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Dancing, Google and fish sauce: Vietnamese students coping with Australian universities

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the language, academic, and socio-cultural concerns of 24 Vietnamese international students (PhD, master's and undergraduate) studying in universities in Sydney, Australia. Alongside the obvious linguistic concerns, the salient issues that emerge from this study draw attention to the struggles these students face to adapt to different educational norms, and particularly the varied expectations of supervisors, the different coping strategies these students use to overcome linguistic and other concerns, and the broader socio-cultural domains that support their studies. This study contributes to an understanding of Vietnamese international students, a growing cohort in Australia and elsewhere. Its findings provide insights that shift the focus away from the "difficulties" faced by international students and the institutional responses (or lack thereof), towards understanding their agentive modes of accommodation in the context of their degree programmes and their other lived experiences which include foods and ways of living.

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Introduction

Overseas education, an attraction for both students and parents in Vietnam (Pham & Fry, 2004), has become a much sought opportunity for Vietnamese people in recent decades. As of November 2016, 130,000 Vietnamese citizens studied overseas through various sources of international, national, and private funding (Vietnamnet, 2016). And this number is projected to rise, notably as the country's growing middle class drives demand for overseas education (ICEF Monitor, 2018), together with increased foreign scholarships (Yang, 2017) and continued state fund schemes for overseas study on the part of Vietnam (Vietnamnet, 2017).

Australia has recently been a growing popular destination for Vietnamese students, accounting for 23.8% of the total share of this student cohort, second only to Japan (29.2%), in five top receiving countries (Japan, Australia, the US, the UK, and China) as of June 2017 (Yang, 2017). As of July 2017, there were 27,148 Vietnamese international students enrolled in different sectors of education in Australia (Australian Education International [AEI], 2017). Among these were 14,439 Vietnamese students in higher education, making Vietnam the fifth highest contributor to the international student cohort in Australian higher education, after China (131,203), India (50,985), Nepal (19,303), and Malaysia (14,534) (AEI, 2017). Despite the large number of Vietnamese international students attending Australian institutions, research into the experiences of this cohort of students is limited, and has focused on motivation and social networks (Bennett, Volet, & Fozda, 2013; Pham, 2013; Pham & Saltmarsh, 2013), general experiences (Wearing, Le, Wilson, &

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Arambewela, 2015), or the issue of reticence in the classroom (Yates & Nguyen, 2012). While these studies have shed light on different aspects of the experience of Vietnamese students in Australia, they have focused largely on separate undergraduate or postgraduate study programme groups, in line with the main orientation of research on international students (e.g., Haugh, 2016; Hennebry, Lo, & Macaro, 2012; Krase, 2007; Phakiti & Li, 2011). Useful as it is, research that has included students of different programme levels (e.g., Gomes, Berry, Alzougool, & Chang, 2014; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Zhang & Mi, 2010) tends to treat them as a homogeneous group, thus presenting an insufficient view on international students at different levels of study. Although Tran (2009, 2011) looks at case studies of Chinese and Vietnamese students' adaptation to their master's writing assignments, little research has particularly addressed the coping mechanisms of Vietnamese students with regards to multiple language, academic, and socio-cultural domains.

Regarding international students' relocating to a new study and living environment, language proficiency has repeatedly been reported as one of the pertinent issues they encounter in Australia and elsewhere, affecting not only their studies but also pervading their socio-cultural experiences (e.g., Robertson, Line, Jones, & Thomas, 2000; Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012; Tananuraksakul, 2012). Although a deficit view on international students from Confucian-Heritage or Asian countries has been challenged (Haugh, 2016; Heng, 2018; Kettle, 2011, 2017; Ryan, 2011, 2012; Ryan & Louie, 2007; Ryan & Viète, 2009), negative discourses about them as lacking English proficiency, and academic and socio-cultural capability has never subsided (Marginson, 2014). They are underrated and discredited in various ways (Kettle, 2017). Typically, Asian students are often downplayed as "needy, problematic and passive" (Heng, 2018, p. 6). Although students from Vietnam share some common issues with students from other Asian or Confucian-Heritage countries, they can differ in many ways, for example, how they overcome language, academic, and sociolinguistic problems. According to Marginson (2014), current discourses on international students undervalue the role of students' agency, how they agentively self-form and exercise their reflexive capability. By studying this specific group of Vietnamese students, focusing on their coping strategies, in linguistic, academic, and socio-cultural terms, we therefore hope to further contribute to a better understanding of international students.

The present research examines the language, academic, and socio-cultural concerns of Vietnamese international students (PhD, master's and undergraduate) while studying in Sydney, Australia and the ways they overcome them. Alongside the obvious linguistic concerns, the salient issues that emerge from this study are the struggles to adapt to different educational norms, and particularly the varied expectations of supervisors, the different coping strategies these students use to overcome difficulties and the broader socio-cultural domains that support their studies. Based largely around ethnographic interviews, the study did not set out with an explicit theoretical framework or set of concerns to be explored. Although we operated with an agenda to understand how these students overcame the various problems they encountered – and were therefore oriented away from deficit and difficulty frameworks and towards accounts of coping strategies – the themes and topics that we focused on emerged from the research process. More precisely it emerged from our careful thematic organization and analysis of the interview data. In our initial design of the project, topics such as food were not mentioned but became increasingly salient as the research progressed.

We aim to draw attention to several important points when looking at international students in higher education: First, they are in themselves diverse, and we should be very wary of drawing any strong assumptions about Vietnameseness or other such ethno-cultural categories. We take the perspective that "there can be greater diversity within cultures than between them" (Ryan & Viète, 2009, p. 304). Second, students can be very active in their attempts to adapt and acclimatize (see Heng, 2018; Marginson, 2014). A focus on problems they face and the institutional support (student support services, language help, counselling) available to help them overcome these difficulties, tends to overlook the ways in which students develop their own support measures and carve out a particular space in social, cultural, and physical terms. Third, the question of what they accommodate

to is diverse, including both a diversity of languages, cultures, and practices among other students and teachers as well as a complex social and cultural environment in which they find a parallel living space. So finally, we also want to draw attention to the ways in which students' study is interlinked with their other living experiences, including the availability of housing, food, and ways of living. This study contributes to an understanding of Vietnamese international students, a growing cohort in Australia and elsewhere, but also suggests lines of investigation for other future studies. This is particularly important, given that the current discourses tend towards an essentialization of international students (Kettle, 2017; Ryan, 2012), and that the economic impetus for international education is Australia's "necessary context" (Cadman, 2000, p. 488).

Difficulties international students face

This section gives a brief overview of difficulties international students encounter in three areas, namely language, and academic and socio-cultural domains. Studies related to Vietnamese students, though limited, will also be addressed. Research has, for the past decades, shown that language proficiency is one of the greatest barriers to international students' academic performance and social adjustment (e.g., Andrade, 2006; Robertson et al., 2000; Sawir et al., 2012; Tananuraksakul, 2012). In particular, international students have difficulty communicating verbally (Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Zhang & Mi, 2010), with the accent and speed of lecturers being obstacles that affected their academic performance (Hennebry et al., 2012; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Wearing et al., 2015). Reading and writing are additionally problematic for international students due to their inadequate vocabulary and terms (Phakiti & Li, 2011; Sawir et al., 2012; Son & Park, 2014; Wang & Li, 2011; Zhang & Mi, 2010). Language was similarly an issue that Wearing et al. (2015) found with Vietnamese postgraduate students in an Australian university.

Much research has also revealed that international students face a range of cross-academic cultural difficulties (Cadman, 2000; Neri & Ville, 2008; Phakiti & Li, 2011; Robinson-Pant, 2009; Son & Park, 2014). Among these are the challenges for international students from Asia to adjust to self-directed learning (Campbell & Li, 2007; Scheyvens, Wild, & Overton, 2003). Vietnamese undergraduate students who came to New Zealand from a programme in Vietnam run by the same host institution felt abandoned or "uncared" (p. 275) for in the initial stage of their sojourn (Vu & Doyle, 2014). Unmet expectations as to the role of supervisors caused emotional disturbances, distress, and disappointment among research students (Cadman, 2000; Wang & Li, 2011; Wash, 2010). In a study drawing on questionnaire data, cultural differences were also seen to hinder supervisor-student relationship from working effectively and to lead to conflicts (Adrian-Taylor, Noels, & Tischler, 2007). Mismatch of expectations has also been found to be due to a lack of explicit communication about how the relationship between a supervisor and students should work (Krase, 2007). This mismatch might impinge on the students' progress and well-being, and raises the question for the internationalization of education as to who should be required to make adjustments (students or institutions) (Volet & Ang, 1998).

In addition to language and academic culture barriers, research has shown that international students encounter myriad socio-cultural difficulties. They feel overwhelmingly isolated and lonely, with a constant lack of a sense of belonging (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). Discrimination and racism have been reported as additional challenges (Novera, 2004; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007; Singh, 2011). Most persistent and intense of all is that international students find it difficult to make friends with local students. They "mix uneasily and infrequently" with local students (Harman, 2005, p. 129), or bond exclusively with same-country students or other international students due to inadequate language proficiency and cultural differences (Gomes, Berry, & Alzougool, 2014; Leask, 2009; Sawir et al., 2008, 2012). In line with this research, Wearing et al. (2015) found that Vietnamese international students in Australia experienced a lack of interaction with local students, as did their fellow students in France (Brisset, Safdar, Lewis, & Sabatier, 2010). Bennett et al. (2013), however report the case of a local

Australian student and a Vietnamese undergraduate student co-developing their relationship to “break through the barrier” (p. 10), but this relationship was maintained only in the university setting, not outside campus.

The studies reviewed so far highlight a range of language, academic, and socio-cultural difficulties international students encounter, with the problems seeming to come from students themselves. Though insightful, this body of research focuses largely on “difficulties”, and thus fails to show how students cope and get by. There have been continued negative discourses around international students as lacking English proficiency which is commonly blamed in the media for supposed falling academic standards in Australia (Devos, 2003; Trouson, 2011). The issue of language proficiency, however, is often conflated with academic ability in research on international students (Haugh, 2016; Kettle, 2017; Ryan & Viete, 2009). “Little is known about the resources ... that students mobilise to manage their overseas study experience” (Kettle, 2011, p. 2). The additional academic challenges international students, especially students from Asia, encounter are often explained by reference to the concept of the “cultural fit” or differences in academic cultures. That is, the more similar the culture students come from to the host cultural environment the more it facilitates student adaptation (Mehdizadeh & Scott, 2005). The difference between so-called collectivist Asian cultures, and individualist Western environments (Hofstede, 1980) suggests that students from Vietnam, like other Asian students might experience major difficulties when studying in Australia.

The concept of the independent, autonomous, self-responsible learner prevalently valued in higher education discourse, particularly doctoral education, has subjected international students who “do not ‘fit’ this profile” to being represented as “deficient” (Goode, 2007, p. 592). In Goode’s words, “they become subject to the negative moral discourse surrounding ‘dependency’, via an infantilizing discourse that characterizes them as immature learners” (p. 600). Polarizing Western and non-western or particularly Confucian-Heritage styles of learning, however, is a “false dichotomy” (Ryan & Louie, 2007, p. 404) or a “fallacy” (Goode, 2007, p. 595). It “undervalues the inherent interdependence of learning and teaching” (Goode, 2007, p. 592) and denies opportunities to learn from different traditions of knowledge (Cadman, 2000), thus inhibiting transcultural teaching and mutual learning (Kettle, 2017; Ryan, 2011, 2012). The present paper argues for a move from “complaints and troubles talk” (Haugh, 2016, p. 2) discourses that marginalize students to understanding their coping capability and agency, a move from a deficit to a transcultural approach (Cadman, 2000; Kettle, 2017; Ryan, 2012) through accounts of how Vietnamese international students cope linguistically, academically, and socio-linguistically when studying in Sydney. This study provides evidence to support the concept of international education as self-formation, as proposed by Marginson (2014), where students’ “active will” or agency plays an important role (p. 18). It contributes to an emerging line of research that highlights “what students are able to do” (Zhang, & Mi, 2010, p. 385), their personal agency (Bennett et al., 2013; Kettle, 2005; Marginson, 2014; Sawir et al., 2012; Tran, 2009, 2011), their coping strategies (Heng, 2018; Khawaja & Stallman, 2011), and their engagement (Kettle, 2011, 2017). Clearly more research is needed to understand students’ ways of coping, particularly with multiple aspects of their overseas experience.

The study

The present study looks at how Vietnamese international students coped linguistically, academically, and socio-linguistically while studying in Sydney, Australia. Individual in-depth semi-structured interviews were employed to provide students a chance to narrate and elaborate on their experiences. The purpose was to seek *understanding* of their lived experiences. In this study, Vietnamese international students refers to students from Vietnam who come to Australia to do a degree (BA, MA, or PhD), but not Vietnamese students who are Australian citizens or have permanent Australian residency. Since the study focuses on the experiences of students, recruitment included only Vietnamese students who had embarked on their degree programme in Sydney, Australia for at least six months at the time of the interview.

After the ethics approval for this research had been obtained, information was sent to various faculties and schools at different institutions in Sydney, using public contacts, invitations, and flyers. Participation was voluntary and students who were willing to participate contacted the first researcher for interviews. In appreciation of the students' time, a gift voucher worth \$10 was given to each participant. Twenty-four students voluntarily participated in interviews conducted in Vietnamese and lasting on average 45 minutes each. These interviews were mainly face to face (20), and as students wished, telephone interviews (3) and email (1) were also conducted. One group interview included three students from the same university who knew each other. All were audio-recorded for accuracy, with the students' permission. Students were asked about background information first and then open-ended questions regarding the language, academic, and socio-cultural challenges they encountered and how they overcame their issues. Tables 1 and 2 provide student background information.

It is worth noting that over half of this cohort of students were influenced by their prior education overseas (either in Australia or elsewhere): Thirteen out of 24 students had experienced education overseas before commencing study in Australia at the time of the interview. Five students went straight to university from high school or foundation programmes in Australia; one student studied Medicine after completing a bachelor degree in Australia; one had done their high school in Singapore. Six PhD students completed their master's in Australia, Europe, or Korea. This prior experience of study was a constant point of reference when they talked about the challenges they encountered in their current programme of study.

The data were de-identified and students' real names, and the name of their institution, were not identified in any way in the research. The interviews were transcribed verbatim in their entirety. Each individual interview transcript was printed out and inductively analysed through an iterative process of identifying and re-identifying themes and categories that emerged from students' responses. These themes were treated as "provisional knowledge" to be further examined for confirmation (Silverman, 2010, p. 279). All the interview transcripts were then checked for overlapping (or distinguishing) themes. Since theme-based analysis based on "prevalence" may be subject to researcher bias, the qualitative data was also processed quantitatively (Bryman, 2008). Excel spreadsheets were used to keep track of the categories, which were coded in an open-ended manner, for each participant and all participants, which additionally allows for quantifying the categories that emerged. The number of students mentioning certain themes, the centrality of themes, and the intensity of difficulties were traced. Five out of the 24 interview transcripts were

Table 1. Student background information.

	PhD students (<i>n</i> = 15)	Undergraduate/Master students (<i>n</i> = 9)
Aged 30–43	11	3
Aged 22–25	0	6
Aged 27–29	4	0
Female	9	3
Married	10	1
On scholarship	15	0
Prior education overseas	7	6
Length of stay in Australia	6 months–5 years	1.5–8 years

Table 2. Student academic disciplines.

PhD students (<i>n</i> = 15)	Undergraduate/Master students (<i>n</i> = 9)
Education (9)	Design & Architecture (5)
Engineering(5)	Medicine (3)
Journalism & Communications (1)	Engineering (1)

randomly selected and coded independently by a Vietnamese colleague for inter-rater reliability. The percentage of agreement for all categories was 94%. The quotations illustrated are excerpts from the stories told by the students which were translated into English. Translations of the excerpts were also cross-checked by another Vietnamese EFL teacher. For reasons of space the original Vietnamese texts have not been included.

Findings

The findings show that for the undergraduate and master's students the intensity of difficulties clustered around oral communication as a barrier, while for the PhD group, reading and writing, and working with supervisors were recounted as the greatest challenges. With regards to their socio-cultural experience, the present study reflects the complex nature of social relationships in connection with students' other lived experiences overseas. Most important of all, and something the participants were keen to stress, were the accommodating and coping mechanisms they developed.

Overcoming language issues: "It seems like I'm dancing to illustrate my idea, because my English is not good"

The language issues emerged frequently across the interviews in the present study, and this is broadly in congruence with findings from other studies (Andrade, 2006; Hellstén & Prescott, 2004; Robertson et al., 2000; Tananuraksakul, 2012; Zhang & Mi, 2010). This was not surprising, though it was also clear that for most of these students this was something they managed to overcome in various ways. This included not only getting better at working out the linguistic requirements of academic English but also working out when and in what ways it mattered and how this could be overcome.

In this study, comments about the struggles with both spoken and written English were common. For some it was the question of adjusting to an Australian accent.

When I came here, I found it hard to understand Australian accents. (Student 8, master's, Design & Architecture)

For medical students, the issue of oral comprehension became more pronounced as they moved into medical contexts and dealt with patients of various backgrounds:

I did my Bachelor in Engineering in Australia; at that time the language was simple, mainly numbers and experiments. But doing Medicine is different. Medicine sounds like very much a natural science, but it is social in nature. The greatest challenge is the language for communication when I interact with people in hospitals. It's difficult to understand completely what some patients say. It's more difficult to understand people who come from rural areas than those coming from the city. (Student 12, undergraduate, Medicine)

As this student makes clear, while domains such as engineering may make fairly low linguistic demands because of their use of scientific studies and symbols, medicine is also a social practice, placing particular communicative demands in contexts such as hospitals. What these students used English for, and who they interacted with, surfaced as important in understanding the nature of language problems that might not depend on the length of stay in Australia. More interestingly, however, it was not so much Australian English as the diversity of other Englishes that were at play:

Here many international teachers teach me, not native speakers of English, especially in my discipline, Indian, Iranian male teachers also teach me. I can't understand them because of their accent. I have German and French teachers, I feel Ok with them, but those from that Indian... Iranian regions are almost impossible to understand [laughs], even local students also say so. This semester, a Vietnamese male teacher teaches me. Although I can understand his English because I'm used to Vietnamese people speaking English, many of my friends complain about him ... they don't understand him. (Student 24, undergraduate, Engineering)

It was a common observation that in both their university classrooms and their lives outside the university, they encountered this kind of diversity of accents. This is the reality of contemporary internationally-oriented universities, and particularly in a city such as Sydney: It is not only the student body that is diverse but also the teachers and tutors. It can take a considerable period of adjustment for both international and local students to become accustomed to the different ways in which English is used by a wide diversity of people.

The story that emerges across these language questions is generally one of managing to get by and realizing that getting by, rather than performing at some idealized level, is what is required. This adjustment takes two particular forms. On the one hand, students come to realize that it is the capacity to communicate above all that matters rather than formal properties of that communication. As one student put it:

Sometimes we say an English sentence which is not accurate; they don't care! The purpose is during the conversation we understand what they say and they understand what we say. (Student 8, master's, Design & Architecture)

On the other hand, as they start to realize that the central focus is on getting meanings across rather than concentrating on the medium by which this is done, students develop communicative strategies to ensure they are understood. As one student of design explained, she overcame what she saw as her difficulties with English by the use of various nonverbal strategies, which she describes as "dancing" as well as drawing.

My greatest challenges are mainly English. Often I have to communicate the idea behind my design or model. Each time I present my design, it seems like I'm dancing to illustrate my idea, because my English is not good. Sometimes the teacher doesn't understand, I have to even draw and explain. (Student 9, undergraduate, Design & Architecture)

Such comments point to the ways in which an overemphasis on language and more particularly "correct English" by both students and institutions may miss the point that at the heart of much educational interaction is the need to communicate. And such communication may be achieved in a range of different ways. The more complex literacy skills required for assignments, reports, and articles posed larger problems, though students – particularly those in the sciences – recognized a similar emphasis on needing to get the ideas across. For doctoral students in engineering there was the added pressure to publish articles, and to ensure that the results they obtained in experiments were adequately explained. The pragmatic coping strategies many of them developed were well captured by one engineering student's observation:

For me I am not concerned about whether the sentences I write are academically elite or not, but whether they are comprehensible or not. The academicness will come later, because people can help you with non-academic sentences; they can polish them to make them sound more academic; but they can't correct the sentences they don't understand. This is my experience after so many years. Nobody can correct an incomprehensible sentence; nobody can correct a 'wrong' structure. They can polish an article that is written in simple language. (Student 22, PhD, Engineering)

Although this engineering student's focus on writing simple but comprehensible prose differs in a number of ways from the design student's multimodal strategies, both can be seen as pragmatic coping strategies that turn their apparent weaknesses into minor problems that can be overcome. While language issues remained an obvious concern for these students (both undergraduate and postgraduate, though in different ways), two points of interest emerged from these interviews. First, although there was a necessary adjustment to Australian accents, this was somewhat eclipsed by the need to adapt to a wide variety of ways of using English by a diversity of speakers. Coming to Australia may be less about fitting in to some Australian way of doing and speaking and more with being ready to engage with a diversity of speakers from different parts of the world. Second, although competence in both oral and written English was an important aspect of their study, these students came to adopt a range of pragmatic coping strategies as they came to appreciate

that others were interested in what they had to say rather than in how they said it. From dancing to drawing and polishing, there were many ways in which English could be supported, and this had less to do with learning the particular codes and genres of academic disciplines and more to do with using a wider variety of semiotic resources.

Adapting to supervisors: “do you know how to Google?”

The undergraduate and master’s students in the present study reported positive experiences with their lecturers and supervisors. They also emphasized the importance of making sure they took control where possible:

Whenever I need help I come to talk to my teacher; or sometimes I have noticed he often comes up and down the stairs when he has breaks, I come out and catch him ... he’s very kind and enthusiastic. If he’s busy he will suggest another time for me to come and see him ... So don’t be afraid. I always tell my Vietnamese new comers to ask and not to be afraid. (Student 8, master’s, Design & Architecture)

Students acknowledge that, coming from a culture where they tend to depend on the teacher, they need to adapt to a context where they are expected to take the initiative:

I need to be self-directed. It depends on you. You need to step out to find things for yourself. If you don’t step out, nobody will come to you. For example, if I want to improve my skills in hospitals, I need to go to the teachers and ask their permission to come along. (Student 15, undergraduate, Medicine)

For the doctoral students, it was in the interactions with supervisors, however, that much greater obstacles seemed to occur. While some students reported good working relationships with their supervisors – “My two supervisors are wonderful; I feel their support is more than enough for me” (Student 11, PhD, Education) – for many a problem was the insistence on “independence”.

When I asked him something he said, ‘As a PhD student, you need to be an independent thinker.’ He said this sentence more than 100 times for the first year [laughs]. So I did things by myself. (Student 13, PhD, Education)

Clearly at one level we can interpret this in terms of the general struggle to develop independent doctoral researchers, a general process of guiding students towards becoming autonomous researchers. It may also be interpretable in relation to different educultural norms, with Vietnamese students expecting to be more reliant on their teachers, while supervisors resist these attempts by pushing the students to work on their own. The constant reiteration of this theme of independence may also be read in terms of some supervisors making cultural assumptions about students of particular backgrounds who they see as more dependent. Students were also aware of these different approaches and commented unfavourably about modes of supervision that seemed to offer so little guidance. In their eyes, this may also have to do more with supervisory workloads than with different approaches to education:

I expected I would be joining a group of intellectuals, I would have a chance to cooperate but mostly it’s our inner struggle. Supervisors are too busy. Some supervise up to ten students. It’s terrible ... They are under pressure for publications ... Here education is business, but they don’t care enough. I find this disappointing. (Student 6, PhD, Education)

Such comments are an important reminder to institutions receiving overseas students who come from contexts (such as Vietnam) where education is strongly revered: When education has taken on aspects of business-like behaviour, and supervisors are under pressure to take on students to achieve “completions”, this may look very un-educational to students from other backgrounds. For a number of these students, it was not so much a question of independence as an issue of quality of supervision:

There should be some policy for supervision to be effective, that means, supervision needs to be associated with outcomes for certain stages of the research. That means it needs to be associated with responsibility, but maybe they think it’s the responsibility of the student, and support is just support but that kind of support is hard to figure out. (Student 2, PhD, Education)

Once again, however, although these students recognized flaws and inconsistencies in the type of support they were being given, they also realized that it was up to them to change and challenge what they felt were inadequate forms of supervision. For some, this meant consulting other students – sometimes other Vietnamese students, sometimes others – including at times trips to other cities to talk through the issues with a trusted friend. In a number of cases this led to the challenge of changing supervisors (a process, we might note, that requires considerable courage and independence).

One term that comes up over and over again in the data on supervisors is “shocked” – or rather the Vietnamese term “sốc” which means “much worse than expected”, “making one feel faint”. As one student explained:

On the very first day I met my supervisor, I was shocked and felt very discouraged. When I met him he told me that we had to narrow down the topic in my proposal; then he asked me what my model in the proposal was. But in Vietnam when I wrote this proposal I didn't know what this model was, this is why I came here to build it; I hadn't had it yet ... that's why I came here to study. Then I asked my supervisor if he could suggest any direction, he answered 'No, it's your own research, you have to find it.' I was really shocked. But that was not as shocking as this. After that I asked him if he had any reading list, because I had heard that some supervisors sometimes have some references or articles to refer students to. He said 'Do you know how to Google?' I was too shocked [laughs]. (Student 10, PhD, Engineering)

This sense of shock perhaps suggests, on the one hand, that such students were not well prepared for what is involved in the doctoral research process in Australian institutions (for example, narrowing down a research topic, developing a model for the research proposal or independently finding relevant literature materials) and for the way in which supervision occurs in these Australian contexts. It also suggests, on the other hand, that these supervisors were poorly prepared in ways of dealing with students of different backgrounds, failing, it seems, to make sufficient accommodations to different expectations. While it may be useful to provide further preparation both pre-departure and in-country to students with respect to these expectations about independent study, it is also clear that supervisors could benefit from developing a wider variety of strategies than repeating “As a PhD student, you need to be an independent thinker” a 100 times or asking “Do you know how to Google?” Supervisors may need assistance in finding ways to adapt to different kinds of expectations (rather than just insisting on independence). However, further questions need to be asked – issues raised clearly by these students – about the extent to which the insistence on student independence masks incapacity by overworked supervisors to attend to the needs of their students.

Again, students nonetheless showed an ability to develop coping strategies for themselves. One doctoral student compared her previous tendency to rely on professors to her newfound capacity to take control. As she notes, the onus for change is clearly on the students rather than supervisors and this change involves their own initiative to seek out support and to equip themselves with knowledge and skills needed to do independent research in Australia.

It's me who has made efforts to overcome difficulties. Nobody can teach you how to do this, how to do that. If you don't have experience, you go out seeking support, for example, attending workshops on how to write a proposal. You go to workshops or read to gradually pick up skills needed. In Vietnam, I thought I would depend on the professor. But I have adjusted; I have come to understand that it's me who has to change. They won't change to fit us. (Student 2, PhD, Education)

This suggests, on the one hand, the importance of students' initiative in taking control of their studies, and on the other hand, the “static” and seemingly unresponsive staff, who “won't change to fit us”. A preferable circumstance would see both staff and students adapting to each other in a more mutual learning process.

Fitting in and getting by: “they have everything here, even fish sauce”

An important part of student life also occurs outside university and it has been frequently observed in the literature that despite university advertising materials presenting groups of integrated local

and international students, the reality is more commonly one in which overseas students hang out together (Brisset et al., 2010; Gomes et al., 2014; Harman, 2005; Leask, 2009; Sawir et al., 2008). The present study shows that the reasons for this are several, from linguistic and cultural factors (various differences as well as a lack of opportunity for interaction) to economic factors (students from countries such as Vietnam rarely have the economic resources to frequent the same places as many local students), prejudice and discrimination.

In places where there are more Western people I feel there's discrimination. When I was in Newcastle, at night time while I was waiting for my bus at the bus stop, there were Australian guys who drove past us, shouting at us with f-words. My Vietnamese friends also told me they witnessed Australian guys even threw empty beer bottles at them. These are the things that make me feel not belonging to this land. When I moved to Sydney, there are more Asian people, so I feel better. I feel more included, though in Sydney I still feel I do not belong here. I'm an international student. (Student 24, undergraduate, Engineering)

This kind of experience of racial abuse – either direct or reported – remains a deplorable aspect of international student experience, exacerbated, it seems, by experiences in more provincial cities. Even in the more cosmopolitan Sydney, with its larger Asian population, however, the possibilities for a greater sense of inclusion were outweighed by a continued feeling that international students do not really belong. In the present study, particularly for the majority of doctoral students, there was also a feeling that they were in any case just here to study. As long as their basic needs were met, they were reasonably comfortable with this work-intensive life:

My greatest interest is my PhD study; it's more than anything else. It overshadows everything else. (Student 23, PhD, Engineering)

You have work to do, have a place to live and have rice to eat you're happy up to 80%. (Student 22, PhD, Engineering)

For others, however, the basic requirement of “rice to eat” and 80% happiness was not enough. For them it was the possibilities offered by a multicultural city like Sydney that made them feel reasonably comfortable:

I have no problems adapting to life here. Sydney is diverse in cultures, so I don't feel isolated or discriminated against. There are so many Asian people, so many Vietnamese people, so many Chinese people I don't feel out of place. There are Asian foods ... I eat as I do in Vietnam. (Student 19, PhD, Education)

This focus on Asianness and foods occurred often in our data (though was not something we had originally intended to explore) and was clearly both a way that these students started to think about themselves and a means for them to find a niche in a city that could also be alienating:

Adapting to life here is nothing to worry about. There are so many Asian people Vietnamese people, Indonesian people, ... We don't feel completely left out. There are Vietnamese foods of all types ... they have everything here, even fish sauce. There are also many Asian foods, Asian restaurants. Easy to eat; there's nothing to worry about. Just relaxing and comfortable! (Student 1, PhD, Engineering)

Although more undergraduates and master's students reported having networks with other international and local students outside classroom life than their PhD counterparts (who seemed centrally concerned with their studies), what emerged from our data was the ways many of these students lived a kind of parallel life. For many of them this was part of being an international student, and although they might proactively attempt to expand their community of acquaintances, they could also be content with the new community of international students they came to know:

For me, I don't proactively go out there seeking local people to make friends with. If it happens it happens. I have international friends in the dormitory. I talk to them when we have breakfast, lunch or dinner together. (Student 15, undergraduate, Medicine)

They were neither part of what they saw as Australian life nor excluded from it; rather they lived a life slightly apart, not isolated but not included:

English is my major, I don't feel overwhelmed or excluded. I'm not going out networking with people to practise English. I don't set my aim like that, so my network is not ideal, but I'm not lonely, not excluded, not isolated though we are not entirely in this Australian society. (Student 19, PhD, Education)

They might have wanted greater integration with mainstream Australian life but they also seemed reasonably content with the separate lifestyle they developed:

I don't have to follow the culture here in order to live here because there are so many international students here; I can eat my own way; I never eat the Western way. This is different from the time when I was doing my master's in Belgium I had to eat Western food even though I didn't want to, because you don't have much choice there; I didn't have any Asian friends, so I had to make friends with them; I had to watch out, not being too physically close to them like hugging them or putting my arms on their shoulders like the way Vietnamese people do to show intimacy. Here I don't have the need to integrate with them We have our community of Asian friends, they can eat my food and I can eat theirs. (Student 6, PhD, Education)

This student was quite explicit about her way of being in Sydney in comparison to her previous socio-cultural experiences in Belgium while she was doing her master's degree. While the Belgian experience seemed to offer a lack of choice in terms of food and friends, the Sydney experience is seen as more readily accommodating, offering Asian foods and Asian people. This was not necessarily a Vietnamese community, but as this student suggests, a wider sense of being "Asian". In the same way that Ibrahim (1999) talks of African students "becoming Black" (p. 350) in Canada – their diverse prior identities get moulded into one racial category which also affords certain investments in cultural forms such as Hip Hop – so Vietnamese and other students from the region "become Asian", with implications on the one hand for a generic and racial categorization, but on the other for a shared sense of solidarity often built around food. While the category of "international student" seemed to provide both a sense of solidarity with other students but separation from the wider community, the inclusiveness of the Asian category (which was not premised on being either international or Australian) seemed to afford greater possibilities of affinity. Clearly access to Asian foods, and particularly items such as fish sauce, provides satisfaction and reassurance. Although the sense of inclusion here is somewhat ambivalent (not feeling completely left out), it is clear that the affordances of a large city with a substantial Asian population becomes an important part of finding a way to live. Access to certain foods and the capacity to share food with others is an important part of student life (Novera, 2004) and one deserving of further study (Brown, Edwards, & Hartwell, 2010) if we wish to understand what matters for students in their daily lives.

Discussion and conclusion

The present research has shown that unmet expectations had made the learning painful for many Vietnamese doctoral students, and this is similar to findings from other research on international students (Adrian-Taylor et al., 2007; Cadman, 2000; Wang & Li, 2011; Wash, 2010). When many PhD students in this study began to engage in interaction with their supervisors, they received responses that bewildered ("shocked") them, preventing them from further participation. This provides evidence for Goode's (2007, p. 597) contention that, "certain international students risk being subject to a 'double-bind' of being constructed as 'dependent' when they are 'passive', and 'dependent' when they try to make sense of and engage with the system by being 'interactive' ('demanding')". The discourse around "independence" added more adjustment weight and pain to these students, while unfortunately what was actually intended by supervisors' injunction to be independent was hard to discern. This implicitness subjected the Vietnamese international students in the present study to an inferior position as "outsiders" who need to adapt and struggle to make sense of what to do and how to do it in this unfamiliar culture. But as we have seen, by the

time students figured out “the rule of the games” (Goode, 2007, p. 597), they were active in their attempts to, as Marginson (2014) argues, ‘self-form’ and become “reflexively capable” of “steering” their studies.

This self-forming and reflexive capability has similarly been demonstrated by many undergraduate and master’s students, and some doctoral fellows who had a positive relationship with their lecturers. For these students, “interdependence” rather than “independence” was what they valued. This raises the question of whether the stereotypical construction of international students coming from so-called “collectivist” Asian cultures as “dependent” inhibits supervisors and institutions from understanding them and providing realistic assistance (also see Goode, 2007). While more research is needed from the perspective of supervisors, clearly staff need to change some of their supervisory practices. This does not mean moving away from the path of developing independent research but it does suggest the need to make this transition a more supported, interdependent, and gentle one. Asking whether a student knows how to Google is not a constructive supervisory strategy. Given supervisors’ busy schedule, institutional support or policy might be more usefully aimed at facilitating students’ transitions and their dream of pursuing education in Australia. Supervision from this perspective could be understood more productively in pedagogical rather than research terms (Boud & Lee, 2005), as a form of mutual learning and respect (Ryan, 2012), and of ethical response and inclusion (Kettle, 2017).

While culture might play a role, as the students also acknowledged, “it is much more inclusive to accept the different conceptualisations of the teacher/student relationship, certainly at the beginning of that relationship, as this can lessen the anxiety of such students” (Trahar, 2009, p. 14). Though of a different nature, explicit clarification of roles was identified by a group of international master’s students as a helpful and facilitative teaching technique in Kettle’s (2011, 2017) studies. Moving in this inclusive direction should make it easier to embrace diversity rather than seeing it as problematic (Trahar & Hyland, 2011). This provides a way to move towards “transculturalism” (Salvadori, 1997, p. 178), or “a common culture” where people bring in their different cultures and knowledges to shape what learning occurs for them (Cadman, 2000, p. 477). In this way, international education can re-focus on “academic learning that blends the concepts of *self*, *strange* and *otherness*” (Teekens, 2006, p. 17, original emphasis).

Food is an essential component in the spiritual and cultural life of Vietnamese people. The Vietnamese students in the present study turned to what Ang (2007) describes as “collective identity” (p. 176), that is, Asian foods and similar-looking Asian people as their in-group identity. They felt “included” because they were together outsiders as Asians in Sydney. This Asianness is in part an imposed category – like Ibrahim’s (1999) Blackness in Canada, it is a category that comes from an Australian indifference to distinctions among the Asian Other – but it is also a category of shared affiliation, of food, behaviours, and solidarity. While this is an appeal of Sydney as a host environment to international students, particularly students from Asia, this Asian association, according to many students, provides a shelter which might obviate their need to mix with other students from different cultural (food and race) backgrounds, thus also potentially hindering them from having a more enriched intercultural learning sojourn. It is important from an institutional level to understand that these students are going through a range of changes, including “becoming Asian”. Support therefore involves much more than just improving access to services; it is also about helping them see how the different ways they are positioned can be both confining and expanding.

The findings as to how Vietnamese international students constructed themselves in Sydney, and their accounts of how they managed to work things out, are in some ways refreshing. They provide an alternative perspective to some of the “deficit”-oriented discourses or accounts of discrimination (not that these were absent) reported elsewhere (Novera, 2004; Poyrazli & Grahame, 2007). While many studies have reported international students as being lonely and isolated (e.g., Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Sawir et al., 2008), the issues of loneliness and isolation do not feature strongly for the students in the present study, though they did report experiencing a

lack of a sense of belonging. An Asian affiliation and the self-containment particularly among doctoral students, and the parallel life many students led in cosmopolitan Sydney provide evidence in that it is not necessarily deficiency in language or intercultural competence, or discrimination that is to blame. Evidence additionally points to the contrary when many undergraduate and master's students developed a wider social network. It is difficult to compare this finding to other studies, since existing research on socio-cultural adaptation focuses on international students as a homogeneous group, and largely cites inadequate proficiency, cultural references, and discrimination for why international students do not bond with locals (c.f. Pham & Tran, 2015 for VET students). The ways in which students relate to others in their own local contexts may derive from a range of social, personal, and other factors (Kobayashi, 2010).

The findings show a clear need to understand individual students in more complex ways than as international students (Montgomery, 2010). The complicated nature of human relationships involves more than just linguistic and cultural barriers, and it was also evident that the students in this study were active in making things work for them. They engaged in a process of self-formation (Marginson, 2014), drawing on a variety of available resources. A focus on difficulties students face, adequacy of support services, and cultural and linguistic differences tends to miss several other factors: Diversity of student groups, diversity of contexts in which they find themselves, capacity to overcome obstacles, and the significance of life outside the university context. Despite generic differences, in the context of linguistic and cultural difficulties, it became clear that what students needed, and were often able to draw on, were not fixed codes of academic appropriacy, but rather modes of accommodation. What is important here is the focus on "resourceful speakers" (Pennycook, 2014, p. 13; Otsuji & Pennycook, 2018) who are able to bring different resources into sufficient alignment, to draw, to dance to communicate. Language support programmes at universities might need to extend beyond generic provisions of assistance in for example, reading or writing or speaking, to include a broader focus on how to engage international students in academic practices (Kettle, 2017), essentially how to support them to mobilize their linguistic or semiotic resources in a wide range of contexts.

This study could only reveal the experiences of 24 Vietnamese international students studying in one city of Australia, Sydney, and from a limited number of disciplines. The students volunteered to take part in the research, so they were by themselves a select group in a way that they were confident and wanted to share their experience. In this cohort, more than half of the students had experienced education overseas, an experience not uncommon among international students (a focus only on "fresh off the boat" students might miss this dynamic) but one that clearly marked their capacity to adapt and change. Understanding the challenges Vietnamese international students face needs to be carried out with more Vietnamese students in other cities in Australia and elsewhere, and from more varied disciplines. In addition, the students had only one interview with one of the researchers; multiple interviews at different stages of their studies might provide more insights. Finally, the findings show that relationships with local students (including local students of Vietnamese background) and local people are more complex than just noticeable language and cultural factors might indicate, and are influenced by the interests of both sides. Further research carried out with staff and local students on their construction of themselves in relation to international students, how they feel about making friends with international students, and what gaps they feel, will be useful (see Leask, 2009).

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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