

*Can you teach Aussie Universities to Salsa?  
Investigating the orientation and support needs of Latin American  
students in Australian education.*

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## Introduction

Internationalisation of Australian higher education, including student and staff mobility, transnational academic provision, distance education and multinational research has seen the Australian system transform to a global entity. International students studying in Australian universities has moved from being a novelty in the 1980's, to a necessity for intuitions' financial security in 2006. International students represent 17.7% of total enrolments in Australian higher education, and in addition over 50,000 students currently study with Australian institutions in their own country at satellite campuses or as a distance learner (IDP 2006). While the perceived relaxed lifestyle, and relatively reasonable cost of living has in the past attracted students from all over the globe, it is the quality of our education and our student support systems that need to maintain an excellent reputation in order to keep international students thinking of Australia as their preferred education destination over our major competitors the USA and the UK.

Traditionally Australian higher education have drawn students from within the Asian region, with the Peoples republic of China recently being the major provider at 21% of total international student enrolment in 2004 (AEI 2005). However, as economic situations strengthen in China and in other student provider nations such as India, international competition has seen the Australian market share decrease. The USA, United Kingdom and European nations have greatly increased their presence by offering on shore education opportunities and increased marketing of their well regarded higher education systems. In addition improved domestic higher education infrastructure such as China's creation of 'University Towns' (China Education and Research Network 2006), designed to take millions of citizens to the highest educational level has reduced the necessity to seek education outside their borders. Another of Australia's former major provider of students, Singapore, has shifted from sending many of their students offshore for higher education, to

being an importer market, taking students from Thailand, China, Hong Kong and Korea into their improving higher education institutions (Hill 2006).

While International Student revenue streams remain vital to higher education institutions, Australia will need to look further a field for their international students. When interviewed by Michael Maher (2006), James Wolfensohn, past head of the World Bank, stated that "Australians need to look beyond our strong allies for expansion, look to our neighbours" and it is the developing world where economic and cultural expansions will occur the fastest in coming years. If Asia has reached its prime for higher education imports then Australian Institutions need to identify alternative markets in order to continue to expand international education.

Australian education can look to our partners in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation group to find new economies and countries of interest. Within the Pacific Rim region there are many developing areas that would benefit the collective attention of our international educators. Africa has exported many individuals to Australia for economic and education reasons, in addition to smaller island nations sending numbers of students to Australian institutions, utilising aid in the form of education scholarships (Ausaid 2006). Latin America is an area of great interest for Australian higher education. After a time of political instability and economic hardship, some Latin American countries are seeing economic growth (Brazil is currently seen to be one of the fastest growing economies in the world) (AEI 2005). The middle classes are looking to educate their own overseas, and as the United States tightens their visa regulations for foreign students, Australia offers an attractive and accessible alternative.

Australia has a reputation for excellent education provision within Latin America, and has enjoyed a general expansion of students over the past five years (AEI 2006). With Scholarship programs, such as CONYACT in Mexico, Higher Education in Australia is becoming an increasingly more viable option for Latin American students who wish to add to their domestic education. Additionally, post graduate education is becoming more common, along with

vocational education such as TAFE NSW and Canberra Institute of Technology which fills a void within Brazilian, Chilean and Argentinean domestic education in particular (AEI 2006). With the increasing popularity of Spanish as a second language, there has been a greater amount of student mobility with arrangements being created between Australian and Latin American institutions. The result of this is a large amount of Latin American students will partake in short term study abroad opportunities in institutions throughout Australia.

As student numbers increase, so does the need for specialised student support. With traditional markets driving the provision of international student support systems within Australian higher education institutions, it is no surprise that the current focus is on the needs of Asian students. It is the intent of this report to examine Latin American student needs and to provide international student support employees the information required to refocus on this new student cohort.

## **Hypothesis**

*“Current orientation programs and support services offered by Australian higher education institutions require further development to suit the needs of Latin American students”*

## **Justification**

As a result of the decrease in incoming student numbers from traditional international student markets, Australia needs to look towards developing markets to supplement international student income. Latin America is shaping up to be an excellent market for Australia, and as a result will need to identify

needs of Latin American students to develop specialised orientation and support programs.

## Methodology

For the purposes of this report two methods of data gathering were used:

- Literature review
- First person interviews

This combination allows for effective understanding of how orientation and support programs are currently run, and if they are relevant to the needs of Latin American students studying in Australia.

### *Literature Review*

Initially, a varied sample of texts that are available to Australian international education support staff was selected to probe the current information that is used for developing Orientation and support programs. This ranged from handbooks for orientation, exchange student survival guides, home-stay survival suggestions to voluminous texts about transition and cultural assimilation.

On communication with staff from an American publishing house that specialises in cross cultural texts a selection of books which reference Latin American culture and transition were analysed. Although these texts have a US perspective for comparison, they have all been written by Latinos or those that have spent a great amount of time working in Latin America and as a result comparisons on Latin Culture to Australian culture could be further developed.

This information also proved exceptionally useful in the first person interviews as questions could be framed to obtain opinion on the stereotypes proffered from the literature and given opportunity to confirm or deny.

## *First person Interviews*

First person, unstructured interviews was the main source of gaining an insight of Latin American student's experiences within Australian higher education. In all, thirty five students were interviewed and where possible their responses taped. The main intent of the first person interviews was to locate commonly occurring themes that are representative of the issues of cultural transition and orientation and support need.

The students interviewed have been or are enrolled across a range of academic disciplines and levels of study, including short term study abroad (or exchange) students. Students are to be at differing stages of completion, ranging from new arrivals, to individuals that have already returned.

The intention behind utilising first person interviews was to obtain information that is personal in nature and is being used to extend the qualitative aspects of the report. By following the natural rhythm of a normal conversation, and using questioning techniques, the information obtained was easily tailored to the needs of the report (Hart 2005). The length of the interviews ranged considerably, with the shortest being fifteen minutes in length and the longest being one hour and a half. The participants were made fully aware that they had the freedom to cut the interview at any time, or take as much time as they felt they needed. This was achievable as the interview guide was open-ended in nature (appendix two) and a great deal of information could be obtained in relatively short amounts of time. (Teske1997)



## **Review of literature**

There is a growing body of research suggesting the need to adopt a more holistic approach to assisting international students at tertiary institutions to become accomplished global citizens, rather than purely tertiary educated (Pope, Reynolds & Muller, 2004; Flaitz, 2003; Kennedy & Roudometof 2002). Students interviewed in these studies with regard to their international education experience indicate that there is a need for support from peers, members of general staff and academics when first arriving and throughout their experience on an international campus (Major, 2005).

Within the area of international student orientation there has been varied work done on the needs of cultural groups of students. The literature reviewed here, therefore, is related to studies of the orientation offered to international students in general. There is also a small focus on work theorising the adjustment process that international students negotiate when studying at an international campus. In addition studies of Latin American culture are explored for the purpose of identifying potential disconnects with the Australian way of life and education system.

The International student experience has been looked at in detail by Claudia Doria, in particular the issue of housing. Doria, a home-stay mother for a number of years, has produced a work that claims to provide an insight into experiences shared by international students in Australia. Doria was impressed by the candidness of the responses from students interviewed, when students talked of the pain and confusion of their arrival on campus (Doria, 2005).

It is a certainty that home-stay providers offer an element of support to all of their charges. However, issues faced while staying with an Australian family are not the full extent of the pressures felt by new international students. This work is limited in scope and perhaps would be better utilised by potential home-stay families. Students may profit from reading Doria's book, but it will

only give advice for their potential housing choices and experiences. However, if they wish to obtain advice about the academic system in Australia, in addition to assistance with adjustment, visa requirements and a varied list of topics will greatly benefit from reading Goldwasser's 2006 work. Examples of advice offered include hints and tips to get over frustration at lack of language skills in an Australian class room:

Whilst there's no doubt that local students have the advantage of speaking a language they grew up with, don't assume that all local student have perfect English skills...The study of English as a language e.g grammar, spelling and punctuation, is not always ongoing nor is it of interest to all school students. Some local students grow up believing that their English skills are quite good and are shocked when they are told otherwise (Goldwasser, I. 2006, p. 124)

Goldwasser's style is approachable and non-jargonistic, and this work would be of great benefit as a supplement to specific institutional advice offered on campus as a part of the onsite orientation.

Bettina Hansel's 1993 work "The Exchange Student Survival Kit" is an extremely practical book, created to help support and advise high school exchange students. Although created for the use for all exchange students, much of the content has been provided by past and current AFS Intercultural Exchange students. AFS, one of the longest running high school exchange programs, was created after the Second World War, after American ambulance drivers who had recently returned from war torn Europe, established the need for intercultural understanding through exposure of students to another culture. The not for profit company still operates with the same goal, world peace through intercultural understanding. It is understood that AFS Exchange students become as integrated as possible into their host family, community, school and culture. This text has been created to help facilitate integration, by offering advice on cultural baggage, the basics of culture and the adjustment cycle. Hansel's work has been designed to be used as a put down – pick up text, to be used at all stages of the exchange

students year (With chapters based around the pre-departure process to Re-orientation) and is an excellent text for students studying internationally within High School. Although it does have advice for students that are young and inexperienced, it does not talk down to the students or simplify its message.

Asia is the biggest exporter of students for the purpose of education, as a result a great amount of research has been created around support of Asian students. Elza Major of the University of Nevada has produced a work stipulating the needs of Asian students within a US institution. Students interviewed by Major indicated that they were unlikely to approach international support staff on campus, preferring to utilise networks of fellow nationals to get through the maze of the new campus. While needs and problems were well explored (along with expectations, dissonance and adjustment), solutions haven't been stipulated within the report, which given the content, would have been beneficial for international education staff within the US system (Major 2005).

Reorientation for the US student and need for pre-departure and orientation support is explored in the short work by Kauffman et al. Four US students were interviewed about their overseas study abroad activity, and their success evaluated. This extremely limited work still manages to establish that orientation and support is needed in order to make international study a success. The limitations however are exposed as this work is heavy on dialogue and lingers on the supposed unsuccessful elements of study abroad, without providing real solutions. (Kauffman & Martin, 1992)

Peer support has been touted as being greatly beneficial for the adjustment of new international and domestic students on campuses. The University of Canberra's Peer network is explored in Deveraux's 2004 work, looking at the benefits for all university students. Billed as an opportunity to internationalise campuses and all students interaction, peer networking is an important part of the orientation experience. Deveraux's work doesn't extend into problems of international students, just offers a solution to lack of integration between domestic and international cohorts on campuses. (Devereux, 2004)

There are many instructional texts for academic staff and international education professionals. Two such works are those of Flaitz and Gannon. Flaitz explains the cultural backgrounds of a small selection of overseas students, and uses stereotypes heavily to justify perceived student need. For example “Cubans, both children and adults alike, participate in an activity including the phrase *el que no salte es yanqui*, meaning ‘he who doesn’t jump is a Yankee’ ” (Flaitz, 2003). This is just one example of the basic and stereotypical ‘advice’ offered to teachers of international students within this text. The utilisation of such narrow-minded preconceptions with international students is highly inappropriate. Gannon’s work consists of educational, group activities for cultural learning. One could use this in a small group orientation, to allow for the identification of personal cultural values and identifying techniques to utilise while getting to know the new culture (Gannon 2001).

International students are defined within cultural adjustment texts as being Sojourners, individuals that “move to another country to achieve certain objectives, within a specific time frame and intend to return home” (Sonn & Fisher 2005, p. 350). Studies concentrating on the cultural adjustment of sojourners (Sonn & Fisher 2005; Bouchner, Furnham & Ward 2001; Marshall & Klingberg 1970) draw heavily on Geert Hofstede’s work in characterising individual cultures and resulting adjustment need. By identifying particular country cultural characteristics, students can develop coping and adjustment methods to achieve integration while studying abroad. All of the above mentioned texts are beneficial for utilisation by international support staff during cultural counselling and provide orientation support to students of many countries.

Latin American culture has been explored by our US colleagues expansively since the early years of cross-cultural research. Proximity, traditional trade routes and immigration has demanded that research be produced to guide education, tourism and business transactions. Many texts have been produced to advise US individuals about Mexican culture, two of which are Condon’s 1997 work and the expansive 2004 work of Crouch. Condon has

produced a guide with a focus on explaining intricacies of Mexican cultures, with specific emphasis on communication. Condon is a cross-cultural educator at the University of New Mexico, a US state with a great amount of cross-border traffic for education, immigration and trade. The book has been designed to be a guide for cultural interaction, for multiple audiences (i.e. tourists, students, Mexicans to the US and visa versa) and has specific concentration on the exploration of US/Mexican histories, differing approaches to Time and truth, the importance of the family and the Mexican view of death. Although limited in scope, Condon's work would be a good start for readings for students that want to study in Mexico, and if used conservatively, a good guide for international educators looking to have Mexicans study at their campus (Condon 1997). Expanding the translation of culture, Crouch gives examples of US business entrance and success in the Mexican market in addition to exploration of the Mexican way of life. Breaking down his book into three key themes: Intercultural operation, Working with Mexicans and building a historical context, Crouch gives an excellent starting point for those that wish to operate truly cross culturally within the Mexican culture. In fact, reading this book would give individuals the opportunity to look to their own culture, prior to any cross-cultural experience:

When you understand, as cultural anthropologists explain, that culture is a survival mechanism, you can accept that people hold onto their culture tenaciously. With this in mind, you don't have to waste your time trying to bring people around to *your* way of thinking. Instead, you can get right down to the business of trying to understand why people from other cultures act the way they do and how you can work more effectively with them. (Crouch 2004, p.xx1)

For Australians, this book would allow for an advanced exposure to cultural watch points. While other works, such as Condon's, places heavy emphasis on the comparison between US and Mexican way of life, Crouch instead concentrates on Mexico and what you can do as a new comer to the culture to understand and operate without causing offence. The flipside of this is that we can look to this book to get some guidance to the histories of Mexicans that

study within our institutions, and create some idea of what may well need translation between Mexican and Australian culture (Crouch 2004).

For convenience sake cross-cultural observers would like to be able to put Latin America into a mould, and explain all cultural peculiarities in a neat tidy package. This is near impossible, with all countries in Latin America having greatly different histories. Perhaps the one thing we can make assumptions on is the fact that Spanish is spoken. Language, the one common thread may help with grouping Latin countries culturally, however language is another aspect where differences can occur. Argentinean Spanish varies greatly with Mexican and what is appropriate in Columbia may well be extremely offensive in Peru. As international educators we need to find reference material that will assist with aspects of culture that can be attributed to the whole of Latin America and country specific culture. The works of Chong et al and Stephenson effectively look at country specific cultural aspects along with whole of Latin American generalisations. We can use the explanation of the importance of Mate to Argentinean bonding in Stephenson's work to explain the importance of group cooking in Australian residence halls (Stephenson 2003). Or we could work with Chong et al's explanation of Latino Time orientation to diffuse an academic's anger at the tardiness of Latino students in his class (Chong & Baez 2005).

It is clear from the literature that cultural adjustment of international students is key to the success of an international study experience. The literature also points to a need for International Education professionals to understand the cultural particulars of the client group, with particular focus being on how to make adjustments to programs, be it orientation or other, to suit the cultural needs of the students as an individual, just as it has been completed for the Asian market. However the single most concerning issue is the lack of direct literature available for Australians on the Latin American market, a market that will continue to grow world wide and offers great potential for Australian Education providers.

## **Orientation and support Audit of Australian Universities**

Orientation and support in Australian higher education institutions have been designed to ease the international student's adjustment into Australian culture and academic environs. Programs run at Australian institutions are all varied in nature, ranging from hands on week long programs, to one day, activity based events. They are all designed to assist a particular student cohort at individual locations and are continually evolving, as student need changes from semester to semester.

Overseas students and their welfare is protected by Australian law within the Department of Education's act of 2000, Education Services for Overseas Students. It is legislated that institutions provide orientation for all new international students and ongoing support throughout their program. The act is currently in consultation phase for re-evaluation, and a consultation draft is available to industry. Within the draft, orientation and support are mentioned in Standard 6 –Student Support Services:

The registered provider must assist overseas students to adjust to study and life in Australia, including through the provision of an age and culturally appropriate orientation programme that addresses:

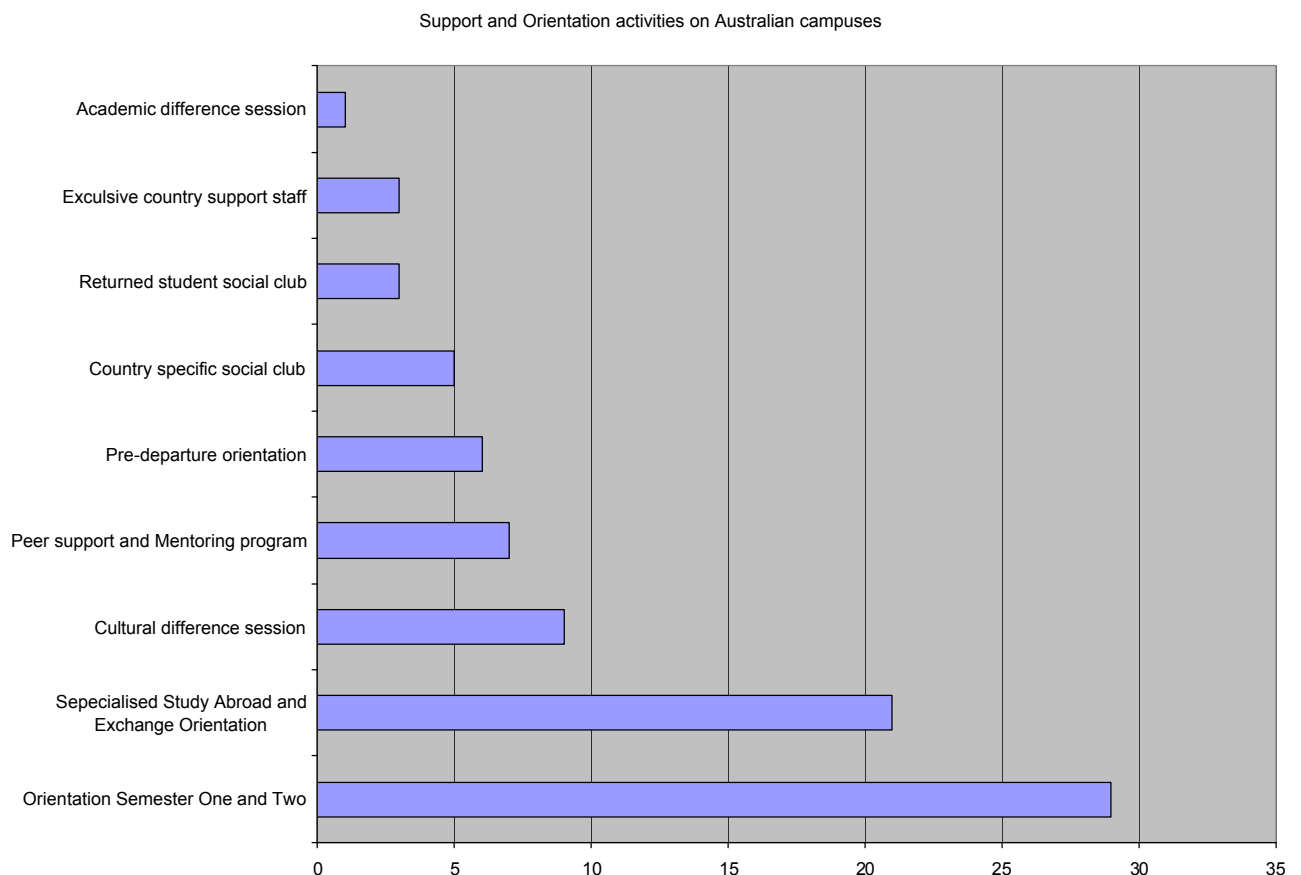
- a. cultural issues
- b. student support services available to overseas students in the transition to life and study in a new environment
- c. information on legal services
- d. emergency and health services
- e. facilities and resources
- f. complaints and appeals procedures, and
- g. academic progress and attendance visa conditions

(DEST, 2005)

In order to get a comprehensive snapshot of what is being offered to international students on Australian campuses, international education professionals from universities were surveyed to find out what orientation and

support activities were available at their campuses. Australian International education professionals filled out surveys when attending NAFSA's 2006 Annual Conference and Expo in Montreal, Canada (see methodology for more information on the data gathering methods employed). Please note that all institutions mentioned are Australian, and when institution is used it is in reference to Australian higher education.

There was a great amount of commonalities in the responses received. The more common elements of orientation include mid year start orientation, cultural adjustment sessions, academic support and visa advice. The following graph illustrates the amount of institutions that utilised common elements of orientation on their campuses:



Australian universities have long seen themselves to be innovators in student support. Understanding the power of word of mouth and with Australian universities increasingly relying on international student funds, Australian



higher education institutions need to continue to be innovative in its supply of service to international students.

## Discussion of Interviews with Latin American students

In order to gain an understanding of Latin American student experience of higher education in Australia, a selection of students were interviewed. The results of the interviews are explored in this section, dividing the focus from Latino culture and its effects on adjustment into Australian culture and exploration of experiences with Australian higher education orientation and support activities.

In order to get a cohesive view of Latino culture and its effects on the student experience, a reference point was utilised in interviews by which to start conversation. Chong et al demonstrate “Eight cultural Values’ within Latino culture which were utilised within the interviews with Latin students to identify issues experienced in Australia and Australian education. The values are:

1. Time orientation
2. *personalismo* (sense of self-worth)
3. *simpatia* (sensitivity)
4. *respecto* (respect or dignity)
5. power distance (hierarchy)
6. collectivism
7. familism; and
8. Religion

(Chong & Baez 2005)

All students were asked to relate their identification with the above values, and expand on how they believe they may have effected their time so far in Australia and their institution. The following is an explanation of the eight different cultural values and student’s identification with them.

## **Time orientation**

Categorised within chromatics, it is estimated that the Latin American culture is polychromic in nature (Martin & Nakayama 2004). This means that Latinos prefer working in the immediate; they are present orientated and put more importance onto what is happening in the moment than what is likely to happen in the future (Chong & Baez 2005). The stereotype that Latin countries and individuals operate on *manana* time can be explained by this cultural value.

All participants agreed that they identify with the Latino time orientation cultural value. Some mentioned that they had to quickly adopt the Australian view of time to be able to adjust socially and in the University context. While studying in Latin America it was thought to be acceptable to turn up to class fifteen minutes late, as if you arrived earlier, you would be the only one in the classroom. In addition one student related a tale of her realising that her friends didn't like her turning up late for dinner parties and other events.

One student mentioned a stressful experience he had with a lecturer when he handed in a piece of assessment just a "little" late. Losing marks and face with the lecturer was worrying for the student. His confusion and stress lasted until he talked with an Australian classmate and asked why he was being so unfairly treated for his three day delay. Receiving an explanation of the importance of the Friday afternoon submission time and the imperative of asking for extensions when not being able to get assessment in on time was a great learning event for the student.

## ***Personalismo* (Sense of self worth)**

*Personalismo* as a personality trait is described by Chong et al as:

Unbiased, objective, well-intentioned one-to-one interaction exhibited with a personal, caring and respectful attitude.

(Chong & Baez 2005 Pg 32 )

Exhibiting these attributes is seen to be most important to Latinos, and respect is automatically given to those that act within these boundaries. *Personalismo* is closely linked with *respecto* (expanded further on in this chapter), linking morals, personality and consideration to all activities. It is seen that those that act in this way give themselves and others the ultimate respect.

The effect of *personalismo* on students experience in Australia was well explained by one of the interviewees. She felt that some members of the staff in her universities international office were rude as they were short in their answers to her and not generous in offering one on one time for her. She recognised that they were very busy people, but thought it unfair that they couldn't see her in an office, instead answered her questions very briskly over a counter.

### ***Simpatia***

Harmony and integrity is very important to Latinos, along with the extreme avoidance of all confrontation. *Simpatia* was explained by students to be the attributes displayed by your favourite uncle, or the lecturer that remembers your name and takes an interest in your work. The relevance of this to education as explained by the students is that they will try to avoid any uncomfortable situation. For example, one student felt he didn't get the right information from a university staffer, however instead of questioning or asking for clarification the student removed himself from the situation. Unfortunately as a result of this incorrect information he missed an administration date and failed a subject.

### ***Respecto* and Power-Distance**

Respect and the recognition people's rank or place in society is very important to Latino's. This is why *respecto* and power-distance are linked, as respect is

automatically given to those in higher positions in the hierarchy than the individual. Respecto “involves the high regard that is granted to a person because of age or in the hierarchy” (Chong and Baez 2005, pg 30). Power distance is the automatic deference given to those in the community that hold a position of respect.

Latin American students may seem reserved in some situations where Australian students may not. For example, students interviewed said that they were uncomfortable at first with the familiar way other students addressed their lecturers and professors. One student in particular said it took her one year in her degree to become comfortable calling her tutors by their first names. Another mentioned that the joking relationship other employees had with his manager at a fast food restaurant confused him at first, as they didn't seem to respect the manager.

### ***Collectivism***

The well being of a group of people is always held in more regard than the individual within the Latino culture. Individuals will go to great efforts to make sure that sensitivity is displayed to an entire group when group problems arise. Students relate stories of class uprising if exam dates are not popular, and through the power of the group academics must change. One student expressed experienced distress due to the fact that students will not group together in the same way as at home; instead go to efforts to keep information about academic results and experiences to themselves. As a result the student feels isolated within class groups, and struggles when forced to do group work with Australians. He expressed feelings of confusion as he feels he needs to be individualistic in producing work for group presentations.

### **Familism and Religion**

The two strongest influences over Latin culture are family and religion. Students report that their parents made the final decision on where they were

to study and what they will study. Parents participated in their application process, and sought out much of the pre-departure information and took a great proportion of the financial responsibility. Students expressed feeling isolated from families when arriving into Australia, however felt they couldn't replace that relationship with friends as that would be somewhat disrespectful to their families at home.

Two of the students mentioned that they identify themselves to be religious and feel this to be a central part of their cultural makeup. They both indicated that they found fair access to religious services and used church communities to assist in cultural integration. However the difference between Latino's and Australians is that even the non-religious Latino will make reference to a higher power in conversation. For example, one student illustrated the Latin habit of saying "God willing" when talking of things that will happen in the future, where Australians in the same situation would say "touch wood". Australians may well perceive Latino's to be religious when overhearing this type of conversation, which may well cause confusion in conversation and interaction.

## **Experience of Australian Education**

Latin American students interviewed for this report were enthused by the opportunity to express their experiences with Australian institutions. The reason for this enthusiasm may well be due to the fact that Latin students are still very much in the minority of international students on Australian campuses, and as a result are somewhat anonymous. The tradition of catering for student need when it arises has caused some orientation and support activities to be targeted to cultural groups (East Asian groups for example). Students expressed appreciation at being given the chance to provide feedback on orientation and support and felt that if their needs were taken into account when planning programs, their adaptation process may well have been simplified. Among the issues that students expressed was the importance of computer literacy, dependence of other students on interaction

with home country nationals, differing definitions of plagiarism, misunderstanding of grades and results and frustration with a lack of knowledge of available support.

The majority of the students interviewed were surprised at the reliance Australian institutions had on information technology and were frustrated that they needed to have a high level of knowledge of computers as soon as they arrived. Most students had to enrol in classes online, put themselves into tutorials, change addresses and make most contact with their institution in an online forum. The typical Latino experience with these administration activities is that students are required to enrol with a person, and are assisted in the process. One student mentioned that she utilised offered computer tutorial support when taking on these activities, and this assisted her greatly in the process. The others reported stress at sorting out the mess of the computer, and persevered for the rest of their enrolment period. Another student expressed frustration as when asking for help from the international office she was told she should have attended the computer tutorial and the staff member wasn't willing to help her as a result of her non attendance.

A great majority of Latino students arrive into Australia with little English skills. As a result they take part in English language training with other students from all over the world. A frustration expressed by two of the students interviewed was that the other students in their classes were very clique, and didn't want to communicate with students that didn't speak their home language. As Latinos are still in the minority, there weren't many opportunities for our students to speak Spanish. In addition all students expressed that they wanted to come to Australia to meet Australians and speak English. The very nature of the English language classes kept them isolated from their Australian peers for a certain period of time, delaying the assimilation process for months after arrival.

Plagiarism and Latino students were simply expressed by one of the students:

“If we can cheat, we will”

Talking in exams is natural, in fact leaning across a desk and looking for an answer is normal. Of course this is not acceptable within Australian education, and the adjustment was difficult for one of the students interviewed. The sheer size of exam halls and the fact that any type of interaction is forbidden was stressful for the student. In fact he was also worried at being watched by strangers while taking the paper. Another academic difference that was consternation to students was the grading system in Australian education. It is anticipated that students adjust to getting grades awarded without questions. This becomes a problem with students that are participating in a short term program in Australia but need to grades transferred to their home institution in Latin America. Students expressed that they were concerned that their home grades would suffer as a result of their Australian experience, as they were not used to using the bell curve for marking.

Finally, students were not aware of the available orientation and support options to them on campus. A high percentage of interview participants didn't realise the importance of attending orientation, and as a result didn't participate in a great proportion of the event. They expressed that if they had their time again it would have helped them to adjust if they did participate.

The experience of a new international student is always varied and challenging. Students adjust as they can, and try to adapt to their new country while preserving elements of their personality that are made up by culture. The experience of interviewing these students was not only beneficial for international education staff, but for the students themselves. Having the chance to debrief with a captive audience is something that is treasured by those that have the opportunity. The issues mentioned are just a snapshot of some students' experiences in addition to their Latino cultural identification and its effects on understanding Australia. Further research is needed within this area, and it could only assist Australian higher education in creating a strong niche in Latin America.



## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this research was to investigate what is available to all international students in the form of orientation and support programs on campus and explore the Latin American student experience in those programs. Within the research there was a great amount of interaction with international education professionals, and many of them questioned the purpose of the report. Professionals expressed doubt that there would be particular Latin American need within orientation and support, and indicated that they would be interested to have access to the research. For a long time international education in Australia's focus has been on providing for the majority while supporting all in the process of adjustment into the Australian system. Nothing in the research indicates expansive need on the behalf of Latin American students; however the small things make a difference to adjustment, and anything we can do to accommodate incoming international students will allow for our reputation as educational providers to soar.

The students interviewed for the purpose of this report are unique, trailblazers who have decided to come to Australia before it became common for Latin American students to seek education in Australia. However the experiences they have had are valuable for international education professionals to examine, as we can foretell problems that their compatriots may well have when arriving and studying in Australia in the future. Cultural challenges will not change with more students from Latin America arriving, in fact the problems may well become more serious as we have to cope with them on mass.

What can international education professionals do to make the experience of studying in Australia easier for Latin American students?

Australian international education professionals need to find mutually beneficial programs to allow for the cultural adjustment of Latin American students. One aspect of adjustment that the students interviewed found difficult was the lack of options to meet Australians when they arrived into language training. Outbound student mobility is very important to the Australian government (DEST, 2006) and getting newly arrived Latin American students access to language classes would allow for peer networking to occur for the mutual benefit of both student cohorts. Latin Americans would be able to improve language skills and meet Australians; Australians improve language skills and expose themselves to the possibility of studying in the home countries of their new friends. Utilising newly returned exchange students is another fine way of getting Latin American students access to peers of their same age group. Some institutions organise returned students social clubs for the purpose of supporting newly returned students with the process of reorientation and integrating new students into the culture through an informal and fun event based organisation.

Students interviewed expressed remorse at not taking part in provided orientation events and activities, as they believed that they would have benefited if they attended. Students are aware of the investment made in attending another countries institution, and one student suggested that we put a quantifiable amount to the orientation. Of course orientation is compulsory, and if students are made aware of the amount they pay to attend orientation, they would be aware of the wasted money if they didn't attend and would participate willingly. International education professionals need to sell orientation as a benefit, and although crude, the quantifiable aspect of this plan would allow for students to think twice about sleeping through orientation.

International education professionals are by nature caring and considerate. Cross cultural communication training is an important pre-requisite for employment and patience is a necessity. However, if Australian international education professionals are to be successful in dealing with Latinos they need to be aware of the specificities of Latin culture and what causes offence. For example *simpatia* needs to be observed. If busy, make an appointment with

the student to come back, to sit down in a private place, and work through the problems in a non confrontational manor. This will allow for mutual respect and the student will feel comfortable to reapproach that individual for assistance in the future. If Latin American students come to a professional in a group, it is necessary to avoid taking offence or feeling confronted. Knowledge of collectivism and its effects on Latino approach to dealing with issues will help to diffuse the situation at hand at get to the bottom of the problem.

The process of working out the differences in culture is also assisted by international education staff exposure to the academic system that the Latino students are coming from. Orientation sessions could be offered to explain the Australian marking systems in relation to country based systems in Latin America. Sessions on plagiarism could be partaken in a method that is non-confrontational and Australian academic staff should be encouraged to teach, research and travel to Latin American partners to not only extend knowledge of the different system, but explore transnational teaching opportunities and to promote Australian institutions.

One cannot ignore the importance of family to Latinos, and the fact that institutions will not be able to supplement family while the student is studying abroad. Australian institutions can assist in the process of supporting by allowing for home-stay opportunities (getting students into an Aussie family environment) and provide pre-departure support for family members letting them become involved in the students orientation process. In addition universities could extend pastoral support to students, to avoid the negative perception that counselling or therapy has within the Latin American culture. While international education professionals would like to be mum, they can't, but allowing for the provision of additional support when family isn't around would soften the blow.

In conclusion there is not one program that international education professionals must offer in order to support the Latin American student cohort. Instead a simple understanding of what makes Latinos culturally different will

allow for adjustment of already operating programs to support the students to integrate into Australian culture and academia. This understanding will allow for Australian education to gain a reputation of respect and knowledge that will assist with promotion and success into the future.

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## Appendix One – Interview Guide

### Interview Guide

1. What are you currently studying / What studies have you completed?
2. How long will you/did you spend in Australia studying?
3. Did you have any pre-conceived notions of what studying and living in Australia would be like?
4. Did you receive any pre-departure advice from your current/past institution?
5. What orientation did you receive when you first arrived at your institution?
6. Did you feel supported when you first arrived on campus?
7. As your stay continued, did you feel supported by your institution?
  - a. Please expand
8. I am going to list support services commonly available to international students on Australian University campuses. Please say yes if you have used these services in your time at your University:

Peer Mentors/ Buddies:	Yes	No
International Clubs and Societies	Yes	No
Academic Support/Advice centre	Yes	No
International Student Advisor	Yes	No
Pastoral Support	Yes	No
Religious Services	Yes	No
International student Counsellor	Yes	No

- a. Are there any services that you have used that I missed in the above advice?
- b. Would you like to comment on any of the above services, for example your experience, positive or negative etc...

9. When you first arrived into Australia, what challenged you culturally?

a. How did you deal with these challenges?

10. Socially, did you feel automatically accepted into Australian Society?

a. Please Explain...

10. Please comment on the below stereotypes of Latino culture, and how you feel they explain you as a Latino: [Take time to explain the cultural values if confusion arises]

Time Orientation

Personalismo (sense of self-worth)

Simpatía (sensitivity)

Religion

Respecto (respect or dignity)

Power distance (hierarchy)

Collectivism

Familiarity

11. Do you have any questions?

Thanks so much for your time...