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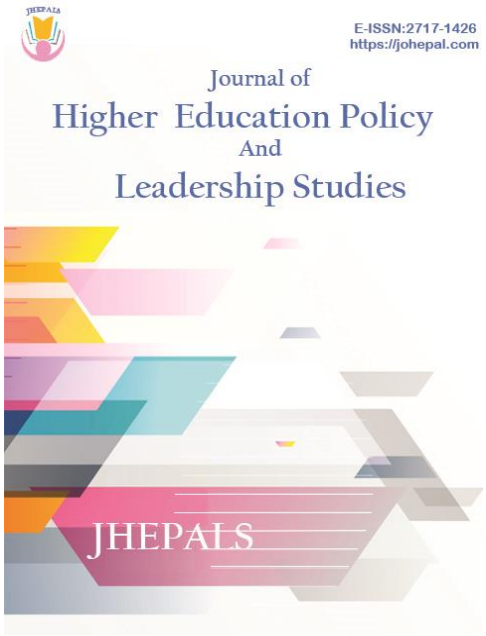

Enhancing International Students' Learning Experience: The Role of Constructivist Teaching Practices in Australian Higher Education

Mehdi Moharami

Southern Cross Education Institute-Higher Education (SCEI-HE), AUSTRALIA
Email: mehdi.moharami@scei-he.edu.au
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6435-8501

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Mehdi Moharami *

Highlights

- This study explores how clear communication and motivational support by lecturers enhance international students' academic experiences.
- Cultural sensitivity and inclusivity are emphasized as key factors in creating equitable learning environments.
- Addressing challenges like inconsistent expectations and insufficient feedback can significantly improve teaching practices.
- Constructivist teaching principles, which prioritize active engagement and collaboration, are shown to improve learning outcomes.
- Recommendations include fostering personalized support, consistent evaluation practices, and culturally responsive pedagogy to better serve diverse classrooms.

Keywords: Constructivist Teaching; Student-Centered Learning; Higher Education; International Students; Feedback Practices

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*Corresponding author's email: mehdi.moharami@scei-he.edu.au

Introduction

Australian higher education institutions are prime destinations for international students, contributing significantly to the nation's economy (Bessant, 1996). However, these students face unique challenges such as language barriers, cultural differences, and varying educational norms (Smith & Khawaja, 2011). Understanding their expectations is critical to creating a supportive learning environment. This study explores how constructivist teaching practices impact international students' learning experiences, particularly emphasizing the qualities they value in their lecturers.

Grounded in social constructivism—a theory positing that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and cultural context (Vygotsky, 1978)—this study analyzes student feedback to identify effective teaching practices. The aim is to bridge the gap between student expectations and pedagogical strategies.

Significance of the Study

This study aims to bridge the gap between students' feedback and lecturers' practices by focusing on the development of a positive learning environment through a constructivist approach. By examining student survey feedback, this research will provide insights into:

- Expectations of International Students: Understanding what international students expect from their lecturers in terms of support, communication, and teaching practices. This includes identifying the specific needs that arise from their unique cultural and social contexts.
- Facilitative Qualities in Lecturers: Highlighting the key qualities and behaviours that international students find beneficial in their lecturers to enhance their academic and social integration.
- Practical Implications for Teaching: Offering actionable recommendations for lecturers to adopt practices that align with the principles of social constructivism, thereby improving the learning experience for international students.

Research Problem

International students in Australia encounter a range of challenges due to their diverse cultural and social backgrounds, which can impact their learning experiences and interactions with lecturers. These challenges may include language barriers, different educational norms, and varying expectations about teaching and learning. Given these complexities, it is crucial to understand how students perceive their lecturers and what specific qualities or practices they value in fostering a supportive and effective learning environment.

Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design to analyse existing student survey feedback from Southern Cross Education Institute - Higher Education (SCEI-HE). The choice of qualitative analysis allows for an in-depth exploration of students' perceptions and experiences, particularly concerning their interactions with lecturers (Maxwell, 2013).

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The primary source of data for this study is the anonymous student survey feedback collected at the end of each semester. The surveys are routinely administered to gather students' opinions on their lecturers' performance and the overall learning experience. For this research, the dataset consists of responses from four consecutive semesters, spanning from Semester 1 of 2023 through Semester 2 of 2024. This methodological approach aligns with current trends in educational research, which emphasise the importance of qualitative feedback in understanding student experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2023). Furthermore, anonymous surveys are crucial for mitigating response bias and ensuring that students provide honest and candid feedback (Neuman, 2014).

The survey includes both quantitative Likert scale questions and one open-ended question. This study specifically utilises the responses to the open-ended question, which invites students to provide detailed feedback on their lecturers. The open-ended responses allow students to express their thoughts in their own words, providing rich qualitative data that can reveal patterns and themes that might be missed in quantitative analysis. This qualitative data is particularly valuable for understanding the nuances of students' experiences and identifying key themes related to effective teaching practices.

Data Analysis

The analysis of the open-ended survey responses was conducted using thematic analysis, following the approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility and effectiveness in identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data. The analysis process included the following steps:

- Data Familiarisation: The researcher carefully read through all open-ended responses multiple times to gain a deep understanding of the content.
- Initial Coding: Key phrases and segments of text were systematically coded, focusing on themes such as teaching effectiveness, student engagement, cultural sensitivity, and emotional support.
- Theme Development: The codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected the study's research questions and theoretical framework. Themes were iteratively reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data.
- Theme Interpretation: The final themes were interpreted within the context of social constructivism, emphasising how the identified teaching practices contribute to students' active construction of knowledge through interaction and cultural engagement.

Results

Supportiveness and Accessibility

Students consistently highlighted the importance of lecturers' approachability and availability. Comments like "Our lecturer was very helpful throughout the semester" illustrate the value of personalized support in fostering a positive learning environment. This aligns with Lei et al. (2023), who emphasize that accessible lecturers enhance student engagement and satisfaction.

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Clarity in Communication and Instruction

Effective communication emerged as another critical expectation. Students valued lecturers who explained concepts clearly and provided sufficient resources. One student noted, “I’m satisfied with my lecturer because she always made sure we didn’t have any confusion.” Clear instruction is particularly important for international students navigating language barriers (Witsel, 2003).

Learner Motivation and Encouragement

Motivational strategies are also crucial in creating an engaging learning environment. Lecturers who actively encourage participation and employ dynamic teaching methods are noted for their ability to inspire and motivate students. This is supported by research (Schunk & Pintrich, 2008) which highlights the importance of motivational strategies and intrinsic motivation in fostering student engagement and achievement. Positive reinforcement and interactive teaching methods contribute to a more enjoyable learning experience, enhancing students' confidence and enthusiasm for the subject. In contrast, feedback on unengaging teaching methods and poor classroom management shows how this can lead to decreased student motivation, reflecting concerns raised by Fredricks et al. (2022), who note that ineffective teaching practices often result in lower levels of student engagement.

The feedback from students, such as "She always motivates us to participate in class activities," and "Lecturers encouraged students to be interactive in class always, which will help us to communicate without hesitation," underscores the critical role that lecturers play in empowering students to build confidence and actively engage in classroom activities. This aligns with the literature that highlights the significance of student motivation in fostering active participation.

Engagement and Interaction

Student feedback also reveals a strong preference for lecturers who actively engage students in the learning process. Many students expressed appreciation for lecturers who encouraged interaction and participation in class. For instance, one student mentioned, "She really interacts with us while teaching," and “brings a lively energy to each class, keeping us engaged and eager to learn. His teaching style is interactive, making even the most complex concepts accessible and understandable.” while another noted, "The methods and class interactions are so great, and she knows how to keep the class engaged". While another mentioned, "Our lecturer for this unit lacks engagement and simply reads from slides, making the classes painfully boring. It's clear she isn't prepared for the lecture, and she often seems distracted".

Professionalism and Preparedness

Professionalism and preparedness are essential attributes that international students expect from their lecturers. Students expressed high regard for lecturers who demonstrate a strong command of the subject matter and are well-prepared for their classes. One student remarked, "She has a lot of knowledge which helps my studies and understanding of the subject. Excellent lecturer," while another noted, "Her knowledge, understanding, and

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supportive nature is very appreciable". Additionally, a student highlighted, "She is always well-prepared and communicates the ideas related to this unit clearly".

Cultural Sensitivity and Inclusiveness

The interconnectedness of different aspects of a person's life is a core principle in recognising that changes in one area can affect others (Carter, 2011). This concept is particularly relevant in the context of international education, where students' cultural backgrounds, language skills, and social experiences are deeply interconnected with their academic success. The feedback from students, such as " Her commitment to culturally relevant education and nurturing inclusive learning environments reflects a profound understanding of unique challenges and strengths within Indigenous communities" highlights the importance of lecturers who are culturally sensitive and inclusive.

Cultural sensitivity and inclusiveness are critical qualities that international students expect from their lecturers. The feedback indicates that students value lecturers who are aware of and responsive to the diverse cultural backgrounds of their students.

Constructive Feedback and Assessment Support

Constructive feedback and timely support with assessments are crucial for student success, particularly for international students who may be unfamiliar with the academic standards and expectations in Australia. Many students emphasised the importance of receiving detailed and constructive feedback on their assessments. For example, one student stated, "She gave constructive feedback that helped me with this unit," while another commented, "The feedback provided on assignments was detailed and constructive, helping us improve our work".

Individualised Approach and Personalised Support

Emphasis on an individualised approach is reflected in student feedback, where students consistently expressed the need for personalised support and constructive feedback. Comments such as "She provides personalised support to address my concerns and questions", and "Her willingness to provide extra support has greatly enhanced my understanding of the material" demonstrate the value of individualised care in the educational context.

This approach is supported by contemporary research, which indicates that personalised teaching methods are effective in meeting the diverse needs of students and enhancing their learning outcomes (Stewart & Walker-Gleaves, 2020). By tailoring their teaching strategies to the unique needs of each student, educators can provide more relevant and effective support, which is particularly important for international students who may face additional challenges in adjusting to a new academic environment.

Conclusion

This study underscores the importance of integrating constructivist principles into teaching practices to enhance international students' learning experiences. Key recommendations include fostering clear communication, cultural sensitivity, and consistent feedback practices. By addressing these areas, educators can create inclusive and supportive learning environments that improve academic outcomes and student satisfaction.

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Human Participants

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Originality Note

The author confirms that the manuscript is their original work, and if others' works are used, they are properly cited/quoted.

Use of Generative AI/ AI-assisted Technologies Statement

The author claimed that [OpenAI (ChatGPT)] is used in this research just for the purpose of improving the language of the manuscript. No further use of these technologies are also confirmed by the author to write different parts of the research. After using this tool/service, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the published article.

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Dr. Mehdi Moharami (Ph.D. in Education at Monash University, Australia) focuses on the impact of English language learning on identity formation and language learner practices. His research delves into areas such as language policy, cultural influences, TESOL methodologies, and the intersection of language learning with social practices.

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