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Voices from the coalface: Teaching in a highly diverse postgraduate tourism program

Kay Dimmock[a,*], Paul Weeks[b], Sally Ashton-Hay[c]

[a] School of Business and Tourism, Southern Cross University, Lismore, NSW, 2480, Australia
[b] The Hotel School Sydney, Macquarie Street, Sydney, NSW, 2000, Australia
[c] Centre for Teaching and Learning, Southern Cross University, Gold Coast, QLD, 4225, Australia

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ABSTRACT

The higher education sector's reliance on international students, including Australian postgraduate tourism programs, impacts students and staff. Teachers' stories contribute to understanding the complexity involved. This exploratory study collected stories from classroom experiences of a sample of teaching staff working in majority international classrooms. Using narrative inquiry the teachers' revealed experiences ranging from surprise through to challenge. Drawing on assessment feedback as an example, staff were confronted with unexpected situations and a student learning deficit. Their views noted the absence of preparatory advice on student readiness for postgraduate study and learning. Staff created new avenues for students to access learning.

1. Introduction

We contribute research on the stories shared by a sample of teachers delivering postgraduate course based tourism and hospitality education in an Australian PCW program hosting a majority of international students. Participants were asked to draw from their experiences through story telling which was guided by a series of questions to frame data collection. The story telling approach is a research method useful in capturing the detail and revealing the complexity of experiences (Gallagher, 2011; Rooney, Lawlor, & Rohan, 2016; Webster & Mertova, 2007). Meanwhile, it is essential to continue discussion of student needs and staff expectations for better understanding (Beres & Woloshyn, 2017; Cadman, 2000). The paper is arranged with background to the postgraduate coursework environment, followed by a literature review. Findings from data collection and a discussion section lead to the conclusion.

2. Background

Postgraduate coursework degrees (PCW) are important offerings in the Higher Education arena (Cadman, 2000). Developed in the late twentieth century PCWs allow many international students to study abroad and contribute to campus diversity (Anderson, 2014). Researchers confirm that internationalisation has been a driving force underpinning higher education globally (Hsu, 2017; Kearney & Lincoln, 2017). In 2014–2015, Australian exports from international students were valued at AUD$18.8 billion, the country's third largest export behind coal and iron ore (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). In 2018, international student enrolments increased on 2017 by over 12% (Robinson, 2018), with revenue estimated at AUS$28 billion (Saini, 2018). Within the Australian PCW environment, international students contribute in the vicinity of $17 billion to the economy (Forsyth, Laxton, Moran, Banks, & Taylor,

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: kay.dimmock@scu.edu.au (K. Dimmock).

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2009). Tourism and hospitality specific PWCs are more difficult to quantify, as many courses are designated 'business/commerce', merging with larger MBA-type courses. However, Beirman (2018) noted tourism and hospitality has become a focal point across Asia where tourism is seen as an economic god-send noting, globally, 5 million students are studying tertiary level tourism, hospitality and/or events courses. As part of higher education internationalisation, tourism, hospitality and events education draws from a 40 year history of program development, with an established global reputation (Airey, Dredge, & Gross, 2015). Across programs there is broad disciplinary reach. Meanwhile reduced government funding confronts tertiary institutions and places emphasis on the international student market for postgraduate tourism programs (Ruhanen & McLennan, 2012).

Trends in the international student market changed higher education with emphasis towards marketing and commodified education creating new situations for students and staff (Forsyth et al., 2009). The focus on student numbers was said to have diminished considerations of strategically internationalising postgraduate education, even in policy making (Cadman, 2000, p. 476). Deep Saini, Vice Chancellor of the University of Canberra (Saini, 2018), noted that Australian governments saw international students as a potential export cash-cow (relaxing visa regulations and encouraging mass-internationalisation). Universities fell into the trap of seeing education as a revenue generator, and not its traditional vestige as a provider of quality education and knowledge.

Many regional universities in Australia were previously Colleges of Advanced Education. Around the late 1980s many regional tertiary institutions became universities (Clarke, 1999). About the same time the sector commenced offering tourism programs at undergraduate level. Undergraduate tourism programs were popular in the 1990s and remained so until the latter years of the century. By this time international post graduate programs had emerged as a new component of university and program offerings. By 2011 Australian federal government loosening of international student visa requirements enabled a dramatic rise in the percentage of international postgraduate numbers. In some instances, particularly in tourism programs there had been a 90% increase in international PCW student enrolments with a majority originating from South Asia and China. These strong international enrolment numbers continue to be a cornerstone of some disciplinary enrolments.

Authors have noted ramifications from, and commitment required by all stakeholders if economic reliance on international students is to be fully implemented (Hsu, 2017; Schoorman, 1999). Some have drawn attention specifically to understanding the student experience (Li, 2012; Ryan, 2005; Stagg & Kimmins, 2014). Meanwhile education providers have been encouraged to develop internal systems which support international students' learning and transitioning experiences (Gale & Parker, 2014; Leask, 2005; Leask & Wallace, 2011).

Research into the international student experience has drawn attention to ways staff can bridge student success by improving retention through building an established sense of community and belonging while contributing to student and faculty interaction (Glass & Westmont, 2014; Kim & Sax, 2009). Glass, Gesing, Hales, and Cong (2017) noted that international students' sense of community is supported by good faculty-student relations, inside and outside the classroom, which contributes to success and retention.

In this context, faculty teaching staff are key to the learning experience, which often involves aspects of student transitioning and academic progress (Glass et al., 2017; O'Hara 2009). We draw on work by Biggs (1993) which discussed factors contributing to student learning. In the 3P model of classroom learning, teaching context is one factor and 'includes the superstructure set by teaching and the institution' which interacts with student 'prior knowledge, abilities and preferred ways of learning' (Biggs, 1993, p. 8) leading to the learning process. The model aligns faculty and institutional influence in students' learning.

Authors such as Cao, Li, Jiang, and Kang (2014) advise that faculty commitment to working in highly diverse classrooms can be positive for students and staff. To this end, Beres and Woloshyn (2017) found teacher readiness and empowerment was important as it led to a form of co-creation with international students. Meanwhile, Barron (2002) drew attention to consequences for teaching staff from the increasing numbers of international students in the classroom. Yet, little discussion appears to showcase the teacher experience in the PCW international student space. This is a critical omission given the impact of faculty on teaching practices and their role in the broader student experience (Cao et al., 2014) and amidst a fast paced enrolment and study timeframe.

3. Literature

3.1. International students' academic transition

The Australian higher education landscape is highly competitive and has become reliant on the international student market. A significant portion of this market is the postgraduate coursework sector which has seen increasing diversity in product offerings (Forsyth et al., 2009; Kiley & Cumming, 2014; Nyland, Forbes-Mewett and Hartel 2013). The number of international students entering Australian universities particularly from Asian middle-income economies provides enormous opportunity for all involved. Tourism, hospitality and events researchers report on the rapid growth and maturity over recent decades in that area of higher education with a large and increasingly multi-national student body pursuing study programs at institutions globally (Airey et al., 2015; Hsu, 2017; McCabe, Gross, & Reynolds, 2008).

Yet, as international enrolment rates increase there is the likelihood that students' expectations will not be met including that they will not master necessary requirements, and leaving academic staff unsure of students' learning capabilities (Laurillard, 2006; Ryan & Carroll, 2005). Educators broadly recognise the learning diversity in the classroom (Li, 2012) as do tourism and hospitality educators. Reporting on international hospitality management students, Barron (2002) explained the diversity was related to different learning styles between students' home country and the current international experience. Malfroy and Daruwalla (2000) agree, noting extra care is required to minimise miscommunication. The impact of different learning styles can impact transition. For international students university transition generates both social and academic rewards and challenges from studying abroad (Li, 2012; Ryan,

2005).

Research has indicated that international students anticipated a “higher level of support” than they received at their university (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011, p. 214). Transition can involve isolation, language, and psychological problems (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011). Highlighting the multidimensional nature of transitioning, postgraduate study in Australia has been described as involving ‘three levels of shock’: ‘culture, language, and academic shock’ (Zhou, Jindal-Snape, Keith, & Todman, 2008, p. 72) Students find themselves in very different physical locations and are further challenged by a new language and a new learning culture (Ryan, 2005, p. 149).

Australian universities have received recommendations from researchers to frame student transition experiences around the multidimensional experience and university policy imperatives which support them. Gale and Parker (2014) found three perspectives taken in Australia towards transition – induction, development and becoming. Transition as induction and development ‘implies assimilation and integration into university culture as the preferred method for student success’, while ‘becoming’ reveals the institution ‘transform’ teaching practices and curriculum to value and affirm a student's cultural capital (Gale & Parker, 2014). In ‘becoming’ students are supported in their ‘transition’ to a new culture and learning environment. The academic support that students may require can be realised during the exchange process between students and staff in the enrolment and study of their subjects.

3.2. Issues arising from international student participation

The contribution and rich experiences tertiary institutions gain from student diversity is recognised in the literature (Anderson, 2014; Forsyth et al., 2009). In their study, Kiley and Cumming (2014) found an increased percentage of graduate students under 30 years of age highlighting increased diversity in student learning needs are likely to belong to international students. The presence of international students has generated new demands and challenges for tertiary education providers according to authors including Zhang, Xia, Fan, and Zhu (2016). Referring to growth in cultural and linguistically diverse students (CLDI) in OECD universities, Zhang et al. (2016) emphasize the need for organizational change to include CLDI students within a university's integrative approach. Ryan and Carroll (2005) also see breadth in the sector diversity as a feature of universities today, with all students covering a spectrum including mature aged, indigenous students as well as first in families. International students add to the richness and diversity from which universities operate.

Discussion about the internationalisation of university campuses outlines the strategic move to mobilize in this direction on one hand but reports on crucial details like different perspectives to internationalisation by key stakeholder groups which engage and guide learners at the faculty level (Schoorman, 1999; Stohl, 2013). In this context, staff are key to success: the current environment anticipates teaching staff will work with increasingly diverse cohorts (Leask, 2015; Zhang et al., 2016). Teachers can do much to ensure students ‘bridge the gap’ as motivation and commitment to internationalisation puts staff in highly influential positions (Schoorman, 1999; Stohl, 2013). Inclusive pedagogy including student centred teaching is widely encouraged (Biggs, 1999; Ryan, 2005, p. 148; Slethaug, 2007). The approaches support the social dimensions of learning which can generate a sense of belonging and have been acknowledged as critical to international students and their successful transition to study abroad (Glass, Kociolek, Wongtrirat, Lynch, & Cong, 2015; Lin & Scherz, 2014).

In a critique of approaches towards internationalisation, Stohl (2013, 363) shared three points which highlight the chance to learn about, learn from or learn with, others as a form of co-creation. Meanwhile, Tait (2008, 58) reflected on challenges teachers confront in their profession, noting value in acknowledging and overcoming situations which occur as a measure of strength and development. Other authors (Day & Gu, 2007) identified commitment and resilience to be fundamental to teacher effectiveness which directly related to the quality of one's teaching and learning. The experience relies on student engagement with the learning experience.

One concern to emerge from the literature was that even though arriving students complied with English language proficiency admission, non-English-speaking background (NESB) students confronted academic challenges from limited English language competency (Oliver, Vanderford, & Grote, 2012). Li (2012, 46) pointed out that once international students have met admission requirements there is a ‘hidden assumption’ they can complete their academic course with little further assistance. Yet, some students struggle with postgraduate academic demands (Li, 2012). Barriers to international students' success include language, reluctance to participate in class and lack of familiarity with assessment (Crose, 2011, p. 394).

Teaching across cultures may be challenging, however, Biggs (2001) pointed out there are ways of approaching the experience and learning outcomes. The author used a ‘Ladder of Abstraction’ to highlight three teaching perspectives. Progressing through the stages allows teaching staff to connect with and develop students:

- acknowledge difference in learning style with international students adapting to host model
- draw on skills appropriate to the learning group
- assist students through the learning process (Biggs, 2001, p. 294).

3.3. Value of assessment feedback to international students

A key part of the communication with students and successful learning is assessment from which the uptake of formative feedback can positively influence a student's understanding (Hattie & Timperley, 2007; Jonsson 2012). Students engage with assessment and feedback as a central form of evaluative communication which can bridge student actual and desired performance outcomes (Evans, 2013; Hounsell, 2003). Feedback helps students gauge how they are going in the knowledge, skills and understanding that determines their success in higher education (Hounsell, 2003; Scott, 2014). Hattie and Timperley (2007, 102) contend feedback to be ‘among the

most critical influences on student learning'.

Student uptake and engagement with feedback forms a platform in the co-creation between staff and students. The importance of assessment feedback to learning in higher education is evident from Evans' (2013) critique of 460 articles published over 12 years! Feedback is a key component of teaching and learning (Carless, 2006; O'Donovan, Rust, & Price, 2016; Rowe, 2011; Tang & Harrison, 2011; Tuck, 2012). Second language (L2) teachers supported the use of feedback because 'it helps students', 'students expect it' and 'students need it' (Evans, James Hartshorn, & Allen Tuioti, 2010, p. 60). While acknowledging there is diversity in types of and views towards assessment feedback, the abundant literature reveals there has been a shift towards a developmental view of feedback in students learning, emphasising the formative potential to improve student success (Hyland, 2010).

However, Boud and Falchikov (2007) note a slow uptake in approaches which encourage feedback for learning, while affirming feedback can dramatically impact on students' views of higher education. Kvale (2007) maintains the evolution of feedback in higher education had reached a point where the promotion of learning should underpin feedback in contemporary higher education. Hyland (2010) concurs, suggesting the situation offers teachers an opportunity to provide feedback which can lead to development rather than react to errors.

There are writers who contend it is only feedback if it alters performance (Tricomi, Delgado, McCandliss, McClelland, & Fiez, 2006): feedback should lead students to overcome any learning deficit. Hounsell (2003) meanwhile, pointed to the challenge for teachers in communicating the gap to students: the 'balancing act' between 'explaining how work has been graded and providing feed-forward advice to improve it' (Bailey & Garner, 2010, p. 195). Carless (2006) described feedback as a social process in which teachers and students often hold different perceptions. In the classroom, it appears the onus is on teaching faculty to establish student engagement with the assessment feedback process.

When a student does not benefit from assessment feedback, a 'feedback gap' exists (Evans, 2013). The gap between students receiving and acting on feedback contributes to their inability to benefit from feedback (Evans, 2013). To assist, strategies are offered including incorporating assessment feedback into broader student learning discussion. The aim is to help students understand how feedback is central to learning (Brown & Race, 2012). For international students early feedback is encouraged and, when used in class, can model appropriate responses regarding what can be improved.

Communication between staff and students about feedback is necessary as Malfroy and Daruwella (2000) found in their work with postgraduate hospitality students. Brown and Race (2012, 87) suggest making 'feedback a shared learning experience' like giving oral feedback on cohort performance, common errors and shared areas for improvement. Data collected from Chinese students revealed formative feedback can bridge understanding of western writing norms and practices (Tian & Lowe, 2013, p. 580).

However, response to feedback can have negative impacts on students' learning. Chang (2014, 273) found international students felt insecure and excluded after receiving feedback. Meanwhile, Evans (2013) found negative emotional responses can occur when feedback intended for the task level is interpreted at the self-level which can generate self-doubt, anger, or frustration. The point raised by Malfroy and Daruwalla (2000) regarding miscommunication is valuable to note. Their work with international postgraduate hospitality students encompassed the international nature of the student group highlighting communication barriers related to academic culture.

Drawing on the teaching perspective, Todd and Nesdale (1997) noted an absence of literature looking at postgraduate lecturer's experiences of a diverse classroom. Since that time, researchers in tourism, hospitality and events have given attention to the issue (Barron, 2002, Ruhannen and McLennan, 2012; Malfroy and Daruwalla, 2000) but not for the last 10 years. Noting points raised in the literature this study set out to explore contemporary teaching experiences within the current environment. As such the study aimed to:

- Understand the experiences of teaching in a majority international student PCW tourism and hospitality program.
- Highlight teacher views on student preparation and response to teaching in a PCW tourism and hospitality program.

4. Context to this study

Southern Cross University is a 'young', regional university in the North East corner of New South Wales, Australia. It was created in 1994, out of a Teachers' Training and College of Advanced Education (similar to the old Polytechnics in the UK). Prior to that date the university was a 'college' of the University of New England (UNE), and was known as UNE-NR (for Northern Rivers, its geological location). In 1988, a Centre for Tourism was created within the university, offering its first undergraduate course to a group of 60 students. By 1991, intakes had doubled and continued at 120 odd students enrolling each year for the next ten or so years.

The Centre changed its name to School of Tourism and Hospitality Management towards the end of the 1990s, which it kept until 2015 when the School merged with the university Business School to form the School of Business and Tourism. Apart from creating several linked undergraduate courses, the School commenced post graduate programs in 2004, enrolling its first international student the following year.

Since the current Master of International Tourism and Hotel Management (MITHM) commenced in 2011, international student enrolments have increased exponentially, especially with the loosening of international student visa requirements. Although all student numbers have been increasing, the percentage of international students has risen dramatically: currently 98% of all students studying the MITHM come from off-shore, with the majority originating from South Asia and China.

5. Research methodology

The focus on understanding teaching stories of experiences in postgraduate coursework programs was central to the study. The value of story in teaching and learning research is a way of examining the human centered experience, being learning and teaching. Webster and Mertova (2007) point out that using 'story' to make a teacher's voice public is greatly assisted using a narrative approach. To guide the research, broad topic areas were used to frame discussion. These were forwarded prior to meeting participants to allow time for consideration.

- Teaching experiences with PCW students
- Teacher perceptions of student learning in PCW delivery
- Teacher experience with feedback in PCW programs

The research design, including data collection and analysis were informed by a qualitative methodology. Qualitative methods assume an ontology in which multiple realities exist, along with a researcher who is seen as an insider from the research participant perspectives (Jennings, 2010). These research parameters were appropriate given the exploratory nature of the research and the insider status of the research team. Exploratory qualitative research recognizes that randomness is not an intention in sample design nor are large numbers of participants (Henderson, 1991). The qualitative method supported a non-random purposive sample where data are gathered from a specific group of people, in this instance PCW tourism teaching staff (Jennings, 2010).

After Ethics approval, participants from the department's pool of 16 academic staff teaching on the PCW program were forwarded an invitation to participate in one to one interviews. Seidman (2013) refers to the benefit of interviews as a way to capture other people's stories. Ten staff volunteered involvement with six face to face interviews ultimately being recorded. Conducting interviews until redundancy in data collection was achieved is more appropriate than aiming for a large number of study participants (Jennings, 2010). Face to face semi-structured interviews gathered participant stories of teaching experience in the tourism PCW program. Qualitative methods have previously been used in research into university teacher experiences (Bailey, 2013; Lempp & Seale, 2004; Prosser, Trigwell, and Taylor 1994).

The interviews ranged from 45 min to 1.5 h duration. Recorded on a digital voice recorder, each participant's story was transcribed verbatim using an online transcription service. Transcribed files were then checked for accuracy alongside the original audio files. The transcript was returned to each participant for confirmation as an accurate record of the discussion (Shenton, 2004). On receipt of confirmation, transcripts were ready for analysis. Team members reviewed each transcript highlighting key aspects which emerged from the data. One member was responsible for final analysis. The analysis aided understanding of complexity in the situations, as stories of experience revealed how participants internalized and responded. They are an opportunity to look for what worked as well as looking for lessons and consequences from experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Following this process allowed synthesis and analysis across the data (Gallagher, 2011; Vink, 2015). Research objectives and questions guided the emergence and form of study outcomes.

6. Findings

Participant experiences across the transcripts revealed staff stories of surprise and challenge in PCW tourism and hospitality teaching. Across the interviews, prior expectations that staff held of preparing to work with their student group were inconsistent with some of the experiences encountered. Participants shared experiences from across the teaching session including from the early weeks through the duration of the program which highlighted concern for student readiness and preparation to study in the program.

6.1. Onboarding

Staff were surprised and worried by early signs of a student learning deficit which they made efforts to negotiate. Seeking solutions involved staff looking to create additional opportunities to aide students. Some felt they had little choice but to be flexible with initial teaching plans as well as negotiating organisational systems like classroom and curriculum schedules. Participants indicated that as teaching sessions progressed their work within an increasingly diverse classroom involved varying levels of student awareness, preparation and knowledge of academic process and skills for postgraduate study.

For example, at the outset of the semester, teaching and learning were impacted by delayed enrolment processes for incoming students. In one session, up to 10% of enrolled students arrived in Australia, and more critically into the classroom, several weeks after the start of teaching, thus constraining class delivery schedule, those already in attendance and affecting students' understanding of assessment including group work. The outcome moved the participant's classroom discussion to matters beyond scheduled content delivery. Late enrolments were often accompanied by '*requests for extensions and revision of material already covered*'!

6.2. Language and writing

There was surprise experienced as teaching staff anticipated incoming students would have '*fairly good basic skills like writing and necessary study skills*'. Tourism and hospitality are international phenomena with global appeal, and the postgraduate level of the program inferred for staff that students would have previous university experience and be familiar with critical thinking or confident

to learn the requirements of the system. Yet, there was a view students in their enrolment were unsure how to study the subject with comments including: '*many seem terribly lost when they get here*' or '*a lot were under-prepared to study*'. Staff expectations were that postgraduate students have established independent learning patterns and, before entering the international classroom, have been inducted with local learning systems. One respondent explained: '*I don't think they realise, they need to be self-motivated. We have laid out everything and they just need to follow guidelines including do homework*'. However, while the method of instruction seemed clear to staff, the situation presented uncertainties for students impacting comprehension, study progress and development.

Staff noted a high proportion of students seemed to flounder and staff sought to resolve the situation. Adjustments were required and included revised lesson plans once learning and study needs became evident. Teachers explained students in their class seemed to become happy and alert when the discussion was about forthcoming assessment. One actually made a point of regularly discussing assessment: '*each class, I set aside time to spend on the assessment*', while another indicated: '*I try and help them become used to Australian-type assessment*'. Meanwhile another shared that '*at the start there were a lot of issues around poor English and not understanding including assessment expectations*'. As a result, the teacher '*introduced a library skills session which related directly to the assessment*'.

The need for staff flexibility became apparent in approaches to assessment and assessment design as staff confronted diversity in student learning, writing and English language comprehension. One participant stated '*I have lowered my expectations in terms of grammar*'. Another shared that '*assumptions about students being able to write academic essays were somewhat overblown*'. In one instance, a participant modified future assessment design to resolve issues for students, despite the extensive administrative process involved, and to better cater to students' learning profiles. For another, after identifying student difficulties with a formative assessment, a forthcoming assessment was divided into '*smaller milestones*' which were handled progressively throughout the remainder of the semester.

Teachers confirmed looking for ways to support students. When confronted with poor written English, participants '*looked for meaning*', to support those students who '*demonstrate an understanding of the content*'. When marking assessments participants noted:

'*It's not about how well they can write … it's got to be readable and make sense*'.

'*I'm looking for the presentation of an idea supported by literature as a reflection of the effort rather than writing skills*'.

Notably, all respondents spoke about the number of requests for them to read assessment drafts prior to submitting. Staff were confronted by the close timing between the requests and submission date. The approaches taken to resolve the matter varied and included '*a blanket policy of not reading drafts and directing students to utilise academic* support *systems*' or '*a quick look and make general comments*' through to '*I've introduced drafts into the assessment schedule*'. Two things emerged for teaching staff from this experience: the regular feature of requests from international students which caused staff to build in strategies which benefit students and themselves; and drawing attention to students' use of assessment feedback.

6.3. Feedback

Staff were asked about their experience with assessment feedback. Teachers spoke of the importance of feedback to learning. Guiding students to improve their work was reflected in approaches taken. One respondent commented, '*let's face it, feedback is the foundation of learning. They're not going to learn if they don't know what they've done right or wrong. It is hugely important*'! Others acknowledged feedback to be key in the teaching/learning exchange with the data revealing efforts taken to communicate feedback to students.

Feedback approaches were consistent in several ways. All participants indicated the need to offer support and provided multiple types of feedback for each assessment. Comments explained '*I give quite a bit of feedback*' and '*Í try to praise, identify strengths in the work and comments for improvement*'. A common strategy taken with feedback was to '*encourage and comment*', with all respondents noting it was important to acknowledge good work. Student feedback across the sample included statements like '*I give the best volume and quality feedback I can*', or '*I give three levels of feedback*'. Along with volume and quality of feedback, staff indicated being supportive while also pointing to corrections. Statements from the respondents included: '*I give praise plus directing in places needing correction*', or '*I start with what they did well and go into specific detail about things to improve showing how they could have improved*'.

Yet, staff were unsure of the real outcomes of feedback they provided to their student group, with comments like '*I suspect the majority pay little attention to my feedback*' or '*I don't think I've had any student at PCW level talk about feedback*'. Meanwhile another commented '*some definitely do respond to feedback, whereas others don't carry over the comments into future assessments*'. The need for greater clarity on whether students use feedback was voiced by one teacher who said '*it would be helpful to see research about students' response to feedback*'.

The term 'feedforward' wasn't voiced by participants but they were clear that feedback was '*the foundation of learning*', and '*hugely important*'. Several mentioned being available to discuss feedback with students who seek clarification and one used technology to provide audio feedback. All staff expressed concern regarding student engagement with feedback and were unaware whether information communicated through feedback to support learning was being accessed at all by students.

8. Discussion

Stories reported in the study were experienced at the classroom level. From the outset of delivering teaching, staff shared experiences extending from surprise, challenge, a need to adjust, a need to create options, and a need to be flexible with the impact of revising their expectations and being unsure about student access to assessment feedback. Unexpected circumstances alerted

participants to student learning barriers and a deficit which many staff did not anticipate. Explanations offered included:

> '*feeling you aren't being understood by so many in the classroom is disheartening,* and, *lack of preparation and support given to these people ends up in our classrooms, that's crazy!*

Biggs (1999) discussed the value and outcome for a greater number of students to access learning when the task is understood and accessible to them. Drawing from data gathered from the current study, it is evident teaching staff felt there were students within their classes who either did not understand or were unable to access ways of learning. One educator in the current study spoke of the need to empower students more to ensure they are connected with the broader complexities of their international university experience:

> *Students who don't participate for whatever reason, I don't hear from, who are simply names on an assignment. They are the ones slipping through. If we empowered them more, harnessed them, perhaps some problems can be dealt with and students can gain from that.*

The unexpected situations created '*a whole of subject adjustment*' in some circumstances, through to '*changing the level and volume of feedback on early assignments, as a result*', indicating much more prescriptive feedback is given early to guide and direct students on style and format. For example, participants highlighted how formative assessments are now a '*litmus test*' and '*when I can detect students who have difficulty*'. Another was reflective of the impact of the international student experience within a global marketplace:

> *I cannot expect someone for whom English is a second language to be writing perfect English, or near perfect English, even though there's a body of opinion that would say everybody must meet certain requirements.*

In their efforts staff looked to broader social and cultural issues which affected student learning and worked to manage student's demonstrated learning needs. Practical adjustments involved finding additional time in their teaching schedule to review assessments and progress, or embedding specialist services including academic support into content delivery, or re-organising classroom activities, and refining future assessments. The initiatives revealed staff motivation to benefit the learning situation and create ways for students to access learning.

To adapt to circumstances, staff sought to engage using approaches such as asking students to draw on experiences from their home country to '*help build confidence and students problem solving skills*'. When students were silent in class there was need for continued reinforcement of ideas and suggestions. One encouraged students stating, '*I ask them directly and say it is OK to challenge me*' reflecting efforts to engage active learning. The approach draws on the dialogic method of teaching which encourages students to contribute to discussions and is a counterpoint to traditional methods (Malfroy and Duwalli 2000). Briguglio and Smith (2012) looked at the international student experience and whether international Chinese students' needs at Australian universities were being met. They found personal and cultural hurdles for international students have potential to lead to a lack of student confidence. Barriers experienced when students lack speaking and listening skills can hamper confidence, class participation and, ultimately, knowledge of assessment and study development.

Participants reflected on their efforts to create an open exchange between staff and students. Nicol (2010) is one who laments the impoverished dialogue between teaching staff and students, including through the approach being taken by many towards feedback. The current study also found potential to improve understanding through the interaction with students at numerous stages of the teaching calendar. Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006) recommend teachers also use opportunities to establish learning strategies which encourage self-regulated learning. The comment is notable in the current context as this study's participants were clear on the real need to accommodate learning challenges.

Using approaches including teaching styles familiar to international students can develop their academic competence to assist international students transition (Li, 2012). Zepke and Leach (2010) acknowledge active learning styles assist relationship development and enable student engagement. Meanwhile, Zhang et al. (2016) contend universities can do more to move beyond individual classroom approaches and adopt the scholarly dimension of diversity as a whole-of-organisation strategy. They recommend extending the definition of diversity to acknowledge cultural and linguistic diversity brought to universities by international students.

The complexities of studying abroad are acknowledged in the literature which refers to the multi-dimensional aspect of transitioning and the shock which can be experienced (Zhou et al., 2008). Within tourism, hospitality and events education authors have noted that demand for programs by culturally diverse cohorts is challenging institutions and educators (Ruhanen & McLennan, 2012). Roberts and Dunworth (2012) agree the experience for international students is complex and universities can do much to support student expectations as improved support is likely to have a positive impact in the classroom. According to Arthur (2017) the benefits of social integration extend far beyond academic outcomes and go a long way to overcome power distance and cross cultural dynamics to benefit students.

Hsu (2017) made the point that internationalising tourism and hospitality education is undeniable, yet much of the process has been carried out in an ad hoc manner. The current study contributes to understanding the nuances of teaching in a highly diverse tourism and hospitality postgraduate classroom. Framed in the context of increasing diversity within university classrooms, the stories of experience reveal ways staff responded to unexpected experiences highlighting opportunities for broader organisational communication to engage with students to improve the dialogue in classroom practices that will better support international postgraduate students. Biggs (1993) discussion of key factors in student learning outcomes highlights the intrinsic link between superstructure, students and teaching.

Our research noted some unexpected challenges to teaching were interpreted as belonging to broader system preparation which had led to a study and learning deficit. Staff expressed empathy for international students but looked to broader organisational processes to prepare the diverse student group. Views included:

We should be asking some fundamental questions about either the standards we are prepared to accept or the broader organisational support and preparation we give to facilitate students through the system.

You know, they are adults and are enrolled in a postgraduate program where there is a level of expectation of the student ability and motivation.

It seems there will be ongoing attention by the university sector towards international students in PCW programs. Alongside this, students globally have seen personal opportunities from enrolling in tourism, hospitality and events programs. In doing so, students and staff will continue to experience unforeseen situations. From such experiences the strength of staff and student exchange relies on a co-creation commencing at induction, continuing throughout the teaching period, and including areas like engaging with assessment feedback, which is critical to overcome any learning deficit. To support classroom efforts, universities which adopt a whole-of university approach to better support student and teaching experiences will improve practices and assist learning (McMillin & Dyball, 2009).

9. Conclusion

This study of teaching experiences in a majority international postgraduate tourism and hospitality program revealed contemporary realities including situations beyond those anticipated by staff teaching in the classroom. Experiences demanded staff adaptability and flexibility to create new opportunities for their international postgraduate PCW students. Implications suggest that the sector can work more to understand the ongoing nature of the teacher/student experience to overcome confusion and improve communication which impacts at the international classroom level. From experiences reported in the data, what transpires at the classroom level is key to overcome broader process gaps which cause confusion. Throughout the stories of experience critical themes emerged, drawing attention to opportunities to improve the provision of the PCW tourism and hospitality program.

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