



Australian Government

Australian Education International

Student Voices:
Enhancing the experience of
international students in Australia

Student Voices: Enhancing the experience of international students in Australia.

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Australian Education International
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LIST OF ACRONYMS

ACPET	-	Australian Council for Private Education and Training
AEI	-	Australian Education International
CBIE	-	Canadian Bureau for International Education
ELICOS	-	English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students
ISANA	-	ISANA : International Education Association (formerly International Student Advisers Network of Australia)
ISB	-	International Student Barometer
ISS	-	International Student Survey
ISSA	-	International Students Strategy for Australia
NSW	-	New South Wales
PD	-	Professional development
POSSE	-	Postgraduate Survey of Student Engagement
QETI	-	Queensland Education and Training International
QLD	-	Queensland
SA	-	South Australia
UA	-	Universities Australia
VET	-	Vocational Education and Training
VIC	-	Victoria
WA	-	Western Australia

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As the third largest destination in the world for international tertiary students, Australia hosts more than 400,000 international school, vocational education and training (VET), higher education and English language students each year. With word of mouth being one of the most important influences on the decision making process for prospective students, the experiences that these international students have living and studying in Australia are important, and satisfied students can become important ambassadors for Australia and Australia's education system.

To understand the views and experiences of international students and to provide useful information to international education providers, Australian Education International (AEI) conducts national benchmarking surveys of international education students in each sector. The most recent of these surveys was conducted in 2010 and found high levels of satisfaction with the overall living and studying experiences of international students in Australia.

These high-level findings are very positive and the surveys have identified a number of areas where improvements can be made to enhance the overall experience of international students. These areas include:

- helping international students to interact with Australian students and the broader Australian community,
- providing and promoting support services to international students, and
- providing opportunities for international students to undertake work experience relevant to their studies, which will then help them to find suitable jobs after graduation.

To support Australian education institutions to deliver a high quality international education experience, the Council of Australian Governments developed the *International Students Strategy for Australia 2010-2014* (the ISSA). The ISSA is designed to “support a high-quality experience for international students, in order to ensure a sustainable future for quality international education in Australia”¹. Under the ISSA the Australian Government has implemented a number of initiatives to support international students' education experiences and to further enhance the student experience, including holding two international student roundtables and providing funding to ISANA, TAFE Directors Australia and Universities Australia to develop good practice guides for the sector.

This research report represents a part of this broader Government response. To develop a greater understanding of and ideas for improving the experiences of international students around the issues of interaction, support services and relevant work experience, AEI conducted 41 focus groups across Australia in 2011. These focus groups included groups of international school, VET and higher education students, as well as domestic VET and higher education students and international education support staff from a wide range of international education providers. Focus groups were held in Adelaide, Brisbane, Perth, Sydney and Melbourne, with the assistance of Study Adelaide, Queensland Education and Training International, the Western Australia Department of Education Services, the New South Wales branch of ISANA and the City of Melbourne.

¹ COAG 2010

International and domestic students shared their experiences of studying in Australia and talked about ideas for improving interaction with Australian students and enhancing the experience of international students. Some of the voices of the students are captured in the body of this report, providing a human element and giving more context to some of the findings of AEI's international student surveys.

The focus groups with international education support staff provided an opportunity to discuss strategies that effectively support international students, and to workshop ideas that can further enhance and improve the experience of international students in Australia. Many of the ideas and experiences that were communicated by international education support staff are also presented in the body of this report.

Key findings

Looking at the lifecycle of the international student experience, from pre-departure through to work experience and graduation, the key findings of this report are:

- Pre departure information is highly valued – institutions can improve international students' education experience by ensuring pre-departure information is timely and remains relevant to current practice in Australia.
- Large proportions of students move through education pathways and there are opportunities for stronger collaboration between providers involved in these pathways.
- The initial experiences of international students are extremely important, laying the foundation for their success in Australia.
- Institutions use a variety of different orientation programs, including using later-year international and domestic students as 'buddies' for new students.
- Some students are unaware of support services available to them and would use them if they were aware of them. Institutions are exploring new ways to promote their support services.
- Institutions have opportunities to use multiple media of communication to transmit important information about available support services, recognising that international students represent a diverse group with different communication styles.
- In promoting activities, it is important that the promotion encourages both international and domestic students to participate.
- Students want work experience – and volunteering is a popular option. Work experience is often about gaining relevant experience and opportunities for social interaction, rather than for the income alone.

SECTION 1. INTRODUCTION

Between 2008 and 2011, more than 400,000 international students a year have studied in Australia on student visas, with the large majority choosing to study in Australia because of Australia's reputation as a safe, high quality education destination. For most international higher education and vocational education and training (VET) students, studying in Australia presents an opportunity to experience a new culture or lifestyle, while allowing them to improve their chances of employment after graduation through gaining an internationally recognised, high quality qualification.

The OECD's *Education at a Glance 2011* shows that Australia was the third largest destination for international students studying at the tertiary level in 2009 (the most recently available data)². While Australia is extremely successful as an international education destination and has grown its share of the global international education market, there are a growing number of countries developing themselves as international education destinations, competing for the attention of prospective international students. For Australia to continue to attract international students in this increasingly competitive environment, it is important that international students studying in Australia are satisfied with the quality of their education and their experiences of studying and living in Australia.

Research has consistently shown that family and friends as well as current and past students are strong influences on the decision about where to study³, both at the country and at the institution level. Word of mouth is a key source of information used by prospective students. The purpose of this research report is to provide further insight into individual students' experiences of studying and living in Australia. It is intended to detail some of the individual stories that underlie the broader statistical findings from large scale surveys, including Australian Education International's (AEI) international student surveys.

To support Australia's international education sector, the Council of Australian Governments developed the *International Students Strategy for Australia 2010-2104* (the ISSA)⁴, which was released on 29 October 2010. The purpose of the ISSA is "to support a high-quality experience for international students, in order to ensure a sustainable future for quality international education in Australia". One of the five elements of the ISSA is the provision of better information – including through international student surveys "to better understand international students' experience of living and studying in Australia."

AEI conducted a national survey of international students in each of the sectors in 2006, with a follow-up survey of graduating VET and higher education students in 2007. AEI also conducted a national survey in 2010 under the auspices of the ISSA, using the International Student Barometer (ISB) developed by i-graduate for the English language, VET and higher education sectors, and a separately designed survey for the schools sector. Each of these surveys showed high overall levels of satisfaction with the experiences of studying and living in Australia, with the 2010 surveys showing results comparable to international benchmarks⁵.

² OECD 2011

³ AEI 2007, CBIE 2009, UA 2011, Lawson, C 2011

⁴ COAG 2010

⁵ AEI 2007, AEI 2010b, UA 2011

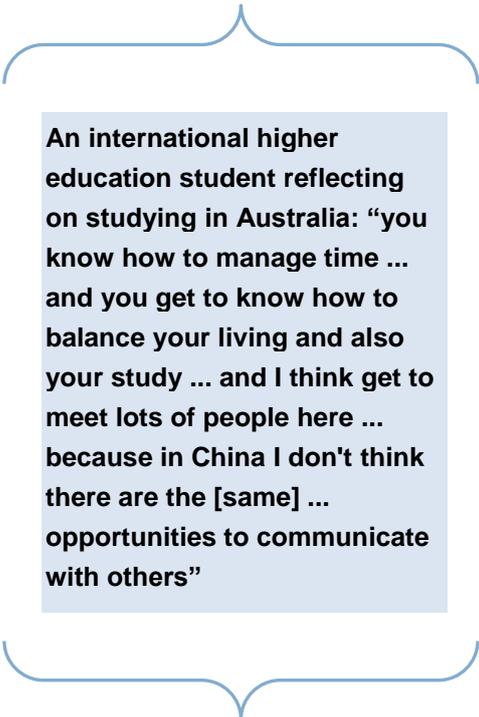
While the surveys showed that most students were positive about their overall experience, and were willing to recommend studying in Australia to their friends and family, there were some consistent themes coming through where improvements could be made. Three of these themes have to do with encouraging and supporting social interaction between international students and Australian students and members of the broader Australian community, providing more opportunities for international students to undertake relevant work experience while studying, and promoting and developing support services for international students.

These themes are not new – social interaction, in particular, is a theme that has been a topic for research for many years. They are also not unique to Australia’s international education system – surveys of international students in other countries have found similar results⁶.

A separate AEI survey of international graduate outcomes and employer perceptions further reinforces the first two of these themes, with employers seeing a need for more to be done to improve the language and communication skills and work experience of international graduates to prepare them for the workforce⁷.

A number of resources relating to social interaction have been prepared to support education providers, such as the *Finding Common Ground: enhancing interaction between domestic and international students* guide for academics⁸.

AEI has also contributed to resources encouraging social interaction, producing the *Examples of good practice in assisting international students to integrate with Australian students and the wider community*⁹ publication in 2009 and providing funding to ISANA¹⁰, TAFE Directors Australia¹¹ and English Australia to produce good practice guides for the sector. In 2012, AEI is collaborating with Universities Australia to establish a number of projects that demonstrate good practice in enhancing international student experience.



An international higher education student reflecting on studying in Australia: “you know how to manage time ... and you get to know how to balance your living and also your study ... and I think get to meet lots of people here ... because in China I don't think there are the [same] ... opportunities to communicate with others”

As a follow up to the 2010 international student survey, AEI conducted a series of more than forty focus groups across Australia in 2011 to investigate in more depth the experiences of international students studying in Australia and to provide more opportunities for student voices to be heard. This report outlines the key findings of these focus groups, and looks at some of the ways that Australian providers and organisations are enhancing the experience of international students studying in Australia.

⁶ NZ 2008, CBIE 2009, Marshall, J 2011

⁷ AEI 2010a

⁸ Arkoudis, S *et al* 2010

⁹ AEI 2009

¹⁰ Ziguras, C and Harwood, A 2011

¹¹ TDA 2011

SECTION 2. METHODOLOGY

To get an understanding of the views and experiences of international students from a number of different perspectives, AEI held separate focus groups with international school, VET and higher education students, domestic (Australian) VET and higher education students, and international education support staff working in Australian education institutions. All participants were 18 or older at the time of the focus groups.

The focus groups for this project were conducted in two waves, with the first wave, covering South Australia (SA) and Queensland (QLD), conducted over March and April 2011. The second wave, covering Western Australia (WA), New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria (VIC), was conducted in August 2011.

AEI worked closely with partners in each of these states, and would like to acknowledge the assistance received from Study Adelaide, Queensland Education and Training International (QETI), the WA Department of Education Services, the NSW branch of ISANA and the City of Melbourne. These partners helped disseminate information about the project and encouraged students and education providers to participate in the focus groups. The success of this project would not have been possible without their support.

Table 1 below outlines the number and range of focus groups that AEI conducted in each state, as well as the total numbers of participants.

Table 1. Focus groups and participants

	SA	QLD	WA	NSW	VIC	Groups	Participants
International school students	1	0	0	0	1	2	18
International VET students	1	2	2	1	2	8	59
International higher education students	2	3	2	2	2	11	93
Domestic VET students	1	1	1	1	1	5	35
Domestic higher education students	1	1	1	1	1	5	36
Support staff	2	2	3	1	2	10	67
Groups	8	9	9	6	9	41	N/A
Participants	58	65	65	51	69	N/A	308

In total, 170 international students from 39 countries, ranging from Afghanistan to China to Zambia, participated in 21 focus groups for this project. Seventy-one domestic students participated in 10 focus groups, and 67 support staff took part in a further 10 focus groups

spread across the five states. The final number and representation of focus groups was influenced by the numbers of students and support staff agreeing to participate. For this reason, focus groups representing English Language Intensive Courses for Overseas Students (ELICOS) students and some planned school focus groups were not able to be convened (although a small number of ELICOS students participated in other focus groups).

AEI contracted Wallis Consulting Group (Wallis) to organise and facilitate the focus groups in each state, using discussion guides that were jointly developed by Wallis and AEI, with input from Study Adelaide and QETI. For most of the focus groups, Wallis had a facilitator and a scribe. The author of this report, Christopher Lawson, participated in every focus group, and also held separate meetings for the project with a number of providers.

Each focus group was audio taped with the participants' permission, and a number of quotes from the focus groups are used in this report, specifically to convey student voices, although individual participants are not identified.

SECTION 3. PREVIOUS RESEARCH

Many Australian international education institutions routinely conduct surveys of their international students, to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching and support activities. In addition to these institution-level surveys, AEI has also conducted a number of major sector-wide surveys, with the most recent such surveys taking place in 2006 and 2010 (known respectively as the 2006 ISS and the 2010 ISS). As part of the COAG ISSA, AEI will also be conducting another major sector-wide survey in 2012.

Table 2. Overall satisfaction rates from international student surveys¹²

		Sector		
		Higher Education	VET	ELICOS
Overall satisfaction with living	2006 ISS	84%	88%	79%
	2010 ISS	86%	88%	86%
Overall satisfaction with studying	2006 ISS	85%	82%	Not asked
	2010 ISS	84%	85%	86%

Table 2 shows the overall satisfaction rates with living and studying for the higher education, VET and ELICOS sectors in the 2006 ISS and 2010 ISS. Although not shown, each of these surveys included a comparison group, for benchmarking purposes. The 2006 ISS incorporated a control group of domestic students across Australia, and the 2010 ISS incorporated an international benchmarking exercise using data from 162 universities in North America, South Africa, Singapore, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom in 2009 and 2010. Results for the schools sector are not shown, as the schools surveys were conducted using a different survey instrument to that used for the other sectors.

The results shown in Table 2 are mostly positive, with international higher education student satisfaction with living and studying in Australia in 2010 on par with satisfaction levels found in other countries participating in the ISB. While the high-level findings present a very positive picture, a deeper analysis of the 2006 ISS and 2010 ISS show that there is scope for enhancement of specific elements of the international student living and studying experience in Australia.

Work experience

For example, a third of all international VET and higher education respondents in the 2006 ISS were dissatisfied with the opportunity to gain relevant Australian work experience in their field of education. This was especially the case with higher education respondents, with 40 per cent dissatisfied while 22 per cent of VET students were dissatisfied¹³.

¹² AEI 2007, AEI 2010b

¹³ AEI 2007

The 2010 ISS found that 60 per cent of higher education respondents were satisfied with the quality and quantity of opportunities for work experience, while 67 per cent of ELICOS and 72 per cent of VET respondents were satisfied. The higher education response was marginally lower than the 64 per cent result for the ISB¹⁴ (showing that embedding opportunities for work experience is important for other English speaking destinations).

An AEI survey of employers found that more than 60 per cent of Australian and more than 70 per cent of international employers surveyed nominated providing practical work experience as one of the main areas requiring more emphasis in an Australian education for international graduates¹⁵. Another AEI survey of Australian education international graduates found that the most commonly perceived barrier for graduates who had been unable to find work was a lack of work experience¹⁶.

With international students choosing to study in Australia making substantial investments in their future, there is scope for improvement to help these students to gain the tools to find appropriate jobs once they graduate.

Social interaction

International students express a strong interest in interacting with Australian students and the wider community. A consistent theme that has come through the international student surveys is the desire for more opportunities to make Australian friends.

In the 2006 ISS, 87 per cent of international school, 80 per cent of international higher education and 91 per cent of ELICOS respondents stated that they would like to have more Australians as friends. International VET respondents were more likely to have close friends in Australia through their jobs, although 44 per cent felt that Australian students did not seem interested in making friends with international students¹⁷.

The 2010 ISS findings highlighted these issues. Only 67 per cent of higher education, 76 per cent of VET and 69 per cent of ELICOS respondents were satisfied with opportunities to interact with Australian students, and 81 per cent of school respondents would like to have more Australian students as close friends¹⁸.

One reason for the lack of opportunities to make more Australian friends may be that many Australian students work part- or full-time while studying, and therefore spend little time on their campus outside of classroom periods. As an example, results from the 2010 Postgraduate

International school students from the same school discussing whether their school has activities designed to help them make friends with Australian students:

“No.”

“No we don’t have.”

“No.”

“Yes we do.”

“Do we?”

“But I don’t think that really helps”

¹⁴ AEI 2010b

¹⁵ AEI 2010a

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ AEI 2007

¹⁸ AEI 2010b

Survey of Student Engagement (POSSE) conducted by the Australian Council for Educational Research found that more than 30 per cent of postgraduate respondents spent no additional time on campus outside of class. The POSSE also found that more than half of the 78 per cent of postgraduates employed during their studies were working more than 30 hours a week¹⁹.

The POSSE also looked at engagement and interaction, finding that 45 per cent of international respondents thought their university promoted interaction among different groups of students 'quite a bit' or 'very much'. Only 36 per cent of domestic respondents thought that their institution was supportive of activities to promote this sort of interaction²⁰.

With the AEI employer survey also finding that employers want more emphasis in an Australian education on developing communication skills and English language skills among international students²¹, improving opportunities for interaction and engagement with Australian students and the Australian community would not only help improve the living experience of international students, it would also help them to develop the communication and language skills desired by Australian and international employers.

Support services

The final element focused on in this report relates to the support services that are offered by most international education providers. These services cover a wide range of areas, and are designed to support and enhance elements of the living and studying experience in Australia. There is also considerable overlap between support services and both work experience and interaction, with many providers offering support in finding work and encouraging social interaction and engagement for international students.

The overview report of the 2010 ISS shows high levels of satisfaction with the information, advice and support provided to students on arrival, with 86 per cent of higher education students and 87 per cent of VET students reporting satisfaction (ELICOS students were not asked this question in the survey). School students were asked about a range of separate services, and reported satisfaction levels ranging from the mid 80 per cents to the mid 90 per cents. While these look like very high levels of satisfaction, these results are only for those students who used these services. As the report notes, only half of school respondents knew about these types of support services, and only one in three had used these services.

The table below shows the proportion of higher education and VET respondents who thought that a service might have been useful to them, but were unaware that the service was offered, or did not know how or where to find that service.

¹⁹ ACER 2011

²⁰ *op cit.*

²¹ AEI 2010 a

Table 3. Proportion of students who were unaware that a service was offered, but would have used that service²²

	Sector	
	Higher Education	VET
Accommodation office	23%	32%
Counselling services	31%	32%
Careers/job services	34%	41%
Student advisory information services	22%	27%

As can be seen from Table 3, a substantial proportion of international students were unaware of key support services that were offered by their institution, but would have used them if they were aware that these services existed. These results, taken with the high levels of satisfaction from students who actually used these support services, suggest that the support services offered by many institutions are highly valued by students but are not always being promoted effectively by the institutions.

Based on these key findings, in collaboration with Universities Australia (UA) AEI provided funding to a number of institutions and organisations in 2011 to undertake innovative projects to enhance the international student experience. These projects were underway at the time of writing this report.

The areas for improvement identified here are not unique to Australia. Just as the Australian satisfaction levels for living and studying are similar to the satisfaction levels seen in the ISB, a number of the issues identified above as areas for improvement in Australia have also been identified in student surveys conducted in other countries.

For example, looking at opportunities for interaction, a recent survey of international students and alumni of French institutions found that a third of respondents had had difficulties integrating into France²³ and a New Zealand survey of international students conducted in 2007 found that 61% of international students would like to have more New Zealand friends. Only a third of international students surveyed thought that there were opportunities for other students to learn about their culture in class, and less than half agreed that they 'feel included' in their classes²⁴.

An international higher education student talking about a service offered at their university: "We don't know about that opportunity being available at [our university]."

With respect to awareness and usage of support services, a 2009 Canadian survey found that only half or less of international students attended university or college orientation programs, with one in five unaware that these programs were offered. The lack of awareness may be related to communication problems, with a third of respondents stating that they had problems communicating and receiving sufficient information from institutions during the application process. Of those that did attend orientation programs, 90 per cent found them to be somewhat or very useful²⁵.

²² Derived using unpublished 2010 ISS data

²³ Marshall, J 2011

²⁴ NZ 2008

²⁵ CBIE 2009

SECTION 4. THE FOCUS GROUPS

This section looks at the findings from the focus groups, using these to explore and elaborate on some of the results seen in the student surveys, and using quotes to illustrate the feelings and experiences of international students. Drawing on the previous research discussed in section 3, the focus groups examined three broad themes:

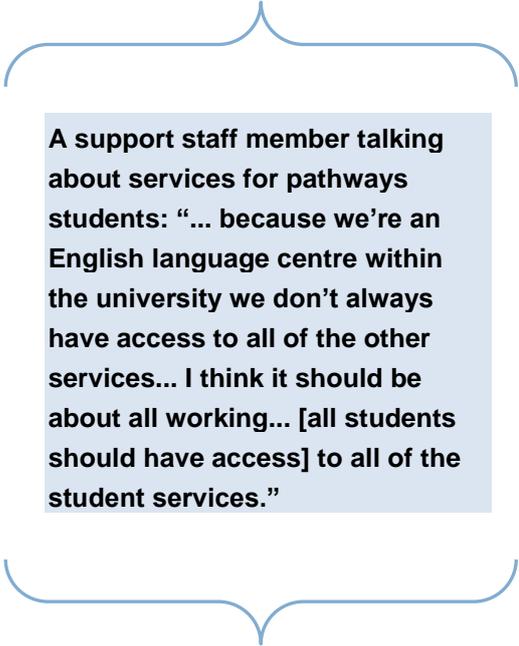
- Opportunities for social interaction with Australian students and the broader Australian community;
- Awareness and usage of student support services; and
- Opportunities to gain work experience in relevant areas.

As the 41 focus groups progressed, much of the discussion around these three broad themes were interrelated, so rather than address each theme separately in this report, the approach taken in this section is to look at the international student experience from pre-departure through to graduation and beyond.

Student pathways

When it comes to improving the experiences in Australia of international students, the significance of study pathways cannot be overstated. Research by AEI has shown that less than half of commencing international higher education and VET students enter directly into these sectors – the rest have had some previous experience in another sector, usually with an ELICOS provider or sometimes with a school or foundation program provider. For school students, 47 per cent move on to further study, while for ELICOS students, the proportion is 69 per cent²⁶.

Higher education and VET institutions that work closely with their pathway partners to provide support and encouragement to international students early on during their time in Australia are likely to see more students articulate to their tertiary programs, and these students are likely to be better prepared and have a more positive experience:



A support staff member talking about services for pathways students: “... because we’re an English language centre within the university we don’t always have access to all of the other services... I think it should be about all working... [all students should have access] to all of the student services.”

²⁶ AEI 2012

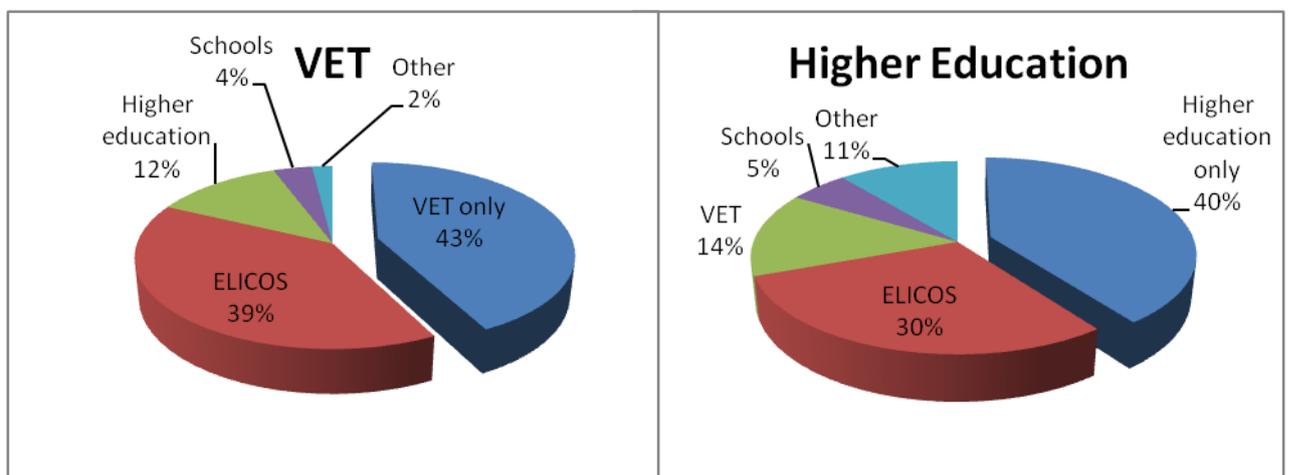
International VET student: *“one thing that would really be nice if university lecturers could perhaps come and just give a bit more of an overview of what to expect, because there is no bridge between TAFE and uni, because at TAFE you’re expected to come to class, you are expected to hand it in, you are reminded and at uni it’s more serious and everything is at your own risk”*

The interrelated nature of Australia’s education system, where students can move through a pathway of different types of courses, means that the early experiences of students in schools, language colleges and foundation programs are extremely important. These institutions in effect provide the foundation or building blocks for the experiences an international student will have in Australia.

This is important when considering ways to improve the living and studying experience of international students in Australia, because the first contact for many international students is not with a university or a VET provider, but with a school, foundation provider or language provider that may or may not be associated with the tertiary institution.

Figure 1 below shows the sectors that international students were enrolled in prior to commencing VET studies (on the left) or higher education (on the right) in 2011. The figure shows that only 43% of commencing VET students and only 40% of commencing higher education students had done no other study in Australia before commencing their tertiary studies. In both cases, an ELICOS course was the most common form of prior study in Australia.

Figure 1. Sector enrolled in immediately before commencing tertiary studies



Key finding:

- Large proportions of students move through education pathways and there are opportunities for stronger collaboration between providers involved in these pathways.

Pre-departure and arrival information and assistance

International students are not a homogenous group, and it is important that they not be treated as such. In 2011, Australia played host to international students from nearly 200 different countries. The 170 international students participating in the focus groups came from 39 different countries, representing a diverse spectrum of nationalities and views. As the focus groups showed, even among the large source countries like China and India students come from a wide range of different backgrounds, speak different languages and dialects, and have varying levels of English competency.

For many international students, their time in Australia will be the first time that they have travelled alone or to a foreign country – they are young and inexperienced travellers, with little or no knowledge of Australia, moderate levels of English and no friends or relatives in Australia to ease their transition into study.

Others may be older, experienced travellers who may have visited Australia before. Some might have studied overseas in other international education destinations, or they might be following in the footsteps of brothers, sisters, aunts or uncles who live in Australia and are able to help them make a seamless entry into Australian education:

International school student: "I kind of have information before I came here, because my aunty was staying here for 10 years before I came here, and my brother and my cousin was already starting here, so I kind of get information from them"

While older, experienced students or students with strong links to Australia may be able to access the information they need before they arrive in Australia, other students need substantial support to find accurate, reliable information prior to their departure.

The initial experiences of international students when they arrive in Australia are very important to ensure the success of their studies. It is during this initial stage that they are familiarising themselves with a new city and a new country, learning how to use a new transport system, finding accommodation and preparing for their studies. The more accurate, relevant and timely information they receive before they arrive in Australia and during this initial settling in period, the better their experience in Australia is likely to be.

Many students in the focus groups spoke about their positive experiences, with either their Australian institution or their education agent providing them with comprehensive, timely information. Some accessed this information through websites or Facebook pages set up by their institutions, while others choosing to use home stays communicated with their future home stay families in Australia before arriving:

International higher education student: "I ... get the information from the home stay because I sent her an email and talked to her about everything here - about living and food and the environment and the temperature"

Some institutions make use of multimedia technology to provide a more visual and interactive picture of studying in Australia, including making use of the living and study experiences of current international students to help prepare students for their time in

Australia²⁷. A number of institutions also “buddy-up” commencing international students with other students who have been studying at that institution for a while, putting them in touch before arrival²⁸:

International higher education student: *“they have a buddy program so when you come ... at least two months before, they hook up with one of the current [international] students. So you can just interact with that person and ask ... any question you want ... it was very useful for me... I asked about the accommodation, about the culture here and everything”*

First impressions can make a big difference – programs like the Welcome Desk at the Melbourne airport²⁹ can help students to feel welcome and find their way around in a new city and country. One student noted:

International higher education student: *“When I was coming to Australia in February 2011 I saw this study desk at the airport and I get a blue bag with a lot of information and there was this culture card for example and a map and it was really nice to see what it’s in and then I was also participating in the Lord Mayor student welcome in March and now also in July and it’s great you see everything and what you can do in Melbourne.”*

Students also spoke positively about service like airport pickups, although in a number of focus groups students were unaware that their institution offered such a service when other students from the same institution talked about their experiences.

Under the ISSA, the Study in Australia portal³⁰, which is translated into several languages, is designed to provide “a single, authoritative source of comprehensive up-to-date and accurate information for international students, including information about personal safety, support services and employment rights and responsibilities”³¹. State and territory government websites are also linked to from the Study in Australia portal, providing relevant information at a more local level. Where international education providers have limited resources to provide pre-departure information to international students, linking to the Study in Australia portal would be a low cost way of ensuring that students have access to key information.

Key findings

- Pre departure information is highly valued – institutions can improve international students’ education experience by ensuring pre-departure information is timely and remains relevant to current practice in Australia.
- The initial experiences of international students are extremely important, laying the foundation for their success in Australia.

²⁷ Dalglish et al 2006

²⁸ “Buddy” programs are discussed in more detail later.

²⁹ See http://www.studymelbourne.vic.gov.au/living_in_melbourne/support-services/welcomedesk

³⁰ <http://www.studyinaustralia.gov.au/>

³¹ COAG 2010

Orientation programs and “buddy” systems

Once students have arrived in Australia and have begun the process of settling in to their new city, their institution’s orientation program is often the first main contact they have with their education provider.

The orientation program, which might be conducted over a single day, an entire week, or spread out over a period of weeks, is where the institution provides important information about the programs and support services that they offer. Orientation programs can also play an important role in helping to form interpersonal links, with many providers creating opportunities for social interaction and engagement among new and existing students, both international and domestic. These orientation programs continue the induction process for new students that begins with pre-departure information.

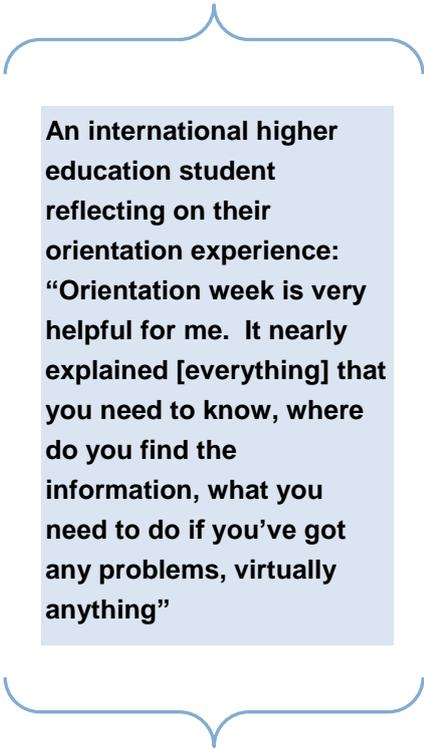
A number of institutions are moving away from the idea of having their orientation as a series of “talking heads” where staff from different support services lecture students about their services, recognising that the orientation program is a very busy and often stressful period where new students are given enormous amounts of information to digest.

To try and provide information in a different way, some institutions arrange ‘scavenger hunts’ or ‘Great Race’ type events as a way to get international students to interact and engage with domestic students and the broader community. Such events might involve sending mixed teams of domestic and international students across the city, exposing them to a number of different activities and places available to students. Other events might be run on a smaller scale, involving teams of domestic and international students exploring a range of different support services on campus (for example getting a ‘passport’ stamped by visiting the careers centre, the library, the learning and teaching unit etc).

These events can be a fun way for new students to meet other people, and run effectively, they are also a good way to promote the support services available at the institution.

A number of institutions also make use of “buddy” programs as part of their orientation, using later year volunteer students to help new students (both domestic and international) to settle in. Some institutions use domestic student volunteers, some use international student volunteers, and some use a combination of both. In a number of cases, student volunteers in “buddy” programs receive small honorariums, or receive formal recognition of their participation from their institutions on their transcripts or certificates.

These “buddy” programs can be very effective, as they make use of the experiences of other students. Returning international students are a good source of information for new international students, as they have been through the initial period of disorientation and have hopefully adjusted – they can let students know about support services and activities to improve their living and study experience:



An international higher education student reflecting on their orientation experience: “Orientation week is very helpful for me. It nearly explained [everything] that you need to know, where do you find the information, what you need to do if you’ve got any problems, virtually anything”

International VET student: *“Before I came here I knew that the school was a good one and there’s going to be one person to help me but when I came here the principal introduced us to that person. For example she is for a student from South America or Spain, she can speak Spanish and she is for a student from Japan and they can help you with this, this, this and those things.”*

A study by Sidoryn and Slade of one such “buddy” program found a significant increase in international student interaction and sense of community for participants, with improvements of more than 20 percentage points over results prior to the implementation of the buddy system³².

Domestic students can also be a good source of information, particularly students who have undertaken a period of study abroad – some universities encourage returned study abroad students to act as buddies for international students, as again these students have an understanding of the types of issues facing new international students.

Several of the domestic and international students in the focus groups had benefitted from having a “buddy” mentor, or were currently acting as a volunteer “buddy” for other students, and spoke positively about the experience:

International higher education student: *“they have a buddy program so when you come ... at least 2 months before, they hook up with one of the current [international] students. So you can just interact with that person and ask ... any question you want ... it was very useful for me... I asked about the accommodation, about the culture here and everything”*

New students need to take in a lot of information about studying in Australia during their orientation programs. To help avoid information overload, some institutions try to steadily feed information to their students throughout the semester or term, aiming to give the information to students when they need it, rather than at the start of the year. For example, this could include reminding students about study support services in the weeks before exams or major assignments are due. Education providers also offer refresher events throughout the semester or term to reinforce the initial orientation information.

Providers also take advantage of their orientation programs to ensure that their education agents are providing timely, accurate information:

Support staff member: *“We actually screen our students as part of the orientation program about their agent experience, whether the information that we’ve now given them at orientation matches what they were told by the agent as well so that’s all part of our induction checklist with the students as well.”*

In addition to orientation programs run by institutions, sometimes city or state level organisations also run orientation programs or seminars. For example, ACPET and Study Adelaide conduct a series of free international student induction seminars each year, covering different aspects of living and studying in Adelaide. Activities like this can be a good way for smaller providers to work together collaboratively to help ensure that their students receive the orientation information that they

³² Sidoryn, T and Slade, J 2008

Key finding

- Institutions use a variety of different orientation programs, including using later-year international and domestic students as 'buddies' for new students.

Support services

Most international education providers provide a range of support services for their domestic and international students, and as the international student surveys conducted by AEI have shown, when they are used these support services generally receive high levels of satisfaction. However, as noted in Section 3, some students are unaware of these services and would have liked to use them if they had been aware of them. This suggests that there is a need for all institutions to look at how they promote the support services they offer, even when survey results show very high levels of satisfaction.

The level of support services varies across different types of international education institutions, and also within sectors. Many institutions have long-standing dedicated international student support offices, while others are starting to develop programs to provide support:

Support staff member: *"I've been recently appointed to International Student Support. [The institution hasn't] had that position before so it's a new area where they've decided they need to look after their international students which I really agree with. But we're in the early stages of, you know, developing programs"*

Some institutions are able to provide a range of support staff who speak different languages, to help with orientation and information. Students who made use of staff speaking the student's native language found this to be extremely helpful:

International VET student: *"it's harder because we can't speak English so fluently like other people. My school has one person who can speak Spanish or who can speak Japanese and will help all the students there and they help us with everything that we need ... apply for a job ... looking for accommodation ... If you want you can speak in your own language it's so good because sometimes it's so frustrating because you want to say exactly what you're thinking but you don't know how and if you can speak in your own language about that it's amazing."*

In the focus groups with support staff, people spoke at length about different things that they do to help their students, including delivering orientation programs in innovative ways, drip feeding information, and developing volunteer "buddy" programs (discussed earlier). In some cases, where people spoke about particular programs and services that they had developed, subsequent focus groups involving domestic or international students from those institutions were unaware of these programs.

To raise awareness of support services, some support staff conduct professional development (PD) programs for all of their lecturers, letting them know about the services available to students, and encouraging the lecturers to make students aware of these services:

Support staff member: *"there's so much information the lecturers themselves just filter it out ... we said okay what we're going to do is we have a compulsory PD and it's orientation for all lecturers ... I actually have a 20 to 25 minute talk and introduce this is*

the student advisory team and these are the services that we offer ... So we actually keep on informing the lecturers, 'come to us this is what we're going to be doing to help your students' ... we then email them ... just a little reminder hey you know do you have any students who are struggling academically, do you have any students who have got welfare [problems] ... just to jog their memory ... so they then remember who do we go to."

Students participating in the focus groups were asked about what they knew about support services offered by their institution, and how they found out about those services. Some students find out about support services available at institutions through international student information books prepared by their institution:

International higher education student: "[I know about the services offered] because I got international student information book"

Others found out about services and activities through emails, Facebook pages or posters:

International VET student: "once a month we have this email the bulletin email like what's going on for the past month and for the next month and also every day around the campus we have posters what's happening today and tomorrow"

What was apparent from the focus group discussions was that both domestic and international students use a large number of different tools and media of communication, depending in part on their age and background, but also on their interests and courses of study. This means that institutions cannot rely on a single medium of communication to transmit important information about support services: while many students were voracious users of social networking tools, some students talked about rarely or never accessing their institution emails, and others had little interest in tools like Facebook or Twitter:

Domestic higher education student: "sometimes they have posters up at the university and also those little pamphlet things that they have ... you go up to student services and they've got this wall with all these things, and I found them really useful because I've found out about different things, and I go 'hey look they've got that' ... because I'm a bit overwhelmed by computers, they scare me."

Key findings

- Some students are unaware of support services available to them and would use them if they were aware of them. Institutions are exploring new ways to promote their support services.
- Institutions have opportunities to use multiple media of communication to transmit important information about available support services, recognising that international students represent a diverse group with different communication styles.

Increasing social interaction and engagement

For international students choosing to study in Australia, some of the potential benefits of their time in Australia are being able to improve their English and to make networks of contacts that can help them in the future, by making friends with fellow students and people in the broader community:

International higher education student: *"I'd have to say that I try to get to know Australians because that was one of my biggest goals coming here I wanted to make more Australian friends, get to know the Australian culture"*

While most international students want to make friends in Australia, not all are able to get the level of social interaction that they are seeking. One reason why international students find it difficult to make friends with Australian students is that Australian students often have existing networks of friends, and see little benefit in spending the time to get to know international students:

Support staff member: *"I wonder if there's a lack of incentive for domestic students to interact with international students. They have their own networks, they're involved in a group of friends already and maybe it's a bit of laziness on the domestic students' behalf that they don't want to invest, that's been my experience"*

Many domestic graduates come to regret not taking advantage of the opportunities they had to engage with students from other cultures while they were studying. A 2007 AEI study of university graduates a year after they had graduated found that only 36 per cent of Australian respondents were satisfied on reflection with their ability to make close friends with international students, and only 37 per cent were satisfied with the networks they had formed with people around the world³³.

Australian focus group participants reflected on this, noting some potential long term benefits to increased interaction with international students:

Domestic higher education student: *"I'd like to have more contact with international students because I like to travel a fair bit, and you know, I think it would be awesome if I could say "Yeah, hey, you know, we've got to know each other for six months in Australia, I'm coming to visit you", and you know, like have somebody who can show me around and do the same for me."*

Another Australian student commented on the benefits of interacting with international students from a future employment perspective:

Domestic VET student: *"I think at communication level, like in your workforce you're going to deal with all kinds of clientele and the nationality and the language barriers are a lot easier if you've had the experience at school rather than just going straight in and not"*

³³ AEI 2008

knowing anything different than Australians, their accents and the way they talk, so it's easier that way"

Some international education providers are promoting to their domestic students the long-term benefits of engaging and interacting with international students, and encouraging international students to interact and engage more outside of their studies, to maximise their experience in Australia. This benefits both domestic and international students, and enhances the experience of international students studying in Australia.

A lot of the social interaction between international and Australian students starts in the classroom, through group work where international and domestic students work together on collaborative assignments. Group work can be very effective when run in a structured way, and can help develop a number of important attributes desired by employers, including effective communication skills, working as part of a team, effective problem solving skills and English language competency³⁴.

Many international and domestic students noted that their lecturers and tutors facilitated and organised groups to encourage international and domestic students to engage and interact, and spoke about some of the friendships they had formed through this group work:

Domestic VET student: "Our lecturers put us in groups, mix it up ... each one of the Australian students is working ... in a different group and we've all got a couple of international students, we're a team" ... "Now I'm probably better friends with the [international student] that's in my classes than anyone else because we have worked together and had that bonding time."

As well as structured group work, exercises and icebreakers in the classroom can give students an opportunity to learn about each other and the different cultures represented by the students in the classroom:

International higher education student: "we were given an assignment to just do a Powerpoint about your country and just, I suppose like each one in class talked about their country, which was pretty much good, because like we got to know about each other's countries and which in some way that really brought people together, so like people started interacting because of that, and then they'd be like I want to visit your country, it seems like it's really good, because of what they saw when you were talking about it, so yeah"

Most institutions also offer a range of social activities to help students interact with each other outside of classes. Some international students find it difficult to interact with domestic students outside of class time because many domestic students do not live near their institutions, and either head home or to work after classes:

International VET student: "mostly I go out with other international students who I met the first day of the induction so yeah I mean I also have good relationships with my classmates from Australia but we don't go out very often because they ... live not in the city ... so I hang out a lot more with the international students [who live nearby]"

³⁴ AEI 2010a

International support staff are aware of this, and acknowledge it as a problem:

Support staff member: *“often the way that our universities especially are set up is that local students live at home and so when their day’s over they go home they have family they have friends they have a life outside of university so often the difficulty that I’ve seen is getting the time to have them interact because when they’re at university, when they’re at school they’re studying so there’s not a lot of personal time there and then the local students have no need to stay around the campus when they’re not particularly studying”*

Several students indicated that they would welcome international education providers holding activities and events during lunch hours or class time, to ensure that both international and domestic students are able to attend and interact:

Domestic higher education student: *“there’s this weekly event on every Wednesday at campus and actually, a lot of the people that go there are international students, so I met a lot of them through this, and I see them every week ... there’s a couple that I’ve been to the movies with”*

To encourage international and domestic students to participate in activities organised by international education providers and community based organisations, it is important to consider how these activities and events are advertised and promoted.

International students talked about a number of activities that they had seen promoted as being events for international students. There was a feeling among the international students in the focus groups that advertising events as being specifically for international students discouraged local students and the broader community from participating, and could also discourage participation by international students looking to interact with domestic students:

International higher education student: *“I think they shouldn’t make it an obvious thing that this should be only for international students, or [only] for local students ... yeah we came for education, but also interaction is good because it pushes people ... two weeks or a week ago we had some international thing ... it’s international schools only and I didn’t even go there because there was going to be just like us, so for us to be here we have to meet [local people] ... so that we can learn from them, their experiences here, and we learn from other people as well”*

Domestic students echoed these thoughts, stating that they would be unlikely to attend events marketed this way:

Domestic higher education student: *“for me, when I see an international students’ event, I think “Well, that’s for international students”. Like, you know, it wouldn’t really occur to me to go to something that’s sort of marketed to international students, I feel. So, maybe if it was more like, “Hey guys, why don’t you come along and you know, make some connections around the world and why don’t you show people what your life is like here”, and let them into – like, really inviting domestic students to come and be part of the experience. For me personally, like, I see international students there, it’s kind of like, well, that’s not for me, because I live here, so why would I go?”*

The consensus among focus group students was that the best way to advertise events was to market them as being for all students, while also specifically inviting international students in order to make the international students feel wanted.

International students are interested in participating in social activities and social clubs as a way of meeting other people with similar interests, but not every institution has or promotes these activities and clubs:

International higher education student: *"Yeah I was keen to join some sort of club but I haven't found any"*

With the passing of legislation in October 2011 allowing universities and other higher education providers to charge a fee for student services and amenities of a non-academic nature³⁵, more providers will be in a position to offer social clubs to their domestic and international students.

A number of students suggested that higher education providers could open up membership of their clubs and societies to students from other institutions (especially to pathways providers teaching students who are likely to articulate to the higher education provider). This could help support and encourage more students to progress through education pathways, and would be particularly useful where pathways providers lacking certain facilities are located near providers with extensive facilities:

Support staff member: *"it would make so much sense to ... be able to share stuff ... because we, all of us worry about the problem of student engagement ... why can't we, on the economies of scale, share things ... the students actually do it on their own but we could actually help them ... we could provide support for it and do it, and it just makes sense because they do connect with each other across the institutions ... You already [have] the students so to speak, so why can't you make a bit of fun to share across the sectors?"*

Religious and community groups also provide international students with the opportunities to interact with other people and practice their English:

International higher education student: *"Yes I go to church because I am Christian and I went to Asian church and I kind of like the situation there – the people over there is very friendly and they will speak to you in English and you can practice ... because we have study group on Friday night and also Sunday service"*

Local community volunteer language classes are also a useful source of English practice for students, with a number of local libraries offering these services:

International higher education student: *"I go to the ... Adelaide City Library - there are some free English classes there and some volunteer tutors there who correct my pronunciation and something like that"*

³⁵ DEEWR 2011

While religious and community groups and local community volunteer language classes can be useful resources for international students looking to increase their interaction, a number of international students participating in the focus groups were unaware of these opportunities. State level websites could compile information on these resources to help inform students about available opportunities.

Students also talked about sports as a way of interacting with Australians and learning about Australian culture. In a number of cities, students and support staff talked about links between institutions and local sports clubs, where for example international students might be given an Australian Rules training session and barbeque, and taken to see an Australian Football League match:

Support staff member: *“the AFL experience is like the whole thing. They will start with a BBQ, and they’ll have footy handling skills, this is done by Port ... and then they go and actually sit and watch a game in a stadium, surrounded by all these Port supporters.”*

Participating in activities like this benefit both the students, who can more effectively engage in “water cooler talk” about sports, and the sports clubs, who might gain potential fans and members.

Sports contests like soccer matches between international and domestic students within or across institutions are also good ways to encourage increased interaction and engagement.

Key finding

- In promoting activities, it is important that the promotion encourages both international and domestic students to participate.

Work experience and volunteering

Many domestic and international students work part-time while they are studying to help support themselves – this was certainly true in the focus groups, with most student participants working. Working while studying can help students to develop some of the attributes that employers consider valuable³⁶, and for many of the international focus group participants, part time employment also helped them make friends. Generally, participants said they made friends with their work colleagues more easily than with their classmates, and they were more likely to spend time socially with their work friends than their class friends.

Some institutions offer career advice and job search workshops focusing on resume and cover letter writing, to help their students find jobs. These can be quite useful, since most international students come from different work environments:

Support staff member: *“I think there’s a bit of a language issue. We had a position advertised recently and I would say that 80% of the applications were from international students ... And the level of the English in the cover letter, but also the style ... I’m not sure if it’s a convention in China to flatter the person that you’re writing the letter to ... I mean it was completely inappropriate. ‘Dear Mr ... the Esteemed Advisor to ... who has a fantastic reputation throughout South Australia’.”*

This support can be very helpful to students looking for work:

International VET student: *“[the institution’s career centre] help me how to build a resume, what are the things that you need to add in your resume to build up your good profile and actually it worked for me you know. I got a good job in a good hotel... and ... I always thank [the career centre]... because it has really stood me out in the world.”*

Other providers also offer mock interviews to help prepare students for employment:

International higher education student: *“Well I went to this career workshop ... it is very helpful ... tell you how to write the CV and how to behave on the interview and he even encouraged us to do an interview ... in front of everyone - so that was very helpful”*

While part time work can be useful in providing financial assistance and opportunities to make friends, both employers and graduates have spoken about the need for students to have work experience relevant to their field of study to help make them more employable³⁷. Finding relevant work experience is a challenge for both domestic and international students, although international students also have to battle issues related to language, cultural barriers and their visa status:

International higher education student: *“[it] is very hard looking for a job around here basically because their language ... is not very good and maybe different culture and maybe because their [student] visas just ... [allow them to work limited hours].”*

³⁶ AEI 2010a

³⁷ *ibid*

These problems with student visas also apply to some job placements and internships opportunities:

International higher education student: *“they require [permanent residency or citizenship] for like if they provide you with training they hope that you can like stay with their company for a long time that's why”*

Even when international students have substantial work experience in their own country, they often find it difficult to get relevant part time work in Australia:

International higher education student: *“I have more than 10 years experience in my field, I'm a professional engineer in my country, I have the authority to sign to endorse the drawings, the civil engineering drawings, but when I try to apply for a job here, right, they all say that first of all you are holding a student visa, due to the working hours restrictions we cannot hire you”*

One of the reasons why these experienced, well qualified students are unable to get interviews and relevant part time jobs is likely due to a lack of understanding of the Australian work environment. Australia's skilled industries are also potentially missing out on valuable contributions from high calibre international students (many of who are university graduates in their own countries).

This lack of understanding could be addressed if international education providers work with industry and government bodies to develop mentor programs for their students – for example, senior accountants or engineers could mentor international accounting or engineering students. Mentoring would not commit the employer to offer a job, but could open up opportunities for both employers and experienced international students.

Another way that international education providers could assist their students (both domestic and international) to become more work ready on graduation would be to invite industry associations to come and talk to students early in their course, to talk about what employers are looking for in graduates (such as developing communication skills and work experience).

Several support staff talked about programs that run within their institutions to help their international students get relevant work experience. As an example, some institutions use their international design students to help design their promotional brochures, and use their international media students to direct, film and take part in promotional videos, giving their students relevant experience they can put on their resumes.

Quite a few international students use volunteering as a way to both interact with a wider range of Australians, and as a way of developing relevant work experience and practical skills:

International higher education student: *“I'm [volunteering] for St John's [Ambulance Service] just learning how to do payroll because it's related to accounting which is really good... and then I'm doing ATO later, Australian Tax Office volunteer as well and at the moment I'm one of the two people doing voluntary work there...”*

Some teachers are quite proactive in suggesting volunteer work as a way for students to develop their employment skills:

Domestic higher education student: *“a lot of my friends that have graduated, said extracurricular work helps more to get into a graduate position. So, a lot of teachers have all said get into volunteer work, get into a sport, do things outside of your degree... you will be more likely to get a job because you’re an all around person...”*

Focus group participants mentioned a number of websites that provide useful information on volunteering opportunities, although a number of the participants were unaware of these. It would be useful if state level education websites included information on volunteering opportunities:

Domestic higher education student: *“Well, I found my volunteer work through the hospital on volunteer.vic.gov.au and they’re great. It’s just like ‘seek’ for volunteer work and I found that really helpful. But a lot of people don’t really know about it, and how comprehensive it is... I was Googling volunteer work and it came up as a government website for volunteer work and I thought that’s got to be more legitimate than something else.”*

Students also talked about career expos. While many students had attended career expos organised by their institution or by other organisations, the consensus among the focus groups was that most employers participating in the expos were not interested in looking at international students, and where employers were willing to look at these students, their focus was on the permanent residency status of students.

As noted above, some international students who have difficulty finding employment are very highly qualified, and could be a substantial asset to Australian companies – particularly those companies with a global focus. Many of these students are multilingual, have proven they can adapt to different cultures, have or are gaining high quality Australian qualifications, and often have relevant work experience and qualifications from other countries.

With the implementation of changes to student work conditions as part of the Government’s response to the Knight review of the student visa program, international students will have more flexibility than before to work part time³⁸. The introduction of post-study work visas from 2013 for certain types of higher education students³⁹ will also offer more opportunities for both students and employers.

To facilitate the employment of international students and international graduates and help employers meet skill shortages, students and support staff suggested that state level organisations could arrange career expos targeted specifically at international students. These expos could incorporate sessions for employers to learn about new migration and employment regulations, and for students to learn about desired graduate attributes. Providing Australian employers with more, relevant information about opportunities to employ international students and graduates should help the employment outcomes of Australian educated international graduates.

³⁸ DIAC 2011a

³⁹ DIAC 2011b

Key finding

- Students want work experience – and volunteering is a popular option. Work experience is often about gaining relevant experience and opportunities for social interaction, rather than for the income alone.

SECTION 5. CONCLUSIONS

Education institutions have programs and processes in place to make the experience of international students studying in Australia a successful and enjoyable one. There is also a recognition that international students are a diverse group of individuals, from different backgrounds and with different needs.

The information students receive before they start their education in Australia is vital, and can set the tone for the experience that students have during their time in Australia. Current and accurate pre-departure information lessens the stress of settling into a new environment, and avoids any disappointment arising from unmet or unrealistic expectations.

Institutions have developed a number of innovative ways of delivering orientation programs to students, and there is scope to develop more good practice guides for the industry focusing on orientation programs and the use of students as “buddies” or mentors for new international students.

While most institutions have a range of support services in place designed to meet the needs of international students, research has shown that a substantial proportion of students are unaware of the existence of these services. Different students prefer different media of communication, and institutions are using a number of different ways of communicating about the programs and services they offer. Future international student surveys will help with this, by capturing and providing a snapshot of the different preferences of different students in terms of communication.

Most, if not all, international students like to make friends with Australians while they are living in Australia and many go on to form lasting friends and networks. International students make friends through their classes, through social activities, sports and employment. Australian students also have the opportunity to develop long lasting friendships and global contacts, but many do not seek interaction with international students because they have existing networks of friends on and off campus. Institutions are working to inform Australian students of the long-term benefits of interacting with international students.

Like many Australian students, many international students also work while they study. Their preference is generally to find work that is relevant to what they are studying. Australian and overseas employers want Australian educated international graduates with relevant work experience. This report has indicated some ways that education providers and employers are helping students to get this relevant work experience while they are studying and when they graduate.

The student voices in this report provide a human element to the broader findings of AEI’s 2010 International Student Survey, and should help international education providers to develop a better understanding of the experiences of international students studying in their institutions.

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