In previous issues of Synergy we have reported on conversations with staff around topics of current interest in academia such as ethics and assessment. In this issue, with its special focus on themes of cultural diversity, we turn our attention to the voices of students, and talk with three international undergraduates about their expectations, perspectives and experiences in their first couple of years at this University.

Our participants

The students were all volunteers. Although we had originally planned to give them lunch to compensate them for their time, the fact that it was Ramadan meant that two of our group were fasting. We therefore agreed to skip lunch, and participants received Coop Bookshop vouchers, instead.

We ran a standard focus group, with the discussion taped and transcribed. The students signed and were given copies of the Information Sheets/Consent Forms we had developed. We offered them the opportunity, later, to make changes to the transcript, and one sent us a few clarifications by email. (Colleagues intending to run similar focus groups with their students are welcome to contact us for our model Consent Form.)

The conversation was facilitated by Christine Asmar, with administrative support from Ifdal Elsaket, who is doing her PhD in Islamic Studies and History. Ifdal is currently working as a Research Assistant on the ITL’s Global Citizenship, Internationalisation and Inclusivity Project. We have edited the transcripts in minor ways, but only where the meaning needed to be clarified; mostly, the students’ voices speak entirely for themselves.

Raja Alsaffar is a first year international student from Saudi Arabia. She has been living in Australia for almost two years and studies Radiation Therapy at the University’s Cumberland Campus, Lidcombe.

Tai Qisheng is a third year Economics and Business student from Malaysia. As a Student Ambassador for the International Office, part of Tai’s role is to promote the University abroad, and organise events for prospective agents and government officials.

Tan Mun Lin is a Malaysian international student. She is currently in her third year of a combined Law and Commerce degree and aims to complete her Commerce degree at the end of this year.
Christine: Before you arrived at this University, what were your overall expectations of what your learning experience would be like?

Tai: Can I just say something on that? I think for international students you have to consider that everyone comes from a different background, every student from a different nationality would be taught in a different way in a different education system. So maybe someone in America will be taught to think critically compared to students from Asia. That is what I think. Because back in Malaysia we always have a private tutor that comes to our house and teaches us everything, in fact summarises notes for exams and things like that. But if you come here, you just have to ask questions or be left out. It is a bit of—you know, it is quite different.

Christine: So in terms of whether those expectations were realised or met, or whether there is any difference between what you expected and what you found—any other comments on that?

Raja: I love the challenge that I found. It was different … to what I expected. I was so scared and nervous at my first two months because of the extreme different method of teaching, studying and attending tutorials and because of that I got really low marks in my first term assessments. However, day after day I start to realise the right methods to study and to question, as well as I became more confident during the assessment period. Thank God I got the required GPA for Radiation Therapy. It was really good experience and most of the teachers were really helpful. Only one small comment I disliked at Taylor's which is that the teachers there were a bit stricter in correcting the exams. I mean, they took off from the marks for small mistakes such as silly spelling mistakes or for using pencil instead of pen which in turn could affect the final mark, but overall it is a beneficial year and very important for the international students because these students came from different countries which each have a different way of teaching.

Mun: The expectation that was realised was actually higher than what I expected. In terms of not so much from the outcome that you learn, but more on your thinking, your mentality. It is different to what you get from back home.

Tai: Back home we get this method of learning, like memorising the facts, just stick with the facts without even thinking about it.

Raja: Don't challenge the formula.

Raja: I cannot imagine myself getting into University and still memorising this bunch of facts. So it has changed the way of studying.

Christine: It is interesting that you have come from such different backgrounds but you have had similar experiences. Let's move on to the actual learning experience. What did you find most helpful here, in terms of the teaching and learning?

Tai: Well, the University's lectures and tutorial experience every week for one thing. It is different because back home you have a teacher, and that's it with your teacher, and that teacher teaches you A to Z. If you don't understand anything from the class, which includes the tutorial homework and stuff like that, you just ask the same person. But here first we ask the tutor and then if it still cannot be settled, we would want to find the lecturer. Because our timetable is different and everyone in the University is so different, sometimes the lecturer only has a very small window ...

So sometimes you had better not be asking something because you just can't make it in time. And if you ask the tutors, some tutors are just casual tutors and they might not even be sure of the topic because it is not their field yet.

Mun: I think Blackboard and WebCT are quite helpful in the sense that you can access your own notes and stuff, but of course there is still a gap in technology issues. And also I think that the tutorials are quite helpful when you ask questions, (they) try and give the answer. But when you try and send emails to lecturers they do not reply most of the time. I am not too sure if it is … policy, or whether it is they have too many emails to reply.

Mun: The instructors/lecturers pay more attention to international students because they are not so experienced, so they are restricted in terms of their opinions, because one thing—what is not so well articulated, and the other one is that our education system back home is more spoon-fed and we have just one opinion … We should be encouraged to speak, but I guess we need the courage to.

Tai: I think lecturers and tutors play a very important role in developing international students, I would say. Because some of the tutors that I got to, I get really good participation marks and some I don't, because sometimes it is just intimidating to speak … It is not really just for me … I am sure most of my friends face the same problems when they say something.

Raja: Just adding on Blackboard and WebCT: I use basically Blackboard more often. I think that it is a very good website, like a portal, because it has discussion boards and things like that. Basically every student will have many of the similar problems that we just get to find out. Even just the problems that we overlooked, we still get to see it and say 'Oh yeah, we have not thought about that, and it is a good point'. Tutors and lecturers, they do respond to that very regularly, which answers most of the doubts students have.

Christine: Are there any ways in which Blackboard and WebCT are particularly useful for international students, or are they just generally useful?

Mun: I think it is just generally …

Tai: Course-related, not just for international students.
Mun: Just on the assignment part, they just write back very brief comments on what you have done generally. When you approach the lecturer about the details he said, for example, you should have had more details and when I ask (about that), he just explains very briefly on the general assignment. I ask him how to improve my critical thinking skills and (he said) ‘You should read more’... But how?

Christine: Just one more question. What about the idea of interactions with other students or learning from other students? As you said, before you came here it was with one teacher and it was all about the teacher. I imagine all three of you would now be doing some group work, for example. So what happens, in terms of your learning, in interactions with other students? It must be relatively a new thing for you.

Raja: It is a new thing, and it is beneficial for most of the students I believe. Like if we finish this particular assignment and everyone had done their assignment individually and then we get together to revise this assignment, that will improve the assignment and will aid in higher marks. I think it is really important to have a group of people. On the other hand, I am really disappointed when I see these people from a particular country just get into each other without even talking with any others. Sometimes, some of them, they even reject to help you or they sometimes just give you a wrong answer, which is really what I don’t like. I am not saying everyone, but there are the helpful group, and (then) there are these people....

Christine: Do you think the teachers are aware of those things?

Raja: I don’t think so.

Tai: I am talking about group work and I’m sure you are aware that Economics and Business actually have a PASS Program, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions. That is a really good program because I did one of the units last semester and I thought it was very good because, for Management Accounting, every answer is a bit subjective, so you know in groups like that, you can have different opinions. We see different people having different answers, you know, and different reasons for doing certain things, so I think it was actually really useful. We had an Australian, we had Koreans, we had Chinese. You know, different people, and we also talk about different countries, how people would do things there, maybe with social boundaries and things like that. That was a good way of exposing not only to the question but getting to know other’s cultures better and it may be useful next time in the future when you do something about that. Discussion is definitely a good thing because that is voluntary. So those who really want to learn, and want to share, go there because there is only like three or four classes for that. For say 400 people, and one class is limited to 20 people. Those who really want to go there are the actual ones that can contribute, and want to contribute, in comparison to what Raja was saying about (people) giving wrong answers. I think that is something that is unacceptable, so a voluntary program would be a very good idea.

Christine: Any other general comments? I’ve reached the end of my formal questions. Any comments about being an international student at the University of Sydney, that come to mind? Like when people back home say: ‘So, how was it?’ What would stand out?

Raja: I strongly recommend to have this experience to study abroad actually, especially as I heard that Sydney University was the strongest University in Australia and in the world as well. I will be proud when I graduate from Sydney University.

Christine: What is your plan for when you go back, Raja?

Raja: After I finish my bachelor degree in Radiation Therapy I really would like to continue my studies to get my Master and PhD but I am not sure, until now, in which major, because I do still need more information and experiences as well as getting deeper in the field so I can decide later.

Radiation therapy is one of the most needed majors in Saudi Arabia. Due to the shortage of universities and the limitation of the majors in Saudi Arabia, radiation therapy is not being taught yet at the universities although it is really wanted. Cancer became a serious illness in Saudi Arabia recently and many hospitals need therapists, so it will be advantageous for me and my country to carry out my skills in my home country after I finished. I really like my staying here in Australia and Sydney particularly, I loved this country and I like dealing with people here. It was really hard for me when I left my home in 2005 but I think it will be harder if I leave Australia and my friends.

Tai: I am talking about group work and I’m sure you are aware that Economics and Business actually have a PASS Program, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions. That is a really good program because I did one of the units last semester and I thought it was very good because, for Management Accounting, every answer is a bit subjective, so you know in groups like that, you can have different opinions. We see different people having different answers, you know, and different reasons for doing certain things, so I think it was actually really useful. We had an Australian, we had Koreans, we had Chinese. You know, different people, and we also talk about different countries, how people would do things there, maybe with social boundaries and things like that. That was a good way of exposing not only to the question but getting to know other’s cultures better and it may be useful next time in the future when you do something about that. Discussion is definitely a good thing because that is voluntary. So those who really want to learn, and want to share, go there because there is only like three or four classes for that. For say 400 people, and one class is limited to 20 people. Those who really want to go there are the actual ones that can contribute, and want to contribute, in comparison to what Raja was saying about (people) giving wrong answers. I think that is something that is unacceptable, so a voluntary program would be a very good idea.

Christine: Do you think the teachers are aware of those things?

Raja: No, not really.

Tai: With the PASS Program it is usually only for first year subjects, so like the first Accounting, first Econometrics class etc. But I actually wanted to enrol more, but I couldn’t. That’s it, there is only one in the second year. Sometimes you just want to limit interaction between students because of assignment purposes and stuff like that, but again there is nothing wrong in learning more, and to discuss and come up with a better assignment than expected by the lecturer. So it would be good to have more PASS classes - if you could get that through Synergy...

Christine: It’s interesting, in the last issue of Synergy there was an article describing exactly that scheme, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions, because they are trying to publicise it across the University.

Tai: My friends are PASS tutors so it is quite easy on them as well, because they have done very well in the first year. It is actually just revising the topic again, and then they might also have Accounting, different ways of debiting and crediting, easy ways to memorise. One of the other things, you know, memorising things - they have short phrases that make it easier and the students are usually top achievers so they know how to memorise it, and different students who volunteer to go there would have achieved a certain sort of grade so they are more concerned about their studies as well.

Tai: For me, I am thinking of continuing into a Masters next year, because I feel that every University, for every country, would have its own limitations of accommodating different people, because some cultures would just not take it in and stuff like that. But you always have to look at the positive side of things, (like) being able to learn from people who have been to Cambridge, who have been to Harvard or top universities. You actually get a very good overseas experience from them, things like that which are different opinions, that is a good thing. It is actually quite popular, this University, back in Kuala Lumpur. My father’s friends ask me, ‘Where are you studying?’ And they are like ‘Wow’, because it has a different reputation, different expectations and opportunities.

Mun: With Sydney University you get more opportunities compared to other universities, especially the Economics and Business Faculty and also the Law Faculty and not to forget to mention the Medicine Faculty. They have a really high reputation, not just in Australia but I guess abroad as well.

Christine: You have a few more years of studying, Mun, don’t you? How many more years?

Mun: Another two more years after this and then I will go back to Malaysia and do my College of Law there, and then a year of practice.

Notes:
1. Two of our participants mentioned Taylors College, a private institution popular with international students which provides foundational studies for students preparing for their entry into University proper.
2. A program found helpful by the two students in the Faculty of Economics & Business is PASS, the Peer Assisted Study Sessions scheme described by Kellie Morrison in the June 2007 issue of Synergy (25, pp 3-7).
3. On issues such as the relative importance of language barriers, compared to the overall perceived quality of students’ experiences of teaching and learning, see the ITL’s report http://itl.usyd.edu.au/diversity/itl_diversityreport.pdf

We thank Mun, Tai and Raja for giving up their time to share their thoughts with us, and we wish them all the best for their future studies and careers.