Improving the International Student Experience: The Role of Community Engagement

Meredith Lawley*, University of the Sunshine Coast, mlawley1@usc.edu.au
Julie Matthews, University of the Sunshine Coast, jmatthew@usc.edu.au
David Fleischman, University of the Sunshine Coast, dfleish@usc.edu.au

Abstract

International education has proven value to both universities and students, with many universities economically reliant on international students. Sustaining the economic, educational and social benefits of this globally-competitive industry requires new thinking and a movement beyond simply measuring student satisfaction. The often-neglected party in the international student experience is the host community outside the university. While research notes the positive impact of student-community interactions on student satisfaction and adjustment, few studies investigate the effects of engagement on student’s personal and professional development or the reciprocal effects of international students on the community. This study follows one cohort of international students through their experience, with results supporting the positive influence of community interactions on both parties.

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Introduction

The rapid growth of international education and the presence of international students on campuses globally indicate that students and higher education institutions alike regard the international experience as an important element of higher education. Further many universities world-wide are taking a more proactive approach to their role in society and their local communities in particular, with corporate social responsibility high on their agendas (Jongbloed, Enders and Salerno, 2008). Given the benefits of international education, surprisingly little research has been undertaken concerning the impact of student interactions outside the university setting on the student experience. A good deal of international education research is conducted under the auspices of routine student satisfaction surveys intended to inform recruitment processes rather than courses and programs. A study of international education survey instruments used at 20 top American universities found that 95% of surveys assessed student satisfaction (Durrant and Doris 2007). Currently very few studies investigate the interaction and relations of international students outside the university setting and the reciprocal effects of engagement on both student and their host community.

Although we know little about the interactions of international students with the wider host community, several surveys on international student issues indicate that international students report limited contact with host nations’ individuals and would like more contact (UKCOSA survey 2004; Ward, 2001). International students also indicate a strong preference for friends from the same country or with other international students (Ward, 2006). It is not clear if this is a matter of choice or circumstance. However, international students who cultivate friendships with local students adjust more easily both academically and socially (Furnham and Alibhai, 1985), experience lower stress levels (Redmond and Bunyi, 1993), and greater satisfaction (Noels, Pon and Clement, 1996). Increased contact is associated with: greater satisfaction, better academic performance and a positive perception of local community.

From a host community standpoint, the presence of international students, as well as significant economic benefits (Education Adelaide 2005), helps develop social consciousness and overall cultural intelligence (Social Development Committee 2006). The experiences of international students in a host community foster the development of global social networks which may not otherwise have developed (Hayes 2008).

In brief there is a dearth of rigorous research into student interactions outside the university context and the benefits these interactions have on students and the host community, that is, how community engagement can be used to create reciprocal marketing value for all parties involved with international education, the student, the university and the host community. This knowledge could be used by universities to improve the international student experience and build stronger links with local community. These benefits in turn would improve competitive advantage and ensure sustainability. Hence this research seeks to address this gap by exploring the expectations of students from their arrival and through their experience, focusing on the nature of interactions and the subsequent personal and professional benefits. In addition, the reciprocal impacts on members of the host community are explored. Specifically, three research questions were addressed:

1. What are students’ initial expectations of the nature and form of their interactions and relationships with the host community?
2. What are the actual outcomes, both personally and professionally of their outside university experiences?
3. What were the personal and professional impacts on host teachers?

Research Method

The research design used a pilot study of a single cohort of international study abroad students specifically chosen as their program incorporated formal contact with the community outside of the university setting, that is, the group were American student teachers who undertook placements in local Australian schools. The cohort comprised 18 students aged between 20 and 32. Seven students were male and 11 female. Nine had not travelled internationally before their study period in Australia and 4 had limited international travel experience. The multi-method approach developed for the pilot study involved the administration of both a pre arrival questionnaire (largely open-ended and qualitative) and a quantitative survey administered on completion of their study, immediately before their return to America. Host teachers supervising the students also completed a survey immediately after students had finished their placements. Of the 19 teachers responding, the majority had more than 15 years experience, had previously supervised over 10 Australian student teachers and had supervised only one non-Australian student teacher.

Results

Results are reported for each of the three research questions next: initial student expectations (drawing data from the pre arrival survey), the actual student experience (drawing data from the survey administered on completion of their study) and finally the reciprocal impacts if international students on one group of the host community, host teachers (drawing data from the teacher survey).

What were students’ initial expectations of the nature and form of their interactions and relationships with the host community? Responses to this question were gathered through the arrival survey. Students were asked about their motivations and expectations of their study, before being asked about the types of people (both professionally and personally) they might interact with and the benefits they foresaw from these interactions. Two key themes emerged that allowed students to be divided into two groups. The first theme was characterised by motherhood responses (world peace and meeting new people) and hence we referred to this group as the optimists, while the second pattern was characterised by statements that reflected more realistic expectations and so we labelled this group the realists. The optimists, (13 of the 18 participants), seemed to have expectations that they thought we wanted to hear and in general, reflected the younger and more limited internationally experienced respondents. Comments included statements like ‘words cannot express the deep and rich connections that will be made’ and ‘I will be changed for ever’. A sub-group within the optimists also indicated a focus on a one way flow of interaction from them to people they met, illustrated by comments such as ‘I want to share my culture with the people I meet’, and ‘I want to leave (people I meet) with a lasting impression of the US’. These respondents (3) seemed to assume that people would be very interested in the United States and appeared less open to receiving information about non-American cultures. A final strong theme running through the optimists was one of safety, the cautious adventurer. While these students gave many platitudes about becoming global citizens and experiencing new cultures there was a
strong proviso that they liked Australia because ‘I can speak the native tongue’ and ‘they speak English’. The optimists expected and sort a different culture but had specifically chosen a foreign culture that was not too different from their own. The second group of respondents, the realists, comprised five of the 18 students. Their expectations were exemplified by statements like ‘share close relationships but they will not be lifelong’ and expected both ‘good and bad experiences’. One of the realists was clearly motivated by a desire to ‘make myself more marketable in the professional world’.

Turning to expectations of both groups in terms of personal interactions, responses focused almost exclusively on Australians with only two respondents (one realist and one optimist) mentioning the expectation of meeting non-Australians. Respondents did highlight a desire to meet people ‘from a wide range of backgrounds’ and expected Australian to be ‘laid back’ and ‘friendly’. Some optimists seemed to have almost childlike expectations as reflected by ‘personally I hope to make friends that I can keep in touch with who can come visit me, I have never had a friend from a different country so I think that if I did it would be great’. The benefits of these personal interactions ranged from the optimists ‘enrich my life and future interactions’ through to very specific benefits like ‘help me with my understanding of accents and vocabulary’. Examples of benefits from the realists are exemplified by comments like ‘Really I cannot foresee the impact right now. I have been told it will be life changing so hopefully in positive ways.’ In terms of professional interactions the optimists again exhibited unrealistic expectations of long term interactions as evidenced by the following comment ‘I would love to keep in contact with my cooperating teacher because when I am back in my country I could email her about a lesson and she could give me her perspective on it’. Specifically the ‘me’ optimists made comments such as ‘Having shared my talents and strengths with people here will further develop my confidence as a teacher’. One of the realists noted ‘give me the strength to be bold and adventurous, hardworking yet smart in trying new ideas in my classroom or in general in my professional life’.

In summary, students’ initial expectations were generally high and positive but fairly narrow in scope and in many cases quite unrealistic, perhaps reflecting the limited international exposure and experience of many respondents. The focus personally was clearly on meeting laid-back, friendly Australians (with meeting other international students not even considered by many) and professionally on teachers and staff in their schools. The expectations of many students seemed unrealistic and unachievable.

What are the actual outcomes, both personally and professionally of their outside university experiences? This question was addressed through a survey administered just prior to the students’ departure home. The survey was based on the initial expectations data. Data was gathered on the nature of interactions, specifically who they interacted with, their expected personal benefits and their expected professional benefits. In relation to who, students were asked to project how many friends and professionals they would keep in contact with after their return home with results summarised in table 1. Students were also asked to evaluate the quality of their actual interactions with friends and professionals. All students reported that the quality of their personal interactions either met (3) or exceeded their initial expectations (15), while all except two students reported the amount of time spent interacting socially was what they expected (5) or greater (11). Supporting the literature (Ward, 2001) the highest number of friendships predicted to continue were from within the national student group. Interestingly, these numbers were on average slightly higher than initially expected. While Ward (2001) suggests that friendships with other international students will also rank highly, our results indicated that there was an expectation of keeping in touch with nearly
twice the number of Australian students as other international students. Next were friends outside of the university context with four students indicating they would not keep in contact with any and one student indicating they would keep in contact with 25. The respondent indicating the very high number of friends was the one respondent who proactively joined a community organisation. If this respondent is removed the next highest number of friends reported was six. In terms of initial expectations these numbers reflect expectations were met (3 students), or exceeded (14 students) with the exception of one student. The final group was other international students with on average one contact being maintained. Surprisingly, 13 students indicated this number met or exceeded their expectations indicating meeting and forming friendships with other international students was not an initial expectation.

Turning to professional contacts, students reported the time spent interacting professionally, the number of people met professionally and the quality of professional interactions were all on average slightly more than they expected. The overall benefit of professional interactions was met or exceeded by all students. The highest number of professional contacts to be maintained were those developed through the in-school experience. In all other categories many respondents indicated they would not be keeping in contact with any professionals. Turning specifically to the professional benefits students expected to gain, again expectations were clearly met or exceeded for all respondents with the exception of one, particularly in terms of their professional growth as teachers and the potential advantage of an international experience when applying for a job. Indeed for the majority of students the professional benefits were ranked considerably higher than initial expectations. While personal benefits were met or exceeded, fewer students reported the considerably higher outcome than expected that was evident in their evaluation of the professional benefits they achieved.

What were the personal and professional impacts on host teachers? Initial motivations of teachers to supervise international students included cultural exchange (4), mutual learning experiences (3), the desire to have an extra adult in the classroom (3) and the desire to be exposed to a different teaching curriculum and practices. While some negative personal impacts were noted (time consuming, additional work required, paperwork), the impacts were overwhelmingly positive and included the cultural experience (6), the making of a new friend (4), learning about the USA and their educational system (4) and becoming more aware of the problems faced when young people move away from home (2).

Professionally, individual teachers noted significant professional benefits for both themselves and on their schools more generally. Individually they noted the benefits of being forced to reflect on their own practice, the stimulation of professional dialogue and the challenge to review and refine their own teaching practice. Teachers also noted impacts on the broader school community including the impact on other staff not directly involved in supervision, the positive impact on students, and the inspiration and ‘buzz’ bought to the school.

In summary, almost all teachers were eager to be involved in further work with international students and found the experience rewarding both personally and professionally and would recommend involvement to other teachers.

Final comments

As expected we found high levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the course and students were clearly delighted with their Australian experience and strongly satisfied with their
university experience. There have been a number of studies of student satisfaction but most come to the same conclusion, namely that students are satisfied. Where studies have identified student dissatisfaction, the problem has been expectation of a greater community interaction and the fact that international education students tend to spend most of their time with members of own cultural group (Ward, 2006; Nesdale and Todd, 1998). Expectations and experiences within the teaching context were generally met or higher. Likewise, expectations in terms of personal growth, social skills, and relationships were met or exceeded on all criteria, as were improved ability to interact with people professionally and socially. Similarly, host teachers reported a strong positive impact on both their personal and professional development for themselves and the school community in general as a result of interactions with the international student teachers.

While these results are exploratory, they do have implications for both the marketing of education and for marketing education. In terms of the marketing of education, our results indicate that an international student experience with planned interaction outside the university context, that is an internship, may provide clear benefits and encourage engagement with a more diverse range of people both personally and professionally, while simultaneously providing a range of reciprocal benefits to the host community. As a consequence the improved student experience resulting from these host community interactions may prove a valuable competitive advantage to those institutions willing to actively support such programs. In terms of marketing education, while our results were obtained from a cohort of education students, they clearly support the important role of structured engagement outside the university setting as a formal part of the curriculum. Hence, while many marketing departments may have internships or some forms of work integrated learning available in their programs, consideration should be given to more formal adoption of these teaching strategies specifically targeting international students.

Whatever the reason it is clear that interventions in international student learning which provide tools for students to identify, reflect on and make adjustments to their behaviour and learning are important. Finally, while this study has focussed on one cohort of students, from one country, undertaking one program, nonetheless the results add new insights into the role of community interactions in the student experience and the development of international education.
References


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