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Communicating with Chinese students offshore to improve their transition and adjustment to Australia - a pilot program

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Communicating with Chinese students offshore to improve their transition and adjustment to Australia – A pilot program

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This paper reports on a pilot peer mentoring program: the *Chinese Mentor-Guide Program.* The pilot program aimed to improve the university transition experiences of students in China to their Australian university through a multi-layered transition program. The first element of the peer mentoring program was the development of a DVD which featured group and individual interviews with Chinese students (the Student Mentors) who had been in Australia for six months and who were studying at Victoria University. These students were featured in a DVD discussing their own transition experiences from China to Australia. The completed DVD was shown to students in China in order to orient them to Victoria University and to studying in Australia. The second and third elements of the program were a dedicated WebCT site and a live WebCT chat between the Student Mentors in Australia who featured in the DVD and the students in China. The fourth element of the program consisted of a face to face "meet and greet" session with the Student Mentors when the Chinese students arrived in Australia. At this session, immediate concerns about the students' transition to Australia were shared and discussed. The DVD and WebCT live chat elements of the pilot program were viewed as the most successful parts of this transition program.

Key Words: transition, peer mentoring, China, WebCT.

1. Introduction

Victoria University has many institutional relationships overseas including ones in China. The inaugural conference held in Beijing in 2006, *Enhancing Partnerships: Maximising Your Students' Success*, brought together teaching staff from Victoria University in Australia with staff in China to discuss and share strategies about student support and to strengthen relationships between the partner institutions. One key factor highlighted by educators at this conference and also by the Department of Education, Science and Training (2006) in the report, *The International Education Market in China*, is the need to improve students' transition. However, both highlighted the need to begin the process of engaging students in their transition not only when they arrive in Australia but *prior to their departure*. In addition, delegates at the conference felt that students needed to hear about positive transition experiences rather than just the early and difficult settling-in phase.

One outcome of the conference was the bringing together of a team of three staff to discuss ways to improve Chinese students' transition to Australia through a transition program which began prior to their departure to Australia. The result was the Chinese Mentor-Guide Program

which was piloted in the second half of 2006 and the first half of 2007, funded by an internal university grant of \$12,500 and supported by key staff in China. The Chinese Mentor-Guide pilot program was informed by literature from a variety of disciplines, including literature on international students, social support, peer mentoring, student engagement, and student retention and transition.

2. Social support

International students have long been a focus for student transition efforts because their transition issues are seemingly obvious, including "culture shock" and English language difficulties (Borland & Pearce, 2002). It is inevitable that moving overseas to study can result in students losing social support from family and friends. As Yeh and Inose (2003) state, "by leaving their countries of origin, international students are deprived of important others who have endorsed their sense of self in the past" (p. 24). This deprivation has a significant influence on international students' psychological well-being, including self-concept and self-efficacy (Hayes & Lin, 1994; Olivas & Li, 2006; Sandhu, 1995). Indeed, Yeh and Inose (2003) used psychological scales to confirm the interaction between social connectedness, social support and acculturative stress.

In order to develop more culturally sensitive support with regards to studying and living in a foreign country, Myburgh, Niehaus, and Poggenpoel (2002), interviewed a range of international PhD students about their coping mechanisms. Their study found that international students relied heavily on communication technologies, mainly the telephone and email, to remain connected to their support networks back in their countries of origin. Providing further evidence of the importance of social support, Olivas and Chi-Sing Li (2006) present a thorough literature review of the adjustment issues, stresses and coping strategies of international students which are more likely to initially involve people of a similar cultural background. They refer to Kaczmaerek, Matlock, Ames, and Ross' (1994) study, which found that building relationships between international and local students was a significant factor in successful adjustment, a factor which they and Zahi (2002) suggest could support the idea of mentoring international students to assist with their transition.

2.1. Student engagement

Students need to be engaged in a variety of meaningful ways to avoid feeling isolated and withdrawing from the institution (Krause, 2005). Student engagement can be increased and improved via the classroom, on-line, and with peers, but only with conscious and multiple efforts in each sphere. However, exacerbating challenges to increasing student engagement are the varying student cohorts' characteristics and needs. For example, Krause (2005) suggests that international students often experience engagement as a battle since both their prior learning experiences and cultural identities are regularly challenged as they face the prospect of integrating into the Australian campus.

Furthermore,

> Many of the expectations formed as a result of reading online marketing hype about the course for which they have enrolled do not meet with the reality of their experience once enrolled. For these students, engagement is a battle. It may sometimes mean reshaping identity, letting go of long-held beliefs and approaches to learning and social interaction. (Krause, 2005, p. 10)

Engaging international students is not as simple as it seems. For instance, although international students spend the most time on campus and in class, spend more time studying than their domestic peers (Krause, 2005), and are therefore apparently engaged with the institution, they often struggle with linguistic and cultural barriers which make them feel overwhelmed and ultimately disengaged. Thus their engagement is one based on overcoming English language deficits, adjusting their learning styles, and understanding the unfamiliar rules of a different

student-teacher relationship. Woods (1994) identified eight stages, not dissimilar to the grieving process that traditional students in a non-traditional classroom may experience: shock, denial, strong emotion, resistance and withdrawal, surrender and acceptance, struggle and exploration, return of confidence, and integration and success. According to Woods, it is only when international students complete the struggle to address their instrumental needs that real engagement and perhaps integration and success occur. Developing strategies to overcome or negate these struggles is a significant task for every university.

2.2. Student retention

Student retention has been examined through the theory of student departure (Tinto, 1975, 1989, 1995; Braxton, 2000) and the focus has largely been on the importance of students' adaptation to the university. However, these models have been criticised for emphasising the students' assimilation to the university rather than for universities making a sincere effort to adapt to their diverse student cohorts (Best, 2002; Tierney, 1992, 2000; Zepka & Leach, 2005). Tierney (2000) argues for institutional as well as student adaptation,

> Rather than a model that assumes that students must fit into what is often an alien culture and that they leave their own cultures, I argue the opposite. The challenge is to develop ways in which an individual's identity is affirmed, honored, and incorporated into the organization's culture. (p. 219)

Given these criticisms, the authors aimed at devising an institutional strategy intended to value the students and their contributions to university life and to do this in both the context and spirit of "internationalization" (Asmar, 2005).

2.3. Peer mentoring

As Bandura (2006) states, students are thinking and feeling beings who look to the past and rely on their experiences and those of others to help them anticipate the future. Invariably, greater weight is given to the experiences of those like us rather than those who are dissimilar, particularly when these experiences have the characteristics of what Zhou, Knoke, & Sakamotoe (2005) refer to as "indigenous knowledge", where the means and methods of transmitting information derive from different knowledge systems. The transmission of others' personal experiences is the oldest and most frequently used method by which understanding of both familiar and exotic events is increased (Bolton, 1987).

According to Astin (1997), the strongest single source of influence on cognitive and affective development is the student's peer group. Peer mentoring programs are used in many universities to either directly or indirectly foster students' connectedness and adjustment, and peer mentoring has proved effective with international students (Olivas & Li, 2006). In Australia, peer support and interaction are increasingly being seen as important strategies to employ for improving the transition process (see for example, Kantanis, 2000; McInnis, James & Hartley, 2000; Tinto, 1989, 1995). Encouraging peer interaction and learning from each other can strengthen students' engagement with their course, with each other, and ultimately with the institution. Furthermore, as Kantanis (2000) and Tinto (1995) both argue, peer interaction is related to increased student effort and persistence, adjustment to university and successful learning.

3. Project conceptualisation

There is a generally accepted pattern of cross-cultural adaptation (Black & Mendenhall, 1991) that has guided thinking in the area of cross-cultural adjustment, referred to as the "U-Curve" theory. The theory describes the expected phases that long term visitors (such as international students) who are called "sojourners", pass through as they progressively adjust to their new place of residence. An important revision of the original U-Curve developed the U into a W-Curve describing individuals' return from their sojourn to their former homeland. The W-Curve is often posited as the labyrinth through which international students will negotiate between offshore to onshore and back to home after they have completed their studies (Hart, 1999). The

W-Curve identifies and labels the process of intercultural adjustments and eventual return home for those who move to a new country. The first phase describes the departure from home and sojourn to a new culture. Following the initial Honeymoon phase, where a person is captivated and excited by new and unexpected experiences, a decrease in affect occurs that is called Culture Shock or Crisis. Eventually, a person begins the process of acceptance of the current reality and Recovery heralds the Adjustment that characterises living in the new culture. The second phase is the return home. The changes in mood and the stages experienced mirror those of the sojourn. The Honeymoon at Home is followed by Crisis at Home, which characterises the Re-entry Shock, and the Recovery at Home is the precursor of eventual Adjustment at Home.

With a view to impacting on students' transition to Australia prior to their departure from China, the authors set out to minimise the usually painful, protracted components of at least the first part of this journey, namely the decline between the points of Honeymoon and Crisis. In addition, the program aimed to facilitate a quicker progression towards the Recovery and Adjustment points by providing numerous models of student adjustment to Australia through the stories and experiences of the Student Mentors.

Student Mentors from China who had been studying at Victoria University in Australia for six months were recruited to form the link between the offshore home culture and onshore host culture. The mentors were to act as cultural interpreters and guides and to supply students about to undertake study in Australia with advice and strategies which would enhance their adaptation process. It was anticipated that the Student Mentors in Australia would be perceived by the students in China as credible sources of information who could provide realistic and timely strategies and advice concerning living in Australia and studying at Victoria University.

The most practical way of beginning the process of providing such strategies and advice through Student Mentors in Australia was via the production of a DVD in which the Student Mentors could be observed discussing their transition experiences in detail. The DVD could be taken to China to be viewed prior to the students' departure to Australia and be a resource for future cohorts of students.

The team predicted that viewing the DVD would result in additional questions about living and studying in Australia. The team knew from the literature that these questions would be most effectively answered by those students who had recently experienced the transition to Australia. In order to create connections between the two student groups, an on-line WebCT live chat was scheduled through a dedicated WebCT site. In addition, the WebCT site included a set of resources designed to assist in orienting the students to living in Australia and studying at Victoria University.

In order to address any emerging issues faced by students on their arrival in Australia and to provide them with direct avenues of support, a face-to-face "meet and greet" session was scheduled. The team predicted that the students would value meeting up with the Student Mentors who they had seen on the DVD and with whom they had begun to develop a relationship through the on-line chat. The Student Mentors would be able to continue the process of providing timely information that was founded upon personal experience.

In summary, a four stage program was created. The four stages were: (1) a DVD, (2) a dedicated WebCT site, (3) a WebCT live chat session, and (4) a face-to-face "meet and greet" session.

4. The DVD

The first stage was to recruit Chinese students who were in their first semester of study in Australia and to ask them to participate in producing a DVD for students in China. The DVD featured these recently arrived students talking about their transition and acculturation experiences and giving tips and advice about how to make the best of their study and social time in Australia. Footage was taken of individual and group interviews with nine volunteer student mentors. A logo was created for the program which consisted of a bridge in China connected to the West Gate Bridge in Melbourne. The phrase, "Building Bridges", also translated into

Mandarin, was used to highlight the aim of the program and to provide a symbol of the students' past, current and future connections with each other.

The DVD was edited in such a way that the viewers can select specific topics of interest. Topics were: Using English, Making Friends, Teachers and Studying, Help Studying, Text Books and the Library, The Weather, Melbourne, Experiencing Australia, Food, Money, and Jobs. All these topics were suggested by mentors as being vital in their adjustment to living and studying in Australia. While a significant part of the DVD was in English, large segments of the DVD were spoken by the students themselves in Mandarin. This was at the request of the student mentors who felt it would be useful for the participants to hear about transition experiences in their first rather than second language. Once completed, the DVD was taken to China by a member of the team. The DVD was shown to students at Liaoning University and Henan University who were intending to go to Australia to study in the next six months.

The project coincided with the availability of a Victoria University Chinese graduate who was undertaking post-graduate studies. Through negotiation with a former lecturer, she conducted an information session for international undergraduate students which addressed the issues she faced in leaving China and studying in Australia. She agreed to be interviewed by the team. Her interview was included on the DVD and mirrored the stories provided by the newly arrived students. Thus the DVD provided descriptions of how to adjust to study in Australia, and also provided a glimpse into what the future may hold for those who remain in Australia to pursue postgraduate studies.

4.1. The WebCT site

The second stage of the program was to develop a dedicated WebCT site. The aim of this site was to provide students in China with a space in which they could communicate with their Chinese counterparts in Australia and to access transition-specific materials and useful website links. These website links included:

- a Chinese student's PowerPoint presentation about study tips
- the Australian Broadcasting Commission's radio station to give students the experience of hearing local Australian accents
- information about social activities at Victoria University to engage in once in Australia
- Melbourne's *The Age* newspaper, to read about Melbourne news.
- maps and details of campuses they were likely to study at
- maps and details of the city of Melbourne.

The site also contained photographs of the Chinese student Mentors in Australia and their mini autobiographies.

4.2. WebCT Live Chat

Two live on-line chats were organised between students in China at Liaoning University and Henan University and the volunteer students in Australia. On each occasion, a member of the team was present in the room in China and two members of the team were present in the computer laboratory at Victoria University in Melbourne.

4.3. Meet and greet session

The final part of the program was a "meet and greet" session in which the newly arrived Chinese students had the opportunity to meet the students they had previously seen featured on the DVD and chatted with via WebCT. Unfortunately, because students arrived on different dates in Australia, this part of the program was attended by only four students. However, those students did enjoy seeing each other and exchanged contact details which assured informal networking could continue.

5. Implementation of the Chinese mentor-guide program

The DVD and WebCT chat elements of the program were evaluated. The utility of the DVD, the WebCT site and the associated live "chat" were tested in an implementation session that was organised at both Liaoning and Henan Universities. This is described below. As the experiences differed between Liaoning and Henan, they are reported separately.

5.1. The experience at Henan University

One of the project team was supported by Chinese colleagues in Henan who encouraged students to attend the DVD and WebCT live chat session and also did some translating. Fifty students came to see the DVD. The DVD was shown in a computer laboratory. All students watched the DVD of the students' settling in stories. The console computer showed the image on the screen and a laptop provided the audio, but they were not able to be perfectly synchronised. However, when the students saw and heard past students they visibly paid more attention. They sat up straighter, leaned towards the screen, and commented on how they knew the students in the DVD. Following this, the project team member discussed with the students the major differences between the diploma and the degree based on the Diploma of Business Marketing subject that they had completed.

After this discussion, attention was focussed on the WebCT site. WebCT was opened on every fourth computer, firstly, because there was concern about overloading the computer system, and secondly, because students said they would prefer to work in groups. The site itself posed no navigational issues, but due to limited time, the students were encouraged to enter the chat zone rather than explore other links. Students were encouraged to structure their conversations using techniques to increase trust and enhance communication, as suggested by Barrett (2002). In Barrett's (2002) study, the students used five techniques: Salutation, Thanking, Personal References, Acknowledging and Praise, and the Sharing of Personal Information to facilitate discussion. The atmosphere in the rooms in China and Australia when the chat occurred was very lively and full of energy and fun. The lecturers both in China and Australia chose to allow the students to have maximum freedom in the chat conversation, provided nothing offensive or harmful was written.

The WebCT live conversations highlighted some common issues the students in China wanted to discuss. Specifically these were about English proficiency, costs of accommodation and food, studying, impressions of the university and its courses, and the availability of part-time work.

Three, lightly edited, conversation threads (Figures 1-3) from Henan University are presented below to give the reader a sense of not only the topics the students were keen to know about but of how the students interacted with each other. For ease of reading, indications of other students entering the chat room and most spelling errors have been deleted. Abbreviations used with SMS type messaging, such as "c u" for "see you", remain. Names have been deleted for anonymity.

Hard copy questionnaires about the DVD and WebCT site (see Appendix A) were distributed to students immediately after the DVD viewing and WebCT chat session. Twenty-seven of these were completed and returned to the project team member. Feedback on the DVD was positive. Selected comments include: *"It can make us know what we want to know specifically". "It builds a bridge between students in China and Aussie. We can get a lot of information through communication in the WebCT." "It helps us that we can contact with students who are studying in Australia learning lots of information."*

Responses to the general idea of the Chinese Mentor-Guide Program were also very positive. In response to the question, "Do you like the notion of the Mentor-Guide program, where more experienced students help less experienced students?" all responses were positive, including: *"Yes, I like it. I can contact with them and get some information about the situation of them." "I like it very much. As a new student there I almost know nothing about things there such how to rent a house, buy things, where is cheaper and etc."*

Figure 1. Opening Conversation on WebCT between Henan University students and Victoria University students: the issue of their English being understood was of immediate concern. (Read the left column completely, then the right.)

Mentor 1 > glad to see you guys!

Mentor 2 > we r so glad to chat with u guys here

Mentor 3 > nice to c u ya, yep ,I am here

Student A > hi, i'm student A. what about your life there?

Mentor 3 > fantastic

Mentor 4 > hey student A

Student A > hi how r u there?

Mentor 1 > today the weather is too bad! but our mood is fantastic!

Student C > do you feel hard to study there

Student D > what about using pinyin?

Mentor 2 > u must study really hard to get a good mark

Mentor 4 > not bad but the exam I took yesterday was really hard

Mentor 1 > yeah, recently we are taking exam, i hope it is good!

Mentor 3 > he-he, actually we are practicing English now

Student C > how much can you understand the ?

Mentor 4 >Sometimes 90%

Mentor 4 > sometimes 10%

Student C > are you joking?

Mentor 2 > u don't need to worry about the language too much

Student A > plus together is 100%

Mentor 1 > cause some teacher have great accent! it is hard to understand

Student C > how much is the tuition of each year

Mentor 4 > i'm not … mate, things here are not like that in chinese

Mentor 2 > u will settle in well soon although some ppl have strong accent

Mentor 4 > the difference is if you can't understand in english the teacher will not explain it in Chinese

Student C > if you can't understand, what will you do

Mentor 1 > of course, cause the teacher do not understand the chinese

Mentor 3 > ask ur friends for help

Mentor 2 > ur chinese friends may help u

Mentor 1 > practise! haha

Mentor 4 > what's your friends for

Student C > what's your QQ NO.

Student D > how many chinese students in your class?

Mentor 2 > u can look for books or guess together

Student C > how many students in each lecture

Mentor 3 > I am really not sure, we will go and see

Mentor 4 > it depends

Mentor 1 > our tutorial class have about 15 students , nearly 9 of them are chinese students!

Mentor 2 > i have to tell u guys a truth, if u choose accounting, u won't have many chance to use English

Mentor 3 > if there are 10 people in vic uni, 3 of them are chinese

Student D > how do you make extra money?

Mentor 3 > u get that?

Mentor 2 > cuz u sit with ur chinese friends, u r in same group when have assignment

Mentor 4 > will you come to victoria university?

Mentor 3 > which means chinese this definitely the second language here, heeh

Figure 2. Conversation Thread 2: Some Chinese students then raised the issue of accommodation and the cost of living in Australia.

Student E > Do you think it is hard to find a house to live in? And how much do you pay for the house?	**Mentor 3** > yep, that is true
Student A > so we share	**Mentor 1** > exactly it is Chinese students! It is popular
Mentor 3 > not really, as long as u have got the money	**Mentor 4** > it sounds really expensive doesn't it
Mentor 4 > it's not hard for us to find a house but it is not easy to find a comfortable one	**Mentor 2** > but if u find a job, u may feel better
Mentor 1 > haha! not hard! you can find the house agency!	**Mentor 3** > actually the rent doesn't include the gas, water and electricity
Mentor 4 > the more money you want to pay the better house you will in	**Mentor 2** > at least u can gain working experience
Mentor 3 > normally $350-$450 per month	**Mentor 2** > and earn extra money
Student F > so many students study accounting	**Mentor 4** > but there is one secret that can help you to settle in here well, that is when you live in Australia, don't convert Australian dollars to RMB
Mentor 2 > if u want to make friends from all over the world, student village would be a good place	**Mentor 2** > ha ha, reasonable
Student E > I see. Thank you	**Mentor 3** > nearly everyone is working while studying, that is not a big deal and I am sure u can handle all these

Figure 3. Conversation Thread 3: Boyfriends, girlfriends and study tips were also highlighted in the on-line chat.

Student D > is it difficult to pass the exam	**Student F** > but i am a boy
Mentor 3 > the best part is u can BBQ everyday if u like	**Student H** > yeah the exam is so hard
Student F > what is BBQ?	**Mentor 1** > haha then you can find a girlfriend in china
Mentor 2 > u need study really hard from the very beginning of a semester	**Mentor 4** > I just took my management accounting yesterday but we have to say no one is confident enough to pass
Student A > that must be wonderful!	**Student G** > i am sorry to hear that!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Mentor 1 > yeah, i like, except the study, as it is hard and tired, but you can handle finally	
Student G > can you give your qq number or msn address to me	**Student A** > have u heng?
Student H > sorry we can't use chinese word	**Student F** > but i can't take her to AU
Student H > here we can't use chinese word	**Mentor 4** > i hope i can pass
Mentor 2 > here r so many handsome guys from different country	**Mentor 3** > Man, trust me, it is so hard to get a girlfriend here, so try u best to get one in China, hehe
Mentor 4 > the exam is more hard than you imagine	**Student F** > good luck to you

5.2. The experience at Liaoning University

After the successful implementation at Henan University, the project member was confident that the Liaoning University session would be equally successful. Individual monitors and head sets were available at Liaoning, therefore watching the DVD was a much better experience for the students. Twenty-two students were present. Students were both pleased and engaged by the DVD. They commented on liking the closeness in age of the student peers which they felt made the DVD more authentic. As these were all Diploma students, discussions were held informally about differences they might experience between diploma and degree subjects.

Unfortunately, the WebCT chat link ran too slowly to be useful. Hence this group of mentees had less opportunity to develop a relationship with the mentors whom had been seen on the DVD. However, other Australian staff members were able to answer students' questions directly. An interesting discovery made during this informal classroom conversation was that although the students seldom communicate with students above or below their year level, the students chat on-line or email very regularly with those classmates who have already moved to study in Melbourne, suggesting the students are adept at utilising their alumni networks.

Students were given hard copy questionnaires to evaluate the DVD and WebCT components of the program. Their responses to the DVD were similar to those of students at Henan and will not be repeated here. As it was not possible to run WebCT, students could not provide comment about it as a medium for communication. This notwithstanding, the failure of WebCT highlighted the potential fragility of programs that rely on technology for their delivery.

5.3. The "meet and greet" mentoring session.

Due to the problem of students arriving on different dates in Australia, the "meet and greet" mentoring session was attended by only four students. Nevertheless, those who attended commented positively on the session. They enjoyed the opportunity to meet with individuals they had seen on the DVD and with whom they had engaged in a WebCT chat. The newly arrived students sought and received clarification about matters that were still of concern. The mentors and the students willingly exchanged contact details and informal networking was encouraged by the staff member present.

5.4 The mentors

The mentors' sense of personal enjoyment through engagement in a worthwhile project is readily observed on the DVD, their responses during the WebCT chats, and in comments made directly to the project team. An examination of email exchanges between the mentors and the project team indicated that engagement with the program went beyond its formal end in the "meet and greet" session. Mentors indicated their willingness to continue to be part of the program: *"I enjoyed it very much and if u need help just let me know"*, and *"I would like to chat [WebCT] again."* As expected, the mentors demonstrated a sophisticated understanding of the partnership that occurred through the program. The mentors' statements of: *"Thanks for what u [the project team] contributed on this project"*, and *"Thx [the project team] for doing that for us!!!"* suggest that the project team had achieved their shared purpose and that the student mentors not only saw the value of the project for themselves, but also for the students in China.

6. Discussion

Despite the technological problems encountered, the Chinese Mentor-Guide program can be considered successful from several perspectives. At an offshore institutional level there was openness to active involvement in the project from both staff and students as it attempted to deal with serious issues that face students who intend to continue their studies in Australia. Similarly, at Henan University there was support and appreciation from students that serious efforts were being made to address transitional issues. From the perspective of the Chinese students at Victoria University, they felt valued and pleased that their experiences were of interest to others, particularly those from their home country. They formed special connections with the Univers-

ity that are similar to those experienced by other student mentors at the institution. Indeed, several of the mentors from this program have become mentors in a number of other peer mentoring programs. As mentioned above, the offshore students valued the fact that it was their fellow Chinese students who had only recently left China for Melbourne who were giving them advice. This finding echoes Zhou et al.'s (2005) study which emphasised the importance of "indigenous knowledge", where the means and methods of transmitting information derive from different knowledge systems. Moreover Koehne (2006) highlights how important it is for international students to maintain their identity and that this identity may have components of both individual and group identity. By having groups of recently arrived onshore students in the program transmitting and exchanging information and experiences with groups of students offshore, recent and important experiences were shared.

When inaccurate or unrealistic advice was given in the WebCT discussions, for example in relation to the level of English required in a Business degree and the demands made on students' English language abilities, the intention of the project team members to remain as unobtrusive as possible in order to facilitate authentic conversation between the students was not always easy to maintain. However, the intention to have a future "meet and greet" session in Australia about what they had experienced, meant little involvement from the lecturers was considered appropriate or necessary. The student-to-student communications enabled social support to be created between the students, which was valued more than any sense of a lecturer wanting to "correct" their perceptions at this early stage in their transition. Indeed, the perception of English language levels and demands from both mentors and mentees raises interesting issues about how such perceptions could or should be addressed in the future.

7. The future

For easy access for students and staff both onshore and offshore, the DVD can now be streamed from both the University library's DVD catalogue and from within the WebCT site. This means the content is now readily available both to teachers and students. Victoria University's English Language teachers are also keen to use the DVD and accompanying work booklet in the offshore classes as an effective way to systematically embed transition discussions into the curriculum. Interest has also been shown in using the DVD as a staff development tool. The DVD is also being used with students from the Horn of Africa as stimulus material to enable them to discuss their experiences of cultural differences and adjustment to Australia.

Since the completion of the pilot project, five students in China have requested enrolment on to the WebCT site in order to view the resources located there. An important future project will be to evaluate the impact and usefulness of these resources and to adapt or develop them according to the findings.

The technological difficulties with WebCT at Liaoning University have led to further discussions with the information technology staff who regularly visit China to troubleshoot issues with WebCT and other technologies. It is anticipated that future problems with WebCT will be reduced as a result.

Students' varying arrival dates in Australia mean that the "meet and greet" component of the program is the most difficult to execute successfully. However, the anticipated usefulness of such a session means that it is worth pursuing. Consequently, further discussions will occur with staff directly responsible for international students concerning students' arrival dates in Australia to help increase numbers at the sessions. There will also be closer liaison between students who participate in the program prior to their arrival in Australia to encourage them to attend the "meet and greet" session.

The use of other technology, such as on-line resources, voice over internet programs and pod casting, may also enable students to experience a virtual pre-departure with Victoria University before leaving for Melbourne without the need for a project member to be present. As a stand-alone resource, a copy of the DVD was requested by one of Victoria University's Chinese

agents who administers all visa applications and who was very keen to show the DVD in their Liaoning office as a form of student-centred communication about life and study in Australia.

At the second Victoria University and Chinese tertiary partners' conference, participants indicated that they were impressed by the DVD and could clearly differentiate between information that is promotional versus information. They confirmed a key message from the Chinese Mentor-Guide Program, which was the importance of using real students and real voices conveying authentic student transition experiences. Further research into outcomes for these students regarding an improved "transition" process when compared to others who did not have this communication opportunity, would be valuable. Through the students' invaluable contributions to this multi-layered transition program, the project team hopes to shift common perceptions of international students as being problematic to the institution (Asmar, 2005) to where, at a minimum, they are considered a valid and credible resource for improving students' social and academic transition experiences to Australia.

Acknowledgements

Appendix A. Evaluation of the Mentor-Guide project

- Did the DVD match your understanding of what studying and living in Australia would be like?
- How will you be able to use this information to assist in studying and living in Australia?
- Do you like the notion of the Mentor-guide program, where more experienced students help less experienced students?
- Do you have specific questions you would like answered?
- How helpful was the WebCT session?
- Are you willing to sign up for the program in 2007 as a mentee?

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