The Challenges Encountered During a Needs Assessment of International Student Partners: Considerations for Future Evaluations

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Abstract: This article describes the challenges encountered during a needs assessment of partners of international students as well as how the research team addressed these challenges. The needs assessment was conducted at the request of the university’s international student centre, which recognized that partners of international students would benefit from increased support. The needs assessment was also supported by an existing gap in international student literature, which identifies partners as experiencing significant barriers and lack of support in their transition as a newcomer (e.g., Martens & Grant, 2008). Implications for attaining and maintaining connections with this population are discussed.

Keywords: cross-cultural transitions, international spouses, international students, needs assessment

Résumé : L’article décrit les défis liés à l’évaluation des besoins des conjoints d’étudiants étrangers, de même qu’à la façon dont les chercheurs ont considéré ces défis. L’évaluation des besoins a été effectuée à la demande du centre des étudiants étrangers de l’université, qui reconnaît que les conjoints d’étudiants étrangers pourraient profiter de mesures d’appui supplémentaires. L’évaluation des besoins a aussi été jugée nécessaire par des lacunes dans la littérature liée aux étudiants étrangers, qui signale que les conjoints font face à des barrières importantes et à un manque d’appui réel dans leur transition comme nouvel arrivant (p. ex., Martens & Grant, 2008). Les répercussions liées à la création et au maintien de liens avec cette population sont explorées.

Mots clés : transitions interculturelles, conjoints d’étudiants étrangers, étudiants étrangers, évaluation des besoins

As Canadian postsecondary institutions have aimed to increase the enrolment of international students, there has been a concurrent effort by institutions to support students’ adjustment (Institute of International Education, 2009). A strong social support network, especially familial support, has been consistently

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identified as an important factor in student adjustment (Kwon, 2009). Given that an increasing number of international students are being accompanied by their partners, the importance of better understanding the needs and well-being of partners to inform university support services has been recognized in recent years (e.g., Martens & Grant, 2008). This article details the challenges encountered throughout the completion of a needs assessment with partners of international students at a Canadian university during the 2014 winter academic semester, and will provide an overview of the context of the needs assessment, the challenges encountered, and how the researchers addressed these challenges.

DESCRIPTION OF CASE AND NEEDS ASSESSMENT CONTEXT

Why Was the Needs Assessment Conducted?
The needs assessment was conducted for two reasons. First, it was an assignment for a Masters of Science required course in program development and evaluation. Second, the director at the university’s Centre for International Students and Study Abroad (CISSA) requested this needs assessment to determine the needs of partners of international students. The director noted that this population has increasingly been recognized as needing and wanting resources, services, and programs from universities. As universities in western, English-speaking countries compete for increasing numbers of international students, universities have started to recognize a responsibility to these partners (Martens & Grant, 2008).

CISSA had attempted to run a formal program to support international student partners; however, due to the very low participation rates, it was decided that more information was needed about partner experiences in the new country as well as what partners wanted in terms of services and specific information. It was determined by the research team that the most suitable evaluation method was a formal needs assessment, which can help to identify unique needs as well as existing gaps in services or problems not previously recognized (Royse, Thyer, & Padgett, 2010). Assessing the level of need in a population is a way to investigate the potential services that are needed to bring the people of that population, specifically international student partners, to a satisfactory state of being (Posavac & Carey, 1997).

What Did the Client Want to Learn?
The director of CISSA wanted to learn what specific services were necessary or desired by international student partners, as well as what information was desired by partners about transitioning to life in a large western Canadian city, Canadian culture, and university life for a positive adjustment experience. The director had learned of this need from his own experiences with students and their families as well as through communication with other student service providers across Canada and the United States during conferences and meetings. The needs
assessment was sought to determine (a) what services were needed, (b) what roadblocks existed to accessing these services, and (c) what might help to facilitate access to services. The director also wondered about the demographics of this population, as the university did not formally collect data about the partners of international students, leaving gaps in knowledge around how many partners accompany international students and whether partners come with children or not.

**What Resources (Time, Money, In-kind, etc.) Were Available for Conducting the Needs Assessment?**

The current needs assessment was limited by the parameters of a course setting. That is, the researchers had two academic semesters (i.e., September 2013–May 2014) to complete the needs assessment. The first semester was used for selecting a program to assess and meeting with stakeholders, including the funders of the program, service providers, and service receivers (Royse et al., 2010). As well, the researchers planned the specific format to be used in conducting the needs assessment, including first conceptualizing the theoretical underpinnings of the assessment by creating a logic model, which provides a framework in identifying main purposes and goals (McDavid, Huse, & Hawthorn, 2013; Tremblay, Brousselle, Richard, & Beaudet, 2013). The second semester was for participant recruitment, data analysis, and dissemination of the findings along with meetings with relevant stakeholders to ensure comprehension of the material.

Although this needs assessment was conducted as part of a course, there were funds made available through the program to ensure quality services were rendered. Specifically, a small budget was provided to purchase supplies (e.g., professional photocopies/binding), services (e.g., SPSS, advanced survey access), and participant incentives (i.e., $25 gift cards to a grocery store). Finally, the needs assessment had four key personnel—the students in the program development and evaluation course—as well as the supervising doctoral-level course instructor with expertise in program evaluation. Assistance was also provided from the international student advisor at CISSA and the international student representative of the Graduate Student Association (GSA) at the university, predominantly for participant recruitment.

**Were the Resources Suitable for Answering the Needs Assessment Questions?**

The funding budgeted for conducting the needs assessment was initially deemed as adequate to cover the general requirements of the assessment. In reflection, a larger budget may have been useful to encompass translated surveys that may have supported higher participant numbers in answering the research questions. At the time of research development, however, it was determined that with the diversity of languages spoken by international students, it would have been difficult to complete data collection and analysis on time if translation services were sought.

The time allocated for conducting the needs assessment could have been longer. Although there was a period of about four months to conduct the survey,
had there been more time, a greater number of participants could have been reached and possibly completed the survey. In terms of personnel, there were enough people working on the construction and analysis of the needs assessment, but there could have been greater participation from other services in the university to assist with data collection, specifically from the university administration (e.g., Enrollment Services and Residence Services).

DESCRIPTION OF CHALLENGES AND HOW THEY IMPEDED THE NEEDS ASSESSMENT PROCESS

What Challenges Did You Face in Conducting This Needs Assessment?

There were two key challenges in conducting this needs assessment with partners of international students. The first was participant recruitment. Specifically, once data collection started, the researchers found that participation numbers were low and recruitment was consistently slow (i.e., on average, about two participants accessed the survey each week during the 13 weeks the survey was online). This occurred even though participants were reached in a variety of ways including (a) electronic mailing lists through CISSA and the Graduate Student Association, (b) flyers around campus, (c) notices on university websites (e.g., CISSA’s site), and (d) notices and in-person recruitment at campus centres (e.g., CISSA, University Wellness Centre). Tied to this challenge is that recruitment targeted partners of international students through the international students themselves, as there was no way to directly contact the partners or to know which students had partners, since this information was not collected by, or accessible to, the university.

The second challenge was incomplete data. That is, once partners of international students were reached through their partners, many partners started surveys but either skipped sections entirely or stopped partway through the survey. This resulted in responses that were insufficient for inclusion within the data analysis, further limiting the number of participants included in the findings of the needs assessment. This was a particularly frustrating challenge, as it indicated to the researchers that there were partners who were interested in having their needs understood but for some reason were unable or unwilling to complete the survey.

To What Extent Did You or Could You Have Anticipated These Challenges?

In reaching partners of international students and having a low number of responses, the researchers expected that there would be some difficulty, given the indirect nature of the communication and recruitment procedures as well as the previous experiences of CISSA staff with this population. The researchers were particularly at a disadvantage given there was no existing information about the number of students who had partners who accompanied them to the university. This was not surprising, as the limited research available has indicated that,
formerly, universities were either unwilling to support partners or did not view the concerns and needs of partners as part of the university’s realm of responsibility (De Verthelyi, 1995; Martens & Grant, 2008; Schwartz & Kahne, 1993).

In terms of incomplete surveys, the researchers had expected some incomplete data, as is the nature of survey administration and completion in research studies (Pelham, 2013). However, it was not anticipated that there would be such a significant number of incomplete surveys accompanying such low participation rates. In reflection, it is possible that the survey being solely in English may have hindered the ability for some partners to complete it, once introduced to it by the student partner. This was somewhat anticipated; however, as the researchers were unaware of the English-language abilities of partners of international students given the lack of information on this population, it was difficult to prepare for this challenge with the limited funds and time available.

**How Did These Challenges Affect the Implementation of the Needs Assessment?**

Originally, the survey incorporated quantitative and qualitative measures. The quantitative measures were included to first compare the partners of international students with the spouses of sojourners, which has typically served as the basis for understanding this population, given the relative lack of research in this area. However, given the low sample size, only descriptive statistics and not inferential statistics were feasible, severely limiting the utility and generalizability of the quantitative section. For the qualitative section, rich descriptions of those specific experiences and needs were gleaned from the surveys; however, with such a limited number of responses, the researchers were not able to generalize the findings to other partners of international students at this university or other universities across Canada. That is, the results may have been skewed to the specific needs of those that did participate, which may not reflect the more general needs of this population.

**DESCRIPTION OF HOW CHALLENGES WERE ADDRESSED**

**How Did You Address Each of These Challenges?**

Addressing these challenges was complicated and, ultimately, not fruitful during the timeframe for the current needs assessment. Regarding the low participation, two months were initially scheduled as the data collection period; however, after only a small number of participants had completed the survey, the time frame was doubled in hopes of gaining more participants. As well, the researchers met again with stakeholders to brainstorm additional opportunities to connect with international students and their partners. Through this, the researchers began to use the university’s Graduate Student Association, which circulated the recruitment notice with their weekly newsletter that was e-mailed directly to all graduate students, including international students. Efforts were also made to connect with...
and seek support from Residence Services, as well as the English Resource Centre. Unfortunately, these centres were unable to assist at that time.

It was difficult to address the incomplete surveys during the time available for the needs assessment. As it was anticipated that there was likely a lower English language proficiency among the partners, the survey was constructed using simple English and was reviewed by an independent professional before deploying the survey.

**What Should Evaluators Do to Avoid These Challenges to Start Off With?**

For evaluators and researchers who are working within a postsecondary context, such as universities and colleges, it is imperative to begin participant recruitment and data collection as soon as possible, beginning in the fall semester and continuing into the winter semester. Specifically, make connections with international students and partners as soon as possible, including attending fall and winter orientations, with explicit invitations given to partners to attend the orientations. This may provide the best opportunity for recruitment, more so than posters and e-mails. If the researchers are working with enrollment services, include demographic questions about accompanying partners in the registration process at the university, along with contact information (e.g., e-mail address). This would help researchers to obtain a better sense of what this population looks like and potentially offer the ability to contact them directly, rather than only through their student partner. In the planning phase of the needs assessment, researchers could consider not only providing the survey in simple English, but also in the most common languages of international students at the institution being evaluated (e.g., Mandarin, Farsi). This may help make the survey more accessible to partners whose English-language abilities keep them from completing an English-only survey.

While collecting data, researchers should try to be as flexible as possible. Specifically, researchers may use online surveys sent through electronic mailing lists, have physical copies of the survey to distribute at orientations or other events where partners are attending, and conduct focus groups for more in-depth, interactive findings. Focus groups may also be used to review the survey before deploying it to the larger group—that is, have partners in the focus groups determine whether the language is accessible, determine whether the questions are relevant to their experiences, offer ideas about how best to reach this population, and help the researchers to clarify key survey topics. It may be necessary to have multilingual staff or people involved who might assist in gaining the information required and designing the survey. Linked to this is having support from other departments, such as Residence Services, that are closer to the population due to partners living in family residences with their student partner. To increase validity and aptness of data for difficult-to-reach populations, it will be important to be consider the intersection between the specific type of information required and the most accessible and suitable methods (Fernando, 2012).
What Would You Recommend for Others Faced with Similar Challenges?

Apart from the above-mentioned suggestions, researchers could attempt snowball sampling. For example, after participants have completed the survey, provide the opportunity for the participant to directly forward the survey to another partner or partners whom the participant knows. One step further would be to have this information shareable on social media platforms, such as Facebook or Twitter. If possible, have the data collection span as prolonged a time frame as possible (e.g., one year, two years), or have a continuous needs assessment (e.g., one a year), which would help to stay current with the changing circumstances of partners. Finally, if a low sample size continues to be a problem, researchers could attempt more in-depth methods, such as focus groups or case studies. Although larger sample sizes are often preferred, such smaller scale methods for needs assessments can be quite valid, providing a thorough understanding of at least a few experiences (Fernando, 2012).

What, If Any, Are the Systemic Issues That the Evaluation Community Should Address?

A particularly salient systemic issue when conducting needs assessments with the partners of international students is that many universities do not explicitly note a mandate for service provision to this population. As such, there is a lack of clarity around specified personnel to implement services for this population. When accessing the partners of international students, researchers need to forge strong relationships with various departments on campus and have their cooperation in distributing recruitment notices and gaining participation. Without this multidepartmental cooperation, researchers will continue to have difficulty reaching partners and facilitating completion of the needs assessment. In addressing this systemic issue, universities need to decide whether or not it is within their mandate to service this population and then make that mandate clear to staff, as well as to students and their partners.

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