

Building a sense of belonging and connectedness: what extra-curricular activities do International students really want?

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Australia is one of the world's leading providers of international education. In 2011, international students formed 21.3% of all enrolments in Australian Universities. International students consider a positive student experience as important as academic quality in choosing to study in Australia.

This pilot study investigated the sense of belonging and connectedness of international students using a validated questionnaire in one Australian University and the types of extra-curricular activities that may attract them to a University setting. The study also investigated the ability of a cooking session with Master Chef Poh Ling and a progressive dinner to facilitate the formation of friendships and sense of belonging.

Ninety-three students participated in focus groups to determine the types of clubs and social activities desired by a predominantly Asian International student cohort. Students appeared to be interested in a wide range of alcohol free activities offered over a wide range of time points, however, overwhelmingly almost all students wanted a Karaoke Club.

Fifty three students participated in the cooking activities; 75% of the International students arrived in Australia knowing fewer than three other people and just under half reported feeling lonely or homesick 2–3 months after arriving. However, 63% felt they belonged to the University. All acknowledged they would need to prepare food for themselves or others, yet 42% arrived in Australia without ever having cooked for themselves. Despite this, it was incredibly difficult to recruit students to a basic cooking session with Master Chef Poh Ling and for these students to prepare food in a progressive dinner format for other students new to Australia.

The students indicated multi focused methods must be employed to publicise and recruit students to extra-curricular activities. However, organisers need to be prepared for many students to express an interest in an extra-curricular activity, but fail to attend.

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