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## **Communicating with International Students: How do their social networks impact on where they go to for information?**

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### **Abstract**

*Nearly all institutions that attract international students provide crucial information — particularly in relation to non-academic issues (e.g. access health services, food, accommodation, and leisure activities) — to these students while they are in Australia. However, this information is not well accessed by the students because of the lack of understanding on how international students search, access, use, rely on or share information. This paper therefore investigates how international students access information related to non-academic issues and provides insights into ways institutions can engage with their international students in the online environment. Through analysing interview data from a series of 8 focus groups, this early research shows that international students display different information seeking behaviour depending on the social networks they belong to while in Australia. By mapping the social networks of international students, this paper suggests some practical implications to effectively provide information to international students.*

### **Key Words**

International students, social networks, information sources, social media, health, accommodation, lifestyle

### **Introduction**

Disseminating crucial information — particularly in relation to non-academic issues (e.g. access health services, food, accommodation, and leisure activities) — to international students while they are in Australia has been a challenge since Australia started receiving large numbers of international students. Challenges range from providing relevant information in a timely manner, understanding sources of information, which students rely on, and more recently, the use of social media in facilitating information exchange amongst international student communities. At various levels, key service providers and governments have tried to produce information portals specific to international students in the hope that they find these sites useful. Yet, there is very low traffic or interest in these portals. Universities and other Educational Institutions are also aware that it is a challenge to get students to keep in touch with them and to get students to seek out information that has been provided within institutional websites. More importantly, some early research shows that international students display different information seeking behaviour depending on the language they speak (Bilal, 1989, Liu and Redfern, 1997,

Onwuegbuzie and Jiao, 1997), educational level (Yi, 2007), where the students are from (Liao et al., 2007, Liu and Redfern, 1997) and the extent to which they might or might not integrate with Australian communities (Liu and Redfern, 1997).

In addition, students are “global citizens” (Young and McPharlin, 2011). There are assumptions that students born from the 1980s onwards have been characterised as ‘digital natives’ (Bennett et al., 2008) because of their familiarity with and reliance on modern social technologies, particularly those transmitted over the internet. (e.g., Patingale and Silkstone, 2011). As a result of their familiarity and experiences with these technologies students are more likely to look for and readily find information online. However, there is literature that shows that internet savvy students are limited in their information seeking behaviour (e.g., Judd and Kennedy, 2011, Kennedy and Judd, 2011, Margaryan et al., 2011) and have been shown to possess a diverse range of technology skills and preferences (Kennedy et al., 2008, Nagler and Ebner, 2009, Kennedy et al., 2010, Margaryan et al., 2011) as well. For example, Margaryan et al. (2011) found that students use few established technologies and their use of collaborative knowledge creation tools, virtual worlds, and social networking sites was low. Kennedy et al. (2008) surveyed 2120 undergraduate students to examine what technology tools were used by students and how frequently. They found that there is a lack of homogeneity in technology use, particularly when moving beyond established technologies such as mobile phones and email. Nagler and Ebner (2009) surveyed 821 first year undergraduate students and found that students use Wikipedia, YouTube and social networking sites more than social bookmarking, photo sharing and microblogging. Therefore, this study extends the work of previous studies into the information seeking behaviour of international students in order to provide a clearer understanding of where students go to for information.

Engaging with future students by implementing an effective communication and media strategy is a primary concern of the Australian government (Evans and Weddell, 2010). Here the “development of communication tools for [the] Austrade network to facilitate consistent messaging” and to “work with the sector in Australia to develop relevant key messages, case studies and good news stories” are emphasised (Evans and Weddell, 2010). International education providers are becoming aware of the impact current communication platforms such as social media has on student information access (Young and McPharlin, 2011). Hence several initiatives have been undertaken to address the quality of the information agents provide to prospective international students. Initiatives by PIER Online (an educational training provider), ISANA International Education Association, and Victoria TAFE International (VTI) (Dunstan et al., 2011) reveal similar concerns and strategies to enhance the quality of information available through agents.

More recently, the call for integration of international students with the wider community has been intensified (Marginson, 2010). The Council of Australian Governments’ (COAG) strategy on International Education (Council of Australian Governments 2010) points to the need for better quality information to be provided to students. However, information needs to be communicated in ways that appeal to the needs of students and their social networks in a timely manner and using platforms with which they can identify. At the same time, there has been evidence that international students do not necessarily refer to host country sources of information or even belong to host country social networks, because of a range of social issues (Andrade, 2006). As a result, international students’ perceived self-identity, social roles and the social networks to which they belong might have a direct impact on how and where they access information, how and where they share their information and how this might impact on their decision making. Therefore, this can have a direct impact on their interaction with the wider community, and adjustment to a new environment in areas such as general lifestyle and health.

This paper presents the findings of a qualitative focus group study investigating the connections between social networks and where international student seek information. The focus of this paper is threefold: (i) it investigates how international students access crucial information in the areas of non-academic issues (e.g. health, accommodation and lifestyle), (ii) it provides a clearer understanding of how self-perceived social roles and networks might have an impact on where students go to for information, how they might use the information and where and how they might share that information, and (iii) it provides insights into way institutions can engage with their international students in the online environment.

## **Background**

International students need information relating to both academic and non-academic activities. For example, Butcher and McGrath (2004) found that international students in New Zealand have academic, social (including health and safety), and financial needs. However, the available literature about international students related to their information needs, behaviours, sources and use (e.g. Hughes, 2005, Liao et al., 2007, Liu and Redfern, 1997, Mehra and Bilal, 2007, Safahieh and Singh, 2006, Yap and Watson, 2011) tends to focus on the academic issues (e.g. university, faculty, study programs, coursework and patterns of library use). In contrast, little

research (e.g. Gu et al., 2004, Smith et al., 2011) has explored other non-academic issues (e.g. access health services, food, accommodation, and leisure activities) of international student everyday life.

With regard to accessing information about non-academic activities, Gu et al. (2004) have explored the medical and health care needs of female Chinese students at the University of Tokyo. They found that the most severe problem was the language barrier when it came to these students obtaining medical and health care for themselves and their children. The lack of knowledge of the Japanese medical and health care system was another obvious problem. Russell et al. (2008) have investigated international student use of university health and counselling services while attending a metropolitan university in Australia. They found that lack of information about services was one main reason for failure to benefit from such services.

In terms of the impact of social networks on information sources, Steffes and Burgee (2009) point out that the stronger tie sources [in the social network] are more likely to be used as a preferred or primary information source. Khawaja and Dempsey (2008) found that in comparison to domestic students, international students had less social support, used more dysfunctional coping strategies and had greater incongruence between their expectations and experiences of university life. Zhiheng (2007) also investigated the experiences of Chinese international students in New Zealand. The results show that recognition of the influence of sociocultural factors beyond the learning experience itself is vital in facilitating mutually beneficial outcomes for Chinese international students. Moreover, Chen (2010) found that immigrants tend to change their preferences on internet use to reflect their residence in the host country. In particular, the longer an immigrant resides in the host country, the less likely they would be to surf their original country's websites and the more likely they would be to communicate with local people via the internet. Furthermore, Kashima and Loh (2006) have found that Asian international students' acculturation to Australia was significantly influenced by their personal ties with other international (non-conational), conational, and local Australian students, and by the individual difference of need for cognitive closure. Having personal ties with locals alleviated their psychological adjustment. Students with more international ties were better adjusted in general. Furthermore, emerging studies (e.g., Sawir, 2008, Kashima and Loh, 2006) are showing that international students in Australia create identities and of course social networks that are tied to the adopted nation while studying and thus find the transition back to the homeland challenging. Therefore, the information seeking behaviour may be based on international student social identities and networks. International students may not have a singular national home-based identity or social network exclusively connected to the home nation. Because of their transnational migration, many international students have multiple identities and identity-based social networks. These identities are based not solely on the place of their birth but on heritage connected to the broad categories of race, ethnic culture, national culture and religion, as well as to other categories such as gender and general interests such as hobbies. Moreover, because international students in Australia often have the intention of successfully converting their residential status to permanent, they have a vested interest in fostering stronger links to their adopted nation.

## Methodology

To achieve the aims of the study, a focus group methodology was used as a way to elicit rich in-depth information from students about their information sources and also their social networks. The rich qualitative methodology enabled the researchers to probe further into the motivations and the reasons for using these particular information sources that respondents reported. It also allowed discussion within the group about the similarities and differences in using these sources. More importantly, the interaction between group members allowed researchers to observe any differences between different groups of students. A range of issues was raised and discussed in the focus groups relating to (i) the students social identities/roles; (ii) their social networks; (iii) their experience in accessing, communicating, and using the information, particular in the areas of health and general lifestyle; and (iv) their preferred ways of more effective information sharing, dissemination and promotion.

Participants who are legitimate international students were recruited via advertising in staff and students newsletters for The University of Melbourne and RMIT University. Potential participants contacted the research assistant who ascertained the their eligibility explained the study to them. Those who agreed to participate were then scheduled for a session that was convenient to them. The participants were compensated for their time with a voucher.. The discussions were audio taped with the consent of participants. The duration of the focus groups ranged from 70 minutes to 120 minutes, depending on the size and depth of discussion.

A total of eight focus groups was conducted. Seven of these were conducted with international students from undergraduate and postgraduate programs at universities and with students from TAFE colleges by the research team. The eighth focus group was conducted by the City of Melbourne (CoM) researcher independently and the data was compared with that of the seven main groups. The details of the focus groups are indicated in Table 1. As indicated in Table 1, the sample included students from a range of countries and across different educational

levels (from vocational education and training (VET) to postgraduate studies (coursework and research higher degree). Notably, the main project did not manage to recruit any students from India for the focus group interviews while the CoM focus group did manage to recruit one Indian student only.

After transcribing the focus groups in full, transcriptions were analysed manually using thematic analysis. This process involved reading and re-reading the selected text, coding, preliminary categorisation, and further classifying the data into categories. The accuracy of these categories was verified by working backwards and forwards between the data and the coding scheme. Over time, the themes were expanded, contrasted and discussed amongst researchers.

*Table 1. Focus Group Participants' Background*

	No. of Students	Gender	Educational Level	Discipline Areas	Countries
<b>Focus Group 1</b>	5	M (2) F (3)	Undergraduate	Commerce (4) English (1)	China (2), South Korea (1) Vietnam (1), Hong Kong (1)
<b>Focus Group 2</b>	3	M (2) F (1)	Postgraduate	Commerce (1) Communication (1) Architecture (1)	Iran (1) China (1) Singapore (1)
<b>Focus Group 3</b>	6	M (1) F (5)	Postgraduate	Public Health (2) Medicine (1) Teaching (1) Art (1) Psychology (1)	Japan (1) USA (1) Brazil (1) Sri Lanka (1) Bangladesh (1), Vietnam (1)
<b>Focus Group 4</b>	6	M (2) F (4)	Undergraduate	Commerce (2) Engineering (2) Law (1) Food Science (1)	Indonesia (2) Hong Kong (2) Malaysia (1) Brunei (1)
<b>Focus Group 5</b>	4	M (1) F (3)	TAFE/Private Colleges	Business (2) English Language (2)	Chile (2) China (1), Turkey (1)
<b>Focus Group 6</b>	5	M (1) F (4)	TAFE/Private Colleges	Business (2) IT (1) Design (1) Early childhood educated (1)	Brazil (1) China (1) Indonesia (1) Thailand (1), Kuwait (1)
<b>Focus Group 7</b>	6	M (1) F (5)	TAFE/Private Colleges	Business (2) General English (2) Marketing (1) Hospitality management (1)	Colombia (3) Brazil (1) Chile (1) Vietnam (1)
<b>City of Melbourne (CoM) FG</b>	4	M (3) F (1)	Postgraduate	N/A	Turkey (2), China (1), India (1)

## Findings

### Social networks of international students

From the focus groups, it is evident that students could be classified into four categories derived from the focus group data based on the demographic make up of their social networks. Four groups were clearly distinct from each other. These were:

- **Students whose social networks are dominated by international students from their home country (SNHC)** – this group of students reported that they tended to socialise, study with and often lived with other international students from their home country. Pre-dominantly, they would speak their home language.
- **Students whose social networks are dominated by international students from a variety of countries (SNIS)** – This group of students reported that they tended to socialise with a range of other international students who are not necessarily from their home country. Sometimes, this might be due to a desire to interact across cultures while others reported that they might find it hard to connect with students from their own countries (either due to small numbers or social differences). These students tended to communicate in a common language that their social network is familiar with.
- **Students whose social networks are dominated by Australian domestic students (SNAS)** – This group of students is smaller than the other three within our sample and reported that they actively sought to integrate and find local friends through study, work or general social clubs within their institutions or within the communities they live in. Some of the students might already have made Australian friends even before coming to Australia. This might have been through visiting Australia and overseas or through social networking sites. They tended to speak English in their interactions.

- **Students whose social networks include a mix group of students, both Australian and international (SNMS)** – This group of students reported that they almost seem to have two social networks that do not always mix with each other. They tended to be the middle person ‘moving and travelling’ between their social networks. They reported that they would speak different languages in their different networks.

In addition to the broad social network categories, the research also examined similarities between students in the distinct groups of college/TAFE students, undergraduate students, and postgraduate students. However, it was found that there were fewer commonalities within educational level groupings than there were within the social network groupings. The findings from the CoM focus group that was carried out independently also correlated closely to the findings of the main project.

While many studies in the past have focused on country of origin as a way to differentiate international students from each other, this project found that focusing on country of origin could provide very misleading and incomplete information about international students. For example, students from China were represented in three of the four social network groupings above (namely, SNHC, SNAS, and SNMS). In terms of use and access to information, the Chinese students in each of the social network groupings displayed more commonalities with other students in the same social network groupings than with Chinese students who reported other social network groupings. Therefore, this study found that it was more useful to look at the sources of information from the perspective of different social network groupings than from the country of origin perspective. The importance of understanding a social network’s role in influencing the source of international students’ information is clearly highlighted by the experience of the students in all eight focus groups. The following quotes highlight the reliance on social networks;

- A Bruneian undergraduate student belonging to SNIS social network stated that she would use various sources in addition to university sources to get information on accommodation and everyday life; “*I [would] go to search for the board in Melbourne Uni, and also the Gumtree and maybe ask for information from my flat mate or just go to the suburb and get a feel of how the people*” (UG/ Brunei).
- A Chinese postgraduate student with a SNMS social network depended on his university friends to know where to go for social activities then share this information with his home country friends; “[I] ask them [my university friends] where to go, then share with Chinese friends” (PG/ China).

These demonstrate that international students relied on their social networks for information, which means that the more diverse the social network of the students, the greater the range of information the international student is likely to get. However, it is worth noting that there were some patterns (within the sample) of how students from some countries reported their social networks. The following are key patterns discerned from the focus group interviews:

1. In this sample, students from China were more likely to report that they have a SNHC social network.
2. In this sample, students from Brazil, USA and Japan were more likely to report either a SNAS or SNMS social network.
3. In this sample, students from Southeast Asia were more likely to report a SNIS social network.

## Information sources of international students

### Overall – what are the patterns?

Students from all four social networks types identified in this study tended to rely on Australian sources of information for most of the basic everyday things they do in Australia (e.g. food, health, local travel, weather, jobs, and banks). For other activities (e.g. news), students from SNHC and SNAS social networks used mainly sources from their home countries and/or international sources, whereas students from SNIS and SNMS social networks used only international sources. On the other hand, students from SNMS social networks rarely used sources from their home countries.

- When asked about how they access information in general terms students with SNHC social networks reported that they mainly tended to use sources from their home countries, “*I use QQ more,*” (UG/China) and international sources (e.g. Google, Yahoo, Facebook) for information, including news, “*I use as many search resources as I can, like Google*” (UG/ Vietnam).
- Students with SNIS social networks mainly tended to use international sources (e.g. Google, Facebook) and fewer sources from their home countries, “[I] use more of Facebook than the Korean equivalent [Minihompy]” (UG/ South Korea).
- Students with SNAS social networks mainly tended to use Australian sources of information but in terms of news about their home countries (to know what is going on there) they tended to rely on sources from their home countries, “*I use Japanese websites more (than Australian) now, because I don’t know what’s going on at home*” (PG/ Japan).

### **Accommodation and everyday life information**

Students from SNHC, SNIS and SNMS social network types sought information from various sources such as friends, community associations, Gumtree website and real estate websites. Fewer tended to rely on institutional websites. Some of the responses included; “[I would] go to the website of the Vietnamese Association, the Gumtree would be the final one” (PG/ Vietnam) and “[I] ask university staff about accommodation, talk to friends about where to live (PG/ Singapore). Students from the SNAS social network indicated that they would seek information from their home country sources (e.g. Japanese website), university housing site and real estates. One postgraduate student from Japan stated “I [would] use real estate and the Melbourne University housing sites, and two Japanese websites” (PG/ Japan).

### **Health information**

Students from SNHC, SNIS and SNMS social networks would mainly rely on the university health services and search Google for symptoms to get information about serious health issues they experience. Some typical responses included; “I would go to the university health centre” (PG/ Vietnam) and “[I would] go to see a doctor... [and]...Google” (UG/Hong Kong 3). Some students from SNHC and SNAS social networks would ask their parents to get this kind of information; “[I] ask parents” (UG/ Indonesia 2) and “I usually call my mom” (PG/ Japan). Students with SNIS and SNMS social networks indicated that they would not rely on their parents for information about serious health issues.

### **Entertainment information**

Students from all four social network types tended to rely on various sources (e.g. *That's Melbourne* website, posters, university newsletters, Google, online games, YouTube, friends, backpackers and tourists) to find out about entertainment activities. However, there are still some differences between and within these networks. For example, some students in the SNMS social network relied on their home country websites for entertainment while other students from SNMS social network may rely on Facebook friends' event invitations. Some students from SNHC social networks also indicated that they rely on websites from their home countries for entertainment whereas others from this group indicated that they use websites such as *That's Melbourne*. Some typical responses included; “Melbourne has got an official website, so just go there and check for it” (UG/Hong Kong 1) and “Just looking around, there are a lot of flyers and posters” (PG/ USA)

### **Social activities information**

Students from all four social network types tended to do the same activities (e.g. food-focused, social-focused, and shopping-focused); however, they varied in terms of the sources they rely on to find information about these activities. For example, students from SNHC and SNMS social network types tended to rely on Australian sources and word of mouth from their friends in their social network; one undergraduate student stated that “I would use for travelling within Australia...definitely use Australian sources” (UG/China 2). On the other hand, students from the SNIS social network type had a tendency to rely on word of mouth from their friends in their social network “Go to each other's house, we do a party...Our food brings many people together” (PG/ Bangladesh), which contrasts with students from the SNAS social network type who often relied on Australian sources “I mainly go out drinking at pubs, clubs, bars – that's a good place for us [Australian friends]” (PG/ Japan).

### **News**

Students from SNHC, SNIS and SNAS social network types mainly used sources from their home countries and/or international sources regularly to keep up with news from their home country. Some typical responses included; “I go to BBC world service” (UG/ Malaysia) and “Everyday news relating to Iran not governmental sites, Google (PG/ Iran)]. Students from the SNMS social network type mixed their news sources; some used sources from their home countries and others checked Australian sources. There was no clear pattern in term of where students go for news because it really depends on the type of news they are looking for. Some examples included; “[I] checked news from home, but I don't even check news from here (Governments)” (PG/ Brazil) and “Information on China from...media, Google links, The age [Australian Newspaper]” (PG/ China).

### **Discussion**

The key result of this paper is the significance played by various social networks of international students when it comes to the ways in which they seek information. This new finding has not been discussed in depth previously and provides a new way of examining the information seeking behaviour of international students. This study found that focusing on country of origin could provide very misleading and incomplete information about international students. For example, students from China were represented in three of the four social

network groupings above (namely, SNHC, SNAS, and SNMS). In terms of use and access to information, the Chinese students in each of the social network groupings displayed more commonalities with other students in the same social network groupings than with Chinese students who reported other social network groupings. Therefore, this study found that it was more useful to look at the sources of information from the perspective of different social network groupings than from the country of origin perspective. The importance of understanding the role social networks play in influencing the source of information international students seek is clearly highlighted by the experience of the students in all eight focus groups. Hence, international students rely on their social networks for information, which means that the more diverse the social network of the students, the greater the range of information the international student is likely to get.

Research into the classification of students in Australia has been either country (e.g. Forbes-Mewett et al., 2010, Kemp et al., 2011, Yap and Watson, 2011) or region specific with an almost exclusive focus on Asia. Such work includes studies on the recruitment of potential students (Ilieva and Goh, 2011) and support of current students (Woodgate et al., 2011). On one level, these studies have not really addressed the increasing number of students arriving from South America who enrol in colleges and TAFE institutions (Baker et al., 2011). This indicates a clear need for further research into where students from Latin America seek information. On another level, these studies do not take into consideration that the ties that bind students their countries and regions loosen and change once they start their courses in Australia, which suggests that social network factors should be considered in greater depth.

This paper argues that students do not solely socialise with others from their country of origin. Instead, they often socialise with students from their courses. Often, the students they socialise with tend to be fellow international students who hail from the region they come from and local students who are culturally similar to them. For example, Singaporeans might socialise with other Asian students from their courses such as international students from Malaysia, India and Vietnam and locals who are ethnically and culturally Chinese and Indian. These more diversified social networks mean that students receive informal information from sources which are not specific to their countries of origin and that they are much more likely to be interested in official information that are clustered round their institution and courses. Hence, these social networks have different impacts on where an international student might go to for information.

It is worth noting that the findings of this study should not be used to generalise the information seeking behaviour of all international students due to several reasons: (i) the qualitative data is derived from a small sample size. While the data is significant in terms of understanding some behavioural patterns, this study could be extended with a large-scale survey so that the factors we identify in our key findings can be analysed further to explore relationships between the types of social networks students have, their countries of origin and how they seek information, (ii) the participating students were from universities and colleges in one city (Melbourne). Students from other universities and colleges in other cities, and, in particular, rural regions may have different views, (iii) the participating students were mainly from Southeast Asia, Mainland China and South America. Students from other regions Middle East, Scandinavia, India, Europe or North America may also have different views.

## Practical implications

There are three clear practical implications from this project in the way educational institutions, service providers and government communicate with students. The findings may influence the manner in which information is disseminated across broad areas of support and marketing.

1. First, the findings indicate that students within the sample varied considerably in terms of where they sought information from on a range of issues including social activities and events, health, and accommodation. The variances cannot be accounted for by country of origin. This suggests that there is a clear need for a diversified strategy based on the differences in the types of social networks we identified rather than simply grouping students according to countries or even regions of origin.
2. Second, the diversity of responses in terms of where international students go to for information strongly suggests that there is benefit to be gained from closer ties between education providers and other service providers such as health and accommodation since students currently tend to go directly to those sources for information when they have serious life issues. Where support services are concerned, there needs to be closer collaboration and partnership between educational institutions, service providers, and the wider community to provide information to international students. Educational institution websites and social media strategies need to be one of referral for a range of services rather than re-creation of a 'one stop shop' site for information. For example, the international students we interviewed rely on a variety of sources for information on health and accommodation but very few actually referred to their educational institution websites. Facebook was also a source of information if



the students had a serious health issue, however most students would go to a clinic or hospital and use Google to search for symptoms. Some students even reported that they didn't think it was their institution's responsibility to look after their health needs. This is not to suggest that there is no role for institutions to provide support in this area. Rather, it shows the need to provide information on the services at the right level and in using (social media) platforms that will increase international student traffic.

Therefore, it would seem that working with external information providers to have an awareness of the needs of international students has to be high on the agenda for educational institutions in servicing their international students. This strategy could include getting external information providers to link back to relevant sections of the educational institution websites.

3. Third, social media is clearly used by students to maintain contact with friends, family and social networks in their home countries. The students pointed out that Facebook was the one tool that allowed them to simultaneously keep in touch with friends and family in their home country as well as with new friends and acquaintances they make in Australia. Some students indicated that they depend on social media networks such as Facebook for their news; this was especially true of those students whose social networks were dominated by international students from a variety of countries. In addition, students from Mainland China tended to use Chinese social media such as Weibo (similar to Twitter), Renren (similar to Facebook) and various online forums for this purpose. However many of the Mainland Chinese students indicated that they were also starting to use Facebook for friends and acquaintances of other nationalities that they make in Australia.

Therefore, social media needs to be incorporated into university and college communication strategies for international students particularly given that Facebook operates on similar levels of trust as word of mouth. It is also important to explore the most popular non-English social media platforms such as Weibo, Renren, and Orkut, even when institutions are looking to provide information for onshore students in Australia. Moreover, there is a need for educational institutions to conduct research into the effectiveness of their use of social media to convey key information to each of the social network groups.

## **Conclusions and future directions**

The research reported in this paper is significant because few previous studies have identified the relationship between social roles and identities of international students and the way they access, use and share information particularly in relation to non-academic issues. The project found that there is some initial evidence that social roles and networks do play a role in mitigating the way information is accessed and shared. It was found that the students interviewed come from a wide range of countries with varying access to the Internet. The students were grouped according to the shapes of their social networks in order to address the impact social networks have on the how and the where international students access information.

What is clear from this study is that students do not subscribe to a 'one size fits all' model. They come from different countries, different levels of post-high school education, different courses and different social interests. This project is a snapshot of the complexity of social and information networks international students rely on.

In order to have a better understanding of the social networks international students keep and the sources of information they seek and rely on, we need to have a bigger sample size, which does not include just focus group discussions but also a nationally conducted survey. A survey that is released to international students throughout Australia will not only provide us with a clearer understanding of the ways in which international students form social networks and seek information for their basic, everyday and specific needs but it will also provide more data that allows us to inform international student service providers of better and effective ways of communicating with them.

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