

A comparative study of the processes of social integration

(University of Melbourne, Monash University and University of Auckland)

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Objectives

My objectives were to explore the processes involved in the social integration of international students at University of Melbourne and Monash University in Australia and Auckland University in New Zealand, through the following key areas of policy and service delivery:

- preparatory and ongoing mechanisms for the support of international students
- organised activities designed to promote international student social interaction
- the housing of international students

Outcomes from study visit

Each of the three universities I visited demonstrated examples of creative, energetic and innovative support for international students along with measures to facilitate their transition and integration into university life and culture. Examples included friendship programmes, family support and mentoring programmes, residential college cross-cultural inductions, overseas students' society activities, intercultural communication workshops, civic engagement and many other initiatives. All three universities could be seen to value and actively invest in social, cultural and sporting activities for their students, while acknowledging the challenges of encouraging and supporting sustained social interaction between international and domestic student communities. A contrasting infrastructure of full support, residential colleges, combined with an overall lower capacity for accommodating students on campus

in universities in Australia and New Zealand, in contrast to the UK, highlighted interesting advantages and disadvantages of current housing policy.

Key findings:

University of Melbourne (MU)

Strategy and policy at the University of Melbourne (MU) in teaching, learning and managing the student experience is firmly underpinned by a very clear and focused commitment to internationalisation and respect for diversity as the University aims to secure its position as a leading international university. The promotion of cultural diversity, tolerance and intercultural communication are embedded in university literature and web pages as well as stated missions and service delivery objectives.

Pre- and post-arrival

Commitment to ensuring new international students integrate into University life starts prior to arrival with MU staff running pre-departure briefings for international students and their families in a number of key sending countries. Current MU students volunteer at the briefings held in their own countries, to share information and tips with prospective students.

Post-arrival, the University makes available to students all the usual, vital services to facilitate the first stage of their transition into life at the University of Melbourne, including airport collections, a compulsory international student briefing, followed by an institutional orientation. Current students are encouraged to be actively involved in helping new international

students make the transition into MU life. Each semester, International Student Services (ISS) seek and train both local and international student mentors and volunteers to assist with various programmes and events. These kinds of mentoring and volunteering programmes are intended to explicitly provide opportunities for Australian and international students to meet and work together, for developing interpersonal and cross-cultural communication skills and for personal satisfaction. Examples of these include helping to run the 'Getting to know Australians' Orientation workshop, assisting in the staffing of the International Welcome Centre, and running Twilight Student Cultural Tours. ISS also run a programme of language support and professional development for the spouses of international students, from the outset and throughout their stay at MU.

I noticed, during my visit, lots of notices posted up advertising 'Compatriot Lunches'. Intrigued, I learnt that in a bid to connect those new international students who have a relatively small representation at the University, ISS organise a series of free lunches, in order to help students meet each other and to develop social networks with later year students from their home country. Through this activity and many other activities, it was clear that overall, much importance was placed on ensuring new students were able to make social connections, right from the start, and that forethought, energy, students' input and university resources were dedicated to this vital aspect of new-student transition.

Ongoing initiatives

Apart from orientation activities, MU has in place many practical, easy-to-access and fun measures to encourage all students to get involved and experience university and Australian life throughout their stay at the university. This approach fosters the sense of equal access for all students and encourages acceptance into the community, regardless of which country students come from.

What was particularly impressive was how integrated this philosophy seemed to be across many different parts of the University: MU Sports organise lunchtime sports competitions, the Postgraduate Association run day trips to local places of interest, the Faculty of Education, in collaboration with the International Student Services, run the MU International Students Outdoor Programme – organising a range of wonderful, day and weekend trips to Australian tourist and cultural sites. In addition to volunteering opportunities such as for ISS, all students have the chance to apply to be MU Student Ambassadors – mentoring new students, through a 14-month long Student Ambassador Leadership Programme, which provides opportunities for students to create networks and develop their qualities and skills via active engagement within the university and volunteering within the wider community.

Melbourne University Overseas Service (MUOSS)

In addition to the initiatives mentioned above, I wanted to give a particular mention to the MUOSS. MUOSS is a department of the Student Union and is the official representative body for all overseas students at MU, including postgraduate, undergraduate, study abroad and exchange students. MUOSS aims to promote international students' welfare and enrich their experience in Melbourne University. It has 18 office bearers who have voting rights in committee meetings and are elected into the positions as international student representatives during elections. MUOSS also has several co-opted Activities Officers and various sub-committees, as well as a wide network of volunteers.

I was extremely impressed with the scope of this service for international students, as well as with the dedication and energy of the committee to their roles in representing students and organising and running a very wide range of social activities. Some of these include: MUOSS Night market (part of

International Week – where students from around the world share their food, crafts and traditions), the MUOSS Amazing Race (Orientation Week event to get to know Melbourne), Bush Dance, Book Fest, Around the World in one Day and the MUOSS Central Australia 11-day trip. Also an important part of MUOSS work is their Buddy Programme which is linked to their peer support work and a range of publications for international students, such as Arrival Survival Handbook, Voice, the MUOSS bi-annual magazine, MUOSS general brochure and fortnightly email newsletters – Accent and MUOSS classifieds.

Visiting MUOSS premises, in the MU Student Union, I was left in no doubt as to the success of their work. A MUOSS Officer told me that he felt that empowering international students and giving them a sense of belonging was extremely important to him and his officers. Judging from the fact that their Overseas Students' Lounge was bustling with students, elected staff and volunteers, brimming over with energy, good ideas, commitment and confidence, I would say that they have clearly contributed a great deal to that end.

On campus accommodation and International House

In common with other universities in Australia, many domestic students at Melbourne University are from the local area and therefore continue to live at home for the duration of their studies. For this reason, it has not been necessary historically to have large-scale student accommodation on-campus. As a result of this, many students, including first years and international students, who aren't able to secure accommodation on-campus, have to find accommodation off-campus independently.

On-campus accommodation at MU is offered at one of 12 residential colleges. Students who are successful in obtaining one of the much sought-after college places can expect to benefit hugely from a highly supportive and academically enriched experience. The University colleges, based on Oxbridge model, provide substantial welfare and pastoral support, as well as academic support, in the form of a comprehensive tutorial programme run by resident and non-resident tutors. Full (communal) dining facilities are provided in all colleges, as are a wide range of social, cultural and sporting activities for all college members.

Many international students

seeking to live in residential accommodation on campus apply to International House. This college, which provides a highly attractive package of benefits to its residents, is heavily over-subscribed. It actively seeks to achieve a balance of cultural diversity, recruiting Australian students as well as international students and works hard to provide an inclusive environment, which explicitly promotes international understanding. As above, students who manage to gain a place in International House can be assured of considerable advantages over students living independently, off-campus. International House are proud to offer their own orientation for their residents, including cross-cultural communication workshops, to foster the best possible mutual understanding. Social and cultural integration is an important focus of the college, and its many social activities to promote cross-cultural interaction allow students to make friendships across the national divides. It's a recipe which seems to succeed and in so doing, constitutes a best practice model in cross-cultural integration.

Key findings: Monash University

Monash University has the largest international student population of any university in Australia, with more than 15,500 international students from over 100 countries. In addition, Monash has campuses outside of Australia including Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia and South Africa. A highly multi-cultural university, Monash takes very seriously the advocacy of cultural diversity and the promotion of international and cross-cultural literacy within the institution, as well as its commitment to continually improving the international student experience. To this end, Monash University has an impressive range of designated support for international students as well as activities aimed at all students which promote inclusiveness and a sense of belonging.

Pre- and post-arrival

Extensive, specialised, support services for international students are available on each of the Monash campuses, which are in turn co-ordinated by central university services. Students are guided through the Monash experience, with advice and information beginning with off-shore, pre-departure briefings, pre-arrival DVDs, booklets and podcasts. Once students have arrived at Monash, they will of course find an

airport reception service, temporary accommodation assistance, as well as a comprehensive orientation. Orientation – ‘O’Week – takes place over five days and includes essential information for international and domestic students, sessions uncovering ‘secrets to a successful life at Monash’, fun days out, social events and a city tour, and the Orientation Carnival.

International Student Support sends all students a ‘welcome email’ and given them access to their ‘E-planner’ for the orientation period. Each campus has its own orientation programme. As Monash has two intakes of students each year, ‘O’Week runs twice a year!

The Monash Transition Programme aims to support students and staff to understand the issues new students face in adjusting to university life and study. Extensive resources are provided via the Transition Programme website for students. During the first six weeks of their course, new students can also be matched up with senior students, as part of the Peer Mentor Scheme, giving them extra support to ensure they settle in as quickly and well as possible.

Ongoing initiatives

Monash has an incredibly well-organised and well-structured package of ongoing support, friendship and social activities for its international students, all of which are expressly designed to facilitate social integration, a sense of belonging to the University and to the wider, Melbourne community. Some of these initiatives are outlined below:

International Student Friendship Programme – an initiative to help students make friendly contacts with a local family or individual and to learn about local community and broaden their cultural experience of Australia. *Family Support Programme* – available to international students at Monash with their families. *Language Exchange Programme* – an opportunity for international students to help local students who are studying a foreign language

Social events of all types are actively encouraged and organised through many different sources: *The Monash University International Students’ Service (MUISS)* who represent the interests of international students, run a number of affordable social activities throughout the year with the star event being the Multicultural Festival in August. Other events include cellar nights, lunchtime bands, BBQs, trivia nights, Oktoberfest, Comedy Week, Campus Games and the Green Week.

Health, Wellbeing and Development facilitate the running of weekly Global Friendship Night, where international and local students can get to know each other, over themed socials with food, music and dancing.

Residential colleges on each of the different campuses will organise their own programme of social and recreational activities, which might include day trips out, college balls, cultural days, cooking classes and inter-residence sport competitions.

In addition to all of the above, each campus also has its own *International Students’ Association*, which also offers a wide range of social activities, including ski trips, go-karting, horse-back riding and farm stays.

The majority of social and recreational events are intended for a mixed student group. This is in part undoubtedly intended to informally embed the reality of social integration of international and domestic students, but also reflects a core objective and brand promise of Monash University to its students and staff of delivering a global experience.

Residential Colleges at Monash

In the same way as outlined above, with reference to University of Melbourne, the collegiate system of residential accommodation at Monash University offers students a superior and ‘enriched’ university experience. Places are oversubscribed and tend to be allocated to the brightest and most dedicated of students.

The college environment recognises and values diversity and as such creates personal, academic, cultural and recreational opportunities to encourage this. A number, though not all, of Monash’s colleges provide academic assistance programmes and pastoral support and full service meals. It might be expected however that students – both home and international – are better adjusted and supported in this environment.

The majority of students at Monash do not live in colleges, but either live at home or must find their own accommodation off-campus. The latter category of students have fewer opportunities to get to know and to live amongst Australian students who, still living at home, often retain their school friends, part-time jobs and aspects of their pre-university life. International students would be more than likely to live with other international students or in same nationality groups. Some work on Unit level 1 (first year undergraduate) pass rates by Monash

Residential Services indicate that students living in a fully-supported college environment achieve higher marks.

Key findings: Auckland University

The University of Auckland was established in 1883 and currently has around 34,000 students, of which over 5,300 are international. The University is internationally recognised for its research excellence. The Office of the Pro Vice-Chancellor (International) at the University of Auckland is part of the Vice-Chancellor’s office and is responsible for the development and implementation of the university’s internationalisation policy and co-ordinates the International Committee. Auckland International, which coordinates international student admission and all pre-arrival information and international student support, is part of this office.

Pre- and post arrival

Comprehensive preparatory and induction material is made available to prospective and new students. Orientation is of course a big focus of initial transition and students are invited to a general university orientation lasting four days, followed by a six-day international student orientation, providing essential information, access to Uni Guides (see below), walking tours, workshops and presentations exploring learning support, academic skills and many others. Social activities during the week are described by students as the ‘highlight of the week’, typically a trip to a nearby beach in Auckland Bay for a BBQ!

The International Student Advice Centre constitutes the focal point for international students – a sort of one-stop shop – comprising comprehensive student information and advice as well as specialist international student support, International Student Advisers and a visa advice and renewal service.

Auckland also has a system of Uni-Guides, who are appointed and trained from the student community to orientate first-year University of Auckland students, to team up first year students with other like-minded students, to provide friendship and support for first year students beginning their university career.

Ongoing initiatives

In addition to the centrally-based International Student Advisers, the Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences have additionally invested in their own

International Student Adviser, who I was very happy to be able to meet up with. Dealing with a relatively small number of international students, she is able to offer an enviously personal service and spend time building up trust and confidence with her lucky cohort. At the time of my visit, the Science Faculty had also just appointed their own designated International Student Adviser.

A wonderful and very successful initiative created and run by staff at Auckland International is I-Space. I-Space aims to promote internationalisation on campus and in so doing, provides premises for international students to relax in and take part in informational workshops, and lots and lots of social events! While I was visiting, a Kiwi lunch was being held with food and drinks (non-alcoholic of course) which many students fell upon with remarkable relish! A full-time member of staff runs I-Space, and aims to get students out and about, meeting each other and discovering the pleasures of New Zealand as much as their studies allow. Activities during the year would typically include, BBQs, fish 'n' chips lunch, Kiwi kai coffee time, henna tattooing, ethnic food evenings, fashion shows, and cultural festivals (different nationalities take their turns).

The *International Student Liaison Committee* was set up in 2004 to give a voice to international students studying at the University of Auckland and thus increase their sense of belonging and representation. The committee meets regularly to discuss the needs of international students from academic, welfare and social perspectives and advises the International Office on a number of areas from the success of activities and events, through to assessments of informational materials.

Other interesting initiatives I came across during my visit were *International Student Diaries* – kept by students for one month and sessions runs by Student Counselling on 'Tips for better cultural Adjustment'.

It was evident that the University of Auckland invests heavily in the well-being and social integration of its students, both in terms of the allocation of staff resources and harnessing the energy and enthusiasm of its students.

Accommodation issues

At Auckland, there are three fully-catered colleges providing residential options for undergraduate students. For the lucky students who manage to gain a place in a college, as seen at the Melbourne and Monash universities,

the emphasis is placed on integrating students as much as possible. Small touches such as national flags for all students' countries make all the difference. Many social activities are organised, although alcohol is discouraged. Activities might typically include harbour cruises, table tennis and volleyball matches and other sporting events. Postgraduate students are accommodated in self-catered flats, or may live in flats in the private, commercial sector.

Apart from the colleges, self-catered university-managed flats and other residences are provided, although in total there are only around 1,600 places available to students. Colleges are naturally over-subscribed.

Social integration measures by the City of Auckland

The very multi-cultural nature of the city has a positive impact on the integration of the international students. Food, services and city events reflect the very broad base of the permanent and temporary Auckland population. Even the Citizens Advice Bureaux have a special International Students Service!

Two events which I attended during my visit and which impressed me greatly were the Civic Welcome and a Safe in the City Expo. Both were organised by Auckland City Council in conjunction with the University of Auckland and all local schools. As a consequence of the very high numbers of new immigrant families and cohorts of international students in Auckland, the City Council has identified and addressed a need to both welcome and protect this disparate group. The scale of the Civic Welcome and the energy, resources and commitment which went into the event was truly commendable. Cultural performances by professionals and school pupils to the 1,000-plus audience, presentations by key members of the city, school and university students, as well as extremely generous prizes donated for the event, made for the best and most genuine welcome any new resident could possibly hope for.

Following on from the Civic Welcome, the Safe in the City Expo was even more mind-blowing. Packed with students, the event was attended by organisations including Citizens Advice Bureaux, NZ Police, Mental Health Foundation, Chinese Lifeline, the Ministry of Education, Rape Prevention Education and many more. Students were given incentives to visit each stall and thus learn about possible

sources of help and support. The local police liaison officer, in tandem with a young Kiwi TV personality and group of international students, then facilitated and commented on a number of role plays performed by students, to educate new students as to the dangers and pitfalls of big city and university life.

There is no doubt in my mind that equipping students to be informed about cultural, social and legal boundaries, so as to limit or avoid unpleasant experiences which could have been avoided, is a hugely valuable contribution towards better social integration. Well done, Auckland.

Reflections on implementing learning points at own institution and other UK institutions

- The capacity for implementing the kinds of policies and practices at institutions such as the ones I visited is of course very much an issue which depends on institutional priorities and resources. Some support measures may well prove to be beyond the reach of smaller, or less-well resourced institutions.
- It was clear that designated roles monitoring/evaluating the international student experience is a key area for development.
- I remain more convinced than ever of the importance of providing interesting and varied, non-alcohol-related, social activities – both fun and interactive ones and ones where students can learn more about their host country and gain added value to the investment made to their studies.
- I was very impressed with Auckland's Safe in the City Expo and would like to explore possibilities for either city-based or regional versions of the kind I saw in Auckland. Perhaps it might be possible for some institutions to adopt/adapt elements of examples of good practice as befits level of staff and budgetary resource, or to pool resources, contacts and ideas for shared events.
- My visit was extremely useful in allowing me to explore other models of support, which highlight how relevant expertise may develop outside traditional areas associated with international student support. For example, Monash University has a member of the Counselling Service, who has expertise and competency in cross-cultural communication and as such, delivers a cross-cultural workshop during Orientation.
- My visits to the colleges at my host institutions left me in no doubt of the obvious added value of a

programme of personal, social and cultural support in residential colleges, as provided by all three universities. Perhaps this ethos might usefully be adopted or adapted into UK institutions, or at least those which don't already provide this. Outside of life within their academic department, the situation in which a student lives is often the most important of their overall experience of life in their institution and potentially where they have most to gain from cross-cultural interaction.

Reflections on national policy issues raised

One area of obvious relevance to the UK further and higher education market is the compulsory regulation through the Department of Education, by the Education Services for Overseas Students (ESOS) Act of all Australian educational institutions, who recruit international students.

The Act provides for the delivery of nationally-consistent quality education services within academic institutions, by registering education providers, setting minimum standards, ensuring tuition and financial assurances which, in so doing, protects the interests of international students studying in Australia. The integrity of the education providers is further strengthened by the ESOS legislation's interface with immigration law. This imposes visa-related reporting requirements on both students and providers.

Some aspects of ESOS have either already been implemented here in the UK, such as the Department for Innovation, Universities & Skills (DIUS) Register of training providers or will come into effect under the Points Based System. However, ESOS goes further than this, with legislation governing, amongst other things, the obligations of providers and tuition fees assurance and consumer protection mechanisms. New Zealand is similarly regulated by legislation under the Code of Practice for the Pastoral Care of International Students which provides a mandatory framework for minimum standards, good practice procedures and a complaints procedure for all education providers enrolling international students.

Conclusions

Each of the three universities I visited generously shared with me some of the many ways in which they have impressively engaged with policy and practical measures for providing quality support for orientation, transition

and the social integration of their international students to institutional life.

It is clear that social integration into institutional life takes place through different routes. For some it is through engagement with student representation, or volunteering. For others, taking part in social and sporting activities may allow them to feel connected to their institution and surroundings, not as an international student but, more simply, as a student. In order for international students to feel able to join in, transcend their own social and national boundaries, and integrate with groups other than their own, they need to feel secure, confident and welcomed. Several international students spoke to me of their own personal philosophies governing successful integration and satisfaction with life as an international student. They talked about needing to have a sense of belonging and the capacity to have some control over their lives, while at the same time knowing that the university was behind them, providing support whenever needed. One student confessed that he and other international students have experienced a sense of conflict when faced with having to move out of their comfort zone and meet local students and members of the community – a rewarding thing to do, but somewhat scary.

I wish to thank UKCISA, through the PMI, for granting me the funds to make my study visit. I found the experience truly exhilarating and energising and I very much enjoyed discovering examples of excellent practice at each of the three host universities and getting excited – and not a little envious – at the resources, energy and commitment to the support of their international students.