



The human face of international education: The potential effect of learning anxiety on international students studying at Australian tertiary institutions

Key Words

international students, learning anxiety, academic achievement, higher education

Abstract

International students face a variety of challenges when choosing to pursue their tertiary education in Australia. They are expected by their host institutions to adapt readily to what can be a very different culture and language. Already under the pressure of meeting their daily living needs, their stress can be further compounded by the academic demands of their chosen course of study. It is indeed commendable that the majority meet this challenge with resilience and go on to be successful (DEST, 2016; Olsen, Burgess, & Sharma, 2006). However, for some the experience is a negative one. For various reasons, there are those international students who are unable to adjust to their new educational environment. As their poor performance persists, so their learning anxiety (LA) increases (Horwitz, 1986, 2001, 2010). This exacerbates the stress placed on their ability to cope and reinforces learning approaches which can lead to worsening performance. Anxiety builds upon anxiety, overwhelming the students' capacity to manage their studies and perform successfully. Eventually they fail their course and leave Australia empty-handed. This affects the students, their host institutions, and it has the potential to reflect negatively on our higher education sector in general. It has therefore become important for Australian universities to develop early intervention strategies which identify the sources of international students' LA. This presentation (paper) examines several factors which have been shown to contribute to lower levels of academic performance in relation to LA (Hewison, 2015) [1]. Demographic, linguistic (Buehl & Alexander, 2001; Hofer, 2000; Schommer-Aikins, Duell, & Barker, 2003), and psychological variables (Bandura, 1997, 2000, 2006; Biggs, Kember, & Leung, 2001; Biggs & Tang, 2011; Schommer-Aikins & Easter, 2006; Schommer, 1990) are discussed with particular reference to their potential to increase the debilitating effects of LA for international students. In particular, it will be argued that there is predictive value in examining as early as possible the potential interaction of these variables with student levels of LA (Hewison, 2015). Ideally, universities would then be able to refine their early intervention strategies to include measures aimed at minimising the effects of LA on academic achievement. Recommendations for action and further research are made.

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