The Current Reality: Assessing the known experiences of International Students

Carolyn McSwiney published a study on the subject in 1995. Prior to her return to Australia she had been a teacher librarian in India. She became involved in the tertiary education of International Students to this country on her return to Australia. And in 1995 she published the results of the survey she had just completed about the experiences of International Students studying at Swinburne University. Her study was titled _Essential understandings: international students learning libraries_ and published by Auslib Press, Adelaide.

Her findings related to experiences common to International Students in the UK as well as America. The major thrust of her argument was the barriers created by using an unfamiliar language with which to both communicate and learn with; additionally there were significant cultural barriers relating to relocation to a new country with different approaches across the board including different approaches to teaching and learning. What the International students were experiencing was a form of 'culture shock'.

Tina Hurley et al's study in the UK titled _Crossing a bridge: the challenges of developing and delivering a pilot information literacy course for international students_, and published in New Library World in 2006, repeated the findings of Carolyn McSwiney, emphasizing communication problems, re-settlement into new educational and library systems and the problems of adapting to a new set of cultural dynamics being the main hurdles.

Some examples of this follow:

-   international students spend longer hours studying in the University library than most domestic students do

-   international students come from backgrounds in which passive learning styles are the norm. This involves attending lectures without the need for formal research.

-   rote learning and learning from one single resource is common

-   international students are highly computer literate

-   the social needs of international students are met within the library and frequently involves study groups of 3 or more

-   the impact of language barriers can be isolating. The International student response to this has been to bond strongly with other students with similar barriers particularly from the same region.

-   They use each others support and knowledge to overcome obstacles in their understanding of strange and unfamiliar practices and this can be off putting to locals

- In some cases the strong cultural bonds and friendships forged by International students can appear to foster feelings of racism in local populations due to the appearance of an unwillingness to bond or share common experiences with the locals which creates another form of barrier and can give rise to discrimination

- Inability to adapt to new academic environments is not dealt with adequately by current standards and the language barriers of international students prevents them from articulating problems and receiving answers or assistance

- Carolyn McSwiney noted that there were many instances of cross cultural interaction which International students experienced as threatening and withdrew from making further contact

- Alternatively when International students successfully formed cross-cultural bonding it enhanced their experience dramatically

This information is confirmed by the published study of Yoo-Seong Song in Science Direct (2005) titled *A comparative study on information-seeking behaviours of domestic and international business students*. The following were some of her findings:

- comparing the library usage of domestic and International students, domestic students spent 72 percent of library usage time in research and 24 percent on study

- International students performed profoundly differently, spending 54 percent of their library usage time on study and group work

- The library had become the focus of the social life of international students

- In terms of research needs the habits of domestic students differed markedly since database research dominated the research habits of domestic students

- International students used google and yahoo for most of their research needs indicating a weakness in information literacy forming another study barrier

Another factor in the experience of the International student population is local attitudes to their presence in our universities as well as in cities and suburbs as they participate in leisure activities in culturally exclusive groups. The attitude of local populations may need to change in order to enhance the cultural experience of International students

An aspect of this is the failure of the tertiary education system in this country to attract students from more impoverished suburbs or country localities. It has been reported that only small numbers of Aussie school leavers participate in the tertiary education sector.

The failure of our education system to provide attractive education experiences for Australian poor is a disadvantage that is prejudicial to International students success rate because of class envy or envy at opportunities to advance for poor local school leavers which are limiting this country's intellectual base, leaving us open to intolerant attitudes towards race and many other categories of intolerance

There has been a lack of planning approach to the range of qualifications required and the numbers of job vacancies that can successfully be filled once students graduate. Again this promotes lack of tolerance towards International students being grafted onto our tertiary education institutions without proper preparation or consideration of the needs of domestic school leavers.

Access to opportunities for less well educated or uneducated Australians may be a prohibitive factor in acceptance of the International student base. Factors relating to this include:

- What is the percentage of International students emergant from the upper classes in their countries of origins and how does this relate to their expectations about rights, privileges and ambitions to succeed? International students from wealthier backgrounds may have access to better class accommodation, learning tools such as wifi, electronic equipment including lap tops mobile phones and expensive transport in the form of latest model luxury cars at their disposal to reinforce the possibilities of success in addition to an excellent grasp of English. This can disadvantage International students arriving from less wealthy circumstances. From the local perspective it may not always be easy to ascertain needs arising from background circumstances and this can breed intolerance on a massive scale…since generalizations can be formed about all students from Asian backgrounds on the basis of a few adverse experiences in relation to arrogant expressions or misconceptions about rights associated with intellectual elite privileges compared to absolute timidity of no expression of rights whatsoever and a total communications failure particularly from the perspective of diminutive Asian young women who may feel physically inferior to larger more confident caucasion student counterparts??

    + Self image plays a role in this. More information alerts students to rights and possibilities. In addition background circumstances need to be taken account of to counteract problems of inequity

- As mentioned earlier, the emphasis on latest technology electronic equipment by the International student politic can dominate to such a degree that the international students can't relate to other cultural features of the Australian domestic situation – such as cultural activities in addition to and excluding electronics, touring and work. This makes successful integration less likely.

    + Welcomes need to be provided to new students from overseas to various interest groups to ensure that new students are catered for

in addition to domestic students for instance, inclusion in union operated vegetarian restaurants, such as what is in operation in the Student Union Building at Monash Clayton. Shared cooking experiences with different cultural inputs may be a very warm way of making foreign students blend in with existing local conditions with enhancements both ways.

- Statistics imply that International graduates are less likely to gravitate to successful professional employment. Those that do may find they upset the power elite within local workplaces by being required to supervise less well-off Australians with unpredictable level of cultural understanding which can work both for and against them in Australian workplaces.

- Poverty can be a disadvantage for new arrivals unfamiliar with new cities or how to navigate them to obtain accommodation or equipment. It is a common feature of the International student population that they share accommodation at cut rate prices and on leaving will pass the same accommodation onto friends or acquaintances.

    - Volunteers could be recruited from university localities to show new arrivals around and introduce them to cultural facits of Australia and the Australian way of life, possibly? This may be seen as a form of ambassadorship

- When returning to their countries of origin they will sell off newly acquired goods to newer arrivals thus alleviating the cost of setting up new accommodation

    - This could be done in a more organized fashion via cooperatives in which local student base could participate and benefit also – with shared goods to service poor students whatever their origins. Percentages of students studying in capital city universities are country based and would benefit from the same programs as international students do with some overlapping services for both sets of students and inclusion of local students in the planning and running of such services given their prior grasp of where what and how …

- Without a sharing of resources with domestic students to the same extent and this can cause lack of integration between domestic and international students and work as another form of barrier

One important factor in obtaining cultural awareness and integration may come through work participation. This fact relates to the experiences of the older generation who have formed lasting relationships with European refugees. They have watched European migrants adapting to the new culture simply through sharing common work goals. On this score it is important to note that the international study body is now absorbed into very low paid jobs available in city and regional areas such as MacDonalds who provide

part time out of hours work which assists students in completing their studies with some form of income besides that provided from home. This kind of work was traditionally performed by poor Australians but has become less acceptable to Aussie students due to the low status and hard to achieve hours of work which may be overnight and prevent adequate rest. Although work can enhance cultural experience, if you are only working with your own kind as frequently is now occurring in these cheaply run low paid places of work, then the growing cultural awareness can be limited instead of useful.

- More planning about how International students are absorbed into the workforce in part time work situations should be done and how they can be best culturally integrated to compliment the experience of existing younger Australians together.

- Teaching staff and academics should be trained in enhancing cross cultural learning and to encourage exchanges of learning styles and information between all students to share common and not-so-common experiences. This is aligned to our Labor government's major policy changes towards Social Inclusion. Adapt information on different learning styles and cultural styles within the structure of lectures and tutorials provides a feeling of welcome across the board

- Students career expectations ambitions and possibilities need to be addressed from the outset so no expectations are raised beyond the realms of possibility. This directly relates to best fit policies in line with Labor's major changes towards Social Inclusion and least harm done due to wrongfully targeted student places etcetera. This necessitates the needs of domestic students being attended to complimentary to those of International Students so conflict of interests are kept as low as possible. This may require a series of complex personality and skills based assessments tied to local job market needs and requirements for future.