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Social Inclusion and International Students

Background

Australia's international student population has increased exponentially. In the five years between 2004 and 2009, the Australian Education International (AEI) published data that reflected some 547,663 enrolments in July 2009 from 286,668 enrolments in July 2004 – an average increase of 38% per year. Amongst the education streams, the vocational training (VET) sector has seen the most dramatic increase in numbers.¹

Recent media attention has however brought heightened publicity to the disconcerting state of the 'international student experience'. This, noted in photographs from glossy brochures in the offices of various overseas education agents with images of students of varied nationalities and ethnicities cheerfully engaged in seemingly thoughtful conversations on green lawns set against the magnificent backdrop of Australia's historic architecture and cultural heritage, is not often the experience of most international students, with very few even establishing meaningful relationships with their local peers and even fewer being guests into the homes of a local student.

In an opinion expressed by an international student,

'We are like guests in Australia – except we forever remain visitors and outsiders for the three, plus, years that we remain studying here.'

As an emerging community with rising cultural and economic significance in Australia, it is important and in the interest for both the Australian community and international students that they engage well with Australia's multicultural fabric.

Social Inclusion

Defined

In addressing the dichotomy of social inclusion and exclusion in Europe, Silver and Miller wrote a seminal paper that stated 'social exclusion [as the inverse of inclusion, to be] a relational process of declining participation, solidarity and access.'² Outcomes of successful social inclusion are thus demonstrated by an increase in all-of-community participation, meaningful engagement, and appropriate access to services and facilities. The concept is provided a very comprehensive examination in the Australian Government Research paper series on Social Inclusion: The Origins, Meaning, Definition and Economic Implications of the Concept Social Inclusion/Exclusion.³



International students – the problems with exclusion

Undoubtedly, international students are to a certain extent ‘visitors’ to Australia. However, as compared to tourists and persons with short-stay business agendas, international students will arrive and remain in Australia over an extended period of time, and expect to (or invariably are also expected to) settle in and meaningfully engage with their local peers. Meaningful social engagement also promotes academic learning and contributes to the development of a well-rounded individual.

Advocating for International Students in a Socially Inclusive Community

An extended focus has been placed on encouraging international students to engage in meaningful activities with their local peers or to introduce incentives to increase the level of participation. However this focus on increasing participation, and the programs or projects developed to address this issue, often suggest that international students do not adequately participate or engage with the wider Australian community.

What is often overlooked, however, is that international students *do* engage with the local community – albeit passively. With social inclusivity, addressing this focus with the appropriate scope is crucial as traditional principles of social inclusion propose that disadvantaged groups are denied or are faced with barriers that prevent them from fully participating in the community. International students, on the other hand, face similar issues as disadvantaged groups, but these issues of access lie with the fact that international students engage the wider community *passively*, with little desire or incentive to actively engage.

For example:

Programs that do not adequately promote active engagement:

- Brochures and seminars designed to inform international students of the availability of services and facilities
- Organising a ‘city tour’ as part of an orientation program for new international students
- Volunteer program for international students

In contrast and in the respective order, programs promoting active engagement:

- Addressing barriers that discourage international students from accessing services and facilities
- Assigning mentors to new international students
- Volunteer program for all students that encourages group mixes

By inadequately recognising the passive engagement of international students the opportunity for gaps in the scope of programs aimed at addressing issues of social inclusion may be created.



Passive engagement

International students, ultimately are foreigners in Australia and to varying degrees are unused or alien to the Australian culture they will from arrival begin to, at the very least, passively engage. Passive engagement entails mundane tasks, such as buying groceries from the market and buying a tram ticket from a ticket counter, to less mundane but passive activities such as attending lectures or participating in low levels of social dialogue during tutorials.

‘I never made friends with my classmates. We were ‘hi and bye’ friends, maybe, and we spoke during lessons, but once we left the classroom, or if we met on the street – we were strangers again.’

In passive engagement, international students choose to engage with their environment by listening and observing, and then, analysing and reflecting on what they have heard and seen.

Active engagement

In contrast, with active engagement, international students engage in activities that allow them to directly interact with their local peers and the wider local community. This will create opportunities for an immediate immersion into the local culture.

Active engagement is a process of direct interaction through collaboration, receiving immediate feedback, being able to apply this feedback, and making a personal contribution to the interaction.

The concept of active engagement is indirectly derived from Kearsley and Shneiderman’s ‘engagement theory’ in academic learning, which is based on the core principles of ‘relate’, ‘create’ and ‘donate’. Engagement theory states that learning is supported by the process of relating to others, creating purposeful activities and donating value to others, collaboratively creating meaningful references to subject material.⁴

An example of active engagement is a recent AFIS and Scouts event that took international students out to the bush for a two-day camp. International students were teamed up with local guides and a local bushwalking expert who taught basic safety and essential bush survival skills over the three day program (one additional day of instruction conducted indoors). Enabled with these essential camping skills and a sense of confidence and enthusiasm towards the outdoors, students were encouraged at the end of the program to join other camping enthusiasts in their schools.

Through this simple receive-learn-contribute exchange, international students actively engaging with local communities also promote successful cultural exchanges that weave into the multicultural fabric of Australia.

Factors that contribute to Passive Engagement

The following is a non-comprehensive list of factors that may result in international students not actively engaging with the local communities. This list is intended to provide a concept of how circumstances that lead to passive engagement may be avoided and addressed in the design of future programs and projects.



External factors – environmental and institutional

The environment and wider community can influence international students to shy away from actively engagement or are prevented from actively engaging with their local communities.

Equal opportunity

There are several barriers that exist and prevent this from being realised for an international student – financial barriers (e.g., cost of fees for courses, and transport, services that are subsidised to local students), cultural barriers (e.g., differences and unfamiliarity to language and customs), and legislative barriers (e.g., requirements to maintain visa, legal definitions of an international student).

These barriers contribute to the sense of ‘foreignness’ that some international students feel. In fact some international students graduate after five years of study in Australia and comment of the clear delineation between themselves and their local peers. They highlight issues ranging from the lack of firsthand knowledge of customs and values, to the inability to sometimes communicate with service providers because of the stereotypes that have been labelled onto international students (e.g., newly arrived and gullible).

Legislative and cultural barriers that define international students as ‘temporary migrants’ also entrench barriers to providing them with an equal level of opportunity in gaining access to employment, concessions, and services. For example:

- A higher degree of local knowledge and the ability to better fit into a business with an ‘Australian working culture’ may allow an Australian or a long-standing resident of Australia to be a preferred employee as compared to an international student with little or no Australian work experience.
- There is public opinion that concessions to publicly-funded services, and access to publicly-funded scholarships and grants, are a privilege of citizenship and permanent residency that international students, as temporary migrants – despite some engaging in study that will have them residing in Australia for several years – should not be entitled to receive.

Restrictive environments

- Student housing
Apartments ‘designed’ for international students contribute to passive engagement by being extremely siloed and bordering the occupant up within his or her own space. Whilst shared housing with local students is available as an option, for those who can afford it, student apartments are marketed overseas as being safer, purpose-built, and ‘a stone’s throw away’ from educational institutions and their facilities. International students (and their financial sponsors) will have no indication of the actual size and living space of these apartments until arrival.
- Classrooms and programs for international students
Courses that enrol a disproportionate number of international students may risk providing little to no active engagement with the local communities. In addition, volunteer programs



targeted only at international students often do not adequately expose international students to a level of active engagement with local communities.

Internal factors – personal and attitudinal

Not all factors are external and influenced by the wider community – international students also contribute to their own passive engagement.

Safety concerns

International students, often under the advice of their parents or guardians overseas, are constantly encouraged and reminded to ‘stay safe in the foreign land’. Unfamiliarity may lead to a need to exhibit caution towards the external environment.

Some international students have built, or are provided with the perception that Australia is free from crime, and on occasions engage in behaviour that identifies them as soft targets for crime.

‘I used to buy myself supper from the [Melbourne] CBD at 3 [a.m.] in the morning during the [examination preparations] period, walking along Flinders Street alone with wallet in hand and iPod in my ears, my hood [sic – jacket] pulled over [my head] to keep myself warm. I didn’t realise until I made friends with some local students how dangerous that actually was, and how easy it might have been for someone to sneak up, and attack me from behind.’

Concerns over safety can lead to international students setting boundaries physically and socially. Some feel safer forming cliques consisting of members of a familiar nationality or culture, limiting the possibilities of a broader spectrum of cultural interaction.

The recent reports of assaults and ‘racist behaviour’ towards international students can also reinforce concerns over safety. Some reports have been criticised as being sensationalist and contrary to the positive interest of international students, potentially negating efforts to actively engage international students.

Fear of getting lost

International students can be fearful of getting lost, literally and metaphorically – they can find it challenging to physically find their way to landmarks and to navigating amongst services, including services designed to support them. In some cultures seeking help from a stranger may be uncommon or discouraged, precluding the international student from going beyond his or her established boundaries and ‘safe zones’ to seek advice or direction.

Over focus on academic activity

At one end of the equilibrium, some international students carry with them to Australia a massive burden of responsibility. Yet, more commonly, students are held responsible by their parents and guardians to achieve good grades. The high course fees and high cost of living are often, at the very least initially, borne by the financial sponsors of these students, in most cases their parents or guardians. Consequently, international students can feel pressured to maintain an overbearing focus on academic study and adopt strict study regimes.



Conversely, an inability to socialise and establish meaningful relationships with local peers can also result in overzealous academic study behaviour and consequently leads them to adopt lifestyles that are un conducive for active engagement.

International students can be nonchalant about their passive engagement

Passive engagement may also be attributed to students themselves. Some students do not regard actively engaging with the wider local community as a priority during their stay in Australia. Others still are not actually aware that they are not actively engaging, or do not realise the difference between active and passive engagement.

'I thought by attending classes and by listening to the stories told by my tutors and classmates [during tutorials] I was [participating] in [the Australian culture]. It only struck me when I was back home and finding employment that I realised I have actually not personally gained a [cultural] experience of Australia or Australians at all.'

Loss of parental supervision and direction

The international student demographic includes those of a relatively young age or those who may have never lived away from their parents, and may become overwhelmed by the sudden access to freedom from parental supervision. However, when such supervision and guidance is lost some international students may retreat from social behaviour which allows them to feel safer. Under these circumstances, unless they are actively approached and guided, they will remain passive towards the external environment.

Unfamiliarity to cultural language devices

International students may also be unfamiliar with cultural language devices such as slangs and hence, for example, have difficulty capturing the humour in a typical Australian joke. This may be due to language and cultural barriers, and lead to an understanding that is divergent from its original meaning or (harmless) intention.

Cultural and language nuances, missed connotations may lead to awkwardness, confusion and embarrassing situations.

'I didn't realise that Australians have a completely different understanding of the term 'porridge'. In most Asian countries, 'porridge' is a broth made with rice, whilst 'porridge' in the Australian context is a broth made with oats. That was a cause of much embarrassment once when I was trying to order the dish and became utterly confused.'

While the student above had the benefit of learning this from a good friend who is an Australian, other students may not be as fortunate. Potentially embarrassing situations encourage passive interaction; some students fear being ridiculed if cultural mistakes are made.



Not getting it right the first time

While it is commendable that a vast resource of information about Australia is available online, it is in reality nearly impossible to plan or create an accurate impression of Australia, any one of its cities, and any of its educational institutions and facilities before arrival.

Living in a foreign land can be daunting or overwhelming to some, and the immediate weeks following arrival can form lasting impressions of Australia. Some international students with little or no experience setting up and navigating amongst service providers can be faced with barriers that can make it difficult for them to settle comfortably into Australia, and consequently build perceptions that can discourage active engagement.

Principles of Social Inclusion

AFIS supports and commends the principles of social inclusion set forth by the Australian Government and adopted or adapted by the governments, its departments and several other independent organisations, including those that provide services to international students.

Yet some programs aimed at improving the welfare of international students may be reactionary, issue-centric and focus narrowly on individual projects, emphasising specific improvement into targeted areas. They can introduce new challenges and create new barriers against social inclusion, and may prevent international students from actively engaging with the local communities.

To encourage a targeted, yet holistic, multi-dimensional approach of addressing specific issues in relation to the social inclusion of international students through the promotion international students' active engagement with local communities, AFIS is proposing the following general principles:

- A commitment towards social justice and fair treatment
Programs and policies should not be restrictive nor exclusive. Ideally, programs and policies should not advantage or disadvantage international students at the expense or benefit of other communities, or specific communities within the international student demographic.
- Avoid the creation of restrictive environments
Encourage and facilitate community interaction by creating non-exclusive environments that allow international students to meaningfully engage with and participate in the activities of local communities.
- Support for actively engaging communities
Policy developers, program coordinators and project planners should bear in mind contributing factors of passive engagement.
- Promote two-way engagement
Policy developers, program coordinators and project planners should bear in mind the attitudinal factors of passive engagement and incorporate strategies into their programs, policies and projects to encourage the active engagement of international students.



Recommendations

In conjunction with the principles of social inclusion, AFIS also recommends that:

- It must be recognised that positive outcomes may only be achievable in the long term. This should not discourage governments from providing support through an adequate and appropriate level of funding to programs and projects that support the AFIS-proposed principles of social inclusion of international students, and that can advance the welfare of international students.
- Support must also come from the local communities and organisations, and this support should be provided cohesively and collaboratively, taking into account the AFIS-proposed principles of social inclusion of international students.
- Organisations bearing the interests of international students should advocate for the community while bearing in mind the AFIS-proposed principles of social inclusion of international students to maintain a commitment towards social justice and fair treatment of all communities.
- Programs and strategies are developed to discourage the personal attitudinal factors contributing to passive engagement by international students. This may be developed in the form of appropriate mentoring programs for new international students, easily accessible resource kits and 'personalised contact' programs.

References

1. Australian Education International.
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4. Kearsley, G. & Shneiderman, B. (1999) Engagement Theory: A framework for technology-based teaching and learning. Available from: <http://home.sprynet.com/~gkearsley/engage.htm>; retrieved 18 August 2009.