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Towards a reframing of student support: a case study approach

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Abstract This paper reports on a study that investigated the range of institutional support needs of international students at one Australian university with a view to increasing understanding of their needs and the ways in which support was provided. The study involved a number of data collection methods including focus groups, key informant interviews and a larger scale survey, undertaken in an inductive and sequential process. The results indicated that the levels of awareness about services differed, that lack of knowledge of how to access a service and finding information about it were key reasons for non-use, and that the helpfulness of staff impacted on the perception of services as useful. The paper concludes by recommending a reconsideration of current practices to move towards a model of student support service provision in which the student is at the centre.

Keywords Student support · International students · Higher education · Case study

The educational context

The provision of institutional support services for students undertaking tertiary courses outside their home countries has become an issue of increasing importance as the numbers and diversity of internationally mobile students has grown. Recent statistics on international

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student numbers in the higher education sector, for example, show that there were 272,095 enrolments for the year in 2015 in Australia (DET 2016) and 436,585 for the 2014–2015 academic year in the UK (UKCISA 2016). The upward trend is likely to continue worldwide and has been estimated as increasing at rates of 5% or above annually for at least another decade (Kemp 2016).

As a component of the institutional infrastructure, student support is subject to the same internal and external forces that shape higher education more generally. The impact of globalisation, marketisation and managerialism on higher education has been extensively documented (Brown with Carasso 2013; Jacklin and Le Riche 2009; Milliken and Colohan 2004; Smith 2007) and has led, it is claimed, to measuring the value of higher education primarily in terms of its 'contribution to the economy' (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009, p. 280). In a recent study, one rationale put forward for the internationalisation of higher education institutions, as identified from a review of the literature, was the increased revenue accruing to universities from the increase in the number of full fee-paying overseas students (Seeber, Cattaneo, Huisman and Paleari 2016). Indeed, the Australian Government's *National Strategy for International Education 2025* states that 'International education is currently one of Australia's top service exports, valued at over $19 billion in 2015' (2016, p. 6). In short, as Scott (2016, p. 16) has claimed, the language of international education 'is now dominated by talk of market shares of international students and global league tables'. Thus, international students are particularly sought for and reported in terms of the income they generate (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2013; Marginson 2012).

Within such a paradigm, students have been recast as consumers (Molesworth, Nixon, and Scullion 2009). This might appear to offer improved benefits, such as a greater level of individual choice and market-driven responsiveness on the part of institutions. However, the framing of institutional obligations as consumer rights is limiting, as Marginson (2012, p. 502) observes: '…the compass of consumer rights is narrow, centering on financial transactions', rather than focusing on standards and forms of care. An institution might therefore provide 'mechanistic, depersonalised and "off the shelf" support products' (Smith 2007, p. 688). Indeed, in Australia, it has been argued that a recent downturn in the recruitment of international students may be partly explained by universities' '"no-frills" highly commercial approach to students and their welfare' (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2013, p. 191). Ultimately, while the consumer's power to withhold their custom might eventually act as a form of control, it is a slow-acting lever given that, as Marginson (2012) points out, international students cannot assess the quality of their university experience in advance.

Thus it can be seen that the current managerial approach does not necessarily mean that the provision of a range of support services will be experience-enhancing. Support needs to be provided in a way that ensures it is taken up and is meaningful (Smith 2007). Achieving this requires an institution to examine its specific context, its culture and the assumptions that underpin its activities (Clegg, Bradley, and Smith 2006). How the organisation conceptualises support and support provision will ultimately be the driver of the way in which it is operationalised. For example, an organisational culture may facilitate a holistic approach based on a belief about the nurturing of an individual to develop the learner (Bartram 2009). One example of this in action is the creation of a student 'hub' at an Australian institution that melded several forms of support and is believed to embody an approach of 'shared responsibility for educational quality and student success' (Buultjens and Robinson 2011, p. 343). That particular institutional response to the current educational paradigm illustrates the kinds

of questions that need to be asked in formulating a strategy for student support. Schulz and Szekeres (2008, p. 270) list some of those questions:

> 'Have universities taken a user-centred or a staff-centred approach? Should structures be for the institution's convenience of should they be set up with the customer in mind? Or perhaps, the question now ought to be: should structures primarily ensure compliance with legislative requirements?'

The evidence reported in the literature, such as the article described above by Buultjens and Robinson (2011), which increasingly suggests that a reconsidered framing of support is required, provided the background for the case study described in this paper. The primary impetus, however, was the evidence from the institution's course experience questionnaires, and student surveys that levels of student satisfaction at the institution under investigation were lower than the sector average in important areas and that student support was one of the key areas in which improvements were deemed necessary. The surveys, while valuable in themselves for identifying problematic issues, primarily sought to establish levels of satisfaction and did not probe into student views about access, use and usefulness. This limited their capacity to contribute to initiating changes or improvements and indicated that there was a need for a different kind of approach that could explore in more depth perceptions of international students about their experience of support services.

Background to institutional student support

The framing of student support naturally has an impact on the manner in which support is provided (Roberts, Boldy and Dunworth, 2015). So, for example, a positioning of students within a deficit model that emphasises the shortcomings of the individual will result in a different approach to provision of support from one based on the development of a nurturing institutional culture, as the former does not take into account the role that the organisation plays in perpetuating structural barriers, and does not seek out ways of addressing them (Smit 2012). As Jacklin and Le Riche (2009, p. 736) argue, 'problems are thus perceived as located within the individual student and support understood as the institutional mechanism for relieving that problem'. In an era of unprecedented student mobility and increasing levels of student participation in higher education domestically, the student body is becoming ever more diverse, and all students are therefore likely to have a range of needs as they enter what for many will be an unfamiliar educational environment.

This is not to deny that the status of international students can bring particular issues, and international students have often been described in terms that reflect this. For example, although many international students in Australia may be interested in permanent migration (Cao & Tran 2015) they are often only temporary residents and have been referred to as 'sojourners' (Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson 2007) and 'temporary migrants' (Deumert et al. 2005), removed from their home culture, religion, support networks and often language, and required to adjust to what may be very different values, cultural norms and academic expectations. The capacity to manage the resultant pressure, it has been argued, can depend on multiple factors, for example, an individual's capacity for resilience, the extent of available support (Wang 2004) and the degree to which the new environment differs from that previously experienced (Brown 2008).

The research literature has identified a range of specific needs that international students have, which, according to Rosenthal, Russell and Thomson (2008) can be broadly grouped into two categories: the academic and the physical or psychosocial. When it comes to academic needs, for example, one of the factors that has been identified as having a major impact on the quality of students' experience in English-speaking countries is English language proficiency (Mak and Kennedy 2012; Poyrazli and Kavanaugh 2006; Rochecouste et al. 2010). Lower levels of proficiency have been shown, for example, to negatively affect academic achievement, social integration and adaptation to a new academic culture (Brown 2008; Poyrazli and Kavanaugh 2006).

Low levels of integration and limited development of social networks in turn increase the likelihood that students will experience feelings of isolation (Wang 2004), insecurity and homesickness (Myburgh, Niehaus and Poggenpoel 2002), and loneliness, which Sawir et al. (2008, p. 152) describe as 'resulting from the absence of either intimate personal ties or social ties and social integration of a less intimate kind'.

Safety and a sense of well-being have also been identified as factors impacting on the student experience. While some researchers have focused on discrimination and racism (Hanassab 2006; Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung 2008), others have suggested that security is a broader issue that incorporates social, physical and economic dimensions (Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2008; Deumert et al. 2005), thus shifting the debate away from the individual towards the context in which education takes place.

Much research has investigated the capacity of international students to manage the stress they experience by examining and identifying some of the influencing demographic variables such as gender, age or race and ethnicity (Poyrazli and Kavanaugh 2006; Sumer, Poyrazli, and Grahame 2008). Other studies have identified personal attributes such as problem solving skills and self-efficacy (Rosenthal, Russell, and Thomson 2008). International students with higher levels of English language proficiency, personality characteristics which support a strong sense of self-efficacy and the ability to establish a social network appear from such studies to be more likely to manage change effectively. When it comes to information-seeking behaviours, differences have been observed between groups of students with different kinds of social networks, but there are commonalities: in circumstances where problems have been identified, students tend to consult academic staff, student centres and peers in preference to online information (Chang et al. 2012). In-country relatives may also be a source of information (Ling & Tran 2015).

Some of the studies identified above are valuable because of their focus on the individual's capacity to deal with difficult circumstances and therefore help to promote agency in dealing with perceived problems. Others are important because they have approached the issue from an alternative perspective, urging that care needs to be taken to avoid 'pathologising' students with a deficit approach (Jacklin and Le Riche 2009) that views the student as a problem or the source of the challenges they face. Focusing instead on support as a key resource for facilitating achievement may result in a type of provision that assists students to flourish in their new surroundings.

These studies show that multiple factors impact on the nature of support provision, including legislated requirements, community attitudes, the culture of the environment and a given institution, and staff beliefs about what is best for the student. It is essential, therefore, that providers of support recognise the multiplicity of factors that are involved in obtaining a degree from an overseas university, and that they are able to understand support from students' perspective and provide the necessary support mechanisms in a contextually appropriate way.

Starting from this assumption that the student perspective is vital, the study described in this paper sought to explore the concept of institutional support from the perspective of students at the selected university in Australia, in order to better understand the relationship between students' articulated wants and needs and the support provided.

The study

The institution where the research took place was an Australian university that recruits high numbers of international students. For the purposes of the study, the term 'international student' refers to what has been described by UNESCO as an 'internationally mobile student', i.e. one 'who has physically crossed an international border between two countries with the objective to participate in educational activities in a destination country, where the destination country is different from his or her country of origin' (UNESCO 2014). This definition was important for the study, as the term is not always consistently applied (Abdullah, Aziz and Ibrahim 2013), and the institution in question has a wide transnational reach, with campuses and partner institutions overseas that also recruit high numbers of students. Only those students who had left their own countries to study in Australia contributed to the research, because the study was predicated on the assumption that the transient nature of overseas study would be relevant to the findings. This group was therefore a subset of the total number of students from outside Australia enrolled at the institution. The primary source countries for the university's students are Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and China.

The institutional 'services' to be included in the study as coming under the category of student support were identified by reference to the university's organisational structure, as they were coordinated and managed by a designated director and listed on a dedicated university 'support' web page. Some additional services that were provided exclusively for international students, which were coordinated by the university's international office, were also included. At the outset of the study and at the data collection stage, these services were listed individually. Once the research data were analysed, as described in more detail below, the support services were grouped into categories according to their primary or stated function. This process resulted in five different categories of service: learning support, administrative support, support for academic development, support for security and well-being and social support. The individual services and categories are listed in Table 1.

Table 1 Categories of support services

Service category	Services included
Learning support	Library, English language, academic learning, bookshop, student equity
Administrative support	International office, residential assistance, student advisors
Support for academic development	First year coordinator, alumni services, career service, student guild, buddy support, mentoring
Support for security and well-being	Campus security, health service, counselling service, disability support, multi-faith officer
Social support	Volunteers, international student societies, sporting clubs and sporting and fitness facilities

The case study approach was selected because of its capacity to probe a 'bounded system' (Stake 1995) such as an institution, in a way that involves in-depth analysis of the phenomenon being investigated (Yin 2009), thus providing 'contextual understanding and meaningfulness' (Greene 2006, p. 94). This overarching approach was operationalised using an inductive, sequential, mixed methods procedure. Mixed methods was selected because of its capacity to minimise the weaknesses inherent in any single paradigm and to combine their strengths (Creswell 2013) and because this approach can lead to a fuller picture of the phenomenon under investigation through its multiple data collection strategies (Teddlie and Tashakkori 2009). The contribution of each phase to the current study is described in more detail below. The choice of a sequential design meant that the data obtained from the initial phases of the study were able to strengthen the foundations of the subsequent stages and validate the overall findings.

Data were collected through document analysis, key informant interviews, focus group interviews and an institution-wide student questionnaire. The initial stage involved analysis of documentary sources from the institution, which provided the essential background information about the support services available, as described above. This was followed by interviews with six key informants in the area of student support, selected for their experience in the area and their availability for the study. The purpose of this step was to identify the issues related to student needs, as perceived by those whose role it was to address them. This was followed by focus group interviews with students: four of them with a total of 19 international student volunteers drawn from the target cohort across the four major teaching faculties of the university (Humanities, Business, Health Sciences and Science and Engineering) and one with five members of the student guild, the student-led organisation that represents students' interests. The data obtained from these stages, in conjunction with the findings from relevant previous research obtained through a review of the scholarly literature, led through inductive analysis to the identification of the themes and sub-themes that were used to inform the final stage: the development, trial and administration to students of an online questionnaire. The systematic sequencing of these earlier stages was intended to maximise understanding of the kinds of provision that were available and to identify staff and student perceptions of the major issues and themes, so that questions about them could be integrated into the final instrument, the large-scale questionnaire, thereby enhancing the robustness of the overall data. The data from staff and students were not intended to be contrastive but were collected to establish a more complete understanding of key issues. In the event, some differences were identified between staff and students, described elsewhere (Roberts and Dunworth 2012), but these kinds of tensions were integrated into the questions that were asked in the final survey.

This paper therefore focuses primarily on the final stage of the study and the results obtained from the final data collection method. As the aim of the study was to contribute to an improved understanding of the support needs of international students at the university and to make recommendations for providing an optimally supportive environment within the research site, that final data collection method, the distribution of an institution-wide student questionnaire, was the major component of the study. It examined the kinds of services that were provided in terms of their reported adequacy and value through the previous data collection stages, the extent to which they were used and the context within which they were provided. It also investigated factors that students identified as enhancing or inhibiting their use of the available services. The questions were framed according to the key notions that had emerged from the earlier stages of the study, and which were considered critical for any consideration of the student support environment: awareness, usefulness, utilisation, accessibility and importance of services as well as barriers to service use.

The questionnaire underwent a number of trials. The first version was distributed to a group of 13 international students who provided feedback on the format and language. A second, online, version was then distributed to a different group of 10 international students and was further revised according to feedback received. To ascertain the reliability of the instrument, a further 15 students agreed to undertake a test/retest exercise, which yielded an agreement rate of 89%. A total of 3105 international students studying internally full time were then identified as the total population of potential respondents for the study. The university gave permission for all the students to be approached through email and given a link to the online survey, provided that they were split into two cohorts and surveyed over two semesters rather than one because of concerns about over-surveying students for research purposes. A total of 395 respondents commenced the survey, but 62 surveys were discarded because they were not completed to any substantial extent. This left a total of 333 surveys that were used in the subsequent analysis.

The instrument comprised ten questions. The first question set the scene for the study by inviting respondents to identify the kinds of issues, if any, that international students face during their overseas sojourn. The questions that followed helped identify respondents' knowledge of the institution's support services those which they considered the most important. There were also items that requested respondents to self-report their awareness of the range of support services offered and to rate their usefulness. Where participants indicated they had not used a service, they were asked to identify the reason from a pre-determined list (which also included an 'other' open-ended option). The data from this part of the questionnaire were analysed using the framework in Fig. 1. The survey also included open-ended questions that invited respondents to comment on such issues as how they viewed the available support services and how those services could be improved. The quotations which appear below to support the findings have been taken from these open-ended responses, except where clearly indicated otherwise. The survey, which is reproduced in Appendix A, concluded with a set of questions that requested demographic data.
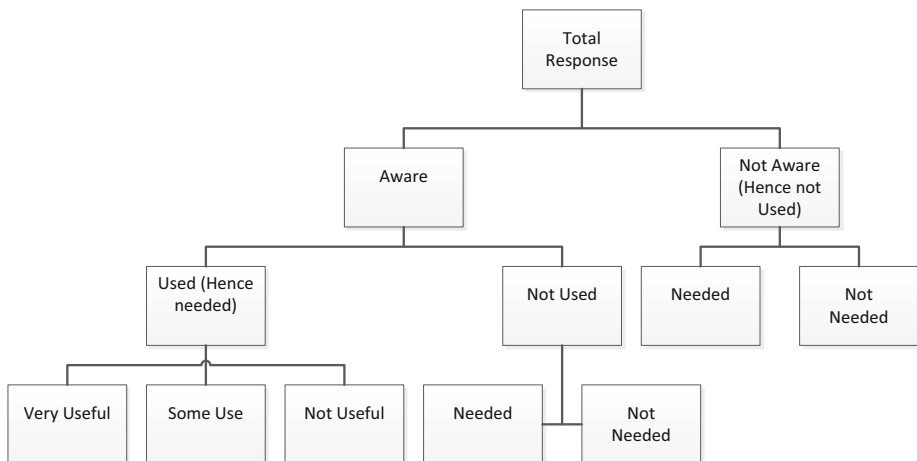

Fig. 1 Framework for analysing survey data (reproduced from Roberts, Boldy and Dunworth 2015)

Findings

The results from the first question that asked respondents to identify the issues that they had experienced showed that the most commonly reported of these concerned language and communication, integration into the academic environment, cultural adjustment and social isolation. Five further items could be grouped under the umbrella of 'security and well-being' if this is interpreted at a broad level (e.g. as in Forbes-Mewett and Nyland 2008). These issues correlated broadly with those identified in a wide range of previous studies, as described in the literature cited above, and provided support for the presumption that the experience of students at the research site would not be atypical of the documented experience of international students elsewhere. They also linked back to some of the matters raised by participants in the focus groups. Table 2 shows the full list of issues identified by respondents, with the number of times each issue was raised. As some respondents listed more than one issue, the total number of responses is greater than the number of respondents.

The identification of these issues contributed towards building a deeper understanding of those factors which could contribute to the kind of organisational culture that would be most conducive to providing support services in an optimally student-centred way. That is, providing an environment that minimised these concerns should be a key element in optimising the student experience. Thus, an effective model of student support provision would take into account these concerns and reduce or eliminate their potentially harmful impact.

Using the framework for analysis illustrated in Fig. 1, the findings are presented below in terms of awareness, use and non-use, and degree of usefulness.

Awareness of services

When it came to awareness, the results indicated that over 90% of the students appeared to be aware of many of the available services, although the level of awareness varied widely according to the type of service. For example, all respondents indicated an awareness of the service offered by the library, while only 46% of the respondents stated that they were aware of a 'buddy system' that was in place. Other services associated with low rates of stated awareness were those provided by the multi-faith officer and the mentoring system. Some services with a high level of awareness, such as the library, were also identified as being both useful and important.

Table 2 Issues identified by respondents (reproduced from Roberts, Boldy and Dunworth 2015)

Issues identified	Responses	% of responses
Language and communication	166	24
Integration into academic environment	118	17
Cultural adjustment	109	16
Social isolation	80	12
Financial problems	59	9
Access to services	54	8
Security and safety	35	5
Accommodation issues	32	5
Discrimination and racism	28	4
Total	681	100

It was not surprising that services such as those provided by the library would be associated with a high level of awareness and use, since they are central to educational development. It did not follow, however, that such highly visible services would necessarily be rated as useful. The rating of the library service as 'very useful' by 78% of the respondents strongly suggested that the service was offered in a way that was more aligned to students' perceived needs than some of the other services. Indeed, one participant noted 'One of the most amazing supports to me is the library support, it's so helpful'. This compared, for example, with 62% of the respondents evaluating the university's international office as of limited use ('some use' or 'not useful'), even though there was a high level of awareness of the services provided by this department and a stated belief in their importance. Open-ended comments and focus group data from participants provided more specific information as to the ways in which some highly visible services were found to be disappointing. For example, one focus group participant stated 'International office found me a house but left me there… no water [and] no electricity in the house'. Another focus group member commented in regard to the same department "the documents that they were preparing for us… they had big big mistakes'.

Use and non-use

The extent to which the support services were used varied considerably. For example, library, bookshop, international office and campus security services were acknowledged as being used by more than 85% of the respondents, while ten of the services appeared to be used by fewer than half of the respondents. The aim of identifying the factors that inhibited the use of support services was addressed in two ways. First, in the survey, respondents who indicated that they had not used an individual service were asked why they had not done so. The results from this process are shown in Table 3. Second, a thematic analysis of the qualitative data collected from the whole study was conducted. From that process, a number of factors impacting on use were identified that complemented and enhanced the data obtained through the relevant item on the questionnaire.

In the survey, respondents were provided with a choice of seven pre-determined reasons, developed from the focus groups, interviews and the initial review of the literature, as to why they had not used a particular service. Respondents were also given an eighth choice entitled 'other' if none of the listed reasons was applicable.

The key to the reasons for the non-use of support services:

1. Have not needed to use service
2. Did not know how to access the service
3. Service was not offered at a time I could attend

Table 3 Reasons given for non-use of support services

Reasons for non-use of service	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
Support for security and well-being	502	40	8	4	10	10	2	22	96
Learning support	272	51	14	1	9	15	-	10	100
Social support	301	74	17	9	19	22	13	61	215
Administrative support	201	26	1	3	6	10	–	5	51
Support for academic development	336	119	16	4	10	26	7	26	208
Total	1612	310	56	21	54	83	22	124	670

4. Unable to obtain an appointment when I needed it
5. I did not feel comfortable using the service in the way it is offered
6. Could not find any information about the service when I needed it
7. Service is not conveniently located
8. Other
9. Total not used but needed (i.e. sum of reasons 2–8)

Table 3 shows that the most common, and unsurprising, reason given for non-use of any service was that it was not required. Other than that, the most frequently selected of the specified reasons was that the respondents did not know how to access the service and that they could not find any information about the service at the time it was required. Comments provided by respondents under the section 'Other' provided a range of additional reasons for the services not being used. The most frequently reported of these were timeliness and cost. Respondents suggested that food outlets were not open at times outside 'office' hours when they were required, for example. In other cases, services required an appointment, and while this was not perceived as an issue per se, concern was expressed that it took time to be able to access those services through the system that was in operation.

With regard to cost, the majority of services offered by the institution were free of charge, but a small number of services did incur a charge. These included sporting clubs, sporting facilities and the student guild, membership of which was optional. This meant that some participants were excluded from the key organisation that relayed the voice of the student to the university's management. As one participant commented: 'I didn't register for the Guild… benefit is not clear and quite expensive for me… I mean they only support members and fee is expensive'.

Usefulness

There appeared to be a clear link between the perceived usefulness of a service and the kind of assistance offered by staff. As indicated earlier, library services were frequently designated as 'useful', a term that was also associated in the data with 'helpful'. The quality of assistance provided by staff was not on the list of provided reasons for non-use, but did appear in a number of open-ended comments and other data. It might be extrapolated that this also lay behind two of the most commonly ticked reasons for non-use: not knowing how to use a service and not being able to find information about it. For example, one participant commented: 'it may well be around how the services are presented and structured that is a bit of a deterrent for use… there should perhaps be more human interface'. When it came to individual assistance, some respondents also commented that university staff lacked the requisite knowledge about international student issues and needs, which impacted on their capacity to be helpful. It also meant that respondents had difficulty accessing information about services when it was needed. This was an issue that had also been raised in the focus groups. One participant, for example, had stated 'friends provide best advice as staff do not seem aware'. Another commented '[staff] are not very aware of the services and systems… so they are not referring us to services or a person who would know'. When asked to suggest ways in which the institution could improve its support services, this factor also appeared, with respondents particularly identifying the need to improve the quality of services (71 respondents) and improve the capacity of staff to help. In short, it appeared that respondents did not have confidence that staff were knowledgeable about the issues they managed, and therefore were not able to address students' needs.

Observations about service provision were also linked to this lack of focus on what students might actually require. Access to services was an issue that was raised by multiple respondents to the survey. The comment by respondents of 'not knowing how to access the service' as a major reason for not using a service applied even when respondents had also stated that they had needed that service. This applied to the quality of information that was provided about a service as well as the availability of that information. For example, respondents criticised the nature of the information that was available, including pre-arrival information, on the basis that it did not help them to learn how to use a particular service or understand how it would be useful. As one participant stated: 'It wasn't difficult to find services… they just didn't offer the help I needed so they weren't helpful'.

Discussion and conclusion

The findings indicated that the relationship between student awareness, need, use, accessibility and perceived usefulness of the range of support services offered by the institution was not a straightforward one. Awareness did not necessarily translate into use, even when need was a mediating factor, and use of a given service did not mean that participants found it useful. It should be stressed that not all respondents in the study were unhappy with the services available. More than half of all participants expressed the belief that services were appropriate and valued them, but many did identify the need for improvements in the environment and the usefulness of the services that existed. Indeed, many of the findings support the arguments that have been put forward elsewhere (Bartram 2009; Smith 2007) that the current corporate managerial culture within higher education has adversely impacted on the concept of student support both as a principle and in practice. Support has shifted from academic staff to a range of professional service providers who offer generic services to the student body as a whole. Staff student relationships have, as part of a marketised, more commercial approach, become one of provider and consumer. This was also noted by Ziguras and Harwood (2011, p. 35), reporting on a project that sought to identify good practice in student service provision in higher education in Australia, who stated that 'a steady stream of students complained that their education providers were treating them as customers and were indifferent to their welfare'.

The university in this study demonstrated through its publicly available documents that it was concerned to meet legislative requirements and address student needs through the provision of a range of support services, but action plans and vision statements did not incorporate statements about enhancing the experience of students for whom the services were intended and did not indicate that students' own voices would be taken into account in improving the ways in which services were provided. Nor did it report that staff development would be a feature of this, although the need for staff training to update skills and knowledge was a 'consistent finding' (p. 35) in Ziguras and Harwood's (2011) study.

Kingston and Forland (2008) and Jacklin and Le Riche (2009) have criticised the corporate culture of higher education and argue that since culture is central to providing support and support services, institutions need to engage in a cultural shift that focuses on supporting the learning needs of students. In the current study, perhaps the single greatest issue to emerge was the absence of a culture that was centred on students, as it encompasses many of the other

concerns that were identified. The provision of services that genuinely focused on student need would need to address some of the key concerns expressed by participants about the manner in which services were provided and would need to be underpinned by explicitly articulated values that could help staff conceptualise a culture of support that would result in an enhanced experience for students. While the articulation of values is largely absent from the literature on international higher education in Australia produced by government offices and peak educational bodies, it does feature more strongly in the UK, for example, in the Internationalising Higher Education Framework produced by the Higher Education Academy (Higher Education Academy 2014) which lists such values as respect, equity and openness, although even this document notes that 'its content and style is deliberately aspirational' (Higher Education Academy 2014, p. 2).

What this study has found, then, is that student support services, while technically adequate in many ways and perceived by a large number of students as satisfactory, were not provided within a cultural context that promoted the kind of critique that could begin to raise awareness of and therefore potentially address the structural barriers that students encountered. What is proposed is a reframing of student support that draws on these findings as well as the literature cited earlier in this paper, which can lead to the instantiation of practices that are consistent and reflect the forms of provision which the students in this study identified as of value. The first key element of this reframing, as observed by Jacklin and Le Riche (2009), Smit (2012), and Smith (2007), is that the goal for student support should be an institutional provision of resources and information designed to enhance students' development and quality of experience within the context of the specific institutional environment, and not on addressing perceived student shortcomings; in other words, a shift from an individual to a social view of student support. The second element involves a movement from the concept of expert provider addressing the needs of the novice user to one of shared responsibility, as described by Buultjens and Robinson (2011). In this study, most respondents were aware of the support available, and the literature has shown that students seek out support from multiple sources beyond formal provision (Ling and Tran 2015), which demonstrates students' agentive capabilities and suggests that the inclusion of students in identifying the approach to support would contribute towards building a genuinely supportive culture.

As discussed in the findings section above, the student participants in the study identified a number of key elements either directly or indirectly (by noting their absence) that would facilitate access to or promote use of the support services provided. Through their identification of the major issues confronting them and their comments in focus groups and the open-ended sections of the questionnaire, they also indicated the kind of values that would help produce the culture of support that they desired. These findings have been incorporated in Fig. 2, which illustrates how a reframed student support service might be actualised.

Within the reframed approach, students are clearly placed at the centre of support activities. The inner circle lists the factors which participants in this study identified as being of importance when they seek out or access a support service. These, therefore, have been selected as the qualities that under this approach would drive the way in which the service was provided. The outer circle describes the values that would underpin the kind of support culture which could ensure that international students had adequate support to manage many of the issues that they encounter during their period of study.
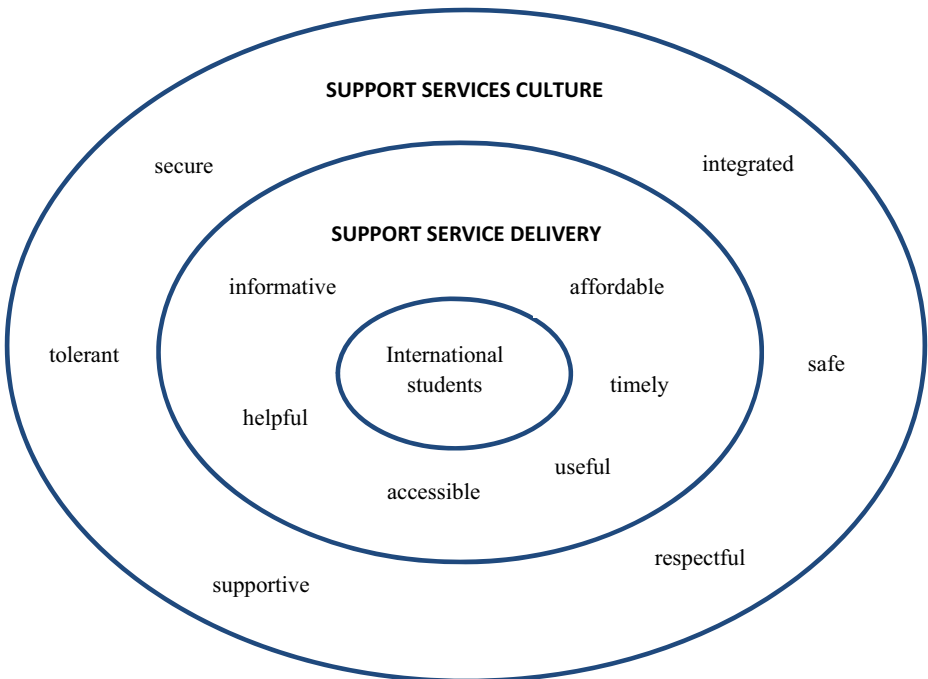
Fig. 2 Reframed approach to student support

   The study has contributed to our understanding of student support services for international students in Australian higher education in a number of ways. First, it supports the findings of previous studies in relation to the factors that students identify as influencing their support needs. Second, while numerous studies have reported on the range and type of student services that are required, this study had uniquely investigated not only whether the range of services link to requirements, but how the effectiveness of the support services provided are impacted by the manner in which they are provided and the culture that underpins their delivery. Third, it has put forward a proposal for reframing student support provision that is solidly based on empirical evidence derived from students themselves as well as the research literature. Finally, the study provides a baseline for further research into this area. As a case study conducted at a single institution, it cannot claim to be applicable outside the location where it was conducted, but it does provide a body of evidence on which future studies might build for comparison or contrast. For example, the organisational structure of providers and their roles (e.g. the international office) will vary across contexts and borders, which is likely to have an effect on the nature of the support and the approach to its provision, and a study that examined the same issues in relation to undergraduate students might identify very different patterns of awareness, use and usefulness. In addition, while the current study did involve interviews with staff, the resultant data were used to identify themes and inform the formation of the questions for the student survey, the analysis of which led to the findings reported in this paper. Staff perspectives do not, therefore, feature in this paper, but further research that explicitly sought to compare the views of staff and students might help strengthen our understanding of how student support could be further enhanced.

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