

Expectations and Experiences of Indian students in Australia: Findings from a Survey and Focus Group Study

Swati Basu
International Student Services
Queensland University of Technology

Abstract

India currently ranks among the top source countries for the Australian education industry and therefore, a better understanding of the concerns and challenges confronted by Indian students is essential. This study was undertaken among Indian students enrolled at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) to assess the needs and expectations through survey and focus group meetings. Whilst several past studies have emphasised language and acculturation difficulties encountered by international students, we find that Indian students coming to Australia are more concerned about 'value for money' aspects of their education including quality of programs, course fees, availability of scholarships, and career and networking opportunities. The findings also reveal an acute need for more effective dissemination of information prior to the students commencing their programs in Australia. Initiatives like pre-departure briefings and orientation programs should cover both academic and non-academic aspects of university life as well as resources and support services available to international students.

Keywords

Indian students, international student experience, focus group.

Introduction

Australia has gained recognition as one of the world's leading providers of education and training. Students from different parts of the world have made Australia their education destination. This is the result of an innovative and effective education system. Australian qualifications are widely recognized, gaining the attention of many employers worldwide and launching many successful careers. The Australian education experience is seen as different and challenging, each year attracting hundreds of thousands of international students who wish to maximize their potential and secure their future.

In the past decade, more than a million overseas students have studied in Australia. The international student enrolment data for 2009 showed that 631,935 international students drawn from more than 100 different countries around the world were undertaking a qualification in Australia (Australian High Commission, 2010). Over one in five tertiary students in Australia were international students (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). These students reportedly chose Australian education for several reasons: its reputation for excellence and world-wide recognition; safe and stable environment; Australia's enviable standard of living – one of the highest in the world; and Australia's multicultural society which helps international students feel at home.

In keeping with the international student enrolment trends, the number of Indian students studying in Australia has also grown rapidly over last decade. In fact, the growth rate in Indian student numbers far outstripped the growth rate in students from most other countries. The end of year Indian student enrolment data for 2009 shows that 120,913 Indian students had enrolled to undertake an Australian qualification in that year. In other words, one out of every five international students enrolled in Australian institutions came from India. This made India the second top-source country (after China) for Australia's international education providers. To put it in perspective, India was ranked eighth in the list of top-source countries as recently as in 2003 when Indian students accounted for less than 5% of all international student enrolments. Since then, for Indian

students, Australia became the second most popular international education destination behind the United States.

Indian students find it easy to transfer to the Australian education system due to its similarity with the 10+2+3 education system prevalent in India.¹ Students can choose from a wide variety of Australian universities and education institutions to suit their specific needs and goals. Each higher education institution has its own strengths and areas of specialisation. This provides students with a wide choice of study options and access to the latest research in their chosen field. The most popular courses amongst Indian students coming to Australia are in the areas of business, information technology, engineering, and science. Although vocational education and training (VET) sector attracted by far the greatest share of enrolments among Indian students (62% in 2009), enrolments in the higher education sector also grew three-fold between 2003 and 2009 to reach 24% (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2009).

However, there is a continual need on the part of Australian higher education providers to be attuned to the changing perceptions and needs of international students. Any perception of decline in overall quality of education and related services can result in students becoming reluctant to select Australia as their destination and instead choosing to study elsewhere. Sometimes a single issue like security (on and off campus) can exert substantial influence in choice of destination countries, cities, and education providers. For example, incidents of violence against Indian students in 2009 and the consequent media attention had a damaging effect on Australia's reputation as a safe destination for study among Indian nationals and adversely impacted levels of enrolments of Indian students in the following years.

Understanding the overall Indian student experience in Australia, in relation to life on campus and beyond it, is critical to assess the needs of the students and identify areas of concern. This knowledge can be informative to higher education providers in devising successful strategies to provide superior service to the current and future cohorts of students coming from India. This is the overarching motivation of the current study.

Background

In keeping with the international student trends in Australia, international student enrolments at Queensland University of Technology (QUT) have also seen a steady increase in the last decade. In 2009, out of a student population of 40,000, nearly 6,700 students enrolled at QUT were international students. About 5% of these students were from India. Subsequently the number of Indian students, both in absolute and relative terms, sharply declined. This slump is not unique to QUT but is a trend reflected across all Australian education providers and is consistent with the anecdotal evidence of widespread concern among Indian students about choosing Australia as their study destination in the wake of several violent attacks reported against Indian students mainly in the southern states during 2009.

This strong interest among Indian students in Australia as an education destination in recent years has been underpinned by a perception of quality. Australia has comprehensive quality assurance mechanisms embedded in its education system at the government and institutional level as well as through professional peak bodies. To maintain their reputation as providers of a high quality education experience, Australian universities need to offer robust student support services and conduct regular quality assessment of those services. This is a complex task in itself.

Whilst Western higher education institutions are academically among the best, they are continually challenged by the need to simultaneously address the cognitive, social, and interpersonal development of students (Keeling, 2004). Despite the interwoven nature of learning, programs,

¹ In India, students gain secondary qualification after ten years of schooling and post-secondary qualification after another two years. This is followed by three years of undergraduate studies to gain a bachelor's degree. Hence, this system is referred to as 10+2+3.

services, and systems of support may remain fragmented and separate. Such fragmentation had been common among institutions in the past. However, sophisticated student affairs models and infrastructures have been found to dramatically enhance students' experience in Western colleges and universities (Chakrabarti, Bartning, & Sengupta, 2009). Australian universities are no exception to this.

However, student experience is not confined to what is delivered within the university campus. For international students, education involves more than just acquiring an overseas qualification. By studying abroad, students gain valuable experience through living and working in a foreign country. These opportunities, however, come with an additional set of challenges of adjusting to unfamiliar social and cultural settings. The change in surroundings can result in feelings of disorientation and helplessness (Furnham & Bochner, 1986; Olivás & Lee, 2006). These feelings can be accentuated at times of crises, real or perceived, like the reports of violent attacks on Indian students flashed regularly in the media. Feelings of isolation and loneliness have also been reported by Deumart, Marginson, Nyland, Ramia, & Erlenawati (2004) as issues affecting a large proportion of international students. The present study, therefore, attempts to capture the different facets of Indian students' experiences, both within and outside the university campus.

The study contributes to a growing body of work that looks into international student experiences from a social and developmental perspective (Ward, Bochner, & Furnham, 2008). Undoubtedly, the overall international student experience is significantly influenced by the ease or difficulty in adjusting to the host environment. Araujo (2011) organises these adjustment issues around several convergent findings. For example, many studies find proficiency in English language to be a significant factor in relation to both academic and social adjustment. Poyrazli & Kavanaugh (2006) reveal that English proficiency significantly affects the level of academic adjustment. On the other hand, Yeh and Inose (2003) find that self-reported English language fluency is a significant predictor of acculturative distress. In a study conducted among Taiwanese students in United States, it is found that that apprehension about speaking English affected the adjustment of these students (Swagler & Ellis, 2003). Alarmingly, Sümer, Poyrazli, & Grahame (2008) report that students with lower levels of English skills show higher levels of depression and anxiety. Finally, Kwon (2009) suggests that international students undertaking 'English as second language' programs are more likely to feel intimidated or isolated in classes where the medium of instruction is English.

Social support is identified as an important factor in facilitating adjustment of international students. Poyrazli, Kavanaugh, Baker & Al-Timini (2004) report that students with higher levels of social support demonstrate lower levels of acculturative stress. Ye (2006) examined the linkage between cross-cultural adaptation of Chinese international students in the United States and the perceived support from traditional support networks and online ethnic social groups. The paper's findings suggest that there is a negative correlation between perceived support (from interpersonal networks in the host country and from online ethnic social groups) and difficulties in social adjustment.

Perceived discrimination and prejudice has also been shown to affect the acculturation and adjustment process of international students. Constantine, Anderson, Berkel, Cadwell, and Utsey (2005) qualitatively investigate the adjustment experiences of Kenyan, Nigerian, and Ghanaian international students in the United States. In their study, all subjects reported experiencing discriminatory treatment. Interestingly, Poyrazli & Grahame (2007) find that the different types of discrimination experienced by international students occur mainly outside the campus.

There has been very little research to date on homesickness of international students. Among the two prominent studies in this field, Poyrazli & Lopez (2007) find that not only international students in United States experience higher levels of homesickness than American students, but their level of perceived discrimination is an important predictor of the level of homesickness. The

second study (Tochkov, Levine, & Sanaka, 2010) compares the level of homesickness experienced by a sample of Indian students in United States to that of a sample of American (domestic) students. The authors find that international students from India experienced significantly higher levels of homesickness than American freshmen, although the level declined among students who had accumulated more credit hours.

Gunawardena & Wilson (2012) investigate the experience of students from the Indian subcontinent in Australian universities. In addition to many other studies dealing with the socio-cultural factors shaping international student experience, they also look into the reasons behind the choice of Australia as destination for higher education. One of the key issues that emerge from their research is the influence of the agents who market Australian universities in this region. Since the agents earn commissions on student recruitment, they have an incentive to promote an overly attractive image of student life in Australia and not adequately highlight potential difficulties the students may encounter with high cost of living, scarcity of accommodation, and limited employment opportunities. When student expectations are not met on arrival to Australia, it leads to disappointment. The authors point out that a majority of these students come from the lower end of the rising middle class population of the region and therefore, are financially constrained with significant debt burden.² Consequently, they are driven to make poor choices to cut living costs (such as residing in cramped accommodations far away from campus) and generate income (such as working excessive hours in menial jobs unrelated to their study or past experience). Although a vast number of students arrive with the expectation that they will be able to obtain permanent residence in Australia on completion of their studies, in reality many of their degrees are not of sufficient duration to make them eligible to apply for permanent residence.

Many academic institutions (and researchers) often treat international students as one cultural group. Gunawardena & Wilson (2012) warn against this notion as it can result in the overlooking of important variations between and within cultural groups. For example, they note that whilst past studies have highlighted English language issues among international students, students from the Indian subcontinent have superior English language skills because it was taught to them at a very young age alongside their native language. However, while they are proficient in the grammatical aspects of English language usage, they may still have difficulty with certain aspects of communication like jargon and accent, which are more culturally specific. This study makes an important contribution in this context. It provides a more nuanced understanding of the issues relevant to students of a particular nationality (India), who have a distinct socio-cultural identity within the international student population. Although the sample in the study is drawn from students enrolled in one university only and as such their experience is likely to be partly influenced by institution-specific factors, the insights are sufficiently general to be useful and informative to other universities and various entities operating within the tertiary education sector.

Table 1 presents QUT's annual new enrolment numbers for Indian students over a four-year period between 2008 and 2011. The aggregate number for all international student enrolments is given in the parentheses for comparison. The data indicates dramatic drop in number of Indian students in 2010 from the new enrolments in previous years. The overall international student numbers, however, were steady over this period. This forms the backdrop for this study conducted among Indian students currently enrolled at QUT.

Table 1. Indian student enrolments at QUT

Year	2008	2009	2010	2011
Enrolments	187 (3,212)	186 (3,641)	86 (3,674)	91 (3,210)

² 95% of the students in their study had student loans and 88% were in part-time employment.

QUT aims to deliver very high standard of service as well as meet the demand of continuous improvement in overall experience of all international students enrolled in its programs. The International Student Services (ISS) plays a central role in achievement of these goals. The ISS, through its activities, provides dedicated support services to international students, to assist them in adjusting to life and study in Australia, including helping them to resolve any problem that may arise during their course of stay in Australia.³

The goal of ISS is not only to provide a service that meets the needs and expectations of the international students but also to enhance existing services through constant monitoring, evaluation and assessment. It is in this context that the current study was undertaken to gain a better understanding of how ISS can provide or facilitate in providing better services to Indian students enrolled in QUT. The aims of the study were as follows.

- Understand and assess needs and expectations of Indian students
- Explore their experiences
- Discuss problems, issues, and coping mechanisms
- Elicit feedback on existing services provided by QUT
- Seek suggestions on how to improve the services

Methodology

This study involved two data collection techniques – e-mail survey and focus group meetings. Survey method is commonly used to gather information about attitudes and orientation of a population of interest that the researcher cannot observe directly. Focus groups help the researcher to further explore and clarify the views of the participants in ways that is not possible through surveys. They explicitly use group interaction as a method of gathering information where participants are encouraged to talk to one another, ask questions, exchange anecdotes and comment on one another's experiences and perspectives (Kitzinger, 1994). As this research was meant to be an exploratory study to understand the expectations and experiences of Indian students at QUT, a combination of survey and focus group research methods were considered appropriate for the purpose.

The survey and focus group meetings were conducted sequentially. The survey was launched first and remained open for four weeks. After a month following the closure of the survey, two focus group meetings were organised. The survey responses served as the basis for framing discussion questions for the focus group meeting. More details on the data collection and sample are provided below.

Survey

For the survey, responses were sought from all Indian students enrolled in QUT. Key Survey, an online survey creation tool used at QUT, was used to develop and distribute the survey questionnaire online. The survey consisted of thirteen questions seeking information on different aspects of student life and experiences. The survey questions are presented in Appendix A. Although individual information was requested, it was not compulsory for students to identify themselves on the survey form. A total of 280 Indian students enrolled in various courses at QUT were found in the university's student database. E-mails were sent out individually to these students where the weblink to the survey was provided. In addition, the survey (including the weblink) was also advertised in 'ISS News' newsletter consecutively for a few weeks. Responses from 41 students who completed the survey were downloaded from Key Survey after the closing date.

³ Details of the services offered by the ISS to international students can be viewed on the ISS website <https://www.student.qut.edu.au/international>

Focus group

Invitations were sent out to all 280 Indian students enrolled at QUT as found in the student database. Out of these, eighteen students registered for participation in the focus group. These students were split into two groups and meetings were held on separate days to suit their convenience. The meetings were held in an informal setting. Data collection approach was inductive in nature to gather as much evidence as possible with nothing ruled out. As Dalglish and Chan (2005) points out, through the inductive process it is possible to identify issues that have not been previously identified in the existing literature. Nevertheless a clear set of questions was used as a guide for framing the discussion. However, students were able to move outside this framework when and where they wished to discuss something on their own. The questions taken up for discussion in the focus group meeting are provided in Appendix B.

Focus group discussion was centered on experiences of Indian students studying at QUT, their perceived needs and concerns, and perception of the services provided by QUT and ISS. At the beginning of the focus group session, the purpose of the session - to collect information that might enable ISS to improve its services - was explained to the participants. Complete confidentiality of individual comments was guaranteed. At no time during the session, the identity of any individual speaker was recorded. The sessions lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Where students had individual issues that they wanted to have addressed, they met with the facilitator after the session. Students contributed openly on different issues although only the most pressing issues were probed further due to time constraints. The relaxed and conversational nature of the group sessions enabled students to explore the issues and spontaneously contribute to the discussions. Tea and snacks were provided to the participants during the meetings.

Sample data

As stated before, there were 41 individual responses to the survey. As shown in Table 2, the number of survey respondents was almost evenly split between undergraduate and postgraduate students. A majority of respondents (75%) were enrolled in coursework programs. However, research students were well represented with about 25% of the respondents belonging to that category.

All eighteen participants who registered for the focus group meetings attended. There were eight participants (seven male, one female) in the first meeting. The second meeting had ten participants (six male, four female). Unlike the survey, most participants in the focus group meetings were postgraduate students.

Table 2. Student categories

Enrolment	Survey	Focus Group
	Number (Percentage)	Number (Percentage)
Undergraduate	21 (51.2%)	5 (27.8%)
Postgraduate (coursework)	10 (24.4%)	10 (55.6%)
Postgraduate (research)	10 (24.4%)	3 (16.6%)

Figure 1 presents the age distribution of survey respondents.⁴ The 18-25 age group was by far the largest age category in the survey sample data. More than half of all survey respondents belonged to this age group. On the other hand, there were only two respondents above 40 years, which is about 5% of the total number of respondents.

⁴ The same data for focus group participants could not be procured as it was optional for them to provide personal information beyond a bare minimum in order to retain anonymity.

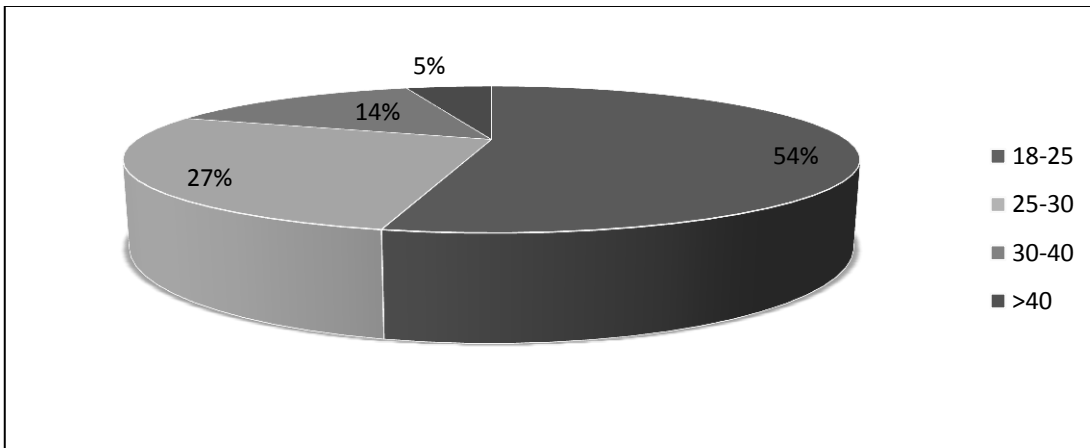


Figure 1. Respondents' age

Within every age group, barring above 40, both undergraduate and post graduate students were well represented as shown in Figure 2. Expectedly, undergraduate students vastly outnumbered postgraduate students in the youngest cohort (18-25) in the sample. For other age groups, there were a higher proportion of post graduate students.

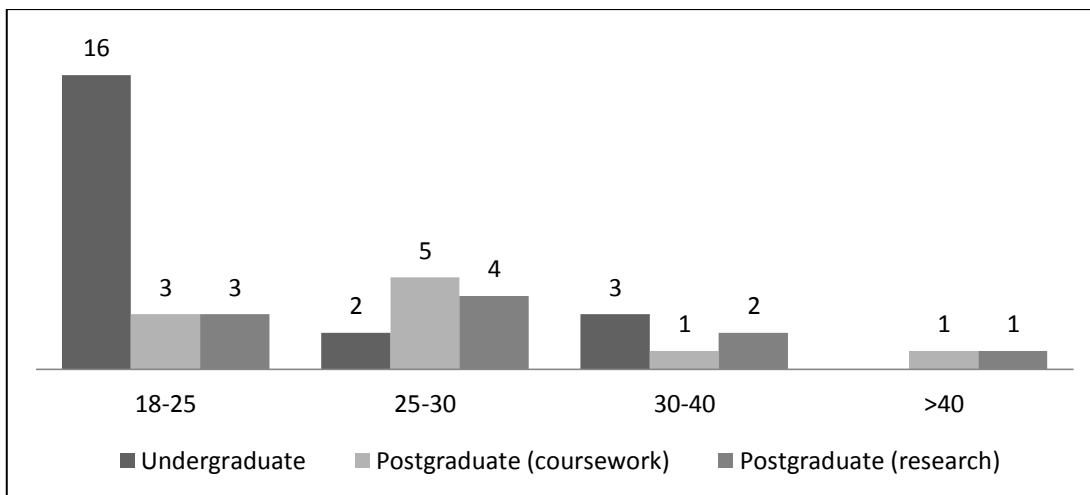


Figure 2. Age distribution by categories

Results and Discussion

The results of the survey and focus group meetings are presented and discussed below.

Survey

Students were asked to specify the reason(s) behind their decision to study at QUT. The responses are tabulated in Table 3. Since students were allowed to pick more than one factor that influenced their selection, the number of reasons is higher than the total number of respondents.

From the responses, it appeared that reputation of the institution was the most important factor behind the decision to study at QUT. This was closely followed by reputation of the course and desire to study in Australia. This is consistent with the findings of Dalglish and Chan (2005). Personal and family reasons played a less important role. The responses also suggested that financial reasons such as tuition fees, living costs and so on, appeared to have negligible influence on choosing QUT as the institution of study.

Table 3. Reasons for studying at QUT

Reasons	No. (percentage) of Responses
To study in Australia	15 (36.6%)
QUT's reputation	19 (46.3%)
Reputation of the course	16 (39%)
Tuition fee	1 (2.4%)
To live in Brisbane city	2 (4.9%)
Cost of living	0 (0%)
Recommended by a QUT graduate	4 (9.8%)
Personal reasons (eg. Family lives here)	6 (14.6%)
Other	12 (29.3%)

Next the survey explored the issue of perception about cost of living, specifically the student's expectation before arriving in Brisbane vis-à-vis what they actually confronted while living here. The responses summarised in Table 4 indicates that more than half of the respondents found living expenses to be higher than they had expected. However, a sizeable proportion of respondents (39%) found that cost of living in Brisbane was in line with their expectations.

Table 4. Cost of living

Cost of living in Brisbane	No. (percentage) of Responses
Same as I expected	16 (39%)
More than I expected	21 (51.2%)
Less than I expected	0
Uncertain	4 (9.8%)

Social life forms an important part of the international student experience and the survey focussed on this aspect. Participants were asked to identify if their friends in Australia were mainly students from their home country (India), domestic students, or international students from other countries. The results, shown in Figure 3, did not suggest any clear preference. More than half of the respondents indicated that their friends were a mix of domestic and international students. From the responses, it seemed that it was equally likely that Indian students would socialise with students from their home country or those from other countries.

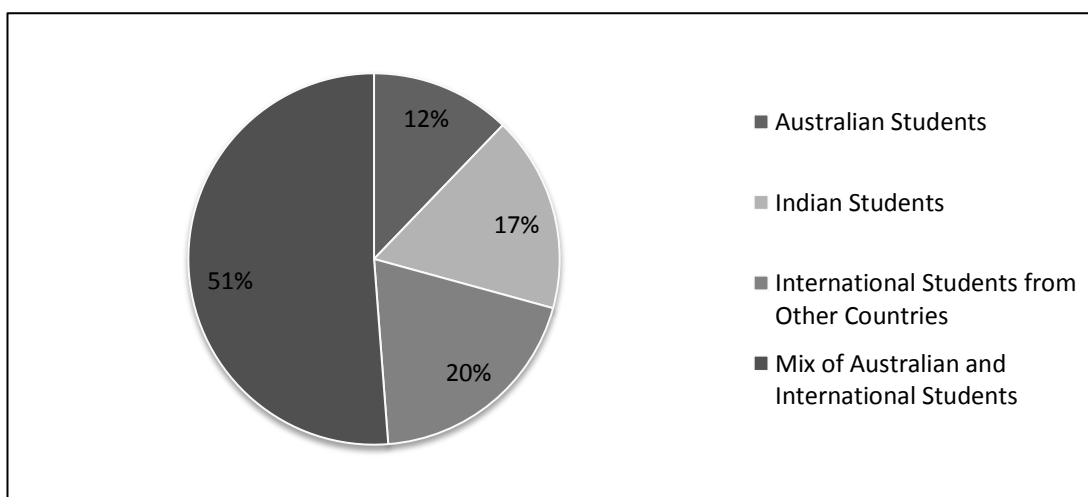


Figure 3. Friends of respondents

Next, the students were asked to respond to the concerns and challenges they faced during the time they spent in Brisbane and at QUT. The responses are presented in Table 5. Financial and migration issues appear to be the dominant concerns among the respondents. Almost half of the respondents faced challenges with cost of living issues and more than a third of the respondents cited financial

concerns. Nearly two in five respondents indicated changing migration conditions as a concern. Next were issues related to accommodation and food with 30% of the respondents citing accommodation as a challenging issue and 25% citing food. Adapting to a new academic environment and different study methods were a source of concern to a quarter of the respondents. Social needs such as friendship needs and homesickness were also of concern to nearly 20% of the respondents. Very few survey respondents (less than 10%) indicated English language to be a challenge, which is consistent with the findings of previous research on Indian students such as that by Deumart et al. (2004), Dalglish & Chan (2005), and Gunawardena & Wilson (2012).

Table 5. Concerns and challenges

Issues	No. (percentage) of Responses
English language (social use)	3 (7.3%)
English language (academic use)	2 (4.9%)
Adapting to new place	6 (14.6%)
Adapting to new/different study methods	11 (26.8%)
Financial concerns	15 (36.6%)
Food	10 (24.4%)
Accommodation	12 (29.3%)
Cost of living	19 (46.3%)
Changing migration conditions	16 (39%)
Meeting religious needs	4 (9.8%)
Feeling homesick	7 (17.1%)
Keeping in touch with family and friends	4 (9.8%)
Making new friends	9 (22%)
Relationship with QUT staff	4 (9.8%)
Other	4 (9.8%)

The survey also asked the participants about sources of support they would seek in relation to issues of concern. Responses are tabulated in Table 6. The overwhelming response to this question was that help would be sought from friends within QUT and family members. More than 35% of respondents mentioned speaking to lecturers and tutors. Only 28% of the respondents stated that they would speak to an ISS advisor about their concerns. This was identical to the number of respondents who said they would speak to friends outside QUT regarding these matters. The results also indicated that Indian students are unlikely to talk about their concerns to a community person such as a religious adviser.

Table 6. Support providers

If you had a concern, who would you speak to?	No. (percentage) of Responses
Family	22 (56.4%)
Friends outside QUT	11 (28.2%)
Friends within QUT	24 (61.5%)
Community person (eg. religious adviser)	1 (2.6%)
Lecturer, Tutor	14 (35.9%)
ISS Advisor (International Student Services)	11 (28.2%)

Finally the survey asked whether they would like attend a focus group meeting to discuss the above issues further. Nearly 60% of the respondents answered in the affirmative.

Focus group

The focus group meetings were organised to gain a deeper understanding of the issues related to the Indian students' experience of studying at QUT and living in Brisbane. The objective was to understand needs, concerns, and challenges faced by these students within and outside of university, to assess the current level of support provided by QUT and ISS in relation to these issues, and to identify specific steps that could be taken to close the gap between student needs and services offered by the university.

The focus group meeting revealed the following concerns (in no particular order of significance). Academic challenges, financial difficulties and uncertain employment prospects emerged as key concerns followed by issues related to personal adjustments in a foreign environment.

- English language for academic usage such as completing assignments was difficult. Level of language skills demanded was higher than students had originally expected. In response to questions about their main concerns with studying at QUT, two students mentioned *'Language barrier in group meeting'* and *'Language barrier, especially when it comes to academic writing.'*
- Lecturers have specific expectations and requirements of assignments but offer very general and broad feedback. The following comment from a student illustrates this point: *..all they can teach us is what to do, not how to do. We have come here to learn 'how things are done' and nobody tell us that.*
- Difficulty in finding jobs. A number of students expressed concern about finding employment after finishing studies, through comments such as: *How good is QUT's reputation internationally? Will I get job security in QUT after graduating?;* and *...employment is still a concern.* One remarked, *QUT should have more employment opportunities on campus, arrange for job placement and provide some kind of internships as students would be more employable with some work experience.*
- Resume writing service needed to be improved.
- Proof reading service in the library (only fifteen minutes) was not adequate.
- University fee increases. Comments included *...the awful INCREASE in FEES! In return we're not receiving anything extra...* and *...the fees structure is so uncertain, it keeps increasing every year which makes it tough for us as International students.*
- Temporary accommodation costs were very high.
- Transport was generally considered safe but expensive and inconvenient.
- Safety was an issue. While no participant reported any incident where their personal safety was directly under threat, many were aware of such incidents through acquaintances and media reports. Some students opined that Indians get attacked more often because they are reluctant to report such incidents to the police. (No racist attack was experienced by any of the participants.)
- Hard to make friends.
- Lack of proactive support by the university.

While concerns were highlighted during the meeting, a major part of the discussions revolved around what could be done to alleviate students' concerns and provide them with more support in coping with academic and living issues. The emphasis of the focus groups was to learn what the participants thought would be helpful. Following is a list of specific steps/actions that were suggested during the meeting.

- Comprehensive and authentic pre-departure briefings including information about coursework and level of required English language proficiency.
- More information needs to be made available to parents back in India (to address their concerns and, at times, their reluctance to send their children to Australia after media coverage about racial attacks and natural disasters)
- Supplying complimentary phone cards on arrival.

- Providing arriving students with a list of cheap food and lodging options.
- Providing a list of vegetarian food outlets.
- Providing more information about assignments, with examples provided.
- Mentoring/tutoring facilities in their respective subjects, with senior students mentoring new students in their own disciplinary fields.
- More information on the level of English language skills required should be covered in the orientation.
- More detailed information should be provided at the Faculty level orientation.
- More English language support would be helpful.
- Free printing services for international students.
- More networking facilities by conducting meetings (such as the current focus group), workshops, social and cultural events. (The role of ISS was valued by most participants. One commented, *If a student ever walks in through it's (sic) doors, we know he'll be fine... He'll be looked after, nurtured and supported*)
- More information needs to be provided on services offered by ISS. A number of participants in the survey and focus group meetings were not aware of the services provided by the ISS. One student commented *I didn't know about ISS until I got this email but I would love to know more about this.*
- Discussion groups, forums and focus groups needed to be held more often, with one at the start of each semester.
- Meetings with police could be organised as these were very helpful in addressing safety concerns and raising awareness.
- Students needed to feel 'homely' away from home. Suggestions were made by students about providing support from people who can speak their language and understand their cultural and socio-economic backgrounds (someone who could 'relate' to them).

The focus group also deliberated on what students themselves could do to address some of the issues they faced while studying at QUT and living in Australia. The participants showed recognition of the areas where more effort needs to be made. Some important action points that emerged from the discussions are provided below:

- Acculturate effectively by opening up to people from other cultures and background. "Move around" and mix more with students from different backgrounds.
- "Get their priorities right". Show a more serious attitude towards achieving their goals and aspirations.
- Get more involved in sports and other co-curricular activities.
- "Speak up for themselves" and not suffer from lack of confidence due to living in a foreign environment.
- Be more aware of the facilities and resources available to them.

Implications

Findings from the survey responses and focus group discussions have important implications for student support services. Some suggestions and recommendations are provided below.

- a) Pre-departure briefing seminars need to provide more emphasis on academic issues. Expected level of English language proficiency required to undertake degree programs (and to communicate socially) should be made clear. Samples of academic writing in English could be provided. More information regarding assignments typically undertaken by students (with some samples) could also be provided. Time allocated for these briefings should be increased providing representatives more opportunities for one-on-one consultation with the students. Follow-up on these issues could be provided at the orientation sessions that students attend after arriving in Australia.
- b) Both pre-departure briefings and orientation sessions upon arrival should highlight the services provided by international support services in supporting the needs of international students.
- c) Providing a dedicated editing and proof-reading service should be explored. Career related services need to be improved by organising more resume writing workshops, arranging for internship and placement with local employers.
- d) Since accommodation appears to be one of the most important issues for many arriving students, an information pack on bonds, lease, tenancy rules and regulations (RTO) should be made readily available. This could be provided at pre-departure seminars.
- e) To overcome feelings of loneliness away from home, more social networking opportunities should be provided. Group discussion meetings, workshops, seminars are very helpful if such meetings are held at the start of the semester. Mutual discussion among members helps clarify issues as well as providing opportunities for the sharing of knowledge and information. Helpful practical tips could be passed on by senior students to newly arrived students at such meetings and seminars.
- f) Periodic sessions could be organised with members of the police to apprise students about safety and security issues and to help them deal with any potential law and order situations with confidence.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to monitor, evaluate, and assess the needs of Indian students studying at QUT. Although the study was undertaken on a small scale, it provides some understanding of the factors that attracted students to study at QUT; how well they coped after arriving in Australia; and whether the overall experience met their expectations. This information may be useful to other higher education providers in communicating with prospective students and also providing a more effective learning experience.

The survey responses and focus group discussions indicate that Indian students feel the need for more support from the university in various areas, although there was appreciation for the assistance currently offered by QUT. In terms of identifying which issues are of most concern to Indian students, the survey and focus group findings were not consistent. For example, usage of English language in an academic setting emerged as a major issue in the focus group meetings but this was not reflected in the survey results at all. On the other hand, migration related issues were cited as a concern by many survey respondents but was not raised by any of the focus group participants.

Overall, the findings suggest there is an acute need for more detailed information dissemination prior to students commencing their studies in Australia. In relation to Indian students at QUT, Dalglish and Chan (2005) emphasised the importance of orientation. In the current study, it was apparent that the students wanted more information prior to their enrolment or before their arrival in Australia. Improvements in services once they arrived were mainly needed in areas such as academic support, career issues, low cost accommodation and provision of more networking opportunities. A greater emphasis on pre-departure briefings may be beneficial in providing a better

understanding of the level of support they can expect on arrival.

One finding of particular concern was that Indian students who confronted difficulties in coping with their studies or personal life were not very likely to contact university services such as ISS for advice or guidance. This is possibly a result of lack of awareness about QUT's existing support services. Interestingly, Indian students who made use of support services such as ISS generally had positive experiences to share. This finding makes a strong case for utilising existing resources of the university more effectively through more efficient dissemination of information amongst the student community. Orientation programs can play a key role in developing greater awareness of university support services as well as opportunities for cultural intermingling and networking (such as national day celebrations, student excursions) thereby facilitating acculturation within an unfamiliar academic and living environment.

In terms of the specific student concerns highlighted in this study and their significance, caution needs to be exercised in drawing general conclusions because of two important limitations. Firstly, survey studies can potentially suffer from response bias as participants essentially self-select. Whilst there is no reason to believe that the views of the participants are widely different from those who did not participate in the survey and focus group, the possibility of some variation cannot be completely discounted. Further studies with a larger sample of Indian students in Australia need to be undertaken to validate these findings. Secondly, since the participants in this study belonged to a single university, their experience is likely to be influenced at least to some extent by local factors. For example, students in larger Australian capital cities such as Sydney or Melbourne may demonstrate a greater level of concern with cost of living, relative to their counterparts in Brisbane (where QUT is located) whereas students in regional universities may view it as a lower order issue. On the other hand, larger Indian communities in Sydney and Melbourne may provide students with greater possibilities for engagement with their own culture, helping students to feel more 'at home' than in Brisbane and other smaller centres. Similarly, there is likely to be a great deal of variation between these locations in terms of work placement and training opportunities which can impact upon the students' level of concern with career and employment prospects.

However, despite these limitations, this study offers some important insights that may apply more generally to other tertiary institutions with international student enrolments, particularly from India. The findings suggest that issues with language and culture, often highlighted in the literature as being a key factor affecting the international student experience, are not necessarily the foremost concern for these students. The results suggest that there is a need for universities to avoid a narrow focus on providing English language support but instead to offer a more holistic approach that addresses deeper challenges in academic engagement confronted by international students who are coming from a completely different teaching and learning environment. Increasingly, Indian students in Australian universities are from an aspirational middle class background and are looking for 'value for money' from their education providers. As a result, support in the areas of financial aid (such as loans and scholarships) and career opportunities (job placements, internships) needs to be accorded strategic priority in future student recruitment and retention in this highly competitive environment.

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The author may be contacted

Swati Basu
S1.basu@qut.edu.au

Appendix A: Survey questions

1. What student category are you?
Undergraduate Post-graduate (coursework)
Postgraduate (research)
2. What age group?
18-25 25-30 30 -40 > 40
3. Reasons for studying at QUT (please tick all that apply to you)
To study in Australia
QUT reputation
Reputation of the course
Tuition fee
To live in Brisbane city
Cost of living
Recommended by a QUT graduate
Personal reasons (eg. Family lives here)
Other (Please specify).....
4. The cost of living in Brisbane is (please tick all that apply to you)
As I expected
More than I expected
Less than I expected
Uncertain
5. Most of my friends are
Australian students
Students from India
International students from other countries
Mix of Australian and international students
Cannot say
6. Which of the following are concerns or challenges during your time at QUT?
English language (social use)
English language (academic use)
Adapting to new place
Adapting to new/different study methods
Financial concerns
Food
Accommodation
Cost of living

- Changing Migration Conditions
- Meeting religious needs
- Feeling homesick
- Keeping in touch with family and friends
- Making new friends
- Relationship with QUT staff
- Other (Please specify) _____

7. What are your main concerns before coming to QUT?

8. What are your main concerns as a student studying at QUT?

If you had a concern, who would you speak to?

- Family
- Friends outside QUT
- Friends within QUT
- Community Person (e.g., religious adviser)
- Lecturer, Tutor
- ISS Advisor (International Student Services)

9. Do you think Indian students perceived needs are met by the current service?

10. What gap do you see in service provision?

11. What resources would be needed to fill this gap?

12. What have you gained from living here and studying at QUT (from what you have learnt here, what will you take back to your home country)

Appendix B: Focus group questions

Experiences of Indian students living in Brisbane and studying at QUT

1. Take a few moments to tell us about yourself. Tell us about your life in Brisbane, your struggles and achievements. What was it like living in a new environment?
2. Could you tell us about your experiences and coping strategies with respect to cross-cultural differences? How well adjusted do you think you are (on a scale of 1-5)?
3. Why did you choose to study at QUT?
4. What have you learnt from living here?

Perceived Needs /concerns of Indian students

5. What are your needs as a student studying at QUT?

Probe: What do you think your needs are in terms of:

- *Financial (monthly expenditure/income)*
- *Emotional*
- *Academic*
- *Social*

6. What are your main concerns as a student living in Brisbane?
7. What are some of the key issues for Indian students studying at QUT?

Probe: What are the main challenges/concerns for you as a student at QUT? Are there different issues 1) for Indian males 2) for Indian females?

Support services

8. Are Indian students perceived needs met by current services provided at QUT?
9. What gaps are there generally within QUT of the services provided to Indian students?
10. What support do you seek when you have issues or problems?

Probe: Who do you go to with regard to these concerns? Again – who and where you go to for support is different for 1) males 2) for females – what are these differences? Have you been satisfied with this support?

International Student Services

11. Did you ever seek help from ISS or attend support and information programs/sessions such as ‘New to Brisbane’, ‘Orientation’, ‘Accommodation Services’, ‘PR Seminars’, ‘Pre-departure briefings’, etc held by ISS? Have you been satisfied with this support?
12. What other resources do you think would be useful to Indian students studying at QUT?
13. Do you feel that QUT values and supports International students? In what ways do you think this support could be beneficial to Indian students?