

## CHAPTER TEN

# WELCOME TO WOLLONGONG: HOST COMMUNITIES AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

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### **Introduction**

The relationship that international students have with members of the community is very significant (Ward 2006). The way that various community representatives and residents respond to newcomers will impact on the extent to which these newcomers are able to participate as full members of their host communities rather than remaining on the periphery. The depiction of international students by the media also influences the perceptions that community members have of newcomers and their attitudes towards these newcomers. A focus on building nurturing and welcoming communities is imperative in providing an inclusive environment in which all members are able to fully engage which is important for the health and wellbeing of international students. However, studies with international students show that most students access support from within their educational institutions and many only have very superficial contact with the broader community (Ward 2006).

The initial part of this chapter draws on research that has emerged from a number of projects carried out by Kell and Vogl (2006, 2007 & 2008) that have highlighted the issues that international students face while studying and living in Australia. In this part of the chapter, the relationship between the media's portrayal of international students and their acceptance into the community will be explored. The second part of this chapter discusses the Welcome to Wollongong project (W2W) that emerged as a result of the findings from this research. "The Welcome to Wollongong project" had a number of aims:

- To assess the needs of international students and the attitudes of domestic students towards international students,
- To create greater links between the community and university with regard to international students,
- To involve community organisations, business groups, faith groups, social clubs, community residents, domestic and international students in helping to welcome international students,
- To reduce racism towards international students within the university and broader community and raise awareness of the contribution that international students make to the communities in which they live and
- To create opportunities for enhanced intercultural relationships between international students and members of the Wollongong community.

## **Background Literature**

The majority of research carried out with regard to international students suggests both that international students want and expect to form friendships with local students and that this interaction is important for international students' social, psychological and academic well being. According to Sidhu (2004) Australia is sold as a study destination to Asia, through a marketing strategy that presents Australia and its universities as friendly, ethnically diverse, safe and free from racism. However, in reality the amount of contact between international and domestic students is low with many international students experiencing racism and threats to their safety both on campus and in the broader community.

Deumert et al. (2006) interviewed 202 students from 43 nationalities. Students were asked if they had experienced loneliness and isolation since they had been in Australia with 65 per cent of students saying that they had. 50 per cent of students stated that they had experienced discrimination with more woman reporting experiences of discrimination than men. 9 per cent of the students interviewed said that they did not feel safe and secure in Australia. The majority of students who had experienced discrimination reported problems of discrimination, bad treatment and racism. Students from China and Malaysia experienced more discrimination. However, it was students from India and China who felt less safe living in Australia (Deumert et al., 2006).

In Robertson et al's (2000) study, while most racist episodes appeared to occur in the broader community, a total number of 46 incidents were

mentioned by 20 students as happening within the university. Some of the incidents involved; being laughed at in class, local students expressing frustration over the English language proficiency of international students when they were doing presentations and also a belief that lecturers paid less attention to international students than to local students.

Novera (2004) states that not enough attention has been paid to religious backgrounds with regard to both social and cultural adjustment and the attitudes of others. The Islamic prohibition on drinking alcohol makes it harder for students from Muslim backgrounds to mix with many of the local students where drinking alcohol, was for many, part of student culture. Many of the participants in Novera's (2004) study felt that both the Bali bombings and the media focus on radical Islam, terrorism and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan had resulted in increased racism towards Indonesians and Muslims. They felt that it was now much harder to be an Indonesian student studying in Australia. Students were also upset over the 'soft marking debate' that implied that international students had low academic standards and were in some way responsible for lowering the educational standard of Australian Universities.

The media plays a large role in how communities view newcomers. Rhee and Sagaria's (2004) analysis of the way in which the US media constructs international students is relevant to the way international students have essentially been reflected in the Australian media. According to Rhee and Sagaria's (2004) international students are depicted in the media as capital, subjugated others and person's with limited individual identities. International students are represented as inferior to local citizens. Within the Australian media, international students have been characterised as a homogenous group who are responsible for lowered academic standards and increased plagiarism, while simultaneously being characterized as cash cows that are keeping under-funded universities afloat. International students are characterised as corrupt, enrolling in study as an excuse to stay in Australia and as not only taking the university places of local students but now also competing with locals for graduate jobs (SMH Nov 23<sup>rd</sup> 2006; SMH March 27 2007; SMH September 17 2007). These media stories highlight a "crisis" that creates negative perceptions of international students and community attitudes towards those students.

Rees and Taylor (2003) surveyed 80 international students at a university in Melbourne about both their destination choices and their reasons for choosing to study in Australia. When deciding where to study, over 60% of students made the decision themselves as to where to study, for 28% it was a joint decision between themselves and their parents and

for 11% of students it was their parent's decision. Nearly half of the students interviewed obtained information about where to study through word of mouth, 30% from IDP, nearly 28% from the internet and 25% from course guides. 43% of the students that they surveyed had experienced racism off campus and nearly 27% on campus. These students will go home and tell potential students about their experiences and evidence from Rees and Taylor's (2003) study suggests that there is evidence that shows that potential students have not come to Australia due to the threats of racism.

## **The study**

The research data described below has emerged from a number of research projects conducted by Kell and Vogl between 2005 and 2008. These all involved qualitative research methods with a focus on purposive and snowball sampling. The sample in the initial project included interviews and focus groups with university staff and international students at a university and also international students and teachers at a university college. The subsequent research involved interviews and focus groups with both international and domestic students and representatives from business and community organizations in the Illawarra.

Many of the international students that Kell and Vogl spoke to, felt that domestic students and people in the larger community didn't really want to get to know them, at best they were superficially friendly. As one student stated:

In general Australian students, they just don't care, because maybe the cultural difference, because in my country when there is some foreign student, usually we approach them first, I feel like they just don't care.

Nearly all the research on intercultural relationships has been with international students and there is a paucity of research that has focused on asking local students about their friendships/lack of friendships with international students (Ward 2006). The lack of research from the perspective of domestic students was questioned by one of the international students Kell and Vogl spoke to:

What I want to know is the opinion of domestic students, what do they think about us? I don't know what they think about us, is there any research on the opinion of domestic students, maybe it is easier to match, if you know the opinions of both

Vogl and Kell interviewed a number of domestic students with regard to their attitudes towards international students. A few domestic students who attended the interviews and focus groups responded negatively about international students and there were replies to an email request to attend focus groups like the one below:

Hey, I'm a Domestic student enrolled in subjects where they're are no other students with English as a first language. It's really annoying to have to constantly have to correct their working group projects. Grrrrr!

Many of the domestic students who Kell and Vogl spoke to did want to get to know international students but were not sure how to approach them.

The slight downside is I think sometimes there is a language barrier between you know and a slight cultural difference, you are not sure how to approach them on occasions, particularly, more when I was an undergrad student in group work situations, you are with an international student and there's that little bit of "am I saying that they wrong way, I might offend you"

I went to Wonoona high. We had sixty students in our year. We had one Swedish exchange student. That was our multiculturalism- growing up in Australia gives you limited experience of the world.

Many domestic students felt that there was a need for interventionist strategies to create avenues for domestic and international students to interact with one another. These students felt that these needed to be campus wide activities and also activities that were located beyond the university campus and in the broader community.

## **International students and their host communities**

National and media discourses about international students where students are constructed as a 'problem' and a 'threat' to locals have been played out on a local level through increased racism and discrimination towards international students. Many students felt very well treated in the community but others had their safety threatened and endured racism and discrimination. One of the domestic students who Kell and Vogl interviewed spoke about how people made connections between international students and the way in which foreigners are portrayed in the media

It is more just the perceptions in the media are more to do with foreigners coming in and so I guess you get all those, the terrorism and the worry about people taking jobs from Australians, you get more of that filtering through than I think students specifically but they push those conceptions through and that sometimes it is not always good for them to be here because they are changing Australia, but I don't know.

Many students spoke very positively about the broader community, particularly about their interaction with more elderly locals. Essentially, they viewed youth in the community as being more hostile towards international students;

The older people, some ladies are really nice and I like to talk with them, once I got some problems, I can get information from them, I think the teenagers are not really nice and some students are not really nice, sometimes they will answer my questions but sometimes not, the older people they will always really nice and answer my question.

International students spoke about having beer bottles thrown at them and of locals wanting to fight them. Others spoke about how people had yelled at them from their cars to speak English. Kell and Vogl found that some of the Indonesian Muslim students had experienced increased racism within the broader community. The excerpt from the following email that was sent to one of the authors typifies the experiences of a number of the Muslim students that Kell and Vogl spoke to:

Australia in general is a nice place to live but not in the past few years. Few years ago, I was with a few friends doing a bushwalk (how much more Australian it can be?). When we hit the road (near Stanwell Park), one girl in our group was shouted at, honked at and thrown beer can - all because she was wearing a Hijab (Muslim head dress). That's just a small example unfortunately.

A few of the students' felt that the abuse that was directed towards them was not specific to Australian youth and was universal to youth in all countries:

I think it is a special age, they don't actually know what they are doing, I think a problem of age, it is an international problem.

International students spoke of discrimination when trying to rent places in the community and felt that priority was given to local students over international students when it came to private accommodation. The

students also perceived that they were discriminated against in the local labour market with some suggesting that they never even made it to the interview stage as prospective employers were put off by their ethnic sounding surnames.

While some students had very positive experiences, another source of stress for some students was in fact Homestays. Homestays is a full board accommodation where international students pay to stay with a local family. On the Study in Australia website (<http://www.studyinaustralia.gov.au/Sia/en/Home.htm>) Homestays are described in the following way:

Many students living in Homestay situations experience Australian family life in a natural, friendly way and often find they are treated like a family member. Wherever you live - Homestay, boarding school or campus accommodation - you will discover many opportunities to make lasting friendships.

The reality is that while some students really enjoyed Homestay accommodation, many of the students that Kell and Vogl spoke to, missed their own food, found their Homestay accommodation to be very expensive and found having to speak English all the time quite stressful. For one student the Homestay cost him \$200 per week. This included a room and two meals a day (Kell and Vogl 2006). One of the students didn't like the lack of freedom that she experienced at her Homestay.

The first month that I arrived here, I lived in Homestay, the speech was very fast, the Homestay was ok but still have a lot of difference between the thinking, sometimes I tried to explain something but she misunderstood and sometime she wanted to communicate something with me but I misunderstood, eventually I moved out because the rent of Homestay, if you live by yourself you can enjoy more freedom

G: So you felt like you didn't have enough freedom?

Not a lot of freedom because you have to comply with the Homestay rules and you couldn't use the kitchen, one time I used the kitchen to cook an egg, she was so angry, shouting at me, terrible.

G: So she wasn't very nice?

P: Actually this lady she was nice, just sometimes the communication was not very good and sometimes I wanted to speak my personal experience, when I arrived here, I really wanted to communicate my feelings to her but

she was a business woman and she was always very busy with her work and didn't want to talk a lot to me.

Another issue that arose from the focus groups was that many of the students didn't feel safe studying in Australia. One the marketing website's Australia is promoted as safe study destination. The 'Why study in Australia' website states that one of the reasons for studying in Australia is because:

Australia is safe (<http://study.australia.edu/WhyAustralia.html>)

Another website promoting study in Australia claims:

Australia offers a clean, safe and cosmopolitan environment for international students. The country has low crime rate and strict gun control laws ensuring a safe and comfortable environment for studies (<http://www.ultimatestudiesaustralia.com/Parents-Living%20Environment.htm>)

While a number of students the authors spoke to did feel safe in Australia, others had experiences where they had been placed in physical danger and this had also placed them at risk psychologically due to the ensuing trauma from their experiences.

Actually, I was robbed by 3 Aussie guys in June, one of them point at me with a gun, I was totally in shock and then I go for help from the international student office, a student counselor helped me a lot, to get over and move on with my life

Another student stated that:

I expected Wollongong to be safe but actually I was robbed two times by teenagers and some of my friends also told me that teenagers threw tomatoes at them, that was terrible, I think about, they used a knife and asked me for money two time, I report to the security office but I don't think it worked.

In their interview with representatives from community and business groups, Kell and Vogl found that there was very little awareness about the cultural and economic contribution that international student make to their host communities and there was also very little awareness of the issues which international students face. Although, one of the representatives from a community organisation, that ran a multicultural playgroup where



some of the partners and children of some of international students attended, mentioned the extreme isolation that many of the partners of international students suffered.

The majority of international students that Kell and Vogl spoke to said that they would like to be more involved in their communities and Kell and Vogl found that the students who were more involved in local community and faith groups or who had made friends in the community felt more positively about studying in Australia than those that weren't. Kell and Vogl argued that it was not only academics, domestic students and service providers at the University but also others in the broader Wollongong community who play an integral role in making international students feel welcome in Australia. They suggested that greater links should be made between the broader community and universities with regard to international students. Community organisations and local business should be involved in helping to provide opportunities for students to feel included in their local community. Also, these community organisations and local businesses need to be made aware of the great cultural and economic contribution that international students make to both the communities and businesses in the areas in which they study. International student spending on goods and services in Australia in 2005 was \$5.3 billion (ABS).

## **The Welcome to Wollongong Project (W2W)**

Through funding in 2006 and then subsequent funding in 2007, a working group was set up in partnership with Wollongong City Council. In terms of University representation this group included domestic and international student representatives, representatives from the undergraduate and post graduate student unions, representatives from international student groups, (Illawarra committee for international students and Momentum), representatives from the Office of Community Partnerships, University of Wollongong's Accommodation service, Student Service, the UniCentre (the commercial section of the university) and from the University of Wollongong's Career Service. Included within the working group's non university members were a number of representatives from Wollongong City Council, marketing managers from two organisations that manage both the exterior and enclosed businesses in the Wollongong Shopping strip (Wollongong Central and GPT), representatives from Illawarra Ethnic Communities Council, representatives and students from Wollongong TAFE and the president of the Illawarra

Chamber of Business who also owned a local bus company. This group has been meeting once a month since mid 2006. Kell and Vogl obtained an initial \$10,000 worth of funding from the University of Wollongong's Office of Community Partnerships and the University of Wollongong's international committee to set up the working group. Once the working group was set up, the group was successful in securing a \$20,000 IMB community foundation grant to put in place some strategies to make Wollongong a more welcoming city for international students.

The working group was responsible for making decisions regarding the implementation of strategies/events which would make the Illawarra more inclusive of international students. The group decided to organise a civic reception and mini festival, in addition to a community website for international students. The rationale behind the civic reception was to provide a symbolic welcome to Wollongong. In the last few years, a number of universities have joined with their local councils to provide civic receptions to welcome international students. In 2007 a civic reception was held at Sydney Town Hall, attended by Lord Mayor Clover Moore and the Vice Chancellors from three Sydney Universities, UTS, University of NSW and University of Sydney. Other Australian Cities who have held civic receptions are Bendigo, Ballarat, Adelaide, Launceston and Newcastle. The difference between these civic receptions and the one proposed by the Welcome to Wollongong (W2W) working group was that the W2W group decided that the civic reception would be held on stage in the main shopping strip rather than in an enclosed hall, so that it would take place amongst everyday community members and hopefully raise community awareness of the number of international students studying in Wollongong and also make the community aware that international students were being officially welcomed to the area. The mini festival was conducted to provide both a celebration to welcome international students to Wollongong and also to entice local students and community members to come along. The date and day of the week of the civic reception and mini festival were chosen to coincide with the Friday markets in the mall. This was done as it was thought that the markets would enhance the festive atmosphere on the day and ensure that a number of community residents would be there on the day. Community groups and business were also invited to have stall on the day.

A number of international students were employed on the project and more have attended the meetings voluntarily and therefore the whole process of meeting together as a working group has created greater social interaction between these international students and other members from the community. The working group was also divided into a number of sub

committees with the international students in the W2W group being an integral part of these sub committees. Thus the project, which is still continuing, culminated into more than just a one off event with many of these students forming what will be hopefully long lasting contacts with members from the community.

The funding for the mini festival and civic reception were seen as seeding funds and the intention was that the mini festival and civic reception become an annual event through business and community sponsorship. Thus part of the W2W agenda has been to make local businesses and the community aware of the financial contribution that international students make to the area.

The second part of the project was a website, [w2w@uow.edu.au](mailto:w2w@uow.edu.au) with the aim of providing information to international students about the community. The diagram below is the home page of the website.



## Welcome to Wollongong (W2W)

The Welcome to Wollongong project is aimed at:

- Making international students feel welcome in the Illawarra.
- Providing international students with more information about what is happening in the community.
- Making the community more aware of the large and diverse international student population who study in Wollongong.

Read more about W2W

### **Civic Reception: Feb 29 2008**

A civic reception and mini festival to welcome international students to Wollongong will take place on Friday the 29th of February 2008.

Supported by Wollongong City Council and the University of Wollongong, the Civic Reception will be held on the amphitheatre stage in Wollongong Mall at 11.30am and run for approximately 45 minutes.

Find out more

### **Information for International Students**

Take a look at our International Student information pages to help you during your time in Wollongong.

#### **Supported by:**



Diagram-Webpage for Welcome to Wollongong project

### **Evaluation**

Essentially, the Welcome to Wollongong project was broadly successful in the achievement of its aims. The proposed events were conducted and implemented according to the original proposal and there was strong support and involvement for the three components of the project within the university and among representative from business and community organisations. The success of this project can be partly evidenced by the fact that the university has committed to provide part of the funding so that the project can continue. The most significant achievement of the project was the development of the community working group. The diversity of the group meant that we were able to focus on the needs of international students from a range of perspectives and the group if nurtured has the potential to become an invaluable resource in helping to provide strategies for international students. There is the potential for the group to develop into an even more strongly cohesive group in the future and for it to include additional members.

Essentially, the group ran smoothly and feedback from members is that they would like to continue to be part of the W2W group in the future. Overall, experiences of being part of the group were positive. There were minor tensions and disagreements over a few issues but these were resolved. The committee structure operated as a place where international students could demonstrate their effectiveness as productive members of the Australian community.

The days of the civic reception and festival seemed to be a great success with over 500 people attending. Students provided positive feedback about the W2W website and the civic reception and festival. While there was a lot of positive feedback about the festival, there were also some criticisms. Some of the staff and students felt that more work needed to be done to involve community members. Some students felt that they still did not know enough about the community. In addition, an academic staff member from the university was critical of the festival stating that it was superficial and “tacky”. While there is always the danger of superficial responses to multiculturalism which reaffirm stereotypes, the Welcome to Wollongong program represented an initiative from students and a genuine attempt to engage meaningfully with the community. As a result of the development of the festival, dialogue was created between the University, the community and business groups. Many international students also played an extremely pro active role in helping organise the festival and obtained ‘local’ experience from being involved in the project. Many students have become more involved in community activities and with community organisations as a result of their involvement W2W project. Stronger networks have been created between community and business groups and international students. Also, the strategies which would be put in place to welcome international students, such as, the festival were decided upon collaboratively by the group and thus it became a community owned project rather than a university dominated one. The pride and joy they had in this success is evident in the photos of some of the students on the cover of this book.

## **Conclusion**

While the Welcome to Wollongong project helped to make some international students feel welcome in the area; racism, discrimination, isolation, loneliness and poverty continue to characterise the lives of many international students. National and media discourses about international students where students are constructed as a ‘problem’ and a ‘threat’ to locals have been played out on a local level through increased racism and discrimination towards international students. Many students felt very well treated in the community but others had their safety threatened and endured racism and discrimination. Host community’s perceptions about international students need to be challenged so that international students can be welcomed into the communities in which they live while they study. International students make an enormous economic and cultural contribution to the communities in which they live and study and the

various sectors of the community need to be made aware of this. While many students had very positive experiences of living in the community, many of the community representatives who the authors spoke to were unaware of the very large international student population that lived in their community and also of the issues that these students faced. The Welcome to Wollongong Project to an extent addressed this lack of awareness but is just a beginning towards building the capacities of a host community to truly include and engage with its international student population.

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