



Australian Government

Australian Education International

Enhancing the International Student Experience

A report on seven demonstration projects funded by Australian Education International and conducted in collaboration with Universities Australia

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Introduction

Released in 2010, the Council of Australian Governments' (COAG) *International Students Strategy for Australia 2010-14* outlined the Governments' strategic framework and action plan for supporting a high-quality experience for international students.

To assist in meeting the objectives of the Strategy, (available on the COAG website www.coag.gov.au), Australian Education International (AEI) developed a program to support innovative projects that showcase best practice in enhancing international students' experience, including:

- **Social engagement** - effective strategies for improving the level and quality of interaction between domestic and international students both on and off campus;
- **Career readiness** – models for ensuring that the employability skills of international students are developed and improved on an ongoing basis through continuous learning and integration into the total study experience;
- **Student support services** – exploring how international students access information that affects health and lifestyle, and the relationship between self-perceived identity and social networks; and
- **Orientation programs** – innovative ways to use new technologies (such as social media) to more effectively disseminate information on the nature and availability of support services for international students.

The program was undertaken in collaboration with Universities Australia, the peak body for the Australian higher education sector.

Several of the projects directly engaged community groups and Australian students, giving all involved a better understanding of the significance of international education in Australia. All the projects created opportunities for Australian and international student integration, with students often working together as team towards a common goal.

In some cases local councils and community organisations have pledged to continue to support project activities beyond the scope and timeframe of these Australian Government funded projects.

In all cases, the projects were a positive experience for participating students and staff and raised awareness of international students' experience on and off campus.

Background

Universities Australia was delighted with the high level of interest from many higher education institutions. Their submissions were assessed by a selection committee comprising three members:

- Professor William Purcell (Chair), Deputy Vice-Chancellor, international at the University of Technology Sydney;
- Dr Pamela Kinnear, Deputy Chief Executive at Universities Australia; and
- Ms Arfa Noor, President of the Council of International Students Australia.

Seven projects were awarded grants under this initiative to a total value of \$180,000.

Projects supported under this initiative

Summary of Projects		
Project title	Objectives	Sponsor
The Student Life Art Project 2012: Exploring and enhancing the student experience through the creative and expressive arts	To enhance community and social engagement; to highlight and raise awareness of the contribution of international students, and of the University to the local and broader community.	The Australian Catholic University
In My Eyes: Reflections on life in Canberra by ANU students	To improve the quality of interaction amongst Canberra community and students at the ANU without making any distinction between international and domestic students, by overcoming assumptions and perceptions based on where they come from.	The Australian National University
Enhancing the student experience - career readiness	To assist students in gaining career positions and getting ready to join the Australian workforce.	G'Day SA ¹
Mapping the social networks of international students: foundations for improving communication.	To explore how international students access information that affects health and lifestyle, and study the relationship between self-perceived identity and social networks.	The University of Melbourne
Engaging domestic and international students with the Australian environment - Wild Mob Wilderness Conservation projects	To facilitate the voluntary involvement of both domestic and international students in established and respected community organisations.	Griffith University
Social Engagement and Leadership Program (SELP) Pilot	To generate interaction between domestic and international students and help students build the soft skills highly valued by employers, like problem solving skills, communication skills and interpersonal skills.	The University of Western Sydney
An interactive game playing approach to student orientation	To transfer vital information about student support services more effectively using an activity based approach to orientation, and to promote early interaction between domestic and international students.	Southern Cross University

¹ G'day SA is a community organisation associated with Rotary International and supported by Education Adelaide.

Social engagement

The Australian Catholic University – The Student Life Art Project 2012: Exploring and enhancing the student experience through the creative and expressive arts.

To facilitate interaction and connections between international and domestic students at the Australian Catholic University (ACU), ACU International, in collaboration with Counselling Services of the Brisbane Campus, developed a creative and expressive arts project exploring themes around the student experience.

The project included six creative and expressive arts workshops, each with a central theme relating to student life. An art therapy and psychotherapy facilitator supported the students to weave their personal stories into the creation of art works expressing their student life.

A final public arts exhibition brought a voice to the stories and experiences, celebrating the significance of international students to the broader community and the contribution made by Australian universities in the provision of opportunities and resources for international students.

Students involved in the project reported:

- improved orientation to University life
- a heightened awareness of the nature of University support services
- a greater awareness of the needs of international students and how they can best be addressed
- increased collaboration between University support services and Faculty
- improved connections with other students and staff on campus
- enhanced relationships between international and domestic students, and
- the development of greater self-awareness and personal skills.

Building the success of this project, future collaborations are planned with the Brisbane City Council to provide further student and community engagement opportunities for ACU international students.



Tomomi Mase 2012

Key outcomes

- Increased empathy and integration between international and domestic students.
- Improved connections between students and staff at the ACU Brisbane campus, with students feeling more understood.
- Students got to know the campus and services available.
- Students gained better self-awareness and learnt new skills, both professional and personal.
- Raised awareness of international students in the community and a demonstrated potential for universities to connect with community groups through such activities.

In My Eyes: Reflections on life in Canberra by ANU students

The photography project *In my Eyes: Reflections on Life in Canberra by ANU Students* run by the Australian National University (ANU) provided an opportunity for students at the university, both international and domestic, to showcase to how they engage and interact with each other and the wider Canberra community.

The project aimed to enhance interaction amongst the Canberra community and students without making any separation between international and domestic students.

The photographs were considered by a committee of people in the Canberra art scene who selected 25 photographs to be printed for the exhibition. Students attended public speaking and writing seminars to complement their photo-taking and build their confidence in talking about their work and speaking with strangers.

A two week exhibition showcased the photos to the public, at which students had a chance to speak and interact with the community.

Several student photographs featured in various media including the Canberra Times, The Chronicle, CityNews online, BMA Magazine online, Blondelink (a local blog) and was also discussed on ABC radio 666 Breakfast with Ross Solly (May 1) and by the CanberrArts panel (May 3 2012).

The students involved in the project have since formed an ANU photography club and the ANU is considering using the photos as part of its recruitment activities.

Key outcomes

- Both international and domestic students achieved a high degree of integration and collaboration during the project
- The students involved expressed the view that they developed a strong connection with Canberra's environs and community while pursuing their photography subjects
- The workshops are expected to assist the students with their studies and later careers where they may need to write or give presentations to a public audience
- The photos are available in electronic form at: <http://drss.anu.edu.au/inmyeyes/photographs.php>



Faisal Shah - The fountain of life
<http://drss.anu.edu.au/inmyeyes/Shah.php>



Hannah Leslie-O'Neill - The Bush Capital
<http://drss.anu.edu.au/inmyeyes/Ting.php>

Griffith University – Enhancing the International Student Experience: Wild Mob Wilderness Conservation Projects

The aim of Griffith University's *Enhancing the International Student Experience: Wild Mob Wilderness Conservation Projects* was to build connections between international and domestic students through volunteer conservation projects run by the not-for-profit community organisation Wild Mob. In collaboration with Wild Mob, Griffith's Student Linx program provided students with the opportunity to get to know each other whilst participating in projects aimed at raising awareness of environmental issues on Brampton Island and Moreton Bay.

Following on-site training for the students *The Brampton Island Conservation Project* involved conservation activities including vegetation management, beach debris clean up, surveys and coral reef health surveys. Students explored the island together through group bushwalks and stopped in at a local pub in Mackay on return from the island.

The Moreton Bay Marine Wildlife Conservation Project included on-site training followed by conservation activities including beach debris clean ups, in-water marine debris clean ups and turtle conservation education workshops. The traditional owners of Stradbroke Island hosted a cultural workshop for the students introducing them to the island's traditional history food, medicine, tools and weapons.

Feedback was overwhelmingly positive with students staying in touch after the project. Students showcased their experiences in the following video:



International and Australian students work together to remove washed-up plastics that represent a risk to the local marine wildlife. A screenshot from:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bt-UpfDxTrw&feature=plcp>.

Key outcomes

- Both international and domestic students reported they were more confident interacting with each other after completing the project.
- International students reported they felt more confident engaging with domestic students and had developed a better understanding of how to engage with students from a non-English speaking background.
- All students reported a better understanding of the issues facing the environment and what they can do to help with environmental conservation.

Career readiness

The University of Western Sydney (UWS) – SELP (Social Engagement and Leadership Program)

Generating interaction between domestic and international students at the University of Western Sydney, whilst helping students improve their career readiness was the aim of the Social engagement and Leadership Program (SELP).

Sixty students, international and domestic, attended career readiness workshops over a four week period developing skills in problem solving, communication, project management, cross-cultural understanding and globalization.

Students also gained practical experience in community engagement and volunteering through local council projects made up of teams of both domestic students and international students.

At an award ceremony hosted by the Associate Pro Vice-Chancellor Engagement and International, the students' achievements were recognised with each SELP team giving a short presentation on their project outcomes, outlining the challenges and benefits of the project.

The community partners were very pleased with the contribution of the SELP students, with the students acting as ambassadors between the university and the community, strengthening community engagement.

Key findings

- Participants reported the program helped improve their communication skills and gave them a better idea of what it would be like in a real working environment.
- International and domestic students also reported they learnt valuable cross-cultural communication skills during the program.
- In particular students were very satisfied with the community engagement opportunities with the local councils.



A group of the sixty students who completed the SELP at their award ceremony. A video clip is available at:

http://www.uws.edu.au/selp/social_engagement_and_leadership_program/gallery

G'day SA - Job ready: assisting international student graduates gain career starts in Australia

The G'day SA project was based on the premise that students who have gained skills from casual or part-time work whilst studying are better prepared to find full time jobs and rewarding careers after graduation.

The project run by G'day SA, a community organisation associated with Rotary International and supported by Education Adelaide, provided workshops and mentoring on career readiness to assist international students to gain workplace experience and workplace skills that could help them become more employable in the longer term.

Students with the three major universities in South Australia participated in several *Job Ready* workshops designed to create an understanding of the business culture in Australia and how best to take advantage of this culture to gain career-start jobs. The workshops concentrated on resumes, letters of application and interviews, modified to take into account the current business climate and the state of the job market in various vocations.

Each graduate of the workshop was also given the opportunity to be 'embedded' in a Rotary club to assist the development of their business and networking skills while volunteering in Rotary club activities. The students were offered places with clubs for a 12 week period close to their places of residence and encouraged to volunteer for club projects.

The Rotarians appreciated the volunteer hours put in by the students, with G'day SA being approached by Rotary NSW to duplicate the project. Initial discussions with the University of Sydney are being planned and a similar project proposed with the University of NSW and Wollongong.

Key outcomes

- The workshops offered were well received with over 80% of attendees rating them successful and useful.
- Many of the students found their experience with Rotary very gratifying and several have since joined as full members.
- G'day SA has been approached by Rotary NSW to duplicate the project in some of the universities across New South Wales.



Student support services

The University of Melbourne - Mapping the Social Networks of International Students: Foundations for improving communication

The *Mapping the Social Networks of International Students: Foundations for improving communication* project investigated how international university and VET students from a variety of countries accessed information about health and lifestyle in Australia both before and after their arrival.

The research by the University of Melbourne together with researchers from RMIT and the Multicultural Health Support Service Centre, involved a review of the literature, followed by a survey of seven focus groups consisting of international students from undergraduate, postgraduate and colleges/ TAFE in Melbourne.

Issues raised and discussed in the focus groups centred on:

- the students social identities/roles;
- their social networks;
- their experience in accessing, communicating, and using the information, particular in the areas of health and general lifestyle; and
- their preferred ways of more effective information sharing, dissemination and promotion.

The researchers found that students tended to fit into four groups based on their social networks, including:

- Students whose social networks are dominated by international students from their home country
- Students whose social networks are dominated by international students from a variety of countries
- Students whose social networks are dominated by Australian domestic students
- Students whose social networks include a mix group of students, both Australian and international

The findings from this research will assist education providers in Australia and education agents offering pre-arrival information to tailor the information they offer, including how and where they offer it according to students' social network group.

Further national research into this topic is anticipated with the researchers intending to apply for a grant from the Australian Research Council.

Key findings

- All of the groups were mostly similar in the ways they access information sources about academic development and progress, accommodation and entertainment.
- The groups behaved very differently when it came to accessing information relating to pre-arrival, social activities and everyday life and health.
- Postgraduate students relied more on information provided by the education provider than other students.

Orientation programs

Southern Cross University (SCU) – An interactive game playing approach for Orientation to effectively disseminate information on the nature and availability of support services to international students to enhance the first year experience

Developing a more interactive approach to orientation to campus life and student services was behind Southern Cross University's orientation project for international students.

To communicate information about student support services more effectively, the project used an activity based approach utilising new and existing technology to empower students, foster social engagement and enhance student experience.

This activity-based approach involved making use of new technologies including You Tube style videos, board games, online quizzes, surveys, wikis, blogs and virtual classrooms to allow students to absorb orientation information in a fun, interesting, relevant and useful way.

Integrating the use of online facilities in student orientation also offered opportunities for students to familiarise themselves with these tools prior to commencing their studies and helped to empower them as they acquired foundational skills.

International students have reported they feel their orientation experience at university is enhanced when they are given the opportunity to interact with domestic students, staff and members of the wider community in informal social settings. The project offered international students a range of activities that required group interaction, enabling greater community engagement and establishing information resources that benefit the entire student body at the university.



An example of the game -playing strategies used in Southern Cross University student orientation program.

Key outcomes

- Greater interaction between international and domestic students, several of whom formed a social group after orientation.
- Student videos and case study scenarios provided a very meaningful way of transferring information.
- Staff at the university have seen an increase in the use of student services and students have been comfortable approaching staff directly.
- The student association has seen a sharp rise in membership from international students.
- A reduction in help line calls on issues with IT and passwords suggests information on these services is being better disseminated than before.