HOW DO ASIAN STUDENTS MANAGE THEIR FIRST SEMESTER TRANSITIONING PHASE AT A SMALL REGIONAL UNIVERSITY?

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Abstract

Australian higher education institutions are vying for business in the lucrative market of educating international students. Meeting the demands of this student cohort is a priority for those universities wishing to position themselves as market leaders in international education. In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in the numbers of students from Asian regions choosing to study in Australia. In order to better service this unique cohort, it is important to understand the initial transition experiences of these students as they move into a new learning domain and navigate the multi-faceted social, cultural and academic aspects of their new host environment in Australia. Using visual narrative inquiry as a methodology and Photovoice to collect data, this qualitative study investigates students from Asia Major and Minor, mapping the terrain of their transitioning experiences in their first semester at a regional university in Australia. Participants submitted photographic evidence of their transitioning experiences and provided text-based commentaries which contextualised the photographs. These were thematically analysed using NVivo 10 relational database management software. The results revealed that overall, the participants experienced smooth transitions, due in principle to the close support networks established between same nationality students and other international students which provided emotional and academic support. The main stressor in the transition phase was identified as managing the work, life and study balance, though this cannot be attributed as an acculturative factor as it is not linked to any cultural adjustment, but rather an adjustment to studying within the domain of higher education. A unique finding of this study was the positive impact of the nature and beauty of the local environment on the transition experiences of the participants. In line with other research on transition and acculturation of international students, results of this study revealed that there was minimal integration with the domestic student cohort. Recommendations are provided to facilitate enhanced international student transitions and to support the use of Photovoice as an effective qualitative data collection method of the student experience.
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Statement of Original Authorship

The work contained in this research project has not been previously submitted to meet requirements for an award at this or any other higher education institution. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the research project contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made.

Signature:

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1. **Introduction**

Australia is a key player in the global market for providing international student education. More than half of all international students in tertiary education are from Asia, with the largest numbers from China, India, Vietnam, Republic of Korea and Thailand (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). Within the Australian higher education sector, 18 percent of students are classified under the international student category. For higher education institutions, this international market sector is a valuable source of funds, and many universities are aggressively marketing themselves to take advantage of the demand to educate international students in their institutions. Universities aspiring to secure an international student cohort have developed internationalisation policies, programs and curriculums to accommodate the needs of these international students who must navigate many challenges facing them in transitioning to a new culture and learning environment in the host country. The purpose of this research is to map the terrain of Asian students’ transitioning experiences and adaptation strategies in their first semester of study at a regional university in Australia.

The research question is designed to evince these experiences:

*How do Asian students manage their first semester transitioning phase at a small regional university?*

The investigation of this question is outlined in the following six chapters.

1.1 **OUTLINE**

This chapter is the introduction to the research, focussing on the background of the study topic and contextualising the research. The research question is presented and fundamental aspects outlined. The topic has significant importance at a number of levels and affects a wide range of groups including international students, domestic students, tertiary-level institution teaching and support staff and university policy makers.
A definition of key terms is given in Section 1.2. The author’s background and reasons for initiating this research is provided in Section 1.3, *Background*, followed by a discussion of the context with respect to Australia’s involvement in educating international students within higher education and the importance of understanding their transition experiences. Under Section 1.4, *Context*, the aims of this research are presented with a description of how the results may be used to shape university policy. Section 1.5, *Significance*, covers the significance of this topic area within economic and socio-cultural contexts.

Chapter 2 is a review of the literature relating to international students, in particular those from Asian backgrounds, and their transition, acculturation and adaptation experiences in foreign universities where English is the language of instruction and communication. A review of the literature indicates that the transitioning experience is multifaceted in terms of students’ adaptation within emotional, socio-cultural and academic contexts. Whilst there has been significant research on this topic at overseas universities and within Australian tertiary-level institutions, there is no evidence that this has been investigated at a regional university in Australia. This research will provide a detailed insight into how these transitioning mechanisms work, identify the gap existing in the present sphere of study and add to the body of literature on this topic.

A rationale for the selection of visual narrative inquiry as a methodology will be explained in Chapter 3. Justification for and an explanation of the qualitative method of data collection using Photovoice will also be provided in this chapter. The selection and description of the research participants will be included as well as a description of data analysis using the NVivo 10 data analysis and management software package. Chapter 3 will close with ethical considerations and limitations of this research.

Chapter 4 will present the results obtained from analysis of the Photovoice submissions from the research participants in relation to their transition experiences. Further in this chapter is an analysis and discussion of the key issues facing Asian
students transitioning to their new learning environment in a regional university compared and contrasted with existing literature.

A summary of the research will be provided in Chapter 5 and conclusions drawn, including what the implications are for stakeholders involved in the educational domain that constitutes the learning spaces of these students. Limitations on the research will be presented and suggestions are offered for future directions of research on the topic of transitioning experiences of international students from Asian backgrounds.

Chapter 6 will provide three recommendations for policy and curriculum change at the University with respect to the international student initial transitioning experience and ongoing support. These recommendations are not limited in their scope to focus exclusively on international students, as there are also implications for host national students and University staff. A fourth recommendation is to support the use of Photovoice as a valuable method of data collection.

1.2 DEFINITIONS OF KEY TERMS

Higher education
For the purposes of this research, higher education is tertiary-level education undertaken at a university offering undergraduate and postgraduate degree programs.

International students
International students are defined as students who have crossed a national border to undertake study in a country other than their home country (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013). Within Australia, these students are studying on visas with subclasses between 570 and 575, and exclude those on temporary visas or on Australian-funded scholarships.

Asian students
Asian students being students from Asia Major and Minor, including but not limited to: China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Japan, Thailand, the Philippines, Malaysia, Taiwan, Indonesia, Vietnam, Nepal, India and Pakistan.
Transition phase
The *transition phase* is identified as the first semester of study for the student - a period of approximately 13 contact weeks of study.

Regional university
*A regional university* is defined as the university at the centre of this research: the International University of Australia [IUA]. With an enrolment of approximately 10,000 students, it is the second smallest university in Australia.

1.3 BACKGROUND

The author’s 12-year experience in teaching and educational management in Japan and further teaching of international students, predominantly from Asian backgrounds, in an Australian university setting has been the catalyst for this research. Observations of how students from Asian backgrounds approach the learning experience in their native environment and how this transposes to a foreign one in Australia have engaged the author and stimulated an interest to ascertain exactly what issues these particular students face when transitioning to a new tertiary-level study environment, and what mechanisms they employ to cope, adapt and acculturate.

The author has evidenced first-hand experience of Asian students both successfully and unsuccessfully managing the transition phase of their international studies. While there is a considerable array of support mechanisms in place which are specifically designed for international students at the author’s university, anecdotal evidence suggests that the students are either unaware of, or seldom use these resources to assist them in the early phases of their study within their new environment. This is mirrored in the International Student Survey conducted in 2014 “...large proportions of [international] students were not aware that such support services were available to them. This finding suggests that more effort is needed to bring these services to the attention of international students” (Department of Education and Training, 2015a, p. 9). Thus, while it is clear from the literature and from first-hand experience that

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1 The name of the university at which this research project was conducted has been de-identified by using the pseudonym, the International University of Australia [IUA].
Australian universities recognise the many-faceted benefits of having international students on campus and strive to attract, accommodate and support them with a multitude of services and policy-specific internationalisation measures, the question of whether the students themselves are actually utilising these to their advantage in their transition remains a question it is expected this research will answer.

1.4 CONTEXT

Australia has more than a century-long history of providing educational services to international students, with the first overseas students commencing their studies in 1904. Since that time, growth in this sector has been significant, especially since the advent of globalisation. The number of international students studying in Australia and New Zealand has almost tripled since 2000 (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2013), and in October 2015, there were 615,061 international student enrolments in Australia’s education sector, of which 266,648 [43.3%] were within the higher education sector (Department of Education and Training [DET], 2015b). This positions Australia as the fifth largest international higher education provider worldwide, behind the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Germany and France (DET, 2015c). The top ten countries were all in the Asia Major and Minor regions with China, India, Malaysia, Nepal and Pakistan accounting for 63 percent [167,968 students] of the total international cohort (DET, 2015c).

Although these countries are classified under the broad umbrella of Asia, the significant differences in culture, religion and ethnic orientation need to be recognised by researchers. Within the context of education, Burns (1991) observes that this is not a homogenous group of people, and that both the similarities and differences between the cultures need to be studied in order to understand the unique transition experiences of individuals in foreign universities. Li and Gasser (2005) also recognise the importance of not applying an overarching cultural standard, even for countries which have geographic proximity, as they may be significantly heterogeneous culturally. In line with these observations, in their 25-year review of the transition experiences of international students in their first year of higher education, Campbell, Saltonstall and Buford (2013) noted the increasing diversity of the student cohort and cautioned against taking a “one-size-fits-all approach” (p. 27). Understanding the multi-faceted
differences between these various geographically and culturally positioned student cohorts is important if their academic and socio-cultural needs are to be met within higher education in Australia.

With such evidence supporting a significant international student cohort from countries in Asia Major and Minor, it would seem prudent to investigate their experiences and overall satisfaction with the services provided by educational institutions. Bodycott (2012), Ramachandran (2011) and Sawir (2013) suggest that a good educational experience will transmute into lucrative word of mouth advertising, with satisfied students communicating their positive international study experiences to family and friends, effectively becoming good-will ambassadors for Australian higher education. This is supported by the results in the 2014 International Student Barometer where the category friends was cited as the third most influential factor in selection of university for international students (Strategic Information and Analysis Unit, 2016a).

Presently, it would appear that Australia is ranked very positively as a quality service provider in international higher education. In a 2014 international student satisfaction survey with 55,609 participants, 87 percent of international students studying in the higher education sector were satisfied or very satisfied with their overall study experience in Australia, and the overall living experience was above the international benchmark (Department of Education and Training, 2015a).

The nature of this research is primarily descriptive with the overarching objective to map the terrain of Asian students’ transitioning, acculturation and adaptation experiences. This will be achieved by recording and reflecting on the transition experiences of the research participants with the goal of increasing knowledge and promoting critical dialogue on international student transition. This research falls within the category of oriented strategic basic research which seeks to provide a foundation of knowledge from which solutions to problems or issues can be extrapolated. It is anticipated that this research will furnish a body of knowledge that will assist participants and stakeholders of the international student transition process in gaining a better understanding of the experiences, coping mechanisms and strategies used in this initial phase of their international study.
At the institutional level, it is expected that this knowledge will provide a deeper comprehension of the students’ needs and will enable a re-evaluation of existing policy, practice and programs assisting transition. This will help direct the form and function of the institutional support services offered to transitioning students to enhance the overall transition experience within the academic environment.

1.5 SIGNIFICANCE

International students bring a number of economic, social and cultural benefits to the country and Australian society, enhancing communities and building global networks in all spheres. They bring an array of skill sets, knowledge and perspectives that contribute to the intellectual capital of their host nation (Smith & Khawaja, 2011), broadening diversity and adding elements of cultural richness. As Australia is geographically isolated, the presence of international students in Australian universities provides opportunities for domestic students to broaden their intercultural learning experiences (Sawir, 2013), enhance their global perspectives on education, and better prepare them to successfully operate within an international market place after completing their qualifications.

Economically, education is Australia’s largest export service industry adding $16.3 billion to the economy in 2010-11 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011). Understanding the economic and other contributions that international students make, universities are positioning themselves to provide an exemplary service delivery that meets international students’ needs, ensuring satisfaction and creating a loyalty towards the host institution as a study destination (Ramachandran, 2011). To achieve these goals, universities are closely examining how they accommodate international students, both academically and socio-culturally. Focus has gone beyond retention management where the basic aim was to attract and keep international students, to one of carefully orchestrated enrolment management which “…includes strategically aligning recruitment and retention efforts to the institution’s mission, strategic plan and resources” (Campbell, Saltonstall, & Buford, 2013, p. 29). To this end, many higher education institutions have set out to internationalise their curriculums as a measure to attract international students to study on their campuses.
In order to achieve the growth and maintenance of international student numbers, higher education institutions would benefit from knowing what experiences international students are faced with in their various phases of transition, and what internal and external elements they draw upon to assist them with their academic, socio-cultural, emotional and physiological acculturation and adaptation to the new host environment. As Kinzie (2013) maintains, understanding what contributes to and constitutes successful first year transition experiences should be a high priority for all administrative, academic and political stakeholders involved in post-secondary education. This broad view of a network of sectors being responsible for delivering a positive international student experience is reinforced by Nyland, Forbes-Mewett and Hartel, (2013, p. 657) who argue that:

…if communities are to build a stable, commercially oriented international education sector that has long-term stability, they need to underpin their efforts with a governance network that is multi-level, multidivisional, and that permits the exercise of negotiation and countervailing power.

For example, as one of the participant groups involved in this internationalisation process, the role of the host domestic student in international student transitions is under close scrutiny. In his study of internationalising the Australian higher education curriculum, Sawir (2013) specifically noted the importance of the domestic students’ attitudes of acceptance and active participation in the acculturation of sojourning international students.

A review of the literature in this regard follows in Chapter 2.
2. Literature review

This chapter provides a review of the literature around Transition, Acculturation and Adaptation of Asian students (Section 2.1). Intercultural Competence, (Section 2.2), introduces and defines key terminology around the research question, which considers the cultural norms of the international student with respect to those of the new host country and explores the impacts of change on the student in making adjustments as a result of the cultural variances. Psychological Issues (Section 2.3) delves into how the change process affects the mental well-being of transitioning students, and introduces the concepts of acculturative stress, culture bumps and culture shock. Social Support is covered in Section 2.4, examining how transitioning students develop social and academic support networks, and how they interrelate with the domestic student cohort with respect to the framework of internationalisation policies advocated by many higher education institutions. Aspects of discrimination and racism are also covered in this section. The significance of the family unit and the bearing it has on students’ educational aspirations, academic performance and psychological well-being is discussed in Section 2.5, Family Influences. Language Issues (Section 2.6) outlines the impacts related to English language proficiency in the social and academic contexts of a transitioning student, and the overall importance of the language factor in attaining successful acculturation. Academic Performance is introduced in Section 2.7, and covers a number of interrelated aspects including: required adjustments to a new set of academic demands with respect to assignment writing, negotiating the relative informality of the learning space and interaction with teachers, the difference in Confucian-based learning styles with those of western-oriented host countries, and the causes and effects of academic stress. How Information and Communications Technology is used in academic and social contexts is summarised in Section 2.8, Technology.

2.1 TRANSITION, ACCULTURATION AND ADAPTATION

For any student entering tertiary level education for the first time, there are transition issues to address in adjusting to the new environment. As well as navigating
new living environments, selecting courses of study and adjusting to a new study regime, international students have the additional considerations of coping with these within a new culture and with language barriers (Andrade, 2005). These students must find ways and means to adjust and adapt to the many-faceted challenges that face them in their new environments.

The process of adaptation is complex and can be viewed from a number of perspectives. According to Berry (1997, p. 13), adaptation refers to “…changes that take place in individuals or groups in response to environmental demands”. This adaptation may be analysed further through the twin lenses of psychological [individual] and sociocultural [group] adaptation as posited by Searle and Ward (1990). Examples of psychological adaptation are: a perception of self with respect to mental health and cultural identity, and a sense of fulfilment within the new cultural context. These attributes are classed as internal psychological outcomes by Berry because they are best examined through psychopathology analysis. External psychological outcomes are more closely associated with social skills, and enable the student to deal with daily issues concerning their lives such as family, study and work (Berry, 1997). Adaptation therefore, involves a complex interplay of ongoing adjustments within an individual’s cultural, social, psychological and even physiological elements over time. The aspect of time is fundamental, as this indicates the nature of the adjustments occur within a process framework which is shaped through the cultural values and perspectives of the transitioning individual and those of the host country. This process is termed acculturation and the outcome of this process is adaptation (Berry & Sam, 1997).

The concept of acculturation emerged in the 1930s, and the term was introduced by researchers Redfield, Linton and Herskovits (1936) while studying the effects of intercultural transitions. They define acculturation as adjustments in the original cultural blueprint of the group that are an outcome of interactions with other cultures (Redfield, Linton, & Herskovits, 1936). Technically, acculturation is a term that could apply to either or both the transitioning group and the host group, however, it has generally come to be accepted as a process mainly experienced by the sojourners who are facing the largest degree of adaptation (Berry, 1997). Within the context of education, these transitioning adjustments are often seen as having to be made
exclusively by the international student, but the process has a measure of mutuality involved, as the host nationals must also negotiate a degree of adjustment in their interaction with their international peers (Ujitani & Volet, 2008).

In 2005, Berry introduced the concept of acculturation being a dual process, further incorporating the psychological changes that took place, and defining acculturation as “…the dual process of cultural and psychological change that takes place as a result of contact between two or more cultural groups and their individual members” (2005, p. 698). Interculturation is another term introduced in the 1990s and has many evident similarities to acculturation, however, its characteristic feature is that new cultures are formed as a result of the blend of two or more individual cultures coming together, rather than a change in the culture of one group to fit in with another (Berry, 2005).

Acculturation strategies adopted by sojourners to a new cultural environment can be divided into four types: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation according to Berry (1997), all of which encompass two main aspects of “cultural maintenance” and “contact and participation” (p. 9) which can be measured on a continuum. Berry (1997) proposes that the former relates to the importance of maintaining the individual’s cultural individuality and nature, and the latter, the degree to which they choose to integrate with other cultural factions. Berry (1997) defines assimilation as when an individual does not wish to maintain their traditional culture and fully adopts the new culture. Separation is where the individual views little merit in adopting the new host culture and maintains their traditional culture within the new host environment (Berry, 1997). When aspects of both the traditional and new cultures are deemed meritorious, a blend of both is assumed within the strategy of integration (Berry, 1997). The most extreme of the strategies is marginalisation, when it is not possible to maintain the traditional culture, and there is no interest in adopting the new culture, thus the individual is marginalised from both (Berry, 1997).

Berry and Kalin (1995) point out that individuals may only choose their preferred acculturation strategy when the host society is essentially multicultural in nature and generally accepts cultural diversity, as in the Australian context. The process of acculturation takes time, and within the transitioning period, individuals
explore different strategies and will, in due course, adopt one or a combination of strategies that ultimately is the most personally useful and satisfying, and is the most sustainable according to each individual’s unique context. Wang and Hannes (2014) in their study of Asian students transitioning to higher education study in Belgium, corroborates Berry’s work by observing that a variety of strategies were employed, including assimilation, separation and integration, depending on the effort required to adopt or adapt to differing aspects within the new and foreign context.

2.2 INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

International students relocating to a new country, culture and educational environment need to make significant adjustments in their behaviour in order to transition and adapt to the cultural, social and academic norms of the host society. “Cultural adjustment has been defined as the social and psychological ability of individuals or cultural groups to operate effectively within the new cultural environment in which they now reside” (Woods et al., 2013, p. 524).

A major factor in a successful adjustment process is the individual’s cultural competency, defined by Padilla and Perez (2003) as “…the learned ability to function in a culture in a manner that is congruent with the values, beliefs, customs, mannerisms, and language of the majority of members of the culture” (p. 42). The degree of adaptation required to achieve cultural competency depends on the cultural distance in terms of dissimilarity between language, religion and cultural values; the greater the cultural differences, the greater the adjustment required (Berry, 1997). Students who originate from Asian cultures find the cultural gap between their own and western countries significantly greater than students from European countries. This was evidenced by Volet and Ang (1998), researching South-East Asian students studying in Australian universities, who reported extreme opposite measures of collectivism in Asian students and individualism in Australian students when analysing the cohorts’ social identities.

In order to bridge the cultural gap and achieve a measure of cultural competency, knowledge of the host culture is necessary for a successful transition. Yeh and Inose (2003), studying a diverse range of international students’ transitions, established that, “European international students were significantly less likely to
experience acculturative distress than were students from the geographic regions of Asia, Africa and Latin/Central America” (p. 12). Ward and Searle (1990) also found this to be evident in their study of Malaysian international students in New Zealand, who experienced socialisation problems due to a lack of relevant cultural knowledge of the host country.

There has been much research conducted on the effects of transitioning to new cultures, and a range of terminology has evolved to describe these effects and degrees of impact upon the individual. In order to acculturate and eventually adapt, it may be necessary for the student to shed cultural beliefs and behaviours in order to adopt those of the host culture. When the level or intensity of the required adjustments become overwhelming for the individual, the term culture shock may be used to describe the impact of the related stressors. Berry (2007) however, introduces an aligned but different concept, citing that the stressors experienced by people adjusting to a new host country environment are not purely cultural in their nature or source, therefore acculturative stress is a more appropriate label as this stress stems from intercultural differences rather than purely cultural ones. Wu and Hammond (2011), studying a group of Asian students in a United Kingdom university master’s program, found that these students did experience stressors in transitioning but the severity could not be clearly labelled as culture shock, but rather a culture bump, a term coined by Chen (2007). Perspectives on the impact of culture shock or acculturative stress differ, with some researchers establishing that negative transitioning experiences do not necessarily lead to negative outcomes, and that having gone through certain levels of transition difficulties, tenacity developed in the international student cohort. International student participants in Moores and Popadiuk’s (2011) study identified both positive and negative transitioning experiences as beneficial to their successful overall intercultural adjustment within the host university, explaining that they identified these experiences as an integral part of the adaptation process.

In contrast to the concept of culture shedding, other research has demonstrated that some students are able to navigate an existence where they maintain the strong cultural identity of their home country while developing a parallel identity that is more closely aligned with the host country they are residing in (Li & Gasser, 2005). Further, the individuals who manage twin dimensions of identity are able to utilise these in
different aspects of their acculturation with their psychological adjustment related to their national identity, and their sociocultural adjustment related to their host identity (Li & Gasser, 2005). In managing congruent identities, these students demonstrated an ability to navigate the transition process with overall less acculturative stress than students who adopted culture shedding coping strategies (Li & Gasser, 2005).

Berry (1997) notes that the phase of the acculturation experience is important when examining the impacts of acculturative stress on adaptation and the development of cross cultural competency. Length of residence in the host culture was similarly identified by Ward (1996) as a factor in achieving socio-cultural adjustment by international students. Both researchers pointed to the initial phases of the transition being the most stressful in terms of adjustment to the social and academic environs of the new host culture.

Clearly, while achieving a degree of overall cross-cultural competency is desirable, this does not necessarily positively impact on other, more specific aspects of transition for the international student. As Ramachandran (2011) notes, this competency, while enhancing a student’s ability to develop social networks and improve cross cultural communications for example, does not necessarily translate into academic success. This is discussed in further detail in Section 2.8, Academic Performance.

### 2.3 PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES

The multi-faceted aspects of the acculturation experience have significant psychological impacts on the individual, and this may be analysed in cross cultural psychology with respect to cultural context and behavioural development (Berry, 1997). *Psychological acculturation* is defined by Berry (1997) as “…the psychological changes and eventual outcomes that occur as a result of individuals experiencing acculturation” (p. 5). Some behavioural changes may be relatively easy for the transitioning individual to accommodate and may pose minimal or no adaptation issues, while others may necessitate a degree of culture shedding whereby certain aspects of the person’s existing culture may need to be discarded in order to adopt different behaviours appropriate to the new cultural context (Berry, 1992; Berry 1997). If these new host culture behaviours are deemed incompatible with those of
transitioning individual’s traditional culture, and the individual cannot easily negotiate the required changes, a degree of cultural conflict may arise. The result of this conflict is a measure of acculturative stress on the individual, and this will in turn result in some form of psychological distress (Berry, 1997).

Left unchecked, psychological distress can lead to more serious mental health issues according to Lee, Koeske and Sales (2004), the most common of which is depression. Research indicates that students from Asian backgrounds have a tendency to suffer from depression, as evidenced in a study of 189 Chinese students studying in the United States of America, where many of this cohort displayed depressive tendencies as a result of their transitioning stress (Wei et al., 2007). Other studies have also demonstrated a significant link between depression and acculturative stress in Asian students studying in foreign universities (Dao, Lee, & Chang, 2007; Pan, Wong, Joubert, & Chan, 2007).

Psychological distress also manifests itself in forms other than depression. A number of researchers have identified that transitioning Asian students display somatic [physiological] symptoms resulting from the psychological distress of the acculturation process (Mori, 2000; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Yeh & Inose, 2003) and seek medical attention rather than psychological counselling. Mori (2000) posits that this is due to cultural differences in the beliefs about seeking mental health support, and the stigma of acknowledging mental health issues within the family and associated networks.

The psychological impacts of transitioning do not necessarily have a long term negative impact, providing they are managed appropriately. For example, it was established in Mallinckrodt and Leong’s (1992) study of international students studying in American universities, that the level of support from families and academic staff for individuals suffering from psychological stress was a key factor in the eventual successful adaptation.

2.4 SOCIAL SUPPORT

Social support has been identified as an important factor in the acculturation process, but it is debated as to exactly what form that support takes, and what may be
the most effective form of support for sojourning international students. Gómez, Urzúa and Glass (2014) identify three types of social networks that international students access: “…monocultural social ties (contact with students of the same national or cultural background), multicultural social ties (contact with other international students and faculty), and bicultural social ties, (contact with students from the host country)” (p. 11). Glass and Westmont-Campbell (2014) noted that a sound network of multicultural or monocultural peers provided a sense of security for international students to navigate their way through their new cultural environment. This was also found to be the case by Moores and Popadiuk (2011), who established that having empathetic international student peers was a vital element in a successful transition to a new host culture. Students in Moores and Popadiuk’s (2011) study placed very high value on these particular networks comprised of international students, summarising them as “…deeply meaningful cross-cultural experiences and vital sources of practical support” (p. 296).

Universities that wish to encourage international students to study at their institution take explicit measures to incorporate internationalisation into their operating frameworks and governing policies. For example, the International University of Australia’s Internationalisation Governing Policy, states:

…the University must have in place. . . (b) information and support schemes and services needed to enable domestic and international students, domestic and international staff, and international university visitors to participate in internationalisation activities. (International University of Australia, 2007, para. 5)

Yet Sawir (2013), studying the interactions between international students and nationals in an Australian university, found not only a lack bicultural interaction, but even a willingness to consider such exchanges, especially from the domestic student cohort. This is further supported by Nesdale and Todd’s (1993) findings that student preferences toward cross-cultural academic activities decreased as they moved through their undergraduate studies from the first to the third year. Volet and Ang (1998), in their study of South-East Asian students in Australian higher education institutions, revealed that even when students had successfully participated in activities in mixed
cultural groups, the students [from both cohorts] would not purposefully seek out further opportunities for cross-cultural cooperation between themselves. These researchers identified that both the Asian cohort and the domestic cohort were equally responsible for the lack of cross-cultural integration (Volet & Ang, 1998). As can be seen, the existence and successful operation of these monocultural and multicultural intra-networks which ostensibly exclude significant levels of interaction with host national students, would appear to be contrary to the efforts of universities to encourage bicultural social networks between international and domestic students.

The fact that international students may be present on campus, a desirable and well-published feature of many universities claiming to offer internationalised curriculums, does not automatically lead to intercultural communication and bonding experiences with domestic students (Sawir, 2013). Thom (2010) states that “spontaneous, genuine, intercultural interaction between international students and their host community is unusual, and simply being exposed to people from different cultures does not lead to internationalization any more than living in the same street creates a community” (p. 58). In summary, whilst many Australian universities have internationalisation policies in place to create a desirable multi-cultural setting for intercultural collaboration to take place between host national and international students, it has been evidenced that this interaction is not spontaneously happening in the present environment.

Because of the many common denominators between international students, with language and culture being the two most prominent, the establishment of monocultural and multicultural networks is often easier and likely to happen more spontaneously than bicultural networks with host university students. This networking may already have begun prior to the foreign students arriving in their new host destinations. Quan, Smailes and Fraser’s (2013) study of Chinese students transitioning to study in a United Kingdom university, found that monocultural or intra-networks were established not in the host country but within the universities of the country of origin and continued to operate in the new host country universities abroad.

Other research provides additional reasons for international students developing close-knit networks among themselves, rather than with host country
students. Kormos, Csizér and Iwaniec (2014) maintain that international students prefer to network with each other due to the anxiety and stress involved in having to communicate with host nationals in English. In Campbell and Li’s (2008) study of Asian students’ transition experiences within higher education in New Zealand, most of the students reported the desire and willingness to make friends with host national students, but for a number of reasons, mainly language and cultural differences, this did not eventuate, even after a number of years studying at the university. A third reason for the preference of these networks by Asian students in particular is explained by Yeh and Inose (2003), relating this to the collectivist nature of their society and desire to preserve their cultural heritage. This is corroborated by Smith and Khawaja (2011, p. 703), who assert “Asian international students may experience difficulties when interacting and attempting to make friends in a Western culture that emphasises individualism, assertiveness, and self-sufficiency over interdependence and relatedness”. Sawir (2013) noted a distinct disinterest by Australian domestic students to engage with their international peers and commented that although the universities took special care to provide an internationalised learning environment with the aim of establishing a multicultural learning experience for all students, the domestic cohort were either ignorant of, or placed little value on the culturally diverse opportunities available to them.

According to Quan, Smailes and Fraser (2013), the Asian students in their United Kingdom university study did not seem concerned that they were missing out on what universities would regard as the rich, multicultural aspects of integrating with a broader student cohort. Whilst monocultural and multicultural networks largely exclude host national interaction, Gu (2011) argues that this is not necessarily a negative point given the amount of peer support that occurs when international students collectively navigate their cultural adjustment. Wu and Hammond (2011) reported of their East-Asian students in their study, “they felt that they had emotional and academic support from other international students so did not feel compelled to mix with local students” (p. 431). With reference to the acculturation process, Wu and Hammond (2011) summarised their findings by noting that the participants in their study did not adjust to a bicultural environment and integrate with host students, but rather they adjusted to a multicultural environment of international students within the host university.
There are however, many positive aspects impacting on the acculturation experience if international students are able to navigate and overcome the barriers to developing bicultural relations with host national students. Within social-psychological theory, open-mindedness is a crucial element in navigating cross cultural interactions (Arthur & Bennett, 1995) and managing the acculturation process successfully. International students who are able to establish friendships with host nationals are more open-minded in their overall outlook on cross cultural interactions according to Williams and Johnson (2011), and they reported that international students had lower levels of anxiety in negotiating intercultural settings if they had bicultural networks and friendships with host national students. Similarly, Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) found the international students in their study at a Hawaiian university, 59 percent of whom were from Asian backgrounds, reported a greater sense of connectedness, contentment and satisfaction when they had a higher ratio of host national friendships than those students who reported a higher ratio of same nationality or international friendships. In contrast to much of the literature on social networks of international students, this Hawaiian study found the majority of international students had developed relationships with higher proportions of host national students than co-nationals, however, it was suggested that this was a result of the high Asian ethnic mix of Hawaiian born host nationals being more open and accepting of overseas born international students, and especially those from other Asian backgrounds (Hendrickson, Rosen, & Aune, 2011). Li and Gasser (2005), in examining the sociocultural adjustment of 117 students from 17 Asian countries within higher education in the United States of America, found that increased contact with host national students facilitated improved cross cultural efficacy and sociocultural adjustment, underpinning a smooth transition and adaptation to their new environment.

Within the context of developing new social relations in the host country, the aspect of prejudice and racial discrimination must be addressed. Smith and Khawaja (2011) noted that international students from Asian, African and Middle Eastern backgrounds reported higher and more frequent levels of discrimination than those students from European backgrounds. In a study of the effects of trust, discrimination and acculturation on Asian international students in Australian universities, Guillen and Ji (2011) suggest that there is a degree of discrimination against Asian students by
the domestic student cohort, however, the authors identify this as taste-based rather than statistical i.e., the discrimination is not based on an identifying attribute (e.g., race, colour or religion), but is preferential in its nature. Choi (1997) also revealed evidence of discrimination by both Australian domestic students and teachers, as perceived by the Korean international students studying in an Australian university, citing discriminatory behaviour attributed to the domestic student cohort [23 percent] and teaching staff [13.3 percent]. Choi attributed this perception of discrimination to the strong recognition of appropriate forms of address between individuals of different ages and educational standing held by Korean people, and the misunderstandings involved in them communicating with staff and students in the relatively egalitarian atmosphere of an Australian university classroom.

Marginson (2010) draws attention to the ethical responsibility of higher education institutions to safeguard international students from acts of discrimination, whether real or perceived, and notes that lack of attention to this obligation may negatively impact on the institution’s efforts to secure continued international student enrolments as a result of dissatisfied customers. This can be evidenced in the decline in the number of international students from India after the widely publicised race-related assaults in Melbourne and New South Wales between 2009 and 2010 (Graycar, 2010).

Prejudice and discrimination are not limited to the academic environment. According to Graycar (2010), the level of racial discrimination is greater in the wider community than on campus, citing international students’ problems with prejudice in obtaining employment and housing. Regardless of the nature of the discrimination, the negative effect on the overall transitioning experience is evident in high levels of acculturative stress, potentially leading to serious psychological impacts (Berry, 1997).

2.5 FAMILY INFLUENCES

For students from Asian countries, there is a relatively strong influence of the family in the decision-making process of selecting a university for study abroad. The 2015 International Student Barometer reports that family ranked fourth out of the ten most influential factors in students’ choice of university (International University of Australia, 2016a). For Asian students whose backgrounds are from Confucian
societies, family expectations can have a significant effect on the student’s acculturation experiences. Confucianism values education highly, and there is a high level of respect for, and obedience to family members, especially the father, elders and antecedents (Salili, Fu, Tong, & Tabatabai, 2001). Thus, while Asian students may be, for all intents and purposes, thoroughly modern international students with progressive viewpoints, there are underlying familial-based principles and values stemming from their heritage that strongly influence their decision-making regarding their education and careers. Bodycott and Lai (2012) evidenced this in a study of mainland Chinese students studying abroad, finding that 65 percent of these students were following a program of study that was ostensibly prescribed by their families.

As Zhong (2011) points out, the Chinese place great value on education, and a qualification from a Western university is highly regarded within the family unit and larger society, thus bringing not only recognition for educational achievement but also the potential for a better career, and therefore, income. For students whose family members may be financing their study abroad, the expectations for them to achieve academic excellence are significant, and the resulting pressure can negatively impact on their transition experience (Bankston & Zhou, 2002). One reason for the keen interest that Chinese parents have in the education of their children is China’s one child policy. Bodycott (2011) notes, “In essence, with only one child bound to secure the future of the family, there is increased pressure on that child to deliver on the family’s financial and cultural investment” (p. 358). Under these circumstances, if the student does not perform to expectations, the result can be disgrace and dishonour which can lead to depressive tendencies (Guns, Richardson, & Watt, 2012), further impacting on successful acculturation.

The academic expectations of international students, and in particular students with Asian backgrounds whose parents may have a significant bearing on their study paths, can be a factor contributing to academic stress within the transition experience. A study of Chinese students and their parents found a number of differences in the perceived importance of aspects in obtaining an international education. Parents prioritised economic and social benefits in the long term, while students valued the shorter term aspects such as quality of the international education and the intercultural experiences offered (Bodycott, 2012). This highlights the sometimes significant
variance in fundamental educational perspectives and career-oriented goals that some Asian students must rationalise in their overseas study experiences.

Notwithstanding the potentially negative impacts of family pressure to succeed academically and career-wise, the family can be a grounding entity while a student is studying abroad, with regular contact seen to provide stability to an individual’s cultural identity while managing the transition to a new culture. Mallinckrodt and Leong (1992) assert that acculturative stress in transitioning to the host culture was lowered when international students maintained family contact. According to Moores and Popadiuk (2011) who tracked significant incident transitioning experiences of international students [including Chinese nationals], being able to maintain a connection with their cultural roots via communication with family during their sojourn enabled them to establish a sense of belonging in their new cultural environment. This is supported by Wang and Hannes (2014) who established that Asian students in their Belgian study maintained close ties with family and friends in their home countries via various Information Communication Technologies. Moores and Popadiuk (2011) revealed mixed responses from their international student cohort regarding the value of maintaining familial ties. “Family members were also seen as a touchstone during difficult times and as a reminder of one’s identity beyond the host culture” (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011, p. 299). In contrast to other studies, the Chinese student cohort in this particular study however, expressed the desire to avoid family contact, with the authors extrapolating that the students felt an incompatibility with their new role as being an independent international student and somewhat having to break family ties in order to achieve this (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). To summarise, the role of the family unit has a significant influence on both the initial direction taken with respect to study and career goals as well as the ongoing transition experiences of the sojourning Asian student.

2.6 LANGUAGE ISSUES

Second language proficiency for transitioning international students has a substantial impact on many facets of the acculturation process, including academic, social, cultural, psychological and emotional aspects. Campbell and Li’s (2008) study on Asian students in New Zealand universities confirmed the results of many other studies, finding that English language proficiency was the most influential factor
affecting the transitioning process and eventual socio-cultural and academic adaptation. According to Gómez, Urzúa and Glass (2014), “Language, although only one among multiple components of acculturation, remains a most popular index of cross-cultural adaptation, whether in terms of overall language use, language preference, or language proficiency” (p. 10).

Language and culture are heavily interdependent. Yeh and Inose (2003) report that international students from European cultures were less likely to be impacted upon by acculturative stress resulting from language issues than students from Asia and other non-Western regions. Language and the ability to therefore communicate, plays a vital role in the transition experiences of any international student, but more so for those where English is a second language. This is supported by Kang (2006) who found that for international students from Asian backgrounds, English as a second language competence was defined as a more important factor in acculturative adjustment than any other.

Within the academic framework, students who lack sufficient language skills will experience difficulties associated with all aspects of their written, reading, oral and aural study (Campbell & Li, 2008; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). From the viewpoint of academic staff, Trice (2003) established that English language competence was the most significant challenge facing foreign students, and the one most often affecting academic performance. Though English may not be the student’s first language, exposure to English at an early age within the education system may provide a solid platform for academic achievement. Bone and Reid (2013) established that Asian students who were schooled in English in their home countries outperformed those students for example, from China and Korea who were instructed in their native languages.

There is sometimes a significant difference between English proficiency test-scores which are used to determine entry into foreign universities, and international students’ actual ability to use English in the host nation academic classroom environment. Ramachandran (2011) says of international students “…confidence is shattered when they find that their earlier training in English language and
achievements in TOEFL/IELTS\(^2\) do not help them to resolve practical issues that arise in a classroom environment” (pp. 203-204). While these students may possess the necessary subject specific skills, they are unprepared for the highly interactive and communicative nature of the Western classroom environment involving group work, presentations and other student directed activities, all of which require a level of English proficiency within a context the students have not yet experienced (Andrade, 2005; Campbell & Li, 2008; Ramachandran, 2011).

International students’ proficiency in the language of the host nation has significant effects on transition aspects other than academic performance. The ability to communicate in the host country language impacts on the sojourning student’s sociocultural adaptation. Smith and Khawaja (2011) demonstrated that language barriers hamper students’ attempts to network with host nationals both within and outside of the academic environment. Hayes and Lin (1994) also reported that lack of language proficiency can be an impediment to international students socially networking with host nationals. Poyrazli, Arbona, Bullington and Pisecco, (2001) revealed the same evidence, reporting that the ability to relate to locals depended on foreign students’ English competency. This is also supported by Sawir (2013) who established that the level of English competence was a direct factor attributed to the lack of integration between international and domestic students in Australian universities.

Given the language challenges in developing social skills with locals, it is understandable that students socialise within their own, familiar cultural groups. Woods et al. (2013), studying a pre-undergraduate cohort of international students predominantly from Asian backgrounds [Chinese, Korean and Japanese], found students tended to socialise with peers from the same ethnicity and language base. This in itself, is not necessarily a negative element as Kormos, Csizér and Iwaniec (2014) point out that having the support of one’s own ethnic community, especially in times of high stress and requiring emotional support, is an important factor in the

\(^2\) IELTS – International English Language Testing System. TOEFL – Test of English as a Foreign Language
cultural adjustment process, as these interactions promote a sense of security that perhaps could not be provided by host nationals at these times.

If, however, international students can negotiate the language barrier, there are benefits to be gained both academically and socially. Use of the host country language for example, in informal contexts can have positive ramifications for the transitioning student. From the sociocultural aspect, international students in a study conducted by Moores and Popadiuk (2011) indicated that contact with host nationals provided them with social communication experiences on informal levels that could not be achieved in a formal classroom setting, enabling them to feel more at ease and well-regarded by their host nation peers. In examining the role of language proficiency with respect to transitioning experiences and the overall acculturation process, second language proficiency is a key, if not the key element, in achieving successful acculturation of international students within both the academic and sociocultural domains.

2.7 ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

There can be many differing perspectives on the purpose of education, depending on the cultural viewpoints within any given society. In China for example, which is a collectivist culture, education is for the purpose of creating citizens who are useful and productive contributors to society, rather than for the exclusive purpose of benefiting the individual (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). In contrast, countries with western cultural ideologies view education to serve the individual in fulfilling their personal and professional development and general self-esteem (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). These differences highlight the potentially conflicting aspects of cultural adaptation within the context of education that must be navigated for students in transitioning to study abroad.

Academic stress is something which most students in higher education encounter, but for international students, acculturative stressors are likely to be exacerbated when dealing with second language issues within a new educational environment (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). There is a range of other factors concerning education and academic performance that sojourning international students must face in their transition to their new and foreign study environment, including: study
strategies and learning styles, policies around assessment protocols and plagiarism, and communication protocols with academic staff.

Within the university classroom, there are a number of factors that may impact on transitioning experiences with respect to teaching pedagogy and student learning approaches. Students who originate from cultures with Confucian-based education systems where effort and willpower reflect in memorisation and rote learning, will find significant contrasts with Western education systems where students are expected to apply critical analysis, challenge assumptions and ask questions (Holmes, 2005; Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Some Asian students appear to face a number of paradoxes in the academic environment as a result of contrasting approaches to the teaching/learning paradigm of their native land and their new host. As Campbell and Li (2008) state, “…in the process of intercultural communication, Asian international students were seesawing between contradictions, inconsistencies, and conflicting ideologies” (p. 392). One of these issues in particular is the notion of becoming a self-sufficient, independent learner by taking responsibility for one’s own learning; this being in direct contrast to their home country Confucian educational ethos. Asian students are uncomfortable when required to participate in classroom dialogue, reflect on past learning and apply critical analysis as a means to discover their own learning, as their Confucian heritage of knowledge acquisition is by means of a more didactic approach of the instructor teaching the students what they must know (Campbell & Li, 2008).

The informal aspect of the Western classroom environment, including the relatively informal way of addressing teaching staff, may also pose challenges for students of Asian backgrounds (Ladd & Ruby, 1999) in contrast to their home country education systems where the learning environment is strictly governed and teachers are esteemed and treated with a high degree of formality. For Korean students, this is an area fraught with difficulty, not only from a student to teacher perspective, but also from teacher to student and student to student perspectives. In Korean culture, there is a range of clearly defined terms of appropriateness for personal address, depending on age and relationship. In a study of Korean students in Australian universities, it was found that confusion and even citations of racism were directed towards both the domestic student cohort and the teaching staff by Korean students because the highly
egalitarian approach to personal terms of address used by Australians conflicted with the Korean norm (Choi, 1997). In contrast however, a study of Asian students in a New Zealand university showed the students “…were deeply impressed with the flat rather than hierarchical mode of teacher–student classroom interactions” (Campbell & Li, 2008, p. 380), but at the same time they felt uncomfortable with the lack of push-to-succeed pressure from New Zealand teachers. This was in sharp contrast to the way they were treated by their teachers in their home countries and required an adjustment in their learning approach.

International students studying in foreign universities need to understand and adapt to a new, multi-faceted set of academic demands within their transitioning phase. Coping with these new academic demands can be stressful, and if not managed, these stressors can negatively impact on the successful acculturation process of international students with Quan, Smailes and Fraser (2013) noting that this is particularly so for students from Asian cultures due to their significantly different educational tenets. However, if students can manage to successfully navigate these scholastic challenges, the resulting academic success has been shown to facilitate overall cross-cultural transition (Moores & Popadiuk, 2011). This aligns with Berry’s (1997) earlier findings where he noted that higher education in particular was a dependable factor in predicting positive adaptations with less acculturative stress.

There are multiple and often interconnected factors that can assist in successful academic transition for international students. Moores and Popadiuk (2011) investigated critical events that impacted on the transition of international students and concluded that these students relied on faculty support and the strong relationships developed with the staff as principal factors in managing a successful transition. Andrade (2005) also demonstrated that while international students in her study may not have rated themselves as having excellent study skills, they had successfully managed their transition by adopting a set of particular study strategies to help them overcome their academic weaknesses in the foreign learning environment.

Subject matter and language in which the students were schooled may influence the degree of success of international students’ academic studies. Bone and Reid (2013) found that international students from a range Asian backgrounds
performed as well as or better than domestic students in a first year biology class at an Australian university. These students, who were from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Sri Lanka, and were schooled in English, outperformed domestic students overall, while students who were schooled in their native languages from China and Korea were on par with domestic students’ scores (Bone & Reid, 2013).

According to the International University Australia’s Strategic Information and Analysis Unit [SIAU] (2016b) overall, international students’ progress rates and grade point averages [GPA] were marginally but consistently higher than those of domestic students between 2009 and 2013. Grade point averages for international students over the period ranged between 4.7 and 4.8 out of a possible 7 points, in contrast to those of domestic students’ 4.6 and 4.7 (SIAU, 2016b). However, the results are mixed when identifying the GPAs of individual Asian countries. In 2013, students from Taiwan and South Korea scored in the top five best performing countries [GPA 5.1], which is in sharp contrast with India [GPA 2.8, a failing average grade] and China, the Philippines and Asia other [GPA 4.2], making these four areas the worst performing regions (SIAU, 2016b). Taiwanese and South Korean students are schooled in their native languages and yet achieved considerable academic success with their studies using English as a second or other language. These results demonstrate a considerable variance in the academic success of students from Asia Major and Minor at the University.

2.8 TECHNOLOGY

With respect to international students’ transition experiences regarding communication, and how this is facilitated, the use of technology should be examined to assess its role in the acculturation process. As early as 2005, international students were using the internet and related technologies to facilitate communications with friends and family in their country of origin, (Cemalcilar, Falbo, & Stapleton, 2005) with positive outcomes in sustaining familial ties while being distanced in different counties. Wang and Hannes (2014), in their more recent research of Asian exchange students transitioning within a Belgian university first semester, noted that their students sustained intense contacts through a range of social networks in their home countries and used the internet as a source of home-based local news and events.
With the growth of communications technologies, present day sojourners are seen to be utilising this even more so with the surge in social media and Information Communication Technologies-related sites where students may network with like-minded peers (Ramachandran, 2011). For example, Social Networking Sites were highly regarded and utilised by Chinese students in their adaptation to academic study and life in general while transitioning to their new studies at a New Zealand university. These students used Facebook, Skykiwi and RenRen [Facebook-type social mediums] for both social chat and academic dissemination of information regarding the new academic protocols they were facing in their studies (Cao & Zhang, 2012).

International students are using a range of technologies to establish and maintain self-supporting networks which enable them to navigate the transition process scholastically and socially. However, the application of these technologies can have both positive and negative implications on the acculturation process, depending on how this is managed by the individual. Having immediate electronic access to friends and family in the student’s home country aids the perception of connection to home culture, news and political happenings, thus minimising the sense of distance and disconnection with culturally and socially significant events (Kormos, Csizér, & Iwaniec, 2014; Wu & Hammond, 2011). This in itself may be enough to maintain the motivation to study (Wu & Hammond, 2011), but on the other hand, because these communications are in the first language of their mother country, this may mean less exposure to and practice of the second language [usually English] required for their studies according to Kormos, Csizér and Iwaniec (2014). In a study of 70 international students, of which more than 70 percent were of Asia Major and Minor extraction, Kormos, Csizér and Iwaniec (2014) concluded that “…the interviewees rarely used social networking sites in the medium of English and did not write emails in English frequently either” (p. 161). In this aspect then, international students are deriving the necessary social and emotional support from family and friends in their native languages, but this is at the expense of them further developing their English language skills which are required of them to transition in the host country.

The use of Social Networking Sites in the students’ native language does not engender cross cultural communication between host and international students. Cao
and Zhang (2012) identified clear parallels between the ways in which students communicate face to face and in online environments. These researchers found that the Chinese students in their New Zealand study maintained close ties with existing Chinese contacts by way of face to face exchanges and through social media, and tended not to generate any new interactions with domestic students in either communication medium. How Information Communication Technologies affect the transition experience and overall process of acculturation therefore, depends upon the students maintaining an appropriate balance of communication in their first language with family and friends at home, without this negatively impacting on their second language development and face to face communication opportunities with host nationals.

The use of Information Communication Technologies is also being progressively incorporated into university course modules by way of blended learning teaching techniques, providing flexible delivery of course content. McCarthy’s 2008-2009 Australian study of first year architectural course students used Facebook as medium to upload assignments for peer review, discussion and critique. McCarthy (2010) found that both international and domestic students enjoyed being able to engage in an online forum and felt more comfortable in communicating with each other online than in a face to face classroom environment. Domestic students acknowledged the positive online interactions with foreign students and appreciated their differing cultural perspectives on the subject matter, while foreign students, having more time to consider and process their responses before uploading, felt more confident in expressing their views (McCarthy, 2010).

As instruments in the process of acculturation for transitioning international students, Information Communications Technologies play a significant role in maintaining contacts in students’ home countries, with peer international students and within the classroom environment as a study tool. While there are many positive attributes of their usage, there are some drawbacks with respect to the opportunity costs of communication in the language of the host country.
3. Research design

The research question is:

*How do Asian students manage their first semester transitioning phase at a small regional university?*

To answer the research question, the participants in this study were asked to submit evidence of their transitional experiences of their first university semester using Photovoice, a combined photographic and text-based method of gathering data. The methodology selected is visual narrative enquiry, using the voices of multiple participants belonging to a common cohort, that being of international students from Asia Major and Minor, studying at a regional university in Australia. The study aims to unearth the lived experiences of the participants with respect to their transition to a new cultural, social and academic environment. It is anticipated that the results could be used to inform University policy, particularly relating to aspects of internationalisation.

The rationale for selecting and implementing the methodology of visual narrative enquiry is explained in Section 3.1, and this is followed by an overview of the study’s participants in Section 3.2. The research instruments, their design and reasons for selection are described in Section 3.3, followed by an explanation of the procedure involved in this research in Section 3.4. Section 3.5 describes the method of data analysis, and in Section 3.6, limitations are acknowledged and ethical concerns relating to the study are explained.

3.1 METHODOLOGY

Within the field of education, Mitchell (2008) encourages research teachers to expose students to a multiplicity of research approaches so that critical evaluation of conventional and more innovative methodologies may occur. According to Mitchell
(2008), there is an emergent trend within a growing body of researchers to incorporate visual methodologies into their qualitative research design. Following Mitchell’s observations, this research uses visual narrative inquiry, a derivative of narrative inquiry, as a methodology. Narrative inquiry covers a range of variants, however, the fundamental feature common to this methodology and its variants is that it is the study of experiences of the world articulated from perspective of the participants themselves through some form of account or description (Cresswell, Hanson, Plano-Clark, & Morales, 2007; Holley & Colyar, 2012). It is suitable as a methodology to explore topics within social sciences and in particular education, as noted by Connelly and Clandinin (1990). As a variant of narrative inquiry, visual narrative inquiry , “…adds the layer of meaning so that photographs and visuals [as well as the narrative] become ways of living and telling one’s stories of experience” (Bach, 2008, p. 939). Narrative inquirers need to be receptive to addressing a wide range of data collection methods including: field notes, journal records, interviews, storytelling, letter writing and photographs (Clandinin, 2006). In this research project, the method of Photovoice, which employs both visual [photographic] and written data collection, has been chosen. A more detailed description of this method and rationale in support of its selection is provided in Section 3.3.

Simply recounting experiences of an individual or group does not provide an analysis of the common underlying facets or the impacts that these events have on the participants. According to Holley and Colyar (2012) “…representing the variety of voices and stories requires careful and reflective decision-making” (p. 114) on the part of the researcher to ensure the interpretation is an accurate portrayal of the participants’ intentions. Thus, the narrative in its final form becomes a synthesis of the participants’ original contributions depicted through the lens of the researcher’s analysis. The ethical issues of this analysis and interpretation are further discussed in Section 3.6.

A qualitative data analysis approach has been identified an appropriate method given the context of the study within higher education and the experiential nature of the data gathered. King, Perez and Shim (2013) and Kinginger (2008) advocate the use of qualitative analysis for studies investigating intercultural perspectives of participants, as is this study of students’ transitional experiences within a new cultural context in an Australian university. Kinzie (2013) studied the variety of research
methods used in the first-year experience and students in transition over a 25-year period and concluded that there has been a strong trend towards research using qualitative analysis in these fields, citing a 300 percent increase in the number of published qualitative studies over the period. Kinzie (2013) promotes the use of qualitative analysis to “…examine the needs and experiences of distinctive populations – defined by race, ethnicity or socio-economic factors, from a perspective that explicitly recognises their authenticity and value” (p. 50). This ethnicity as described by Kinzie is reflected in the participant group of this study, being students from Asia Major and Minor.

3.2 PARTICIPANTS

The sampling method used in this study was purposive. The participants were recruited at the International Student Orientation Day event held in the week prior to the start of Semester 2, 2015. Of the 27 students who signed up at the orientation day event, nine actively participated in the study over the course of Semester 2, 2015. There were six females and three males. The country of origin breakdown was: Philippines – five, Japan – one, Hong Kong – one, Taiwan – one and Nepal – one. All participants except for one were studying for a Bachelor of Nursing Science undergraduate degree. The remaining student was on a Study Abroad non-award program.

The study location was a regional university in Australia. This university is defined as a small regional university with a total number of 10,447 students, and an international cohort of 1,110 students in the first semester of 2015 (Strategic Information and Analysis Unit [SIAU], 2015). Of the international student cohort, three of the top five source countries were located in Asia Major and Minor, those being India, Nepal and China (SIAU, 2015).

3.3 INSTRUMENTS

This study used a qualitative data collection method of Photovoice. This method, developed in 1992 by Wang and Burris (Photovoice Worldwide, 2015), requires the participant to capture a photographic image on a theme or issue that they wish to present, and to write an accompanying text to contextualise the photograph, the exact format of which differs according to the specifics of the research design.
Photovoice aligns well with epistemology of constructivism by allowing participants to portray their learning by constructing and portraying visually and textually, meaning of their experiences (Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi, & Pula, 2009). As a tool for conveying information about international students’ transition experiences, Photovoice is a suitable data collection instrument for this study. According to Keegan (2008), “photographs are a primary source of data that offers the potential to gain insights that are not accessible through interview methods” (p. 620), as participants are able to provide personal interpretations and highlight specific aspects of importance to them as an individual. One of the advantages of using Photovoice according to its founders Wang and Burris (1997), is that it empowers the community to become advocates on issues of concern, allowing their voice to reach and influence policymakers. Goodhart et al. (2006) relate this to a higher education context by stating that, “…it provides a process and resources for students to amplify their voices in order to influence and gain power to shape university policies” (p. 55). This is of particular importance, as one of the projected outcomes of this study is to provide a platform for change within University policies concerning international students.

Responding to questions developed by researchers in other types of qualitative data collection methods such as interviews and questionnaires, for example, limits the scope of the participant’s response. Photovoice, in contrast, places discretionary power in the hands of the participants to bring to the table for discussion and analysis, issues which they personally view as important, providing a level of freedom and flexibility that other data collection methods do not offer to the same degree (Graziano & Litton, 2007; Kinzie, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). This is supported by Mathison (2009) who explains that descriptions of participant-generated images such as Photovoice, allow the respondent to communicate meaning and intent from their own perspective without being constrained by the researcher’s perceptions. Similarly, Wang and Burris (1997) emphasise the fact that Photovoice enables participants to put forward views on what they think is important, not what the researcher perceives as important, thus validating the authenticity of the data source.
There are other advantages of using Photovoice in research where participants ostensibly use English as a second or other language. Photovoice does not require participants to be fully fluent in English (Emme, 2008; Hergenrather, Rhodes, Cowan, Bardhoshi, & Pula, 2009), as the text accompanying the photographic image may be explained sufficiently at phrase or even word level. From the researcher’s anecdotal experience in working with students whose first language is not English, scenarios where participants may feel under stress as a result of articulating their thoughts in English is to be avoided, as they may not have sufficient vocabulary or grammatical knowledge to accurately convey their true viewpoints or perceptions on issues under question. As a result, the data may not be an accurate reflection of their views and feelings. It is possible for the participants to communicate quite clearly using Photovoice without necessarily being highly proficient in English. It was anticipated that a brief and spontaneous commentary about the photograph would provide a more accurate representation of participants’ feelings than text that had been laboured over in order to achieve native-like ‘perfect’ English for presentation purposes. This issue was stressed in the initial stages of instruction on using Photovoice with participants being advised not to be overly concerned about their grammar, spelling and punctuation in their submissions.

Transitional experiences often impact significantly on the individual’s psychological wellbeing, with various social, cultural and academic stressors building up during the acculturation process (Berry, 1997; Lee, Koeske, & Sales, 2004; Wei et al., 2007). These experiences may not always be easy to articulate within the framework of interviews or written responses in surveys, especially for participants whose first language is not English. The choice of Photovoice as an instrument to unpack these deeper, psychological experiences is acknowledged by Wang and Hannes (2014) who used this method of data collection in investigating the transition experiences of Asian students in a Flemish, higher education setting. “Photovoice is known for its ability to open up the black box of ‘what we cannot or dare not speak about’….and may help reveal deeper and hidden emotions and feelings which are difficult to be captured by words only” (Wang & Hannes, 2014, p. 70).

In some qualitative research methods, it is possible that participants will provide answers to the researcher’s questions based on what they think the researchers
wish to hear, rather than provide answers that are a true reflection of their real views. While it cannot be guaranteed that participants’ responses in any data collection method will be open, complete and truthful, there is no perceived benefit for the participants to falsify information in Photovoice, as they are simply providing a commentary of their own photograph rather than responding to a set of preselected questions, as is the case with data collection methods such as interviews or questionnaires.

There are some restrictions and drawbacks in using Photovoice as a data collection instrument. Goodhart et al., (2006) mention the ethical issues relating to capturing other people’s images, and the use of these images without express consent in the public domain where the Photovoice submissions form part of a public forum or exhibition of participants’ work. This issue was addressed with the participants of this study, as explained in Section 3.6, with a discussion of other issues of using Photovoice as a data collection method.

3.4 PROCEDURE

Participants were recruited through a presentation at the International Student Orientation Day, held the week prior to the commencement of Semester 2 of the University’s year in 2015. The presentation introduced the researcher and his background in international education within Asian and Australian contexts, the focus and aims of the research project and the process of data collection using Photovoice. After a question and answer session, the students identified from Asia Major and Minor countries were invited to participate in the study by providing names and email contact information. At that time, Consent to Participate in Research forms [Appendix A] and Research Project Information Sheets [Appendix B] were issued to 27 participants, outlining the terms under which their participation was required, as governed by the University’s ethics body. In the following week, participants were emailed a brief recapitulation of how the data collection would be established using Photovoice, a template to submit their Photovoice data [Appendix C], and three Photovoice exemplars [Appendix D] to present a guide as to the kind of information required and how it was to be formatted.
Using a camera or other digital device capable of taking a photograph, participants were asked to capture an image that they determined had an impact on their transition at the University. The three exemplars [Appendix D] provided a range of topics to indicate the focus that participants may wish to take, and included: aspects of the environment [a local beach], academic pursuits [a student studying in the University library] and a social gathering of students [an international food party]. Participants were reminded that these exemplars were guidelines only and they were not limited to, nor required to include these themes in their own submissions. Participants were assured that they had full choice of subject matter, and that the researcher was interested in any experience that they believed had a positive or negative impact on their transition.

The template was designed to minimise the time and effort it would take for participants to complete, and to ensure uniformity in the data collection process. Participants were asked to create a text to contextualise various aspects of the photograph, based on a series of prompts using the acronym PH.O.T.O:

PH – Describe your Photograph.
O – Why did you take a photograph Of this?
T – Tell us about how this helped you transition?
O – How are you feeling about your transition right now?

The PH.O.T.O acronym was a guide to what information was required, however, students were free to respond as they wished against each prompt. There was also an additional comments area provided to capture any information that the participants felt did not fit against the PH.O.T.O acronym. Once complete, the template was emailed to the researcher where it was kept on a password-secured computer.

The participating students were sent reminder emails according to a programmed schedule of blackout dates set around examination periods as prescribed by the Statistical Information Analysis Unit of the University. On average, students were reminded approximately once every ten days, and on each occasion they were provided with a blank template attachment for their next submission. A thank you email was
sent to each participant upon receipt of their Photovoice submission to acknowledge receipt. At the end of the data collection period, a final email was sent to all participants, thanking them for their input over the term of the data collection phase and advising them when a summary of the results and findings would be published.

3.5 ANALYSIS

Photovoice data was gathered between weeks two and thirteen of the semester via email and uploaded to NVivo 10 Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software. This software uses a relational database enabling the organisation, evaluation, interpretation and explanation of unstructured or semi-structured qualitative data, including image and text.

One advantage of using NVivo for data processing and analysis is the audit trail that is inbuilt into the system. Smyth (2008) stresses the value of the transparency of this software package, “…because NVivo makes it easier for researchers to demonstrate robustness in their practice by assisting the management of data and by establishing trustworthiness, the research process becomes more transparent and therefore is open to closer scrutiny” (p. 564). This study uses thematic analysis, the aim of which is to shape some form of theory about the relationships within the data. Smyth (2008) supports NVivo as an instrument to conduct thematic analysis, explaining that it uses a system of coding that supports the creation of relationships between various elements in the data. According to Ayres (2008), “…thematic analysis is primarily a descriptive strategy that facilitates the search for patterns of experience within a qualitative data set; the product of a thematic analysis is a description of those patterns and the overarching design that unites them” (p. 867). A second reason why NVivo was selected is its ability to allow the researcher to uncover these themes from the data using a variety of tools within the software, thus allowing the same set of data to be analysed from a number of differing perspectives.

Once the Photovoice submissions were imported into NVivo, the first tier of analysis was conducted. As broad themes emerged, nodes were created and data was assigned for further analysis. At this stage, the following themes emerged: friends, environment, academic issues, family, language and feelings. Further analysis using various NVivo tools allowed for the grouping of the text and the image within each
theme and to establish relationships within the data. Selective word frequency searches were conducted to find the terms most often used by the participants and word trees helped to identify and contextualise the meanings these words. It was established that many of the first tier searches paralleled like themes in the literature, however, there were also themes which were not immediately apparent and so a second tier search was conducted, probing for specific elements relating to gender, discrimination, psychological impacts and use of technology, for example. The chronological aspect of analysis was also taken into account by analysing the submissions as the participants progressed through the semester to ascertain if there were any themes that were borne out over time. Photographs were examined both within relation to the accompanying PH.O.T.O text descriptions, but also independently to establish emerging visual themes.

Finally, conclusions were drawn in relation to the study’s aim of establishing the key factors impacting on how Asian international students’ manage their transition in their first semester of study at the University. How the University’s policies and support networks supported transitioning students was also reviewed in light of the findings.

3.6 ETHICS AND LIMITATIONS

Ethics approval (S14671) [Appendix E] was obtained from the University’s ethics committee. A number of low risk ethical issues were identified, assessed and approved. Owing to the photographic nature of the Photovoice data submissions, the Consent to Participate in Research form [Appendix A] contained a clause giving consent to the researcher to use material containing photographic material of the participants. Participants were advised not to submit photographs of other people without first obtaining their permission to do so, and were reminded of this on each Photovoice template that was issued. To preserve their anonymity, participants were informed that all data would be de-identified in the publication of the research. In order to maintain confidentiality and security, all data and associated documentation was stored on a password secured computer located in the researcher’s office at the University.
It was recognised that participants may have felt some level of anxiety or feelings of loneliness or isolation from their home country and contacts when reflecting and commenting on some aspects of their photographs. Participants were provided with the contact details of free counselling services available at the University in the event they felt lonely, anxious or distressed in any way after reflecting and commenting on their Photovoice submissions.

Participants were informed that the researcher was not an instructor on any of their courses, and as such, the content of their submissions could not impact on their grades. This was intended to address the risk of participants feeling compelled into participating because of the perceived unequal relationship between the researcher and themselves. Participants were also informed that there was no obligation to participate in the research and that they could withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Punch (2009) notes the significance that small-scale qualitative research projects have had in the field of education since the 1980s and that, “…research projects for masters or doctoral degrees need to be realistic in size and scope, especially with respect to sample size” (p. 42). O’Leary (2014) also advocates that the strategies used to analyse qualitative data analysis do not necessarily require large numbers, noting that the specific attributes of the data to be collected will inform the sample size. The nine participants in this study may not be representative of a larger population, but this is not the goal of the study. The sample is defined as random purposive, and in line with O’Leary’s (2014) position, is based on a population capturing the definitive characteristics with a clearly defined profile. The researcher is confident that the results will contribute to the body of knowledge within the literature exploring the transitional experiences of Asian international students within the context of higher education in Australia.

Sinclair Bell (2002) in her commentary on using narrative inquiry, raises the ethical issue of researchers portraying other people’s lived experiences through their own personal lens of interpretation, and the potential impact this has on presenting the participants’ experiences in their unalloyed form. There will always be the limitation of the researcher’s perspective rendering the narrative to a degree, but good practice
places demands on the researcher to be vigilant of this and minimise any personal influence as far as possible.
4. Results and analysis

An analysis of the results of this research project is divided into nine sections. The results of this study revealed relatively smooth transition experiences in all aspects for the participants, and these are summarised in the section on Transition, [Section 4.1]. Section 4.2, Academic Performance, shows that the participants in this study had few direct stressors relating directly to academic issues. Unique to this study’s findings were the substantial and positive impacts the environment had on the participants’ transitions. This is discussed in Section 4.3, Environmental Impacts. Corroborating much of the reviewed literature and examined in Section 4.4, Family Influences, are the positive influences of family on international student transitions. Section 4.5, Social Support, evidences the high level of academic and social support participants derived from same-nationality and international student networks, ostensibly at the expense of bicultural integration with the host Australian student cohort. The impact of English language proficiency on transition is discussed in Section 4.6, Language Issues. In contrast to most of the literature reviewed on the transition experiences of Asian students, English competency was minimally rated as an acculturative stressor, and only for a minority of participants. A common theme underpinning the Photovoice submissions, and especially at peak assessment periods of the semester, was the work, life and study balance which is discussed in Section 4.7. An analysis of the participants’ transitions over time is analysed in Section 4.8 Chronological Analysis. This analysis showed a buoyant initial transitioning phase followed by a period of adjustment to the pressures of balancing various aspects of the participants’ lives. In the latter weeks of the semester, there was a further period of fine-tuning and final acculturation, with participants now accustomed to managing the multifaceted aspects of their new environment, drawing on the help and support of their monocultural and multicultural student networks to do so. Section 4.9, Gender Analysis, revealed that the participants in this study did not evidence any discernible differences in how males and females approached their transitions.
As identified in the literature review, Berry (1997) categorised four main acculturation strategies adopted by sojourners to a new environment: assimilation, separation, integration and marginalisation, all of which may be measured on a continuum. It is very clear from this study that the large Filipino cohort established and maintained strong ties with each other both socially and academically, identifying with Berry’s separatist strategy of maintaining their traditional culture within the host environment. However, in other aspects, for example, environmentally, they fully embraced the rich diversity of what the environment offered and frequently commented on the positive impact this had on their transition. This behaviour is characterised by Berry’s integration strategy. Thus, it would appear the Filipinos selectively chose acculturation strategies according to the context in which they were positioned i.e., a continuum, rather than one overarching strategy.

In contrast, the students from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Japan, who established friendships with other international students and Australian housemates, could be seen to be adopting a more defined integrative strategy than the Filipinos. These variations of acculturative strategies depending on context aligns with what Wang and Hannes (2014) established from their study of Asian students in Belgium. These researchers ascertained that the subjects in their study factored in the effort required to adapt or adopt a particular strategy with the associated value of the outcomes (Wang & Hannes, 2014). In the case of the Filipino cohort in this Australian study, it would appear that the reason they developed such close social and academic bonds within the same nationality cohort was a result of a chance time and place occurrence based on their class schedules, rather than a calculated decision to not integrate with host national students. As with the students in Wang and Hannes’ research, it would appear that it was easier to take advantage of an almost ready-made support network than establish networks with other students.

There was no photographic evidence or Photovoice comments that alluded to transition experiences that were not able to be managed either personally or with the help and support of the established social networks of mostly co-national and in a few...
select cases, other international students, as evidenced by the following participant comments:

- *It feels easy to cope with transition because I’ve met people from my home country. Somehow I forget about loneliness and homesickness.*
- *Having new friends makes my transition easier. Thus I feel safe and comfortable. Happy. Very happy.*
- *It has been amazing knowing that there’s not just me or two of us but about 20 Filipino students here at IUA and studying in the same program as I do. It just feels like home to me.*
- *Transition phase is stable – I’m enjoying my stay in Australia, enjoying everything: school, meeting new people, hanging out with friends, celebrating birthdays and all. Life is good!*
- *[The transition] is completely OK and positive with the changes around me.*
- *Having newfound friends makes my transition easier.*
- *I’m feeling happy and confidence. I’m feeling welcomed to this country.*
As a broad text-based overview of the participants’ transitioning experiences, an NVivo analysis of the fifty most frequently appearing words in the participants’ Photovoice comments demonstrated the positive perspective taken of the events surrounding, and their evolution within their new environment [Figure 1]. There were no words in this list that indicated any form of negativity which further indicates the optimistic approach these participants took in navigating their transition.

![Word Cloud](image)

*Figure 1. The fifty most common words in participants’ Photovoice submissions.*

*Friends* was the most frequently used word, followed by *feel* and *IUA* [the International University of Australia]. *Studying, good, right, happy* and *influenced* were also frequently used by students in describing their visual representations of their Photovoice submissions. The strong connection with friends, IUA, studying and positive adjectives would indicate that this cohort had a relatively smooth transition in the first semester of their studies, both socially and academically. There were no specific comments from participants relating to cultural adjustment, but this may be explained because of the relative lack of integration with domestic students. In
summary, it would appear that overall, the participants in this study navigated rather smooth transitions in most aspects of their acculturation.

4.2 ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

The literature on the academic challenges posed for transitioning international students points to a number of issues including: language proficiency, understanding new assessment protocols with respect to research, referencing and plagiarism, and classroom performance and etiquette, all of which can lead to high levels of academic-related stress if not managed (Campbell & Li, 2008; Quan, Smailes, & Fraser, 2013; Smith & Khawaja, 2011; Wu & Hammond, 2011). For the participants in this research however, although challenging from a workload perspective at times, the transition to academic studies within an English context was not identified by the majority of participants as an insurmountable stressor. Most of the students identified that the close support networks they had developed in the early stage of the semester assisted them in overcoming these academic challenges, so even though there was associated stress and anxiety at times over their studies, all students appeared to manage this well.

Overall, the Filipino students acknowledged that although on occasion they felt stressed about their workload, they seemed to know they would cope due to the support mechanisms of the monocultural [same-nationality] study group they had established. About 20 Filipino students had an Anatomy and Physiology class on the same day, and all of them used that day as both a social and a group study opportunity, providing academic and social support. One student succinctly summarised her feelings about the value of support derived from this group interaction:

*Without them I would be lost.*

The general consensus was that the students appreciated the security that being part of the group brought them with respect to coping within the new academic environment and University systems.

In the early parts of the semester, students were seen to be coping with the academic demands reasonably well with the following comments:
I have been a surprisingly diligent student since Week 1. . . . doing my homework in advance and helping other students.

Everything has been going well, especially with my studies. . . . so far, I’m able to cope.

In some periods when multiple assessments were usually due, there was evidence of heightened stress levels, however, the students felt confident that support from the group would get them through this period:

Week 6 is a good week although there are looming requirements ahead of us, I still feel that I won’t be alone in doing the assessments.

I’m getting anxious about the upcoming requirements, but I’m adjusting well in school, not too nervous about entering university. I’m actually looking forward to every Monday when I get to see my friends again.

Some students commented on the social aspects of the Filipino group in helping them to manage the stress factors of their academic workload:

Here is my newfound friends and we’re having a chill out session. . . . we took this photo coz we need to destress from heaps of assessments.

We went to Brisbane [to socialise with other Filipino friends] for a much needed rest and relaxation from academics.

Only one Filipino student mentioned the help and support of her Australian housemate:

My housemate helps me a lot with my study. . . . I’m so glad we get along with each other and become good friends.
Non-Filipino students tended to establish bicultural or multicultural friendships more so than the Filipinos, possibly because there were not significant numbers of same nationality students in these students’ classes, unlike the Filipino cohort.

Two students posted visual evidence of their studies as the theme of their Photovoice submissions. Both of these were of nursing text books positioned in front of computer screens. The remaining photographic submissions relating to the academic nature of the students’ transitions were all of group photos with other international student friends, with text comments about the help and support of the group in coping with their academic assessment workload in general. This would indicate that overall, academic issues relating to the students’ transitions were not directly related to the specific content of the course subject matter, but more general and broader in their nature, and effectively managed due to the social support networks established.

The Nepalese student commented on the significant difference in study approaches between the two cultures, noting that students in Nepal did not have to conduct background research to complete assignments. This example of a difference in learning strategy is in line with the findings of Quan, Smailes and Fraser (2013) who noted that students from Asian backgrounds in particular, coming from significantly different educational tenets, needed to make substantial adjustments to their study approaches in their new academic environments. Though challenged academically, this student acknowledged the help and support from academic staff:

*The lecturers and tutors have helped me in all possible ways to fill the transition gap.*

This comment supports Moores and Popadiuk’s (2011) research findings where they investigated critical events impacting on the transition experiences of sojourning international students, and found that the strong relationships forged between academic staff and students were identified as principle factors in successful transition to the new academic environment.
Except for the Nepalese student’s comment about not being used to the high level of background research required for each course, within the Photovoice submissions relating to academic studies, no other students commented on issues about assessment protocols, classroom interactions with other students and teaching staff, or academic requirements in general being vastly different from what they were used to. It was the workload itself, rather than the course content specifics that most participants mentioned, so it would appear that they were coping with their studies and expected to pass their courses. This is in contrast to the overall performance of Filipino students at the University in 2013, where this cohort was in the one of the poorest performing international groups at the International University of Australia, according to grade point average scores (Strategic Information and Analysis Unit, 2016b).

Section 4.8 Chronological Analysis, provides an further account of the participants’ academic transition experiences as they moved sequentially through the weeks of the semester.

4.3 ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACTS

From the literature reviewed, there is little mention of the physical environment impacting on students’ transitions. Smith and Khawaja (2011) noted in general terms that all international students experience some difficulties in adjusting to their new environments. Comments from international students in Mazzarol and Soutar’s (2002) study indicated that the attractiveness of the local environment could be an influencing factor in the choice of university. Moores and Popadiuk (2011) documented a slightly more direct impact, identifying that one of the transition coping strategies adopted by the international students in their study was to engage in extracurricular activities such as exploring the local environment. The results of this study evidenced a unique finding which contributes to the body of knowledge on this particular aspect of transition experience. For the participants in this research project, environmental factors had a direct and positive impact on transition to their new living and study environment.

The environment was a prominent feature for a number of students in this study with photographs of the area’s lakes, parks, beaches, clouds and sunsets, comprising approximately 18.5 percent of total Photovoice submissions [Appendix F]. Almost all
the participants’ comments on the environmental themes were positively associated with their transition experiences. These students were from Taiwan, Hong Kong and Japan, and all observed how uniquely different and beautiful the environment was compared to their home cities. The student from Hong Kong noted:

In Hong Kong we don’t usually have such blue sky and nice weather, so it was an enjoyable moment for me, doing yoga with the sunshine under this beautiful sky and amazing country. It also helps me have more energy to keep going on my study.

The Taiwanese student regularly sent these photographs and short video clips back to her family to show them the contrast between her present surroundings compared with their city life in Taiwan:

Wanted to show my family how beautiful it was to be in between the sunshine and the storm. It’s something I have not experienced before. [Appendix F]

I took a photo of this because I would like to show it to my family and friends. This activity [kite surfing] is not something you see every day, especially when you live in a city. My family all live a city life so it would be nice to share with them what we’re having here! [Appendix F]

The weather was the focus of the only negative comment from one student being that when it rained, it made commuting between the University and her residence more difficult, and this student believed it had an effect on her emotionally:

I have realized that my mood is quite dependent on the weather. I felt pretty down yesterday and this morning because of the rain, and now that the sun is up, I’ve started to feel emotionally happy again.

The Japanese student travelled to various scenic places and recreational areas with other international students and remarked that he felt better able to concentrate on his studies after socialising with his new friends who were other international students of European extraction:
To go somewhere with friends who are from other countries makes me refresh.

A Filipino student directly linked the environment to his positive transition experience in week 3 of the semester stating:

*I am still adjusting to the culture, but seeing this nature’s work of art, it gives me all the reason to love the place even more.*

Mazzarol and Soutar (2002) studied the push-pull factors influencing international students’ choice of destination to study. The physical nature of the host environment was considered important by students from Taiwan, India, China and Indonesia, thus prompting the authors to suggest that this was a matter for higher education service providers to be aware of when developing their marketing and promotional materials (Mazzarol & Soutar, 2002). In line with this comment, and although now changed, one of the University’s promotional themes has been *The best of both worlds*, indicating opportunities for students to capitalise on the unique aspects that the environment has to offer, as well the academic cachet of a five-star teaching university.

In summary, it would appear that, that the University’s marketing campaign of the institution’s geographic location and associated environmental features [The best of both worlds], reflects the participants’ views in that this aspect had a positive impact on the students’ transitional experiences. The International Student Barometer Report for 2015 which points to the success of the marketing campaigns to attract international students to Australia: “The findings of this survey also indicate that Australian marketing strategies to attract international students are working” (Department of Education and Training, 2015a, p. 4). Azmat et al. (2013) advocate for higher education institutions to pay detailed attention to their marketing strategies to ensure that the symbolic elements connected with the institution created through these campaigns, actually meet the product and service delivered to the international student body. This would indicate that the University is delivering on its marketing claims with both the participants in this study and the broader international student cohort rating the environment highly.
4.4 FAMILY INFLUENCES

Students’ communications regarding their families as an element of the transition process was considerable, with approximately a fifth of the participants mentioning their families in their submissions. This is in line with Mallinckrodt and Leong’s (1992) findings that maintaining close family contacts for sojourning students had a positive impact on their transition, resulting in lower levels of acculturative stress. Those students who had family members with them during their sojourn in Australia clearly found them to be of significant support in a number of practical, day to day aspects, as well as that of boosting morale. One student, whose husband had come to Australia with her, submitted a photograph of them walking together to the University, remarking on the positive aspects of having moral support while studying, and how this has favourably impacted on her transition:

*It is good to have your significant others with you when you are studying in a foreign country. You will never feel alone. Adaptation and transition surely become easier and will go on smoothly.*

Two students made direct references to missing family members and loved ones in their home countries, but not to the extent that it was negatively impacting on their transition. Mostly, the comments in Photovoice submissions referring to family were of a positive nature with one student in particular wishing to share images of the environment with her city-based family in the Philippines. This student referred to her family four times during the 13-week semester, noting that sending photographs was more valuable than sending typed text alone, as the imagery was more impactful and profound. Although appearing to transition well from her overall comments, this student did express feelings about being alone even though she had made new friends:

*It’s challenging to be living alone in a different country without your family and loved ones. . . . it’d be a lot easier to have a family member or my significant other here to help me out with chores whenever I’m busy with uni or work.*

Another Filipino student in week 5 commented that although overall she was happy with her new environment, she did miss her family, including her daughter.
For the students in this research, keeping in contact with family members in their home countries appeared to be a regular occurrence throughout their transition, and their comments could be summarised as providing a certain level of stability by keeping in contact with their familial and cultural roots and providing an opportunity to share their new Australian experiences. This parallels the results of Wang and Hannes’ (2014) study which highlighted the importance of maintaining family contacts in helping international students maintain a sense of belonging in the new host culture.

There was no evidence from the participants in this study that they were under pressure from family to scholastically perform to a high level. This is contrary to what other researchers have established from their studies of international students from Asian, and typically Confucian backgrounds (Bankston & Zhou, 2002; Bodycott, 2011; Guns, Richardson, & Watt, 2012). However, this may be due to the small percentage of students from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong in this study.

4.5 SOCIAL SUPPORT

A substantial amount of Photovoice submissions [63%] involved the participants’ friends, indicating the strong influence this peer network played in the transition experiences of the participants. The larger Filipino cohort often submitted photographs of themselves in groups of between and five sixteen students taken of them socialising on the University campus or sharing food at restaurants or in their homes. The explanations relating to the images revealed that this monocultural network of friends was the single most important factor impacting on positive transition experiences in terms of social support and academic collaboration as evidenced by the following range of comments:

Social support:

- It was such a relief finding fellow Filipino students at IUA. It helped ease the homesickness…
- This has boosted my confidence in dealing with things because I know I have friends who I can trust.
- When I came here and I met them, I was so happy to be able to talk to my fellow Filipinos and share our food.
- Our lunchtime every Monday has become like a ritual for us. Whether we are complete or not, we just love taking pictures and being together.
- We took this photo coz we need to destress from heaps of assessments.

**Academic collaboration:**

- The group has helped me a lot by reminding each other of due quizzes and other important things, and we have done group studies so we are able to cope with how things work around the class and around university.
- This photo was taken because of our agreement to have a weekly group photo to document our personal growth and academic development while studying at the university.
- It is not just adjusting to school life that my friends have helped me... But having them here at IUA has helped me develop socially too.

This finding supports those of a number of other researchers (Gómez, Urzúa, & Glass, 2014; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Nesdale & Todd 1993; Sawir, 2013, Wu & Hammond, 2011) who also established that international students tended to develop strong networks of same nationality peers rather than integrate with host nationals. Clearly, the Filipino students in this study derived considerable social and academic support from each other. This parallels the findings in Wu and Hammond’s (2011) study of East-Asian students, with the authors commenting, “They felt they had academic and emotional support from other international students so did not feel compelled to mix with local students” (p. 431). One of the reasons for this could be explained by Volet and Ang (1998) when they introduce the term *cultural-emotional connectedness* to describe the sense of social comfort that same nationality students have when interacting with each other, because of their shared heritages and similarity of cultural backgrounds. They do not have to negotiate a new communication environment with the host nationals which would involve interpreting and understanding culturally different communication norms. Gu (2011) concluded that the proliferation of monocultural and multicultural networks, seemingly at the expense
of bicultural networks involving host students, is not necessarily a negative outcome if the end result is a successful transition to the new environment, as is the case with the participants in this study. From the University perspective however, the desired and intentional attempts to integrate domestic and international students, according to its internationalisation polices, appears not to be effective within this context. More formally structured efforts on the part of the higher education service providers are required to achieve cross-cultural student integration, for as Volet and Ang (1998) observe, “Spontaneous inter-cultural contacts are likely to be few and far between if students are left to make their own choices” (p. 17).

Only a small number of non-Filipino students made reference to other international student friendships that they had made, however, the influence of these multicultural friendships was positive for those few students. The Japanese student had made friends with Norwegian and German students also studying at the University and frequently travelled with them to local scenic and recreational areas; beaches, forest parks and wildlife sanctuaries. His comment indicated the positive effect these multicultural alliances had on his overall transition:

*I am always with them. . . . I feel very good so I can concentrate on my study after that.*

The student from Hong Kong was the only participant to comment on a friendship made with a host national, her Australian housemate, along with other Asian housemates:

*I felt happy around them because when I first came here, I didn’t have any friends. . . . I’m so glad we get along with each other and have become good friends.*

Only one student noted the lack of intercultural contact with other international students and Australian students as a result of the close-knit monocultural network that had developed between the Filipino students:
...but always being together didn’t give me chances to be friends with other international students or Aussie students. Other students might say we are not friendly or are too involved with our own little group because we are always together.

In 2014, 21 percent of international undergraduate students at the International University of Australia cited *making friends from this country* as the third most important influencing factor in choosing to study at the University (Strategic Information and Analysis and Unit, 2016a). However, the reality mirrors Wu and Hammond’s (2011) observation that for many international students, the adjustment process is not one of that to the host culture, evidencing integration with host national students and the development of friendships with this cohort, but an adjustment to an international student culture [international students integrating with other international students] within a foreign context; in this case, an Australian university.

There are differing perspectives in the literature on the perceived value of the composition of social support networks with respect to their cultural profile. Wang et al. (2012), in a three-semester study of 507 Chinese students transitioning to a university in the United States of America, found that the group of students who evidenced the most successful transitions in terms of least acculturative stress, were the ones who developed solid bicultural networks with host American students. In contrast to Wang et al., this study showed an exact opposite network configuration. The participants had minimal bicultural student interaction with host students, low-to medium levels of multicultural interaction with international students and high levels of monocultural interaction with same nationality students. With the exception of one participant who had generated bicultural friendships, all other participants consistently noted the strong level of support from their non-Australian peers in contributing to a positive transition process. The participants in this study did not elucidate on why they did not integrate with the local Australian student cohort but perhaps as Wu and Hammond (2011) reported in their study of East-Asian students, the participants were satisfied with the level of support they were receiving from their international peer networks and had no reason to go beyond these by developing bicultural contacts with local students.
4.6 LANGUAGE ISSUES

Much of the literature on transitional experiences of international students points to the conception that proficiency in the host country language is the most prominent factor in successful adaptation (Campbell & Li, 2008; Gómez, Urzúa, & Glass, 2014; Kang, 2006; Woods et al, 2013). The results of this study showed that English language proficiency did not appear to be a salient issue, either socially or academically, with any of the students. This may be attributed to the fact that the large contingent of Filipino students in this study were reasonably proficient in English having been schooled predominantly in English from their post primary education years in the Philippines. This is in line with Bone and Reid’s (2013) findings that even though English may not be the student’s first language, exposure to it from an early age will greatly enhance their ability to perform academically in an English-speaking educational environment.

One Filipino student remarked that it was good to be able to hear her native tongue being spoken by other Filipino students as this reduced the pressure of having to speak English all the time, and it also eased some feelings of homesickness. The Japanese student was pleased with his improved English ability due to the friendships made and close contact with non-Asian international students:

...whenever my Germany flatmates go to somewhere, they invite me . . . .my English skills has been improving, especially my speaking.

These observations are in line with the findings of Moores and Popadiuk’s (2008) study where they identified that the use of English in non-academic contexts established a sense of belonging and ease as a result of peer student interaction, all of which had positive ramifications on the transition process and especially with respect to their socio-cultural adaptation.

A third student mentioned there was a small degree of hesitation when communicating with other foreign students:
There’s still some hesitation especially when communicating with other foreign students, but I’ve somehow already managed to adjust to my new environment.

On a social level therefore, English ability was only minimally or in some cases not required at all, as participants in the study mainly socialised with co-nationals and presumably in their native tongue. This parallels what Kormos, Csizér and Iwaniec (2014) concluded from their study, that students derived a level of support from socialising in their native tongue that can only be gained from students from the same cultural background and with the ability to naturally empathise with each other.

Campbell and Li (2008) and Smith and Khawaja (2011) identified that a lack of English language skills led to difficulties in academic performance, citing reading and aural competence as two of the most impacted. These outcomes were also highlighted in the comments of the Nepalese student who, when referring to her use of English as a second language within an academic context, noted that she had to read and review texts more than once and listen to podcasts a number of times until she felt comfortable in understanding the material. However, in contrast, the remaining participants made no reference to language skills impacting on their academic performance, so it would appear that this was not an acculturative stressor for the majority of participants in this study.

4.7 WORK, LIFE AND STUDY BALANCE

In terms of the literature, the participants in this study did not evidence experiences of culture shock as defined when the required adjustments to the new culture become overwhelming. Even the culture bumps, introduced by Chen (2007), could not be identified through the participants’ Photovoice contributions as there was no direct evidence of cultural issues impacting negatively on their transition.

Transitional stressors were mainly identified as academic in nature, and these, together with managing the work, life and study balance featured most prominently in the participants’ submissions in relation to challenges they faced in adjusting to their new environment. One student made the following observation:
Since I am married, doing all the chores at home and helping my husband in his cleaning job on some days is making me so exhausted. I try to sit down and do my assessments every afternoon, but my mind just can’t focus well.

Another student’s submission also made reference to the work/study interface:

This week was an overwhelming week for me. . . . It is not easy to be in uni when you also have to have a job to survive.

A third student, also with work commitments commented:

Although I am extremely thankful to land a decent job, being at uni, having to work loses me time to explore the local area. Life is really all about balance.

The student from Hong Kong noted in week 8:

I was so stressful about everything here because I've just been here two months. . . . I really think that the work life balance is so important!!!

The Nepalese student’s photograph was of her nursing studies textbook, laptop, study notes, small child and baby, all on the one bed. She commented:

Clicked this photo yesterday while facing difficulties in completing my assignment which is due today. The baby sleeping is beside my 3 month old daughter.

In this aspect, what the participants experienced with respect to academic workload and stressors relating to managing the work, life and study balance are the same that any student at tertiary level faces at some stage during their studies whether they be an international student or a student studying in their own country. Thus, while these were identified by the participants as transitional markers in relation to their Australian experience, they are not unique to the acculturation process as these are similar for all students making the transition to higher level education.
The participants in Moores and Popadiuk’s (2011) study identified both positive and negative transition experiences as beneficial to their overall acculturation in their new environment and viewed this as a form of rite of passage. This is also borne out by comments largely from the Filipino cohort who identified and acknowledged the stressors they were experiencing, and understood that this was a phase of their transition that would pass in time. Their approach was that to endure was the best possible way of coping.

4.8 CHRONOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

An NVivo 10 analysis of the Photovoice submissions was conducted on the basis of chronology to ascertain if there were any trends appearing over the period of the first semester for the transitioning participants. Up to the beginning of week 5 of the semester, there was a mix of photographic themes predominantly around friends and the environment with only one submission about studying. The associated commentaries were very positive in their content with all participants evidencing supportive transition experiences with no negative aspects being revealed:

[Week 2] The transition stage is treating me well so far ;) no pressure felt at uni at all.

[Week 3] As of now, everything seems to be going well in uni and I’m looking forward to learning more and having more Nursing experience.

[Week 4] I think [I] can finally say that I’m well settled.

Weeks 5 and 6 evidenced a more stressful period for the participants, this aligning with the first set of assessments that would have been due in the semester. Comments alluded to the additional academic and work-life balance pressure the participants were experiencing. However, in almost all submissions, this was offset by comments relating to the strong supportive social networks that had been well established by this stage. As much as the participants were aware of and identified their academic stressors during this period, they were also cognisant of measures to help them cope.
This week [Week 5] was an overwhelming week for me because of assessments. Despite this week’s challenges, I’ve started getting used to the feeling of feeling overwhelmed and knowing it’ll pass.

This week [Week 6] was a busy, tiring week. . . . I felt overwhelmed but I just gotta remind myself to take one step at a time.

In the remaining weeks of the semester, the academic pressure was still evident, but the participants’ comments suggested that they were now treading a path they had experienced before and were mindful that they would cope. This was due to their social support networks, and further assisted to an extent by the environment which consistently received very positive reviews as a transitioning element.

In summary, there was a clear, buoyant beginning, a middle period of adjustment to the new environment and a final period in which it was acknowledged that it was somewhat of a labour to the end. At all times though, participants maintained an overall positive outlook on their transitioning experiences, mainly due to monocultural and multicultural student support networks established in the first weeks of the semester.

Both Berry (1997) and Ward (1996) identified the phase of the acculturation experience as important when analysing cross cultural adaptation, and in particular both authors postulated that the initial phases of the transition were the most stressful. Berry and Ward do not define exactly how long their initial phases are, but in the context of this study, where the semester is 13 weeks, this phase would be measured at the first three to four weeks. In contrast therefore, the high stress initial phase indicated by Berry and Ward was not evidenced in this study where the participants started their semester with an optimistic outlook and stated explicitly that they felt very good about their transitions.

4.9 GENDER ANALYSIS

Yue and Le (2013), in their study of coping strategies adopted by international students at an Australian university, found that there was a significant difference between the coping strategies adopted according to gender. Females tended to prefer
coping strategies which entailed taking a positive attitude towards transition obstacles, viewing them optimistically as a challenge, rather than seeing them as a negative (Yue & Le, 2013). A gender analysis of the Photovoice submissions in this study did not reveal any data that could be attributed to the different ways males and females coped with their first semester transitions. There was approximately the same number of photographic submissions relating to friends and the environment from both males and females, and an analysis of the commentaries showed that both genders experienced and responded to the same issues relating mainly to the work, study and life balance. In contrast to Yue and Le’s study, both male and female participants in this study adopted positive coping strategies, acknowledging their challenges and facing them with a constructive attitude, secure in the knowledge that their monocultural and bicultural networks of friends would be their support, as evidenced by this comment:

Week 6 is a good week although there are looming requirements ahead of us, I still feel that I won’t be alone in doing the assessments.
5. Conclusions

This research set out to examine the transitioning experiences of Asian students in their first semester of university study. The research question is:

*How do Asian students manage their first semester transitioning phase at a small regional university?*

With an increasing number of international students from Asian regions coming to Australia to study in higher education institutions, it is important that these institutions are not only meeting the students’ needs, but creating a favourable impact for a number of socio-cultural, economic and ethical reasons. Many universities are incorporating internationalisation policies and curriculums to meet this demand, and by examining the first semester transitioning experiences of international students, higher education service providers can start to understand what socio-cultural, psychological and academic aspects are contributing to or detracting from a positive initial transition phase in the host culture. This knowledge will help to shape the way higher education institutions respond to the demands of this valuable international student cohort.

This qualitative research project uses the methodology of visual narrative inquiry. This was selected as an appropriate methodology as it facilitates the examination of participants’ experiences of the world from their own perspectives, and it is also well suited to the small sample of nine participants. The method, Photovoice permits participants to present visual as well as written data relating to their experiences. The topics are participant-generated and are not influenced by or constrained by the researcher’s agenda as is sometimes the case with other qualitative data collection methods such as interviews or questionnaires. Transitional experiences can impact significantly on the participant’s psychological well-being, and issues relating to this may be difficult to express in face to face interviews or in the written form of questionnaires. Photographs are a unique source of data that allows the participants to portray aspects of their experiences that are not easily expressed in other
forms. NVivo 10 qualitative data analysis software was used to analyse the participants’ Photovoice submissions from a thematic perspective.

There are numerous definitions of what it means to transition or acculturate, but these can be summarised by viewing it as an adjustment process, where the participant recognises the need to modify their existing behaviour or adopt new behaviours in order to transition within the new host culture. Sojourning students are faced with a complex interplay of factors affecting their transition to the host culture and must navigate their way through and manage these by adopting various coping mechanisms and strategies. This is a process which takes time, with the end result being some form of adaptation. Adaptation may be viewed as successful if the participant has adjusted and maintained an overall positive psychological well-being, or unsuccessful if the stressors in the acculturation process have impacted negatively and the participant has not been able to psychologically cope. Transitioning stressors for the group in this study were well managed psychologically and did not escalate to the level of culture shock that other researchers have evidenced in their studies. In summary, the participants successfully transitioned through acculturation and achieved adaptation with positive psychological outcomes.

The literature on international students’ transition and acculturative experiences, points to a number of recurring themes: socio-cultural interaction, language competency, academic protocols and family influences. The degree to which each sojourner finds these as impactful on their transition depends on their cultural context and how different or similar theirs is to the host’s culture. Students from Asian backgrounds with predominantly Confucian heritages are usually found to have the largest cultural gap and therefore are required to make greater adjustments in their behaviour compared to students from countries in Europe or North America, for example.

Most students from Asian backgrounds are schooled in their native language with English taught as a foreign language. Language competency is a critical factor in the transition process as it affects almost every aspect of the sojourner’s experience in the new host culture, being required for both social interaction and for academic study. Thus, proficiency in the host country’s language is seen to be the single most
important factor governing successful acculturation and overall adaptation. However, the degree of English language proficiency and how it is measured is an important determiner in its successful application, especially within the context of academic study. Most international students are required to pass internationally recognised English examinations such as the International English Language Testing System [IELTS] or Test of English as a Foreign Language [TOEFL]; however, the requisite score in these tests does not necessarily equip the student with the academic-specific language and socio-pragmatic skills required in higher education, both in terms of their written assessments and in interacting in the classroom environment. Having to acquire these skills while simultaneously applying them in their courses can result in academic stressors which negatively impact on the student’s academic performance and overall transition experience. In this study however, there was little evidence of language being a substantial issue, either in the social context or academically. Perhaps because the participants in this study did not largely interact with Australian students, the need for English at a social level was not required. Similarly, except for one Nepalese student who commented that she had to review readings and videos in preparation for her courses several times in order to understand the content, use of English in the academic context did not appear in any other participants responses. It can be assumed therefore that, in contrast to much of the literature, the participants in this study did not find the lack of English language proficiency a negative factor in their transition experiences.

Social support can be seen to be derived from a number of sources, the two most significant being family and friends residing in the student’s home country and student networks in the host country. The composition of these networks can vary from intra-networks which consist of students from the same cultural identity, multicultural networks consisting of other international students, and bicultural networks of host nation students. Despite the efforts of many higher education institutions to incorporate aspects of internationalisation into their policies and programs to attract and accommodate the international student cohort, most of the reviewed literature points to a proliferation of intra-networks and multicultural networks and the occasional development of networks with host students actually occurring on campuses. According to the data unearthed in this study, the rich, multi-faceted socio-cultural integration of host and international students desired from the
institutional perspective, in reality is not happening. This was clearly evidenced wherein the Filipino student cohort appeared to interact almost exclusively with each other, and the remaining international students from other Asian nations, establishing multicultural networks. Only one student from Hong Kong mentioned any form of bicultural relationships with the Australian student cohort, and this was as a result of living arrangements rather than a relationship developed in an academic context. It would appear from these results that there are missed opportunities for the University to engage domestic and international students in developing rich and meaningful multicultural perspectives and competencies because of the lack of integration of these cohorts, despite the fact that the University, in its Equity and Diversity Governing Policy states:

The University will work to develop a ‘diversity capable campus’ where staff and students demonstrate the necessary knowledge, skills and understandings to enable them to enjoy respectful and productive relationships with people from a wide range of backgrounds and where each person is valued for the unique contribution they can make to the university enterprise. (International University of Australia, 2016b, para. 5)

As Volet and Ang (1998) suggest, unless intercultural contact between students is engineered by the institution within its curriculum design, students will not gain exposure to vital cross-cultural learning opportunities, and this will negatively impact on the success of the internationalisation measures taken by higher education service providers.

What this study revealed, yet not evidenced in research on the transition experiences of international students in other studies, was the clear and positive impact the physical environment had on the participants and their transitions. Almost 20 percent of participants’ submissions directly related to the University campus setting, environmental features such as beaches, lakes, forest parks, and the ambient weather conditions. Their comments contrasted their new environment with that of their home countries, and except for one comment about rainy days making commuting by bus to the campus more problematic, there was a very positive association about the
environment having beneficial impacts on the participants’ well-being and overall transitional experiences.

Much research on transition of any nature points to the phenomenon of culture shock, broadly defined as when the stress of acculturating becomes unmanageable. This can lead to more serious issues such as depression if the shock extends over a lengthened period of time. The overwhelming majority of participants’ evidence in this study points to a very smooth first semester transition with no suggestion of any degree of culture shock. That is not to say that the transition experiences were stress free, but this stress was identified and managed, mostly through the support networks of the international student cohort themselves. The main stressor referred to was managing the study, work and life balance, however, this did not start to become evident until about the fifth week of the semester when the first set of assessments was due. Until then, the comments in the Photovoice submissions were exceptionally positive and predominantly about the friendly and supportive relationships that had developed and the pleasant environs. Participants commented on the challenge of getting assessments due on time and balancing this with work and other day to day activities. Though this was experienced within a foreign environment for these participants, it cannot be classified as a stressor as a result of a cultural transition, but rather a stressor relating to transitioning to a higher education environment. This is something that almost every student faces at some stage of their higher education experience, regardless of nationality and regardless of country or location.

The difference between the international students and the local students managing the study, work and life balance issue is that the international students may not be aware of, or feel comfortable in accessing the help and support services available through the University to manage this. This lack of awareness of institutional help and support networks is evidenced in the 2014 International Student Survey Report which identified a lack of knowledge from the international student cohort about these services (Department of Education and Training, 2015a). It is not known whether the international students in this study accessed the academic help and support networks provided by the University. The results do show however, that the participants mostly turned to their trusted intra-networks and multicultural networks for academic help and social support.
The purpose of this study was to map the transition of students from Asia Major and Minor in their first semester of study at the University through a data collection method of Photovoice, using photographs and text to portray participant’s experiences. This has provided a rich source of data which has been thematically analysed. Future research could incorporate a second data collection phase using semi-structured interviews or focus groups. The second phase would aim to answer many Why did this happen? questions which arose in analysing the participants’ What actually happened? experiences. For example, we know the what - that the Filipino cohort established a very strong and supportive same culture social support network, but we do not know exactly why this happened or why they did not integrate with host Australian students. We can assume that this occurred because they were all enrolled in the same first year courses in their Bachelor of Nursing program, but our experience does not extend to this, so interviews or focus groups would enable the researcher to answer this question. Another example: we know the what – that English language proficiency did not appear to be an acculturative stressor for the participants in this study and that this is in sharp contrast to the findings of many other studies on international student transitions. What we do not know is why this is the case. Being able to further probe the themes that arose through the phase one Photovoice data collection in a second round of data collection, would add another layer of understanding to the transition experiences. Face to face dialogue would also enable the researcher to establish the participants’ circumstances prior to the semester commencement and establish how these may have impacted on the transition. An example of this would be to determine if participants attended orientation sessions provided by the University prior to the start of the semester, and what information the participants gained from this that impacted on their transition. For a more in-depth analysis of the longer term acculturation experiences, additional research could go beyond examining the first semester transition experiences, and through a longitudinal approach, track the participants over a number of semesters or for the full term of their study.

The size and cultural composition of this study’s sample could be construed as a limiting factor, however, Layder (2013) advocates that there are no specific rules governing qualitative sample size, and contends that the usefulness and credibility of the data collected, and overall information richness are more important than the size
of the sample. Of the nine participants, five were from the Philippines and one each from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Japan and Nepal, so this cannot be seen to be entirely representative of students from Asia Major and Minor. The results however, do provide an insight of the transition experiences of these select participants however, and further research on a larger scale would further add to the body of knowledge.

The University positions itself as quality service provider in higher education for international students, and in doing so has an Internationalisation Policy which states, “the University must have in place. . .(b) information and mechanisms needed to enable domestic and international students, staff and international University visitors to participate in internationalisation activities” (International University of Australia, 2007, para. 5). The results of this study show that there appears to be little cross cultural interaction between domestic and international students. These results parallel those of Sawir (2013), investigating the effectiveness of the internationalisation policies of a leading Australian university, who asserts, “Despite institutional efforts to integrate local and international students through teaching and learning practices, or extra-curricular activities, research findings continue to indicate the segregation between international and domestic students” (p. 370). The interesting point is that although the nine participants of the study at the International University of Australia appeared to have little socio-cultural interaction with Australian students, they reported positive transitional experiences, and were overall very satisfied with their new environment. This corresponds with the views of the broader international student community at the University. Forty-six percent of international undergraduate students reported that they would actively encourage people to apply to study at the University, which is considerably higher than the Australian benchmark of 30 percent (Strategic Information and Analysis Unit, 2016a).

The outcomes of this study corroborate Wu and Hammond’s (2011) study where they summarised their findings by saying that East Asian students transitioned to an international student culture within the host university rather than a genuinely multicultural one which included the local student cohort. This provides a further opportunity for research which is to ascertain the relative importance which students from Asian countries place on the aspect of intercultural integration between domestic
and international students that higher education institutions in Australia striving to cultivate.
6. Recommendations

One of the benefits of using Photovoice, according to its founders Wang and Burris (1997), is its ability to reach policymakers by empowering its users to be catalysts of change. Goodhart et al. (2006) further endorse its use within a higher education context by advocating that it allows the student voice to shape university policy. After analysing the results of this research project, three recommendations for the International University of Australia to consider with respect to its policies and procedures regarding international students, and one general recommendation for qualitative research regarding the use of Photovoice as a data collection method are presented.

The recommendations for the University are outlined in Sections 6.1 to 6.3. These are: to align the University’s Graduate Attributes framework with its Internationalisation Policy [Section 6.1], to provide country specific pre-departure cultural guidelines to international students [Section 6.2], and to facilitate international student transition forums throughout the semester [Section 6.3]. It is recommended in Section 6.4, that Photovoice be considered as an effective qualitative data collection method. By combining the application of both image and text, Photovoice has the potential to unearth unique data portraying participants’ lived experiences unparalleled by other qualitative research methods.

6.1 ALIGNING GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES FRAMEWORK WITH INTERNATIONALISATION POLICY

Many Australian universities, [e.g., Griffith University, University of Adelaide, Curtin University, RMIT University, University of New England and University of Sydney], include in their Graduate Attributes frameworks, a focus on developing intercultural competencies, dealing in culturally or linguistically diverse contexts, acquiring international perspectives of disciplines and developing cross-border expertise in a range of environments, including cultural contexts. In the introduction to its Graduate Attributes [Appendix G], the International University of Australia states, “Graduate attributes create the curriculum map that traces the transformation of students into highly desirable members of our regional and global
communities” (International University of Australia, 2016c, para. 1). In contrast with many Australian universities, the University’s Graduate Attributes do not include developing multicultural competencies or empowering students to operate within diverse international contexts, despite its assertion that their graduates will be desirable members of global communities.

To bridge this gap, it is recommended that the University align its Graduate Attributes with its Internationalisation Policy so that all students, regardless of country of origin, benefit from an education that acknowledges cultural diversity and equips them with the skills to manage within international and multicultural contexts. Volet and Ang (1997) suggest that in order to truly have effective internationalisation policies, higher education institutions need to engineer cross-cultural learning opportunities into the broader curriculum, thus exposing students to an ongoing discourse with a focus on developing intercultural competencies within their respective disciplines. Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) position educators in a role of responsibility and as catalysts of change by saying that they have a role “…to evoke cultural curiosity in their students and to strengthen each other’s cultural knowledge” (p. 290). By assimilating intercultural components into its Graduate Attributes framework, these competencies will then be mapped into course material and learning outcomes in line with the University’s curriculum renewal plan which incorporates the Graduate Attributes as learning design and mapping tools. As a result, learning to manage the politics of difference and diversity will be an integral component of those programs which align learning outcomes of their courses with the Graduate Attribute framework. As an outcome of this alignment recommendation, it is expected that a higher level of cultural synthesis would result, and both domestic and international students would develop multicultural perspectives and skills sets, better equipping them to conduct themselves as citizens in a globalised world.

6.2 PROVISION OF PRE-DEPARTURE CULTURAL GUIDELINES

While the International University of Australia has a range of policies and procedures in place to effect a smooth transition from an international student’s country of origin to the University, they deal only with the pragmatics of the transfer operation and do not equip the student with any cross cultural information regarding their transition to life in a new country and a study environment that could be
significantly different from their present one. Orientation day presentations deal with the practicalities of visas, health insurance, academic skills services and an introduction to the activities on offer in and around the University’s environs. There is a dearth of information provided for new international students about bridging the cultural divide between their countries of origin, and life and study in the Australian context. For example, the homepage for international students on the University’s website offers advice on housing, transport, visas, budgeting, academic and other support services, but there is no information pertaining to cultural adjustments that are likely to be experienced (International University of Australia, 2016d). This would indicate that there is room for improvement in how the University handles this initial and important aspect of international student transition.

According to Bodycott (2012), institutional support that assists international students with identifying and managing the range of cultural, academic and psychological issues of transition is fundamental to a successful internationalisation policy. Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011) stress the importance of preparing students for the cultural challenges they will face by facilitating intercultural training sessions, likening these to what Peace Corps volunteers undergo. A further recommendation would therefore be for the University to provide international students with sets of cultural guidelines containing information on intercultural academic and social adaptation as part of their pre-departure preparation. Mindful of the fact that Asian students as a cohort cannot be treated as a homogenous unit (Guns, Richardson, & Watt, 2012), as there will be many and potentially significant differences in cultural attributes and academic experiences, [e.g., between Singaporean students and those from Nepal], these cultural management guidelines would need to be culture specific in their orientation. Student voice can be an effective tool to disseminate information to peers, so it is further suggested that the University cooperate with current international students who have made successful transitions, engaging their input of what elements are required and issues that need to be addressed for successful transition management in the region-specific guidelines. International students should be provided with these guidelines as part of their pre-departure preparation, and it is suggested that they also be accessible via the international student homepage on the University’s website.
6.3 INTERNATIONAL STUDENT TRANSITION FORUMS

Campbell, Saltonstall and Buford (2013) advocate that one time interventions [e.g., pre-semester one off orientation day seminars for international students] do not support the present day, diverse student cohort in higher education, and that change will be more effective if systematically deployed across a range of activities. In line with this advice, a third recommendation would be to hold a series of workshops, discussion groups or drop-in sessions throughout the semester, addressing international students’ transition issues and providing students with a forum to discuss matters directly affecting them. If these forums could include current international students in a mentoring role, there is an opportunity for the student voice to be aired and to develop a sense of community support. It is recommended that University academic and social support staff attend these forums, not only to offer professional advice to the students, but also to better understand the issues facing international students’ transitions. This knowledge can then be used to better inform policies and procedures affecting this growing and valuable student cohort.

6.4 PHOTOVOICE: AN EFFECTIVE QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION METHOD

This research project used the qualitative data collection method of Photovoice, which requires participants to combine both image and text-based information to portray their lived experiences. This has proven an effective way to investigate international students’ transitioning experiences, and has revealed unique results. For example, clearly captured in the Photovoice submissions was a finding that has not been given any in-depth coverage in the literature reviewed to date, this being the powerful effect the environment had on the students’ overall well-being and positive influence on their transition.

Data collection methods such as interviews and questionnaires, where the researcher defines the parameters around the type of information gathered, may not offer the participants the opportunity to reveal information pertinent to their personal position on the issue under investigation. In contrast, Photovoice has demonstrated its capability to unearth participants’ emotions and feelings through a more open and unconstrained medium, and one in which could not be captured by words alone. As
such, it is recommended as an effective data collection method in contexts where the student experience is being researched.
References


Bodycott, P. (2012). Embedded culture and intercultural adaptation: Implications for


Burns, R. B. (1991). The adjustment of overseas students: A study of the academic, cultural, social and personal problems of overseas first year students at an Australian university. In M. Innes-Brown & P. Hedges (Eds.), *The Internationalisation of Industry, Government, and Education in Western Australia* (pp. 65-112). Perth, International Business Unit, Curtin University of Technology.


fluency, perceived social support level, and depression among Taiwanese students. *College Student Journal, 41*(2), 287-295.


³⁵ The name of the university at which this research project was conducted and hyperlink information has been de-identified.


experiences of international students. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations, 35*(6), 699-713. doi:10.1016/j.ijintrel.2011.08.004


APPENDIX A: CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH FORM

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT AND ETHICS APPROVAL NUMBER

How do Asian students manage their first semester transitioning phase at a small regional university? (S14671)

I have read, understood and kept a copy of the Research Project Information Sheet for the above research project.

I realise that this research project will be carried out as described in the Research Project Information Sheet.

Any questions I have about this research project and my participation in it have been answered to my satisfaction.

I agree to participate in the research project, How do Asian students manage their first semester transitioning phase at a small regional university?

I give consent for data about my participation to be used in a confidential manner for the purposes of this research project, and in future research projects.

________________________________________  __________________
Participant's Signature                       Date
APPENDIX B: RESEARCH PROJECT INFORMATION SHEET

Research Project Information Sheet

How do Asian students manage their first semester transitioning phase at a small regional university?

Ethics approval number: S14671

Purpose
We invite you to participate in this research project, the purpose of which is to investigate the first semester transitioning experiences of students from Asian backgrounds who are coming to study at the University.

Please read this information sheet before deciding if you would like to participate in the research project.

Contacts
The research team consists of Principal Researcher: Guy Rushton (Associate Lecturer - Coordinator TPP101), Supervisor: Dr Ruth Greenaway (Postdoctoral Research Fellow, Academic Developer – Learning Spaces) and Supervisor: Dr Michael Carey (Lecturer in Education (TESOL). Please direct questions to:

Guy Rushton
Email: grushton@iua.edu.au
Phone: 07 5456 5758

Aim
This project will use innovative research methods called Photovoice to investigate the first semester experiences of international students from Asia. The results will be used to orient University policy and where required, develop or improve support networks to enhance the international student experience, especially in the initial transitioning phase.

Photovoice enables participants to represent their point of view through photography and narrative. Photovoice is a participatory research method that involves the visual representation of the experiences of contributors, and the communication of that experience. The goals are to record and reflect, promote discussion and knowledge about an issue and to influence or enact change if required.

Participation
Your participation in this project is voluntary. If you do agree to participate, you can withdraw from participation at any time during the project without comment or penalty. Your decision to participate will in no way impact upon your current or future relationship with IUA (for example your grades).

If you choose to participate in this project, your participation is as outlined below:

You are invited to participate by taking a number of photographs of your first semester transition experiences and write a brief description of these. You may do this as many times as you like and at any time of the semester, though you will be texted three to four times during the semester to remind you of this project and to encourage you to upload your photographs and text to a wiki page on the IUA BlackBoard system for the purpose of data collection.

Expected benefits
It is expected that your involvement in this project may provide information that will enable the University to provide an enhanced international student transition experience for future students.

Risks
There is a risk that your identity may be revealed to the Principal Researcher or inferred through the description of your photograph. All information will be deidentified in the analysis stage and your identity will not be revealed in any published results.
Research outcomes
The full report of the research and a "plain English" summarised version will be published to a BlackBoard wiki and Facebook page. You will be sent an e-mail or text advice [ whichever you indicate is preferable on the consent form] when this is available. You may also request the results be emailed to your nominated email address.

The data may also be used in future research, for example: peer reviewed and professional journal articles, regarding the transitioning experiences of international students in a tertiary education environment.

Confidentiality
All information provided in this project will be confidential. Your identity and the identities of all participants in this study will be protected as far as possible. You may choose to take a photograph that discloses your identity; by using and commenting on the photograph you give your consent for it to be used for research purposes. Please do not take photographs that identify other people without gaining their consent.

Questions/further information
For additional information about the project, or to have any questions answered please contact Guy Rushton.

Concerns/complaints
If you have any complaints about the way this research project is being conducted you can raise them with the Project Manager or, if you prefer an independent person, contact the Chairperson of the Human Research Ethics Committee at the International University of Australia: (c/- the Research Ethics Officer); telephone (07) 5459 4574; email humanethics@iua.edu.au).

Thank you for participating in this research; your participation is greatly appreciated by the researchers and the International University of Australia.

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3 The name of the university at which this research project was conducted and contact information of personnel have been de-identified.
APPENDIX C: PHOTOVOICE TEMPLATE

This week, please. Take a photograph and complete the PH.O.T.O text box and send to Guy: grushton@iua.edu.au.

Follow these 3 easy steps!

Step 1: Insert [or attach to the email] your photograph/selfie.

Insert your photo here – or just attach it to your email along with this text file.

Step 2: Complete this box.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PH ☑ Describe your photograph.</th>
<th>Write here....</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>O ☑ Why did you take a photo of this?</td>
<td>Write here....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T ☑ Tell us how this has influenced your transition to studying here at IUA.</td>
<td>Write here....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O ☑ How are you feeling right now about your transition?</td>
<td>Write here....</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feel free to write any other comments or observations here if you wish.</td>
<td>Write here....</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Step 3: Email to: grushton@iua.edu.au
See page 2 for some examples.....

Thanks!

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8 The name of the university at which this research project was conducted and contact information of personnel have been de-identified.
If you need counselling help/support advice, please click here for information about IAU’s counselling services: http://www.iua.edu.au/learn/student-support/health-and-wellbeing/counselling-services

If you are including images of other people in your photograph, please ensure they are aware that this photograph will be used for research purposes [confidentiality will be maintained] and that you have their consent to use their image.
APPENDIX D: PHOTOVOICE EXEMPLARS

Example 1: PhotoVoice

PH.O.T.O.

PH This is an international food party put on by IUA students last Saturday.

O I took this photo because everyone was mixing with each other and enjoying the different dishes.

T It has helped me to get to know other international & local students outside of the classroom.

O I’m still settling in but knowing other students are feeling the same as I do helps me to know I’m not alone.

Example 2: PhotoVoice

PH.O.T.O.

PH This is me at Obaiyabli Beach.

O I took this photo because I wanted to show my friends back home what an amazing place I’m living in.

T I go to the beach to chill out & forget about my studies for a while, meet up with friends and enjoy the beautiful environment!

O It’s pretty stressful studying in another language at IUA, so getting away to the beach helps me to relax and get a study/life balance.
**Example 3: PhotoVoice**

**PH.O.T.O.**

**PH**  This is me studying @ IUA's library.

**O**  I took this photo because the library is very different to what we have back in my country.

**T**  I go to the library to study because it is quiet and I can concentrate better there than in my apartment.

**O**  As I said, it’s quiet at the library and I can focus. The librarians are helpful too as I’m not used to researching for information in this way. At home, we are given the materials to read.
APPENDIX E: ETHICS APPROVAL (S/14/671)\(^9\)

23 September 2014

Michelle Searle
Director, Office of Research
Tel.: +61 7 5459 4574
Fax.: +61 7 5459 4727
Email: humanehtics@uq.edu.au

Mr Guy Rushton
Dr Ruth Greenaway
Dr Michael Carey
International University of Australia

Dear Guy, Ruth and Michael

**Expedited ethics approval for research project: How do Asian students manage their first semester transitioning phase at a small regional university? (S/14/671)**

This letter is to confirm that on 23 September 2014, following review of the application for ethics approval of the research project, *How do Asian students manage their first semester transitioning phase at a small regional university? (S/14/671)*, the Chairperson of the Human Research Ethics Committee of the International University of Australia granted expedited ethics approval for the project.

The Human Research Ethics Committee will review the Chairperson's grant of approval and the conditions of approval at its next meeting and, should there be any variation of the conditions of approval, you will be informed as soon as practicable.

The period of ethics approval is from 23 September 2014 to 26 June 2015.

Could you please note that the ethics approval number for the project is HREC: (S/14/671). This number should be quoted in your Research Project Information Sheet and in any written communication when you are recruiting participants.

The standard conditions of ethics approval are listed overleaf. If you have any queries in relation to this ethics approval or if you require further information please contact the Research Ethics Officer by email at humanehtics@uq.edu.au or by telephone on +61 7 5459 4574 / 5430 2823. I wish you well with the success of your project.

Yours sincerely

Michelle Searle
Director, Office of Research

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\(^9\) The name of the university at which this research project was conducted and contact information of personnel have been de-identified.
APPENDIX F: PHOTOVOICE SUBMISSIONS OF THE ENVIRONMENT

Isn’t this photo just lovely? A day never ends without me feeling that I am truly blessed in life. ....I have been provided with whatever I need and there is nothing more that I could ask for.

[Taiwanese student – Week 4]
APPENDIX G: INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF AUSTRALIA: GRADUATE ATTRIBUTES

‘Learning is not a spectator sport’ – Chickering and Gamson, 1987

The IUA Graduate Attributes are the qualities and skills that our university values and endeavours to support the development of our students. These qualities and skills that have been specifically chosen to give our graduates the strategic edge in the workplace as well as enhancing their capabilities to be leaders in the community leveraging their ethical and sustainability focussed understandings. Graduate Attributes create the curriculum map that traces the transformation of students into highly desirable members of our regional and global communities.

Source\textsuperscript{10}, Graduate Attributes 2016. IUA website: http://www.iua.edu.au/learn/the-iua-experience/graduate-attributes

\textsuperscript{10} The name of the university at which this research project was conducted and hyperlink information have been de-identified.