SUPPORTING INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS in HIGHER EDUCATION: a COMPARATIVE EXAMINATION of APPROACHES in THE U.K. and U.S.A

ABSTRACT

This essay offers a critical examination of the ways in which international students are supported by the variety of systems commonly in place at universities in the U.K. and U.S.A – two countries which attract large numbers of students from overseas. While acknowledging the difficulty of defining the term 'support', the article describes, compares and critiques the approaches deployed in both nations. Though certain broad, structural similarities are identified, the authors discuss how a shared neo-liberal instrumentality guiding student support leads to differently inflected institutional responses in both countries. Consideration is also afforded to the extent to which differences in 'national' values and beliefs about higher education might be implicated in these differing approaches, and finally, to what lessons might be learned from these comparisons.

INTRODUCTION

Increased opportunities for student mobility have led to growing numbers of international students at universities in many parts of the world, perhaps particularly in countries like the U.K. and the U.S.A, where the perceived currency of improved English language competence as a result of residence and study acts as a major draw. Such students are often considered to bring with them additional support needs as they adjust to new academic and socio-cultural environments. This article aims to compare the ways in which these needs are addressed at U.K. and U.S. universities, while also examining the relative merits and demerits of the respective approaches. In the process, an additional attempt is made to identify the ways in which different institutional and 'national' concerns/values articulate with - and perhaps even account for - different approaches in the two countries. Finally, the article will consider what lessons concerning support practices for international students might be learned from these comparisons, particularly in the current financial climate where economic and cost-efficiency concerns place such issues as support under increased scrutiny.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT at U.K. UNIVERSITIES

First, two issues must be acknowledged – "that research on student support systems is limited" (Dhillon et al, 2008:284) and that, perhaps as a result, there is some difficulty in talking about a national pattern in student support – Bailey (2006) refers to the lack of integrated policies on international students in Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) in the U.K., resulting thus in considerable institutional variation in practice. Furthermore, there is a lack of agreement on what constitutes support and the factors which motivate it. Bartram (2009) discusses three differing motives for supporting students – an instrumental view, driven by recruitment targets and consumerist priorities; a humanistic

view, motivated by holistic concerns for the development of individuals; and a therapeutic view, based on overly developed concerns for 'needy' students' self-esteem. With regard to international students, the author suggests that support has often been driven by the therapeutic approach, though instrumental motives are perhaps even more prominent in institutional thinking. Nearly twenty years ago, Makepeace and Baxter (1990) referred to the profit motive through international student recruitment, while more recently, Tian and Lowe (2009:659) are explicit about the "economic and financial rationales" associated with this aim. Rushton (2006) comments on how the financial imperative has been further strengthened by the need to compensate for dwindling domestic recruitment. Devlin (2006b:42) explains how this connects with support priorities:

> "Our challenge is to ensure that they continue to want to come here, which means our programmes must be appropriate in terms of content, delivery and evaluation, and so too must our support services."

When it comes to exactly what forms of support different groups of international students require, there is further disagreement – traditionally, a deficit model has dominated, highlighting the barriers and obstacles they face because of background differences and the additional support needs that result. Such a view is perhaps evident in Rushton et al's description below:

> "…international students present a suite of problems to teaching, administrative, resource and technical staff over and above those associated with 'home' students. Such problems include not just language difficulties but also cultural and social aspects, which provide a real challenge to university staff." (2006:14)

Admittedly, there are clear yet ambiguous tensions between acknowledging differences in an attempt to support equity of experience on the one hand, and overstating and amplifying difference on the other. Generally speaking, recent years have seen a greater keenness to underplay these differences and move away from prejudiced views of a diminished capacity among a homogenised group of 'others', arguing that the challenges international students often face are the same as – or a perhaps magnified version of - those faced by many domestic students, and that a greater commonality of experience exists than was often thought.

For all these tensions and different viewpoints, it is nonetheless possible to describe the support systems available commonly in HEIs in the U.K.. MacInnis et al (2000) refer to the general support services available to all students in the U.K., including international students. These include academic support mechanisms (English language tuition, study skills development, library services, academic counselling), practical support (financial advice, careers services, catering facilities, childcare) and social/personal support (personal tuition, counselling, health advice, sports and clubs, Students' Union). Though the authors themselves do not categorise the support available in this way, it is easy to see how the forms of support described fit the three categories identified by Bartram (2008)

corresponding to the types of needs most expressed by international students – academic, practical and socio-cultural.

Dhillon et al (2008) discuss how the above support mechanisms are generally provided at two levels in most U.K. universities – at an institutional level by a range of centrally provided services (e.g. careers advice, counselling, catering, etc) and at a departmental level (e.g. study skills). One key part of departmental support relates to the personal tutor system – "a regular support mechanism for university students in the U.K." (p.283). The authors examined student views on the effectiveness of these support services at one English university and found that "the provision of support facilities cannot guarantee an effective support system" (p.283). They found that wide variation existed in students' awareness of and levels of satisfaction with available services. Although their research was based on U.K. students' views, it seems unlikely that international students' experiences should differ markedly. In fact, Sovic's study offers some evidence that this is indeed the case:

> "University of the Arts London, like most U.K. universities, has considerable publicity around all the facilities and support available to international students including induction, website, leaflets, and posters. However, students in our sample tended to know very little about what was on offer." (2008:36)

For such services to be effective, she argues that the provision of information on these issues by conventional means is not sufficient, especially when targeted at students from cultures and backgrounds where such services might be unusual or even unknown. Dhillon et al also argue that if student support is to be genuinely effective, it must be motivated by humanistic rather than instrumental concerns:

> "…to be effective, it needs to be motivated by a sincere concern for students' development, rather than merely being a response to external measures of quality assurance." (2008: 284)

In terms of specialist services for international students, most U.K. universities have some form of 'international office' that organises pre-arrival documentation and advice, induction and orientation, different forms of additional English language provision, alongside occasional trips and social events. Though these may often be effective in meeting international students' practical and certain social/academic needs, they sometimes fall short in fulfilling their integrational needs, given that many of these support mechanisms are targeted exclusively at students from outside the U.K.. The same can also be said for co-national peer networks in place at some institutions, especially those that recruit large numbers of students from a restricted number of countries (Maundeni, 2001). Sovic's (2008:34) study reflected these concerns:

> "…it appears from student responses that some strategies for dealing with the substantial number of international students are unintentionally

making the situation worse. It appears that special orientation sessions for international students set the tone for what can be become a pattern of separate treatment."

In fact, a key issue emerging from the above study was the need for institutions to play a more active part in the social integration of international students, in part through developing a greater institutional commitment to collaborative learning which, Sovic argues, "presents the most obvious institutionalised opportunity for social interaction" (2008:35). Greater encouragement for international students to participate in Students' Unions was also identified by the author as a key concern, since findings indicated a dominant view of such organisations being largely for home students.

To address this issue, Devlin (2006a: 4) argues that "it has been the experience of this author that you have to take extra steps". She goes on to describe three specialist initiatives available for international students at her institution – an international student forum, which brings students together for a weekly meeting with various speakers and contributors; a scheme which finds placements for international students in local schools; and a social forum where international students join domestic students and local residents for discussions.

Having thus established an overview of some key support concerns and systems for international students at U.K. HEIs, we will now examine these elements in the American context, before proceeding to an analysis of what might be gleaned from this comparison, in terms of the ways in which the issue is inflected by different institutional and wider viewpoints/values.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT at U.S. UNIVERSITIES

As outlined in the introduction, international students have been a large source of income in many countries (Institute of International Education - IIE, 2009) and the efforts of U.S. universities to increase international enrolment have also been largely driven by financial motives. Recruitment efforts in recent years have tended to focus on Asia, where a middle class market of self-funding students has seen considerable growth (A.M. 2009). Alongside financial recruitment incentives, however, institutions and studies identify the positive social influence of international students on home students in higher education. The Institute of International Education (2005) claims that "international students in U.S. classrooms widen the perspectives of their U.S. classmates, contribute to vital research activities, strengthen the local economies in which they live, and build lasting ties between their home countries and the United States" (IIE, 2005:1). Ping (1999) goes on to suggest that university departments should "use the international students on campus to educate American students to the new global reality" (1999:14).

Though there is little literature on support services for international students in American universities, a study by Terano (2007) shows that commonly available services focus on English language competence and facilitating

social networks with other international and home students. Support services are often subsumed in student affairs departments who administer the main auxiliary services for all students (Blimling and Whitt, 1999). Matters relating to international students are handled by international offices, which provide immigration assistance and advice; many also provide study abroad services to domestic students. Counselling services provide additional support tailored to international students, often making use of specially trained staff to assist students from diverse cultural backgrounds (Jacob, 2001).

The key way in which U.S. universities support international students is arguably through facilitating their active involvement in building student communities and associations. Building communities allows students to provide and develop peer support mechanisms, to engage in meaningful activities, and to take the initiative in assisting others. Promoting social integration and building communities have been part of student affairs' efforts in enriching students' learning experiences over the last few decades (American College Personnel Association, 1994). Brazzell and Reisser (1999) characterise supportive and inclusive community as being open, diverse, accessible, moral, and respectful of individual differences. They also recognise that the relationships students develop among themselves are important (Astin, 1993). Tinto (1993) argues that an institutional commitment to social integration is instrumental in positively influencing students' persistence and promoting multicultural understanding. Multicultural competency is in fact often regarded as an important element of college education, preparing students to function successfully in America's pluralistic society (Brazzell and Reisser, 1999; Hanasab and Tidwell, 2002).

Student communities can vary from informal student groups to established group activities, which include student government, cross-curricular clubs and activities, and fraternities and sororities (Brazzell and Reisser, 1999). Student groups that are formally recognized by the institution often need to meet certain criteria relating to structure, constitution and management, and primarily aim to help students develop a sense of self-authorship and responsibility. Self-authorship, according to Baxter Magolda (1999), indicates taking responsibility for oneself and others and being able to adjust to social changes. This is considered an important aspect of student education in American colleges as Baxter Magolda describes:

> "If college graduates are to manage their affairs and become contributing members of contemporary American society, they must develop the capacity for self-authorship and lifelong learning required in a complex world" (1999:30)

The notion of self-authorship or individual responsibility is widely acknowledged as part of U.S. academic and indeed social culture, and has been identified as a particular cultural barrier by some international students (Robinson, 1992). This value might no doubt also have influenced student services approaches as "the philosophies and values of student affairs represent the social context in which administrators have practiced their craft" (Komives et al, 2003: 102).

Many international students in U.S. universities engage in the kinds of student activities described above, which may consist of both single and multiple ethnic groups or nationalities. They provide events, programs and services that provide spaces for peer support relating to social, cultural and practical needs. A Chinese student organisation at the University of Pittsburgh, for example, hosts programs throughout the year and provides pre-arrival support for students (CSSA, 2009). The University of Kansas works with students through its International Student Ambassador Program to recruit students overseas and assist international students after their arrival at the University (ISAP, 2004).

BENEFITS and CHALLENGES

This approach of encouraging community building through group activities and helping students take initiative in addressing their own needs is useful from different perspectives. Firstly, locating support within and among the student body could be argued to be a way of enabling student needs to be identified and addressed more accurately or efficiently, given the insider expertise, immediacy and 'groundedness' of peer networks. The potential this presents for genuine inter-cultural learning to take place, especially where peer support networks bring together multicultural groupings, is perhaps an additional benefit. Secondly, from an institutional point-of-view, this may also reduce pressures and the demands on (and perhaps indeed for the size of) student affairs departments. Furthermore, it provides students with the educational experience of collaborating in and managing group activities, while culturally familiar environments can have the advantage of making international students feel safer and supported. Despite these benefits, however, there are certain challenges which will be discussed in more detail below: the difficulty of involving non-traditional age students in social activities; the availability of ethnicity-focused student communities, and the potential to segregate international students from the rest of the university community.

Even for American undergraduates in general, inclusive community building has been difficult as students have become increasingly pressured to compete for grades, prepare for their future employment and spend large amounts of time in front of their computers (Brazzell and Reisser, 1999). These issues apply equally to international students, perhaps especially those on postgraduate programmes (IIE, 2008), who are under pressure to complete their degrees in a limited amount of time, meet the expectations of their families in their home countries, and are constantly challenged by an unfamiliar social and cultural environment (Dozier, 2001; Jacob, 2001). Age may present a particular challenge given that the majority of international students in the U.S.A are graduate students (IIE, 2008) and are often older than their home equivalents (Dozier, 2001). In general, traditional-age students appear to be more involved in student affairs services than non-traditional-age students, who are:

"…less likely to be interested in joining clubs and organisations or in having the university provide social activities for them. Instead, they are likely to be focused on obtaining the degree that would lead them to career advancement…" (Blimling and Whitt, 1999:3)

The second issue is that the availability of ethnic student communities or groups can depend on the ethnic groups or countries of origins represented in the institution. For example, Indian and Chinese students may easily find peer groups both in and outside their university campus while Mongolian students might struggle to meet compatriots.

Another challenge relates to the difficulty that some international students have integrating with home students, a phenomenon identified in a number of different countries. Tian and Lowe (2009: 672), for example, discuss perceptions of deliberate social exclusion and "perceived indifference or hostility from the host community." Similarly, Ward (2001) found in her literature review that despite international students' interest in interacting with home students, the latter are often less enthusiastic. In a case study examining social and cultural participation in the United States, Terano (2007) also found that international graduate students were interested in interacting with home students but, interestingly, the level of interactions and the nature of relationships they wished to form were more limited - survey respondents expressed their interest in activities such as language exchange, for example, but rarely in sharing living space or visiting homes to share holiday celebrations, etc. Many of them commented that they interacted with home students because they felt the need to learn the language and become familiar with U.S. culture but preferred to communicate with co-national peers:

"Many of those interviewed expressed that they interact with Americans, classmates, or others because 'they have to' but they interact with co-nationals because 'they are like my family' […]." (Terano, 2007:121)

As suggested, if international student organisations are developed solely on the basis of their countries of origin or ethnicity, those who do not have a large representation could be excluded from these communities. Therefore, developing student communities may reduce integration between university communities - both between international and home students, as well as between international students of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSIONS

Several issues arise from this review of support mechanisms for international students in both countries. Clearly, there are a number of structural similarities. These include institutional provision for language support, alongside the availability of dedicated offices and departments that deal with issues of practical pre-arrival advice and on-course guidance and counselling. Both systems are similarly confronted with the challenge of finding ways to

resolve the tension between segregationist/integrationist support policies – acknowledging the particular needs international students may have can at times result in support initiatives that separate rather than include. Though this may frustrate some students' needs, as emerges from the above, integrating with home students is not necessarily a high priority for all international students.

A further similarity relates to the motivation behind support in both countries – clearly, the profit motive is not insignificant in institutional desires both to recruit and retain students from overseas. Yet this common commercial instrumentality appears to create rather differently inflected institutional responses in the two countries. There is perhaps some room to argue that the fee-paying nature of many international students in the U.K. encourages an institutional view of them as important 'client-consumers', thus casting both parties in a client-provider relationship. Against this contractually conditioned background, institutions see themselves obliged to offer their customers a range of services, hence the picture of U.K. provision which emerges above – a vertical arrangement, where support services are delivered by the provider to the clients. Relatively few attempts are made to initiate more horizontal mechanisms, optimising the knowledge and skills of existing international cohorts to provide grassroots level support. The above analysis would suggest that this is a key element of support programmes at U.S. universities. One interpretation might be that the appeal of such mechanisms relates to their cost-effectiveness – unpaid international students become the prime 'institutional' supporters and thereby lessen the need for more expansive departments of salaried staff – maximising income by facilitating low-cost but effective support.

A more generous interpretation, however, which may not necessarily preclude the commercial rationale above, perhaps relates to different concerns or values more prevalent in the U.S.A than the U.K. As discussed above, the importance attached to voluntary community involvement in America has a long tradition, and student affairs organisations promote student service to society as part of their values (Evans and Reason, 2001). This orientation is today further legitimised through its close affiliation with the neo-liberal rhetoric of employability, anchored in widespread awareness of labour market competition and the increasing need to demonstrate edge, initiative and professional skills - working independently and in teams, communication, leadership, fundraising, organisational management, etc. As a result, it is possible that the predominance of such cultural values in the U.S. account to some extent for the development of the different support practices described above.

The current financial climate is pushing universities across the world to consider cost efficiency in all areas of their operations; reflecting on the above, it could be argued that the horizontal support mechanisms favoured by American universities are not only cost-effective/cost-reductive in operation, but can also be instrumental in providing quality and meaningful support systems that nurture a range of positive personal and professional qualities by encouraging student independence and self-authorship. In this sense, U.K.

universities might reflect on the extent to which such 'horizontal' practices could be developed and promoted within U.K. HEIs, notwithstanding the limitations that may be entailed, as noted above, and the arguably understated cultural precedent in a system more used to vertical arrangements. A further potential complication relates to urban universities where student populations may be more likely to live off campus than on. More detailed research would also seem needed in terms of determining which forms of support for international students are best provided separately or collectively – given that many of the support needs noted by international students are often merely a magnification of those for domestic students (Jacob, 2001). This final point would appear all the more worthy of consideration, given that the above suggests that inter-cultural understanding leading to genuine mutual growth may not automatically occur as a result of contact, highlighting thus the need for carefully considered preparation and training in this field.

References:

A. M. (2009). Stats Watch - International Students Still Flock to U.S. *University Business* 11(0), 2009-0112:1, ISSN: 10976671, p.11.

American College Personnel Association (1994). *The Student Learning Imperative: Implications for Student Affairs.* Washington, D.C.: American College Personnel Association.

Astin, A.W. (1993) *What Matters in College?* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bailey, C. (2006) Supporting international students in higher education: key issues and recommendations for further research; CELT Learning and Teaching Projects 2005/2006, University of Wolverhampton; http://hdl.handle.net/2436/7590

Bartram, B. (2008) Supporting international students in higher education: constructions, cultures and clashes, *Teaching in Higher Education,* 113, 6, pp. 657-668

Bartram, B. (2009) Student support in higher education: understandings, implications and challenges, *Higher Education Quarterly*, 63, 3, pp. 308-314

Baxter Magolda, M.B. (1999). Engaging Students in Active Learning. In *Good Practice in Student Affairs.* Jossey-Bass. pp.67-89.

Blimling and Whitt (1999). 'Identifying the Principles that Guide Student Affairs Practice.' In *Good Practice in Student Affairs.* Jossey-Bass. pp.1-20.

Brazzell, J.S. and Reisser, L. (1999). 'Creating Inclusive Communities.' In *Good Practice in Student Affairs.* Jossey-Bass. pp.157-177.

Chinese Students and Scholars Association at University of Pittsburgh (CSSA) (2009). *Welcome to University of Pittsburgh.* Retrieved September 13, 2009, from http://www.pittcssa.net.

Devlin, S. (2006a) *Supporting International Students' Integration into the Learning and Wider Communities*, Higher Education Academy

Devlin, S. (2006b) University of Sunderland retention initiatives for international students, in: Rushton, B.S., Cook, A. & Macintosh, K.A. (2006) *Supporting students: international students – The Star Project*, University of Coleraine, Ulster

Dhillon, J., McGowan, M., & Wang, H. (2008) How effective are institutional and departmental systems of student support? Insights from an investigation into the support available to students at one English university*, Research in Post Compulsory Education*, 13, 3, pp. 281-293

Dozier, S.B. (2001) 'Undocumented and Documented International Students: A Comparative Study of Their Academic…' *Community College Review*, 29(2). pp.43-54.

Evans, N.J., & Reason, R.D. (2001). Guiding principles: A review and analysis of student affairs philosophical statements. *Journal of College Student Development*, 42, pp. 359-377.

Hanassab, S. & Tidwell, R. (2002) International Students in Higher Education: Identification of Needs and Implications for Policy and Practice, Journal of Studies in International Education, 6(4), Association for Studies in International Education.

Institute of International Education (IIE) (2005). International Student Enrollments Declined by 2.4% in 2003/04, Open Doors 2004: *International Students in the U.S*., Embargoed for release November 10, 2004, [On-line]: http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=50137.

IIE (2009) *The Economic Impact of International Students from a Cross-National Perspective.* NAFSA 2009 presentation. [On-line]: http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/file_depot/0-10000000/0-10000/3390/folder/84965/NAFSA+2009+Econ+Impact+Session.pdf.

International Student Ambassador Program, University of Kansas (ISAP) (2004). *About ISAP.* Retrieved September 13, 2009 from http://groups.ku.edu/~isap/about.htm.

Jacob, E.J. (2001) 'Using Counsellor Training and Collaborative Programming Strategies in Working with International Students.' *Journal of Multicultural Counselling & Development,* 29(1). pp.73-88.

MacInnis, C., James, R. & Hartley, R. (2000) Trends in the first year experience in Australian universities. In: *Impact of student support services*

and academic development programmes on student outcomes in undergraduate tertiary study: a synthesis of the research. Report to the ministry of education in New Zealand, eds. T. Prebble, H. Hargreaves, L. Leach, K. Naidoo, G. Suddaby & N. Zepke, 2004. Part IV: 51-86

Makepeace, E. & Baxter, A. (1990) Overseas students and examination failure: a national study, *Journal of International education*, 1, 1, pp. 36-48

Maundeni, T. (2001) The Role of social networks in the adjustment of African students to British society: students' perceptions, *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 4 (3), pp. 253-276

Ping, Charles (1999) 'An Expanded Role for Student Affaires' in *New Direction for Student Services*, no.86, Summer 1999: Jossey-Bass.

Robinson, J. (1992) *International Students and American University Culture: Adjustment Issues*, Paper presented at the Washington Area Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (WATESOL) Annual Convention (Arlington, VA)

Rushton, B.S., Cook, A. & Macintosh, K.A. (2006) *Supporting students: international students – The Star Project*, University of Coleraine, Ulster

Sosic, S (2008) *Lost in Transition? The International Students' Experience Project*, Centre for Excellence in teaching and Learning: University of the Arts, London

Terano, M (2007). Effective Programming for International Students Base on Their Perceived Social and Cultural Needs (Doctoral dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2007). *University of Pittsburgh Electronic Theses and Dissertations (ETD),* 12062007-133251.

Tian, M. & Lowe, J. (2009) Existentialist internationalisation and the Chinese student experience in English universities, *Compare*, 39, 5, pp.659-676

Tinto, V. (1993). *Leaving college: Rethinking the causes and cures of student attrition* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Ward, C. (2001) *The impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions.* Prepared for the Export Education Policy Project of the New Zealand Ministry of Education. [On-line]:
http://www.educationcounts.govt.nz/publications/international

Submission title:

Supporting international students in Higher Education: a comparative
examination of approaches in the UK and USA

Word count: 3,567

Lead author:

Dr Brendan Bartram, University of Wolverhampton, UK

School of Education,
Gorway Road,
Walsall,
WS1 3BD
UK

Tel: ++ 44 1902 323297
Email: b.bartram@wlv.ac.uk

Co-author Dr Mayumi Terano, email: mayumi.terano@gmail.com

Biographical details:

Dr Brendan Bartram is Senior Lecturer in Education Studies at the University
of Wolverhampton. His research interests include foreign language
education, comparative education and international education programmes.
Recent publications have examined international students in higher education
and school pupils' attitudes to foreign language learning.

Mayumi Terano, Ph.D., is a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute of
Education, University of London. She is also a visiting scholar at the Institute
of International Studies in Education, University of Pittsburgh. Her current
areas of research include the social and cultural participation of diverse
student populations and civic engagement of higher education institutions.