

# Enriching international education with socio-cultural development

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## Abstract:

Literally, 'International Education' merely represents the pursuit of studies in a foreign educational institution. While this may be an accurate summary of the primary purpose of many overseas students, the description clearly does not accord full effect to the word 'International'. Australia prides itself as being a multicultural society; and the meaning of 'International Education' is accordingly expansive and encompasses such diverse experiences as community events hosted by the government, city councils, corporate bodies and student organisations. These events are often widely promoted, and while the students are not obliged to participate, many choose to attend. The presentation will endeavour to explore some of the reasons why this may be so and why socio-cultural development is an important dimension in international education from the perspectives of international students, local students and the general community.

## Key Words:

Student Clubs and Societies (C&S)  
Cultural activities  
Student satisfaction  
Cultural diversity  
Community participation

## Introduction:

The Educational export business constitutes a \$5.622 billion industry which includes the value of education and associated expenditure (IDP 2004). It is becoming one of our largest export industries. However, the current trend shows that Australian universities are seeing a downturn in international student demand in mid-2004 (Rood, David 2004). It is important for us to realize the factors that contribute to this downturn and address the problems.

Astin (1984) in his paper stressed the critical role of student involvement in student development. By actively engaging in their surrounding environment, students gain greater self confidence and learning and growth will take place. Through involvement with Clubs and Societies (C&S) on campus, students develop these factors. In this presentation we explore some of the reasons why C&S adds an important dimension in international education from the perspectives of international students, local students and the general community, and how we can further develop it to make it worthwhile. In addition, we will make some recommendations for the government and universities on what we can further offer these students.

From the dictionary, we define 'International Education' as the learning process to develop the skills and knowledge of international students. As for 'socio-cultural development', we mean the personal growth of student in terms of social and cultural factors.

International students do not only come to Australia for our lectures and tutorials, but also for their personal and socio-cultural development. The decreasing enrolment number is largely due to perceived lack of quality, in terms of support and research indicates that satisfaction levels and success rates of these students have a high impact on future enrolments (Kutirleh, S., Egege S., Morgan D.). We believe the current high retention rates of international students is not a reflection of complete satisfaction at the current level of support. Therefore it is important for us to acknowledge this as an important factor, and utilize it to enhance our value proposition to facilitate the growth of our international education sector. In the long run, international student's perception of the education can only improve. Research provides strong evidence that the student support services have a high impact on retention rates and success rates (Promnitz & Germain,

1996). If Australia is perceived as a welcoming place for the students, one that gave them a pleasant learning experience of a life time, the satisfied students will become ambassadors of the Australian educational sector. They will contribute positively to the Australian Economy. They will spread the good word about the Australian education system, and perhaps even sign themselves up as highly desirable, highly skilled migrants!

As Andrew Linder from Canada noted in *The Age*, “If you don't give your cash cow the feed, don't expect to milk it forever. Trade it in for a magic bean, and go climb to the giant's lair.” We at AFIS believe more can be done to strengthen the personal and social-cultural development aspects of the Australian educational experience, through C&S collaboration with the community.

The current universities and local councils have began to spend money to offer programs such as the international students' orientation week, cultural awareness programs to assist with students' transition to Australian life and University Life (Kutirleh, S., Egege S, Morgan D.). Although these programs are good initiatives, they do not, however, achieve the aim of helping them to “fit into” the Australian life. Why?

Firstly, most of these programs are aimed at the newly arrived international students. This is often a testing time where they are preoccupied in settling in, looking for accommodation, getting to know Melbourne and their University, and trying to adapt to the Australian style of teaching. It is unsurprising that some find it hard to allocate time for these programs.

Secondly, in many cases, international students lack the motivation or incentive to participate in programs offered by universities and local councils. International students, especially those who have come from Asia, are generally resilient and hence participating in these programs does not fall into their comfort zone. This is particularly the case where programs are offered in English, because students with poor language competence will experience discomfort (Lee, A., Abd-Ella, M. & Burks, 1981) in those programs.

Now, we will examine student's responses to why C&S is the preferred choice over the programs offered by the Universities.

### **Methods:**

The research was conducted in the form of a survey and a focus group meeting with international students C&S leaders and randomly picked international students. The questionnaire was developed and designed by the Australian Federation of International Students (AFIS) after discussions with some C&S leaders.

The questions asked at the focus group were:

1. What do they see as the needs of the international students?
2. What could be done to enhance the experiences of international students?
3. What is the main problem faced by your club when organising activities?

The questions on the survey were:

1. Have you joined a program offered by the University before?
2. What was the reason for joining/not joining the programs?
3. Are you a member of any C&S?
4. Do you hold any position of responsibility in a C&S?
5. How much time do you spend with a C&S per week?
6. What type of C&S did you join?
7. What was the reason and expectation to join C&S?
8. What are the tangible and intangible benefits that you receive from the C&S?

The questions were aimed at investigating the reasons students choose C&S to develop their social circle and what they learned from joining the C&S.

The surveys were distributed through AFIS' network of international students, C&S, as well as personal network of friends in the University of Melbourne, Monash University, Swinburne University, Deakin University and RMIT. When data was received, it was analysed by the researcher.

## Results:

A total of 176 responses were received from this survey. Out of the 176 responses, the majority of the participants were international students (85.9%) who have joined a C&S (90.1%), but 96.2% had not joined any international students programs. A majority of the responding students spoke Mandarin (16.1%), followed by Cantonese (13.3%) and Indonesian (13.1%). Approximately 54% of the respondents were females and 46% were males and the majority of the students stayed in shared accommodation (61%).

### *Reason for joining or not joining programs offered by the Universities:*

Respondents were given space to write their reasons. It was found that a large majority (82.3%) were aware of the programs offered to them by universities. Among those who are aware of the programs, however, the majority stated that they did not participate because they found the programs unappealing, because it seems so “big” and made them feel uncomfortable.

### *Type of C&S joined:*

Respondents were given boxes to tick those which apply to them. Social Clubs (69.7%) were found to be the most commonly joined, followed by faculty clubs (54.1%), and finally arts and cultural clubs (53.2%). These results support the proposition that international students genuinely wish to develop and broaden their social circle through the clubs.

### *Responsibility held and time spent in C&S:*

Out of the respondents who joined a C&S, 62.3% hold a position of responsibility and on average spend 1-5 hrs/week in the club. Around 13.2% spend 5-10 hrs/week and a rare 2% spend 10+ hrs/week in a club. It is clear that many students spend a fair proportion of their social lives participating in C&S.

### *Reason to join C&S and the benefits:*

Respondents were given space to pen down their responses. From the responses received, it was found that one of the major reasons to join C&S was to meet new friends, followed closely by the desire to develop improved communication, organization or management skills. It is obvious from this result that international students do want to develop personal skills and enhance their experiences through C&S.

By becoming involved in C&S, students found that they are given opportunities to explore their potentials and inner strengths by organising events and building personal networks. These opportunities, in turn, enhance their communications, management and leadership skills. When students have the time to participate in activities and events, they want to be more involved than to simply know more people, they also wish to get to enhance their organisational skills. This is something that most programs offered by universities do not cater for.

In addition, students are able to enhance their personal development within their comfort zone by participating in social clubs, country-specific clubs<sup>1</sup>, arts and cultural clubs<sup>2</sup> and faculty clubs. They are then able to exchange their experiences of their own culture with others and promote this to the University community as well as the Australian community. After building their confidence and competency in English, they can then integrate comfortably into the local Australian society.

This way, local students and the general community can also embrace the cultural benefits brought along by international students and help to create a more multicultural Australia.

### *Focus group responses:*

There were seven C&S leaders who participated in this research, including leaders from faculty clubs, arts and culture clubs and social clubs, and twelve randomly picked international students. Through discussions, it was found that the international students generally associate themselves with their own ethnic groups and lacked social support. Many of them are lonely and do not know where to seek help. In transition programs, the support services provided by the Universities (such as counselling, legal services etc...) are only offered in English, and due to their limited language skills, many will not use the service provided. The reason behind this phenomenon is that international students find it difficult to begin a conversation outside their

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Indonesian Student Associations, Indian Student Associations, Hong Kong Student Associations

<sup>2</sup> For example: Chinese Culture Society, African drumming Club

comfort zone. C&S are often approached by students seeking help. However C&S have very limited resources, and as such, their ability to provide such services is restricted.

This finding coincides with Atkinson, Pronterotte & Sanchez's paper. International students, especially Asians, tend to seek help for personal problems from closer friends or a group (such as C&S) than professionals.

In order to enhance international students' Australian education experience, the participants all agreed that there needs to be some sort of international students body to provide students with adequate welfare services and to improve the quality of activities offered by C&S through better funding. If more funding is made available to C&S, they will be able to concentrate on more important issues such as ensuring the satisfaction of their club members, promoting their activities and managing the club.

The biggest problem experienced by the C&S is financials. It is well known that financial resources are limited for funding international students' C&S activities, and that they are also time poor given the average university term of 8 months excluding holidays. Hence good management skills are vital to ensure the best utilisation of scarce money. Here we face a chicken and egg situation -- if the C&S spend 80% of their precious time and energy chasing the money, what can they do with the remaining 20%? How can they find the time to learn and develop the good management skills?

### **Recommendations & Solutions**

From the research, we have seen that C&S plays an important role in enriching the international students' socio-cultural development, and their activities should be encouraged through funding. The issue here is that to fully enrich socio-cultural life in Australia, we need the international students to expand their social life beyond their special-interest ethnic/national groups. We need to take an active role in helping students to network with the local communities. The invitation to C&S to participate in the development and creation of cultural programs, art projects and festivals should be encouraged. Furthermore it sends the message that international students are welcomed and embraced (Lee & Robinson, 1995).

The issue here is how do we achieve this?

The Australian Federation of International Students aims to fill this gap. We assist Universities, Local Councils and Government to bridge between the C&S and the general community. We assist the C&S to steer their members to become a more open and integrated with the local society. The first project undertaken was with the City of Melbourne Arts department's initiative to welcome international students. They wish to identify the interests of international students, so that an arts project can be planned for international students. We bridged the gap between C&S and the local councils by hosting an open forum to explore the international students' interests. As a result, the City managed to stage a successful, targeted and relevant campaign that captured the interests of international students.

Now, our proposal of a centralized, complementary support for international students' C&S might not appear to lead to short term economic gains. Indeed our sights are set on a longer horizon. We need to expand the support by C&S and integrate with programs offered by Universities, local councils and the government. This way, not only students are able to participate in programs that are of interest to them, but also able to utilize their strengths to help to build a multicultural Australia.

In order to achieve this goal, we must work together as a team and this is what we propose:

1. The government should provide more funding to international-based C&S for their activities and events. These funds can be managed by an external party and is approved on application basis. The result of this will be to increase the satisfaction of the students' social life and hence add value and complement the industry as a whole. One possibility is that the C&S can form a partnership with a centralised, full time, non-profit, and accountable 3rd party organisation that specialises in these matters. The 3rd party organisation will have full time, qualified consultants who can advise on financial, management and cross-cultural communication issues.
2. There should be an international students' body such as our organization to liaise with Universities, local councils and the government on behalf of C&S. Partnership is all about networking and human

relationships. A centralised, permanent and full time 3rd party non-profit organisation can provide a sense of "continuity", which is often lost whenever C&S committees disband. Also, if every department liaise with the C&S, this will result in an overlapping of effort. Such inefficiency is not ideal.

3. Universities and local councils should actively invite participation from C&S (where possible) in their programs. The result of this is to break the language barrier between the mainstream and the international students, understand the richness of Australian culture, to learn interpersonal, communication and organisational skills. And most important of all, it will help them to gain greater self-confidence and become socially competent.

### **Conclusion:**

Socio-cultural development is an important factor for international students. We understand the effects of dissatisfied customers on Australia's education export industry, so we must find solutions to help counter the decline of international student growth.

International students are not here to acquire qualifications on paper – that can be done via e-learning these days. We recognise that it is the entire learning experience that counts. We can go beyond the “quality service provider” way of doing business. Universities can position themselves as the international students' trusted partners in the quest for success and excellence -- through a memorable learning experience that lasts a life time. To move towards that difficult goal, we need to begin addressing some often overlooked problems in the “package” we currently offer.

Our research shows that international students generally stick with their own ethnic group, and are often lonely and frustrated. C&S is their preferred choice over programs offered by the Universities and Councils. This is an insight that we can act upon. Australia prides itself as being a multicultural society, and C&S contribute to the shaping of this image. Yet they do not receive much funding for multicultural activities and events that they organise. The government and the universities can easily make a big difference by allocating more funding to C&S-hosted events, activities and projects. AFIS is also currently undertaking further research into our proposed models and strategies for a more efficient framework of C&S management and support.

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