

# Enhancing the International Student cultural experience - International Student Activities

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## Abstract

For many International Students, “Seeing Australia” is a top priority alongside their academic ventures. Swinburne University recognised this need and over the past 7 years, have developed a comprehensive International Student Activities program. Activities take the form of course-based day trips through to organised programs that run over the whole semester. In this paper we will draw on the experiences of the Swinburne Activities Model and cover such topics as: the benefits of running activities in-house, coming up with suitable ideas, choosing the best times of year to run them, planning tips on the day and gathering feedback.

## Introduction.

For the past 7 years Swinburne University of Technology has been developing a semester Activities program designed specifically for its International Student Population. The program has now grown to include a minimum of at least 10 daytrips each semester as well as extended trips at the end of each semester. (See figure 1) The aim of the program is to give students opportunities to expand their cultural experiences whilst taking time out from study and meeting lots of new people in a friendly environment.

**INTERNATIONAL STUDENT UNIT > ACTIVITIES SEMESTER 2004**

**AUG 27/29 - THE ANNUAL SNOW WEEKEND**  
 AUG 27/29 Ski Trip Mt Hotham  
 The annual Ski-trip to Mt Hotham. Stay on mountain at the Arlberg Ski resort. Not to be missed.  
 JUST \$295 (SWIN STUDENTS)

**SEP 4 - Bushrangers, Bakeries + Beechworth**  
 (\$30 Swin / \$35 Others)  
 Come with us as we explore Victoria's North-East. Learn about Bushrangers, visit Brown Brothers Winery and the famous Beechworth bakery.

**SEP 12 - Werribee Park Zoo and Mansion**  
 (\$25 Swin / \$30 Others)  
 Visit Victoria's only Open Range Zoo, take a safari tour then take a stroll amongst the famous Rose Gardens at Werribee Mansion.

**SEP 18 - Bendigo Day Trip**  
 (\$30 Swin / \$35 Others)  
 Ride a 'talking' tram, go down the Deborah goldmine and visit the Famous Chinese Museum and Gardens

**SEP 20 - Gramplains Day Trip**  
 (\$30 Swin / \$40 Others)  
 Visit the most popular attractions in the Gramplains, Mckenzie's Falls, The Jaws of Death and Boroka Lookout

**SEP 24 - Phillip Island Koala's and Penguins**  
 (\$20 Swin / \$25 Others)  
 Visit the Koala Conservation centre, then see the 'little penguins'. You won't beat this price

**SEP 22 - Royal Melbourne Show**  
 (\$15 Swin / \$25 Others / \$10 Kids)  
 Enjoy the rides, showbags and all the fun of the Royal Melbourne Show. Includes transport and entry.

**SEP 29 - MCG Tour**  
 (Melbourne Cricket Ground)  
 (\$5 Swin / \$10 Others)  
 Take a tour of the home of "Australian Sport" and the venue for the 2006 Commonwealth games.

**SEP 30 - Great Ocean Road**  
 (\$25 Swin / \$30 Others)  
 Travel the most famous road in Victoria. Includes the 12 Apostles, London Bridge, Campbell and Loch Ard Gorge

**OCT 2 - Tulip Festival and The Dandenongs**  
 (\$25 Swin / \$30 Others)  
 Ride the Buffing Billy railway, have lunch in the hills and then visit the Tulip festival at Moebuck

**OCT 10 - Around The Bay in a Day**  
 (\$25 Swin / \$30 Others)  
 Travel all the way around Port Phillip Bay on 3 different modes of transport: Bus, ferry and steam train.

**OCT 16 - Surf Trip (Phillip Island)**  
 (\$50 Swin / \$60 Others)  
 Includes a 2 hour lesson, all equipment and transport. Will fill up fast!

**OCT International Student Party**  
 Check with ISU for more details

**HOW TO SIGN UP:**  
 Sign up now at any ISU office (How, Phs, Lily, Croy, Wan)  
 FULL PAYMENT must be made when booking for any activity  
 Swin prices = Swinburne Students  
 QUESTIONS: Contact Ian Egan (9214 5575) [iegan@swin.edu.au](mailto:iegan@swin.edu.au)

get regular activities updates, send an email to: [isactivities@groupwise.swin.edu.au](mailto:isactivities@groupwise.swin.edu.au)

**SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY**

*"All buses depart Hawthorn ISU office. Buses sometimes available from other campuses, check with your campus ISU office"*

Figure 1: Swinburne University Of Technology, International Student Activities Flyer 2004

Over the past 7 the program has grown to include between 10 and 20 trips per semester, with between 48 and 100 students participating on each activity. There have been many visible benefits for students, staff and the University as a whole. In this paper we will examine the fundamental structure of the program that has led to its success, as well as looking at the benefits that a well structured activities program can bring both the student and the University.

#### *Why Run Activities in house?*

With so many external tour companies, it may well be asked, 'why run activities in house'. First and foremost it gives the University total control of the program which means it can structure it around student timetables to ensure maximum participation and minimal distraction to studies. Activities also provide well earned time out from study and are a unique "student support" program that adds to the "Swinburne Experience". A student's dealings with the University may be purely academic, therefore getting involved in a fun way can improve the students overall perception of University life. A well structured activities program can also be 'marketed' overseas, as being a unique student support option at the University.

Running activities in house also allows you to keep costs way down. A lot of places can be visited simply by hiring a coach/bus and splitting the cost between 44 students. Most tour places give group discounts bringing costs down even further. If you offer the right price and promote well, it is hard for students to resist, as most external tour companies charge triple our prices.

Keeping costs down also allows students from lower socio-economic groups the chance to see Australia at a reasonable price. There is a common misconception that all International students have lots of money., while in reality many work multiple jobs to make ends meet A value for money program gives all students new opportunities and also helps them to achieve life-long dreams, eg surfing, swimming with dolphins.



"The trips that I went on were all organised extremely well with a lot of attention to detail and consideration for all who went. Had ISU not organised these trips, I would not have been able to see as much of Australia, thank you ISU!"

The Swinburne program has also developed stronger relationships between staff and students in a friendly non-teaching environment. Students get to meet staff in a non-threatening environment (eg ISA's) and then when they need to report to staff on academic grounds, they feel more comfortable if they have already had some contact with that staff member. It also adds a personal touch to the Organisation, as students get to know staff on a personal level, also creating good conversation material to break the ice with students (eg. "Hi, didn't you go on the Great Ocean Road Trip?")

The sense of community has also been made a lot stronger amongst students who get involved and get to know staff via the activities program. Some students attend numerous trips and then get involved with the student host program at Orientation,. Many students meet new friends on trips, and there is no better place to meet new friends than when sharing a new common experience. Being in a bus for an extended time allows staff to encourage students to mingle via the use of on board bus games.

#### *What Activities Work? Ideas for programs*

Most International students come here with some knowledge of at least some of the major tourist attractions within Australia. They will also be bombarded with tourist information on arrival. Therefore it is a good idea to go for some 'safe' options as well as some new ideas they may never have tried.

The Swinburne Program can be broken down into various 'themes' throughout the semester. These themes have been developed to cover the most popular tourist expectations, as well as offering new and memorable experiences.

Themes include:

Historical: Museums (tours/demonstration/interactive is better)  
Theme parks (eg Sovereign Hill)  
Areas / Towns (eg Goldrush / Ballarat / Bendigo)

Nature: Natural Beauty (National Parks)  
Wildlife (wildlife parks / zoos)  
Natural wildlife (eg Penguin Parade / Whales)  
Extremes (Snow, Great Ocean Road)

New Experiences Snow, Surfing, Swim with Dolphins, Horseriding

Orientation: City experience. Tallest Building, Aquarium, Markets

If you do not have a lot of resources to organise activities, then it is important to remember that Low risk = less problems. The Swinburne program aims to give students the greatest possible experience while minimising any possible risks to the students. Keep it simple and fewer things can go wrong. Leave the 'high-risk' stuff to the professionals. If there is a potential for disaster, don't do it. Also consider numbers, big groups means more time and less opportunity. While it may take you 4 hours to see something in a car, add on 50 students and you will find things take a lot longer.



“The trips were really enjoyable and had a good price for me. Another important thing is that ISU Staff are very friendly towards me. I have very happy memories of Melbourne thanks to ISU”

### *Best Time to run them?*

Experiences at Swinburne have shown us that the best time to run activities for International Students is during the first 2 months of each semester. This is when students have the least amount of pressure with academic work, and can more easily give up a day to attend an activity.

We have also found that its good to run a Summer program, with water based / outside activities such as swim with dolphins / surfing, and a Winter Program, more suited to indoors with things such as skiing / Imax. Following this rule also means you have less outdoor activities in winter and therefore less risk of problems

Extended trips (8 – 12 days) are also becoming increasingly popular, especially with European students looking for a cheap holiday. These trips can only be organised when the students have extended periods of break, and therefore are usually run immediately after exams, before students leave the country.

### *Best way to attract students and promote Activities?*

One of the best ways to let students know that there is an activities program especially for them is to organise an Initial low cost activity as part of each Orientation program. This could be a ½ of full day excursion, and if properly integrated into the Orientation program then more students will attend. Students Hosts are an essential part of this process as they also promote to the new students via word of mouth.

Perhaps the most important method of communication and the key to the success of the Swinburne Program has been its 'Activities email list'. This email list now contains over 2000 International students from all campuses. After providing their email address at orientation or at the International counter, students receive fortnightly updates as to what activities are happening and how to get involved. The list is also used to convey important VISA and Health care information. It is easy to maintain and an essential communication tool between International Staff and Students.

Posters and flyers are also a key way to attract attention. Large posters listing all the semesters' activities are vital, and need to be on display from the first day the students arrive. Smaller versions are also essential as students can then actually keep a list of dates and programs.

Word of mouth is also a very strong selling point with International Students, and this done by several key people at various points of the University. Key people who have direct contact with International Students are constantly informing students of the trips and tours on offer. These people range from the receptionists at the International counter, to ISA's, Counsellors and Support Staff.



### *Planning the day*

There are many elements to consider when planning the actual day of the trip or outing. However these can all be covered with careful planning and preparation.

Firstly there is the issue of First Aid and Insurance. Because the majority of students attending University are over 18 years old, there is no existing government legislation that covers outdoor activities and university aged students. Therefore at Swinburne we made up our own policy which states that at least one of the attending staff must have a current First Aid qualification. All students attending the trip must have valid Health Cover and we encourage family and friends to take it out, especially for extended trips.

It's always a good idea to book ahead with large groups. This saves frustration for the people involved, and also means they can have tickets waiting and guides ready to go. With large groups too, most places will offer some sort of discount or give free entry for staff..

On the day it's a great idea to give students an information sheet that clearly states any information they are required to know, such as a leader's mobile number, and the times they need to be back on the bus (you can never guarantee they will read it but it an excellent back-up). It is a good idea to clearly state all departure times via a microphone and also repeat to each person as they leave the bus. Exaggerate all times by 15 mins. That way if you leave 15 mins later, you are actually leaving at the time you originally planned but the students will never know.

### *Feedback*

It is extremely important to gather feedback after activities. This allows you to evaluate your program and make changes in light of student trends. At Swinburne, we have found that it is good to use a variety of methods including random surveys during and also at the end of semester. Because the same people attend a number of trips, it is very repetitive for the students if you are handing out the same survey after every trip or activity. Completing surveys on the bus is very easy to do as you will have a captive audience, who can easily be rewarded with a small gift such as chocolates.

### *Conclusion*

International student activities are an important part of the International Student experience. Swinburne University of Technology's International Student Recreation Program, offers a unique student support program for International students. Organising the program 'in-house' has many benefits including keeping costs down, increasing opportunities for all International students and building stronger bonds between University staff and students. By having total control, Universities can then arrange activities to best suit student's timetables and workloads to ensure maximum and a successful program. The Swinburne program has been divided into main themes for activities and these include Historical/Cultural, Natural Features and Wildlife and also new experiences for International Visitors. Activities should be well planned and offer the lowest risk possible for those involved.

Contacting students via email has proved to be most beneficial way to promote the Swinburne Activities program, however other methods are also just as essential and include posters, word of mouth from key staff, and informing new students at Orientation.

The Swinburne Activities program has now developed an identity of its own and can be marketed overseas as a unique experience. Students can meet other students, have fun and see Australia, all within the "Swinburne" experience. The success of the program has been due to a variety of factors and these include promotion, pricing and building its identity over time.