

Paper Title: An Empowerment Support Programme and A “Home Away From Home” Community that Foster Academic Successes and Confidence in International Asian Students

Angela Liew

Department of Information Systems and Operations Management, the University of Auckland
Private Bag 92-019, Auckland, New Zealand.

<http://www.osas.auckland.ac.nz>

a.liew@auckland.ac.nz

Abstract:

The foremost concerns of most international Asian students were disappointments with their academic performance and their lack of fluency in English. There was a huge gap between their own expectations and reality, and was primarily caused by cultural misunderstanding and language inadequacy. However, such gap also created unnecessary performance pressures, prevented meaningful interaction and integration between international and local students, and generated feelings of rejections and isolations. Placing appropriate support mechanisms and training opportunities could address many of these issues. Even though all students needed support and care, it was much more effective and efficient to address a specific ethnic group and adopt strategies of their cultures. As a result, a support and care programme called *Ongoing Support for Asian Students (OSAS)* was initiated and implemented to raise awareness, communicate issues to students to encourage and equip them to do well academically as well as overall in the long term. OSAS organised many activities in the attempt to achieve its missions. This paper focuses on one particular support implementation that aims to develop strong relationships between Asian students, cultivate community care and group dynamics, extend social and communication skills, provide leadership internship, and build much self-confidence in themselves.

Key Words:

International education, international students, Asian students, pastoral care, educative care.

Introduction:

Many international Asian students were observed not performing and coping as well as their Kiwi counterparts in class (Li, Baker and Marshall, 2000; Berno and Ward, 2002). They often struggled to receive culturally appropriate advice from various offices in the institutions. Even though all students needed support and care, it was much more effective and efficient if the support programme for that specific ethnic group was created by that specific ethnic group for the purposes of that specific ethnic group (Bishop and Glynn, 1998). Furthermore, they often lacked opportunities to lead and self-confidence to compete against their Kiwi counterparts. It was also observed that international students tended to keep problems to themselves (Abe, Talbot and Geelhoed, 1998; Yeh, Inose, Kobori and Change, 2001) as they placed much distrust in others (Kosowski, Grams, Taylor and Wilson, 2001). If they were to call upon those outside their circle of friends and family, they would choose to converse with professors or teachers and rely on them (Delaney, 2002) more than what domestic students would (Abe, Talbot et al., 1998; Yeh, Inose et al., 2001). Furthermore, many support mechanisms rely on students to approach them directly without realising the cultural barriers involved, for example shame and distrust.

Many of these international students grew up in strong structures of extended families and friends and were used to seeking guidance from others. They were often active members or leaders in their school community. However, after they arrived in New Zealand they were required to adopt another culture despite the resistance from the general public. This often caused much distress in one's self esteem and yearned for belongingness in a community, and prevented them from applying and receiving the same opportunities and placements as their Kiwi counterparts.

As a result of these identified issues, a support and care programme called *Ongoing Support for Asian Students (OSAS)* was initiated and implemented to alleviate their academic and cultural transitions and create a sense of belongingness for those originated from the Asia continent (Liew, 2004). One key strategy of this programme was the recruitment of student volunteers for mentoring and leadership internship. Students needed opportunities to meet with their classmates outside classrooms and be trained with social and

leadership skills. Another key strategy of this programme was the utilisation of the notion of “teachers” (Abe, Talbot et al., 1998; Yeh, Inose et al., 2001; Delaney, 2002). Lecturers and teaching staff have a higher chance of interacting with students and would be in a better position noticing any immediate issues and needs. Furthermore, they would have established some levels of relationships and trust after several weeks.

OSAS was launched since July 2003 in the department of *Information Systems and Operations Management (ISOM)* at the main campus to look after about 850 Asian students, and has since extended two of its satellite campuses to look after a total of about 1200 Asian students. In order to deal with the sheer volume of students, student volunteers are advertised and recruited subsequently. 18 active student volunteers were first recruited in February 2004 in the main campus, and have since grown to 75 active volunteers at all three campuses. The implementation methods and results described and evaluated in the following sections were based on the preliminary feedback and results from the first eight months of mentorship and leadership internship implementation in the main campus.

Methods:

Underlying Mission

There are often many cultural barriers involved for international Asian students in seeking help from main stream support mechanisms. One way to alleviate this is to provide them with proactive care and assistance, as listed below:

1. to provide Asian students immediate and proactive academic and social support and personal development to alleviate academic and cultural adaptation;
2. to equip and empower Asian students to deal with common issues which hindered successful study in New Zealand;
3. to take an interest in each individual student and build relationship and trust so that these students:
 - 3.1 have more confidence to participate in class activities;
 - 3.2 have a sense of belonging;
 - 3.3 able to resist wrong companies; and
 - 3.4 be better focus in their studies;
4. to share first hand experiences about language, cultures, people, job-hunting, and careers so that they have a fuller view of their international education; and
5. to encourage them to be proud of their Asian heritage so that they have more confidence to approach local students.

At OSAS, we believe that prevention is the key recipe in providing pastoral care, while care and practical assistance are two key ingredients in delivering such pastoral care.

Organisational Structure

OSAS has a collective organisational structure where academic staff act as guides, while teaching assistants (“tutors”) and student volunteers act as mentors. Networking occurs by creating a sense of belonging and connectivity through extending friends and teachers as an adopted family abroad; while mentoring occurs through monitoring and study operating as though brothers and sisters in a family structure teaching the younger ones. Figure 1 gives an overview of the early organisational structure of OSAS with academic staff and students; while Figure 2 gives an overview of the current organisational structure of OSAS with the inclusion of student volunteers. The OSAS Coordinator is currently the sole academic staff officially appointed and dedicated to OSAS.

Issues and the Building of an In-House Community

The early OSAS model, as shown in Figure 1, was a good start in providing proactive care; however, due to the sheer volume of students under care, it was impossible to individually care for them and monitor each of their progress. Furthermore, it was impossible to organise many events, prepare for lots of food with the limited amount of budget, and look after each attendees in every events. Moreover, many students expressed their gratitude and willingness to contribute after experiencing much care and assistance. As a result, an opportunity arose to build a small caring community to promote proactive care and reach out to others.

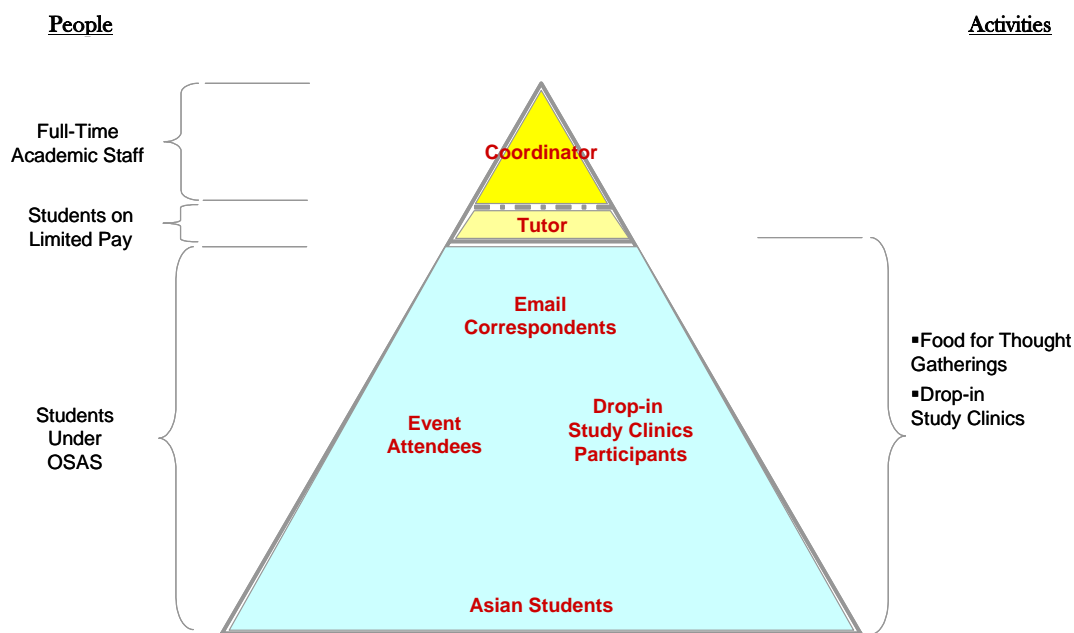


Figure 1. Early OSAS Model

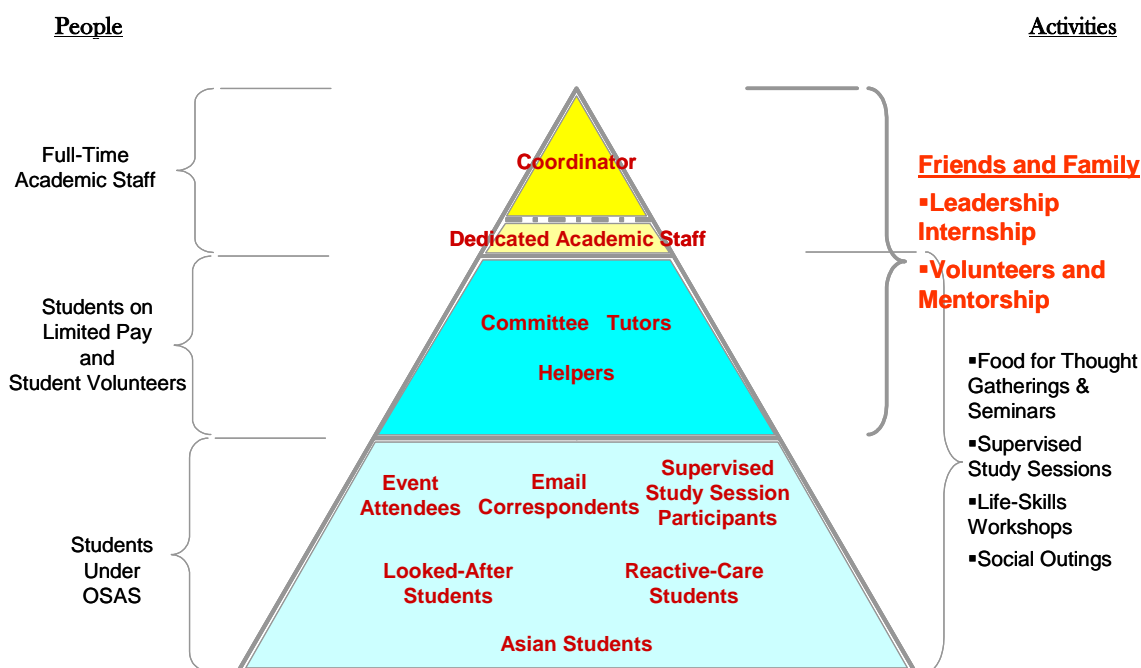


Figure 2. Organisational Structure of OSAS

A Chinese proverb said “you rely on your family when you’re at home, but you rely on your friends when you’re abroad”. Being away from familiar support structures did not mean one has to cope solely on one-self. The notion of family in many Asian cultures extends beyond immediate family and involves all relatives. This notion often resembles a community, and clan is also another meaning for “family” in Chinese dictionaries. A group of friends could also act as a “home” abroad to symbolise a place with people whom you could rely on when in need. The name “Friends and Family” was therefore carefully chosen to signify this in-house community. Furthermore, “Friends and Family” “亲朋戚友” is a common term in Chinese, and its translation includes friends “朋友” and relatives “亲戚”. However, many students neither felt the need nor the availability to join a club or association to receive social support. Both the students and their parents

would feel at ease if that group of people and support exist inside their institution, has an academic related focus, and was endorsed and supported by the education institution.

Even though the initial purpose of recruiting volunteers were simply to help out with events, students would not consider volunteering and adopting a new family unless they have been touched, helped or enriched by that family. Hence, volunteers were only recruited after OSAS has been implemented for at least one semester. Even though many of them have attended prior activities, they did not know each other well. For this reason, frequent gatherings and social outings were held throughout the year to enable the volunteers to get to know each other and feel part of a new family. Such an adopted family could relieve homesickness and improve the wellbeing of students, which we hope lead to better concentration on studies, and fulfilment of their education goals.

Issues and the Creation of Internship Opportunities

As OSAS grew and attracted more students to attend its regular activities and events, it was impossible for the OSAS coordinator to plan and organise every single detail in an event, host each event at all three campuses, and deal with the sheer volume of student volunteers and students on a one-to-one basis at all times. Furthermore, due to cultural and language barriers, many capable Asian students often missed out on personal development and leadership training opportunities, especially when competing with mainstream domestic students. As a result, an opportunity arose to appoint promising volunteers to leadership internship to learn and receive valuable practical experience within a safe environment. Three particular internship roles were created: to oversee the overall running, to organise the venue and prepare for the food, and to look after students and attendees at events and arrange for suitable mentorship match. However, in order to ensure more student volunteers were able to benefit from this, strict appointment and continuation rules must be enforced to ensure of rotations and personal development.

Results:

The performance and success of the *OSAS Friends and Family Volunteers and Mentorship* programme was measured on the preliminary feedback and results received and observed during the first eight months of mentorship implementation in the main campus; while the *OSAS Friends and Family Leadership Internship* programme was measured during the first four months of internship carried out in the main campus.

In-House Community – “Friends and Family Volunteers and Mentorship”

We started with 18 active student volunteers. Many of them were past event attendees or study session participants from the previous semester. The observation made during the first four months suggested five main themes of changes occurring among the first batch of volunteers. Firstly, the volunteers learnt to work and operate in teams even under pressure. Secondly, they developed better interpersonal and intercommunication skills with each other as well as with strangers. Thirdly, their self-confidence grew. Fourthly, they became closer and often conversed with each other outside scheduled events. So, the frequent meetings and trainings have allowed them build close relationships between each other. Lastly, they often dropped by to see the OSAS Coordinator in her office or email or text her for small conversations or guidance. So, the constant electronic communications and physical meetings have enabled the OSAS Coordinator to gain their trusts. Furthermore, it has enabled the OSAS Coordinator to identify each of their strengths and weaknesses and treat them as an individual people with individual needs. All these five themes evolved through care, monitoring and guidance, and clearly revealed the improvement of volunteers' wellbeing. The fact that they were comfortable with a staff member and each other and called upon for academic or personal support suggested that the notion of a family has been planted since there was a place for them to turn to for assistance and reassurance. Furthermore, some graduating wished they could stay behind and experience once more. As one respondent said, *“It’s home for me on campus, where I can always find help whenever necessary”*.

When the volunteers were asked to comment on their expectation and experience gained through OSAS at the end of four months, 94% of the seventeen respondents said that they have met more people and learnt to socialise or network. 77% of the respondents felt that they have helped students in some way and 71% of them have gained valuable team work experience, as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1. Volunteers' Feedback on Their Expectation and Actual Experience Gained (n = 17)

Question	Agreed
Meet more people and learn to socialise or network	94%
Helped students	77%
Team work	71%

When they were asked in an open-ended “any other comments”, their responses clearly indicated their satisfaction and trust in the support programme and especially in those who were involved. These comments include: *“OSAS is a great programme”*; *“Nobody should be doubtful of OSAS’s existence”*; *“OSAS is a great family for Asian students I enjoyed working with friends in OSAS, helping other students and feel thankful for help I got from OSAS”*; and *“Keep on doing what OSAS has been doing. Not only makes new students feel better but also other Asian students that have been here for a long time feel better too”*.

When the volunteers were asked to comment on OSAS in general at the end of four months, every respondent believed that they have had opportunities to meet new friends, as indicated in Table 2. However, only 77% of the respondents thought we have provided food and drinks, despite that they were served at every seminars and gatherings. This might be contributed by the fact that most volunteers were too busy serving attendees and did not receive much of their shares. Furthermore, only a number of staff members have attended the events. Hence, some have had to chance to meet and talk with staff members, while others did not get a chance to talk with their lecturers. Many of the volunteers were unable to receive study assistance through the supervised study sessions. This was due to the fact that the supervised study sessions were only offered to limited papers and mostly at lower levels.

Table 2. Volunteers' Feedback on OSAS in General (n = 17)

Question	Agreed
OSAS has provided opportunities to meet new friends	100%
OSAS has provided food and drinks	71%
OSAS has provided opportunities to meet staff informally	71%
OSAS has provided study assistance	53%

When students were asked in an open-ended “any other comments”, their responses clearly indicated their adoption of a new family abroad and their satisfaction in the support programme. These comments include: *“This is a family here. Like in my home, parents show me the path I may follow, and sisters and brothers study together side by side. The older will tell the younger: When I was doing ... paper.....”*; and *“It’s GREAT! It helps Asian students in almost all aspects of there university life: study, language skills, making new friends, even delicious food! I appreciate that I had an opportunity to participate in OSAS activities”*.

The number of student volunteers subsequently increased to 42 after four months of implementation at the main campus. Among the later volunteers, majority of them were stage 3 students and/or past event attendees. When compared to the satellite campuses, the demographic was rather different; almost all of them there were stage 1 and 2 students.

One particular student said this in an unsolicited email prior to volunteering which summed up nicely of what OSAS has been doing, *“all i want to say here is thank you, to OSAS, and to you, angela, thank you very much. Thank u for being there, thank you for the nice food and thank u for sending me the emails all the time, they do make me feel that i am really important to someone other than my girlfriend, :-)* And such feeling is not that easy to find, i promise, OSAS made feel that whatever i do, i’m not alone. Thank you”. After volunteering, this particular student made so many good friends with other volunteers and was one of the popular students among the volunteers. He even made such close friend with another volunteer that they caught the bus to university and back together everyday.

When another volunteer went and collated information from others for the purpose of preparing a testimonial speech at the end of eight months, she highlighted a number of points in her speech:

- their initial purpose of volunteering was purely to help other students, but they have gained so much themselves beyond their imagination;
- they finally made so many new and close friends from the university (most of them had only friends from high-school);
- they became more outgoing and not as shy to approach strangers or Kiwis;
- they sat with other student volunteers in their classes;
- they always thought each of them individually was the only one struggling academically;
- they underwent stress and struggle together in their studies (even sleeping next to each other at 4:30am in the computer lab);
- someone was always watching them and helping them to meet and greet other people even if they were shy to approach others in any event; and
- they worked together towards a common goal – to prepare an event that runs smoothly.

When reflecting back to the underlying mission and the interactions between OSAS Coordinator and the volunteers, we must have shared some valuable first hand experiences (mission numbered 4) as they often came back for follow-up conversations and inquired more for information after a lunch outing, which in turn gave them more ideas as how to face their common issues and future challenges (mission numbered 2). We have approached everyone discreetly to wish certain volunteers happy birthday and to take him/her out to lunch (mission numbered 3). We also try not to involve specific volunteers in too many OSAS events or administration if their academic performance were weaker (mission numbered 3). One particular volunteer with straight A grades once remarked that she only started to believe that she was just as good as her Kiwi peers after actively taking part in OSAS and that being an Asian was not necessarily a detriment (mission numbered 5). One staff member said she could now do interactive discussion in her stage 2 and 3 classes which have high proportions of Asian students and OSAS volunteers. She also “*perceived a big change in the students’ attitude and it reflected back to their understanding, learning and outcomes*” after the setup and support of OSAS (mission numbered 3.1). Due to the fact that we have close connections with the volunteers, we were often the first to hear of any issues that have happened among the volunteers (mission numbered 1).

When reflecting back to the underlying mission and the interactions among the volunteers, the close-knit and friendships have helped them to support each other through stress and hard times (missions numbered 1 and 2). We have also created an environment that keeps an eye on each other in all times and always have someone to call upon, even simply to commute together on a daily basis or chat on the internet (missions numbered 3, 3.2, 3.3, and 3.4). Furthermore, they would not hesitate to approach anyone who appeared at the events and behave like hosts, including approaching and welcoming staff members whom they have never met (missions numbered 5). Many of these staff members were also able to know their students more intimately than otherwise.

Even though the student volunteers were spending much of their time helping out and attending more events than otherwise, their academic results were uplifted rather being disturbed. For those that did not do well in last year, they have subsequently passed all of their papers and were reported to enjoy their papers much more.

In-House Leaders – “Friends and Family Leadership Internship”

The appointment of promising volunteers as designated leaders has been an extremely valuable exercise. Not only did it solve many practical hands-on matters, but it gave the students a chance to move forward, and put some of the theories they have learnt into action. Some of them have had to speak publicly, analyse human behaviour and characters, learn how to organise and manage people, operate within a budget, use a computer application efficiently and effectively, and prepare animation presentations that tell stories. One volunteer commented on how everyone has grown over the past few months, particular the appointed leaders and how they have taken initiative and responsibility and doing public speaking.

Even though the student leaders were spending much more time planning and organising events than the rest of the volunteers, their academic results were either maintained at a high quality or uplifted. Some of them were even ranked in the top 5 in their enrolled papers. Furthermore, every one of them has a very close relationship with the OSAS Coordinator as well as with each other. This was observed through the daily email and/or text messages exchanged.

Conclusion:

The notion of care and trust required much time and effort. A combination of academic staff and students were some key characteristics in spreading and fostering pastoral care. It was essential in differentiating this support programme from any other social clubs. Through the feedback and results discussed, the empowerment initiatives have equipped students to meet common issues and challenges, and minimised the amount of unnecessary grief and mental stress which they would otherwise face. Creating a sense of belonging and self-worth have certainly given them more confidence and ammunition to participate in mainstream activities and concentrate on their studies. Many of them were certainly performing positively and confidently than a few months ago prior to their volunteering and were committed to continue their friendships and “family”-ties in the years to come.

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