Chapter 61
Studying Locally, Interacting Globally:
Demographic Change and International Students in Australian Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter uses findings from an online survey of international onshore undergraduate and post-graduate students enrolled in an Australian university in 2009 to critically examine and compare their expectations, experiences, and levels of satisfaction. This research yielded a plethora of unique and vital concerns that were further affected by variables such as students' age and geographic location in regional/rural versus metropolitan areas. Moreover, the results of this study, in turn, can offer educators important initial insights they can then use to develop online educational materials or online courses for such internationally diverse groups of students. This chapter argues the gap between expectations and experiences requires further attention if the delivery of academic excellence to students from divergent cultural backgrounds, with different language skills and varying social norms is to be achieved within an environment that supports and reflects cultural diversity. The chapter also provides suggestions on how such factors can and should be addressed when devising online educational materials and environments for such students.

The general trend towards freely circulating capital, goods and services, coupled with changes in the openness of labour markets, has translated into growing demands for an international dimension of education and training. Indeed, as world economies become increasingly inter-connected, international skills have grown in importance for operating on a global scale. Globally oriented firms seek interna-tionally-competent workers versed in foreign languages and having mastered basic inter-cultural skills

to successfully interact with international partners. Governments as well as individuals are looking to higher education to play a role in broadening students' horizons and allowing them to develop a deeper understanding of the world's languages, cultures and business methods. One way for students to expand their knowledge of other societies and languages, and hence leverage their labour market prospects, is to study in tertiary educational institutions in countries other than their own. Several OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] governments – especially in countries of the European Union (EU) – have set up schemes and policies to promote mobility as a means of fostering intercultural contacts and building social networks for the future. (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2009, p. 310)

INTRODUCTION

Enrolment numbers of international students, defined as "those who left their country of origin and moved to another country for the purpose of study" (OECD, 2009, p. 324), at Australian universities has increased with the development and improved capacity of information communication technologies. Some Australian universities, such as Deakin, have tried to address such international interests in education via the development of online classes and curricula designed for such an international student base. In other cases, Australian educators and administrators have sought to use online media to find new ways to address the educational needs of on-site students attending brick and mortar campuses. At Charles Sturt University (CSU), a rural and regional university in inland Australia, international students are receiving increased interest from university administrators and marketers as a unique sub-culture within the student population. This approach, in turn, affects how online media are used to connect with and provide education to such students.

Historically, the use of technologically-driven communication systems, as a foundational component of educational systems, is a recent phenomenon (Schifter, 2004). Recent changes in the structure of higher education, in Australia and globally, have vastly changed the development, range and use of information technologies, particularly computer mediated communications (CMC). As recently as 2005, the vast majority of distance education courses offered in Australia existed as correspondence degrees (Ragusa, 2007). The growth in primary and supplementary learning materials based upon electronic resources has increased exponentially, partially in response to internationalisation of the tertiary education sector and more generally in response to broad social changes in technical skills, required proficiencies and cross-cultural communications. As Adeoye and Wentling (2007) explain, "Demographic change, technological advances and globalization have forced corporations throughout the world to re-examine their policies, programs, and practices" (p. 119).

Yet, while "the spread of information and communication technology lowered the information and transaction costs of study abroad and boosted demand for international education" (OECD, 2009, p. 313), the proliferation of academic research investigating the cultural relevance, not to mention the access, uptake and competence with use of these computer-based resources, remains minimal at best. Equally important, the use of such resources remains largely nonexistent for international students in Australian universities. The introduction and widespread adoption of CMC in university education in Australia has contributed to the globalization of classrooms, virtual and physical (Ragusa, 2007) and is fundamentally altering the degree and nature of how individuals from divergent cultures interact in formal educational environments. As a result of these factors, the time has now come to examine

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