

Profiling international students: A practical approach to improving student experience and understanding diverse cultures

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As traditional international mono-markets decline, our knowledge of other cultures is being challenged by the influx from a more variable market. We need to question if, on the basis of our past cultural encounters, it is now possible to deal effectively, realistically and empathetically with the increasing range of factors presented by this cultural variety.

This is an issue confronting support areas, such as Monash International at the Gippsland campus of Monash University, where, at any one time, over 30 different, and often distinct national groups require perceptive support. Profiling individual students via one-on-one interviews, as representatives of disparate cultures, is a one approach that facilitates and creates opportunities for empathetic understanding.

A number of benefits to the international office accrue from this: increasing cross-cultural knowledge, broadening of perceptions, identifying service gaps, building of individual relationships, creating insights into student needs, generating contextualization of students' actions, constructing student experiences and strategies, and encouraging acceptance of difference. The student also benefits in that the opportunity enables them to take the role of an expert authority, to be a deliverer rather than a receiver of knowledge, to share their culture, to make cultural comparisons that provide personal insights and to connect their home experiences with their study experiences.

This paper discusses one strategy used in a multi-focused approach to improving the experience of international students at university.