

The International Student Experience in Australian Higher Education: Ongoing challenges and emerging issues

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Abstract. Currently over 5 million students are enrolled in courses outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2016), and Australia is one of the most popular study destinations for many of these students. While the majority of international students report high levels of satisfaction with their study experience in Australia, recent research significant issues and challenges faced by many international students, particularly in relation to their social integration into the university community and their wellbeing. This paper examines the challenges – old and new – facing international students in Australian universities and discusses the implications for universities in enhancing the international student experience and maintaining their reputation for providing high quality education. It is argued that to sustain Australia's strong position in the global international student market, institutions must re-balance their efforts from developing strategies to recruit international students, to finding creative solutions for improving the quality of the student experience both within and beyond the university.

Keywords: international students, student experience, social integration, internationalization of the curriculum

Introduction

Every year millions of students travel around the world to undertake tertiary education with latest OECD data showing that there are currently over 5 million students enrolled in courses outside their country of citizenship (OECD, 2016). Of these, approximately 338,400 students (or 6 percent) choose Australia as their study destination. This represents a six-fold increase in the past two decades from 53,188 enrolments in 1996, and means that international students now make up over 20 percent of all students in Australian higher education (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017a).

International education is a huge industry in Australia contributing over \$20 billion in export revenue (Universities Australia, 2017) and supporting over 130,000 employees (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). Considering its relatively small size, Australia has been a significant force within

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the international student market. It is now the third most popular destination for international tertiary students with 6 percent of the market after the US with 19% and the UK with 10%, and closely followed by France, Germany, Japan and Canada (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). The growth over two decades in international student enrolment remains strong. In the first quarter of 2017, international enrolments increased by 15 percent continuing the trend of record growth over the past few years (Universities Australia, 2017).

While Australia is currently one of the most popular destinations for tertiary students globally, whether this will remain the case in the future is uncertain. The international education market has become increasingly competitive in recent years, not only with other major English-speaking countries like the US, UK and Canada, but also with the expanding higher education systems in East Asian countries. These countries are emerging as genuine competitors in the region with data indicating increased demand for Asian tertiary education, a trend that is likely to continue (Marginson, 2011). According to Choudra (2017) there will be increasing growth in “glocal students” – that is, those who seek global experiences at local cost (p.830). The author cites 2015 OECD data showing that 20 percent of all foreign students in OECD countries are regionally mobile international students, choosing an international study experience while staying close to their home country. As well, Asian countries such as China and Japan are actively recruiting international students to their universities from within and outside the region through offering courses in English as well as attractive scholarships (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016). If Australia is to maintain its share of the international student market, new creative strategies are needed to meet the diverse needs of international students and to ensure they have an excellent student experience, both academically and socially.

Most international students report that their top reason for choosing Australia as a study destination is the reputation of Australian universities and the quality of education. Australia is also considered to be a safe play to study and live (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2016). While the majority of international students report being satisfied at university, a substantial proportion experience significant challenges engaging in their studies, finding employment opportunities and coping with social isolation. This paper examines key issues and challenges – old and new – facing international students entering contemporary Australian universities, and discusses the implications for universities and educators in enhancing the international student experience. It is argued that enhancing the quality of the student experience and their wellbeing will be increasingly important in maintaining Australia’s strong reputation for providing high quality education in a safe and welcoming environment.

International students in Australia

Over half a million international students are currently studying in Australia, with approximately 70 percent enrolled in higher education. More than half of these students come from five countries in the Asian region: China (29%), India (11%), Nepal (4%), Malaysia (4%), and Vietnam (4%) (Australian

Government Department of Education and Training, 2017b). For the vast majority of these students, English is their second or additional language (EAL). The ability to improve their English language skills through immersion in a native English speaking country is one of the key drivers for international students choosing Australia as a study destination. Another important factor is the opportunity to enhance their employment prospects after graduation (OECD, 2016). International students are permitted to stay in Australia and seek employment for a period of up to four years, and they come to Australia with high expectations about post-study employment (Blackmore et al., 2014).

In annual national surveys of the international student experience conducted by the Australian government a large majority consistently report being satisfied with their educational experiences in Australia. In 2016, 88 percent of 47,810 respondents reported satisfaction with their overall experience as well as with their learning experience, and 89 percent were satisfied with the support provided to them. These results are consistent with the findings from other global international student surveys and suggest that globally, students who travel abroad to study are generally satisfied with their experience (Australian Government Department of Education and Training, 2017b). While these broad indicators of satisfaction may suggest that Australia has been successful in providing international students with an excellent university experience, other more in-depth research has revealed that for many international students the experience of studying in Australia is extremely challenging and less than positive. For example, a 2016 mixed methods study at a large Australian university involving a survey of over 360 students and focus group interviews with 30 students revealed that although the majority of students reported that they were enjoying their university studies (77%), and that they found their courses interesting (75%), interacting with local students remained challenging for international students, with only one in five students (22%) reporting that they had made friends with Australian students. The study also highlighted some of the issues regarding the lack of interaction and the broader segregation that seems to exist in the University, not only between international and local students, but also between different ethnic groups within the international student cohort (Arkoudis et al., forthcoming).

Ongoing challenges

Interaction with local students

Addressing the lack of interaction between international and domestic students is an ongoing challenge for universities, with evidence suggesting that international students are concerned about the limited opportunities they have to interact with domestic students, both inside and outside the classroom (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014). This is an important issue, not just because of the potential learning benefits that come from interacting with diverse students, but because social interaction with local students greatly impacts international students' overall experience in Australia. Many come to Australia expecting and wishing to make friends with Australian students.

While there are numerous reasons for the lack of interaction between local and international students, poor English language skills are often cited as the main reason. This is not a new issue; much has been written about the English language standards of international English as an additional language (EAL) students (Arkoudis, Baik & Richardson, 2012), and the difficulty they experience in their studies and comprehending learning material (Baik et al., 2015), as well as in their interaction with local students and employers (Murray et al., 2011). Marginson (2011) argues that the difficulty international students have communicating in English is not trivial because it not only affects their engagement with members of the community, but also their ability to foster individual agency and understand the new cultural environment. Although universities have invested considerable resources in developing English language support programs, most have been peripheral to the main curriculum and most have focused on English for academic purposes, namely reading and writing. There has been much less work within the core curriculum to encourage English language development and specifically to facilitate spoken interaction (Arkoudis & Baik, 2014).

In addition to language barriers, a number of factors contribute to the lack of interaction. Understandably, many students prefer to stay within familiar cultural and language groups, what Eisenchlas and Trevaskes (2007) refer to as ‘the phenomenon of social categorisation and perception’ (p.421), and it can be difficult for students to initiate interaction when there is a lack of common ground in terms of cultural knowledge and interests (Baik, 2013; Arkoudis & Baik, 2014). This problem is not confined to Australia; studies in other English speaking countries such as the UK and Canada reveal similar challenges (e.g. Arthur, 2017; Guo & Guo, 2017). For example, Guo and Guo’s (2017) study of international students in Canada showed that as well as the language barrier, the lack of common interests between international students and local students was an obstacle to deep interaction.

Academic teachers also often report feeling ill-equipped to teach international students (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2003). While they acknowledge the importance and benefits of enhancing interaction among students from diverse backgrounds, they also report feeling frustrated as they attempt to cope with the diversity that exists in their classrooms. This has important implications for universities. Designing appropriate professional development for academics in this area seems particularly important given the crucial role they play in the engagement and educational experience of students.

Employment opportunities

Opportunity for employment in the host country is a major factor in international students’ decision making about where to study, and international students come to Australia with high expectations about post-study employment (Blackmore et al., 2014). However, when seeking employment in their field of study after graduation, there are numerous challenges and obstacles facing international students.

For many international students, one of the main barriers to finding a job is employer perceptions about the poor English language standards of international students. Arkoudis et al.’s (2009) study on

the workplace readiness and employment outcomes of international students found that international students face significant challenges in finding work in their field of study. The majority of the 40 international final-year students and recent graduates interviewed in the study had not been successful in finding work in their chosen field of study, whereas all the Australian graduates interviewed were working in a field related to their university course or pursuing further studies. The study found that employers routinely screened applicants to check oral communication skills through telephone calls before proceeding to the interview stage of the application process. Most international students thus failed to reach the interview stage despite having strong curriculum vitae. Even for those who had found work after graduation, a major challenge for them in progressing their careers was a lack of workplace-appropriate English language skills and ‘cultural fit.’ This is supported by Blackmore et al.’s (2014) more recent study which found that poor communication skills, inadequate generic skills, and lack of local work experience were the main barriers to employment for international graduates.

Cultural hostility and discrimination

In 2009, Australia suffered considerable damage to its reputation as a safe destination for international students following a number of violent attacks, which led to a highly-publicized protest by Indian students in the Melbourne Central Business District. At the time it appeared that at least some of the attacks were racially motivated, and the incidents received a great deal of media attention in India, with the Indian Prime Minister publicly expressing his concerns about the attacks (Universities Australia, 2011).

Since then, research has shed more light on the range and extent of issues and challenges experienced by international students. From their extensive interviews with over 250 participants, Marginson et al. (2010) highlight challenges in the international student experience as including, in addition to language barriers, being “outsiders” and marginalised non-citizens, and cultural hostility or prejudice (more so for women than men). Approximately 50 percent of the interviewees reported experiencing cultural hostility or prejudice. Similarly in Arkoudis et al.’s 2016 study mentioned above, students cited issues of discrimination based on race, ethnicity, or culture – for example, exclusion of membership from a group, or unfair treatment by teachers or peers. Some students (6.5%) had also experienced verbal assault in the form of offensive insults or threats (Arkoudis et al., forthcoming).

This issue is not limited to Australia. In examining the experience of international students in the UK, Arthur (2017, p.892) refers to ‘aversion to exploring diversity’ when international students are viewed as ‘inferior’ or treated as unequal due to their English language proficiency or different ways of learning and demonstrating knowledge. This leads to isolation of international students during class interactions and exclusion during group assignments. Guo and Guo (2017) report similar findings from their qualitative study of international students in Canada, some of whom reported that they dealt with discrimination not just from their classmates but from their instructors and the local community. Those

who spoke English with a ‘non-standard’ accent in particular felt that they were thought of as being less intelligent. The authors note: “In reality, some international students in this study had to deal with deep-rooted racism from their peers and people in the local community in the form of verbal attacks, including swearing and being told to return to their home country” (Guo & Guo, 2017, p.863). Similarly, Brown and Jones’ study (2013) involving a cohort of around 150 international postgraduate students in the UK showed that one third had experienced some form of racism, which had a strong emotional impact on students and left negative impressions of the host country in many cases.

Emerging issues

The issues discussed so far in this paper have been ongoing challenges for Australian universities for over a decade. In recent years, a couple of issues have emerged as being critical for the safety and wellbeing of international students.

Late last year, Universities Australia, the peak body representing Australian universities launched its “*Respect. Now. Always*” campaign in response to growing concerns about the prevalence of campus sexual assault and violence. While this is a critical issue affecting all students, international female students were identified as being particularly vulnerable due to cultural and language barriers, as well as their isolation. International students are also more vulnerable because they may not fully understand their legal rights and be fearful about being blamed for the assault or the consequences of speaking out for their families, future studies, or visas (EROC, 2017). These reasons also make international students more susceptible to workplace exploitation. In the past few years, this issue has attracted considerable attention after revelations of nationwide exploitation and underpayment of international students, including by such companies as 7-Eleven and Caltex.

Another issue of increasing concern for universities is the mental health of university students. A growing body of research shows that university students are a ‘very high risk population’ for psychological distress and mental disorders. For example, Stallman’s study of almost 6,500 students at two major Australian universities found high levels of psychological distress (as measured by the Kessler 10) in 84% of the participants, compared to 29% of the overall Australian population reporting such levels (Stallman, 2010). Similarly, research involving over 5000 students at a large Australian university found that one in four students, both local and international, reported severe levels of psychological distress as assessed by the Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales (DASS-21) (Larcombe et al., 2015). At these levels it becomes difficult for students to deal with daily activities such as sleeping, let alone concentrating and studying effectively.

While the problem of student mental health is not a new issue, two major reports published in the last two years (Orygen, 2017; Veness, 2016) put a spotlight on the significance of the “wicked problem” of university student mental health. According to the Orygen report (2017, p.13), factors associated with increased risk of mental health difficulties are academic pressures, financial pressures, and

relocation to participate in higher education. They emphasise that international students are at greater risk of mental health difficulties due to the additional stressors they experience from language barriers, displacement and disconnection from family, and possibly because of their religion or culture in which mental health issues may carry a stigma and thus make students less likely to seek support. For these reasons, one of the key recommendations in Veness's (2016) report, the "Wicked problem of university student mental health", refers to the need to pay special regard to the needs of international students.

How can universities improve the experience of international students?

There are no simple solutions to addressing the challenges outlined in this paper. Australian universities have devoted considerable resources and energy to supporting international students and enhancing their experience, largely focused on supporting students' academic and cultural transition to university, and in helping them develop their academic English language skills. These are all very important areas to support; however, it is clear that more attention needs to be paid to promoting social cohesion and international student wellbeing, particularly by fostering regular and meaningful interaction between international and local students.

The interactions international students have with local students have a strong influence on the quality of their experience. As Arthur (2017) puts it, 'establishing friendships with local students is critical for reducing feelings of loneliness and homesickness' (p.891). While universities have implemented a number of strategies to enhance student engagement with their peers such as the scheduling of shared time for extra-curricular activities and building collaborative learning spaces, evidence suggests that there are continuing problems with international student isolation and wellbeing. More needs to be done to develop a strategic and holistic approach to fostering social cohesion among students and building international students' sense of belonging to the university community and beyond. Four areas for action are proposed below.

1. Developing creative approaches to curriculum design

First and foremost, universities need to develop curricula that acknowledges the potential for classroom diversity to be a resource for student learning, and that are "compelling enough to break down the barriers created by scarce time and inter-cultural inhibition, so as to foster interaction and have a positive effect on attitudes and approaches to learning" (Baik, 2013, p.133). This will require creative approaches to curriculum design that help to break down some of the aversion to working with diverse peers mentioned earlier, as well as engage students in learning tasks and projects designed to help them develop and practice the skills needed for effective cross-cultural communication. Most international students come to Australia with a strong desire to interact and make friends with local students. Local students on the other hand may be uninterested or reluctant to engage with international students,

particularly with those whom they perceive as having limited English language skills. As all students are required to engage with the core curriculum, it is the best place to intentionally foster and support interaction among diverse students (Arkoudis et al., 2010). Increasing interaction within the curriculum will also provide valuable opportunities for international students to develop their speaking skills, an issue of critical importance not just for their social integration, but also for their employability.

Designing curriculum to foster meaningful interaction between local and international students will require a re-thinking of assessment design. Given that assessment has a powerful influence on students' approaches to learning, assessment tasks and marking criteria should be strategically designed to signal to students the importance of collaborative learning and the ability to work with people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Designing assessment tasks and engaging curricula to meet the objectives of an internationalized curriculum is not an easy task, and academic educators will need appropriate support and resources to achieve the objectives. A recent Australian government funded project, *Finding Common Ground* (Arkoudis et al., 2010) presents a conceptual framework and practice resources for designing curriculum to foster interaction between international and local students.

2. Internationalising the educational experience of local students

Universities should place more priority on providing local students with a genuinely international university experience through curriculum as mentioned above, but equally importantly, through increased opportunities to study abroad and stronger encouragement to learn a foreign language (Baik, 2013). This will help students develop a genuine interest in, and skills for, engaging with students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. As Doyle et al., 2010 argue, a major challenge for universities in English-speaking countries like Australia is 'how to stimulate students' interests in studying about, and in nontraditional localities such as Asia, South America and the Middle East' (p.486).

Australia sends an insignificant number of their students abroad for study (OECD, 2016). Only 1% of Australian students are enrolled in courses overseas, and the ratio of international students in Australia to the number of Australian students studying abroad is 20 to 1. This is the highest ratio of OECD countries and arguably puts Australian graduates at a disadvantage in the global labour market. Compared to Australia, in the UK there are 14 international students to every UK student abroad, and in the US the ratio is lower at 11 to 1 (OECD, 2016).

In addition to supporting students to undertake part of their studies abroad, universities need to place greater priority on encouraging Australian students to learn a foreign language. Australia has the lowest level of second-country language skills of all OECD countries and in their report, *Languages in Crisis: A rescue plan for Australia*, the Group of Eight Australian universities (2007) warn that mono-lingualism and the decline in foreign language learning is putting Australia at risk educationally and economically. As Baik (2013, p.144) writes: 'Monolingual graduates not only lack the ability to

speak another language *per se*, they have missed out on the numerous cognitive benefits and cross-cultural skills and knowledge acquired during the process of learning a foreign language'. Encouraging (and providing incentives for) local students to learn a foreign language is thus a broad strategy for fostering interaction with international students as learning a foreign language will likely increase their local students' interest in, and understanding of, other cultures as well as their empathy for international students for whom English is an additional language.

3. Promoting student wellbeing

The safety and wellbeing of international students is of utmost importance, and it is critical that universities devote energy and resources to reducing international student isolation and assisting them to understand their rights, particularly in relation to the workplace and personal safety. As well, it is essential that student have access to, and know where to go for, assistance and support in a range of matters, both study-related and personal. Reducing social isolation from other students in particular, is vitally important as empirical studies have identified social isolation and lack of a sense of belonging to the institution as strongly associated with mental health difficulties (Baik et al., 2016).

To promote student mental wellbeing, Baik et al. (2016) argue for a whole-of-university approach that focuses on five strategic action areas: 1) foster engaging curricula and learning experiences; 2) cultivate supportive social, physical and digital environments; 3) strengthen community awareness and actions; 4) develop students' mental health knowledge and self-regulatory skills; and 5) ensure access to effective services. In particular for international students, it is essential that universities create social, physical and digital environments that are strongly inclusive, and that promote positive interactions among diverse students. It is also important that the misunderstanding and stigma surrounding mental health difficulties is reduced so that students are more likely to recognize mental health difficulties when they arise and seek support and assistance.

4. Establishing partnerships with local communities

Universities should establish partnerships with local communities to raise awareness and develop a welcoming "host culture" that recognizes the contribution international students make to the cultural richness and diversity of local communities, not to mention the financial contributions they make. In discussing international students in the Canadian context, Guo and Guo (2017) argue that 'the limited receptiveness of the local community' may contribute to the sense of alienation among international students. Social isolation is also a problem for international students in Australia (Baik et al., 2015). Universities should work with relevant community groups and businesses to encourage more international student involvement in organising community events and activities. Moreover, while

many universities run anti-racism campaigns within their institutions, it is important that they also continue to engage with local communities to address discrimination and racism more broadly.

Another way universities can support international students' engagement with the broader community outside of the university, is by working with local businesses and employers to create opportunities for students to gain experience in the Australian workplace. Presently, there are numerous obstacles facing international students in gaining work placements and internships, which provide valuable experience for enhancing their workplace readiness and employability (Blackmore et al., 2014). Without workplace experience, many students are poorly prepared to enter the labour market at the end of their studies. While most universities offer workshops on resume writing and interview skills and facilitate work-integrated learning opportunities where possible, more needs to be done to support the employability of international students. Universities should boost their efforts in establishing partnerships with local businesses and employers to assist international student gain valuable work experience and enhance their engagement with the broader community.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed the main challenges experienced by international students in Australian higher education and emerging issues affecting the quality of their educational experience. It argued that to maintain Australia's strong position in the global international student market, institutions must re-balance their efforts from developing strategies to recruit international students, to finding creative solutions for addressing common challenges and improving the quality of the international student experience both within and beyond the university.

While Australia continues to enjoy large growth in international student enrolments, universities cannot become complacent in their efforts to provide a high-quality cosmopolitan experience for their international students. As East Asian countries continue to develop their own education systems with internationalised curricula and courses delivered in English, it will be increasingly difficult for English-speaking countries such as Australia to maintain their positional advantage (Marginson, 2006). A critical aspect of improving the quality of international students' experience is enhancing the social cohesion between international with local students, as well as building their sense of belonging to the institution and the broader community. This necessarily includes supporting international students to develop their workplace readiness and employability. Of utmost importance is the need to pay greater attention to promoting the safety and wellbeing of international students. This is essential in maintaining and elevating Australia's reputation for providing high quality tertiary education in a safe and welcoming environment.

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