1e Organisational / Campus issues

SUBSTANTIVE CODES	INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IS: N = 48	KEY STAKEHOLDERS KS: N = 23
Campus facilities / resources	26	17
Positive experiences of support on Campus	25	15
Transitional issues in adjusting to University ‘the 1 st year’.	19	19
Cross-cultural staff communication issues	7	9

This theme emerged strongly from both the key stakeholder and international student comments in response to the questions about ‘how are we as a campus doing so far in responding to the needs of international students’? In analysing the results it was really clear that key stakeholders and international students had inter-related but different views about campus facilities and resources. Key stakeholders were predominantly concerned with resource issues in terms of staffing numbers, whilst international students were more concerned with resource issues in terms of campus facilities. In analysing this data, several other issues emerged such as positive experiences of support, transitional issues in the first year and cross cultural staff communication issues.

Campus facilities / resources

Campus facilities / resources	IS: N = 26/48	KS: N = 17/23
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More than half of the international student participants mentioned campus facilities and resources as an issue. Comments were made predominantly about the lack of facilities on campus with a high degree of concern expressed about this. Three main concerns emerged:

1. The size of the campus being too small for the number of students expressed through comments such as “this campus has outgrown its’ capacity” and “Uni has grown but not enough for the size of the students”.

2. Inadequate facilities for the number of students across four main areas:

Female toilet facilities

Predominantly female international students mentioned this concern through comments such as “the University does not provide enough toilets” which was spoken of as being a distressing, annoying and difficult situation.

Classrooms and equipment

“Crowded classrooms” was a frequent comment made by many international students and this was of high concern given students said they did not expect this. On the ACU National Website / International students marketing information promotes the expectation that “With a staff to student ratio of 1:18, lecturers and staff really have the opportunity to know you”. Comments were made by international student participants about the need to “provide more equipment in the [nursing] labs” due to experiences of equipment failure or unavailability of equipment.

Student common area

This was frequently mentioned as being an issue of concern with students saying they needed a quieter place to sit rather than the busy noisy student common room where the canteen is also located. This is really the only common student space at MacKillop given it is a very small site. Comments such as “there are not enough seats in the canteen and courtyard area at busy times and “when it is wet or cold there’s no space for the students to sit” and “it is so noisy in the canteen area I can’t hear at all” were representative of many other participants’ comments.

Library area

Some students talked about there not being enough desks and seats in the library for students to use especially at busy times whilst a few students commented that there were not enough computers to access.

3. General under- resourcing on campus

Overall, international student participants expressed a view that “resourcing is bad” at MacKillop and they raised questions about why this would occur. Some participants linked this to the high fees they pay each Semester, and expressed concern as to why some of this money wasn’t being used to fund adequate resources and facilities. This included increasing staff resources in the School of Nursing clinical office with many international students strongly recommending “an increase in the staff located in the clinical office to assist with clinical placements”.

A number of international students in the School of Business and Informatics suggested that staff resources be available to assist international student to find work experience placements and in so doing “reduce the stress in us having to find this ourselves”. Some other students suggested an increase in the staff at international office “because it is always so busy”

A majority (17 out of 23) of key stakeholders commented predominantly on the resource situation on campus. One key stakeholder said that “we are resource poor”, with many other key stakeholders commenting on the fact that there are “so many international students with not enough staff to provide support”. Other key stakeholders talked of needing increases in staff numbers to respond to the enormous increase in the international student population on campus.

These key stakeholders also commented on the need for better facilities on campus particularly a “drop in lounge area / quiet common room for (international) students” and a “dedicated prayer room for Muslim students” and “engagement in interfaith needs”. There were some comment on the campus canteen but these have been included later under in Section 6.3 – Participant ideas and suggestions.

Positive experiences of support on Campus

Positive experiences of support on Campus	IS: N = 25/48	KS: N = 15/23
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More than half (25 out of 48) of international students reported experiences of support on Campus from a wide number of staff and services. Comments such as “I am absolutely thrilled at the support we receive at this Uni.” and “I am a Muslim and I feel welcome here” were common, along with more general comments such as “It is good to talk to staff that you know will listen to you” and the size of the campus being small was appreciated by many students. Comments such as “people seem to care more than at bigger institutions” and there are “pockets of staff that help outside their roles” was appreciated by international students with more than half of key stakeholders saying that “we can be more caring than larger unis” and the “close knit ACU community ... small ... sharing ... caring” is good.

The meaning of support is important in that the words “kind” and “respectful” were repeatedly mentioned as being of importance in encouraging students to approach staff, and suggests that if international students have a perception that kindness and respect is present then an approach for support is more possible. Services such as Academic Skills and Counselling in Student Services were identified as being very supportive as was the International and ACUcom offices. In addition to this, identified international adviser or co-ordinator positions or particular lecturers located in the Schools of Nursing and/or Business and Informatics were also identified as being very supportive. A number of key stakeholders commented that the “student association is positive” and is “trying to break barriers” whilst many international student participants expressed a different view saying that the student association is “good for local students but not for other cultures – drinking and pub events”. However, another international student talked about how he had been involved in the ACU Big Event and how “it was awesome” and that he would “recommend that this happen yearly”. Perhaps this is an area for further discussion and collaboration.

The existence of particular support groups such as the mature aged students support group was mentioned by participants as being another example of support on campus. There were many ideas for future groups, sporting activities, social interaction activities and flying home country and Australian flags on Campus which were all mentioned within the context of support (see Section 6.3). Arrangements such as the fee instalment structure were also identified by participants as being supportive, as was the campus opening ceremony “I am a Buddhist. I like the opening ceremony because it is spiritual”.

The need to have close interpersonal support of a more “informal” and “relaxed” nature which international students can relate to was repeatedly highlighted by both groups of participants. One participant framed this expectation saying they were “not talking in terms of counselling ... more day to day things you might chat with your mum about over a cup of tea.” The strong emphasis placed by respondents on the need for friendly, casual support really invites the University to consider the development of systems of support that respond to building friendly connections and reducing isolation and loneliness through mentoring, community engagement and home link programs that all offer opportunities for casual connections in addition to the current support on campus.

Transitional issues in adjusting to University ‘the 1st year’

Transitional issues in adjusting to University ‘the 1 st year’.	IS: N = 19/48	KS: N = 19/23
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There is much literature written about the challenges of the first year transition to University and a majority of key stakeholders had a high awareness of this issue as being relevant to international students on campus. Comments such as “first semester is extremely difficult; we need to carry them through” and that it is “critical when they first arrive to have supports in place.” Many key stakeholders talked of the first six months as being of critical importance in supporting international students to settle in and that the transitional issues lessen the longer students are on campus.

There is a large difference between the two participant cohorts in frequency of response around this focus. The majority of the international students who identified this as an issue came from second and third year giving a valuable reflective view. These students commented that “it was hard at the beginning-hard to get used to the new teaching and learning technology with shock at the differences”, but “improved over time”. The lack of support was also mentioned as a big issue with feelings of loneliness, isolation and homesickness at the beginning being said to be quite acute. Many international students commented that “the hardest thing is being in first year” and that “English is an issue in the first year” both of which link with issues identified in Core Theme 1.

The importance of pre-departure information was seen as high by both groups of participants with stress put on the need for expectations and reality to be as close as possible so as to achieve an easier transition process. This links with the literature that says that where the expectations are not consistent with the reality then reduced feelings of belonging can occur. Both groups felt there was a high need to receive information about what to expect academically and culturally to enhance cultural adaptation and reduce experiences of culture shock.

Orientation was stressed by both participant groups as being vitally important to welcome international students and provide them with information and orientation, including social interaction activities to encourage mixing and meeting with others to reduce loneliness. As one key stakeholder asked, “how do you explain what it is really like?” In thinking about this question, there may be some positive responses able to be collated from this research project perhaps for possible use with prospective students.

Structural organisation, such as locating students in ‘sections’ were seen as supporting the transition process in that such an organisational arrangement was said to support building friendships and networks. In the same way, key stakeholders saw the appointment of a first year co-ordinator role on campus as being beneficial whilst international students talked of wanting buddy / mentoring systems to help with the first year.

Cross-cultural staff communication issues

Cross-cultural staff communication issues	IS: N = 7/48	KS: N = 9/23
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Nine key stakeholders referenced the challenges of working with students from so many different cultural backgrounds and the need for “us to be open to their culture and make them very welcome”. Many of these key stakeholders have a reasonably long history at MacKillop campus, so they have an awareness of the growing numbers and cultures of international students on campus over time. As well, many key stakeholders were aware of supportive roles taken by many staff which was appreciated by international students, whilst at the same time being aware of some situations that were less desirable in terms of some staff communicating with students. A number of key stakeholders were clear that international students need to be able “to approach [staff] without any fear... that we are confidential”.

Seven international students referenced this issue, mainly recommending that all staff at MacKillop have compulsory cross cultural training to support them in their work. A number of other international students wanted issues of racism and discrimination addressed in staff training so that staff could act in intervening ways if they witnessed any such activity in classes.

CORE THEME 5

6.1e Stories of resilience

Noticing resilience is a really important aspect to understanding how international students deal with the many challenges they face and this was a vital aspect of the research. In the therapeutic counselling domain, strength based focus locating stories of survival and resilience can be a very valuable tool for working with people to achieve alternate stories in their lives and reduce problems. Given that the principal researcher is an experienced social worker and counsellor who works from this perspective and the student researcher was a final year social work student with a similar perspective, listening for and noticing participant reflections on resilience became a key focus.

There is little doubt that there are many layers of challenge that international students face, and finding out what keeps a student going forward in spite of these challenges provides us with very important information. In the participant interviews a question was asked that allowed participants to reflect on what had supported them to keep going when things get hard (international students) and for key stakeholders, what did they notice about how international students cope? The following quotes from International student participants give a real reflection of the comments made by all of the International student participants in response to the question:

When things get hard, how do you keep going?

“I say to myself: I can do it and it increases my confidence”
“I look at what I’ve done already and it helps me keep going”
 “I tell myself that problems can be solved”
 “I keep going to finish – it’s a long journey”
 “I want to study hard to build my future”
 “I don’t want to waste my time”
 “Friends have helped me get through”
When I feel lonely at Uni I just try and ignore it”
 “I think positive”
 “I change my attitude and become more positive”
“I have a passion to be a Nurse and power to keep going”
 “I will not give up – I want to complete this”
 “I want to do this for my family and me”
 “I really want to achieve my goals”
When I go back home I hope it will open many doors for me”
 “I trust people who are ready to help”
 “The effort is worth it – it’s a great opportunity”
 “It’s all about making an effort”
“Hardship is a time when you learn a lot – it is a passage of time”
 “I know how to survive” “It gets easier”
“What gives me the energy to work and study is that the whole process for me
to get here was so great. I can’t just give it up”.
“This is a great opportunity. I feel I should make the best use of my time here”
 “I have ‘yi’ – strength to keep going to finish”

What is interesting about these powerful and inspiring comments from international students is that most of these statements are about personal beliefs and attitudes rather than actions or behaviours which we might have expected. As such they are a very valuable resource for use with other international students to encourage them to think about what they might call on to help them keep going when things get hard. Additionally, staff may find the personal beliefs and values useful in working with new international students and with others who may be experiencing difficulties.

Key stakeholder comments on international students' resilience and survival included comments such as "they are so brave and resilient" and "they are so respectful very prompt" and that "I am amazed at how they do it ... manage ... find accommodation...". Other key stakeholders appreciated the "extraordinary things they deal with ... and what they cope with" whilst others noticed that international students have "extremely high motivation and drive... and are very hardworking" and that their "individual level of commitment is so high."

Comments such as how hard international students work were common, with key stakeholders appreciating that international students were often paying their own way. They "work very hard to make their own money... when their parents have only paid for the first semester and they manage to pay for the rest of their study without help." In addition to this, key stakeholders also talked about how valuable it is to have international students on campus. Comments such as "we are fortunate to have the experience of learning from international students" and we are "learning so much from them ... what they bring is so valuable" were also frequent.

The really strong message is that whatever the university offers in terms of social interaction activities that support an inclusive campus community where all students belong will be in addition to international students' mighty efforts to pull on their own efforts to survive and in so doing show remarkable resilience. If we also reflect on the literature in this area and the strong correlation that has been shown between resiliency and positive adaptation to university life, then efforts to build and strengthen resilience in international students becomes a high priority.

6.2 SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The research results are significant in that a number of areas were identified as core psycho-social needs of international students. Five core themes emerged from the research data. These were personal and interpersonal issues; meeting basic needs; risks to psychological and physical well-being; organisational and campus issues with each theme further sub-divided into related substantive codes. A fifth core theme was developed around international students' resilience. The results are linked directly to the research recommendations made in Section 7.0 and as such are an important contribution to enhancing the University's response to international students. Participants gave many ideas and suggestions (Section 6.2) for improving the University's response to the identified needs and these have also informed the recommendations.

Personal and interpersonal issues

One of the most significant aspects of the results was that a majority of international student participants and key stakeholders rated experiences of loneliness, isolation, lack of connectedness and belonging as the highest psycho-social need of all. The two largest Australian University studies conducted by Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia (2007) and Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2006) reported similar results. For MacKillop campus and for ACU National, there is a strong need to implement recommendations outlined in Section 7.0 that work towards reducing experiences of loneliness and isolation amongst international students whilst increasing a sense of connectedness and belonging on campus.

Work/life/study balance stress was also rated highly by more than half of international student participants and key stakeholder participants reflecting the many demands on international students' lives. There was awareness that this balance can sometimes be precarious leading to increases in experiences of stress. Similarly challenges in communication and language were also rated by more than half of both participant groups as being a significant issue for international students especially in relation to the impact on social connections and friendships as well as on academic performance. The pressures to succeed from self or others along with academic issues were also identified as significant needs adding to the already mentioned personal and interpersonal issues.

All key stakeholders rated cross-cultural issues such as culture shock, grief and loss and reduced supports experienced by international students as a major psycho-social need of international students, whilst less than half of international student participants talked directly about this.

Meeting basic needs

Paramount in this core theme was the issue of financial needs which was rated by more than half of all participants as being a significant issue. International students clearly spoke of constant financial stress and worry and of the related impact on health and on academic performance whilst key stakeholders referenced the cumulative burden of financial stress on students' health and well-being. The lack of transport concessions for international students was another identified need, as was accommodation, employment and navigating cultural differences such as food and 'Aussie culture'.

Risks to psychological and physical well-being

This research mapped issues of risk across a number of domains and found that less than half of both participant groups were concerned about the personal safety needs of international students. Personal safety needs included risks of possible assault, robbery and safety on the streets of Sydney; experiences of exploitation; discrimination on campus; health concerns, both physical and psychological and childcare and parenting issues. One of the strengths of this research is that it has had a strong focus on areas of risk to psychological and physical well-being.

MacKillop campus / organisational issues

The need for better facilities and improved resources including staff resources was identified by more than half of all participants as major issues. More than half of all participants identified many positive experiences of support on campus. In addition to this, transitional issues in adjusting to University in the first year were identified by the majority of key stakeholders as being of high importance which was supported by the international student participants who were enrolled in second or third year. Less than half of key stakeholders and a minority of international students saw staff cross-cultural communication issues as important.

Stories of resilience

Given the two researchers had a high commitment to hearing stories of resilience it is no surprise that listening to ways in which international students survived and kept going to achieve their goals was a high priority. Both key stakeholders and international students were well able to notice personal resilience and reflect on what influenced the ability to keep going in spite of significant difficulties, bringing a contribution to the literature in this area. The fact that many international students do adjust and graduate is indeed a testament to their amazing efforts against considerable odds.

Conclusions

The following conclusions can be reached from these results.

1. Experiences of loneliness, isolation, reduced sense of belonging and connectedness are reported by a majority of participants in this research to be major issues of psycho-social need. The fact that 55 % of the student population at MacKillop is international (2007 figures) representing 62 countries may well contribute to a greater sense of loneliness and isolation than other ACU National campuses and may well contribute amongst other factors, to international students having a reduced sense of connectedness and belonging.
2. Issues of life/work/study balance (core theme one) are high
3. In core theme two, meeting basic needs, the results showed that international students at MacKillop have a high degree of financial need that impact on many domains of their lives, including increasing stress and worry.
5. Issues of risk (core theme three) experienced by international students are present to a significant degree across a number of areas.
6. Organisational/campus issues (core theme four) rated very highly and are important contributors to levels of international student well-being.
7. Participants responded enthusiastically to invitations to give ideas and suggestions for the improvement. Many of these ideas have informed the recommendations with some suggestions already having been implemented.
8. Stories of resilience are important to hear.

6.3 PARTICIPANT IDEAS AND SUGGESTIONS

One of the goals of the research was to enhance the University's response to the psycho-social needs of international students at MacKillop campus. As part of achieving this goal, all participants were invited to comment on how they thought MacKillop campus had gone so far in responding to these needs, and to talk about any ideas that they had for improvement. Many participants said they were pleased to engage with the invitation to give ideas for improvement and this process has provided the University with some high quality and very relevant ideas. Some of these ideas have already been implemented with great success, whilst others are currently being considered for implementation. The Recommendation Section (Section 7.0) of this report contains many of these suggestions. The ideas were plentiful, so in order to manage them, they have been organised around the core theme groupings. Where an idea has already been implemented this will be indicated.

Core Theme 1: Ideas around personal and interpersonal issues

Idea 1.1: Development of peer support / mentoring / buddy systems

Both groups of participants suggested that the campus have a peer support / mentoring program for the benefit of both local and international students. This was seen as providing a formal process for international and local students to meet and mix and to link international students with local students. It can also link international students from second and third year with new international and /or local students. A lot of information on mentoring systems has been reviewed in the Literature review in this research report (see Section 3.0). What needs to be said however is that peer support / mentor / buddy systems need funded positions to develop and implement the wide reaching program options that can include campus student to student mentoring; e-mentoring programs; community volunteer programs where international students have a chance to meet and know Australian families and more. All of these programs require planning, recruitment and advertising, training, co-ordination, support and development. To venture into these programs without adequate resourcing can be the difference between developing a high quality program that is sustainable and achieves outcomes with a program that may achieve short term goals but is unsustainable.

In this research project, it was heartening to hear a lot of international student participants say that they would be happy to act as mentors or supporters to new international students at MacKillop if needed in the future. Equally encouraging was that many key stakeholders indicated that they would be happy to be on working groups to assist in sustaining the focus and to support the achievement of further outcomes. Participants were also very interested to receive feedback about the research and its outcomes, reflecting a high level of involvement in the research project.

Idea 1.2: Australian and international home country flags up on display on campus

A majority (38 out of 48) of international students commented that it would give them a real sense of support and belonging on campus if they were to see their home country flag up on campus alongside other international flags and the Australian flag.

“If I saw my country flag up I would feel like I am existing”
“It would make me feel more at home”
“The flag represents a lot of things so having it up would be nice”
“If I see my flag of nation I feel like I am welcome and I can get to know which countries the other students come from”
“I would feel welcome in Australia to see my flag”
It would make me feel more at home to see my flag up.
“Every flag needs to be there”
“Flags up would be very good”
“Seeing my flag would make me feel welcome and proud”.
“I would like to see the flags up as it would be a big identity for my country”
“It would make me feel like I’m part of Australia”
“It would be respectful”

These quotes are testament to the powerful notion of displaying the flags on campus. A small number of international students said that having their flag up on display on campus was not important to them, though if it did go up they would be pleased. A smaller number of international students were concerned that displaying the flags might be a difficulty for local students illustrated by one student’s comments that “flags are OK as long as it doesn’t upset the Australian students”.



This idea was implemented at MacKillop in April 2008 when the flags of all the home countries of international students currently enrolled at MacKillop were displayed in the student common area alongside the Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags, making 63 flags in all. The event was marked by a celebration of cultural diversity

and the staff and student community were invited to the event. In future years any home country flags of new international students not already displayed will be added. The ACU National International Policy Committee and the ACU National Dean of Students supported the proposal.

During the 'flag ceremony' at MacKillop students were invited to give their feedback and 53 students completed evaluations with 100% saying that it was a good idea to have the flags on display. When asked what it meant to have the flags up permanently at MacKillop, the following student quotes say it all. Many international students said that "It makes me feel accepted, proud, respected and welcomed and that they felt "happy, fantastic and good" to see the flags. Others said that "It can alleviate the migration stress to some extent" and "I feel identity with my country and with the University". Comments from local students included "it reminds me how lucky we are to have so many cultures in our country" and "I feel very happy and it gave me a sense of belonging" and it means that "everyone is welcome and valued".



These comments and many more since the event tell us that even with a relatively low cost a very significant contribution to increasing students' sense of belonging and connectedness on campus can be made. It also has the potential to build connections and a sense of belonging to a culturally diverse campus community through visible images. The current president of the MacKillop campus student association commented that "We have had a very positive response to the flags from students who have come into the office, and I think it will prove to be one of the most positive things that we could have done on this campus". This idea is transferable to all other ACU National campuses where international students are enrolled.

Idea 1.3: A program of cultural events and celebration

Time and time again participants from both groups recommended that on campus, we promote cultural diversity through a cultural program of celebration based around cultural festivals or significant country days (including Australia) through singing, dancing, music, food and cultural dress. Participants suggested this occur at lunch time and involve students from each of the countries in preparing the celebration. Many of the international students in the research volunteered at the time of their interview to be involved in this.

The organisation and planning for any such cultural program could be fairly detailed. Issues of cost need to be carefully considered given that international students have told us already about the high financial pressures they experience. However, a cultural event with dancing, music and cultural dress would be very significant without the need for food. As several key stakeholders said, “multicultural days embody fostering relationships” and “music can bring people together”.

An international student suggested that the campus develop a cultural gallery to house examples of cultural dress / artefacts of all the home countries represented at MacKillop. In April 2008 a campus working group made up of staff and students was formed to consider these ideas and progress the suggestions into a cultural activity program.

1.4: Orientation activities

1.4a) Social interaction activities

Many international students suggested that social interaction activities be organised during international student orientation to support international students to meet others from the same home country whilst also having the opportunity to meet other international students from other countries to help reduce loneliness and isolation. Key stakeholders also suggested the importance of organising social activities at orientation.

An outcome from this idea was that during international student orientation in February 2008 an inaugural ‘Meet and greet’ activity at MacKillop Campus was organised. The activity was evaluated. It was the very last activity on day three of the international student orientation. In the canteen area, each of the new international student home country flags (38) were set up on tables of ten, and students were asked to sit at the table with their flag. Afternoon tea was provided. A Student Service staff member sat at each table for support. We anticipated the activity might take 15-20 mins but after 1.5 hours the students were still talking to each other! We had to wind it up due to our other commitments. The evaluations showed that 100% of students said the activity was a good idea; 100% of students recommended that we repeat it but on the first day rather than the last day and that students said they really appreciated seeing their home country flag.

Some quotes from the student evaluations included “I met more people today than any other day!!”; “we get to meet other people from our own country and feel we belong in this school”; “it was a good chance to communicate with students from other countries” “it’s a cultural bonding”; “we can make many friends” and “this is good for socializing at a new place”. With such comments as these we are committed to make this activity part of every international student orientation program at MacKillop campus and hopefully on the first day, rather than the last day. It also needs to be considered how social interaction activities at the general orientation (with both local and international students) can be increased. There was also a suggestion for a ‘renewal / retreat for new students’ to assist them to settle and to link with others in similar circumstances. Key stakeholders suggested that a ‘second year orientation’ be provided if international students don’t start in first year, and that a broader orientation be given to include information about Australian ‘way of life’ and culture.

1.4b) Useful websites and information distributed at orientation

Another idea from international student participants was that a list of useful websites be collated and circulated at orientation. Several students provided sites that they had found useful.

<u>Brazilian community</u>	<i>Note: These sites have not been checked.</i>
	www.bracca.com.au
	www.informationbrazil.com.au
<u>Kenyan community</u>	
	www.kenyasdownunder.com
	www.kenyahoo.com
	www.afrodownunder.com
<u>Chinese community</u>	
	www.tigtag.com (apparently an excellent site for Chinese students' accommodation needs)
<u>General textbook exchange and second hand texts:</u>	www.textbookexchange.com
<u>The NSW Transport Info Line: 131500; Telstra info line: 1223 + any others.</u>	

Idea 1.5: On-going international student support and friendship groups on campus

The suggestion was made that there be on-going meetings on campus of international students for friendship and support and where international students could discuss issues and have support. This idea was not supported by some other international students in the research who said that they thought meeting just as international students on campus would be divisive and against efforts to mix with local students. What this tells us is that international students have differing needs and that best practice is to offer a range of options responding to these varied needs.

Both groups of participants also suggested the need for planned social interaction activities between local and international students. There was some reference by international student participants to the value of groups like the current campus 'mature aged students support group' which runs regularly and has both international and local students involved. As well as campus support groups, suggestions were made by participants for campus sporting groups and activities as well as for clubs on campus whilst a number of students made suggestions for an on-line conversation group amongst students.

Idea 1.6: Sporting / recreational activities on campus.

Many participants suggested the need for both formal and informal sporting and recreational activities to be developed at MacKillop campus. Currently the students association provides table tennis and snooker facilities in the common room, but usage of these facilities are dependant on students paying a joining fee. Many international student participants regretted this requirement citing financial pressures for their not paying this fee, which then left them unable to access this equipment. However, many suggestions were made especially by male participants in the research for sport on campus. Some of these suggestions included:

Sporting activities

- Badminton / basketball / volley ball was repeatedly suggested
- Need for a gym for sports activities, exercise and relaxation
- Formation of a cricket club plus access to social tennis
- Access to snooker / pool and table tennis (without having to pay the \$50 student assoc. fee) and other indoor games

Other recreational activities

- Chess club and some tables with chess board inserts
- Movie group with discussion afterwards
- Travel club with discussion and trips in and around Sydney and environs
- Music group with discussion; singing group and music events
- Dancing club; Reading club; Sewing / knitting club; cooking group
- Opportunities to practice speaking English through all of the above activities

There is a current proposal that involves a partnership between ACU International Education and the ACU School of Exercise Science, Mount St. Mary campus, Strathfield with the former funding the latter to take on the task of developing sporting facilities on each ACU campus as a student project. This would indeed be welcome, and may constitute a real challenge at MacKillop given the limited outdoor space on campus.

Idea 1.7 **Balancing the percentage of local and international students at MacKillop**

There were many suggestions from both groups of participants about the number of international students being balanced across all of the ACU National campuses. This suggestion is in line with the ACU National Strategic Plan for Internalisation 2008 – 2012 that promotes a balanced distribution of international students across all campuses. Participants generally expressed the idea that social interaction between local and international students is not aided by the current balance at MacKillop.

Idea 1.8: **Communication / language issues/ cross cultural issues**

Many international student participants suggested that academic organisational structures such as the Sections used in the School of Nursing up to Semester 2 of 2006 be re-introduced because of the support this structure created for building friendships and connections across cultures. Suggestions for having communication groups to improve English were regularly suggested. A number of international student participants also suggested that the excellent Academic Skills clinical communication workshops be smaller and more often. Key stakeholders promoted the idea of mixing of international and local students in tutorial groups as a priority with “relaxed” opportunities to practice English and more education around knowing academic expectations.

Core Theme 2: Ideas around meeting Basic Needs

Idea 2:1: **ACU National \$500 repayable loan scheme**

Up to October 2007, international students were not eligible to apply for the ACU National repayable \$500 loan for students in financial need. During the research, an international student participant strongly suggested that international students needed to be part of this loan scheme. This suggestion was taken to the ACU National Dean of Students who was pro-active in including international students in the scheme. (Achieved October 2007).

Idea 2.2 Consider changing the ACU national fee instalment arrangement

One international student suggested that International Office implement a four instalment system for fee payments at the rate of 25%; 25%; 25%; 25%. However if this is not possible and if the 3 instalment arrangement remains in place, the student suggested that consideration be given to the payment rate be changed from 50%; 25%, 25% instalments to a 33%; 33%; 34% option.

Idea 2.3 Start a food cupboard at MacKillop for students who are in financial need

A food cupboard exists at many of the other ACU campuses and certainly has a place at MacKillop given the established financial need of many of the international research participants. (Achieved in Semester 1, 2008)

Idea 2.4 Transport concessions

International student participants repeatedly requested that ACU National take action with the relevant authorities to secure transport concessions to relieve financial stress. Key stakeholders also raised this concern and saw it as a broader political issue.

Idea 2.5 Accommodation (rent/housing)

Key stakeholders suggested that realistic estimates of the cost of living in Sydney especially rental accommodation costs and price variations across areas be provided to prospective international students to assist them to know about the high cost of rental in and around Sydney. International student participants suggested the University provide supported accommodation for one Semester, and general accommodation assistance.

Idea 2.4 Employment

Participants suggested appointment of a careers adviser on campus. This was achieved in February 2008 with the appointment of a 0.6 FTE careers adviser position at MacKillop.

Idea 2.5 Navigating cultural differences eg life skills, 'Aussie' culture, different food

Key stakeholders were interested to increase the information about Australia's socio-cultural history so international students can see "themselves as part of a continuum" International students frequently spoke about the food in the canteen, and how there needs to be much more diversity of food catering for dietary and cultural needs, and to be less expensive. Some key stakeholders suggested that research needs to be done into food requirements so that improvements in the canteen can occur. Both international students and key stakeholders suggested more microwaves are needed. International students also suggested their need for access to free boiling water in the MacKillop student common room. The Dean of Students commissioned a purpose built kitchenette area in response to this suggestion which was completed in October 2007.

Core Theme 3: Risks to psychological and physical well-being

Idea 3.1 Personal safety concerns (assault, robbery)

International students suggested that a workable timetable be developed to run from 9am and 5pm to increase safety when travelling long distances to and from university. Other ideas included self defence classes on campus and workshops on safety issues at orientation on personal safety / water safety / road safety and other general safety issues.

Idea 3.2. Experiences of discrimination on campus

A number of international students suggested that:

- at orientation it be stressed that there is a zero tolerance on campus of any discrimination, racism and/or harassment and that ACU National is committed to providing a safe community for students and staff, and
- that students be encouraged to contact staff for support if something was to happen on campus.

Idea 3.3 Health concerns (physical and psychological)

Some key stakeholders suggested that international students need information about sexual safety and sexual health given that international students may be experiencing greater sexual freedoms than in their home country. International students also commented that the information provided at orientation about culture shock, ideas for surviving and the process of adjustment was useful.

Idea 3.4 Childcare and parenting issues

A number of international student participants suggested that a group for students who are parents would be good, including both local and international students. An outcome from this idea was that in Semester 1 of 2008 a new group for 'students who are parents' was started on MacKillop campus with facilitation by Student Services staff from Counselling and Mission Engagement. The group will run on a monthly basis during Semester. At the date of writing this research report, one well attended 'students who are parents' support group had been held.

Idea 3.5 Exploitation (e.g. Work, rent, sexual safety)

Participants suggested information and advice on tenants and worker rights be available to international students, as well as warnings about financial exploitation. Information on sexual harassment is already provided to every international student at orientation but one international student suggested that providing a safe community on campus free from harassment of all kinds be mentioned at orientation, with stress that staff can help if any student has any worries about this issue. This latter suggestion was implemented in the Orientation program in February 2008.

Core Theme 4: Ideas for organisational & campus issues

Idea 4.1 Campus facilities / resources

There were many ideas around this issue so suggestions will just be listed to reflect the participants' ideas. Some ideas have already been mentioned in earlier sections.

- Co-location of International Office, Student Centre and Student Services.
- A new building with more facilities
- The map of the campus needs to be clearer
- More female toilets
- A quiet student common area.
- Sporting facilities on campus
- Computers and printers in the School of Business and Informatics
- More academic skills workshops with smaller numbers
- More counselling workshops to deal with stress
- Have a web CT site for international students to talk to each other
- Get more staff in the School of Nursing clinical office
- Library hours to extend on weekends and later hours during the week

- More desks and chairs in the library and more discussion rooms in library
- Need more computers and printers in the library
- Put the Librarian in charge of the change-over between students using computers rather than students having to ask another student to leave.
- Have more books for course reading in library and extra time beyond the 2 hours for accessing textbooks in the library

Idea 4.2 Positive experiences of support on Campus

Increase staff resources to give more time for support of international students

Idea 4.3 Transitional issues in adjusting to University 'the 1st year'.

Both groups of participants suggested the idea of mentor/buddy/peer support programs for MacKillop to assist in the first year transition process.

Idea 4.4 Cross-cultural staff communication issues

That staff at ACU National MacKillop campus have compulsory cross cultural communication training.

6.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH

There are a number of limitations of the research and these include:

- ❖ The research sample size of 48 international students was small. However, with the 23 key stakeholders the overall number of participants was 71. Given the active recruitment campaign, we would have liked the number of international student participants to be higher.
- ❖ In the research study international students represented 17 countries which is less than we would have liked even though the seventeen countries did represent the major international student groups on campus.
- ❖ The number of key stakeholders in the research was 23, which was a good number of participants representing the overall Campus. There were unfortunately no key stakeholders from the Library staff which was really an oversight and noticed too late.
- ❖ There was a small number (five) of post-graduate international students, and these students were all male and enrolled in the same academic school. There were no post-graduate female students in the study even though there are female postgraduate students on campus.
- ❖ Both researchers did not speak another language other than English and both are Anglo-Celtic in background. This lack of cultural diversity may have understandably deterred some students from participating. There is some evidence for this idea gained from the following scenario. One research flyer early in the project was emailed out to international students from an international office staff member who has a Japanese name. Five Japanese students registered for a focus group saying they came because of the Japanese name on the email and that they were surprised to meet the student researcher (who is not Japanese). In spite of this, these students agreed to be involved in the research. It does give rise to the suggestion that the response rate may be influenced by the culture of the researchers.
- ❖ There was a definite lack of time to do the research project across all of its dimensions. It is important that general staff at ACU National be considered to receive research time similar to that of Academic staff. General staff have a lot to offer in terms of research and as such are a valuable research resource to the University (see recommendation 7.13).

6.5 AREAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research has highlighted a number of areas for further research at ACU National and especially at MacKillop campus. These include:

- Researching the beliefs, attitudes and needs of local MacKillop students towards cross cultural interaction and their experiences of being at a campus where 55% of students are international and 45% are local. This research also needs to include an emphasis on local MacKillop students who are from a non-English speaking background as a particular cohort within the broader local student cohort.
- Conducting a longitudinal research study on international students in order to gain more informed understandings about their experiences and progression through tertiary study at ACU National.
- Researching the needs and experiences of post-graduate international students.
- Researching the needs and experiences of international students who are parents, both those students who have their children with them, and those who have had to leave their children behind in their home country.
- Researching the needs and experiences of international students who have accessed work in the sex industry in Sydney, particularly the pathways into the sex industry and issues of risk and protection.

7.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations That Inform Policy

- 7.1 That ACU National adopts a *pro-active response* in responding to the needs of international students through:**
- Endorsement of the ACU National Strategic Plan for Internationalisation 2008 – 2012 (implemented March 2008).
 - The provision of adequate resourcing to achieve the Plan's performance indicators especially in relation to strategies focused towards improving support for International students' well-being.
- 7.2 That ACU National marketing and promotion material and information, including the ACU website / International students be reviewed** by International Education and University Relations staff to ensure that recruitment advertising is realistic, achievable and positively contributing to international student expectations.
- 7.3 That immediate funding of a dedicated Mentor Program Co-ordinator position at MacKillop Campus occur** in order to develop, implement and co-ordinate systems of mentoring to increase a sense of belonging & social interaction on Campus. It is also strongly recommended that ACU National consider follow-on funding of similar positions at other Campuses according to their international student numbers.
- 7.4 That the ACU National loan scheme include international students** (implemented October 2007), and that suggestions for fee installment payment proportions be considered.
- 7.5 That the Academic Timetable has at least two common times between 12 noon – 1pm per week** to enable student social interaction activities to occur, and that senior ACU National staff bring their influence to achieve this.
- 7.6 That facilities at MacKillop Campus be reviewed** in line with the concerns, ideas and suggestions from this research to adequately respond to the number of students on campus.
- 7.7 That MacKillop staff resources be enhanced** to meet the multi-dimensional needs of the large number of international students at this campus.
- 7.8 That cross-cultural communication training** (perhaps on-line) is compulsory for all ACU National staff.
- 7.9 That all international student home country flags are permanently displayed at ACU National campuses** alongside the Australian, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flags to promote a sense of belonging and connectedness on campus. (implemented at MacKillop campus on 15th April 2008). .
- 7.11 That social interaction activities be included as an integral part of Orientation programs** (implemented February 2008)

- 7.12 That further research** on the needs of international students be supported.
- 7.13 That inclusion of general ACU National staff in the University research community be implemented** and that the words ‘general staff’ be added to the University Research Mission Statement that currently says “All academic staff will be encouraged to attain their full research potential” (ACU Website / University Mission Statement / Policies). This would acknowledge and support the wealth of knowledge and skills that general staff bring to ACU National and to research in particular. Associated research support (time / resources) to also apply to ACU National general staff.
- 7.14 That applications for ACU National research funding have a clause that allows for exceptions to the eligibility criteria,** especially in situations where a newer employee has sound research and relevant work experience.
- 7.15 That renewed lobbying for international students to receive student travel concessions** from the NSW Government takes place.
- 7.16 That consideration of funding for a booklet / DVD resource project** occur to collate international student experiences including stories of resilience for use with newly arrived and other international students

Recommendations that inform Campus activities

- 7.17 That representative campus working groups be established** to sustain focus and action on the implementation of these recommendations; to work towards a more “unified approach” to international students, and to organise cultural programs (music, dance, country celebration days, concerts, festivals etc) on campus to celebrate diversity & to build community, and to promote social interaction on campus (implemented at MacKillop in April 2008).
- 7.18 That the number of groups, clubs and sport on Campus be increased** where possible referencing the research ideas and suggestions
- 7.19 That supportive responses to different faiths is in place** (implemented to some degree at MacKillop)
- 7.20 That Campus canteens cater for a variety of cultural and dietary needs at as low a cost as possible**
- 7.21 That boiling water, adequate number of microwaves and kitchen sink / bench facilities are freely available for student use** (implemented at MacKillop – September 2007)
- 7.22 That Career Adviser positions** created on all Campuses (implemented at ACU National campuses - February 2008)
- 7.23 That a food cupboard be established at MacKillop campus** to support students experiencing financial stress. (Implemented March 2008)
- 7.24 That workshops and information on rights and safety issues** be provided for international students to reduce risk of exploitation and abuse and to maintain well health.

8.0 CONCLUSION

This research has significantly contributed to identifying the psycho-social needs of international students at MacKillop campus. The research was timely given the increase in numbers of international students at MacKillop since 2004 rising to 55.0% of all students on campus in 2007.

The research objectives were achieved and have added to the knowledge and understanding of the psycho-social needs of international students enrolled at MacKillop campus. There has been some significant contributions made to the less researched areas of risk, parenting and resilience issues. The qualitative research approach enabled participant experiences to be heard.

Quite a number of the research recommendations have already been implemented. There is a strong momentum at MacKillop to implement celebrations of cultural diversity on campus, and the newly formed working group is well poised to achieve this. However, there remain a number of recommendations that involve ACU National policy matters that ACU National senior staff will need to ratify if they are to be implemented.

The research project has already been presented to the ACU National International Policy Committee (IPC); the Student Services team at MacKillop and the Australian and New Zealand Student Service Association (ANZSSA) Conference in Auckland. Presentations are planned for Mount Saint Mary campus, Strathfield in 2008 and the ACU National counsellors group in June 2008. These presentations are important as they bring the research project, the results, analysis and the recommendations to a wider audience of interested university staff and students. At each presentation there has been consistent interest and engaged discussion of the issues. It is anticipated that at a later date an article will be written for publication in a relevant journal. All research participants will be forwarded a copy of the research executive summary and recommendations from this report, and the full research report will be available to ACU National staff and students from various sources.

In concluding this research report, it is worthwhile to revisit that the research itself is part of a university pro-active approach to respond to the needs of international students enrolled at ACU National and particularly at MacKillop campus. Most importantly, the research was conducted in an inclusive and respectful way and gave voice to the valuable experiences of international student and key stakeholder participants. It is hoped that this research will contribute to the well-being of all international students enrolled at ACU National.

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10.0 APPENDICES

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APPENDIX 10.2
RESEARCH FLYER

**ACU National**
Australian Catholic University
Brisbane Sydney Canberra Ballarat Melbourne

ATTENTION INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

STUDYING DEGREE AND DIPLOMA PROGRAMS.



You are invited to participate
in a University research project looking at the needs of International students enrolled at
ACU National North Sydney Campus (MacKillop)

We are interested to hear from you and encourage you to think about participating in either a small group or
an individual interview to talk about your experience as an International student.

An ACU National
'Certificate of participation in a research project'
will be given to each student interviewed

Participation is optional and your choice to participate or not will in no way affect your academic progress.

If you would like to participate, or to find out more information

PLEASE CONTACT:

Judy Wright
Student Services
judy.wright@acu.edu.au
9739 2389

APPENDIX 10.3
LETTER TO PARTICIPANTS

TITLE OF PROJECT: RESEARCHING THE NEEDS OF INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ENROLLED IN DIPLOMA AND DEGREE COURSES AT ACU NATIONAL, NORTH SYDNEY CAMPUS.

NAME OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: JUDY WRIGHT
NAME OF STUDENT RESEARCHER: MELINDA GOLLAN

ACU LOCATION: STUDENT SERVICES – Counselling, North Sydney Campus

Dear Participant,

You are invited to participate in some research on the needs of international students enrolled in diploma and degree courses at ACU National, North Sydney campus. As approximately 48% of students enrolled at the North Sydney campus are International students, the University is very interested to research the needs of International students in order to inform and support the University's response to International students.

The research will be using a series of **Focus Groups** (where 6-8 students meet together in a group) & **Individual Interviews** which will give International students the opportunity to talk about their needs, and how the University can continue to respond to these needs. In addition to this, key University staff involved with International students will be interviewed individually to gather their perceptions about the needs of International students. Several International students representing the student body on University committees and Associations will also be interviewed individually. In addition to this, a broad ranging review of relevant literature and research will be completed.

Student participants will be asked to be available for up to 1 hour. An ACU 'Certificate of Participation' in a university research project will be given to each participating student.

The potential benefits for participants include;

- Knowing that the University rates the psycho-social needs of International students very highly, and sees this as a very important issue.
- Having the opportunity to contribute comments and ideas about the issues through a respectful consultative process.
- Contributing to worthwhile research which may be published to add knowledge to the literature on the needs of International students.

It is emphasised that participation in this study is for the purposes of gathering information about the psycho-social needs of International students enrolled in diploma or degree courses at ACU North Sydney is voluntary. Participants are free to refuse consent altogether without having to justify the decision, or to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the study at any time without giving a reason. Any withdrawal from the research will not prejudice future care or academic progress.

Confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study and in any report of the study. Notes taken at Focus Groups and individual interviews will record only themes and issues relating to needs, and not who individually made the comments. Where some identified needs are located within gender or cultural groupings, this information will only be used if the anonymity of the participants can be assured. Individual participants will not be identified in any reports of the study, as only the overall themes / issues relating to psycho-social needs will be identified.

If you have any questions about the project, before or after participating, please contact:

Principal Investigator/Supervisor: Judy Wright, Counsellor, ACU North Sydney

On telephone number: 02 9739 2389

Department: Student Services - Counselling

of Australian Catholic University
40 Edward St
North Sydney NSW 2060

Results from the research will be available on the Student Services – North Sydney Counselling site on the ACU website.

This study has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee at the Australian Catholic University.

In the event that you have any complaint or concern about the way you have been treated during the study, or you have a query that the Principal Investigator / Supervisor has not been able to satisfy, you may write to:

Chair, HREC
C/o Research Services
Australian Catholic University
Strathfield Campus
Locked bag 2002
STRATHFIELD NSW 2135

Any complaint will be treated in confidence and will be fully investigated. The participant will be informed of the outcome.

If you are willing to participate, please sign the attached consent forms. You should sign both copies of the consent form and return one copy to the student researcher or investigator and the other copy is for your records. Your participation in the research project will be most appreciated.

.....
Judy Wright
Principal Investigator / Supervisor

Date.....

APPENDIX 10.4
CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

CONSENT FORM: Participant's copy

Insert Title of Research Project: Researching needs of international university students enrolled in diploma and degree courses at ACU National, North Sydney campus.

Name of principal researcher: Judy Wright
Name of student researcher: Melinda Gollan

I have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this Interview and/or Focus Group, realising that I can withdraw at any time. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

Name of participant:(block letters)

Participant's signature: **Date:**

Signature of principal researcher: **Date:**

Signature of student researcher: **Date:**

CONSENT FORM: Researcher's copy

Title of Research Project: Researching the needs of international university students enrolled in diploma and degree courses at ACU National, MacKillop Campus, North Sydney.

Names of principal researcher: Judy Wright
Name of student researcher: Melinda Gollan

I have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to Participants. Any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this Interview and/or Focus Group realising that I can withdraw at any time. I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or may be provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.

Name of participant:(block letters)

Participant's signature: **Date:**

Signature of student researcher: **Date:**

Signature of principal researcher: **Date:**

APPENDIX 10.5

Demographic data for international student participants

SOME BRIEF INFORMATION

What is your Country of Origin?

Are you male or female? (please circle)

What age group are you in? Please circle

- Under 20 yrs
- 21yrs – 30 yrs
- 31yrs – 40yrs
- 41yrs – 50yrs
- 51yrs – 60yrs
- 60 + years

What Course are you enrolled in?

What year of the Course are you in now?

When did you first come to Australia?

How long does it take you to travel to this Campus from home?

APPENDIX 10.6

Participant interview questions

10.6a) Key stakeholders

- In what ways are you involved with International students here at ACU North Sydney?
- What does the term psycho-social mean to you?
- What have you noticed about the needs (psycho-social) of International students? (This is a core question and would be expanded for clarification depending on the response)
- What sorts of things tell you this?
- To what degree do you think the MacKillop campus currently meets the needs (psycho-social) of International students?
- How could this be improved / enhanced? – ideas / suggestions.
- Any other comments?

10.6b) International students

(same questions for focus groups and individual interviews)

- What has it been like to be an international student at MacKillop campus? What have been your needs?
- Have there been any difficulties / challenges that you have experienced?
- Have you experienced much support?
- When things get hard, how do you keep going?
- To what degree do you think the MacKillop campus currently meets the needs (psycho-social) of international students?
- How could this be improved / enhanced? Do you have any ideas or suggestions?
- Any other comments?

APPENDIX 10.7

Contact details for researcher

Principal researcher:

Judy Wright
Counsellor,
ACU National
Student Services, MacKillop Campus
PO Box 968, North Sydney NSW 2059

Phone: 02 9739.2389

Fax: 02 9739.2318

Email: judy.wright@acu.edu.au