

Is It a Match Made in Heaven between the International Students and local Communities?

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Abstract

This paper explores aspects of intercultural interaction and connecting into the community. Through his personal experience and community work, the author highlights the different platform of needs and expectations for intercultural interaction.

He took a case study of Chinese speaking students living in Rockhampton and their interaction with local Chinese Community. The research established empirically that international students have different concerns, focus and expectations for their studying in Australia whilst the local Community is keen to help and offered various social activities that failed to attract or sustain interests from students. The author has identified the different needs of these two groups and encouraged them to meet on mutual ground. The research proved there is no solid ground for sustained interest and interaction if needs are not met. Typical needs for local community includes fresh knowledge and first hand cultural experience, linguistic and cultural support, a balance of native language and English, a representation and contribution of that native culture in local community; Meanwhile international students prioritize English proficiency, study skills, accommodation, employment, migration, emotional needs, etc.

The research recommends people promoting intercultural interaction and connection should do analysis on needs from both parties and facilitate a mutual ground that such needs are substantially met so that a fruitful interaction can be achieved and sustained.

Keywords: Intercultural interaction, need analysis, sustained interest in cultural interaction

Introduction

Regional universities have attracted many international students due to the lower costs of living, better safety records, more interaction with local mainstream culture and less distraction from studies (Catherine Llewellyn-Smith, 2008; Forbes & Hamilton, 2004;

Shanka, Quintal, & Taylor, 2006). The geographic isolation and lack of home country cultural activities can be detrimental to student's emotional wellbeing (Jarrahi, 2004; Krause, 2005), thus intercultural interaction and connecting into the community play a more important role in the students academic achievement and general satisfaction (Jones, Laufgraben, & Morris, 2006; Peterson, Hayhoe, & Lu, 2001; Wehrly, 1986). Is It a Match Made in Heaven between the International Students and local Communities? Or just another bad Karma?

The Social Environment

Rockhampton is a regional city in Central Queensland, with a population of 100,000 in surrounding suburbs and coastal area. CQ University Australia is headquartered here, with a few international campuses in three largest cities in Australia and the Gold Coast. Chinese migrants have settled in this area more than 120 years with the Gold Rush. Today there are about 80 students and scholars living around the University and about 200 migrants who have either re-migrated from South East Asia or descended from early migrant families. This has provided a new dynamic for both the established migrants and newly arrived students from "homeland".

Major Chinese cultural groups in Rockhampton include:

1. Rockhampton & District Chinese Association (RCA);
2. Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSA);
3. Friends of Taiwan (FOT); and
4. Cathay Culture Promoters (CCP) that is producing Rocky Chinese Radio Show and an E- Newsletter.

The Relationship between these groups:

Despite of the lack of hostility, there are much interaction between CSA and FOT as members coming from two different sides of the Taiwan Straits. Both receive a modest fund for activities from respective government agencies i.e., Brisbane Consul-General Office of China and Taipei Economic Office. RCA is somehow content with its long history and social standing as their members are perceived as top of the cream professionals and well established local migrant dynasties. Leaving CCP acting as a bridge between these groups as

two main members come from each side of Taiwan Straits, and are quite keen to unify the subgroups of Chinese heritage.

After some informal discussions and interviews with the movers and shakers of each group, the researcher established empirically that international students have different concerns, focus and expectations for their studying in Australia whilst the local Community is keen to help and offered various social activities that failed to attract or sustain interests from students.

Typical needs for local community includes fresh knowledge and first hand cultural experience, linguistic and cultural support, a balance of native language and English, a representation and contribution of that native culture in local community. Meanwhile international students prioritize English proficiency, study skills, accommodation, employment, migration, emotional needs, etc. A major cultural group such as Chinese community is often experiencing lack of coordination as they are bound to have groups divided by regions they come from and dialects they use and social status and length of residency in Australia, etc. These divisions diluted the cultural appeal and international students often feel bedazzled by the multiplicity of choices and decide to stay within its own subculture.

The following cases will illustrate the relationship between a student's capacity and participation in intercultural interaction and his or her academic achievement and quality of study experience.

Method

A case study of Chinese speaking students living in Rockhampton and their interaction with local Chinese Community is undertaken. Here are three cases:

Case 1: Tania

She is from China, enjoying her tight network amongst Chinese students, spent much time and money on playing online games. She did not interact with local community, went out

occasionally with fellow students from China. To supplement her income, she later worked in a local Noodle Box shop.

She failed her studies and eventually returned to China without completing her study or achieving her goal for coming to Australia.

Case 2: Tony

He is active in the community, participating in both Chinese community and local groups. Through his volunteer and paid work, he has improved his English enormously and lived with an Aussie host family. He did extremely well at TAFE, then articulated to a Master degree program before he was awarded Bachelor's degree. That meant he saved 3 years of his lifetime to get his Master qualification compared with his peers in China. Later he secured a well-paid job through the same network that has helped him to interact and achieve what he set out to accomplish at the beginning of his study. As a result, he has been granted permanent residency within weeks of securing the full time professional job. He is now working in a professional service and has established himself well in the adopted country.

Case 3: Tom

He came from Taiwan from an early age, and struggled through his studies. Neither his English nor Chinese is up to the professional standard. He eventually graduated with a below average Arts degree, without much job prospects or solid professional skills as his language skills are not so strong despite of years of studying in Australia.

When Tony (Case 2) came to study in the same University, Tom joined Tony and participated with community activities. Finally, Tom managed to finish his degree, and returned to Taiwan. He achieved the minimal goal of graduating with a degree. He would experience counter- cultural shock when he re-settles in his hometown.

Results

The author has identified the different needs of these two groups and encourages them to meet on mutual ground. The research established empirically that international students have different concerns, focus and expectations for their studying in Australia whilst the local Community is keen to help and offered various social activities that failed to attract or

sustain interests from students. The author has identifies the different needs of these two groups and encourage them to meet on mutual ground.

Conclusion

The research proved there is no solid ground for sustained interest and interaction between Chinese speaking students and local community if needs are not met. The research recommends people promoting intercultural interaction and connection should do needs analysis from both camps and facilitate a mutual ground on which such needs are substantially met so that a perfect match is achieved and fruitful interaction can be initiated and sustained.

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