Chapter 12
Harnessing International Experience to Improve International Student Employability

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Abstract In a climate where the export of higher education has become a major industry for a number of English-speaking countries, internationalisation of university as well as curriculum has become a significant agenda on the strategic plans of many universities. Internationalisation, however, has proved to be a multi-faceted, ambiguous and sometimes confusing concept in the context of higher education. Despite such a broad understanding, improving the achievement and satisfaction of international students has proved to be a common thread among all the interpretations of the concept. An exploration of the internationalisation is carried out based on the personal experience of the author as an international student in his early career development, as well as his academic and professional experience in three continents. Over the last 25 years, as an academic in Australia, he has taken various initiatives to improve the university experience of international students enrolled in the degrees offered in his school and university. A background on the concept of internationalisation is provided. The critical role of academic staff in facilitating the smooth transition of international students to the new culture and educational environment is highlighted. The importance of providing extra support for international students and adjustment to both the content and delivery of the curriculum is underlined. As an example, a recent experience of the author in developing and delivering a special subject on employability assets and communications for international students is described and the outcomes are examined.

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12.1   Introduction

As far back as the fourth century B.C., people have been travelling to other lands in pursuit of knowledge from renowned masters (Cardinale 2000). One of the very early universities established in the fifth century A.C. in the Persian Empire, the Academy of Gundishapur, had an international focus. It provided training in medicine, philosophy, theology and science and welcomed physicians and scholars from Greece and India (Hill 1993) to conduct teaching and research at the academy. The academy hosted the first medical symposium in 550 in which hundreds of physicians and religious figures from different countries participated. The King of Iran, Anushiravan welcomed the Nestorian physicians and Greek philosophers of the famous School of Edessa to work at Gundishapur after it was closed by the order of the Byzantine emperor.

Development of technology and its impact on transportation significantly changed the scale of academic migration in the early 1900s as more people could travel internationally for education. In the early 1980s, universities in industrialised countries went through a series of economic restructuring and deregulation. This forced the higher education providers to become more commercially oriented and to set up fee-charging degrees for foreign students (Chadee and Naidoo 2008). The first major influx of international students to the English speaking countries including the UK, US, Canada and Australia took place in the early 1980s (Kaufman and Goodman 2002).

This phenomenon has continued with a steady pace through the 1990s and 2000s to the extent that the export of higher education has become a new developed area of international trade. According to OECD's estimation, the higher education trade accounts for 3 % of global service exports (Vincent-Lancrin 2005). In this climate, internationalisation of the universities as well as the curriculum has become a significant agenda on the strategic plans of the universities in exporting countries. Internationalisation, however, has proved to be a multi-faceted, ambiguous and sometimes confusing concept in the context of higher education. No matter how the term is interpreted, a number of objectives are pursued to improve the levels of achievement and satisfaction of international students. In some countries like Australia, where undertaking a university degree improves the chance of international students to get permanent residency, internationalisation requires deeper scrutiny.

The author, currently an academic at University of Wollongong, Australia, draws on his personal experience as an international student in his early career development as well as his academic and professional experience in three continents to reflect on the issue of internationalisation. Over the last 25 years, as an academic in Australia, he has taken various initiatives to improve the university experience of international students enrolled in the degrees offered in his school and university. After a background on internationalisation, the paper highlights the critical role of academic staff in facilitating a smooth transition for international students to the new culture and educational environment. This will require providing extra support for international students and adjustment to both the content and delivery of the

curriculum. As an example, a recent experience of the author in developing and delivering a subject on employability assets and communications skills for international students will be shared and the outcomes produced so far will be reported.

The chapter is organised as follows: Initially, a background on internationalisation based on the literature will be provided. The relationship of internationalisation in higher education with globalisation will be explored and various interpretations of this process and its associated activities will be reviewed.

The next section highlights the role of academics in internationalisation and argues that the process of internationalisation in higher education will not be complete unless the nature of curriculum and its delivery are reviewed to embrace the needs and background of international students.

The social and academic needs of international students identified based on the personal experience of the author are addressed in Sect. 12.4. It is also shown how such experience has been leading the author to introduce various innovations to facilitate the smooth transition of international students into university life.

In the final section of the chapter, the author describes one of his initiatives to address the challenges faced by international students. An overview of the work conducted to design and introduce a subject in a Master Coursework degree to enhance communication and 'soft' skills of international students will be provided.

The chapter concludes by drawing some conclusions.

12.2   Exploring Internationalisation

Internationalisation has become a key activity in higher education. Although internationalisation takes place within the context of globalisation, they are distinctively different phenomena.

According to Knight (1993), globalisation represents "the flow of technology, economy, knowledge, people, values, ideas" across national borders. Particularly, in the twenty-first century, the forces of globalisation are opening higher education to a greater international involvement (Altback and Knight 2007). The globalisation process has already produced significant outcomes in higher education including global research integration, international labour market for scientists and scholars, and international publishing companies. Adoption of English as an international language for the global higher education sector and ICT as a powerful tool for communication among scholars and scientists, have significantly increased the pace and impact of globalisation.

Internationalisation of higher education is a systematic and ongoing effort to make tertiary education responsive to the constraints, challenges and opportunities offered by globalisation (Van der Wende 1996). Such definition of internationalisation is broad but at the same time subject to diverse interpretations and applications depending on the context, motivation and specific objectives pursued by different universities. In addition, the term internationalisation has been interpreted and

implemented in a variety of forms. Some universities have defined it as integrating international content and perspectives in the curriculum in order to provide a better understanding of global cultures and circumstances (Groennings and Wiley 1990). According to Thune and Welle-Strand (Thune and Welle-Strand 2005), internationalisation consists of activities that contribute to recruitment of international students, enhancing the teaching and learning processes for international students, providing more internationally oriented course content and resources, recruiting international academic staff, and establishing offshore campuses.

Van Vught et al. (2002) have identified the following activities and processes as major components of internationalisation:

- Transnational mobility of staff and students
- Internationalisation of curricula, policies and procedures
- International cooperation in the areas of research and teaching
- Emergence of international university consortia
- Cross-border delivery of education

Internationalisation in higher education can be motivated by political, academic, cultural/social or economic rationales (Qiang 2003). The desire for national security and dominance by ideologically influencing other countries is an important aspect of the political rationale. The goal of achieving international standards in teaching and research towards higher quality is among the academic rationale. The cultural/social rationale advocates the preservation of language and cultural diversity. Finally, the economic rationale is a response to market forces towards either increasing the revenue of an institution by attracting foreign students or enhancing national competitiveness by developing the required human resources through higher education.

Internationalisation in higher education was driven by political, cultural and academic factors until the 1990s. This is reflected in the spirit of cooperation and support that could be observed in the initiatives that took place during that period. On the contrary, the present internationalisation undertakings are primarily driven by economic factors and competition. In such a climate, the primary challenge is to ensure that the desire for attracting more students and generating income does not compromise the integrity and the quality of the curriculum and delivery. On the other hand, more effort is required to ensure that the necessary mentoring and monitoring processes are in place to cater for the educational needs of the increased number of international students.

12.3   Academics and Internationalisation

As demonstrated in the previous section, the scope of internationalisation is quite broad and many stakeholders at different levels should effectively and harmoniously interact to drive the process for a successful outcome. Many universities have created extensive infrastructure, units and agencies to manage different aspects of

internationalisation such as student recruitment, logistic support and others. The role of academic staff, however, has not been clearly identified in such processes and they are not systematically integrated into the internationalisation efforts.

The dominant assumption is that academic staff should continue as before with a difference that the content of the curriculum is delivered to a wider and more diversified audience. This is, in fact, the common practice. Academic staff usually ignore the impact of increased number of international students on the dynamics of their classroom and the adjustments that they have to make to maintain the quality of teaching and learning. The majority of staff who experience a reduction in the average student satisfaction and performance in their subjects after an increase in the number of international students show resistance to make any changes in the content or delivery as it is viewed as compromising the quality of their teaching.

Such an attitude often results in high failure of international students, particularly in Master coursework degrees due to their relatively short duration. International students do not get an opportunity to adjust to their new social and academic environment. Poor academic background of international students is often blamed for high failures. In general, the status quo continues without either creating a better transition for international students or to adjust the curriculum and delivery to create a better learning environment.

If the aim of internationalisation is to cater for international students, then review of the curriculum and delivery should be an integral part of the process to address the needs and expectations of this cohort of students. The intention should not be to trivialise the curriculum or compromise the expected standards, but to identify effective ways to reduce the gap between academic background of international students and prior learning expected in the curriculum. Otherwise, international students will be disadvantaged and will not get value for the investment they have made for their future career development.

In this process, academic staff play a critical role. They need to understand and appreciate the needs of international students and challenges faced by them. At the same time, they should explore ways to help international students with their challenges and to improve their satisfaction and achievement.

12.4   Meeting the Needs of International Students

Reflecting on my academic experience, I can clearly see the significant impact of my background on the innovation and methods that I have introduced over the years to support international students.

I clearly remember the first days that I arrived as an international student in England and started my Master degree in Bradford, a city in the heart of West Yorkshire. I had no understanding of the local culture and the racial conflict that had been inflicted on the city for decades and created an atmosphere of mistrust and cynicism among different groups. I could feel the estrangement in my encounters

with people but I could not fully comprehend the reason for it. I had not experienced and seen racial intolerance back home.

In addition, people lived and communicated with each other differently. From the simple task of shopping to opening a bank account, the approach was unfamiliar and I had to learn many new things.

Perhaps the biggest challenge was the language. I could not fully understand the strong accent of the Northern England local people and lecturers at university. They talked too fast, used slang words and phrases, and structured and expressed their thoughts rather differently from what I was used to. Although I adapted quickly to my new environment, the communication challenge remained for quite a long time.

Inability to fully understand my lecturers became a significant overload on my study-time as I had to spend longer hours to master each topic and to do my assignments. Since I could not understand the lecturers, my source of learning was the textbook for those subjects that had a textbook. For others, I had to talk to other students and get help from the notes taken from the lecture.

I am sure my experience as an international student was not unique. Every international student can share similar stories. Some students with more resilience can overcome such challenges and successfully complete their studies. For many others, the difficulties and uncertainties faced in the new environment are too much to cope with. This is a strong reason for the poor performance of some international students.

Over the last 25 years, the number of international students in my school at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels has risen from 5 % to around 50 % of the overall students. In parallel with this significant increase we have continuously monitored the performance and satisfaction of international students and have introduced new approaches to assist them. We have identified the following areas critical for smooth transition of international students into university life:

- Social Inclusion: Social inclusion at both the university and community level is one of the major challenges of international students. The surveys conducted at universities relating to international student satisfaction clearly highlight this problem. Generally, it is more difficult for international students than domestic students to find friends and become involved in social activities. In my school, we have been conscious of this challenge and have been proactive in creating various opportunities for international students to get integrated into the university social life. The new subject introduced in our postgraduate Master degree, "Communications and ICT Workplace Practice", described as a case study in the next section, has proved successful in creating a circle of friendship among international students in the early stages of their arrival. The School has also been encouraging the formation of various sports clubs such as soccer, which has proved an effective environment for the integration of international and domestic students. In addition, regular BBQ and morning teas are provided for international students and staff to strengthen their sense of belonging to the school and university and to facilitate closer bonds between students and staff.

- Academic Support and Care: A great deal of resources in my school is dedicated to provide academic advice to international students and assist with their academic issues and problems. This includes a School Academic Advisor, Year Academic Coordinators, Degree Advisors and a School Internationalisation coordinator. In addition, an International Office at the Faculty level provides extra support for students with enquiries beyond subject and curriculum. Academic staff, in particular administrative officers who are the main interface between international students and school are regularly briefed on the special care that they should give to international students.
- Bridging the gaps: A common deficiency we have observed in our international students particularly at postgraduate level is the lack of practical skills. This includes both computational and laboratory skills. We have now introduced special subjects that aim at providing international students with basic skills in conducting a scientific experiment, as well as computational modelling and simulation of various engineering systems.
- Enhancing Communication Skills: A major challenge faced by international students is the lack of confidence and skills to effectively communicate in a foreign language. They are often penalised for their poor literary level in written assignments and verbal presentations. Inability to articulate and present their thoughts often leaves them with no option but to plagiarise with severe consequences and penalties. We have now introduced special subjects and tutorials to systematically address this challenge. Students are introduced to technical writing, referencing methods and presentation skills. They are also provided with an opportunity to practise their presentation skills in various seminars organised for them.
- Quality Teaching and Learning Resources: In order to make up for the deficiency of verbal comprehension in a foreign language, it is critical that quality teaching and learning resources are provided for each subject in addition to standard lectures and tutorials. This is now a common practice in my school for every subject. The complementary materials including the lecture slides, complementary readings, solution to various examples and problems are provided on the university e-learning site.

12.5   Building Employability Skills in International Students

Almost all students enrolled in the coursework Master Degrees offered in the Faculty of Informatics, University of Wollongong are international students. The majority of these students are eager to stay and work in Australia after their graduation. The available evidence shows that finding professional employment in Australia is difficult for these graduates. Failure to secure employment is partly due to their lack of what has been recognised as the employability skills expected in an Australian workplace.

The study conducted by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia in 2002 on behalf of the Federal Department of Education, defines employability skills as "skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one's potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions" (Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry 2002). It also highlights the importance of such skills as being sought by employers in addition to technical knowledge and skills.

The Employability Skills framework (Department of Education, Science and Training 2006) proposed in the study consists of the following "soft skills": Initiative, Communication, Teamwork, Technology, Problem-Solving, Self-Management, Planning and Learning. Various ways that each skill can be manifested and practised have also been identified. Employability Skills are not job specific and "cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs from entry level to chief executive officer" (Sherer and Eadie 1987).

Reports on graduate employment indicate that employers have generally been unsatisfied with the employability skills of university graduates at entry levels (Cassidy 2006). The graduate generic skills are perceived as more important than technical skills by employers (Cotton 2001). Literature shows similar observations in other countries. In a major study conducted by Harvey et al. (1977), graduate employability was identified as a major concern for employers. According to the report from the UK Industry and Parliament Trust's Study group on employability, "employers are not satisfied with the quality of young people and graduates coming into the labour market" (Clarke 1997).

According to literature, generic and employability skills have been of interest in many countries over the last three decades and various schemes have been developed to systematically define and adopt them (Curtis 2004). The first evidence of such interest in Australia emerged in the 1980s. The major step in the process was the Mayer Committee report in 1992 defining generic skills as key competencies (Australian Education Council, Mayer Committee 1992). During the mid-1990s, Australian schools and the VET sector had their focus on implementing these key competencies, though such attention was gradually diverted to other priorities. The significance of the generic and employability skills was raised again in the late 1990s by the Australian industry. A report was subsequently commissioned by the Australian Industry Group in 1999 to identify the training needs of Australia's industry (Allen Consulting Group 1999).

This was followed by a comprehensive study of employability skills conducted by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Business Council of Australia in 2002 on behalf of the Federal Department of Education.

One of the initiatives of the author to address the challenges faced by international students was the launch of a project on enhancing the communications and employability skills of international students in Master coursework degrees. The project was initiated at the School of Electrical, Computer and Telecommunications Engineering (SECTE), University of Wollongong in 2008 and was supported by an internal grant. In this study, a new subject called "Communications and ICT Workplace Practice", targeted at international students taking Masters of Engineering

Studies was developed. The project drew on research by the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry that had identified certain "soft skills" in demand by employers.

The subject runs over one semester, and teaching is shared between the university Career Services, the Learning Development Centre and SECTE. It uses the model of a virtual workplace to integrate different aspects of the course, stimulate teamwork among students and encourage language development.

For the first time, the subject was delivered in the Autumn session of 2009 to 40 students. The formative and summative evaluations strongly indicate that the learning objectives set for the subject were achieved. The continuous assessment of the subject and the survey demonstrated a high degree of achievement and satisfaction.

12.6   Approach

Both technical and generic attributes and qualities that a graduate should acquire during completing a degree forms the basis of the curriculum and the subjects developed to deliver the curriculum. While there is sufficient time and opportunity in an undergraduate degree to work towards accomplishing these qualities through various subjects, the Master postgraduate coursework degrees are relatively short in duration with the most attention given to building technical knowledge and skills. Working within this constraint, it was decided to design a core subject for the degree with the focus of enhancing the employability skills of international students enrolled in the degree.

The work started with a deeper review of the literature. In particular, examples of subjects being taught with a focus on employability or soft skills and communication were identified and considered. The subject was also identified as an opportunity to address the critical issues of social inclusion and to enhance the social life and integration of students within the school and university.

Towards satisfying such requirements, the following major learning objectives were identified for the subject:

- Enhancing the spoken and written communication skills of students
- Building confidence in students to participate in discussions and express their views
- Familiarising students with the Australian workplace culture, job-hunting methods, resume writing and interview skills
- Enhancing the social inclusion of students
- Strengthening the sense of belonging to university among international students

Such objectives can be achieved only when students are active participants in the learning process. It will require their personal thoughts and reflections, effective spaces in which they can express and share their thoughts in both spoken and written English. This was achieved by creating a dynamic learning environment and

Table 12.1 Structure of the subject

Weeks	Topics and activities
1–6	Orientation
	Virtual workplace group assignment
	Language development and communications skills
	First presentation on deliverables
7–10	Career development
	Guest speakers
	Job application to positions in virtual companies
11	Mock interviews for positions
12–13	Final presentation on deliverables

introducing formative and summative continuous assessments. Accordingly, the following components and activities were designed for the subject:

- e-learning and online activities
- Role plays
- Journal activities/reflective and writing practice
- Group work
- Mock job interviews
- Industry visits/talks/guest speakers

The subject features regular assessments including weekly contributions to an online learning journal and group discussion forums, culminating in a group oral presentation as well as a written project-scoping document.

The subject is delivered over a session of 13 weeks, with 4 h contact time per week. The session is divided into four sections. The structure of the subject and various activities taking place in each section are illustrated in Table 12.1. In the first part, which takes place in weeks 1–6, the focus is on communication skills and setting up the virtual workplaces. Three virtual companies in the areas of Electrical, Computer and Telecommunications Engineering are set up. Students are divided into groups and assigned to these companies according to the majors they do.

The focus of weeks 7–10 is on career development. Students are introduced to career planning and are familiarized with the ICT industry in Australia.

They learn how to hunt for a job, prepare a resume and a covering letter according to the job description, and apply for a job in one of three virtual companies.

In week 11 students take an assessed mock interview. They are expected to demonstrate their understanding of the interview techniques covered during their lectures. In addition to marks, students receive feedback on their strengths and deficiencies.

The final presentation on the scoping project happens in weeks 12 and 13. Students present their work in groups and are assessed based on the quality of their work as well as their contribution to the work presented.

12.7 Survey Results

In order to measure student achievement and satisfaction, an evaluation was conducted at the end of the session. Feedback from 38 students who completed the survey is overwhelmingly positive. As a result of taking the subject, they have a greater sense of belonging to school (78 % either agree or strongly agree), they've learnt a great deal about the Australian Culture (92 % agree/strongly agree), have developed friendships with other students (89 % agree/strongly agree, 42 % 'strongly'), three in four feel being integrated in the university life and almost two in three are more confident in talking to academic staff.

According to the majority of students, the learning objectives of the subject are accomplished. Around 78 % of students have a better understanding of how to communicate effectively on an individual basis and 84 % have a better understanding of how to communicate effectively within a group. They are also more confident in using English, whether it's electronic media (81 %), speaking (75 %) or writing (61 %).

Students mention opportunities to practise English, receive feedback from staff, being encouraged to improve language skills, working as a group and the oral presentation as strengths of the subject.

Students report difficulties such as being nervous in a presentation or not being sure about an assignment. The most common ways these were resolved were talking to group mates or asking staff and to practise.
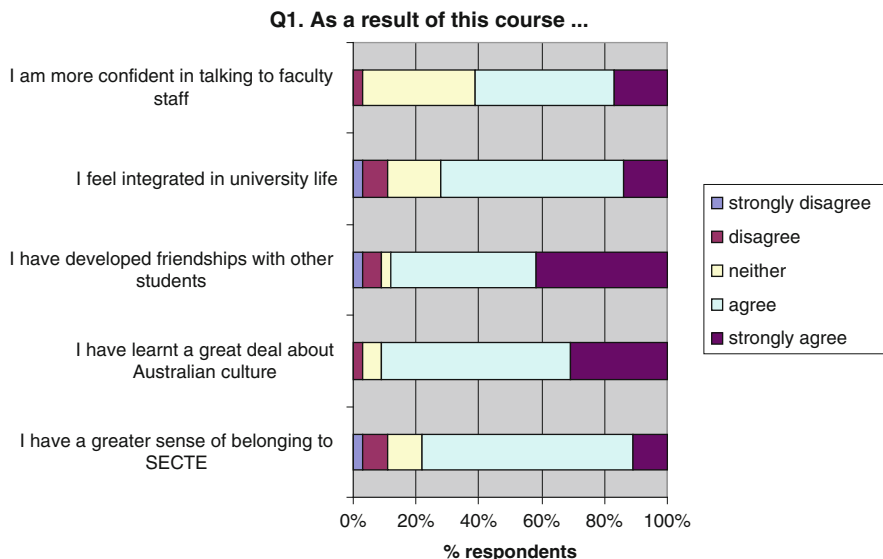
Looking at different elements of the subject, the e-learning site was popular. Around 50 % of students agreed that e-learning site was "really useful and relevant", and a further 39 % saw it as "fairly useful and relevant". The learning journal was also considered a useful and relevant part of the subject. 43 % of student put it as "really useful and relevant", with a further 32 % ranking it as "fairly useful and relevant". 81 % of students found the discussion forum useful and relevant.

The virtual workplace module clearly needs improving. 22 % of students found it irrelevant and not useful (this represents eight students); one in four had no opinion on it, while 55 % thought it either 'fairly useful' or 'really useful'. Suggestions for improving the workplace set up focus on giving better instructions, setting tasks and more active moderation from staff.
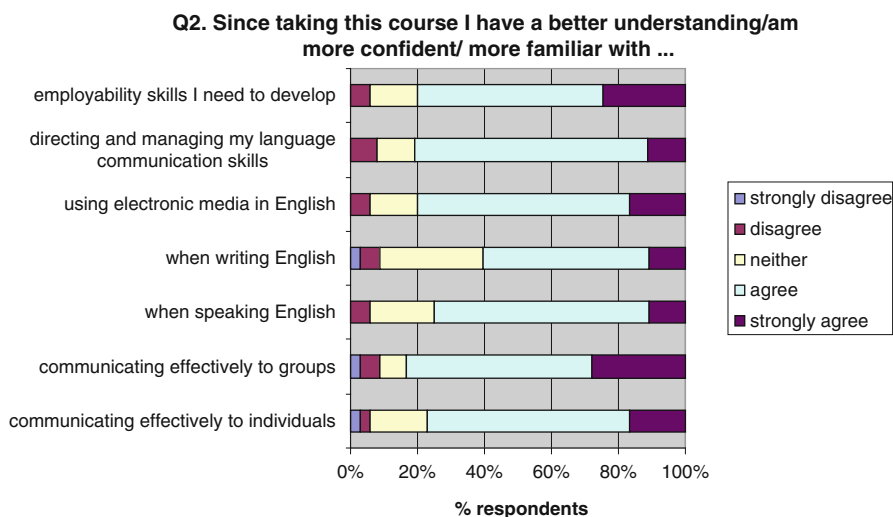
Other suggestions for improvement included providing more opportunities for speaking and presentation. A summary of the responses given to some of the questions in the survey is provided in Figs. 12.1, 12.2, 12.3, and 12.4.

12.8 Conclusions

In higher education, the internationalization process should focus on creating a teaching and learning environment that is conducive to more enhanced achievement and performance of international students. This obviously requires a conscious

Q1. As a result of this course ...

Fig. 12.1 Responses to question 1

Q2. Since taking this course I have a better understanding/am more confident/ more familiar with ...

Fig. 12.2 Responses to question 2

allocation of resources to such focus. At the same time, academic staff who teach international students should accept that the dynamic of their classrooms can radically change with the presence of international students. They should endeavor to introduce the necessary adjustments to the content and delivery of their subjects to accommodate this cohort of students.
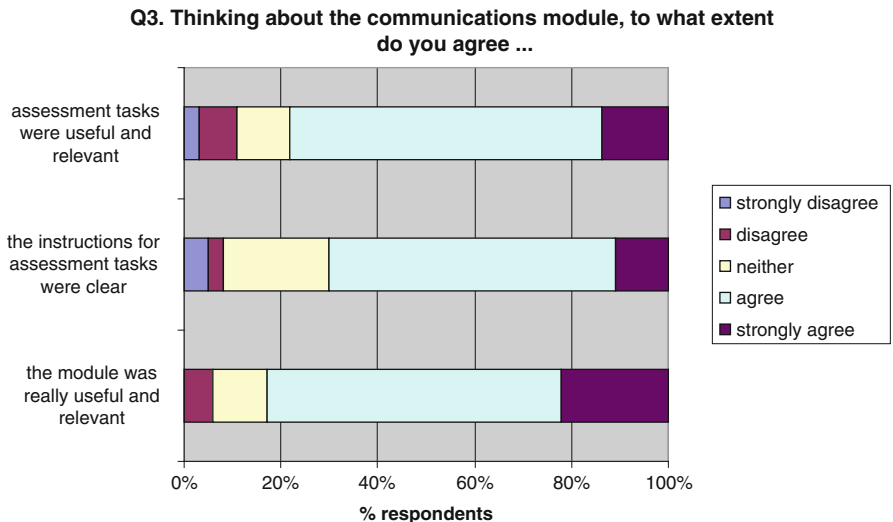
Q3. Thinking about the communications module, to what extent do you agree ...

assessment tasks were useful and relevant

the instructions for assessment tasks were clear

the module was really useful and relevant

Legend:
- strongly disagree
- disagree
- neither
- agree
- strongly agree

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

% respondents

Fig. 12.3 Responses to question 3

Q7. How relevant and useful did you find...?

learning journal

online language resources

e learning site

discussion forum

virtual workplace

Legend:
- totally irrelevant and useless
- not very relevant or useful
- no opinion
- fairly useful and relevant
- really useful and relevant

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%
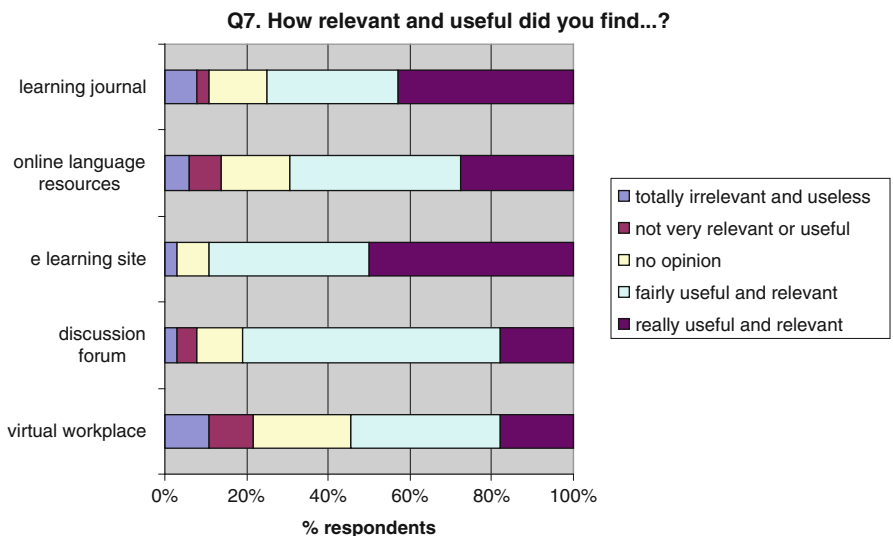
% respondents

Fig. 12.4 Responses to question 7

Universities should also recognise and acknowledge the challenges faced by international students and set in place the necessary processes to assist them. International academic staff who themselves have experienced such difficulties can play a major role in such processes.

The case study presented in this chapter well illustrates the importance of small changes in the curriculum that can greatly support international students. The work

conducted on developing a subject to teach workplace practices and enhance the communication skills of international students enrolled in an Engineering Master degree was reported. Evaluation conducted on the subject indicates that the learning objectives set for the subjects were achieved. In addition, the subject resulted in greater cohesion among students through interaction in group activities. Students also developed a strong sense of belonging to the school and university, previously identified as a challenge.

The evaluation also points to some weaknesses and deficiencies that should be addressed in the future deliveries of the subject. For example, some of the assessment tasks should be better defined. Students also need more opportunities to develop presentation skills.

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