

Cultural Values and Cultural Issues in Mixed Culture International Student Accommodation Arrangements

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Abstract

This study looks at five types of accommodation arrangements for international students, four in Australia and one in England. Problems and issues that occur in them and positive outcomes that arise are discussed both in a general way and in relation to the five Cultural Value dimensions of Hofstede. While the sample is small, there is evidence that the degree of intimacy and the type of cultural mix within such accommodation arrangements can affect the well-being of the students living there and thus their ability to achieve the goals they have in studying overseas. Where there is a cultural mismatch combined with a high degree of intimacy in living, an unhappy outcome and an increase in negative perceptions of people from some other countries can result.

Keywords

International students, accommodation, cultural values, Hofstede

Introduction

There are many variables that can affect the experience that an international student has when studying overseas and the academic outcomes of that study. Type of accommodation and the experiences that they have within that accommodation is one of the most important of these variables. Unhappiness with accommodation arrangements, the inability to find a quiet place to study, lack of sleep and stress caused by friction with those sharing the accommodation can all seriously reduce a student's ability to study well and get the outcomes that they and others desire from their studies.

International students vary greatly in their age, maturity, ethnic and cultural backgrounds and the length of time that they spend studying in Australia so that no one form of accommodation can be said to be best for all students. Mixed culture accommodation arrangements are sometimes suggested as a way in which international students can mix more with Australians and learn more about Australian culture. To what degree is this true and to what degree does placing people from widely differing cultures in the close proximity of living together merely create points of friction and distress and reinforce stereotypes? This paper looks at examples of five types of accommodation for international students of varying degrees of intimacy and varying cultural mixes, the problems and issues experienced within them, and the positive outcomes experienced there.

Types of Accommodation

Information about various types of accommodation and the issues and problems and positive experiences within them was found through a series of structured interviews. For a student apartment block, a student hostel and a university college, an Australian in an appropriate administrative position was interviewed. For a homestay arrangement, I spoke to the Australian homestay host and the final interview was with an Australian postgraduate student who had returned from studies in England where she lived in a shared flat organised by the university for international students.

Level of Intimacy

Table 1 shows the 5 types of accommodation and some variables that affect the level of intimacy within them. All of these accommodation arrangements gave their students their own bedroom. Private bathroom facilities were provided in the apartments in Australia and England, with the other 3 types of accommodation involving shared bathrooms. The university college and the homestay arrangement provided meals and the other 3 types of accommodation involved self-catering and a shared kitchen. The number of international students accommodated at any one time ranged from 90 (university college) to 2 (homestay). Only the university college involved living in close contact with Australian students while the homestay arrangement involved the two students living in close contact with the homestay host.

Table 1. Variables Affecting Level of Intimacy

	Type of Accommodation	Bathroom	Kitchen or cooking	Number of students
1. Student Apartment Block	Apartments – studio, 1 bedroom, 2 bedrooms	Own	Own kitchen/self-catering	400 over 11 years – 35 - 40 at any one time
2. Student Hostel	Rooming House (own bedroom)	Shared	Shared kitchen	60 – 65 students in 5 locations
3. University College	Own bedroom	Shared	Meals provided	90 international students among 293 resident student (29%)
4. Homestay	Own bedroom	Shared	Meals provided	2 at a time 50 over the years
5. Shared University Apartment for International Students (England)	Own bedroom	Ensuite bathrooms	Shared kitchen	4 in 1 flat. 12 in whole house i.e. 3 flats

Mix of students and level of care

Table 2 shows some factors that could affect the level of cultural dissonance in an accommodation arrangement and activities that could facilitate student well-being and cultural integration. The Australian student apartment block and the student hotel catered mainly to students from South East Asia and China. The homestay host has only provided accommodation for students from various parts of Asia. The interviewees from these three types of accommodation drew distinctions between students from various parts of Asia. The student hostel caters mainly to students from Indonesia and finds that this works well and that there is a very happy and supportive atmosphere in the hostel. They did not deliberately seek to target this group but believe that the students from other Asian countries were not happy with their arrangement of shared bathrooms and, when the Indonesians were so happy there, they passed the word onto others.

The university college has a greater variety of international students but those from non-Asian countries were mainly in short-term programs. It should be noted here that international students living in the college instigated themselves the formation of an International Student Committee to provide orientation and other activities because of problems that they saw existing in the college in relation to international students.

The Australian postgraduate student studying in England was placed by the university in a most unfortunate share arrangement which coloured her experience of international education in a very negative way. In the end, she ate in her room to avoid two of her flatmates. She now believes that the one of these people is a good person but says it was difficult to live in close contact with him because of strong cultural factors. Her experience with the other person has left her with only negative things to say about him and any stereotypes she had previously held about people from this country completely reinforced.

The four Australian accommodation arrangements attempted to provide communal activities to varying degrees and there were strong indications that all of them provide a high level of pastoral care. The student hostel believed that part-time work provided a means by which the students has contact with Australians and the wider community.

Table 2. Variables Indicating Cultural Mix and Level of Care

	Person interviewed	Mix of students	Communal activities provided	Pastoral oversight given
1. Student Apartment Block	Manager	Varied over the years. 2001 30% Indonesia 20% Singapore 20% Malaysia Now more from China, India & Thailand	Bowling Rock climbing Going to the football Picnic in Botanic Gardens	YES Self – instigated Not company policy
2. Student Hostel	Manager	Mainly Asian, particularly Indonesian. Some Chinese. A few others from Asia & Europe.	Some communal activities organized. Also some students work in the wider community e.g. at McDonalds	YES But few problems because the students who might cause problems don't come because of shared bathrooms
3. University College	Dean of students & Assistant Dean	Long term from China, Malaysia & Singapore Short term from NZ, Japan, USA, UK & France	College sporting and cultural activities	YES Formal mentoring system in place
4. Homestay	Female homestay host	India, Japan, Korea & China Nearly all short term. A few choose to stay longer	Eat and watch TV together. Some are included in some of her other activities	YES She looks after them, cooking for them & doing their washing, and waits on them e.g. driving them to school and she provides them with advice
5. Shared University Flat for International Students (England)	Australian female graduate student in her mid-30's	In her flat. Canadian (F), Indian (M) & Iranian (M) Others in house from Canada, America, China, Africa & France	Only general orientation activities	She did not feel like there was. A totally administrative approach to things.

Cross-cultural training and staffing

Table 3 looks at the provision of the cross-cultural training for both students and staff and at staffing policies that could assist in providing cultural harmony and integration. No significant cross-cultural training was provided for either the students or the staff of the particular examples of the types of accommodation investigated in this study. Training sessions about practical matters seem to have been provided in orientation programs or prior to the students leaving their home countries but none of the interviewees were aware of any cross-cultural elements to this training. E, the Australian postgraduate in England, was particularly critical of the information that she and her fellow residents were given in their orientation session. She believes that information given about sexual matters may have contributed to unfortunate events that occurred later in the block where she lived and involving one of her flatmates.

Where accommodation providers employed international students, past and present, and/or other Asians as members of their staff they believed that this contributed strongly to cultural understanding and their ability to deal with difficult situations that arose.

Table 3. Cross-cultural Training and Staffing

	Cross-cultural training for students	Cross-cultural training for staff	Type of staff employed
1. Student Apartment Block	Orientation session on practical matters e.g. fire system but not on cultural matters	NO	Employed a lot of Asians
2. Student Hostel	None mentioned	NO	Ex-residents for whom the managers have great respect
3. University College	Orientation session provided by the International Student Committee (formed as a student initiative – looks at cultural issues, initial challenges & language challenges	Nothing specific except Working with Asian names. Rely on advice from staff who come from another culture	Staff are not employed with a special eye to international students but some staff are ex-students with an international background
4. Homestay	The students seemed to have been well briefed in their home countries & when they arrive about what is expected of them & practical issues	NO She would like to meet with other homestay hosts and share with them.	-
5. Shared University Apartment for International Students (England)	Orientation program for international students was flawed. Non cross-cultural training. Information about STD's, doctors & gentlemen's clubs but nothing about "No means no"	It was not obvious to her that there had been any.	-

Problems and Positive Outcomes

General problems and positive outcomes

Table 4 shows the general problems experienced in these accommodation arrangements and the positive outcomes arising from these arrangements that were reported. The four Australian accommodation arrangements reported having very few problems and those that they did have were mainly of a practical nature and could have been reported just as well in relation to Australian young people. Rooms that have not been cleaned, late payments, relationship problems and mental illness occur also with Australian young people. Food and the use of water are problems that have a cultural overlay. That bullying between students occurs within these environments is a matter for concern. Some differences among students from different countries were noted by the interviewees.

E reported problems of two kinds. The difficulty in finding supermarkets that stocked food that met her special dietary requirements and the lack of space arose directly from the practices and policies of the university. The lack of space aggravated the other, more cultural, issues in relation to the students she lived with. The food and money, cleanliness and privacy issues were all culturally based and interpersonal relationships and communication within the flat were made very difficult by an underlying cultural mismatch. E had already experienced living in a share house in Australian and she left that her overseas education experience was worthwhile but, largely because of the difficulties she experienced in her accommodation, she said, "I am glad I didn't do it when I was 18".

Where students were in long-term study, all those interviewed talked under the category of positive outcomes of the relationships that were developed and have lasted. The university college talked of the contribution that international

students can make with their less insular perspective. Several interviewees mentioned the good feeling they had from being able to help these students.

Table 4. General Problems and Positive Outcomes

	Problems	Positives
1. Student Accommodation Block	a. problems with payments b. boyfriend/girlfriend problems c. mental illness d. some apartments very dirty <i>These problems are spread across students from all countries</i>	a. students who return and tell of their successes b. it is good to be able to provide care for these students. <i>No differences across countries</i>
2. Student Hostel	Very few problems. A very small amount of pilfering & one case of bullying (over a 10 year period) <i>Have found Indonesians (majority there) good. Some problems with Chinese boys. The few Australians they had were the worst.</i>	a. pleasant atmosphere b. students are nice to be with, polite & keen to learn
3. University College	a. Food is one of the biggest points of dissonance. b. A complaint from an Indian student being bullied by another student.	a. International students have a better sense of the world – not as insular as Australian students b. Quite a number of Australian students have been invited to go on visits to Malaysia and Thailand c. Many from both long term & SAE come back to visit
4. Homestay	Not a lot of problems but a. Use of water, number of showers, sneaking a shower at 2 am b. Keeping there light on in the light, security of money, watches, phones & computers <i>These issues arose particularly with students from China</i>	a. Company b. Enjoyment of seeing them “enjoying my country” c. Sense of helping <i>Japanese girls are delightful</i>
5. Shared University Apartment for International Students (England)	a. Size of accommodation b. Trouble finding supermarkets c. Cultural difference within the flat. A Muslim male & a high cast Hindu male with an independent feminist Australian women d. money & food e. level of cleanliness f. privacy & personal space	She developed a good relationship with American, Canadian & Russian students & she has kept in contact with them

Hofstede’s Value Dimensions

Geert Hofstede (2005) identified four basic Cultural Value Dimensions in the 1970’s and he and other colleagues around the world have refined the definitions of these values and retested for them across many cultures throughout the world in the intervening years. His four original value dimensions are

Power Distance - the different solutions to the basic problem of human inequality

Individualism vs Collectivism - the integration of individuals into primary groups

Masculinity vs Femininity - the division of emotional roles between men and women

Uncertainty avoidance - the level of stress in a society in the face of uncertainty

A fifth dimension was later added following work by Michael Bond in Asia. It is *Long Term vs Short Term Orientation*.

The scores and rankings in Table 5 are taken from *Culture and Organisations: Software of the Mind* (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). For the first four Cultural Value Dimensions, scores have been obtained for 74 countries and, for the fifth value dimension, scores have been obtained from 39 countries. These scores and rankings give an indication of how people from various countries, considered as a whole group and not as individuals, vary in relation to these cultural value dimensions

Table 4. General Problems and Positive Outcomes

Country	Power Distance	Individualist/ Collectivist	Masculinity/ Femininity	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long-term/ Short-term Orientation
Australia	36 62/74	90 2/74	61 20/74	51 56-56/74	31 25-27/39
China	80 12-14/74	23 55/74	66 11-13/74	30 68-69/74	118 1/39
Indonesia	78 15-16/74	14 68-69/74	46 41-42/74	48 60-61/74	NA
Malaysia	104 1-2/74	26 52/74	50 34-36/74	36 65/74	NA
Japan	54 49-50/74	46 33-35/74	95 2/74	92 11-13/74	80 4-5/39
India	77 17-18/74	48 31/74	56 28-29/74	36 65/74	61 8/39
Iran	58 43-44/74	41 36/74	43 47-50/74	59 48-49/74	NA

The interviewees were asked to consider the problems and the positive outcomes that they had experienced in their accommodation arrangements in relation to the Cultural Value Dimensions of Hofstede. Their responses are summarized in Tables 5 and 6.

With regard to the Power Distance dimension, several respondents mentioned the greater respect given to them by students from various parts of Asia compared with those from the USA (40 57-59/74) and Europe. This corresponds to the high Power Distance scores for Asian countries, particularly Malaysia, China, Indonesia and India. The university college suggested that level of respect sometimes prevented these students from raising issues when they should have. E felt that both men (from Iran and India) acted inappropriately towards her by assuming that they had superior rights and knowledge to her and that they should advise and correct her. They appeared to ignore what she had to say both about practical matters (a roster for taking out the rubbish) and about how communication should take place between them.

Although there are large differences in the area of the Individualist/Collectivist dimension, with Australia having a very high score and most of the countries from Asia having much lower scores, the interviewees only gave single examples in this area that referred to pastoral matters. The university college made an interesting comment about the perspective of some of the Asian students about some Australian males and the homestay host commented on what she saw as the surprising tearfulness of some girls from Japan, a country which scores very high on the Masculinity/Femininity dimension, when they were leaving. E commented on inappropriate perceptions of women by both the men with whom she shared the flat.

With regard to Uncertainty Avoidance, the homestay host felt that she was the one who wanted to avoid uncertainty rather the students. This did not seem to be any area where problems had occurred to any great degree and any differences in what might have been expected point to the variety that exists within one culture.

Table 5. Hofstede's Cultural

Values and Problems

	Power Distance	Individual/Collectivist	Masculine/Feminine	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long-term/Short-term Orientation
1. Student Apartment Block	Some Americans disrespectful of authority	Some religious clubs too demanding of student's time	None mentioned	None Mentioned	Those with short term goals are less confident
2. Student Hostel	Europeans complain more & are more demanding than Asians	Has found the Chinese students very private	Can't comment on differences because mainly have female students	None mentioned	None Mentioned
3. University College	Asian students don't always raise things that are worrying them e.g. the drink culture (cf indigenous students)	Difficult for those from a Collectivist culture (e.g. a Chinese girl) if they feel that they don't fit in	Some male students from Asia sometimes think that the Australian male staff are not manly enough	Some Asian students are not happy if they arrive and the room is not ready	None mentioned
4. Homestay	Indonesian students are more independent	No problems mentioned	A lot of the girls cry when they finish up & say that they will come back but they don't	She likes to know what they are doing so she can dinner but some don't let her know until 6.00 pm.	One Indonesian student was constantly studying so she did not fit in well
5. Shared University Apartment for International Students (England)	Both the men both treated her in ways that she felt were inappropriate. Iranian questioned her in a rude way about her food shopping & the cost of her haircut. The Indian was always right.	She felt that the Iranian was trying to take the role of a male protector of her. The Indian was very self-focused.	The Iranian man had very clear ideas about women. "You don't dress like a western woman" The Indian felt that could force himself upon a girl she was American.	The Iranian had very high UA. He had to know & know exactly. Very dogmatic about pray times and reading labels to check for alcohol. He was always anxious about money and concerned that America would invade Iran.	Both men had long-term goals. The Iranian to return to Iran & help people there. The Indian to get permanent residency (study was not his purpose so he was angry not guilty when he was caught cheating).

The comments across all dimensions were very positive. The Power Distance difference was seen as creating respectful well-behaved students; there was strong evidence that those from collectivist culture do look after each other well; and a long term orientation resulted in hard-working students.

Table 6. Hofstede's Cultural Values Dimensions and Positive Outcomes

	Power Distance	Individual/Collectivist	Masculine/Feminine	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long-term/Short-term Orientation
1. Student Apartment Block	Chinese students are very respectful of authority	Cross-national study groups	None mentioned	None mentioned	Those with long term goals are more confident
2. Student Hostel	The Asian students are very respectful	Strong communal feeling among Indonesian students	None mentioned	None mentioned	Students are smart and determined
3. University College	S.E.Asian students are very respectful	None mentioned	None mentioned	None mentioned	None mentioned
4. Homestay	Japanese students are gentle, polite & well mannered	Students look after each other and introduce them to established groups outside the home	None mentioned	She is flexible and generally finds away around a situation e.g. leaving the food for the weekend in the refrigerator	None mentioned
5. Shared University Apartment for International Students (England)	None mentioned	None mentioned	None mentioned	None mentioned	None mentioned

Further comments on E's situation

E also experienced difficulties in her academic situation. These difficulties she felt were also due to cultural value differences. Although Hofstede indicates that Great Britain has a score of 35 on Power Distance which is almost exactly equal to that of Australia, she felt that those she dealt with there were so bound by an in-built hierarchy that they could not think outside of the way they did things. It took her three trips to get a student rail pass because she was international student. In her classes she was made to feel unwelcome because she was not a local; people questioned why she wanted to study her particular subject; and she felt that assessment was very subjective and biased by this collectivist approach. This strong insider/outsider attitude again contradicts Hofstede's ranking of Great Britain as the third most Individualist country in the world. This may be the result of regional differences. E also felt that the hierarchical nature of the academic and surrounding environment in which she was living fed into the difficulties she was experiencing in her accommodation as a result of the cultural mismatch there.

Limitations of This Study

This research has been very limited in nature. The sample was very small and not very representative. All those associated with accommodation arrangements in Australia showed themselves to be very good people with a good knowledge of their students and a genuine concern for them. This cannot always be said to be the case. Similarly E's experience in England is only one case and cannot be said to represent all international student accommodation in England or all shared house situations organized in Australia. The study has shown, however, that the degree of intimacy and the mix of cultures can affect the happiness and well-being of those involved. E was subjected to a high

degree on intimacy and a strong cultural mismatch. Further studies in this area could explore further the effects of both of these dimensions and their interaction on the well being of the students involved, their ability to study as they wish and achieve their goals and their interactions with the wider Australian community.

Conclusion

Just as there is a wider variety within international students and a wider variety within the accommodation arrangement that can be made for them, there is a variety in the degree to which international students feel safe and happy within their accommodation and thus concentrate on working towards the goals associated with their time of study in an overseas country. Some arrangements work very well but in others there are issues that arise from the closeness with which students from different cultures must mix and whether the cultures from which these students come are similar in their cultural values or whether considerable differences occur. Care needs to be taken in the way that students from different culture are mixed by their accommodation providers. Cross-cultural training for both the incoming students and the Australians who will live and work with them could help increase understanding between students from different cultures, reduce problems that may occur and the stress associated with this, and increase the possibility of international students being able to achieve their goals of study, friendship across cultures and increased knowledge of other cultures.

A final word from E. "Give your international students decent accommodation because they are going to go home and talk about it."

References

Hofstede, G & Hofstede, G.J., 2005. *Cultures and Organisations: Software of the Mind*. McGraw-Hill

I wish to thank sincerely those who agreed to be interviewed in this study and who spoke so frankly and perceptively about the topic.

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