

Myth Busting Stereotypes: The Connections, Disconnections and Benefits of International Student Social Networks

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International students, particularly those from Asia, are often perceived as maintaining social networks primarily with other international students from their home nations. Moreover, established research in the area of international wellbeing in Australia also point out that international students who make friends only with other international students from the home nation are unhappy with their overseas experience (e.g. Sawir et al. 2007; International Graduate Insight Group 2014). Research also suggests that integration with local students makes for happier and healthier individuals (e.g. Sawir et al. 2007). Here international students who have local friends note that they experience less culture shock, feel less homesick and are generally better-adjusted than those who have few or no local friends. This paper however questions if international students in Australia really mix solely with other international students from the home nation and if extending their social networks to include local friends is the only source of their happiness. By looking at the findings of data collected from an online survey of 6699 international students in Australia in 2014 and from in depth face-to-face interviews with 60 international students in Melbourne in 2013, this paper suggests that we cannot stereotype international students under one umbrella when it comes to their social networks. Our work instead reveals that there are distinct groups of international students whose social networks differ from each other (e.g. there is a group whose friends are mostly international students from other countries and a group whose friends are mostly international and local students). Moreover we note that there are increasing numbers of international students whose social networks are dominated by fellow international students who come from countries other than their own. Our research also shows that increasingly international students are having more diversity in their having international students as friends is beneficial since this allows respondents to navigate everyday life in Australia while creating a sense of belonging to a community that is global in makeup yet locally based. However, this paper also found that international students such as those from Asia do not make friends with locals who come from the same ethnic groups as them since they find little in common with Asian-Australians for reasons that include an inability to identify with locally-born or raised Asians.