

Welcome to Wollongong: 3 times lucky or sheer determination?

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Abstract

'Welcome to Wollongong' is a community initiative of the Welcome to Wollongong Community Working Group with the objective of promoting better links between international students and the community. It is aimed at recognising the contribution of international students in the city of Wollongong and the Illawarra. Research carried out since 2005 by Dr Peter Kell and Dr Gillian Vogl found that international students who were well connected to their communities experienced greater well being and performed better academically.

Wollongong City Council has been a partner since its inception, as well as students, many other organisations, and sponsors. This year the local Federal Member, Sharon Bird, welcomed the students at the Civic Reception which is held just before the Festival.

Welcome to Wollongong has occurred now 3 times and still going strong. This year more than 600 students attended the day, from both the local university, TAFE and a high school.

How was it done, and how can the momentum be maintained in such a successful way?

The presenters will outline what has been learned from the 3 festivals, how the committee is continuing to expand community involvement and how the success of past events has been utilised to inform the creation of a strategic plan to ensure the sustainability for this important project (in a world where funding is at times limited). This includes the way in which the group has created a renewed focus on sponsorship/ partnership agreements, whilst still ensuring the event remains primarily non – commercial and student focused.

The presentation will also include a synopsis of the strategy used to engage existing international and domestic students to assist as volunteers in the creation and execution of the project. This focus on current student participation has led to an enhanced opportunity for newly arriving and existing students (both international and domestic) to interact in the early stages of the student lifecycle and provides a valuable leadership opportunity for existing university, TAFE and high school students in the region. This strategy is the result of a partnership between the Welcome to Wollongong Committee and the Centre for Student Engagement.

Keywords Community engagement, partnership

Introduction

'Welcome to Wollongong' is a community initiative with the objective of promoting better links between international students and the community and from the beginning was aimed at recognising the cultural, economic and social contribution of international students in the city of Wollongong and the Illawarra. (Kell, et al - 2008). 'Welcome to Wollongong' consists of a Civic Reception and a Festival, held in the beginning of the UOW Autumn session, as well as a website w2w.uow.edu.au . It is a very good example on how education providers, local council, domestic and international students, community stakeholders and businesses are making international students feel welcome upon their arrival in Wollongong. It goes a small way towards reducing the isolation experienced by international students, as they are made to feel welcome and familiar to the new city before their study session starts.

Social isolation and difficulties integrating into Australian life are two key issues that are commonly identified by international students and key stakeholder groups. (Grimwade, 2008)

And also as Sharon Bird said in her speech in Parliament on 11 March 2010:

These young people come to a region like ours to study and they spend money in the area, but the interest that they create in their home country amongst their families and friends, encouraging them to visit as tourists, is really valuable. (...) The principles that lay behind those schemes at the time are just as relevant in today's world—that is, the more we

know each other the less we fear each other. It is a really important component of international peace and friendship. When people travel to another nation, with a different culture, a different language and a different religious base, and they form friendships, they go away with a positive feeling about that place, and that contributes to a much happier world across all the challenges that we face in modern times.

This paper describes what has been learned from the 3 previous events held since February 2008 through evaluations, student surveys and our own experiences, as most of the Welcome to Wollongong Community Project members are the same people involved from the beginning. It also details how sponsorship and also the involvement of domestic students have increased, and how a MOU between the Welcome to Wollongong Community Working Group and the UOW Centre for Student Engagement has been signed.

At first it appeared to many people that it is an education provider event, whereas the aim was always to get businesses, the community and local council involved and to increase awareness of the contribution of international students, both economically and culturally.

We realised right from the beginning that most of the community and business sector in the Illawarra are not aware of the contribution made by international students, while their time here contributes significantly to the local economy and more needs to be done to point this out to them:

Although higher education had only 32% of the total foreign student market, it was the most economically significant part of the post-secondary sector, generating 57% of export revenue, the authors noted. On average, each foreign university student spends almost \$51,000 a year, with just over a third on fees and the rest on goods and services, mainly for accommodation, food and retail purchases (University World News - <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20101015202357234> 18 October 2010).

And also

In an increasingly competitive global higher education market, the quality of the overall experience of an overseas study sojourn is vital consideration if Australia is to sustain its considerable income from this “onshore” export (Owens and Loomes 2010).

We now have a renewed focus on sponsorship and partnership to grow the event, with more involvement and awareness of the local businesses and community, without losing sight of this being designed to be student-focussed, welcoming international students to Wollongong.

However, more involvement is needed from the council and business community, with stronger partnerships built between all stakeholders to continue to grow the awareness of the presence and the welcoming of international students on more levels.

Funding has been an ongoing issue which has limited the success of W2W as it has not always been timely, which has resulted in the late employment of a coordinator, and thus a lack of time to get the new event organised and sponsorship obtained.

History of Welcome to Wollongong

The majority of research conducted on the experience of international students suggests both that international students want, and expect to form, friendships with local students’ and that this interaction is important for international students social, psychological and academic well being (Kell, P et al – 2008). It has also found that both the business sector and local community were not very well aware of the presence and contribution to the city by international students.

Based on this research funding was applied for to hold a mini-festival and set up a website to welcome the international students and a grant of \$20,000 was received from the IMB Community Foundation Grant Program.

A “Welcome to Wollongong Community Working Group” was formed after the grant was received and planning got underway.

The first public “Welcome to Wollongong” event was held in 2008, followed by one in 2009 and 2010. Planning the event for 2011 is now underway, as the new coordinator has started in the second half of October.

The Welcome to Wollongong Community Working Group

The Welcome To Wollongong Community Working Group initially consisted of the 2 founding academics Peter Kell and Gillian Vogl, some international students, representatives from TAFE, the Department of Education, community organisations, UOW representatives from the Office of Community & Partnership, UOW Student Equity and Diversity Liaison Officers and Accommodation, Wollongong City Council, UOW student organisations and clubs, and a few businesses. Most of the original Working Group members are still members. All are committed to giving international students the welcome they deserve in a new country where they can spend up to 4 years studying and living, indeed, many even become permanent residents, so it is imperative that the welcome is official and hence the Civic Reception.

In the first year the Community Working Group was a large group of enthusiastic people, keen to get a great event off the ground and growing at the same time, lead by Dr Gillian Vogl. There were 3 Committees: a Festival Committee, as well as a Civic Reception and a Website Committee. The following year saw the (paid) employment of a part-time coordinator, supervised and supported by Peter Kell, and the large Community Working Group involved in all aspects of the event with the 3 sub-committees meeting regularly. Sadly, Gillian Vogl by this time had left UOW. For the 2010 event (when Peter Kell also had left UOW temporarily) a Committee was formed with a Chair and Vice-Chair, and the Manager of the Centre for Student Engagement as the manager of the coordinator and financial manager, the part-time coordinator and the 3 sub-committees as above. However, keeping all these involved and informed was becoming unmanageable.

For the 2011 event the Community Working Group has undergone a big change. It will consist of

- 1) An **Executive Committee**
 - a. a Chair
 - b. Vice-Chair
 - c. Finance Manager (this position is held by the Manager of the Centre for Student Engagement, who also manages the coordinator)
 - d. a part-time Coordinator
 - e. 3 General Representatives - one of these will be an international student (currently being recruited)
- 2) An **Event Committee** (2 sub-committees)
 - a. Civic reception Committee
 - b. Festival Committee
- 3) **Associates of W2W**: this level is currently being developed and will be offered to those people who are unable to contribute to any of the committees on an ongoing basis and who express interest in being kept informed about the project's development. It is envisaged that these people will be sent a newsletter to keep them informed on matters relating to W2W or issues to do with international students in the community. However, they would not receive formal minutes as has been the case in the past. It is hoped that the committee will be able to draw on the expertise of any member of the committees or friends for their advice in relevant matters. The fact that many of the members are still on the Working Group allows for transferability of knowledge.

Coordinator

In the first year we did not have a paid coordinator and a lot of the work was done by one of the founders of the project, Dr Gillian Vogl, assisted by the committee members. There was huge enthusiasm generated for the initial project, however, no one had much experience with marketing to involve businesses or the community. We employed an event coordinator for one day per week to organise the performers, stage, sound and liaise with Council and the Mall Management for the venue.

We became aware that a paid coordinator was required, once Gillian Vogl left UOW and no one else could invest such a huge amount of time as Gillian had. In 2009 a coordinator was employed for a very limited amount of money for two days per week and was employed quite late in the time before the event due to circumstances beyond our control. While the event was bigger and better than the previous year, the sponsorship was still lower than needed as the coordinator did not have enough paid hours nor the experience to pursue this goal, nor did the Committee have the time or the knowledge to pursue the need for more community and business involvement.

The paid coordinator for the 3rd event in February 2010 still did not have much more time than previously, however, she delegated work to the Committee in a very efficient manner and as the Committee was determined to make this the most successful event ever, many members rallied around, and approached sponsors and businesses with great success as a sponsorship package was developed with the assistance of the UOW Marketing Department.

The current coordinator is a student studying Event Management (combined TAFE Diploma and UOW Degree) and is already showing great visions for our 4th event to be held on 25 February 2011.

Funding and a renewed focus on sponsorship/ partnership agreements

The first event in 2008 was funded by a \$20,000 Community Grant, received from the local IMB Community Foundation, which was used for the event and the set up of the website and there was no need for sponsorship. As part of the aim of the project was to raise community and business awareness of the economic contribution international students make and so visits to the economic development manager of Wollongong City Council, visits

to the manager of Illawarra Regional Development Board, visits and correspondence with small business owners, attendance at business network meetings and through the media were made in the first year, and the following years some more connections were made.

The following year (2009) no grants were applied for nor received, so the University of Wollongong contributed funding towards this event and for the 2010 event considerable commercial sponsorship (both financial and in-kind) was raised, and the Office of the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (International) contributed UOW funding. A sponsorship package was developed for the 2010 event with various levels for prospective partners to be able to choose the amount of sponsorship they could invest in and through this funding the event broke even. The Manager of the Centre for Student Engagement (CSE) took on to manage the project for the Welcome to Wollongong Committee after a MOU was signed. The W2W coordinator worked from the office of CSE. Since the signing of the MOU sponsorship and awareness has been raised considerably. This MOU has again been signed for 2011.

The 2011 event will have another improvement: the coordinator is offered an incentive package, not previously offered, to encourage more sponsorship. The coordinator will progressively earn more money when a higher level of sponsorship is secured.

A new level of sponsorship will also be offered this year as the 'Friends of W2W'. Details of this are still being worked out, as this paper is submitted. A press release event is planned for December to announce our major sponsor and to launch the 'Friends of W2W' campaign. This would be a great incentive for a major sponsor, and would bring great publicity and credibility to the 'Friends of W2W' campaign.

Welcome to Wollongong Civic Reception and Festival

The first event was held in a local shopping mall with between 300 and 500 students attending. It consisted of an official welcome by various guest speakers, many performances, audience participation in belly dancing, and some give-aways. A local ABC presenter volunteered his time to be the MC with the assistance of an international student.

At the first event there were 8 VIPs: the Wollongong Lord Mayor, the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Wollongong, the Head of TAFE NSW, Peter Kell (as founder of Welcome to Wollongong), the international student representative, a local Aboriginal elder to give the Welcome to country, and the Regional Coordinator of the Community Relations Commission and 6 of these spoke. We have since reduced speaker numbers, as for many students there were too many speakers, and not relevant to a "Welcome to the city", especially as they already get welcomes at TAFE, UOW or school.

The civic reception is now limited to half an hour as previous experience suggests that after half the audience start to become bored and stops paying attention. This year, Sharon Bird, the Member for Cunningham, addressed the students. She was so impressed with this event that she raised it in Parliament on 11 March, and a short excerpt follows here:

It was just wonderful to look out and see young faces from around the world, in all their diversity, coming into our area to study, full of hopes for their future and dreams of what their qualifications will allow them to do with their lives. It was a really good event. The event itself was not only for students of the university, although it had facilitated it; it was also for students who are coming to study at our TAFEs and indeed for some students who are coming to study in our schools. So it was across all the sectors for international students in our region.

At the end of the reception there is a performance by a local indigenous dancing troupe, which has become an integral part of the welcome. After the Civic Reception the dance troupe leads them out to the Civic Square, for the Festival. There is a photo opportunity offered for students to take photos or have photos taken with them. They are handed a 'show bag' with inserts from sponsors.

In 2009 and 2010 Civic Receptions were held in the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre which is situated one street from the local Mall. Again Nick Rheinberger, the local ABC presenter performed the MC duties with an international student. The receptions were followed by Festivals held in the Civic Plaza, next to the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre. Having the Civic Reception in the Illawarra Performing Arts Centre made these more formal, which is quite important to many nationalities, and different to our Australian laid-back attitude. More than 600 students attended in 2010 as a concerted effort was made to transport them with the assistance of the Senior 'Residential Ambassadors' on the buses from the residences, TAFE and school. Most of these students arrive in the preceding week to the area so need to be actively encouraged.

Entertainment

In the first year the list of entertainment was long and impressive: international students groups (Chinese music, Iranian instrumental ensemble), Chinese Dragon dancers, as well as belly dancers, a Bollywood dance group, hip hop group and a rap dancer. We also had an Australian idol contestant, Tarisai Vushe, performing for us. The first Festival lasted more than 3 hours and it was found to be too long.

The last 2 events were not as long, and the entertainment was certainly as impressive. In 2009 the NSW Police Band entertained the crowd, which got up and danced to the music. There were local and student performers both in 2009 and in 2010.

For 2011 our emphasis will be on getting student groups again, as well as local performers involved in performances with a hint of Australiana (last year we served Vegemite sandwiches as well as free BBQ food) and possibly dot painting workshops.

Stalls

For the first event there were 10 stalls and these were quite spread out, as per the rules of the local shopping mall which did not create the right atmosphere. In 2010 the number of stalls had grown to 22, as having a stall is part of one level of sponsorship. The atmosphere was very festive with market umbrellas, lots of music, drumming and performances.

At the end of the event we have a celebration for the volunteers, who each receive a certificate of thanks.

Community involvement

The first year we relied on our promotion by the media and posters to inform the public, and the event was held on a day when there are markets in the centre of Wollongong, thus hoping for the public to attend as the community does not have much awareness of the presence of international students. While this strategy worked to an extent, the local shopping centre rules for stalls meant that our 10 or so stalls were very spread out and moving the event to the Civic Plaza the following 2 years meant that it was more contained and thus better focussed on the international students and their need to feel welcome.

In their interviews with representatives from community and business groups, Kell and Vogl found that there was very little awareness about the cultural and economic contribution that the international students make to their host communities and there was also very little awareness of the issues which international students face (Kell, P & Vogl, G 2008).

However, this may change soon with the new International Students Strategy for Australia (2010 – 2014) from the Council of Australian Governments:

There is also Australian and overseas evidence that better engagement is likely to reduce negative attitudes towards international students (where these exist) and to build social cohesion, particularly in communities with high numbers of international students.

Through a national community engagement strategy, Australian governments will support activities that involve international students in community life, promote best practice in community engagement and help develop local partnerships. Stronger community engagement will make students' experiences in Australia more fulfilling by making them feel welcome and a valued part of their local communities, while also addressing their safety, health and wellbeing needs. (COAG 2010)

Since the first Welcome to Wollongong Festival there is now greater community awareness about the issues that international students face due to the attacks on international students in 2009 which were highlighted in the media.

We also made sure that the Homestay Australia organisation in the Illawarra was involved for the 2010 event and they became a sponsor, came onto the Committee and also had a stall.

However, more needs to be done on this level: the local community awareness can still be increased. Many people are not aware that over 5000 international students study and live in the Illawarra. Nor did the media play a large part in promoting this event to the general public during the past events.

International and Domestic Student Engagement Strategy

From the commencement of the Welcome 2 Wollongong Festival, student volunteers were an important part of the committee structure. Many International Students – particularly in their second or third year at UOW – were keen to share their experiences with their peers. In 2010, the committee elected to focus on increasing the number of students – particularly domestic – who were supporting the event. As the W2W focused on welcoming international Students to the Illawarra community, it was felt that domestic students were vital to this message. In line with the MOU, the Centre for Student Engagement (CSE) staff worked with the committee to brainstorm a number of initiatives, which could increase student volunteerism associated with the festival. Two of these are outlined below.

Accommodation Ambassadors

At the annual training for UOW Accommodation Services Senior Residents, an extra opportunity was offered to the students to become an Ambassador for the W2W Festival, as they would be pivotal in getting international student from the UOW residences to the event. In previous years this had been problematic. The students were given an outline, which included a number of incentives such as a T Shirt and Gift Voucher. They applied to the committee. This was an excellent way to ensure that there was a minimum of one senior student from each residential college attending the event. They took responsibility for promoting the Festival on campus and in their residences, ensuring it was on the O Week schedule and bringing a group of people on the free 'Green Shuttle' (a government funded bus Wollongong is fortunate to have).

Involvement of UOW Clubs & Societies and other Volunteering Programs

The CSE runs many of the Clubs & Societies, Volunteering and Leadership Programs that are offered at UOW. A number of communications were sent to these student groups requesting their involvement in the W2W Festival. Clubs & Societies were offered a funding opportunity to create a display, offer free food or give a performance. The major volunteering program at UOW, UniCrew, offered for students to volunteer at W2W through the regular incentive scheme. The Undergraduate Student Association also provided and manned the (free) BBQ for the day in 2009 and 2010. Drawing on these programs increased the number of post 1st year international and domestic students volunteering at the event. It also gave arriving international students the opportunity to engage with extra curricular activities prior to week 1 (along with other orientation activities) – hopefully increasing the likelihood of their ongoing involvement in these important social networks.

Creating a sustainable future

In 2008 the first event was held in the first week of Autumn session, however, many students could not attend due to classes and so in 2009 it was moved to the week before session start, on the Friday of Orientation Week, which had finished the previous day. In 2010, one small hurdle the committee faced with the W2W Festival was that it was scheduled in Orientation Week at the same time as other important activities (i.e. a Faculty of Commerce event which involved many International Students). To reduce the impact of these conflicts in scheduling, the W2W is now communicated widely to all stakeholders in October of the previous year and forms a part of the official UOW Orientation Schedule that students receive on Enrolment.

Economic considerations

At a time when due to changes to visa requirements and the Global Financial Crisis the number of international students studying in Australia are expected to drop, it is imperative that we continue to make students feel welcome and increase community support for them as well as interest in their cultural contribution to our city. Reduced numbers of international students will mean a considerable economic and cultural loss for the city. In the Australian Education International, Research Snapshot, *Export Income to Australia from Education Services in 2008*, June 2009, it was reported that NSW receives \$5.812 million in export income, of which Wollongong receives more than 100 million annually.

Research has shown that the demand for international higher education will continue, although it is unclear to what extent the global financial crisis may affect such demand. The committee notes the availability of higher education in Asia is growing rapidly. This is a competitive alternative to studying in Australia because students are able to learn English while gaining a qualification for far less cost. (Senate Report 2009)

We have been struggling to involve businesses more in the event and last year there was a marked improvement in sponsorship as we have now developed a sponsorship package, which gave businesses and organisations a choice in the level of sponsorship.

The Website

The Website (w2w.uow.edu.au) has been a vital part of the W2WCWG's offerings to International Students. Originally hosted with UOW, due to policy constraints there were certain limitations on what could and couldn't be

done to the website. In 2009, in line with the MOU with CSE, the W2W website was moved to the UniCentre Server. This allowed for greater customisation of the site and provided support for updated photo galleries and easy access for the coordinator to maintain. The committee is also able to get regular updates on statistics on visits to the website, which can inform decision making around content. One other major benefit the change in host was that W2W is now able to sell advertising space on the website and have the logos of sponsors displayed. It is hoped that this will form another source of funding for W2W Festival.

Evaluation

Evaluation Tools

The W2W Festival has been evaluated since it began in 2008. After every event we held Community Working Group “wash-ups” meetings. In the first two years student participants were given a paper survey to complete and the details were entered manually. In 2009, the committee elected to utilise an online survey tool administered by CSE. This survey link was distributed to all newly arriving International Students at UOW, TAFE and in the involved High Schools. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive and any feedback/ suggestions were considered for 2011. In 2009, the committee also used an online survey tool to ask International Students about their buying behaviours in the local area - including preferred shops, service providers, transport and more. This was very beneficial in supporting the committee’s approach to local businesses for partnerships and financial contributions. Evaluation to foster continuous improvement will continue to be a priority for the committee and W2W.

Conclusion

‘Welcome to Wollongong’ is a community initiative with the objective of promoting better links between international students and the community and was aimed at recognising the cultural, economic and social contribution of international students in the city of Wollongong and the Illawarra. It contains 3 parts: a website, civic reception and festival. The Festivals have been successful, however, it is still seen by some as a university event, and there is still more scope to increase the awareness in the business sector and broader community of the contribution of international students in the city. More work needs to be done to highlight to the community that the care and well-being of international students is not just the province of the education providers at which they study, but also the domain and responsibility of the broader community.

The level of community awareness about issues that international students face has increased slightly after attacks on international students in Victoria in 2009 were highlighted in the media, but still there has not been enough coverage at the local level of the issues that international students face.

As the markets are falling and international students generate a large part of our export dollar, we need to ensure we give international students a take home message that they are welcome in our cities.

The experience from organising this event has been invaluable and for many of the Community Working Group a steep learning curve in the world of business & marketing, employing staff, getting promotion and media coverage and putting a dollar value on student contribution to a city. The partnership with the Centre for Student Engagement was an excellent move forward in creating sustainability for the project; however it is hoped that the sustainability will only be strengthened by increasing the levels of partnership and participation from the community.

The priorities for the Executive moving forward into the future include:

- increasing the funding available to continue to grow Welcome to Wollongong;
- continuing to advocate for the awareness of international students’ contribution to the local community;
- engage with Council and the business sector at higher levels to move towards a model in which greater ownership of Welcome to Wollongong is accepted by these parties;
- stronger partnerships built between all stakeholders to continue to grow the awareness of their contribution and welcoming of international students on more levels;
- increasing the number of hours dedicated to the coordinator’s role;

and finally,

- succession planning so that when the existing Executive Committee moves on Welcome to Wollongong can continue to grow from strength to strength and maintains the expertise and knowledge achieved over the past years .

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