

Initiating International Students Support Groups – Strategies and Sustainability

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This paper is the author's reflections of the various student support groups she had co-initiated with student volunteers and staff within ISS- International Student Services at QUT – Queensland University of Technology. These reflections convey insights on forming and initiating support groups, strategies for finding allies and ways of maintaining and sustaining the lives of the support groups so that the students benefit from them in the long term.

Support groups in this paper refer to groups within organised events and activities whether one off or ongoing which aim to enhance the social aspects of students' experiences whilst pursuing their academic career at the university. This paper highlights lessons learned based on seven case studies.

1. The Case of "East West QUT"

On the 13th of April, 2005, East West QUT was launched at the QUT Gardens Theatre Foyer with more than 200 participants attending. A representation from the international cohort (more than 80 in attendance) matched the domestic counterpart (70 Australian students and 50 QUT staff), marking the achievement of this initiative, encouraging a sense of connectedness among International Students and extending friendship and goodwill with their Australian counterpart.

East West was first of its kind at QUT and it heavily relied upon student volunteers. The program of activities outlined at the launch surpassed the actual events organised within ISS - International Student Services and lead by ISS staff in 2005. By 2006, the East West Centre was lead and established by the manager of ISS and a full time coordinator was designated to oversee the running of this initiative.

Two years on, change of the coordinator's role and later on the shift of its administrative site from its original home base at ISS to its adopted new place within the Student Engagement Office had attracted wider attention within the university.

To date, East West remains an integral element of Student Support Services. It's recognition from a department and university level has given it a chance to continually enrich students' quality of life at QUT. ISS continues to support this initiative as international students remain to be its largest partakers.

In retrospect, a number of factors contributed to the success of the East West launch in 2005 and tracing back over the journey could provide pivotal future strategies for effectively sustaining similar initiatives.

Identifying the need/s – One of the reasons for international students to study overseas is to meet the host country, get to know the people and bring the depth of this experience to their life long career and pride. International students also aspire to interact with fellow international students from many countries of the world with whom they seek friendship or career networks or both.

Clarifying aims of support groups – The concept of East West was to organise a series of activities on campus and out in the community which promote social interaction between International Students and Australians. All participants are encouraged to respect one another regardless of race, colour, cultural origin, gender, sexuality, age, religious beliefs, political conviction, disability and profession.

The Promise in a name - Despite the many criticisms about the name “East West”, it stands as a popular name easy to remember and has proved to be attractive to its intended participants. The several other names tried in 2003-2004 did not work quite as well as East West has. So it seemed, East West in 2005 sounded more encompassing and had more social promise than all the other names that the ISS staff and their volunteers had tried.

A variety of programs attractive to various stakeholders - The launch was just a launch; it was a one off event however both the preceding and proceeding events matter to the participants. The East West launch spelt out a program of activities (social and academic related) for the rest of the year.

Cajoling the experts from within – The author drafted the proposed program and the interim themes and titles of the seminars but the success of the “show” came from her fellow staff members who were more than willing to contribute. The ISS staff come from many nations, a melting pot of internationalisation and have effectively provided a wide range of cross cultural skills and expertise which has been valuable to the various support groups at ISS.

The grassroots - the student volunteers were the strongest base of East West in 2005. The ideas came from them - they were the human resource power and they knew the initiative was for them and naturally helped inform fellow students, their Faculty administrators and academic staff about East West. Given the circumstances, the East West launch was very successful as predicted.

The support of the manager - Consultation and supervision from the manager was essential. It was after all a concern for all ISS and it was the manager’s experience over the many years of organising support groups including leadership training for students within ISS that was most helpful.

Informing the allies - The various sections of Student Support Services, the Equity, the Study Abroad and Exchange Students, the various Faculty based student groups, the International Marketing sections and the QUT Guild are some of the major stakeholders and traditional allies when initiating support groups whether they are for international or of mainstream student participation. Open communication with these allies provides a strong boost for the support groups whereas the opposite disempower the very support groups of their own identity and reasons they were formed in the first place.

The Power of Publicity - The posters and flyers helped visually but in a more practical sense, the students’ experiences from attending previous ISS support group activities and word of mouth attracted confidence to the East West launch in 2005.

The Venue, the food, the timing and the Sponsors - Holding the East West launch at the Gardens Theatre Foyer was strategic as it was a very visible place catering the right food at the right time of the day. The World Care Assist sponsorship was timely and the manager of ISS facilitated this. Mapping and Hydrographic Surveys an unlikely sponsor facilitated by the author was also pivotal

support and sponsor for most of the publicity posters for the East West launch and the East West community events thereafter (e.g. community picnics and sailing with Brisbane Sailing Squadron)

Let the participants contribute - Getting the participants to contribute even a minimum amount shares ownership of the event and helps any activity sustain itself in the longer term.

Shared Vision with ISANA (International Students Advisers Network Association) - Tailored with creativity and honouring feedback from the participants, East West presented a refreshing initiative born of the ideas from ISANA conferences, ISS staff meetings and feedback from the support group workshops that the ISS staff had initiated.

2. The Case of “My Hometown, My Journey”

Initiated in September 2007, the QUT community was invited to share a story or fascinating features about their hometown or travelling experiences. The initiative was aimed at forming support groups as a tangible outcome, encouraging interaction among international and domestic students and staff in a positive atmosphere and to develop appreciation of each other’s cultural experiences thereby welcoming their differences as strengths as much as their similarities. This support group went on for the whole spring of 2007 and some of the initial hometown and travel subjects were from South Korea, Taiwan, France, Germany and Canada. One domestic student even volunteered to speak about her “journey around the world” and a staff member had inspired everyone with her experiences when living in the Galapagos Islands.

This brand of “My Hometown, My Journey” undertaking was revisited in 2010 and was one of the sub events at the “East West Festival”. At this gathering the group was larger as East West had gained wider promotion and recognition across the university. The Director of the International Research Students herself shared her historical journey around the world, her perspective and it’s significance to internationalisation. To the listeners it had now become apparent that internationalisation meant not only looking at the big picture but also appreciating the little things that matter in every interaction with being exposed to an international environment.

The speakers (students and staff) from this event spoke of their hometown stories or travelling experiences in Brunei, Thailand, Vietnam, Japan, Sri Lanka and various counties in Europe and The Middle East. The event was a good two hour program with opportunities to mingle and share a multi-cultural lunch that some of the participants had brought along to share. The author is not aware if any similar initiative was followed through after this event but it remains a wholesome concept if forging internationalisation is to come from the tenets of revisiting history and appreciating culture in a neutral environment whether in the education arena or any other institution.

3. The Case “Cross-cultural Community Outreach”

Initiated within ISS in the spring of 2008, a small group of Japanese students visited one primary school in Brisbane. This support group was formed in the belief that international student’s interacting with primary school children is one of the best ways to start and build cross-cultural appreciation in the community. The volunteers in this group believe that all participants will never forget the experience and the chances are they will grow accustomed to appreciating their multi-cultural environment. It is also considered that the primary school children who met with the

international students will also remember QUT, it's goodwill and friendship seeding education for the "real world" where international and domestic students work together pursuing their career dreams.

Unfortunately this initiative was discontinued due to other priorities at that time; however given the positive outcome of this worthy cause – creating avenues for international students to mix and share their culture with the young Australian community face to face, there may be speculations that the initiative should in the near future be integrated within the Student Engagement realm and agenda .

4. The Case of Research Students Group

PGRSnet (post graduate research students network) was launched on 8 April, 2009; the name was inspired by the PhD students themselves who helped ISS coordinate this initiative. The idea was to encourage both international and domestic students to participate in addressing their common needs and concerns (e.g. social isolation, academic concerns) as researchers. In 2012, the name was changed to **QRSnet** (QUT Research Students Network).

Similar to East West QUT, QRSnet was widely promoted with a launch which attracted much wider attention than any other previous support group initiatives for this cohort. The attendance on the launch day was an overwhelming number (more than 90 people came along out of 120 who signified interest) while previous attempts to engage research students through forums and meetings were barely a handful.

Persistent communication with this cohort paid off, the research students themselves from various nationalities including Australian were facilitators and speakers at the launch. In their discussions, they addressed issues such as effective time management, beating procrastination, handling changes in proposals, finding support, being well and being a happy researcher. Active participation and the supportive atmosphere in this event appear to have formed solidarity across groups and interaction between international and domestic students.

The initiative, QRSnet as it is now called continues to serve the research students cohort (both the domestic and international); the programs organised were specific to their needs both academic or creative and social. The current support of various offices within the Student Support Services is significant in sustaining this initiative. The leadership from ISS is also crucial to sustaining interest in this support group as a majority of participants come from the international cohort and therefore the needs and issues are more familiar to international student advisers and counsellors who have more regular access and interaction with the participating students. Feedback from the participants whether in writing or informal conversation is important in helping sustain this group's interest and the students have consistently expressed their satisfaction of the activities within QRSnet. The author of this paper is aware that the present team of QRSnet coordinators are vigilant in making sure that feedback system is regularly administered for this group.

5. The Case of "LIFE for all seasons"

LIFE stands for laughter, inspirations, faith, energy. LIFE was initiated within ISS with the help of international student volunteers in 2010. There was a growing vision that it was timely that various faiths at QUT be revisited but this time within the ISS support group realm. Organisers from ISS believed this initiative should encourage collective goodwill and friendship. In this initiative, the

author and her student volunteers put together a music-dance-expressionist drama which aimed at reviving the universal philosophy that discrimination against race, gender, age, religion, disability, professional career and political convictions is dangerous. This creative music dance drama was successfully staged at the QUT East West Festival, 2010. Despite that this group is not currently as actively engaged in projects or events, it remains a fertile and fostering ground for social support group interest in the future.

6. The Case of “YODA”

YODA stands for Young Oz Dance Artists and coined by the author with other members of performing arts in the community. YODA was an attempt to inspire engagement between QUT and the Brisbane community’s young talent. In December, 2011, around 200 people (from QUT and community guests) gathered at the QUT Gardens Theatre to share a ‘gala of talent and a night to remember’. Twelve dance schools from the community gathered for the first time and their representatives performed either a dance or song for both the QUT community and guests to enjoy. Selected works of amateur student painters (some from QRSnet group) were displayed in the lobby which added inspiration to the event. A Japanese volunteer student had a table of information about the Japanese plight and this was especially timely in 2011 when Japan had been struck by severe environmental disasters. Part of the raffle ticket proceeds was donated to the cause of the Japanese Students Association but the student volunteer’s presence and his conversation with the guests during intermission was a poignant interaction between international student and the community guests who had a glimpse of both the commitment and leadership of an international sojourner. To date, the author is unaware of any initiative similar to YODA. The international students however who were present at the YODA gala were impressed and inspired and some had asked the initiators if similar events may be organised in the future as they are willing to help and be involved. This feedback had inspired the author to consider initiating a social support group with artistic inclinations and open to an intercultural membership rather than a culturally specific group.

7. The Case of “iStage”

iStage stands for intercultural Sharing of talents and arts group enthusiasts. Affiliated with the QUT Student Guild in October, 2012, the author and ISS student volunteers from various cultural backgrounds had named and initiated this group. iStage was a direct offshoot from ISS initiatives (e.g. East West, QRSnet and LIFE) and Community initiative (i.e. YODA).

Strategies of successfully forming iStage as a student club is a combination of lessons learned from previous initiatives.

- A set of clear aims and objectives:

iStage is a support group that decided to become a club and so the founding leaders had to write their own constitution and had to have a greater autonomy and sense of responsibility towards sustaining its life. iStage founding leaders agreed on these aims: 1. to promote intercultural sharing and exchange among students at QUT 2. to encourage students to utilise their talents, skills, knowledge and cultural experiences in facilitating positive interaction within the university, and 3. to acknowledge that significant contribution can come about from small scale initiatives and any act of goodwill can make a difference to an individual as well as the group.

- Group Appraisal

Herein is a summary of group appraisal based on informal conversation which was later deliberated at the executive committee level, the qualities of iStage as a club:

iStage's members are students themselves from various cultural and professional backgrounds. iStage prides itself with having members who are willing to share their talents and skills with QUT. iStage also extends its goodwill and sense of connectedness to people in the community.

iStage members have been active within the club, supporting each others' social interests such as 'group bonding' events and cultural-artistic seminars such as dance, music, photography, cooking and group dynamics-team skills. iStage members have also been active in supporting events at QUT (e.g. the Orientation Day, Expo., the Dragon Boat Race, QUT Run etc.) and have also performed at various occasions: the Harmony Day, East West Fest, Brisbane Moonlight Festival and Mental Health Week. iStage choreographed their own dances, sang traditional songs, even wrote their expressionist skit portraying issues of students and performed at East West Fest 2013. Many iStage members are also members of other student clubs and therefore have direct active contact and network with a wide range of other events on and off campus. To date, iStage has been invited to perform at various groups at QUT (e.g. Faculty Trivia, QRSnet painting exhibition, etc.). iStage has also recently accepted an invitation to perform out in the community (i.e. at the "Technicolour Festival" at Newmarket) and this is a unique dimension to their experience as a club and as international sojourners. iStage continues to be creative in various fields as well as fostering its members' goodwill and friendship.

- Nurturing the members' interest hence sustaining the group's life:

At the time of writing this paper, iStage is set to hold a 3 hour photo exhibition (called "Panomono" - a panorama on a scroll) and gala in time for the 2013 semesters' end celebration. Many iStage members are interested in arts and so they themselves are the forefront performers and organisers in this gathering. Nurturing the members' interest by supporting their initiatives naturally sustains the group's life and stability.

- Inclusion and Vision:

In "Panomono", iStage invited guest dance performers from within the university and the community. All QUT clubs and societies were also invited to share photographs for the exhibition. iStage members extended invitations to non club friends from both the university and the community (Australian and International) and aim to utilise the event to raise awareness of "anti-poverty campaign" as it envisages itself to be a forefront of goodwill in all its activities.

Reflections on Feedback from Participants:

Participants at ISS support groups generally respond with very positive feedback of their experience, in fact overall excitement is a common reaction. One can see from people's expressions alone a sense of satisfaction. They will even make a point of letting you know how pleased they were and this is quite usual following every support group activity within ISS and the support groups mentioned in this paper were no exception.

At East West launch, the organisers received written feedback from participants based on three themes: 1. The most enjoyable part of the event for them, 2. The good things that they could think of about the event and 3. Suggestions to improve any part of the event. The organisers managed to collect 63 feedback forms and all replied positively and expressed feelings of joy and thanked the organisers and the event for the experience. The “diversity of culture represented” impressed most participants and their notes for improvement were mainly wanting more similar gatherings in the near future and suggested to hold them more regularly.

Participants of “My Hometown, My Journey” were delighted to have the opportunity to meet in such a positive and friendly atmosphere. There was an evaluation questionnaire prepared however given the energy and active interaction following the presentations from each speaker, the organisers thought that it would spoil the momentum of the group happily chatting about their culture and travelling experiences therefore the formal written evaluation was not prioritised and instead lunch was served. Over the next few days the author and coordinator of this event received many thank you emails from participants appreciating the initiative and the great atmosphere created and to be there amongst an international community and sharing insights and experiences about very interesting topics of cultural history and travelling”.

The international student-participants of “Cross-cultural Community Outreach” gathered over afternoon tea and shared feedback about their experience with the primary school children. The reaction was unanimously positive for the international visitors. The International Students were as much impressed with the experience as were their young counterparts. The young children (Grades 5 to 7) were learning Japanese language and culture and so meeting the international Japanese students was a great educational opportunity for them. The faces and curiosity, the laughter, the respectful inquisitiveness and overall active participation in all the activities in that one meeting alone demonstrated a relatively small but successful and lasting impact of internationalisation from the community work perspective.

Similarly, **PGRSnet launch** was filled with excitement. Although this event did not have cultural performances or entertainment, the good noise from informal conversations during lunch hour confirmed that research students appreciated the occasion where they had a chance to meet with fellow research students in a supportive and comfortable atmosphere.

The Life for all seasons group did not have written feedback forms but they showed how the group event had affected them to a deeper level. The group members made efforts to get together on their own and even organised farewell picnics at the end of semester. The absence of feedback forms did not matter as this group had shown obvious bonding and long term friendships, staying connected even after they had left QUT.

As for the **YODA group**, participants from both QUT and the community were astounded at the level of dancing and singing prowess that was displayed during the night. The performers on the other hand were equally delighted to have performed at QUT’s prestigious Gardens Theatre. Feedback (verbal and e-mail) following this YODA gala was all delightful and full of praise even weeks after the performance.

The feedback from iStage which is the most recent support group discussed in this paper has many kind words to say – all sent via Facebook. The most remarkable ones spoke of “ISS being kind to

them and gave them unconditional support". This group is clearly withstanding the test of time as members remain active after more than eighteen months and have even decided to become a club. The group is growing in membership numbers and the ideas are flowing about making their university social life dynamic and positively unforgettable. The depth of interaction between the international students and their host country Australia in the support groups mentioned is not quantified in this paper however the quality of appreciation and overwhelming positive feedback from those involved in all the support groups suggest that initiatives from the grassroots level is widely relevant and a subject in which internationalisation specialists would and should be interested. Based on the support groups experiences described, it would appear that recognising and supporting socio-cultural aims and initiatives is vital to internationalisation, its challenging issues, comprehensive framework and future.

Summary - Reflections on forming International Students Support Groups:

Participants' awareness of a support group aims provides a strong sense of moral synergy – a collective sense of inspiration that everyone has the power and the chance to initiate and lead an activity as long as it facilitates a constructive interaction within the group and its subjects. Likewise, this affirmative sense of morale becomes a team building framework contingent to any support group if it seeks long term survival.

Support groups are initiated and formed based on students' needs and interest and the influence of various stakeholders. In conclusion, intrinsic to strategies and sustainability is the in depth awareness of both needs and interest of students as explained and demonstrated in this paper. Support groups in an educational setting will always persist regardless of resources (time and funds) as it is the lifeblood and social sanity of students particularly the international student sojourners whose life overseas for a number of years is quite a long way from home.

Support groups will always find way to be formed and/or revive and it is appropriate that international students seek the guidance of ISS at some point as it is readily an accessible centre and people known to assist students from simple advice and information to the most complex issues of international education experience. Based on the examples in this paper alone, most students would in fact benefit from a support group whether they are aware that they have been to one or not.

All the support groups discussed in this paper were initiated within International Student Services at QUT. The university also prides itself with supporting a diversity of support group initiatives in every Division and particularly Student Support Services and all the Faculty Departments. In the last few years, the Student Engagement Office at QUT has endeavoured to work within a very organised framework which has been developed over time and the width and breadth of the wider QUT community. It is practical that this framework includes revisiting some of the initiatives that proved to be effective in the past but were discontinued such as those mentioned in this paper. They were support groups initiatives that fostered internationalisation. Also, the framework may still be reviewed to incorporate individual requirements. There are small groups such as "natural or situational groups" (i.e. ad hoc, impromptu, seasonal) and such groups may not necessarily fit the criteria of groups that Student Engagement Office formally recognizes however these groups deserve support and informal encouragement for their contribution. All efforts of goodwill count for internationalisation advocates and participants.