

Building community: The Latin American student experience

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When facing the challenges of relocating to a new environment, international students tend to seek out for familiarity, which may bring comfort and assist them in going through the transition into a tertiary education institution in Australia, making it a smoother process. Familiar elements might include typical food, venues where there is an influence of their own cultural background and especially, people who share their mother tongue and traditions.

In light of this, international students from China and the South East Asian region, who undertake studies in Australian tertiary education institutions, are a privileged cohort. Due to the geographic proximity and the wide spread of information about Australian education, as well as the strong marketing and recruitment strategies used by Australian education providers, the population of international students from these geographic areas continues to show a steady growth rate in Australia.

In the other end of the scale, there are other minority groups from more geographically and culturally distant countries, which are represented in very small numbers in Australian education providers. This is the case of Latin American students. Although Brazil and Mexico have acquired in the past few years a stronger presence in the Australian international education market, the number of Latin American students enrolled in the University and VET sector is still minimal in comparison with those from China and the South East Asian region.

From orientation to graduation, interactions between fellow Chinese and South East Asian students happen almost mechanically. However, for Latin American students, finding compatriots is a more complex task, not only because of their very small representation, but because of the different attitudes in which this cohort approaches social interactions with peers from similar cultural backgrounds.

From the point of view of a former international student from Colombia, currently working in the role of international student adviser at Monash University, I will present Latin American international students' views on their student experience and the different factors which influence their involvement in campus based activities compared to off-campus community based events. Strategies to develop networks between Hispanic background students as well as with the increasing number of Australian and other international students, who are genuinely interested in learning about Latin American culture, will also be presented.