EXCHANGE STUDENTS COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES: A CASE STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT
The end of apartheid in South Africa in 1994 saw many higher education institutions identifying opportunities to increase their intake of international students by introducing student exchange programmes. In South Africa however, cultural and language differences pose various communication challenges for international students. This paper investigates the communication challenges faced by international students studying on an exchange programme at a university in South Africa. A questionnaire and an interview schedule was used to establish the communication challenges faced by international students participating in the exchange programme. The sample comprised of ninety nine international students from first-world countries. Major findings of the investigation indicate that majority of respondents agreed that communication is a major challenge and that there should be increased focus on implementing long and short-term strategies to address these challenges.

1. THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING
Towards the end of the 20th century, international academic institutions from first world countries recognized that strategic planning assumed new importance within the management of higher education at the institutional level. Driven by the pressures of resources, the growth in public accountability and the emergence of market forces that influenced teaching and research, institutional leaders had to re-assess institutional strategies and priorities. Within this context many universities moved to develop institutional strategies for internationalisation (Taylor, 2004: 149).

In South Africa, internationalisation is a relatively new concept traced back to the early 1990’s. The end of apartheid in South Africa (SA), in 1994, saw the opening of a multitude of opportunities to South Africans and the international community within the context of higher education study opportunities. When South Africa finally broke down its segregation barriers and opened its doors to other countries, there was an identifiable need for student exchange programmes in line with government driven initiatives, which steered the country towards the international arena and the need for international acceptance; the ability to compete on a global scale and an increase in the need to encourage relations with the international community.

In 1999, a university in South Africa, in KwaZulu-Natal drove this initiative, through policy, by increasing the access to education to international students. A student exchange programme was identified and an international office was established. The aim of the programme is to establish a platform for students to participate in a reciprocal exchange programme. Local South African students study abroad whilst international students study at the South African university in question for one semester (four months). The students are responsible for paying fees directly to their home institutions and, in return, receive a waiver of fees at the elected host institution. The choice of country/university is governed by the negotiated agreements that are established between the institutions. Courses completed at the host institution are credited at the home institution.

Despite the positive opportunities that student exchanges have created, Brown (2008: 5) found that international students studying in foreign countries are experiencing increased stress levels. Brown (2008: 5) attributes this to the demanding nature of the institutions’ programmes, the need for a high level of English competency, and the vast cultural differences between the host country and the student country. Singh (2009: 4) purports that constant complaints from students and criticism from international universities may harm the reputation of the university. Unchecked, these problems may affect the mutual agreement between universities (Singh, 2009: 4). This paper, therefore, sets out to investigate the communication barriers experienced by international students involved in a student exchange programme at a selected University in South Africa.

2. INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS TRENDS
Bilateral agreements and partnerships, decisions taken at presidential level ultimately dictate the course of South African interaction with foreigners and down the line to higher education’s interaction with foreign students. Altbach & Teichler (2001: 46) state that academic exchanges have historically been a largely elitist enterprise. The vast majority of student exchanges involved students from Western countries going to other Western countries. Student mobility has grown in popularity in recent years as developments in communication infrastructure have evolved. The internet is bridging the global divide between countries as information is made available at the click of a mouse. For students this means study opportunities in foreign countries are easily accessible. Interest in studying in developing countries like South Africa is now becoming more popular. Kishun (2007: 235-243) reinforces this and mentions that the number of international students in South Africa have more than quadrupled in recent years.

The function of foreign study for many students is a cultural experience that would broaden perspectives and provide knowledge of a foreign language and civilization. Bond and Lemasson (1998: 34-36) mention that ideally higher education must do better to prepare its beneficiaries to think in both a global and differentiated context, help them take a cosmopolitan view and be more aware of cultural differences and promote an open, understanding mind. Van Hoof and Verbeeten’s (2005: 3-7) supports this and their study show that most exchange students saw the greatest benefits of studying abroad was that it brought about a greater understanding of other cultures; appreciation of their own culture; it enabled them to learn more about themselves, and that it enriched them personally. South Africa is an ideal platform for this experience because it is a multicultural society with eleven official languages.

However, despite the many benefits student exchange and study abroad programmes bring, the period of adaptation and acclimatization that it takes for students to adjust to the host country’s environment is reported by student exchange staff as being between one and three months. The length of the student exchange programme of the University in question is only four months. This means that the student spends a considerable bulk of his/her international experience being uncomfortable for whatever reasons, until he/she reaches a state of acclimatization.

2.1 Communication Challenges Facing International Students
Persaud (1993), states that all students are challenged by the demands of higher education, but many international students are particularly placed under pressure by the confrontation of an alien culture. Chaney, Martin and Funakawa (2007: 74) stresses that a visitor to another culture should be prepared to acquire new customs and abandon old ideals. He suggests sojourners (people who visit or temporarily reside in another country) should find pleasure in the unfamiliar because those who could not fit into the new culture would either return home or “die” of both psychological and physical ailments. According to Brown (2008: 5), it is widely agreed that, at the start of their stay most sojourners will experience some degree of culture shock.
Samover & Forte (2004) identifies culture shock as a communication problem that involves the frustrations of not understanding the verbal and non-verbal communication of the host culture, its customs and its value systems. Culture shock is anxiety that results from losing all one’s familiar signs and symbols of social intercourse, which do not carry at the level of conscious awareness. Chaney, Martin and Funakawa (2007: 75) recognise that a special form of culture shock was experienced by US travelers, namely, the frustration with the culture which includes language, food and local customs; the unwillingness to understand the rationale behind the local ways of doing things and are quick to label behaviour as backward and inefficient without trying to understand the basis for the behavior.

Foreign students experience acculturation, where they are resistant to abandoning their past and refuse to accept new ideas into their existing culture. A review by Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002: 125) mentions that international students experience frustrations including culture shock, language difficulties, adjustment to customs and values, differences in educational systems, isolation and loneliness, homesickness and a loss of established social networks. GundyKunst (1998) further mentions that sources of strain for foreign students include racial discrimination, weather and food differences, language, accommodation, separation from home, dietary restrictions, money, diminished social interactions, role and status change and different educational systems. Other frustrations may include lack of food, unacceptable levels of cleanliness, different bathroom facilities and a fear for their personal safety. Most students are unprepared for the reality of security issues in a developing country. Having to deal with virtually no telephone support (in terms of American 911 response) and the internal policies of sub-contracted security companies, students become extremely fearful of their safety when faced with difficult situations.

Ballard (1997: 23) states that in the first three months of the academic sojourn, the greatest pressure relates to the ability to understand and be understood. This fear, combined with already high levels of anxiety over having to adapt to a new environment, could mean misunderstandings in communication could be the basis for explosive situations. Therefore international students studying for the first time in South Africa may encounter specific communication challenges based on cultural differences.

Resistance in accepting the new culture stemming from inadequate communication results in enormous personal struggle for the visiting student (Chaney Martin and Funakawa, 2007: 74). Lin & Rancer (2003: 146) confirm that intercultural apprehension can be inversely correlated with a measure of “intercultural willingness to communicate”. It seems that individuals with a high level of intercultural communication apprehension would be more likely to have negative expectations of international contact situations and thus a negative study-abroad experience. Singh (2009: 4) mentions that this seemingly minor communication challenge could impact on the host university’s credibility. However communication could also be used as an effective tool to ease cultural barriers and is a critical factor to consider in the exchange programme for students entering South Africa for the first time. For example, Peacock & Brown (2006: 21) found that academic orientation before commencement of the programme can help to prepare students for academic and cultural differences. In the case of the student exchange programme, the term orientation is referred to as the sharing of information processes whereby new students at the university will undergo orientation based on a variety of issues. Students participating in student exchanges should ideally receive a pre-departure orientation in the home universities, with the assistance of the host universities international office. This should not only cover basic cultural knowledge and the language of the host country, but should also address expectations for classroom interactions. Although culture specific knowledge is important, cultural general knowledge and understanding of some communications concepts, theories and research (e.g. communication-accommodation theory, theories of cross cultural adjustment, anxiety uncertainty management theory and models of intercultural communication competence) can further facilitate ethical and culturally appropriate teaching and learning (Crabtree 2004: 25). In this instance it is evident that communication is regarded as the central and binding element that alleviates barriers. Communication barriers, according to Chaney & Martin (2007: 12), are the obstacles that prevent effective communication from taking place.

According to Sillars and Vangelisti (2006: 364-377), social, cultural, and historical factors influence the way people interpret messages. Therefore, the interpretation of messages, communicated from the South African university to the international students is subject to their influences and understanding. When cultures interact, adaptation must take place for the cultures to communicate effectively. As this contact occurs between cultures, diffusion takes place whereby the different cultures learn and adapt materials and practices from each other. Diffusion, according to Rogers (1997: 1) is the trickle-down process by which an innovation (communication idea or message) is communicated through certain channels. If a significant number of cultural differences are absorbed and a number of similarities are found, then cultural synergy takes place with the two cultures merging to form a stronger overriding culture. If, however, this does not take place, then problems arise in the form of communication barriers.

Shramm’s Transactional Model of Communication, as adapted from Verderber and Verderber (2002: 112), depicts communication as a dynamic process in which both participants are actively engaged in encoding, transmitting, receiving and decoding messages. The model (Figure 1) highlights that the creation of meaning is negotiated between the participants. The outcome of the encounter is determined by the mutual involvement of the participants in negotiating the meaning of the messages. Rather than depicting transmission and feedback as two separate processes, the transactional model indicates that messages are continually passing between the participants. While communication is taking place, external, internal and semantic noise (such as internal prejudices) may be occurring at various places in the model. These noises may affect the ability of the communicator and recipient to share meanings. Noise could cause misunderstanding and therefore a difference of interpretation of the message by the participants. Shramm’s model further states that in order for a message to be understood, language, common background and a common culture is important (Verderber and Verderber, 2002: 112).

Figure 1: Shramms Transactional Model of Communication (Verderber & Verderber, 2002: 112)
The communication messages received by international take the form of the university website, e-mail, correspondence, students contact with university staff, international student guide and a DVD prospectus. This paper is concerned with the interpretation of selected messages received by international exchange students. It specifically sets out to investigate the communication barriers experienced by international students involved in a student exchange programme at a selected University in South Africa.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY
The research methodology employed for this study is both qualitative and quantitative. It is a census study and draws conclusions based on data collected from all (99) students international students involved in a semester student exchange programme in 2011. Respondent profiles include both male and female second-year tertiary respondents, from Europe (EU), and the United States of America (USA). Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires. In terms of this paper conceptual content analysis was used. Content analyses are typically performed on forms of human communication, including books, newspapers, films, television, art, music (Leedy and Ormrod, 2010). Jacob (2006) explains that to conduct a content analysis on any text, the text is coded or broken down into manageable categories on a variety of levels: word, word sentence, phrase, theme and visuals and then examined using one of the basic methods of content analysis, conceptual analysis or relational analysis. The frequency of certain words, phrases and themes common were identified. The findings are reported and contextualised against the specific challenges identified in the literature review.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION
Findings are reported based on the themes extracted from the literature review.

4.1 Students that had the Experience of Living in a Developing Country

Findings revealed that only a small (13%) number of respondents had visited a developing country previously and had some experience of life in a developing country. Most (87%) of the respondents on the other hand had no real experience of the challenges facing them. This confirms Brown's (2008: 5 - 28) assertion that international students are reliant on the information provided to them by their host county. The first time visit of many of the international students also infers that they may be placed under pressure by the confrontation of an alien culture.

4.2 Number of Students that Accessed the University Website for Information

Findings reveal that 100% of the respondents accessed the hosting university’s website and used it as a primary source of information. These findings indicate that the webpage is an effective communication tool. It is also indicative of the respondents’ reliance on the contents of the information contained as a key factor in their choice of student exchange. Furthermore the findings reveal that webpages can be considered as an effective communication tool should be fully utilized to address and to inform international students of some of the major challenges and cultural barriers they may face in a developing country.

4.3 Clarity of the Website Messages

Findings revealed that 100% of the respondents accessed the hosting university’s website and used it as a primary source of information.
Findings reveal a small number (10%) of the respondents were very happy with the information on the website. Most (59%) of the respondents indicated that they were able to understand the message easily and it provided them with some information about the multi-cultural make-up of South Africa. They also indicated that this information helped them to an extent to understand some of the communication and cultural challenges that they may face during their stay in South Africa. This confirms Rogers (1997: 1) argument that the trickle-down process (diffusion) or message communication may lead to cultural synergy if a certain amount of similarities are present. It further confirms that by providing clear and concise messages on subject matters, students have the ability to greater understand the content and clarity of the communication message. A smaller number (14%) of the respondents experienced some difficulty in understanding the content of the message. The remaining (17%) of the respondents were unsure and therefore this is an indication that these students were unable to fully interpret the messages on the University’s website.

4.4 The Quality of the Brochure and DVD Messages

![Diagram showing the quality of the brochure and DVD messages](image)

Figure 4: The quality of the brochure and DVD messages was clear and helpful

Findings revealed that most (63%) of the respondents found that the brochure did not adequately answer their questions and did not contain any valuable information. A further small (20%) number of respondents did however feel that the brochure was adequate for their needs whilst a small (3%) number of the respondents were unsure of the clarity of the brochure. Responses as to why the brochure was inadequate include reasons such as, because the brochure, written in local dialect using familiar names and explanations, may be difficult to interpret by foreign students”. Once viewed, the difficulty in relating to the content may cause the student to project his/her own internal prejudices, which could distort the interpretation of the intended message. Clearly language and the use of words play an important role during the communication process. In order for the brochure to have the necessary impact, it needs to speak to the recipient of the message directly. By using a common language, background or culture, the brochure can be used as an effective tool that speaks to the foreign student directly in his own dialect or in references that are familiar to him/her.

A small (10%) number of the respondents agreed that the DVD provided a general overview of the student exchange programme. The remaining (80%) respondents felt that the DVD did not speak specifically about the student exchange programme, but rather about the university. Respondents felt that the DVD was an ideal medium to include information about local culture and to present an overview of the residences and campus life for international students.

4.5 The Length and Quality of the Orientation Program

![Diagram showing the length and quality of the orientation program](image)

Figure 5: The length and quality of the orientation program was acceptable

A small number (7%) of the respondents strongly agreed that the quality of the orientation programme was good. The others (36% and 47% respectively) strongly believed that the quality of the orientation programmes was not good. Respondents felt that there should be an increase in the frequency of orientation programmes and information on culture, safety, security and other issues should be discussed at
these sessions. These responses support Peacock & Brown (2006: 21) suggestion that academic orientation before the commencement of the programme can help prepare students for academic and cultural differences. Most (77%) respondents agreed that the orientation programme was not long enough. A small (10%) agreed that it was sufficient and another (13%) were unsure of their answer. This finding is a strong indication that an extension in the duration of the orientation programme might be necessary to facilitate the needs of foreign students. It is also indicative that students are not receiving adequate information during the orientation programme. This is supported by Crabtree (2004: 25) who mentions that culture specific knowledge is important and that cultural general knowledge and understanding of some communication concepts, theories and research can further facilitate ethical and culturally appropriate teaching and learning.

4.6 Prior Information was provided on Student Housing and the Housing Environment was Conducive to Learning Most (80%) respondents mentioned that they were not happy about the information they received regarding student housing. Themes that emerged from probing further during the interviews are reflected in the following quotes:

- “I was not informed about state of housing. I did not know what to expect. I only found out when I got here that there were various cultural aspects that I did not understand and could not tolerate. This included people talking very loudly and allowing other friends to live with them despite not being a student at the university”.
- “The only information I received on student housing was the rental prices I would have pay. No other information was provided”.
- “Prior to my arrival I had to enquire about student housing. No information was otherwise volunteered”.
- “My friends in SA warned me not to stay in student housing because of the local and the noise factor. I decided to rent a private flat instead. But no, I did not receive any specific information on student housing”.

From these findings it is evident that there is inadequate information available to students regarding housing. This could be a contributing factor to some of the challenges and the cultural shock faced by students living in student housing in South Africa for the first time.

4.7 Quality of Housing Facilities Most (80%) of respondents felt that the environment was disruptive and not conducive to learning. The other (20%) of respondents was unsure, as they chose to live in outside residences. Common reflections during the interview are reflected in the following quotes:

- “Yes, I stayed at the university student housing. It was very disruptive. It was full of local students and I did not relate very well to them”.
- “I had no idea that student housing was so noisy and chaotic. There was no respect for peoples study time”.
- “There was a lot of screaming and people who did not belong there were constantly walking in and out – even though security was at the doors. I felt very unsafe”.
- “It was always noisy and I couldn't study or sleep. Students would be shouting and talking loudly at all hours of the night and day and nobody did anything about it even though I complained many times”.

From these findings it is evident that international exchange students view housing as being not conducive to learning and therefore will invariably contribute to the negative experience of the local culture in South Africa.

4.8 Security Made Me Feel Secure Findings revealed that majority (80%) of respondents disagreed that campus security helped them to feel secure. Comments received indicated that we were not provided with adequate information on local laws and practices. Further evidence is reflected in the following quotes:

- “I felt uncomfortable with the security guards as I had difficulties understanding them. I felt that they were slightly intimidating and threatening as they were constantly calling me aside and asking me questions. I could not understand what they said because of their tone of voice and because of this I did not feel safe in their presence”.
- “I had forgotten my residence card in my room and could not swipe myself out the door. My friend used her card to get me out instead. As I passed through the gates, I was pulled aside roughly by the residence security who demanded to know where my card was. I explained to him that I had forgotten it, but he was very loud and I therefore felt that he was being very aggressive towards me”.

From these findings it is evident that respondents view security as being inadequate. Language and tone of voice is identified as having made students feel insecure. These factors can be viewed as cultural barriers and can therefore contribute to some of the communications barriers that students experience.

4.9 The Exchange Programme Had Enough Social Events; Communication Channels Were Well Defined Most (80%) of respondents felt that there were not enough social opportunities arranged by the university. The remaining (20%) of respondents however agreed that there were enough individual opportunities to socialize. Evidence is reflected in the following quotes:

- “I was not invited to any social events that were culturally valuable and there were not enough social events arranged by the university. I would have liked to experience more scenic tours, cultural excursions, etc.”
- “I refused to participate in any activities. I was very unhappy and was homesick and just wanted to return to my country”.
- “Tours and social events were poorly planned and we didn’t really have a choice of areas to visit. Also the outings were not really interesting. It is evident that students viewed the social program as being inadequate. This could be contributing to some of the communications barriers that students experienced as they felt that because they did not socialize enough they did not receive a greater understanding of other cultures, and the experience did not enable them to learn more about themselves and therefore they were not enriched as mentioned by Van Hoof and Verbeeten (2001: 3 – 7).

4.10 Overall the Communication Received Was Sufficient All (100%) respondents stated that they had experienced problems with the communication channels and had difficulties liaising with exchange officers. Evidence is reflected in the following quotes:

- “I turned to various people in different departments for help but I received none. I was constantly being sent to different people, but nothing was done to help me. I eventually gave up”.
- “I suffer from sickle cell disease which is life threatening. I had no prior knowledge of SA health systems and believed that my standard issue USA health insurance was sufficient cover for my needs. I fell in and an ambulance was called. It was only then that I found out that my insurance would not cover me at a private hospital and I had to be taken to a government hospital”.

202
hospital. I was shocked at the conditions and received no assistance in the trauma unit for about nine hours. I was just left there! I eventually left on my own to go to a private hospital that would only treat me once I paid the fee. I am not a rich student and cannot afford the additional expense, but had to charge the fee to my credit card. I am now in serious financial problems. I am shocked and appalled that no one informed me prior to my arrival of the medical situation in SA. Had I known, I would have planned better. In all probability I would not have come if I’d known that I would jeopardize my health and finances in this way”.

From the findings it is evident that students view the communication as inadequate and this is contributing to some of the communications barriers that students experience. Verderber and Verderber (2002: 112) discuss Shramm’s transactional model of communication is appropriate in this case as depicting communication as a dynamic process in which both participants are actively engaged in encoding, transmitting, receiving and decoding messages. Meaning is negotiated between the participants and the outcome of the encounter is determined by the mutual involvement of the participants in negotiating the meaning of the messages. While communication is taking place, external, internal and noise (barriers) should be considered as these noises may affect the ability of the communicator and recipient to share meanings.

5. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings it can be concluded that there are some of the major communication challenges experienced by international students during their four month student exchange programme. The major challenges are related to information about the exchange programme, housing, security and developing country socialization. Based on these conclusions the following recommendations are offered:

- A defined communication channel is essential to improving the student exchange programme.
- Issues surrounding student housing should be improved and more information about student housing should be communicated to international students.
- The Student Information Pack should contain more information on SA Laws, Security, Medical Aid, etc.
- More education is needed on cultural differences.
- A cultural awareness programme should be implemented prior to the students’ departure from their home countries. This can then be further enforced at the host university’s orientation programmes;
- Social programmes aimed at encouraging interaction with locals should be ongoing on a weekly basis and offering a wide range of culture rich activities.

References