INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION PREPARATION: MINIMISING RISK AND FURTHERING SECURITY

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ABSTRACT

The decision to undertake study in a foreign land is accompanied by risk. Influenced by Beck’s notion of the risk society and underpinned by recent work concerning international student security, the views of university staff in Australia are presented to further understanding of the importance of preparing for an international education. The preparation period is considered to extend from pre-departure in the students’ country of origin, through to arrival in the host country and orientation at their chosen education institution. It is argued that a lack of preparation may increase risk and that international student security is associated with knowledge and preparedness that assists the maintenance of student agency in the host country.

INTRODUCTION

International student enrolment numbers in Australia have rapidly decreased in 2011 due to newly implemented visa restrictions and safety issues (AIEC 2011, ABC 2010). The downturn in international student numbers suggests Australia’s international education bubble has burst, impacting on university finances and reflecting damage caused to Australia’s reputation as safe and welcoming destination. The current environment has seen the safety and security of international students become of increasing importance to governments, education institutions, as well as students and their families. Indeed, competition between
host countries and education institutions has intensified as students have become more discerning and increasingly expect greater assurances that their education will be accompanied by forms of security that minimise risk. Nonetheless, the recently released statistically based International Student Barometer 2010 indicates high student satisfaction rates for learning, living and support in Australia (Universities Australia 2011). The report also indicates high satisfaction with the arrival process, the first night spent in Australia and university orientation. These findings are particularly relevant and contrasting to the current qualitative case study, which draws on in-depth interviews with university staff and student leaders focus on the preparation period of the student sojourn.

For the purposes of this study the preparation period is considered to extend from pre-departure in the students’ country of origin, through to arrival in the host country and orientation at their chosen education institution. Influenced by Beck’s (1992) notion of the risk society, the study is underpinned by recent work concerning international student security (Forbes-Mewett 2008; Marginson, Nyland, Sawir and Forbes-Mewett 2010; Forbes-Mewett, Nyland and Shao 2010). The term security is broadly applied to include all social influences that contribute to student safety and well-being. By ‘push[ing] the boundaries of the sociology of education into the study of welfare...’ (Antikainen 2010, p. 2), this article aims to broaden the understanding of the importance and forms of preparation required to minimise the risks associated with an international education. The article also aims to highlight the preparation process as a fundamental element of furthering international student security.

Undertaking study in a foreign land is accompanied by varying levels of risk and in this context the issue of student preparation is imperative. It is argued that a lack of preparation and knowledge may increase risk and that international student security is associated with knowledge and preparedness that assists the maintenance of agency in the host country. The case study will show that University support staff overwhelmingly believed that international
students have unique needs and that despite staff efforts, there was an overall deficiency of information and service provision during the preparation stage of the student sojourn.

The article first presents an overview of background literature before outlining the research approach. The views of the research participants follow and are presented in two main sections, which provide an understanding of the importance of preparation in the initial stages of the international student sojourn. The first section relates to the pre-departure period and includes discussions about enrolment requirements in terms of academic and language abilities, information sessions and electronic information. The second section considers matters pertaining to arrival in Australia including airport pick-up, temporary accommodation and university orientation.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Many studies have discussed student concerns for marketing purposes to determine international student host country and host institution destination decisions (Mazzarol & Hosie 1996; Mazzarol & Soutar 2002; Cubillo-Pinilla, Zuniga, Losantos & Sanchez 2009). Others have focused on international student security in the host country (Marginson et al. 2010; Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson 2008). Drawing on the work of Sen (2000), Marginson et al. (2010, p. 59) place the notion of ‘security’ within ‘a broad understanding of human security, which is shaped both by individual freedoms and by the social relations and arrangements’. They define human security as *maintenance of a stable capacity for self-determining human agency* and adapt Marx to make the point that:

... international students make their own security, in circumstances that they do not entirely control including the scope for agency itself. This does not mean individual international students sink or swim
solely by their own efforts. Others share responsibility because they affect the conditions in which the students make their security. (Marginson et al. 2010, p. 59–60)

In a similar vein, Antikainen and Harinen (2002, p. 9) conclude that ‘individuals can change the scripts of their lives still at an adult age and ... use education and learning for this purpose. Other people’s and the communities’ support is, however, needed to realize this change’. The support of others who share the responsibility for the conditions in which students and their families seek their security in terms of international education is affected by the nature and amount of information provided by Governments and education agents during the preparation stage of the proposed sojourn.

Studies concerning the preparation period of an international education have explored various dimensions from a student perspective and numerous works have shown the early stages of the student sojourn to be the most stressful (Ward and Kennedy 1996; Ward, Okura, Kennedy and Kojima 1998). Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) identify pre-departure preparedness as one of two problems unique to international students, the other being an English language barrier. The importance of preparation has not been sufficiently reflected in the literature and seldom adequately acted upon by universities and government agencies responsible for recruiting international students, particularly in Australia (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2008; Marginson et al. 2010). It has been argued that the information provided has been insufficient and inaccurate, thus creating unnecessary risk at a time when student agency may be destabilised (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2008; Marginson et al. 2010; Forbes-Mewett, Nyland and Shao 2010).

Mobility destabilises agency, while at the same time it draws on the capacity of agency to remake itself. It calls on powers of self-determination in a new situation which confronts the student as other-
determination. The agency of some students is weakened. Many others exhibit a robust, conscious, flexible and growing sense of self. (Marginson et al. 2010, p. 61)

International students often ‘begin from a notable information asymmetry in their relationship with education institutions. Access to knowledge, access to information and communicative resources are crucial to self-determining agency, and can be crucial to security’ (Marginson et al. 2010, p. 61). Acknowledging that absolute security is unattainable as it involves balancing opportunity against risk, it remains that without security ‘social life would be both meaningless and relatively dangerous’ (Clements 1990, p. 2). According to Clements (1990, p. 4), the ‘trick is to discover not how to avoid risk, for this is impossible, but how to use risk to get more of the good and less of the bad’. In the context of international education, students and their parents must minimise the risks associated with living and studying in a foreign country for the purposes of furthering security in terms of safety, well-being and success.

In accordance with Beck’s (1999) notion of ‘the risk society’, students undertaking international education are presented with a never previously faced ‘set of risks and hazards’ (Lash & Wynne 1992, p. 2). These contemporary notions of risk have resulted from human endeavour (Beck 1999), and are considered to be ‘part of shared cultural understandings and practices that are founded on social expectations and responsibilities’ (Lupton 2006, 13). According to Beck (1999), in everyday life risk is intrinsically connected with responsibility, trust and security. Conversely, the importance of security as international education issue has tended to be shaded by government agencies and education providers in order to disassociate elements of risk from the student sojourn, or from a specific location or institution (Nyland, Forbes-Mewett & Marginson 2010). As a consequence, under-developed preparation policies and programs have contributed to risks that have affected students, education institutions and national reputations.
In the case of students, it is generally understood that greater differences between education systems require greater levels of academic and social adjustment (Chapman, Wan and Xu 1988; Konyu-Fogel 1993), and also greater need for pre-departure knowledge (Pruitt 1978). Tsang (2001) confirms that pre-departure knowledge of the host country reduces students’ uncertainty and increases the likelihood students’ expectations will more closely match experience. Overawed by their relocation to a foreign country, unprepared students often do not realise the extent of the required adjustment until well after their arrival (Oberg 1960). Some basic risks that confront students immediately upon arrival in Australia tend to be overlooked in the literature. One exception is a study conducted by Lawrence (2007), which illustrates how international students are accommodated on their first night in Australia, as shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Where International Students Stayed on their First Night in Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Backpacker hostel</td>
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<td>With friends</td>
<td>17</td>
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<tr>
<td>Homestay</td>
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<tr>
<td>With family</td>
<td>14</td>
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<td>Student accommodation</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rented apartment</td>
<td>9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hotel</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
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*Source: Millennials as international students, Robert Lawrence, January 2007. Sample taken from 27 universities across every state in Australia except Tasmania, n =1914.*

The Lawrence (2007) data presented in Table 1 indicates that 31 per cent of students stayed with family or
friends on their first night in Australia, suggesting they were welcomed by a secure environment. It is hoped the homestay circumstances would have been similar, with previous contact with the hosts. Of particular concern is the 19 per cent who stayed in backpacker hostels, as well as those who stayed alone in rented apartments and hotels. The *Backpacker hostel, Hotel and Other* categories combined suggests at least one third of international students risked not having accommodation in place on arrival in Australia. While not comparable, these findings add an interesting dimension to the recent International Student Barometer (ISB) 2010 Report (Universities Australia 2011), which suggests that 83 per cent of international students were satisfied with their first night’s accommodation in Australia. This contrasts with Burrage’s (2006) earlier acknowledgement of the difficulties associated with arranging rental accommodation prior to arrival in Australia and the fact that often students are pressured by the need to find accommodation when they arrive immediately prior to term commencement and university orientation.

Universities place much importance on student attendance at orientation, which is designed to provide information to students in the initial stage of their university experience and to facilitate the adjustment process. Wu Dunn (2006:34) draws on the work of Titley (1985) to outline the activities included in an orientation program:

Activities include acquainting students with university regulations, norms, values, and behavioural expectations of the institution; introducing them to student services and campus facilities; creating chances for them to meet informally with faculty; guiding them in academic program design, major choice, and career planning; and helping them develop necessary academic skills as college students.

Studies of the academic outcomes of attending orientation sessions have been mixed. Jones (1984), however, found that students who attended orientation had
greater retention rates at the end of first semester and at the end of the first year. There were indications that orientation programs also help international students adjust in the early stages of their transition to the unfamiliar environment of the host country (Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfe 1986). Longitudinal studies show that the early stages of the student sojourn are the most stressful, after which stress decreases and fluctuates (Ward and Kennedy 1996; Ward et al. 1998). Ying and Liese (1991) examined the pre- to post-arrival emotional well-being of Taiwan students in the US to find more than half experienced decline. Students often experience feelings of inadequacy in relation to difficulties with spoken English (Hellsten and Prescott 2004), thus pointing to a lack of language preparation.

The issue of students arriving to study in their host nation without relevant language proficiency has attracted much attention (Reinick 1986; Chapman et al. 1988; Heggins and Jackson 2003; Birrell 2006). Indeed, language barrier is widely considered to be the most problematic aspect of international students' academic lives (Dunnett 1885; Gibson 1985; Reinick 1986; Chapman et al. 1988). There is little doubt that for many international students, language difficulties permeate and pose a risk to the success of both academic and social elements of their sojourn. As a consequence, there have been frequent calls for the raising of language proficiency for prospective international students (Birrell 2006). While the implementation of this idea would make it more difficult for many international students to access an international education, it would minimise the risks and engender a greater level of social and academic security for those who can meet the higher standard.

Sawir (2005) argues that the scholastic approach focused on grammar and correct usage traditionally adopted by East and Southeast Asian nations does not adequately prepare students for a global environment that is linguistically driven by the English language. The lack of attention to communicative English language limits students' ability to articulate and understand spoken English, which leads to staff dissatisfaction with class presentations and written work. The need for country of origin governments
and education institutions to address English language teaching methods has been highlighted (Hellsten 2002; Hellsten and Prescott 2004). While the primary responsibility tends to rest with the host universities it has been suggested that it should be shared with the country of origin government (Sawir 2005). Sawir (2005) proposes a one-year bridging program in the country of origin as a possible solution that would assist students to develop language skills and reduce the anxiety associated with the inability to communicate effectively. Concerns regarding a lack of English language preparation were confirmed by Forbes-Mewett et al. (2010, p. 363), who quote a Chinese father referring to his son studying in Australia: ‘He could not understand what was said. His mind is empty’. Numerous similar responses were indicative of widespread concern that many students were not linguistically prepared to undertake studies in English-speaking countries (Heggins and Jackson 2003; Sawir 2005; Forbes-Mewett 2008; Forbes-Mewett, Nyland and Shao 2010). Forbes-Mewett et al. (2010) noted in their study that prospective Chinese international student research participants frequently indicated that they had passed the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and elected to conduct an interview in English, yet were unable to do so. The overestimation of their English language ability suggested a lack of knowledge and preparation that could easily translate into risk in the host country. Indeed, views of parents and prospective Chinese students during the pre-departure period indicated that knowledge relating to the students’ forthcoming sojourn was limited, particularly concerning language, health care and the demands of living and studying in Australia (Forbes-Mewett et al. 2010). Alarmingly, students who had not experienced academic success in their home country were often encouraged by their parents to seek security by balancing risk against the opportunities associated with undertaking an international education, for which they were ill-prepared (Forbes-Mewett et al. 2010).

THE RESEARCH APPROACH
Set against the backdrop of an Australian university that had approximately one third of its student cohort classified as ‘international’, this case study focuses on one aspect of a larger project concerning the welfare of international students. The study involved a series of face-to-face, indepth, semi-structured interviews with 55 participants who were either university student support staff, academics or senior management. The interviews were generally between one and two hours duration. Interview questions related to topics concerning international student needs and the provision of student support including security preparation commencing at the pre-departure stage and the initial stages of the student sojourn. The interviews were audio taped and subsequently transcribed and analysed with the development of themes in mind (Bryman and Burgess 1994). Participants were allocated a number (1-55) and a category relating to their employed status (Support Staff, Academic, or Management).

PRE-DEPARTURE

Pre-departure: ‘If we wanted for them to do really well ... we would begin with pre-departure’

The need for students to be prepared for study in Australia was widely accepted by the interviewees. Despite measures taken to assist the students’ endeavour, it was strongly believed that many arrived in Australia unprepared for the associated risks (Beck 1999). The following view captures the sentiments of those inspired to provide pre-departure security measures that would help minimise the risks that may be encountered.

If we wanted for them to do really well and we were going to do it really well, then we would begin with pre-departure. We would prepare them psychologically. They prepare academically kind of
not very well and they kind of do the ordinary, get your laptop and your mobile, sort of and so forth and their clothing. They actually don’t prepare psychologically particularly well and we have a strong belief that if they were to do that, then when they arrived here they would actually kind of recognise that it’s tougher and when they become isolated and lonely and think like everybody else and when you’re here and you’re alone you don’t tell other people that you’re miserable and you don’t know anybody else. So you save face…. If you know that it’s more normalising and you don’t feel like, my God, everybody else is doing really well and I’m the dummy. (P10 Support Staff)

The research participants believed that students were more likely to be prepared for study in Australia if they were aware of potential difficulties they could encounter. In support of Tsang (2001), this view reinforces the need to provide students with information that increases the likelihood of their expectations being in line with their forthcoming experience. Correspondingly, it suggests presenting information from a marketing perspective that indicates studying in Australia will be a problem-free experience gives a false impression that may undermine adaptation and increase students’ risk (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2008). The views of the student support staff regarding student security were further clarified by suggesting a hierarchy of needs.

... if you think about Maslow, after the biological needs there’s security and in another lifetime I would have called it readiness, being ready to study meaning you’ve got somewhere to live and you’re able to pay your rent and your mind is not torn in seventy different ways, that you’ve actually got a space to take on the study. (P9 Support Staff)

Suggesting security emanates from preparedness and that security needs are ranked second only to biological
needs, gives indication to the strength of the belief that students require pre-departure measures to minimise risk. Supporting long-standing views (Oberg 1960; Pruitt 1978; Forbes-Mewett 2008; Marginson et al. 2010), staff repeatedly expressed frustration at the inadequate provision of resources for pre-departure preparation. They also indicated that there was lack of governance concerning pre-departure processes and as a consequence risk was increased and security of both staff and students was challenged.

There’s a lot of pre-existing illness ... I had a case a couple of years ago where I had to take a student back to their home country [because of severe psychological illness], ... we found out later on that this student had been returned from a United States university and I don’t know how they got into this country because they’re supposed to say whether they’ve got pre-existing illnesses or pre-existing episodes. I don’t know who filled the Visa form out or whether they even looked at the Visa form, I think this is the problem a lot. (P6 Management)

These extreme circumstances were not isolated and the participant believed both the University and the Government should share responsibility in such circumstances. Emphasising the need for other people’s support (Antikainen and Harinen 2002), the excerpt validates the need to ensure that international students are adequately prepared academically, socially and psychologically to meet the demands of an education in Australia. The case is indicative of the need for students’ families and others to exercise group agency in the event of destabilised individual agency due to ill health. As highlighted by Marginson et al. (2010), international students do not sink or swim alone. Minimising risk was thought to be necessary at both individual and group levels beginning well before the enrolment process.
Enrolment Requirements: 'There’s frustration on the part of many academics …'

Minimum enrolment requirements are designed to protect education institutions and students from high failure rates. The importance of standards is evident in the literature, which has shown consistently that international students' previous academic qualifications and foreign language proficiency are positively related to academic performance in their host country (Scott and McMahon 1998). The possibility that students may fail is perceived as major risk to potential students and their parents who are often funding the study (Forbes-Mewett 2008). Highlighting these concerns, one interviewee shared her experience of talking with the parents of prospective students in China, revealing that there are limits that recruiters cannot transgress when seeking to market the University's degrees: The parents asked if [the University] can guarantee they will pass. And I said, ‘no’ (P43 Management).

Reassurances that prospective students would pass could not be given. Even high achieving students are subject to difficulties associated with relocation to an unfamiliar environment and, as a consequence, their academic performance may suffer. However, this possibility can be limited if students are adequately prepared to meet the challenges posed by the University experience. Two critical influences that are likely to minimise the risk of failure are adequate academic and language abilities of prospective students. Insisting on these capacities may appear to be in the interest of the University but in fact they are a source of tension between the marketing division and faculties. The marketing division prefer to keep entry standards relatively low in order to maintain or increase international student numbers, while teaching staff generally wish to keep them high in order to maintain academic standards. As a consequence, academic and support staff believed standards were too often sacrificed for the purpose of increasing student numbers and that staff had to 'pick up the pieces' (P6 Management):
... we're finding a lot more failing. We've had more difficulties; we're finding more students that aren't coping. Severe emotional problems. There's a number of people talking about perhaps we need to look at our intake as far as selection and how we select these students and just don't take the numbers, that we start to look at not quantity but quality of students. Whether they've got the skills to deal with a university education in Australia and not just go for numbers and for dollars. (P6 Management)

While entry standards apply to both domestic and international students, standards relating to English language proficiency in practice apply primarily to the international market. The limited English language capacity of international students was a concern referred to repeatedly by interviewees, almost all of whom suggested it was a difficult problem for both staff and students. In support of Sawir (2005), many interview participants believed that the language difference should be dealt with at the preparation stage, and there were numerous calls from academics to increase the level of English language required for acceptance into Australian University courses:

There's frustration on the part of many academics in relation to the poor English language abilities of some students ... legitimate frustration, you know, you're trying to teach students and they can't understand English.... [M]ore should be done, before admission, in other words, a simple thing to do is just increase the score requirement and I think that that would not be a bad thing. (P30 Academic)

There was general agreement among the interviewees that a sound command of English language prior to arrival would minimise risk associated with relocation in the new environment and the demands of academic study. Supporting numerous studies (Reinick 1986; Chapman et al. 1988; Heggies and Jackson 2003; Sawir 2005; Birrell 2006; Forbes-Mewett 2008; Forbes-Mewett,
Nyland and Shao 2010), it was widely believed that many students did not have this capacity. The tension existing between standards and recruitment was articulated in the following account:

I think the standard of English for dealing with some of the programs is too low and you might want to start putting hurdles in their way before they arrive but of course that would decrease our student numbers and that would not be a good idea. (P27 Management)

The above perspective was typical of many who supported the notion that English language training should take place before university courses begin, but who also realised that the University remained reluctant to raise barriers that may hamper recruitment. The common perspective supports a plethora of literature concluding that students' English language proficiency shapes both social and academic success in English speaking education institutions (Reinick 1986; Chapman et al. 1988; Ying and Liese 1991; Sawir 2005; Birrell 2006; Forbes-Mewett 2008; Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2010; Marginson et al. 2010). The tendency of universities to enrol students without adequate English language proficiency increases the risk of failure and ill health due to stress (Forbes-Mewett 2008). The practice also reflects the participants' belief that the commercial perspective had gained excessive influence, which was also evident when discussing pre-departure information sessions.

**Information Sessions: 'I'm surprised it didn't continue’**

Pre-departure related information provided to international students by universities and recruitment agencies was invariably designed to both convey information and encourage the prospective student to follow through their intention to study overseas. There exists a tendency for education suppliers to understate the associated risks for which international students need to prepare prior to arrival.
in the host country. Indeed, this inclination was so prevalent within the Australian international education industry that the Federal Government amended the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act 2000 in 2007 to mandate education suppliers to provide information on topics deemed fundamental to furthering international student security. The information was to be made available before students departed their home country. In the early years of the last decade, the University apportioned limited resources to pre-departure information sessions and by 2008 only five sessions in total were held in capital cities in Asia. This meant that many thousands of prospective students were denied the opportunity to obtain information that could potentially minimise risk and further their security.

Support staff and some faculty managers expressed concern at the lack of a comprehensive program of pre-departure sessions. They indicated that direct contact with students and parents seemed to be a successful way of presenting information relating to courses as well as informing of potential risks.

Years ago I used to go over there on international recruitment trips and one of my tasks over there was to talk to parents ... and tell them the difficulties their children were going to have and what Australia was like. So I used to run an hour lecture. When the students were out there looking at what courses they wanted to do or what university they wanted to attend, we used to offer these one-hour lectures about four times a day for parents. They'd come in and we'd just talk about Australia. We'd talk about [the University], talk a bit about Australia and then let them ask questions. They worked quite well actually. I'm surprised it didn't continue. (P6 Management)

It seemed that the parents took every opportunity to obtain as much information as possible to minimise risk relating to the students sojourn.
When I was in Southern Yangtze I met with the parents of the students ... [I was] trying to say send your students to [the University], we can arrange a special cohort, they'll have special treatment, they'll get a magnificent education ... and the questions I got from them [were]: “Is it safe? Will my children be looked after?” (P43 Management)

When the opportunity did exist, students’ parents sought assurances about risk in the context of safety. This finding aligns with a study conducted in China by Forbes-Mewett et al. (2010, p. 359) in which ‘the parents in particular wished to use the opportunity [of the interview] to obtain more knowledge of Australia and international education in general’. They asked many questions concerning student safety and health. One father asked; ‘Who cares for them if the student is ill ... Will student[s] help each other if one has a fever, and cannot move? Will the teachers help?’ (Forbes-Mewett et al. 2010, p. 364). Interview participants in both the 2010 and the current study indicated that personal contact with university staff at the predeparture stage was a rarity. This was attributed to cost saving and the fact that information was increasingly being offered through electronic modes.

Electronic Information: ‘It was totally different’

Pre-departure information was increasingly conveyed to students electronically via the web. The University had begun to shift much of the knowledge provided from the traditional methods of booklets, brochures, information sessions and consultations to web-based information. This process was implemented both as a cost-saving measure and to make information more accessible to an increasingly technically informed student cohort. Web-based information can be helpful in circumstances when students require basic guidance on how to access the services available. However, attempting to access information online limits students’ ability to participate in verbal communication and to ask questions as they arise. On a website especially designed for
international students, knowledge was available about courses, study preparation, and arrival in Australia. There was also information relating to both on- and off-campus accommodation that was presented from a marketing standpoint, though it did recognise that living away from home can be daunting.

To the University’s credit, off-campus accommodation information included links to the Tenancy Union, Consumer Affairs and as well as information relating to homestay and homeshare. The latter being a program that matches older householders who provide free accommodation in return for student companionship and assistance. Information was also provided in regard to issues such as transport and legal centres. Importantly, students were also advised not to organise private rental accommodation prior to arrival in Australia. A renters’ guide in various languages was also provided. Despite these attempts to provide pre-departure information, the recently released International Student Barometer (Universities Australia 2011) revealed that 40 per cent of international students in Australia were unhappy with their accommodation. It is notable that Marginson et al. (2010, p. 159) found that many students had inadequate predeparture housing information but those ‘with good predeparture information had relatively positive initial housing experiences’. The authors also suggest that on-campus housing offices provide students with good support but questions remained about the effectiveness of web-base housing information and advice. It seems that the University’s web service was not particularly clear in regard to the provision of housing and other facilities, as indicated by the following example:

If you see the website you will see all the facilities … but when I come here [to the campus] it was totally different … living is very good here, but as far as my academic facilities are concerned they are not up towards which I was expecting at the University… We don’t have enough instrumentation here as far as my own subject is related, chemistry. So we are supposed to go to [another campus] that too we face a lot of
difficulty, because we don’t get much [assistance]...
(P21 Student Representative)

The student representative explained how he felt misled by the website. He admitted that he may have misinterpreted the information but it did appear that, prior to course commencement, chemistry students were often not made aware that they were required to use the laboratory facilities at another campus more than 150 kilometres away. The electronic mode of conveying the information meant students’ questions often went unanswered and attempts to minimise risk were hindered. Unfortunately, the plethora of information provided through pre-departure sessions, brochures and electronic sources appears to have inadequately served many students. Strong views were elicited from the interviews as to what was perceived as a serious deficiency of resources for preparing international students for study in Australia. As a result and in line with the findings of Oberg (1960) and Ward et al. (2001), staff believed that students were commonly overwhelmed once they arrived in Australia. This outcome was often initiated as early as arrival at the airport. Hence, being greeted and transported to appropriate and welcoming accommodation was considered to be of fundamental importance.

ARRIVAL AND ORIENTATION

Airport pick-up and temporary accommodation: ‘One participant had to sleep in the foyer...’

A critical moment for international student security was when students first arrived in Australia. There was little information available as to how they found their way from the airport to their accommodation. It was reported that just over 40 per cent used the University’s airport-pickup service of which 87 per cent indicated they would recommend to others. In a study conducted for the University by Dempsey and Associates (2004, p. 5), focus group results note ‘that the experience of being met and taken to their accommodation was not a positive experience for all students’. The risks
associated with airport-pickup and temporary accommodation tended to relate to students enrolled at larger urban campuses, which had an agreement with a company that appeared to offer a less than satisfactory service:

For a significant minority the airport pick up and accommodation drop off were problematic. Drivers did not approach students waiting for them at the airport, made students wait long periods to catch the next flight arrival, were lost or stopped to visit their homes, leaving students waiting in the car.... One participant had to sleep in the foyer of her accommodation, another was dropped at the Halls of Residence, but with no idea of where he was or how to go out and get something to eat. (Dempsey and Associates 2004, n.p.)

That almost 60 per cent of the students did not use the airport pickup service raises the question of where students stay on their first night in Australia. According to Lawrence (2007), large numbers of international students spent their first night in Australia in circumstances less than safe and welcoming. The university reported that less than 23 per cent of international students requested temporary accommodation before leaving their home country and of this group some 63 per cent indicated that they had received written confirmation in adequate time before arriving in Australia. Temporary accommodation organised by the University was provided by local motels and the cost was on average between 80 and 90 dollars per night. Only 20 per cent of the students found it was value for money and, in a similar vein, only 25 per cent indicated that the accommodation met or exceeded their expectations. Almost 32 per cent reported that they would recommend the temporary accommodation to others and almost as many (29 per cent) said they would not. Not reflecting well on the provision of temporary accommodation was the fact that less than half of those who requested temporary accommodation actually used it.
The findings of the ISB 2010 Report (Universities Australia 2011) were more heartening. The report indicates an 86 per cent Australia-wide satisfaction rate for the arrival process and 83 per cent satisfaction rate for the first night spent in Australia. The contrasting perspectives may be a reflection of the different research approaches, a case study involving indepth interviews as opposed to a large-scale quantitative survey. It is also possible that the very high satisfaction rates reported by the ISB may also reflect a concerted effort made by Australian universities to provide greater security for international students in Australia. Nonetheless, the current study concerning the preparation period suggests that to minimise risk there is a great need to provide safe and welcoming transitional accommodation. Interview participants reported that students indicated that the need to find suitable accommodation upon arrival was one of the main reasons for non-attendance at the University’s orientation program.

Orientation: ‘They even don’t know the meaning of orientation!’

Orientation at the University was a week of organised activities at the beginning of first semester to assist students’ integration into university life. The week was designed primarily to introduce the available facilities and services, and to encourage students’ participation in the academic and social dimensions of their new environment. Although studies have reported conflicting evidence as to the benefits of orientation, Pascarella, Terensini and Wolfle (1986) found it assisted with the development of coping strategies in an unfamiliar college environment. Given the first four months were thought to be the most stressful (Ward and Kennedy 1996; Ward et al. 1998), the importance of orientation and the support services offered to international students should not be underestimated. This contention was supported in the current study where orientation was generally considered by staff and students alike to be an important part of the introduction to university life.
University survey data reported that approximately two-thirds (67 per cent) of the students surveyed attended orientation and of those more than one-third believed they had gained little that was helpful in their transition to the University. These figures support the notion that while orientation can play an important role in providing information and helping students adjust to their new environment, the service offered was inadequate and that alternative approaches needed to be considered. The interviews confirmed this need by providing elaborated responses that suggested the survey data may have inflated attendance levels or that orientation attendance levels had deteriorated further since the program was mainstreamed in the wider University. Suggestions were offered as to why attendance was low:

Attendance-wise, I would suggest that the international student attendance at orientation is at the lower end of the scale. I’d be rapt if we got 40 per cent attendance! Many students get their offers late, have trouble booking flights or getting visas, sometimes Chinese New Year gets in the way ... they don’t see a value in going for the info sessions... (P1 Support Staff)

The above view casts doubt over the survey estimations by exclaiming that 40 per cent orientation attendance was desirable but not factual at the time. Another interview participant revealed that support staff was aware of the inadequacy of the content of the orientation program and indicated how they sought to remedy this situation. Explanations as to why the efforts of student support staff commonly proved less than adequate inevitably pointed to a need for increased funding:

You ask them to come to Australia a month before the year starts, then it’s a huge infrastructure cost for the University here and for the parents who may be saying well that’s another month and they’re struggling to meet the costs now. (P6 Management)
Two issues frequently referred to in the interviews was the plethora of information provided to students during orientation and the need for the orientation program to be extended over a longer period of time. In support of the literature, most of the interviewees thought that orientation should be diffused over the first semester. It was believed that to minimise risk and further security, information should be disseminated in stages so students could be given greater assistance with their adjustment during the critical first couple of months. It was during this period that students were believed to be most at risk (Pascarella, Terenzini and Wolfe 1986; Ward and Kennedy 1996; Ward et al. 1998; Forbes-Mewett 2008). The following excerpt captures a much repeated view:

It's pretty hard when you've got students coming in to all these different courses from all these different places and also I think that the sort of thing that we do in the orientation programs, often they're not ready for it just at the time that they arrive. It's all too much too quickly. So probably more support over their first semester here in terms of orientation ... [because] a lot of the students don't come to it. For a start they're busy organising accommodation and they don't realise the importance of it. They're also given masses of information. All these brochures on anything they could possibly need which probably goes in the rubbish bin. They're not going to sit down and read them. Many people just don't do that. So then at the time when they need a service they seem to be unaware that they had been given that information. [It should be] not just once but two or three times over the semester [and] it might be a good thing for people who are taking a first year subject, first year units to actually make students aware of that. (P15 Support Staff)

The above view captures two main issues that represent the perspectives of most staff interviewees. First, it
was commonly felt that too much information was given to the students too soon for it to effectively minimise risk and further security. Second, it was considered that students would benefit if the information and support provided during orientation was reinforced throughout the first semester, while others believed it should continue for the first year or for the duration of the students’ stay. It was also proposed that first year unit coordinators could alert students to ongoing orientation sessions. The following view is supportive:

I do believe general support like what we provide is needed especially in the initial stages and ongoing support available to help them with the other factors so then they can concentrate on their academic study because we often find they need to be settled, they need to have a place, they need to have found where they can buy fish or their halal food or whatever and then when all those, food and shelter and all those needs are satisfied then they can really concentrate on their study. (P11 Support Staff)

This perception suggests that students prioritised their security needs and basic needs such as food and shelter took priority over academic issues in the initial stages in particular. Some students asked for assistance if they were unable to attend the orientation program, however, it was more likely for students not to bother as they did not rate the service very highly:

Generally when they come here they don't think it is very important and they think that they are better off finding accommodation ... too many things to do, I think. (P14 Support Staff)

Another view highlighted a lack of understanding of orientation and explained why some Chinese students did not attend: ‘I say, “why didn’t you go to orientation week?”, and they say, “I don’t know”. They even don’t know the
meaning of orientation — what does that mean?’ (P29 Academic).

Aware that the orientation program was less than satisfactory, senior managers sought to determine what could be garnered from other institutions.

... international students are notorious for turning up late because of Chinese New Year and other things. So attendance at orientation is the first thing. But secondly some people run orientation programs for a week or longer, the experience seems to be at some universities that you've got their attention for maybe two and a half days tops before they get critical about what they're receiving. They're like amoeba with permeable cell walls for a little time but you'd better make sure you actually imprint what you do and say early in that process. We went to [another university] to look at how they run their orientation and transition and in the faculty of economics and commerce they had a full time transition person who really worked primarily at creating orientation then transition in student's minds as indistinguishable from the academic program so the bonding is not with necessarily the group of students who ran a beer barrel or the university more broadly, it's about connectedness with this scholarly community, that is economics and commerce. (P40 Management)

The approach to orientation by the other University was viewed positively. In particular, the effort made to redirect orientation activities away from social events that international students might find inappropriate towards a program that would prepare students for the academic demands they were about to confront:

They organised the beer queues so that people would have to stand in a queue so long it would almost be impossible to get drunk. So the emphasis was not on the beer and barbecues, it was the fact that you'd have mini lectures, even the first week of lectures during
the week of orientation, so that an international student knows — and they’d be very quick to figure out whether it matters or it doesn’t matter. If they think it matters to their academic career they’ll turn up and their experience in terms of people turning up has been very, very positive. So that is a model we’ve tried to think about in a major way ... we’re trying to make that academic part of orientation the key message or the key hook. Then it’s a question [of] where orientation becomes transition... (P40 Management)

The notion that induction programs should be oriented towards the academic demands presented to international students seemed an idea worthy of consideration. Although, it was not necessarily endorsed by support staff who thought more effort should be put into furthering security by ensuring international students have ‘survival skills’:

I think that there probably should be an induction program set up specifically for international students. I find that in our department, or even within the faculty, what we lack is guidelines as soon as they arrive and a lot of them will jump off the plane and come straight to the university to enrol and they come here, then they need to go to [campus], then they need to come back. There is nothing in place to accommodate that, there is nothing in place to say, right this is what you need to look at when you get here and that can be accommodation and transport and even things like train timetables they might know that they can catch the train around but they don’t know how to get a timetable. So an induction program that will help them with going through the enrolment process but also help them settle in just to living. (P5 Support Staff)

This staff member recognised that international students want and need to prepare themselves for both the
academic and non-academic demands they will need to address. As shown by the following excerpt, the participant's perspective differs from the previous viewpoint and is one of the many stressing the need for induction to be extended over a long period:

I think if they had a day session that went over all the obvious things and then they had a meeting once a week for a few months so that they can touch base or come back with something that they haven't understood or share their experiences with other students in the same situation. It would probably add a lot of value and they wouldn't feel so isolated either. (P5 Support Staff)

It is noted that the ISB Project 2010 (Universities Australia 2011) indicates an 87 per cent international student satisfaction rate for orientation. Pre-arrival, arrival, and welcome are also examined in the ISB and 'some 40% of students claim not to have received information from their university between accepting a place and arrival. This is an area that requires further qualitative research and urgent attention by institutions' (Universities Australia 2011, p. 3). While the current study cannot be generalised and is not comparable with the ISB Project, it does however offer insights into the importance of the preparation period for minimising risk for international students, from the perspectives of staff and student leaders at an Australian University.

CONCLUSION

This article was contextualised in an environment where minimising risk and furthering student security has become imperative for Australian governments and universities. The study was influenced by Beck's notion the risk society as a consequence of the human endeavour of pursuing an international education. The focus was on the international student sojourn preparation period, which
extended from pre-departure in the students’ country of origin through to students’ arrival in the host country and orientation at the host University. Discussions involved the pre-departure process, including enrolment requirements, information sessions and electronic or web-based information. It was perceived that English language difficulties contributed to student risk from the earliest stages of the intended sojourn through to orientation. English language preparation was seen to be in need of review with calls for higher levels of English language proficiency and suggestions that the IELTS entry point score be raised and pre-course language programs introduced in the country of origin. The language difficulties experienced by students throughout their preparation period was believed to associated with the level of information absorbed by students and how effectively they would adapt to the new environment and cope with their studies. For the purposes of furthering international student security, it was suggested that this element of the student sojourn required much greater attention than was given.

Pre-departure briefing sessions were well received but by too few students; this was thought to be mainly due to the fact that limited sessions were held in capital cities in major source countries. There was evidence of parents wanting to minimise risk by seeking assurances that their son or daughter would be safe and academically successful. Other evidence suggested that generally students were unprepared socially and psychologically for their sojourn and that a lack of information regarding their forthcoming education and host country compounded the situation. It was shown that web-based information was becoming increasingly used as a method of informing students of what resources and services are available. While this method of information provision was cost saving to the University in the short-term, it was shown to disadvantage students when the information was not clear and/or when it was misinterpreted. It was thought that direct contact between staff and students and their parents was likely to minimise risk as information could be sought and questions answered.
Airport pickup appeared to be well managed from the perspective of most students; however, it was problematic for a significant minority at the urban campuses. The experiences of this group suggest some students were put at risk on their first night in Australia. The Lawrence study (2007) indicated that many international students across Australia spent their first night alone in unsuitable accommodation; thus, it was suggested for the purposes of furthering security the University should keep data on where students are staying and furthermore, consider ways to provide transitional accommodation on-campus. These measures would serve well the parents’ and students’ desire for a safe and welcoming destination. Orientation was considered by staff to be an extremely important aspect of international student preparation that had the potential to minimise risk. However, it was widely believed that too much information was given for the students to absorb and that the program should be extended at least throughout the first semester. The number of international students that attended orientation was considered low and this was attributed to their need to deal with other tasks such as finding accommodation and also due to the students’ unawareness of its importance. These dynamics did nothing to minimise risk. It seemed that within a limited budget the University was seriously constrained in the endeavour to provide sufficient preparation that would further the security of international students.

This study holds that undertaking study in a foreign land is accompanied by varying levels of risk and in this context the issue of student preparation is imperative. The findings of the study suggest that the preparation period is an important phase for furthering the security of international students and that to minimise risk, international students and their families should be afforded greater knowledge about the forthcoming sojourn and the host country. A lack of preparation and knowledge may increase risk because international student security is associated with knowledge and preparedness that assists the maintenance of agency in the host country.
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