

An investigation into international education initiatives to enhance the experience of international students (Monash University, Australia)

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My study visit focused on transition and integration initiatives to enhance international student experiences. Monash University, as I have observed, has developed a very positive atmosphere of openness and approachability for new students. Staff employ a very personal approach and this helps to foster a positive personal experience. As a direct result of the broad range of procedures which were introduced for international students, Monash enjoys a high level of student satisfaction and an outstanding international student retention rate of 94%. As a result of my visit, I discovered there are number of innovative procedures and initiatives which can be used at UK educational institutions.

Introduction

Australia is widely known as one of the primary destinations for international students seeking to study outside their home country, after the US and UK. The latest research by the Australian Education Promotion body (IDP) predicts a massive increase of 291,000 international students by 2025 (up from 165,000 in 2005) applying to Australian universities. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) research report claimed that Australia is the country with the highest proportion of international students, with 17.3% of the campus population from overseas.

My overseas study visit aimed to investigate how one of the major Australian universities, in this case Monash University, prepared for and managed international education initiatives to enhance the experience of international students and thereby

increase student satisfaction and encourage retention.

Monash University is arguably Australia's most internationalised university. It has eight campuses, six in Australia, one in Malaysia and another in South Africa, and a research and teaching centre in Italy. It is Australia's largest university with a student population of over 55,000. Of these, more than 14,000 are international students enrolled at Australian campuses. Monash's biggest campus, Clayton, was ranked the best institution for student experience by an Australia national student body in 2007.

[1] www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,22482190-12332,00.html

Monash is also a member of the prestigious "Group of Eight", a lobby group composed of some of the most research-intensive universities in Australia.

My visit was organised through Monash's Health, Wellbeing and Development office (HWD), a student services division offering support and advice to students and staff on counselling, family and child care, chaplaincy, financial issues, accommodation and issues to do with mental and physical health. A two-week visit programme was arranged by the International Student Experience Co-ordinator, which enabled me to meet the many other staff across the various departments who deal with prospective and current international student matters. This includes faculty staff, central administration staff, support services staff within HWD and residential services and also with various international student societies' presidents and committee members. As I had arrived towards the end of

Monash's orientation period and visited three campuses, I had the opportunity to get first-hand experience in some of the social activities they offer to new international students.

Key findings about Monash University

Feedback from Monash students suggests that the most important transition time for a student is during their first four weeks at university. Various programmes and activities have been established in order to support students through this often difficult time. A Monash Transition Policy was established in response to this with the aim of providing mass education whilst embracing student diversity with a comprehensive programme to support students in their process of adjustment to the university environment. An explicit requirement of this policy was the aim of meeting transition needs throughout the course of students' university experience and beyond.

[2] For general information on transition policy: <http://policy.monash.edu.au/policy-bank/academic/education/management/transition-policy.html>

Monash has created an impressive and varied programme of activities and initiatives, and the key elements of their support programme are listed below:

1. Transition – Orientation

New students are expected to attend the scheduled programme of activities held at the beginning of the academic year as part of the orientation process. Academic programmes, social activities and independent living skills have been designed to help students adjust successfully to university life and study. Faculties are responsible for academic

transition, while student unions and support services help students achieve social transition.

E-Orientation (Pre-Arrival)

An e-orientation programme was launched in 2006 to enable new students to plan their itinerary for orientation by using an online process. This tool allows students to tailor-make their personal orientation programme by selecting their home campus, faculty and a number of other criteria. The planner produces a list of activities which have been categorised as compulsory, highly recommended or general. Events are listed in date and time order and include a brief description of the event, details of location and presenter. According to a satisfaction survey, students have registered very positive comments in relation to this programme when it has been run in previous years.

Student Orientation checklist (On-Arrival)

This is a guide which aims to get students thinking about some of the issues they will face as a new student at university. To complete the checklist they have to investigate the University websites, participate in numerous activities and faculty-based programmes, and meet with other students and various Monash staff during orientation. New students are required to complete a satisfaction survey at the end of the orientation week so the University can review the programme in the following years. [3] www.monash.edu.au/transition/current/checklist.html

Orientation Week (O'Week)

Whilst the Study Abroad/International Exchange office hosts a separate orientation for overseas exchange students, O'Week has, over the years, evolved to become an integrated orientation for all new students, with specific sessions for international students. Programmes and activities are organised by faculties, support services and various student organisations and are similar to those found in UK HE orientation programmes. An interesting element of the O'Week timetable is the safety awareness session where safety officers or representatives of the police are invited to give talks or presentations on crime prevention and campus watch initiatives. In addition to this, a free engraving service for student property is provided by the university security department.

Student Survival Week

A Student Survival week is conducted around Week 4 to show students where to go to find help with adjusting to university life. On each campus, student associations focus on activities that suit students' situations and issues that may arise for them, such as helping with a range of academic programmes, social activities and independent living skills. The aim is to be proactive about student life and to try to provide the tools for students to cope with the unexpected, or to know where to go if they need further support.

2. Integration and cross-cultural initiatives

Peer Mentor Programme

The Peer Mentor Programme is designed to assist new international students in settling in to their studies and becoming independent. It pairs up a senior student with a new student by faculty or home country.

Mentors are requested to commit to seeing between one and three new international students for one hour a week for the first six weeks of the semester. He or she will also be required to attend group mentor meetings and social activities with the mentees. Mentors benefit from this by receiving free leadership and cultural awareness training and certificates.

International Friendship Programme

The aim of this programme is to introduce international students to Australian volunteers and their families for the purpose of developing cross-cultural friendships. It provides social and practical support for international students by establishing friendships and cultural exchange.

[4] www.adm.monash.edu.au/community-services/family/friendship-volunteer.html

Students get to experience Australian culture first-hand as well as the opportunity to practise and improve their English language skills in real-life situations. Promotional material and emails are sent out to international students prior to arrival. These students can register their interest for the programme whilst still in their home country and are interviewed (after they have arrived at the University) before the co-ordinator matches them with a member of the community. Students and volunteers can sign up for the programme at any time in the year. Volunteers are recruited from appropriate sources within the local community, eg alumni, staff members, home students and Australians living in the local community who may not

have had a direct link with Monash. Volunteers contact and meet the student once they have been matched and provide practical assistance and information to students about living in Australia, for example guidance on using the public transport system, where to do shopping, etc. Since starting this programme in 2006 at the biggest campus (Clayton), it has proven to be so popular amongst new international students that the University is now planning to roll it out to all Australian campuses in the near future.

Language Exchange Programme

This programme matches international students with Australian students who are studying a foreign language for one hour per week of language exchange and is strongly promoted by university lecturers. Once appropriate volunteers have been identified, contact details are emailed to the language partners for the first meeting arrangement. International students benefit from learning about Australian culture and developing their informal communication skills through language exchange.

3. Student health, well-being and development programmes

Mental health first-aid training programme for staff working closely with international students

This is a 12-hour course which was originally developed in 2001 at the centre for Mental Health Research at the Australian National University. The course provides participants with the knowledge and understanding to be able to make an initial response to chronic or acute mental health illness. Participants learn the signs and symptoms of key mental health problems, where and how to get help and what sort of help has been shown by research to be effective. The university has set itself a target of at least 6% of Monash staff, especially staff from residential services, support services, academic tutors, to be trained in this course. Staff are more confident in providing help to students after the course.

Podcasting student support materials to promote positive health and well-being on Monash internet radio station

'The Clinic' is a radio programme aimed at students which has been developed and is hosted by administrative staff to maximise the quality of the student experience by informing students of how best to handle each stage of the student life-cycle, and letting them know about the resources available to help them. Students can download the

podcasts if they have missed the original broadcast. Statistics indicate that a special podcast created for orientation week attracted 715 downloads. Further to above programme, HWD is currently implementing several other podcasts to raise services in general.

Further details can be found at [5] <http://radiomonash.net/index.html>

4. Faculty Transition Model Faculty of Art and Design – Discovery Week

Recognising the importance of social integration, the Faculty of Art and Design has tailor-made an innovative ‘Discovery Week’ for all its new students in the first semester. Twenty groups of cross-gender, cross-cultural, cross-disciplinary students are randomly selected into a ‘subgroup’ of five.

Each group of students is required to participate in a series of fun and creative activities which are designed by the committee to develop students’ creative abilities and practices. During Discovery Week, students complete occupational health and safety training, visit art galleries and engage in various group activities and social gatherings with year 2 and 3 students. This helps to break down barriers and encourage the students to mix together in a relaxed, informal atmosphere, whilst sharing a common team focus. An interactive orientation package has been created to help ease the transition.

Details can be found online at [6] http://artdes.monash.edu.au/sas/students/orientation/content/im_in.html

As a Faculty with fewer international students compared to, say, the Business and Economics Faculty, the Dean of Art and Design has clearly made a concerted effort to support new entrants from overseas and encourage the growth of a diverse learning community. Indeed they also boast an International Liaison Officer who is responsible for intervention and advocacy for the faculty’s international students as well as supporting their teaching and learning.

Reflections on implementing learning points at Keele University

The current orientation/fresher week should be repackaged to include input from the student union and societies, faculties/schools, central administration, student support and facilities. The University should consider forming an orientation steering committee with representatives from each division, to introduce an integrated orientation

programme for all new students, with specific sessions for overseas students.

Active Keele (CFM’s healthy campus initiative which consists of a series of sport and fitness activities) should be promoted and introduced as part of orientation at the beginning of the academic year. Icebreaker games and activities, international film nights, etc, are all appropriate examples of interactive social activities that have been identified as effective support tools in making the transition to student life.

The university should work in conjunction with the relevant police department or borough council to promote safety and offer ‘smartwater’ kits (a property marking system which mark personal valuables discreetly so that lost property can be reunited with its owner) to students. Community support officers, security wardens and/or police representatives should also be invited to give presentations on safety awareness and crime prevention.

To further develop or implement current initiatives to attract international students and support them whilst they arrived at the university, Keele will need to have at least an International Office or a team of staff dedicated to service this group of students. Current limitation on resources and staff to support international students’ transition and integration will need to be acknowledged by the University management.

Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions

According to the British Council’s ‘Creating Confidence’ booklet, an international safety survey shows that over 60% of international students were not offered a chance to attend a safety talk by their institutions and over 85% had not attended a personal safety talk from the police. Some students suggested that safety issues should be addressed by institutions. 528 out of 535 students who have attended safety talks found them to be useful and reassuring. [7] www.britishcouncil.org/creating_confidence_-_international_student_safety_survey_-_july_2007.pdf

Personal safety and crime prevention awareness have become increasingly important, especially in recent years; UK institutions may therefore wish to consider implementing such workshops as a part of their induction programme.

International students’ mental health needs need to be addressed by

many institutions if they have not already done so. As learning providers, UK institutions have a duty of care to students and need to be more proactive in looking after their well-being. Campus shootings have occurred in the USA and Australian universities in recent years, and whilst politicians and the media have focused on firearms legislation and campus security, the underlying issue is that there was no unified early intervention mechanism in place. This is a clear indication that educational establishments need to do more to promote positive well-being and prevent mental health problems.

Reflections on national policy issues raised

It has been identified that fostering friendship between international students and British students/families would enhance international students’ experience immensely. This type of programme has proved to be beneficial and popular amongst international students living and studying in the UK. In the light of these findings it seems appropriate that the decision to withdraw funding from the HostUK organisation in the UK in 2008, which provides a very similar service to that described previously, should be reviewed as a matter of urgency. The value of this type of scheme seems inarguable and to remove government funding for such a positive and renowned initiative seems a decidedly retrograde step and defeats the purpose of seeking to nurture the levels of satisfaction of international students.

A meeting with Monash’s International Education Director revealed that Australian legislation, Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) national framework, has changed academia’s perceptions and that they are now required to consider student experience as a priority. Staff who deal with international students are required to attend ESOS workshops. This, in return, has contributed to a better level of customer service for international students. A campus student experience network has been formed by Monash senior management and there are regular meetings with staff representatives across all campuses. In addition, International Student Association presidents from all campuses hold meetings with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor to discuss various international student issues. I have found this legislation very intriguing, as there is currently no national code of practice or legislation in the UK to act as a service quality

standards mechanism for learning providers to international students. It would be in the interests of international students in the UK to have similar legislation and adequate measures in place to protect them as consumers. After all, international education is a very expensive investment and could cause great distress and financial hardship should things go wrong.

The UK is a rapidly evolving multi-cultural society. In recent years, there has been an influx of Eastern European migrants, as well as immigrants of ethnic minorities previously settled in the UK. In addition to this, the UK government aims to attract an additional 100,000 international students to study in the UK. The sector must acknowledge this social transformation and develop in their students intercultural competencies that include various skills that allow the students to deal with social and cultural differences.

References

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