

Assisting international students at university: Teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

Students entering into a foreign learning environment need to adapt into a new environment. This study utilises previous research conducted both within and outside of Australia and, through the use of preliminary face-to-face interviews and cross faculty surveys distributed throughout UWA, provides an insight into international experience of students from the teachers' perspectives. The responses from the surveys can be categorized into a framework provided by Carroll (2005). These attitudes range from denial; teachers who claim their job is to teach and it is the students' responsibility to learn, to teachers that acknowledge and appreciate student diversity, thus and subsequently accommodate and adjust their practices to suit. The research extracts the dominant attitudes, placing them within Carroll's framework, whilst also bringing light to the roles and responsibilities of the institution in assisting academic staff and international students work together to adapt into a foreign university.

Keywords: teacher's perspective, internationalization, adaptation, assisting international students

Introduction

Students studying abroad experience a process of adaptation and, due to the rising number of students studying in a foreign country, this process has become an area of concern for universities which accept international students ([Mori, 2000](#)). It is often in the best interests of the university to make the transition into a new environment as smooth as possible for the student to encourage larger intakes. The study investigates the level of awareness, and perceived impacts of language barrier, cultural differences and academic preparedness of international students from the perspective of the academic teaching staff at The University of Western Australia. This study utilises a framework created by [Carroll \(2005\)](#), and places the perceptions of student and teacher responsibility, from the staffs' point of view, towards the adaptation process of international students. The study then reveals the request on behalf of staff for a combined approach in student, teacher and institutional responsibility in assisting international students adapt to foreign university life.

Literature Review

Students entering into a foreign learning environment need to adapt to this new educational and social environment (Mori, 2000). According to the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development, there is growing evidence that not being aware of and paying attention to the special needs of international students now may have serious consequences in the future (Carroll, 2005). Institutions cannot assume that that students will immediately adapt to foreign life and must provide appropriate support. In order to do this, institutions require an understanding of issues relating to adjustment ([Andrade, 2006](#)). This process of adapting to cross-cultural teaching and learning can be problematic for both the students and teachers. Many authors (Andrade, 2006; [Samuelowicz, 1987](#); [Sawir,](#)

[Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008](#)) claim that common areas of problem lie within the differences in language, cultural and curriculum of the different societies, hence this study focuses on these three aspects.

The language barrier is perceived to be one of the most prevalent problems for international students (Andrade, 2006). Failure to understand the native language often affects students' performance due to their diminished ability to comprehend lecture material and assignments (Mori, 2000). In conjunction with language barriers, a lack of understanding of social norms and culture can also lead to difficulties in learning the course content. Research shows that students from different cultures have different learning styles. For example, a study found evidence to show that Asian students do not perform as well as American students when the primary mode of instruction is auditory ([Ladd & Ruby, 1999](#)). A different study reported that shyness and passivity in the classroom were also contributing factors towards poor performance of Asian students in a Canadian university (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). Other causes of disparity in teacher-student relationships within different cultural groups include social positions of teachers and students in these societies ([Hofstede, 1986](#)).

A previous study conducted in America showed that 87% of faculty members in a national survey of engineering faculty members said they had the same expectations for international students as they did for American students, and 97% did not alter their grading standards between international and local students ([Trice, 2003](#)). A study at the University of Queensland, Australia, compared the learning problems identified by international students with the perception of these problems by the academic staff (Samuelowicz, 1987). Both staff and international students at this university perceived language problems to be of

concern. Staff also perceived that the learning approaches taken, characterized largely by rote learning, especially by Asian students, were ineffective or inappropriate.

Whilst there is generally an agreement that students do have adjustment issues in a foreign country, it is not always clear who should be assisting them. The responses of teachers towards international students do vary and according to Carroll (2005) there are four main general types of responses. The first common response is denial; teachers who claim their job is to teach the content and that it is the students' responsibility to learn. Another response is that of teachers who acknowledge the need for some "repair" however are likely to send them to someone else and continue teaching the content without actively playing a role in ensuring the student understands what is being taught. A third response is one that forces students to adapt to the new environment, based on the argument that students go to a foreign country looking for a foreign learning experience and therefore that's what they should expect and embrace. The fourth and final response is that of teachers who acknowledge that each student brings their own cultural experiences and therefore they choose to accommodate and adjust their practices to suit the students in their class. Using this framework, this study seeks to extract and categorise the attitudes of staff members at The University of Western Australia (UWA).

Method

Carroll's identification of the four main attitudes of teaching staff (denial, repair, adaptation and accommodation) provide the framework for this study. The study collected a combination of quantitative and qualitative data from academic teaching staff across a variety of faculties at UWA. The mixed method approach was taken to obtain both a collective overview of staff attitudes, as well as gain individual written responses to extract

relevant themes and provide avenues for further investigation. The research was conducted in two stages. The first stage was designed to provide a starting point to gain a very basic understanding of staff attitudes towards assisting international students within the classroom. In the first stage, 3 staff members (one each from the disciplines of environmental engineering, anthropology and electrical engineering) participated in individual semi-structured interviews. The following guiding questions were employed in the interviews:

- 1) Please describe your experience of international students.
- 2) Do you feel that you actively assist international students in your class?
- 3) Do you feel that it is your responsibility to assist international students?
- 4) Do you change the teaching style to accommodate for the different cultures?

Question 1 was designed to gain an understanding of the awareness that staff members have towards the presence of international students. Questions 2,3 and 4 were designed to extract the degree to which staff members assist international students and also to what extent they feel they should be assisting them. At the end of the discussion, each participant was given an opportunity to add any additional information that they considered relevant.

The discussions and responses from these interviews were used to prepare the second stage of research; an online survey. The survey comprised demographic questions to assess eligibility, open ended questions allowing participants to describe their experiences of international students, a series of multiple choice questions to assess the extent to which staff members feel prepared to teach international students, and the final set of questions were a series of statements in which participants could state the degree to which they

agreed or disagreed on a four point Likert scale, to eliminate neutral responses, and with room for further explanation if desired. These statements were:

- A. "The teacher's job is to teach and it is the student's responsibility to learn".
- B. "The teacher must change his/her teaching style to accommodate the needs of students".
- C. "The students must change their learning style to match the teacher".
- D. "It is my responsibility to cater to the needs of any international students and I do my best to do so, even if it means more work for me".
- E. International students come to Australia looking for a foreign experience and therefore must adapt to the culture and environment without assistance from teachers".
- F. "There is a need for teaching staff at UWA to better accommodate international students".
- G. "I would like to assist international students at UWA, but I don't know how to".

This final set of questions allowed the attitudes of the participants to fit into Carroll's framework as shown below. The statements correspond to the attitudes presented by Carroll as shown in the Table 1 below.

Table 1 : Staff Attitudes as Identified by Carroll (2005)

Statement	Staff attitudes
A	Denial
B	Accommodate
C	Adapt
D	Accommodate
E	Adapt
F	Repair
G	Repair

Survey participants were selected using a method of non-random sampling. The contacts were found using the UWA online directory and only those staff members with email addresses listed on the database were selected. The selection process was also filtered by their position as listed on the directory. Only those contacts containing the words “lecturer”, “tutor” or “lab demonstrator” in their position description were selected for the pool of participants. The surveys were voluntary and each question was optional, resulting in some unanswered questions. The percentages given in the results will be relative to the number of people who answered the question rather than the total number of people who attempted the survey. A total of 255 academic staff members were invited to complete the survey.

Results

There was a seven percent response rate with a total of 18 responses to the online survey, Of the 18 responses, 15 completed the survey in its entirety. The online responses came from six of the nine faculties at UWA. Table 2 shows the distribution of responses by faculty.

Table 2: Responses by Faculty

Faculty	Total number of responses	Total % of responses
Arts	2	11.1
Business	3	16.7
Education	1	5.6
Engineering, Computing and Mathematics	3	16.7
Medicine	3	16.7
Science	6	33.3

This distribution of responses will be the source of some bias in the analysis of results as the percentage of international students within each faculty is not equal.

Awareness

In order to accurately gauge staff perceptions towards international students, it is imperative to first understand the level of awareness staff have towards the existence of international students within the classroom. The first part of the survey extracted the level of awareness shown by staff members towards students with language barriers, cultural differences and knowledge of prerequisite content. The survey showed that 77.8% of teaching staff surveyed were aware of either having or not having international students in their classes, whilst 22.2% are not sure if they do or not. At UWA, some staff members have access to confidential student information including their residential status, i.e. whether or not they are an international student. The level of awareness also varies by the type of role they assume. In this study, there were 12 lecturers, 8 tutors and 1 lab demonstrator. The lab demonstrator, two of the lecturers and one tutor did not know whether or not there were any international students in their classes.

Language Barriers, Cultural Differences and Prerequisite Knowledge:

Beyond being aware of the presence of international students, the staff were also asked questions regarding language barriers and how they felt this impacted the students' ability to perform in class. Of those staff members who were aware of international students in their classes, 15.4% were not sure if these students had language difficulties or not, whilst 46.2% said there were students with language difficulties in their class. A large proportion

(85.7%) of staff that had students with language difficulties in their classes also claimed that it was impacting the students' ability to perform in class.

Whilst there is a relationship between language barriers and learning difficulty ([Felder & Henriques, 1995](#); [Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000](#)), 78.6% of those who teach students from different backgrounds did not feel that their background impacted their academic performance meaning that staff perceived language barriers to have a greater impact than the background on the academic performance of the student.

International students often have a different level of preparation coming into a foreign university, compared to students who went through the local high school system. These differences in curriculum can affect students' academic performance. Twenty nine percent of staff claimed to have encountered international students who entered their class without an adequate knowledge of prerequisite content, and 60% of these staff claimed that this did affect their ability to perform in class.

Preparation of Staff:

The second part of the research focused on extracting whether or not staff felt prepared to work with students who had language barriers, different cultural backgrounds or those who did not meet course prerequisites. Table 3 summarises the responses received for each question.

Table 3: Questions and Responses Relating to Staff Preparedness

Question	Do not feel prepared	Somewhat prepared	Could use more assistance and/or training	Feel adequately prepared
To what extent do you feel adequately prepared to work with students who may have language barriers?	3 (20%)	1 (7%)	5 (33%)	6 (40%)
To what extent do you feel adequately prepared to work with students from different cultural backgrounds?	0 (0%)	4 (27%)	6 (40%)	5 (33%)
To what extent do you feel adequately prepared to teach international students who do not meet the course prerequisites?	8 (53%)	2 (13%)	2 (13%)	3 (20%)
Average % of total respondents for each type of response	24.67%	15.67%	28.67%	31%

Of the people 18 participants, 15 answered the above three questions. Of the 15 who responded to this section of the survey, almost 1 in 4 staff members surveyed did not feel prepared at all to work with international students, whether it be their language, cultural or academic differences. Almost 1 in 3 did feel adequately prepared, whilst the remainder of responses remains between the two ends of the spectrum, indicating that these people would welcome additional assistance from the university.

Responsibility

The third part of the survey focused on extracting staff perceptions regarding taking responsibility for the learning of international students. Staff were given a series of

statements and asked to select the degree to which they agree or disagree to each statement. The results are illustrated in Figures 1-7.

Figure 1: Responses to "the teacher's job is to teach, and it is the student's responsibility to learn"

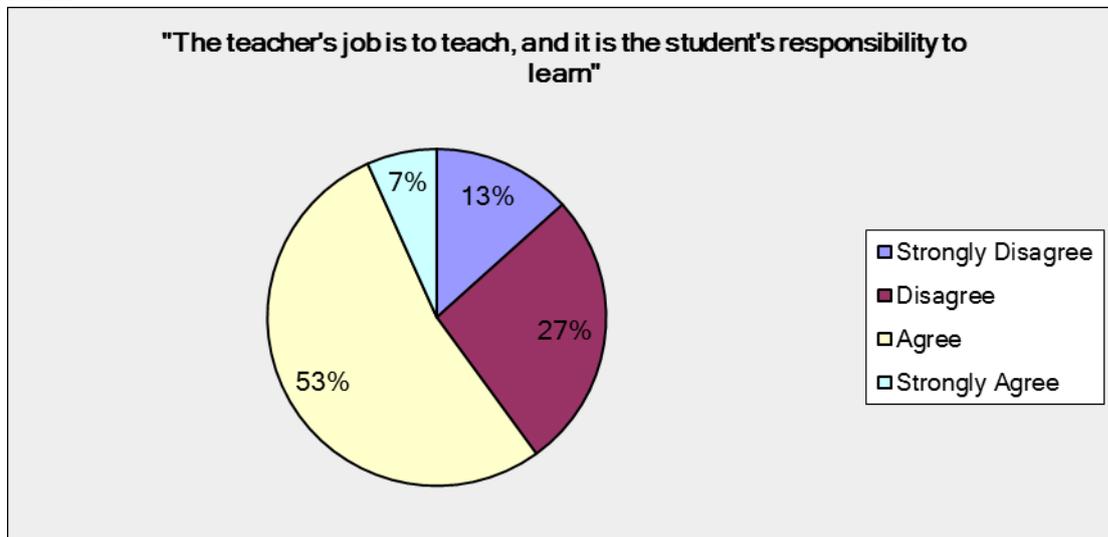


Figure 2: Responses to "the teacher must change his/her teaching style to accommodate the needs of his/her students"

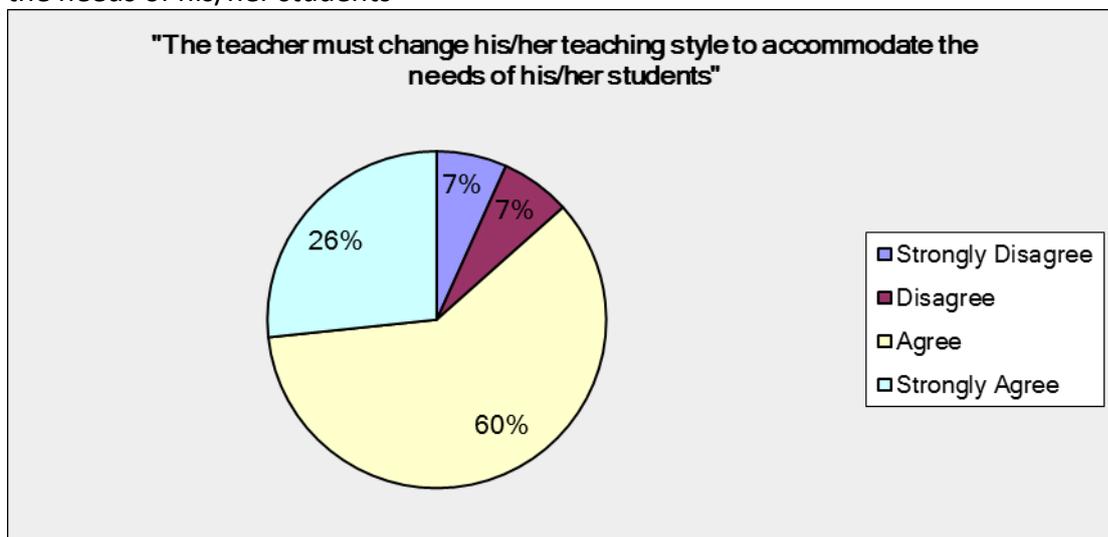


Figure 3: Responses to “the students much change their learning style to match the teacher”

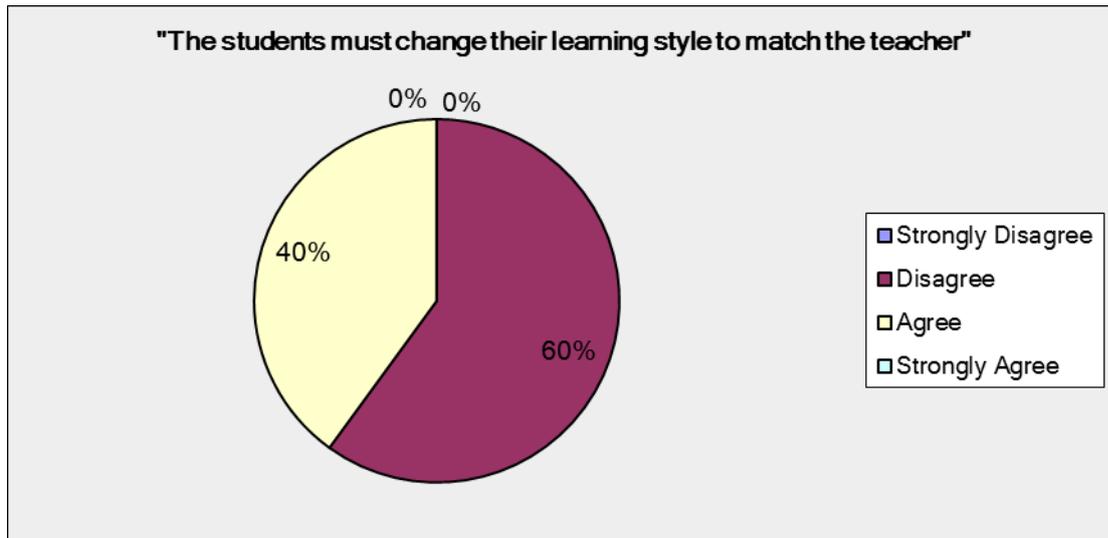


Figure 4: Responses to "It is my responsibility to cater to the needs of any international students in my class and I do my best to do so, even if it means more work for me"

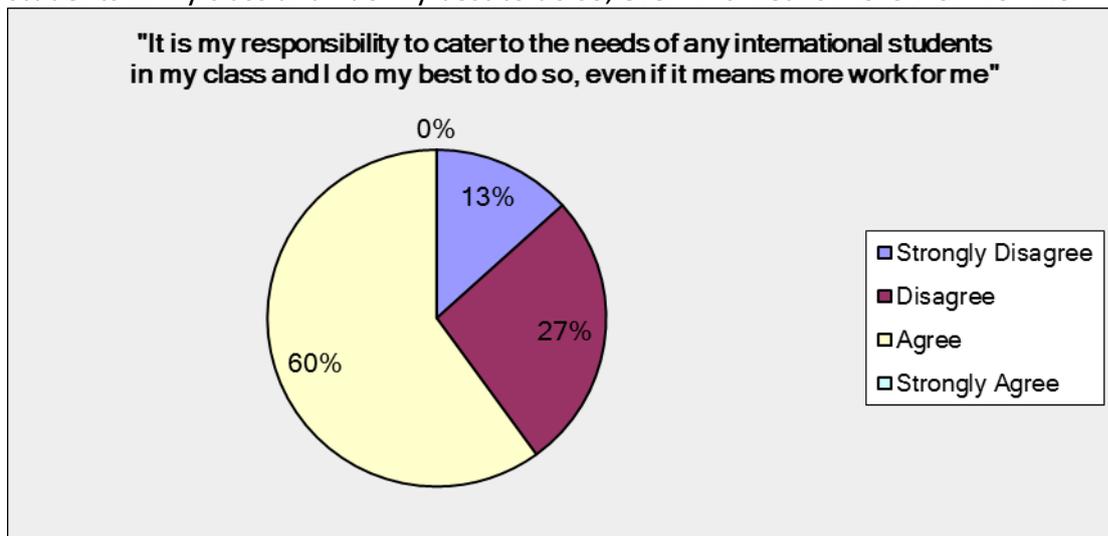


Figure 5: Responses to "International students come to Australia looking for a foreign experience, and therefore must adapt to the culture and environment without assistance from teachers"

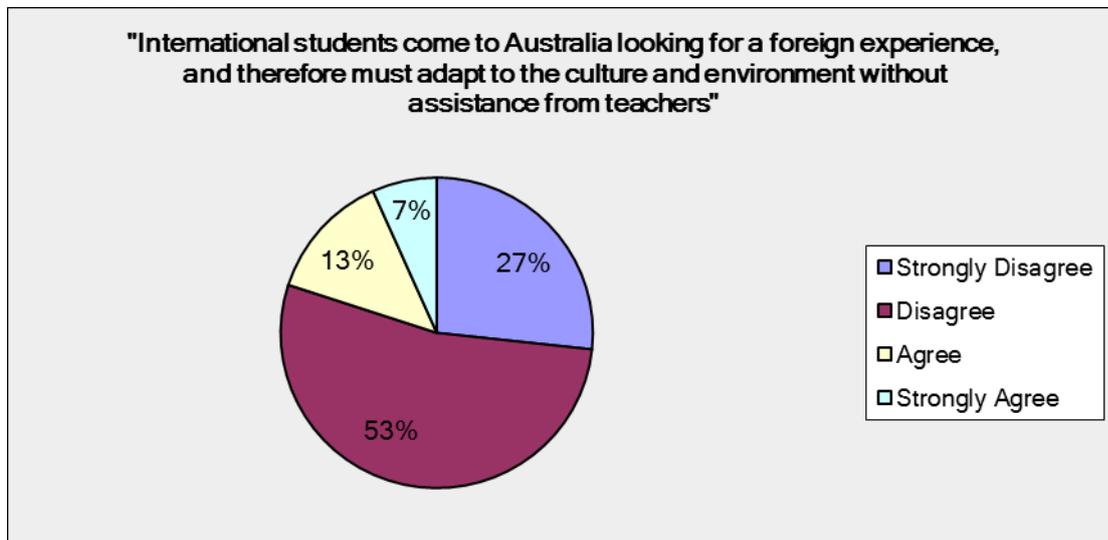


Figure 6: Responses to "There is a need for teaching staff at UWA to better accommodate international students"

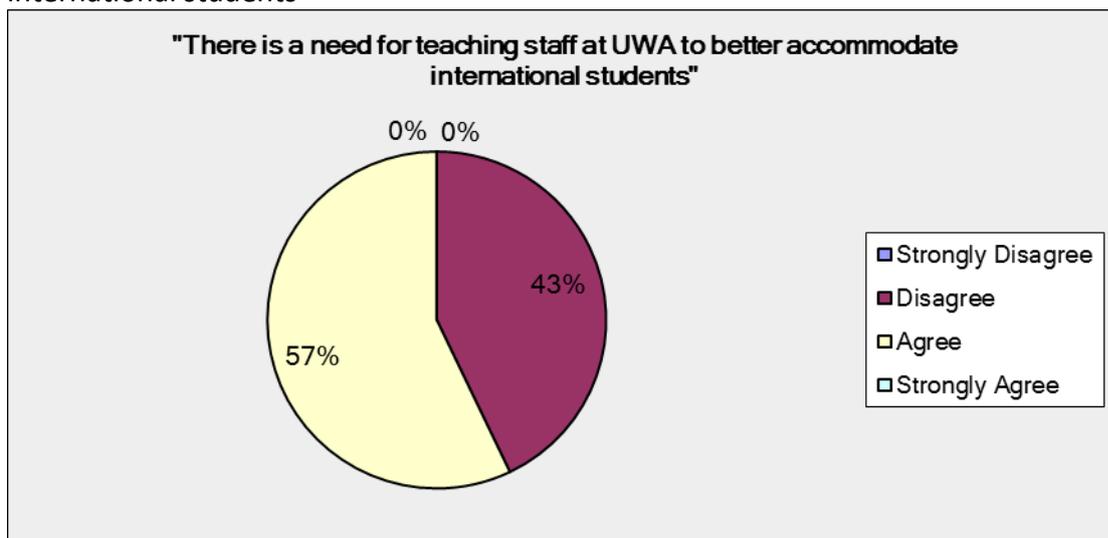
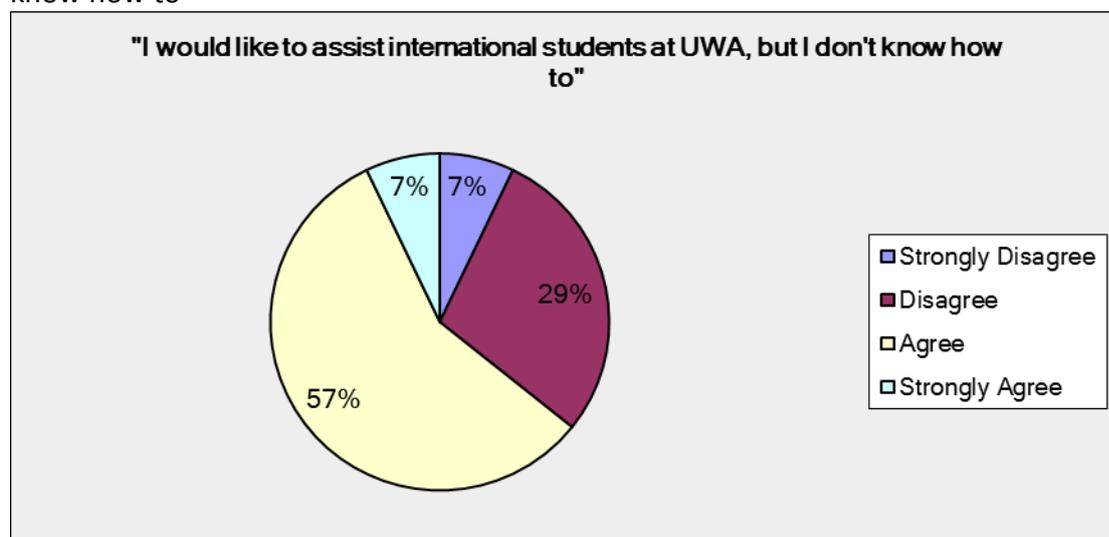


Figure 7: Responses to "I would like to assist international students at UWA, but I don't know how to"

The statements are placed into the four categories of denial, repair, adapt and accommodate. Table 4 indicates the degree to which survey respondents held each of these attitudes.

Table 4: Combined Responses by Category (Number and Percentage of Total Responses)

Statement	Category	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
A	Denial	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	8 (53%)	1 (7%)
B	Accommodate	1 (7%)	1 (7%)	9 (60%)	4 (26%)
C	Adapt	0 (0%)	9 (60%)	6 (40%)	0 (0%)
D	Accommodate	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	9 (60%)	0 (0%)
E	Adapt	4 (27%)	8 (53%)	2 (13%)	1 (7%)
F	Repair	0 (0%)	6 (43%)	8 (57%)	0 (0%)
G	Repair	1 (7%)	4 (29%)	8 (57%)	1 (7%)

Taking an average of the percentages per category produces the following collation of results as displayed in Table 5.

Table 5: Average Percentages by Category and Response

Category	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
Denial	13%	27%	53%	7%
Repair	7%	36%	57%	7%
Adapt	27%	56.5%	46.5%	7%
Accommodate	10%	17%	60%	26%

To statistically determine the predominant attitude and the degree to which staff agree or disagree, each of the four responses were assigned a uniformly distributed weighting to produce a numerical degree to which staff agree or disagree to each of the attitudes. The weightings are stated below:

Strongly Agree = 1

Disagree = 2

Agree = 3

Strongly Agree = 4

The weighted averages are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Total Weighted Average for Each Category

Category/Attitude	Weighted Average
Denial	0.635
Repair	0.695
Adapt	0.4548
Accommodate	0.82

The opportunity existed for respondents of the survey to provide additional comments. From these responses, a number of common themes emerged. The three main themes related to institutional responsibility, student responsibility and autonomy, and the responsibility of academic teaching staff.

Institutional Responsibility:

Whilst the study did focus on extracting the attitudes of teaching staff and categorizing them within Carroll's framework, there were a number of responses requesting the

university to provide further training for staff, as well as extra remuneration. For example, one respondent wrote “I would be happy to do work I was getting paid for. UWA should pay sessional staff for preparation time instead of expectation long hours of unpaid work” and another response stated “training should be provided to those who feel it is required”.

Student Responsibility:

Many responses mention the need for students to take charge of their own learning, to be autonomous, and to inform teachers of any issues they are having. Teachers also feel the need for students to be aware of the commitment they are making when entering the university. This includes being aware of the required expectations regarding the level of English, the acclimatization process and the nature of the courses to which they are applying. One response stated “International students are aware of the course commitments and so should be treated just the same as the other students.” This can be linked back to institutional responsibility because this implies a need for the university to provide potential international students with adequate information to ensure they are aware of what their course will expect of them.

Responsibility of Academic Teaching Staff:

The responses relating to the responsibility of staff fall into academic and non-academic responsibility. Some staff members recognized the need to academically assist international students, whilst others acknowledged the need for students to receive assistance outside of the classroom, for example either socially or psychologically.

In terms of academic responsibility, there were many responses relating to the way in which content delivery can assist international students. . Some responses mentioned in

the surveys included using PowerPoint presentations, group exercises, altering pitch, pace and complexity of language. The results implied that flexibility is desirable for effective teaching. In conjunction with using various methods to deliver course content in a clear and concise manner, academic staff raised the point that it is the role of the teacher to reflect upon the effectiveness of the methods used, again leading to being flexible and changing the method to suit.

In terms of non-academic responsibility, staff indicated that it is important for students to adapt to a new culture but this seemed to be considered secondary in importance to academic adjustment.

Discussion and Conclusion

In line with the work of Carroll (2005), this study identified the range of beliefs of academic teaching staff towards assisting international students at university. However, due to the very small number of respondents, general statements relating to the overall attitudes of staff members at UWA cannot be made. From the responses that were obtained, the written responses predominantly fell into Carroll's framework under the category of "acknowledge" meaning the academics surveyed recognised the need to do something but were happy to refer students on to someone else and focus on teaching disciplinary knowledge. Whilst teachers in this study were aware of the additional adjustment needs of international students, they reported a preference to refer them to outside support systems for help. Beyond that however, this research highlighted staff responsibility, not as a standalone solution, but part of a more detailed combination of shared responsibility of the institution and the students. Within the study, whilst it did extract and categorise the

attitudes of teaching staff at UWA as intended, the written responses of staff indicated a desire for external assistance from the university to improve their ability to teach international students, something that was not addressed within Carroll's framework, and provides a extension point for further research.

The study indicates there is still a growing need for change amongst the mindset of staff, and in an ideal situation all staff would be able to recognize the role they must play in a globalized world to ensure that students feel comfortable in a foreign learning environment. It is also evident through the results that this responsibility lies not only in the hand of those directly teaching these students, but also on other faculty and support staff and many teachers would like extra resources and training to improve their teaching. This suggests that the university would benefit from placing an emphasis on improving teaching resources, and providing specific training regarding international students. The specifics of the types of resources might well be a potential avenue of research in the future. In order to confirm the findings from this particular study, a similar study needs to be conducted on a larger scale, over a wider cross-section of staff, in order to gain more conclusive insights into the perceptions of teaching staff towards assisting international students.

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