International Students and Independent Learning: 
Towards an Eclectic Framework

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Abstract

In recent years, cross-border movements of students have increased significantly. However, international students are finding it challenging to cope with the requirements of independent learning in host institutions, especially while studying in developed western countries. This paper outlines the backgrounds and expectations of these students and the challenges they face in the new cultural and academic environment while dealing with independent learning requirements. It also deliberates on the emotional state of these transplanted students and their attitude towards host institutions and possible independent learning outcome with limited institutional support. The paper then introduces a framework to better understand the nature of independent learning and the manner in which it impacts on the overall learning experience of international students.

Key words: Independent Learning, International Students, Host-country Institutions, Emotion, Motivation, Learning Outcome

Introduction:

With the advent of globalisation, people worldwide are increasingly undertaking academic studies in countries other than their own. This expansion of education on an international plain involves increasing numbers of students from different regions of the world crossing national borders to attain international academic qualifications. While it is a widespread phenomenon, it presents considerable challenges for higher education institutions and academics as well as for students as themselves and their institutions endeavour to cope with the diversity and complexity of the emerging global education market. One of the major challenges for students transplanted from their home countries and education systems is the need to undertake independent learning in institutions which differ significantly from their home-country institutions with respect to delivery method, course requirements and the learning process. Independent learning, however, is a multi-faceted concept with implications for
students’ own ability and efforts to learn while managing their time in an efficient manner. It also relates to the all-important critical and analytical approaches to study, which are the hallmarks of modern higher education system. At the same time, in dealing with a diverse student cohort, academics and their institutions face an added responsibility to facilitate their students’ independent learning processes and outcomes, while helping them to cope with a new academic as well as social environment.

International students primarily choose countries within the industrialised developed world as their education destinations. However, the recent trend suggests that students are also choosing to study in institutions within emerging economies. As a possible link exists between international students’ intended academic training and their subsequent access to the lucrative job market in the host countries, all major industrialised developed nations have in recent times become the targets of aspiring international students, mostly coming from developing countries. Australia is no exception. The number of international students studying in Australian higher education institutions has risen sharply since the early 1990s, and such students now make up a significant proportion of the total students intake in Australian higher education institutions.

This extensive movement of students across academic institutions worldwide has not only swelled the number of students, it has made the learning and teaching more complicated and challenging, while creating a need for institutions and academics to devise appropriate strategies and offer learning experiences suited to students with diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. Drawing on the complexity and hurdles faced by
international students in Australian higher education institutions, this paper explores the interesting but intricate area of international students’ exposure and adjustment to independence in academic learning. We perceive that an aspect of setting the scene for international students to learn independently is to facilitate their familiarity and identification with their respective host institutions. This assists them develop positive attitudes towards their studies. Appropriate transition and academic support programs are effective ways of implicitly recognising these students’ situations and need and, while doing so, helping students to identify and feel included in the institution and their studies, rather than alienated and excluded. The creation of such a sense of belongingness has flow-on effects in terms of increasing students’ motivation for their studies and learn in a pro-active manner. While some research has pointed out the value of transition and support programs for international students’ adjustment to higher education studies (Tinto, 2006; Nyland et al., 2007), this paper focuses on the specific impact of these programs on the affective, or attitudinal factors in the learning schema of international students. An important outcome of these programs is the development of positive attitudes towards the studies, institutions, and themselves as students, providing a platform from which students can take proactive rather than a passive learning approach. Arising from this, a tentative framework is presented that links independent learning with academic input and international students’ academic performance based on their increased confidence and motivation to undertake independent learning.

Tentatively, our framework explains that the ability of international students to learn independently is facilitated by their motivation to do so. The framework reflects a two-way approach of independent learning process. First, the process is affected by
the students’ attitude and emotional response to the challenges they face in undertaking academic programs in a different country. Second, the process is characterised by an increasing understanding by host institutions of the need and support for international students, which in turn, could assist students to evaluate and adjust their own expectations of study approaches and outcomes within a complex international education environment.

**Australian Higher Education, International Students and Independent Learning**

As a leading country in attracting international students, Australia currently ranks as the third most popular education destination for international students, following the US and the UK (Dunn and Wallace: 2006). A study conducted by the Australian Department of Employment, Education and Training (1993) shows that in 1993 there were 42,571 international students enrolled in Australian universities. Ten years later, in 2003, the number had more than quadrupled to 174,732 with International students comprising 21.5 percent of the tertiary student population in Australia (International Development Program Education Australia, 2003). Again in 2004, a study conducted by Deumart, et al. (2004) showed that there were 210,000 international students enrolled in Australian universities, more than 22% of the total student intake in the country. The increasing trend was confirmed by another study conducted in 2006 that reported that 24% of all enrolled students in Australian higher education institutions were international students (Marginson: 2006). According to Marginson (2006), Australian tertiary education exports have built to 9% of the global market, which is one third the share commanded by the USA with 15 times of Australian population in less than two decades.
A significant part of this culturally diverse international student population comes from non-English speaking countries, where English may be spoken as a second or third language, or where it is only learnt as a not-so-important foreign language, receiving little emphasis in the educational program. Apart from English language proficiency, learning the academic disciplinary discourse in a foreign university context while living in a different culture can pose significant difficulties. Further compounding the issue, the independent learning approach required in the Western academic setting presents extra pressure and challenge to most international students. Although all students, local and international, attending higher education institutions for the first time face difficulties in developing independent learning skills, it is more complicated with respect to international students as they face a totally new learning-teaching context while going through significant transition phase and settling down in a new social and cultural environment.

While institutions have responsibility in assisting international students with adjustment to the new and perhaps confusing system under the Australian Government’s Education Services for Overseas (ESOS) Act 2000, a well-designed and ongoing transition and support program promotes the development of positive attitudes towards the institution and studies and helps addressing any transition difficulties and making them more integrated to the new academic environment (Ranabahu and Tamala, 2006).

Similar to most western industrialised countries, independent learning in Australian higher education is considered as a gradual progression from the supervised learning model introduced at a very early stage of schooling in the Australian education
system. Students are incrementally exposed to limited independent learning practices at various levels of schooling until they enrol into higher education institutions where independent learning is considered as one of the primary tools to achieve their academic qualifications (Perry, 1968). It may also be seen that Australia, being a country dominated by individualistic culture (Hofstede, 2003), is likely to nurture the value of independent learning more than its collectivist counterparts such as China and India.

**Independent Learning: Some Theoretical Underpinnings**

According to Oxford (1990), independence involves learners developing what are known as higher level indirect meta cognitive skills related to organisation and evaluation, rather than direct cognitive skills, such as memorisation. Regardless of whether it is called self directed learning, and/or self study, the underpinning philosophy of independent learning emphasises that students need to learn how to learn and at the same time, learn how to be critical thinkers.

All higher education students are expected to function with a considerable level of independence, self reliance and autonomy. The philosophy of independent learning has emerged as one of the major features in higher education teaching and learning since the late 20th century as a powerful discourse in higher education (Holec, 1981; Goode, 2007). While independent learning places a stronger onus on the learner for their educational development, it may be construed as a tool and an element of a managerial view of higher education justifying the under resourcing of teaching provisions (Goode, 2007). However, it is also underpinned by sound educational principles. For example, Malcolm Knowles in the preface to Boud’s 1981 book on
the autonomous learner, states that increasingly so for the twenty-first century, the role of education is to produce “autonomous lifelong learners” with skills of self-directed inquiry, rather than the inculcation of one-way routinised delivery of course materials (Boud, 1981). Todd, Bannister and Clegg (2004, p. 336), in their study of final year tertiary students’ independent learning project, emphasise “the need to produce work ready graduates who are independent and confident, self directed learners”. The current emphasis in higher education of research-led teaching and learning also echoes this principle, where the aim is “… teaching students to be enquiring and research-based in their approach [which is] ... central to the hard-nosed skills required of the future graduate workforce” (Scott, 2002, p. 13). Active learning rather than passive, teacher-focussed learning is therefore integral to independent learning and aligns clearly with a student-centred approach (Gibbs, 1995). According to Healey (2005, p. 191), “active learning is more likely to encourage students to adopt a deep approach to learning than is the traditional transmission model.”

On one level, the expectation of independence applies to students’ lives surrounding their studies so that, for instance, students themselves take responsibility for attending or not attending classes, and fulfilling all assessment criteria such as handing their assignments and attending all tests and examinations on time. Importantly, and at a deeper level, it also relates to students’ own approaches to learning independently. Independence involves a “… shift from the student as passive recipient of knowledge to one who is more independent of the teacher, more responsible for the direction of his or her learning” (Goode, 2007, p. 591). In this regard, Goode (2007) considers the teacher’s role as that of a facilitator, providing resources which are conducive to students’ learning. Implied in this explanation is the notion of critical analysis in
relation to the content of the study. This means that a student is able to, for instance, undertake independent research using critical and analytical approaches, form and present their own responses to issues and topics rather than restating the viewpoints put forward in the literature or by their teachers.

A further dimension of independence has been explained by Benson (2001) as students operating with autonomy to control the processes of their own learning, ‘moving away from dependence through independence to interdependence. …. moving away from dependence on a teacher and a conscious change in role for that teacher’ (Ranabahu and Tamala: 2006, p. 5). The development of major learning skills such as time management, academic study and IT skills are required to control and manage such learning opportunities. This is because the idea of ‘control’ in independent learning includes dimensions such as taking responsibility of one’s own learning and realising the importance effective independent learning process.

Inherent to students taking responsibility for their own learning is motivation, understanding that learning can be affected by effort, and this is a critical factor in an individual’s perseverance in the face of obstacles. As explained later in this paper, motivation is influenced by emotion in learning (Dirkx, 2001). Integrated with such responsibility is the understanding that students need to explore issues that have meaning and relevance for them, and they will be motivated to learn if the learning activity is meaningful and the knowledge is useful and leads to a desired goal. Nonetheless, individual students bring different perspectives and experiences to learning situations, and in the final analysis, while it is the learner who achieves learning and creates meaning from the study material or experience, it does
necessarily place pressure on institutions to ensure that the learning material is presented in ways that are relevant to students, and thus position them to make the best use of it. Students’ educational and academic cultural backgrounds influence the way they approach learning. It is, therefore, important to consider these issues while preparing and delivering student learning activities, which could encourage students to learn independently and effectively despite their different backgrounds, approaches and interests.

Researchers like O’Malley and Chamot (1990), Ellis (1995) from the last decade and Hells’ten and Prescott (2004) and Major (2005) in recent years have investigated the cross-cultural, linguistic, and academic adjustments of non-English speaking international students pursuing degrees in English-speaking countries like the UK, the USA and Australia. These studies show that adjusting to a new environment through the use of a second language involves challenges to self-concept, worldviews, values, and attitudes. Referring to this extensive body of work, Norton (2000) argues that the learning of a second language is not simply a skill that is acquired with hard work and dedication, but a complex social practice that engages the identities of learners who, in this case, fall within the category of linguistic minority international students. Different researchers such as Ballard and Clanchy (1995), Robertson et al (2000), Sawir (2005) and others have described language as one of the major difficulties international students encounter in their academic discourse. Because of lower language competence these students face significant challenges to adopt into the new academic settings. Hence, by creating opportunities and encouraging students’ positive approaches, motivation and curiosity through relevance and inclusion in
learning in new settings, students’ self-confidence, self-reliance and positive self-concept can be fostered, particularly in case of international students.

For many students, being independent in learning is not a state with which they arrive at foreign institutions and is developed through their studies and experience of higher education. In this regard, Perry’s student learning theory presents a systematic spectrum for intellectual development over stages model where students move from dualist through multipitistic to relativist perspectives on issues and topics (Perry, 1968). This development aligns with increased independence in learning, i.e., as students undertake their studies, they move from passive learning approaches wherein the ‘correct response is searched for and reproduced, to relativist perspectives that are contextualised and utilise critical thinking and reasoning’ using materials wider than the prescribed ones (Perry, 1968). A state where students feel alienated and hold negative attitudes towards their studies and institutions will not facilitate this process.

We argue in this paper that positive attitude together with a multi-pronged learning style is important for students in order for them to adopt a deep approach of learning rather than a surface one. An appropriate level of transition and support programs is essential to encourage international students to adopt such an approach. Without a sense of inclusion and a feeling of support, it is difficult to understand how international students can have the confidence to embark on independent learning.

**International Students and Independence**

Many international students from a range of socio-economic backgrounds experience culture shock throughout a period of transition in adjusting and coping with a new learning environment. The majority of international students in Australia come from
Asian countries that possess a collectivistic culture, where mutual support and ongoing guidance form the very beginning of their learning career are the norms (Samuelowicz: 1987, Phillips: 1990). As a consequence, the learning approach in the Asian context is relatively more passive and surface-oriented (Jandt, 2000).

Given the challenges faced by international students, it is important that they feel aligned with their educational institution and studies, and transition and support programs facilitate this process. Studying in a new and foreign country can be exciting and richly rewarding provided a better understanding of, and successful adaptation to, the new realities involving the linguistic, culture and associated learning requirements are effectively met. However, this experience could be constrained by uncertainty and disorientation in finding their way around new cultural practices and social expectations. Transition phase is an important one as they go through a very different trajectory of experience and exposure in a new institution and society. In addition to the physical movement from one country to another, they travel through different experience, context and challenges. In a new country, they not only need to find a new place to live, they also need to familiarise themselves with new values and customs, while making sure they achieve their academic success.

In Australian universities, adjustment to a range of academic contexts including the teaching-learning settings and the use of English as the medium of instruction, may provide some challenges to international students. Despite the fact that these students are fully prepared to undertake academic studies in Australia, as Kalantzis et al (1989) suggest, they face considerable challenge in fulfilling academic requirements. In the process, international students face a variety of genre conventions, exploring the
conventions of their host country in combination with the conventions in new disciplines (Goode, 2007). As a country with Western educational heritage, independent learning is considered as a primary tool to achieve success in Australian higher education. In this challenging context, it is important that international students have positive attitudes to stand them in good stead to face any learning-related challenges.

International non-English speaking students entering a university in Australia need to be prepared emotionally as well as socio-culturally since they are likely to face a multitude of non-linguistic challenges (in addition to the linguistic ones) to succeed academically in an unfamiliar educational environment. Apart from English language proficiency, learning the academic disciplinary discourse in a foreign university context while living in a different culture can be a significant challenge. For example, the CBS FLOTE Project (Gonzales, et al., 1999) shows that for many international linguistic minority students, difficulties often stem from the lack of confidence in using English as a second language. It exacerbates in an academic setting when they also need to cope with the new-found socio-culturally constructed norms of interaction which are rarely taught explicitly. The independent learning requirements in the new academic setting place even more stress on the newly transplanted students. While independent learning is a challenging skill to learn for most international students, it is also a difficulty for local students who have just left schools and started pursuing a university degree. However, for local students, it appears to be less challenging compared to international ones.
Challenges for international students arise because autonomous or independent learning may often be contrary to their home-country learning cultures where students are trained to rely heavily on their teachers as guides as well as providers of knowledge. Researchers like Samuelowicz (1987), Volet and Kee (1993), Ballard and Clanchy (1995), McInnes (2001), Barker (2002) have explained that international students from different backgrounds have a range of learning styles and construct knowledge in different ways because of the interplay of ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ teaching and learning paradigms. For instance, Asian international students are assumed to be passive learners lacking the capability of thinking critically (Samuelowicz, 1987). However, Ballard and Clanchy (1995) and McInnes (2001) explain that these Asian students usually bring with them different learning styles and interpretations of approaches to knowledge, which may not match the Australian academic expectations. On the other hand, Volet and Kee (1993) and Wong (2004) point out that learning approaches adopted by Asian international students in Australian academic settings seem to be contextually based rather than culturally situated. In other words, rather than being shaped by their individual and cultural backgrounds, their learning styles have been tailored to meet the requirements of the specific learning contexts. In many instances, a significant number of international students in the Australian universities consider their teachers and textbooks as authoritative sources of knowledge. And when they are expected to perform in English, these students expect that their teachers would explain how and what they should learn. In this situation, a positive attitude towards the university and their studies become useful when they adapt to independent learning.
Researchers such as Biggs (1995; 1999), Watkins and Biggs (1996), and more recently Koehne (2005) identify international students as a homogenous group and argue against making any assumptions regarding certain groups and typical language problems or learning style difficulties. Rather, individual students’ personal intentions, motivation, personal expectations, individual strategies could be considered as determinants of different learning styles of different international student cohorts. While we support the view that students bring with them to their studies in Australia differing educational and linguistic expectations and backgrounds, our view in this paper concurs with Biggs et al (1998) on the importance of inclusive teaching and learning approaches that emphasises the value of these approaches for an affective independent learning process.

Nonetheless, becoming an independent learner is an ongoing process. It is the responsibility of the institution and the academic to foster this developmental process of learning. According to Sinclair (2006) teachers should be directly involved in terms of supporting the development of independent learning skills and evaluation skills.

Teachers need to be fully involved in the development of learner independence as not many students can become independent learners on their own as learning how to learn is more than learning a few technical procedures. (Ranabahu and Tamala: 2006)

Different studies such as Phillips (1990), Ramburuth (1997), Samuelowicz (1987a) Samuelowicz (1987b) argue that Australian classrooms place emphasis on aspects such as inquiry, independent research, divergent thinking, concept mapping, to collaborate between teacher and learners. This teaching strategy encourages student to participate in making responsible decisions and taking actions to deal with their own learning. However, this strategy is embedded in the educational setting which may be
totally new to international students. In addition, instructions regarding techniques and strategies for encountering this very new concept of independent learning are given in English, which is not their language of expertise. Hence, this notion of independent learning can seem quite overwhelming for these students. In this context, the value of positive attitudes is important - it is difficult to understand how a students can let go of dependence in learning and operate with critical analysis if they feel marginalized and excluded.

**Student Expectations and Independent Learning**

While independence and self reliance in learning are expected in higher education, many students, regardless of their backgrounds, are not either capable of or aspiring to function in this manner. For instance, in White’s (2006) study of full-time, undergraduate students in Victoria in Australia, the students self reported a lack of commitment to their university studies, and a passivity resulting in limited time available for their studies. While this may be because students are balancing paid work with study, it does offer insights into the reality of students’ attitudes towards their learning. Another pertinent factor is the life stage of most undergraduate students. As young adults, operating as independent learners may be problematic, as explained by White (2006), because of their transition to adulthood, wherein social life at university takes on importance (Levine and Cureton 1998 in White). As White further explains, students “… come to university to broaden their experience with people from different backgrounds” (White, p. 240). University provides a period in their lives in which students can “… identify personal directions and consolidate a sense of self”, and within this frame of mind, “unconscious processes may be contributing to student deflection of responsibility” (White, p. 240). Both of these
issues may apply to international students in Australian higher education institutions and could inhibit their ability to become independent learners.

From her study of undergraduate students, White (2006) also identifies another important factor, ‘institutional marginalisation’, which may interfere with students operating as independent learners. To students, academic staff appears to be more committed to their research rather than teaching. Another point relevant to international students is that in the current climate where students are often described as ‘customers’ and teachers appear as ‘service providers’, a learner is a “disengaged position”, where others are relied on to satisfy and to deliver (goods and services) making learning more dependent on service provisions by academic institutions. White (2006, p. 243) explains that such an expectation connotes a sense of passivity and dependence in learning, and is not consistent with students operating with independence. This may be compounded by the perceived role of international students, within the context of an internationalised education market, as ‘cash cows’ while institutions often provide them with structured learning materials to complete a mere ‘business transaction’. This may be viewed by international students as a neglect creating a sense of marginalisation among them. Because of their ‘sojourner’ status, they may be reluctant to operate what may be seen as ‘risky’, as connoted in independent learning. It is apparent that transition and support programs are vital in explaining academic expectations and encouraging international students to engage in independent learning.

Over the last decade or so, the idea has been put forward by different researchers (Samuelowicz: 1987, Phillips: 1990) that international students do not operate with
independence in Australian higher education because this expectation differs from their previous educational experiences. While this may or may not be the case, such a scenario could also be contributed by a different teaching situation in which students find themselves alienated (Biggs, 1987, 1989). It could be because of their preference either for dependence and passivity or learning of information for recall rather than critical analysis. In relation to international PhD students, Goode (2007) states that staff should not ‘stereotype’ particular groups of students as being more ‘dependent’ than the others. Rather, some responsibility should be placed on staff in becoming aware of their own ‘taken for granted’ assumptions, making the tacit explicit and adapting their own supervisory strategies to a certain extent to accommodate some of the student concerns and expectations. She argues that international students can quite competently make adjustments if they are dealt with respect and care while presented with explicitly in order for them to understand the ‘rules of the game’ (Goode: 2007, p. 601). It is thus apparent that independent learning is not inherent in students in general from the beginning of their higher education studies. Given the complexity of adjustment that international students face, it is clear that extra efforts on the part of institutions will assist this process. This accords with Goode’s (2007) view on the importance of understanding various genre conventions by institutions and academics to successfully implant the notion of independent learning among international students.

Independent Learning and Student Attitude, Emotion and Motivation

While the notion of independence alludes to students individually managing their adjustment to higher education studies in the way explained above, the adaptation of students to Australian higher education system and the independent learning process
is beyond the sole responsibility of the students themselves. Students require support from the institution and academics. Support is important in raising students’ awareness of expectations of Australian higher education and of independence in learning and developing academic skills. Operating with independence in studies and applying critical and analytical approaches require confidence as it may be seen as risk taking. For students to operate in this way, a somewhat positive attitude towards themselves as students and towards their institution is required. This is not an unfounded view - the affective factors in learning and academic achievement reflecting students’ attitude to their institutions and their learning approaches play a significant role. In turn, these are affected by support programs available within the higher education institutions. As the individual’s behavior is influenced by previous experiences, environmental conditions and reflective thought processes, it is necessary for institutions to provide programs so that students new to higher education studies can come to understand the expectations of their new institutional setting, including the notion of independence in learning. As Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory explains, there is a reciprocal relationship between the person, the environment and behavior which reflects their attitude towards learning approach and outcome. Students’ sense of self efficacy and confidence are affected by their attitudes, as well as their motivation. In this regard, McKenzie and Schweitzer (2001), based on their study in Australia, have emphasised on the role of self efficacy which is predictive of university grades.

Another important issue within the student learning area involves the notion of emotion and feeling that has extensively been discussed in the literature. Emotions and feelings “connect some aspect of our outer experience with dimly perceived or
understood aspects of our inner worlds” (Dirkx, p. 66). Ingleton (2000), and Dirkx (2001) have explained their powerful role in adult learning. These may, either impede or motivate learning and is central to our ‘ways of knowing’ (Dirkx p. 63). Ingleton (2000) explains that emotions of shame or pride are key elements of self identity, and as pointed out previously, international students’ own identities undergo some sort of transformational developments as they embark on their studies. Lack of self-confidence often impedes their ability to go through this developmental phase and undertake critical and analytical approaches to study. Students experiencing a sense of shame will not feel valued or relevant to the learning situation, leading to alienation and distance. A sense of pride, on the other hand, is seen in inclusion and identification with the institutional expectations which could lead to solidarity and closeness with staff and fellow students affecting personal confidence and building positive temperament to learn.

Self confidence and self belief are related to chain-like values and motivations affecting their approach to study. That means, will the students study in a surface manner seeking only to learn enough to pass, or will they take a deep approach where they seek understanding and are thus able to apply and interpret the content of their study, as reflected in an independent approach to learning? As Fielder’s (2000) work has suggested, “positive affect as a general approach orientation facilitates … generative, top-down and creative processes” (Fielder, 2000, cited in Pintrich and Schunk, 2002, p. 281), and critical thinking underpins creative approaches. Pintrich and Schunk (2002) also point out that “negative affect decreases the probability that students will use cognitive strategies that will result in deeper, more elaborative
processing of the information”, and that negative emotions can “interfere with the
cognitive processing needed to do the academic task” (Pintrich and Schunk, p. 281).

Support from Host Institutions and Academics

Academic transition and support programs can foster inclusion and set the scene for
inclusive social relations and assist international students to become increasingly
confident and independent in their learning approach. Our view is that the role of
support is profound and significant.

However, with combined student cohorts, local and international, it is not an easy task
for higher education academics to follow a balanced support structure and still
encourage independent learning. Nonetheless, the balance between independence and
control is a difficult one to achieve which is a critical element of an effective learning
process. According to Todd, et al. (2004, P. 347), a proactive learning process require
“a balance between freedom and structure, enabling student autonomy while also
providing contact, support and training”. That means, any unstructured learning
mechanism intended to make students more independent, should be complemented by
an appropriately designed curriculum and an ongoing interaction between students
and academics until students find themselves competent enough as independent
learners. Blayney, et al. (2008) consider individualised interactive formative
assessments to support students in gaining independent learning skills so that students
at different levels of learning ability can cope with the process. However, they
consider large classes as not conducive to efficient learning where it is difficult to
introduce individualised questions and assessment process.
In addition, the academic and social support programs in the transition phase, which has already been highlighted above, are a vital precondition for students’ understanding of academic as well as social expectations which are likely to help them developing positive attitudes and increased motivation to achieve their objectives. In this regard, Ranabahu and Tamala (2006) argue that support through well-structured and focused transition programs can help international students better understand the importance of independent learning which could be considered as a positive approach in motivating them in becoming self-reliant learners.

**International Students and Independent Learning: A Proposed Framework**

Based on the discussion above, a framework is proposed to show the manner in which international students’ independent learning outcomes are affected by their backgrounds, expectations, the role of the institution and their exposures in the existing host-country academic environment (see Figure 1).
It is argued that international students’ own linguistic as well as cultural contexts provide them with some expectations about the new academic environment which often appears to be the portrayal of a positive picture. Once they begin their studies in the host institution, they get disenchanted by the complexity of the host country academic environment and the limited support they receive from host institutions to cope with the culture shock, the new academic curriculum and its associated learning structures promoting independent learning.

However, as most international students are not ready to overcome these challenges, they tend to struggle to cope with the realities. Emotionally, it is likely to affect their social as well as academic wellbeing, which in turn, may affect their attitude towards
the entire learning process. Despite host institutions’ limited capacity to support international students during this critical acculturation phase, independent learning is promoted as a primary learning tool. Many students, disillusioned about the promises and expectations, remain stuck to this emotional state and fail to make any significant progress towards achieving their learning objectives. Some, however, get themselves motivated to become independent learners, overcome the initial culture shock and get used to the new social as well as academic realities.

The framework may provide some important directions for any future research undertaken within the area of independent learning involving international students. It may also provide useful insights for the policy makers with respect to providing necessary support for international students in building their capacity to learn independently. Institutions may also use the framework to link their capacity building programs to the actual needs and expectations of international students. For educators, it may help them becoming aware of the situation better and equip themselves to support international students and foster independent learning. This framework may also help international students better understand the actual nature of the problem, trajectory of their learning process in an international context, its associated opportunities and challenges, and the importance of adapting to the new environment and adopting independent learning as a tool of achieving academic success.

Nonetheless, the framework is a tentative one and it does not purport to be comprehensive. It is a conceptual framework and does not backed up by any primary research. However, it provides some explanations with respect to the difficulties international students face in host countries and host institutions with respect to their
independent learning outcomes, the support they require to overcome these difficulties and their home and host country cultural, linguistic and academic contexts. It also offers opportunities for future research through empirical means.

Conclusions:
As mentioned above, independent learning is not carried out in isolation. An independent learning environment requires supports from teachers, institutions and the society. International students often find it difficult to cope with the new academic and social environment they face while studying in an overseas institution. The educator's role, in this regard, is to facilitate learning in a variety of ways which are age appropriate, subject appropriate, related to available resources and relevant to students' needs for a balance between structured learning experience and learning independence. Research has found that academics are aware of the learning needs of their students, but may be unclear about how best to address those needs in fostering independent learning outcomes (Ryan, 2005). This study explores the pedagogical adoption of independent learning strategy by international students in the teaching – learning setting of higher education institutions in Australia. As independent learning approach can differ depending on context and expectations, it is, therefore, important to consider the background and objectives of the students to evaluate their learning strategy and its suitability. Based on an elaborate discussion of the independent learning process and the difficulties of international students to cope with such process, a framework is proposed. Despite the tentative nature of the framework, it represents the relationship pattern across the various key factors relevant to international students and their independent learning experiences and outcomes. The framework has the potential to contribute to the extant literature of independent
learning. It also has implications for policy makers, host academic institutions, educators (teachers) and international students themselves. The paper, however, is a conceptual one and the framework does not purport to be comprehensive as it is yet to be tested through empirical research.

References


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