

Retirees – A Hidden Resource to Welcome International Students into the Community

Andrea Kornhoff¹, Dan Morgan²,

1 International Student Programs Coordinator, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, andreak@uow.edu.au

2 Student Support Adviser, University of Wollongong, NSW 2522, dan@uow.edu.au

The Illawarra Committee for International Students (ICIS) was established 35 years ago by members of the local community to ‘provide services to international students and their families while they are studying at the University of Wollongong’. ICIS remains an independent community group of mainly local retirees who dedicate a large proportion of their time and expertise to make international students feel welcome and at home in the Illawarra. In 2014, the small committee of local retirees and international student volunteers were able to engage with international students more than 5000 times.

The University of Wollongong has funded the committee since its establishment. In 2008 the University took over the coordination of the group and employed a full time Coordinator. ICIS now sits within the portfolio of the Deputy Vice Chancellor Academic in acknowledgement of the contributions it makes towards the international student experience at the University of Wollongong. The committee consists of an equal part of community and international student members, with the International Student Programs Coordinator of the University of Wollongong acting as a facilitator.

With the support of the Coordinator the committee organises free English Conversation Groups, Welcome and Farewell Dinners, Friendship BBQs and multiple daytrips and tours throughout the year. According to their personal preferences the retirees step into the roles of English Conversation Leaders, event organisers, hosts and BBQ chefs. Many busy themselves behind the scenes and share their experience and knowledge with the international students. ICIS has also built strong relationships with other community organisations and enterprises, which regularly welcome international students to their events.

This presentation looks at the benefits of this collaborative approach from the perspective of the education provider and participating students, the challenges associated with working with an independent community organisation, and the need to balance the aims and objectives of the University with those of the community volunteers. We will explore a number of options that education providers can pursue to engage volunteers from the local community, and will discuss potential funding streams for community based international support projects in a climate of tight spending.