

# Enhancing interaction between domestic and international students: Creating opportunities through the student exchange programme

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## Abstract

Previously, the Victoria Overseas Exchange programme (Vic OE) held separate events for outbound exchange students and returned exchange students. There were no events specifically for inbound exchange students, nor university organised events that specifically encouraged social interaction with domestic students. This presentation discusses how Vic OE is bringing together all these groups of students to share knowledge and support each other, thus creating a gateway to increase and enhance interaction. The Vic OE initiatives seek to encourage not only interaction between the various exchange student groups, but also with the wider Victoria domestic and international student populations.

The introduction of a variety of events, emphasis on the importance of an exchange 'community', increased use of social media, initiation of a student-run club and collaboration with other university groups, has created a suite of events offering many opportunities for both domestic and international students to get involved with and engage in meaningful participation. Access to such opportunities enables students to not only cultivate new friendships, but also to broaden their global awareness and to enhance cross-cultural communication skills.

Drawing on the Vic OE experience, this presentation will:

- Analyse the challenges of gaining participation from students and suggest ways of overcoming them;
- Present ways to facilitate interaction and how to market these opportunities;
- Provide tips on how to create a welcoming community for interaction to take place;
- Discuss future ideas to enhance and sustain student interaction.

## Key Words

Interaction, student exchange, participation

## Background

The Vic OE (Victoria Overseas Exchange) programme is part of the International Office at Victoria University of Wellington (VUW) and consists of two full-time staff members. Vic OE is predominantly dedicated to the recruitment and support of outbound exchange students. However more recently, Vic OE has taken on a more active role in connecting incoming and outgoing exchange students. In 2012 Vic OE sent 162 students out on exchange and received 126 students from its overseas partner universities. VUW has a student population of 22,000 of which 2,700 are international students.

## Our Approach

### Where we started

Working with the student exchange programme, we are fortunate to have the opportunity to work closely with both domestic and international students, however this opportunity is not always embraced. Up until 2010, we had no face-to-face contact with our inbound students and very limited contact with our outbound

students. It became clear that there was an unnatural disconnection between these exchange student groups, and that they naturally have so much in common and to share. Bringing these student groups together would increase outbound student preparedness for exchange; encourage greater interaction between student groups (incoming, outgoing, returned) and create a greater sense of support and community among the exchange network. This is important as it increases awareness and understanding of different perspectives and cultures; enriches the student experience; gives students a sense of belonging and improves English language skills. Our goal was to create more opportunities for meaningful interaction to happen and in so doing, create a welcoming exchange community.

While creating new events, we found many of our students were also involved in other university groups with similar goals to ours. We then began to collaborate with the other university groups. This increased participation numbers and allowed for a more diverse range of students attending events.

## **Issues**

There are numerous issues involved in gaining participation from students. One of the main ones is the lack of 'common ground' between international and domestic students. Students, domestic and international, prefer to stay within familiar cultural and linguistic groups, and also with people who share similar backgrounds (Arkoudis, S, Yu, X, Baik, C, Borland, H, Chang, S, Lang, I, Lang, J, Pearce, A, Watty, K 2010). Some obstacles to finding common ground include:

- Students having different academic priorities and plans. For example, achieving high grades is often more important to full-degree students than it is to short-term students here for one trimester;
- Students often having different very social plans that can affect interaction opportunities. For example, many domestic students have part-time jobs and family commitments, while many international students have the time and the budget to travel, and to do so as often as possible;
- Students from different backgrounds also have different cultural expectations and needs; and
- Differing levels of English ability also hinders free communication.

Another key issue is the 'international student' stereotype. The term 'international student' automatically places students into this group stereotype by default. The stereotype includes:

- International students lack English proficiency;
- International students only hang out with other international students and don't want to mix with others;
- International students are just here to study and travel; and
- Some may argue that some international students are socially awkward.

## **Our Plan**

Victoria University currently has several extracurricular cross-cultural initiatives in place for its students that deal with some of the issues mentioned above. These include: language buddies; the ExcelL programme; Kiwi Mates; the Victoria International Leadership Programme (VILP) and the International Buddy Programme (IBP). Many address some of the issues mentioned above. For example, IBP matches students up by their interests. The VUW Accommodation Service recruits domestic kiwi students to live in international houses as Kiwi Mates, and the VILP and ExcelL programme address cross-cultural communication and global understanding in a more formal way.

Vic OE initiatives join these that already exist to create a suite of opportunities for students to get involved with. By having increased availability and a variety of opportunities, there is a better chance of gaining participation. To facilitate meaningful interaction between these student groups we needed to create structured, interesting and relevant events.

## **Vic OE events**

From 2012, both inbound and outbound (including returnee) exchange students have been invited to all Vic OE events. Many events are also run in conjunction with other VUW programmes or groups such as IBP, VILP, Victoria University of Wellington Students Association (VUWSA), Victoria International, Victoria

International Exchange (VIX) Club and other student clubs. Events are not compulsory, they are optional and every event is an opportunity to interact.

As mentioned above, our goals were to create more opportunities for interaction and also make this interaction meaningful, as this does not usually happen automatically. We try to create structured events where interaction is driven by purpose, as without purpose students will naturally aggregate into culturally similar groups (Arkoudis, S, Yu, X, Baik, C, Borland, H, Chang, S, Lang, I, Lang, J, Pearce, A, Watty, K 2010). We select activities where students are always required to interact; there is a common goal or problem solving. We find group based activities work best and we often purposefully create groups based on what the participants have in common. Outlining the purpose of an event and using effective 'Icebreaker' activities help to set the tone of the event. This allows students to know what to expect of the event and what the expectations of their participation are.

Examples of activities:

### ***Exchange Welcome Breakfast***

The Welcome Breakfast is held the week before university starts during international orientation and is advertised as part of the orientation schedule. This is our first opportunity to meet the new students and introduce them to the opportunities available. We invite outbound students to help with preparations and share breakfast with the new students. The VIX Club and VILP also attend to promote their programmes.

### ***Quiz Night***

The quiz night was originally run in conjunction with VUWSA and the VUWSA Clubs. VUWSA funded and administered the quiz, opening it up to Vic OE participants (including IBP and VIX Club) and teams from university clubs (i.e. Tramping Club, Spanish Club etc.). The aim of this collaboration was to expose university club participants to the Vic OE programme and increase awareness of international students at VUW. The quiz is held at the main university bar on campus and is an informal opportunity for students to meet; team up and win prizes. Students are required to RSVP to the event so teams can be purposefully created depending on students' host/home universities or countries/regions. Students are aware they will be assigned to specific groups and often look forward to meeting their team members.

### ***Exchange Mixer***

The Exchange Mixer is a mixture of 'Welcoming Back' students that have returned from their exchanges; 'Welcome' to new inbound students and a 'Welcome to Vic OE' for new applicants to the programme. This event was created for students to mingle and network. Students are given nametags stating their name and where they are going, or where they are from, or where they went on exchange. The event starts with ice-breaker activities to get students warmed up and into groups. As a group, they do a survey or puzzle together which is usually themed with finding what out what they have in common with each other. As 'entertainment' we also announce the photo and video competition winners from the previous trimester. As this event is a mixer, it does rely heavily on students to get out of their comfort zone and interact. Therefore, it is important for the facilitator to encourage and support interaction amongst the students.

### ***Cross-cultural Film night***

This is a discussion based activity requiring students to discuss a cultural issue or theme together about particular short films. Relevant and engaging films are selected based on topics which students can identify with and openly talk about from different cultural perspectives creating common ground for discussions. Such universal themes include family, friendship, love, isolation, values, immigration, language & culture barriers and hope. Themes relevant to students include: study, flatting, doing an OE/living abroad, student parties, making friends, engaging with locals as a non-local. Discussion points for each film are selected by the facilitator as starting points for participants, and groups are asked to report back to the whole group about the main points discussed. Groups for this event combine domestic and international students, and also include IBP and VILP participants.

Other activities:

Volunteer Tree planting, Pre-departure event, Pavlova making.

*“This is really great! I wish we had something like this before I went on exchange, I would have met so many good people.”*

- *Returnee exchange student at the Exchange Mixer*

*“Our students are having a great time at VUW, they say there are so many events to meet other students and that they’ve already become good friends with some kiwis.”*

- *Partner University*

*“I really enjoyed the Breakfast, this is my second day in New Zealand and I didn’t know anyone. Now I’ve got some plans for the weekend.”*

- *Inbound student*

### **Victoria International Exchange (VIX) Club**

The club was created in 2012 with the aim of creating more informal social avenues for interaction between our students. The VIX Club is open to and promoted to all VUW students, in particular the inbound exchange and study abroad students, outbound and returnee exchange students and the rest of the international student cohort.

We recognised that student-run clubs tend to get more buy-in from students and also that a student club would be able to organise all sorts of activities off campus that we would not be able to run. VIX Club leaders were recruited through the Vic OE programme. Many returnee students were inspired to get involved from experiencing the exchange clubs at their host universities, such as the ERASMUS programme in Europe, and wanted to be involved with something similar at VUW. We also offered committee members a reference letter from Victoria International at the end of their commitment.

Although it is a student-run club, clearly outlining the purpose and expectations of the club, and its relationship with Victoria International were important considerations during the establishment process. Supporting the club with a Victoria International grant is also important in linking the club to Vic OE, allowing Vic OE to expect regular updates; it also acts as a reminder that the club is representing VUW.

Initial club meetings discussed the goals of the club, how events would be organised, committee roles, promotion, sustainability of the club, and planned the first few events. After the first few weeks of planning the student leaders took complete ownership and the club held an impressive ten separate events in the first trimester including bowling, rock climbing, a potluck dinner, beach day, mountain walks, wine tasting, movie nights and day trips out of town. Events this year have had from 30 to 100 participants where approximately 60% were international and 40% domestic students. Vic OE now plays a support role for the club providing advice and assistance when needed.

The VIX club communicates and organises activities solely by social media. Students join the VIX club Facebook page and become part of the club. The page is also an active forum for planning other events and trips together i.e. movies, what to do in the mid-term break etc.

*“The best thing about working with VIX is getting to meet all the students, and the variety of cultures all mixed together. It’s also been a great chance to do the touristy things you forget about when you live somewhere. Especially Some’s Island for me, and seeing the tuatara and weta.”*

- *VIX Club Committee member.*

*“The club has been really great to have a place to meet up with other students, and I’ve made some really good friends too.”*

- *Inbound exchange student*

## Connecting the dots

As you can see from the examples above, many Vic OE events are held in collaboration with other university groups. Finding organisational synergies has been one of the keys to making activities successful and sustainable. Working together with other groups in the university increases activity exposure and support; is a gateway to more students from a variety of backgrounds and often allows for a bigger budget. It is mutually beneficial in various ways.



For example, Vic OE students doing the Leadership programme can apply for a grant for their exchange. To complete the Leadership programme, students need to partake in various activities of which many are held in conjunction with Vic OE. The Leadership programme is open to all VUW students and also short term study abroad and exchange students.

Vic OE students are often previous Kiwi Mates, or recruited post-exchange to be a Kiwi Mate. Kiwi Mates bring their international house mates to events and promote events in house.

The student association enjoys working with Vic OE as we have direct links to international student groups, while the Student Association connects Vic OE with the rest of the domestic/VUW student population.

## Tips for creating and marketing your events

Marketing these opportunities and getting students to attend optional extracurricular activities is difficult. There will always be some students that will not attend any events; and some that will attend every event.

- Tap into student life as soon as possible
  - Students tend to make their friends and have their social lives defined in the first couple weeks, or even days of arriving. Events could include an Exchange breakfast or Club Welcome parties before the trimester starts.
- Create expectations
  - Make these events expectations for outbound students – when they prepare to go and return they know what to do and know what to expect.
  - Advertise calendar of events as soon as possible so students know what is coming up in the future.
- Make exchange students the champions E.g. Student Exchange Clubs

- Work with other university groups and make events mutually beneficial. E.g. Student associations, buddy/mentor programmes, leadership programmes, language clubs, science club etc.
- Find incentives. E.g. Leadership certificate points, free food, prizes
- Have structured events with a purpose – Plan your activities so students will get the most of out of them.
- Make the activity relevant for everyone attending – have a variety of activities
- Keep it light and interesting– most events will be held after class, no one wants to attend another lecture after 5pm.
- Hold some events in public university areas to raise awareness of your programmes/activities and give inbound students a sense of belonging
- Use social media to promote events and use photos from past events to highlight how fun it will be
  - Ask student clubs to make events on their social media pages
- Select the right dates – make sure the times and dates are not during busy periods of the trimester or week and don't clash with other events.
- Calendar of events - so students know what is coming up and why each event is held
- Make an exchange newsletter profiling and celebrating inbound students and outbound exchange students.
- Advertise the benefits
  - Meet other students going on exchange, here on exchange or back from exchange from your host university and host country. Outbound students are by far the easiest group to get excited about mingling and networking opportunities before they depart.
  - Encourage outbound students by indicating it will be a good way to learn about other cultures, prepare for potential culture shock, etc.
  - Encourage international students to attend to meet local Kiwi students
  - Advertise to inbound students with a focus on what they can learn about kiwi culture in return & the opportunity to celebrate their own culture
  - Get points towards your VILP certificate for certain activities

## Future Ideas

For the Vic OE Programme:

- Seek to improve benefits from current activities and create more opportunities for interaction
- Create more links with the wider university and strengthen those that already exist
- The VIX Club will naturally grow bigger and more domestic students will become involved.
- Strengthen sense of exchange community
- Increase awareness of club
- Think about how to package all these opportunities up for new students

## Conclusion

In the past two years the amount of organised opportunities available for inbound and outbound students to interact has multiplied greatly. Since 2007, we have grown from just two events per year for only outbound students, to an impressive thirty events in 2012 with participation numbers varying from 30 to 140

participants (60% international and 40% domestic students). Although these opportunities for interaction between domestic and international students were created through the exchange programme, they were not only created for exchange students. Collaborating with other university groups allowed for university-wide exposure, a more diverse range of students attending events and increased participation numbers.

The sense of community these initiatives have created for Vic OE has been impressive, and we believe have created a sense of belonging to Victoria University of Wellington and the Vic OE programme for both our inbound students and outbound students, and all the other student groups involved.

See Appendix 1

## References

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## Acknowledgements

Kirsty McClure, Services Manager, Victoria International  
Clare Penno, Marketing Coordinator, Victoria International  
Marina Abrahao, Student Exchange Coordinator, Victoria International  
Nataly Noguer-Blue, *former* International Buddy Programme Coordinator, Victoria International

## Appendix 1: Conclusion – Timeline of opportunities 2007-2012

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	
February					Exchange Breakfast	Exchange Breakfast	
					Buddy morning tea	Buddy morning tea	
March		Meet & Greet (Outbound only)	Orientation (Outbound only)	Orientation (Outbound only)	Exchange Mixer	Exchange Mixer	
					Buddy Welcome (Pavlova Making)	Buddy Welcome Event	
						VIX Club Picnic	
April				Intercultural Skills Workshop (Outbound & Inbound)	Cultural & Film Night	Cultural & Film Night	
					Buddy Potluck Dinner	Buddy Potluck Dinner	
May	Preparation Orientation (Outbound only)				Quiz Night	VIX Boat Cruise	
						Quiz Night	
						VIX Bowling Night	
						VIX Buffet Dinner	
						VIX Wine Tasting	
June		Farewell & Pre- departure Event (Outbound only)	Pre-departure Orientation (Outbound only)	Pre-departure Orientation (Outbound only)	Pre-departure Event	Pre-departure Event	
July					Exchange Breakfast	Exchange Breakfast	
						VIX Welcome Party	
						VIX City Life Tour	
						VIX Club Picnic	
					Buddy Welcome morning tea	Buddy Welcome morning tea	
August		Meet & Greet (Outbound only)	Orientation (Outbound only)	Orientation (Outbound only)	Cultural & Film Night	Cultural & Film Night	
							VIX Wgtn Dinner
					Buddy Mid-Winter Dinner	Buddy Mid-Winter Dinner	
September	Preparation Orientation (Outbound only)		Intercultural Skills Workshop (Outbound & Inbound)	Intercultural Skills Workshop (Outbound & Inbound)	Quiz Night	Quiz Night	
							VIX Welcome Back
					Volunteer Tree Planting	Volunteer Tree Planting	
October		Farewell & Pre- departure Event (Outbound only)	Pre-departure Orientation (Outbound only)	Pre-departure Orientation (Outbound only)	Pre-departure Event	Pre-departure Event	
November							