

## STORMY OUTLOOK? DOMESTIC STUDENTS' IMPRESSIONS OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AT AN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY

Paul Barron  
School of Tourism and Leisure Management  
The University of Queensland  
Ipswich Campus  
11, Salisbury Road  
Ipswich  
Queensland 4305  
Tel: 07-3381-1313  
Fax: 07-3381-1012  
Email: [p.barron@uq.edu.au](mailto:p.barron@uq.edu.au)

### ABSTRACT

The education of international students in Australian universities has grown significantly over recent years and Australia has the highest ratio of international students to domestic students among the major English speaking destinations popular with international students. While there is a variety of research that examines the learning experiences of international students, little research has been conducted that examines the impact that international students have on their domestic counterparts. This paper reports on research that solicits the perceived advantages and disadvantages as held by 300 domestic students who are sharing their educational experience with international students studying hospitality and tourism management. This paper identifies that there is a sizable proportion of domestic students who consider there to be too many international students on campus; that domestic and international students do not readily mix and highlights that racist incidents, while uncommon, do occur. This paper suggests that institutions wishing to increase their number of international students must take into consideration the feelings and concerns of their domestic students.

International students, domestic students, impacts

## INTRODUCTION

International students, particularly from China, but also from Hong Kong, Malaysia and Singapore, have been arriving in western higher education institutions for education since the latter half of the 19th century (Chan, 1999). According to McNair (1933), western Christianity played a critical role in bringing new education to the Chinese and influencing the trend for overseas education. The Chinese began sending students to western institutions as long ago as 1847 when three Chinese students from Hong Kong travelled to the United States to study medicine (Pan, 1999). By 1916, some 300 Chinese students were reported in the United Kingdom studying mainly medicine, economics and engineering (McNair, 1933). According to Pan (1999), this drive for western learning has been essential for China to modernise and has developed into an integral part of international students' learning opportunities that appears not to be unduly affected by environmental or financial issues (Chan, 1999).

The economic crisis that affected the traditional international student source countries and subsequent devaluing of local currency has affected the local population's value of savings and resulted in a re-evaluation of spending plans (Prideaux, 1999). Consequently this has resulted in a reduction in spending on luxury items, such as holidays abroad, and items which have to be paid for in foreign currency, such as foreign education. However, despite this crisis, the demand for international education remained buoyant and, in the higher education sector, universities in Australia experienced record foreign enrolments during this period. Indeed Maslen (1999) reported that some Australian institutions reported international enrolment gains of up to 40% between sessions 1998 and 1999.

## THE DEMAND FOR WESTERN EDUCATION BY INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

By many accounts, the education of international students in Australia has grown in importance in recent years and is currently Australia's eighth largest export industry. International education earned AUD\$3.149 billion in export income in session 1998/1999 (Davis, Olsen and Bohm, 2000) and contributed AUD\$4.2 billion to the Australian economy in 2001 (Bohm, Davies, Meares and Pearce, 2002). The increase in importance of international students to Australian universities is straightforward - compared to domestic students, who pay tuition fees through a combination of

government subsidy and personal contribution, international students pay full tuition fees (at least double the domestic student fee) direct to the educational institution. Therefore, Australian universities are keen to attract and retain international students and most universities are often explicit in their desire to increase their proportion of full fee paying international students (see for example The University of Queensland Strategic Plan, 2004-2008). Consequently, higher education institutions in Australia commonly adopt marketing and other strategies that will result in international students undertaking tertiary study at that particular university. These strategies have also been pursued by other major English speaking destination (MESD) countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. The UK, for example, through the Education UK brand launched in January 2000 has seen an 8% growth rate of international students in the higher education sector (Russell, 2005).

These initiatives, aimed at international students by Australian universities, appear to be successful as international student enrolment at Australian higher education institutions has grown significantly over the past decade resulting in an increase in the cultural diversity of student cohorts (Scott, 1998; De Vita, 2000). Australia now ranks third behind the United States and the United Kingdom as the destination of choice for international students (Meares, 2003; IDP Education Australia, 2000). Indeed, the IDP reported that some 127,191 international students were enrolled in Australian higher education institutions in 2003 – the majority from traditional source countries of Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong and Indonesia and, increasingly China and India (IDP Australia, 2004). While competition for international students is forecast to intensify (Ward, 2004), future demand for Australian education appears strong with the International Development Program (IDP Australia, 2003) considering that of the forecast 7.6 million students who will be studying overseas by 2025, almost 1 million of these will be studying for Australian qualifications, either onshore in Australia, by distance learning, or at an offshore campus of an Australian institution (Bohm, et al. 2002).

The steady rise in the number of international students studying at Australian universities has subsequently resulted in an increase in the ratio of international students to domestic students. In 1999, fewer than one in ten students on Australian university campuses were international. Since that time the density of international

students has shown a year on year increase and, in 2004, almost 17% of the student population at Australian universities originated overseas (IDP, 2005). Indeed, the popular press in South Korea, itself an important supplier of international students, recently reported that in 2004, the ratio of international to domestic students in Australian universities was the highest in the world (Lee, 2005). Consequently it can be seen that during the past decade universities in Australia have experienced an increase in the internationalisation of their activity, both in terms of the number of international students studying Australian higher education programs, and an increase in the density of international students.

Several recent studies have suggested that international students studying in Australian universities adopt a learning style preference that is at odds with their domestic peers (See for example, Barron, 2004; Barron and Arcodia, 2002, Barron, 2002) and, in addition, experience a range of learning problems and issues that affect their overall educational experience (Barron 2004). Indeed Pedersen (1991) considered that in order to succeed, such students are expected to adjust to a narrowly defined set of classroom behaviours. Consequently, international students often have to adapt to alien teaching and learning styles and have to adopt strategies such as working harder and/or undertaking extra reading. Nevertheless, it has been found that international students studying at university in Australia are more likely than domestic students to successfully complete the academic aspect of their program and, indeed, often outperform their western counterparts (Burns, 1991; Dobson, Sharma and Calderon, 1998).

It is recognised that problems and issues concerning the education of international students occasionally surface in academic and popular press. Recent examples would include allegations of lowering of academic standards in order to allow international students entry onto university programs (Furedi, 2004), lower pass marks being awarded to international students (Bright, 2004), or instances of racism, both institutional and student driven (Robinson, 2004). However, few studies have been undertaken that examine the impact that the ever increasing number of international students has on domestic students.

## THE IMPACT OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

The presence of international students in the classroom has the potential to change both the content and process of education and that these changes can be both positive and negative. From a positive perspective, and in addition to the institutional financial benefits highlighted above, the increase in the number of international students in western classrooms has resulted in many benefits for higher education institutions and domestic students. As Pittaway, Ferguson and Breen (1998) noted, the fact that international students choose a particular university enhances the reputation and status of that university as well as providing the obvious financial benefits associated with international enrolments. For domestic students, the opportunity to share their educational experience with international students enriches their learning experience and broadens their outlook on life. Indeed, it has been found that domestic students recognise the personal and career benefits of having a network of colleagues from different countries (Pittaway, et al, 1998). Indeed, as Volet and Ang (1998:21) succinctly opine, “The presence of international students on university campuses provides a unique social forum for enhancing all students’ understanding and appreciation of the richness of other cultures”

In her analysis of perceptions of international students as held by faculty members, Trice (2003), found that international students brought, quite naturally, an international perspective to the classroom, thus making the lecturer’s job easier and enriching the learning experience for fellow students. Interestingly, the inclusion of international students in the classroom was also seen as a motivator to domestic students to do better as the international cohort were seen to be of higher academic quality than their domestic counterparts. However, as a rebuttal to this argument is the difference in employment patterns between international and domestic students. Studies have identified that almost all Australian students work up to 30 hours per week in order to support their studies in comparison to less than one in five international students studying in Australia becoming involved in part time employment (Anyanwu, 1998). Consequently, it is suggested that international students can spend more time, concentrate more effort on study and thus achieve better marks than their domestic counterparts.

Another benefit that western universities accrue as a consequence of the inclusion of international students in their institutions is the creation and development of a

valuable network of international alumni; often exploited for marketing and recruitment purposes (Trice, 2003). There is some overlap when considering the benefits to the domestic student. A richer experience and the achievement of better grades may not be immediately obvious to the average domestic student, however, Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern (2002) suggest that domestic students widen their world view as a consequence of dealing with international students and develop relationships that might be long lasting and beneficial in future careers.

While international students might be regarded as valuable financial, cultural and intellectual resources that enrich the university community, it has been found that they also possess values, norms and patterns of behaviour that conflict with those of domestic students (Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern, 2002). Consequently, much has been written about the negative impacts or perceptions of the internationalisation of western education. From the domestic student's perspective, the increase in the number of international students present on campus can lead to resentment perhaps stimulated by a consideration that international students are somehow more important than domestic students (Anyanwu, 2004). This feeling of inequality manifests itself through the provision of superior teaching facilities and staff placing primary consideration on the needs of international students (Trice, 2003). This is coupled with a general feeling that the increase in international students has brought with it a decline in academic standards (Anyanwu, 2004), due mainly to an accusation that international students demonstrate poor English language proficiency which results in a subsequent reduction in academic rigour due to slowing of pace and reduction of quality of teaching (Delaney, 2002). In a similar vein, there have been reports that academic staff have lowered pass rates to accommodate international students. Indeed, in some cases accusations have been made suggesting that the requirements for passing courses are different for domestic and international students (Anyanwu, 2004).

Other impacts that have been identified that international students have had on domestic students include the notion that international students take places in universities that would otherwise be awarded to domestic students (Anyanwu, 2004; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern, 2002; Spencer-Rodgers, 2001), communication difficulties (Volet and Ang, 1998, Pittaway, et al, 1998) and the perception that

academic staff were unable to cope with the extra demands placed on them as a consequence of the increasing numbers of international students (Niles, 1995).

The concept of the culturally diverse classroom is brought into sharp relief when the idea of groups of culturally different students working together is explored. There is much evidence (see for example, Barron, 2004; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern, 2002; Volet and Pears, 1995; Quintrell and Westwood, 1994; Burns, 1991) to suggest that local students and international students do not readily mix and tend to study in parallel throughout their program. Volet and Ang (1998) found that both Australian students and students from South East Asia preferred working on assignments with their own people. The reasons for which included a more comfortable feeling when working with people who have similar cultural background and share a common language. In addition it was found that students preferred to work with peers who have similar commitments outside university life. The final reason for preferring to work with people of similar backgrounds is that it was found that each group often holds negative stereotypical views of the other in, for example, the area of motivation and commitment (Volet and Ang, 1998). The issue of domestic and international students not working together appears to exist in other MESD countries with Ledwith and Seymour (1997) concluding that international students studying in the UK were either ignored or excluded from group activities by their domestic peers. Indeed in research that examined hospitality and tourism students, Russell (2005:71) found that international students considered UK students to be “cold, uncaring, unfriendly, rude and closed to different cultures”.

While Volet and Ang (1998) opine that universities have a social responsibility to design learning environments which foster student’s willingness to work across cultural barriers, it is important to note that international students are, at least equally, to blame for this tendency to work with and socialise exclusively with other students from their own country (Mullins, Quintrell and Hancock, 1995). In addition to the obvious cross cultural benefits of working together, it might also be suggested that working exclusively with one’s own kind can have a “consequence of jeopardising their chances of improving their spoken English” (1995:218). It is argued that this, in turn, can affect students’ capacity to participate fully in tutorial and other class

activities (Barron, 2004).

One disturbing outcome of the internationalisation of western university classrooms has been the increase in the level of overt and less obvious instances of racism. In their research Pittaway et al. (1998) found many instances of racism, especially amongst local undergraduate students. They stated that they were "shocked at the amount of unconscious racism expressed by local students... even those in favour of an increasing number of international students made comments that were at best patronising" (1998:69). Indeed the aspect of racism on university campuses has long been raised, with Knight and De Wit (1995) considering that racism is an ever present threat that should be taken into account by those universities interested in increasing international student numbers.

In her report addressing the impact of international students on New Zealand university classrooms, Ward (2001) concluded that there have been no systematic studies that have examined the impact of the steady increase in number of international students on domestic students and institutions. Therefore, given the increasing number of international students combined with the increase in the ratio between international and domestic students in Australian classrooms, there is a need to understand the impact of the internationalisation of classrooms. From a domestic student's perspective, it might be suggested that the typical Australian higher education classroom has changed. Firstly, domestic students will have noticed an increase in the number of international students in the classroom. Additionally, domestic students may also have noticed the study techniques, motivation and success rate of international students. Changes in the Australian classroom might have at best resulted in a more culturally diverse and challenging environment; at worst the current situation may be one that is cultivating a feeling of resentment on the part of domestic students. This research attempts to explore domestic student's perceptions of the increasing number and density of international students in Australian higher education institutions.

## METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The notion to determine the impact of the internationalisation of Australian higher education on domestic students was brought about as a consequence of the results of a



larger study which the researcher approached from a postpositivist perspective. From a practical viewpoint, it is held that the postpositivist conducts research in a well controlled environment, such as the classroom or within the framework of a focus group (Fischer, 1998) and thus uses more natural and comfortable settings (Dias and Hassard, 2001). Sparks (2002) considered that the postpositivist researcher conducts both individual and group research but solicits the emic, or insiders, viewpoint. Consequently, the postpositive researcher aims to produce recommendations that assist in the general improvement of an issue rather than develop definitive results.

The sample and setting for this research were all students enrolled on courses offered by the School of Tourism and Leisure Management at The University of Queensland. A two part questionnaire was developed specifically to investigate the impact of internationalisation of all students' education experiences. The first section asked respondents to answer questions concerning age, gender, nationality and ethnicity. This section also asked questions that attempted to determine motivations for current area of study and reasons for choosing their particular program at The University of Queensland. The second section consisted of a variety of questions that solicited students' attitude to the impact of the number of students from different backgrounds being taught in the same classroom. The majority of questions in this section required a Yes/No response but also presented respondents with the opportunity to provide qualitative comments as a means of elaboration.

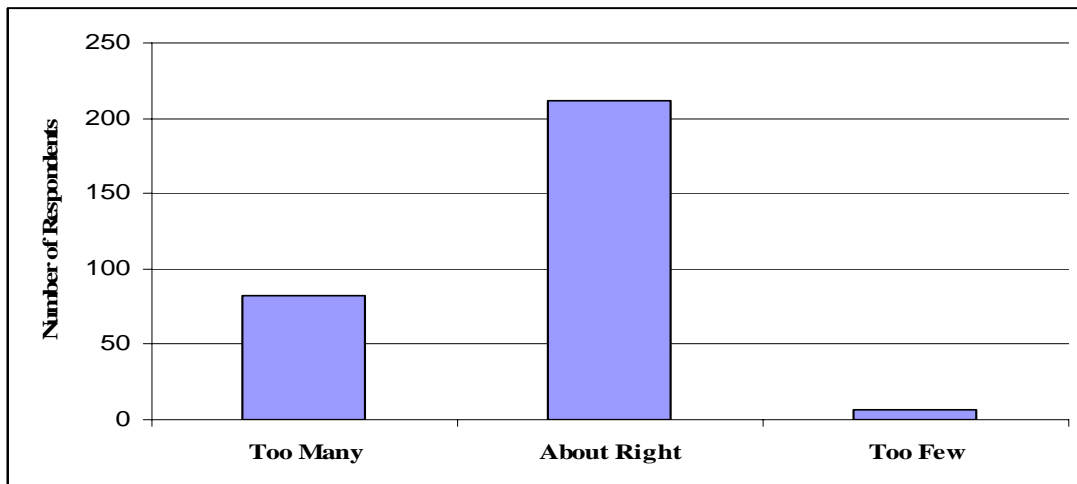
In order to achieve a maximum response, and to answer questions students may have had during the completion of the questionnaire, the questionnaire was administered in the controlled environment of formal class time and under the supervision of the researcher. Ticehurst and Veal (1999:138) describe this approach to a questionnaire survey as a 'captive group survey' and suggest that this method of questionnaire administration is expeditious and less problematic than in less controlled situations. The controlled nature of the questionnaire administration resulted in a total of 405 useable questionnaires being completed by students studying courses within the tourism and leisure management school. The sample population comprised a majority of students (94%) under 24 years and a majority of females (70%). Students representing 27 different nationalities took part in this research. While the questionnaire was administered to all students, regardless of nationality, the focus of

this paper is considering the impact of international students on the educational experiences of domestic students. Consequently the results section will concentrate on the responses of those students who identified their nationality as Australian and who comprised 74% (n=301) of the sample.

The data collected from the questionnaire were analysed via SPSS and a range of frequency tables and cross tabulations were generated which subsequently allowed for the development of bar charts. These charts will be presented in the next section along with a selection of appropriate qualitative responses made by students.

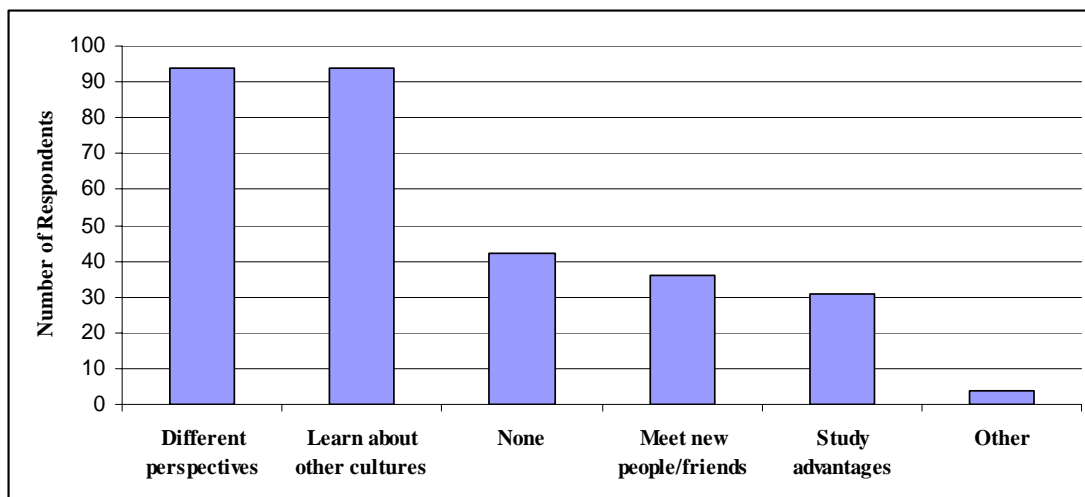
## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In order to gauge the general feeling regarding impressions of the perceived number of international students studying tourism and leisure courses, domestic students were initially asked if they felt that they were sharing their educational experience with too many, too few, or about the right number of international students. Figure 1 below gives an overview of the responses. While it can be seen that the majority of respondents felt that the number of international students was about right, a very small number considered that there was room for more international students. Worryingly, 85 domestic students considered there to be too many international students studying various courses. While it is recognised that this represents a relatively small percentage (28%) of the total number of respondents, it is contended that this group may view international students from a negative perspective. That a number of domestic students consider there to be too many international students on courses is perhaps to be expected given the rapid growth of the number and density of such students (IDP, 2005; Lee, 2005; IDP, 2004; IDP, 2000). Students were then asked if they considered that the standard or quality of their educational experience had been negatively affected by the number of international students on their courses. A similar number (74) of domestic students considered that this was indeed the case. The most commonly cited affect was the perceived lowering of academic standards to accommodate the every increasing number of international students. This accords well with the comments made by Furedi, (2004) and Bright, (2004) discussed earlier.



**Figure 1: Domestic student's perceptions of the number of international students on courses**

While it was found that there were a number of domestic students who considered there to be too many international students, most respondents actually perceived that the inclusion of international students resulted in a variety of advantages to their educational experience and accord well with the findings of previous research (Trice, 2003; Spencer Rodgers and McGovern, 2002; Pittaway, et al, 1998; Volet and Ang, 1998). The most commonly cited advantages were that international students provided an opportunity to gain different perspectives in the classroom and that international students afforded domestic students the opportunity to learn about different cultures. Only a small number of respondents considered that international students were an opportunity to meet new people and make friends and several considered that the inclusion of international students benefited them academically. One respondent stated that “international students in the classroom allows for an exchange in points of view, this interaction helps me academically and might provide a head start in industry” Figure 2 below gives an overview of the responses to this question.



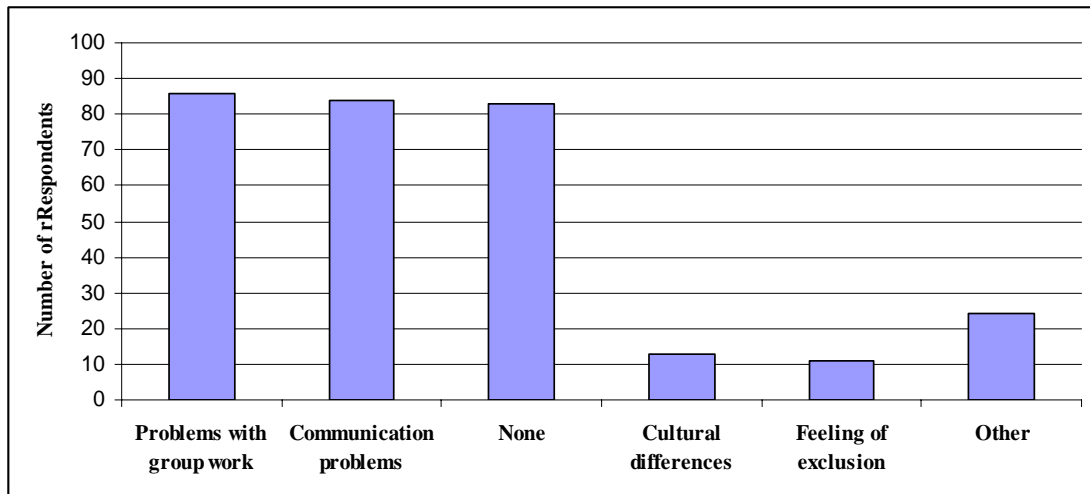
**Figure 2: Domestic student’s perceptions of the advantages arising from the inclusion of international students in the classroom**

Domestic students were asked to consider what disadvantages they had experience as a consequence of the inclusion of international students on their courses. Figure 3 below gives an overview of the total responses to this question. It can be seen that while 83 respondents considered there to be no disadvantages accruing from international students on courses, the majority of respondents considered felt that there were several key disadvantages; notably communication problems and working together issues. This fairly common sentiment was succinctly put by one respondent who stated that:

“(working with international students) can be hard because of the language barrier and this can have an affect on slowing down tutorials for more explanations”

The consequence of these issues was further explored when respondents were asked to reflect on whether international students readily mixed with domestic students in order to tackle group assignments. The majority of respondents (187) considered that no cooperation between domestic and international students took place and that international students chose not to become involved with domestic students for group projects. Indeed, several comments were made that suggested this was no bad thing: one respondent felt that working on group projects with international students made “more work for local students and might negatively affect my final mark”. This attitude, where the concept of working together will have a negative effect on a

student's academic outcome, is of concern and transcends the normal cultural differences arguments of choosing to work exclusively with one's own kind. However it can be seen that wishing to work with people from a similar background appears to be a perennial issue that has been well reported in previous research projects (see for example, Russell, 2005; Spencer-Rodgers and McGovern, 2002; Volet and Pears, 1995; Quintrell and Westwood, 1994; Burns, 1991).



**Figure 3: Domestic student's perceptions of the disadvantages arising from the inclusion of international students in the classroom**

Finally, domestic students were asked if they had witnessed any racist incidents on campus. While the vast majority (262) had not witnessed any such incidents, the remaining 39 respondents had personally witnessed a racist incident against an international student. The most commonly cited incident that had been noticed concerned issues of exclusion. For example, incidents such as domestic students overtly refusing to work with international students on group projects had been noticed. However, several respondents related incidents of staring at, or commenting on, traditional (normally female) dress and name calling. In addition, several respondents commented on the level of indirect or unconscious racism, stating that racism was a common occurrence that was perpetrated by the majority of domestic students who were, in effect, unaware that they were engaging in any behaviour that might be construed as racist. This accords well with the research conducted by Pittaway et al (1998) who found many instances of unconscious racism.

While the focus of this paper was firmly on the impact on domestic students, the researcher felt it useful to examine the number of international students that took part

in this research who had been witness to a racist incident whilst on university campus. It was found that 21 international students who took part in this study had witnessed a racist incident. While it is out with the remit of this research to provide reasons for the difference between the two groups, it might be suggested that international students might be more aware of when such an incident occurs; while domestic students only notice such incidents when they are overt.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has aimed to provide an overview of domestic students' impression of sharing their educational experience with an ever increasing number of international students. The results of this study appear to reinforce previous research projects that have examined the advantages and disadvantages of the multicultural classroom. While many domestic students readily identify the advantages of sharing their educational experience with international peers, this project has identified that domestic students in 2005 are as unlikely as their predecessors to choose to work with people of different cultures.

This research has found that the majority of respondents view their international peers from a very positive perspective and consider that the number of international students studying hospitality and tourism management courses at The University of Queensland is about right. In addition, the majority consider that their educational experience has been enhanced by the inclusion of international students. There does however appear to be a sizeable proportion of domestic students who consider that there are too many international students. This is a point of concern for any institution, particularly one that is explicit to continue to increase the number, and therefore, proportion of international students on its campus's. Of even more concern is the number of racist incidents that appear to have taken place on campus. Universities have a legal and indeed moral responsibility to ensure that there is no place for such incidents on their campuses.

While it is recognised that most student growth occurs in the international market, institutions must consider the impact on domestic students. The results of this research have highlighted several key issues that universities might wish to strategise in order to pre-empt and tackle potential negative issues. Firstly, this research has

emphasised that the effect of the inclusion of international students on their domestic peers continues to be an under researched area. While it is recognised that increasing the number of international students is an economic necessity, those universities who are keen to maintain and indeed increase the number of international students on their campus's would be wise to reflect on the impact such a strategy has on their domestic students. Secondly, Universities must recognise that currently, there appears to be a significant minority of domestic students who view their international classmates from a negative perspective. This important group considers that there are currently too many international students and that, consequently, their educational experience is being negatively affected by the inclusion of international students. The results of this research would suggest that these negative feelings are brought about by a perception of a slowing down of learning, poor levels of English and an unwillingness of students of different backgrounds to work together. It would therefore be wise for universities to adopt initiatives that that examined and solved these issues. While this researcher does not advocate forcing students to work together, it might be recommended that, for example, lecturers take more of an active role when it comes to group composition.

Finally, this research found that there was a feeling of unfairness amongst domestic students and that somehow, international students were perceived as more valuable. This perception is reinforced by the difference in fees paid, the lack of quotas and an image that international students are taking places that have traditionally belonged to domestic students. This unfair perception is perhaps the most potentially dangerous and universities need address this issue through effective communication with domestic students, a more clear admissions process and a more focussed emphasis on the importance of domestic students to the institution. This researcher considers that a more effective and blatant drive to determine domestic students' thoughts and feelings on this issue might be an effective first step in eradicating this perception.

Previous research that has examined the assimilation and learning issues commonly experienced by international students who decide to undertake a period of higher education in one of the major English speaking destination countries has tended to conclude several common issues and problems, such as English language proficiency and academic isolation. Results from this study would indicate that many issues are

also experienced by domestic students, albeit from a different perspective. Thus it is recommended that institutions start to view the experiences of international students from the perspective of their domestic students. Only then will institutions be able to tackle this sensitive issue and develop a strategy aimed at reducing perceived disadvantages and encouraging students to work together: an essential activity should higher education institutions wish to remain attractive to both international and domestic students.

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