THE VALUE OF INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

Report
# Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The value of international education</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The necessity of change</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The place of English and other languages</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement between students</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concluding comments</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suggestions for future development</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>References</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

# Document control

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<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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Introduction

Over the last twenty years the internationalisation of education has involved the movement of students across languages and cultures on an unprecedented scale. There is an extensive literature that focuses on international education as, for example, a source of revenue (OECD, 2004) and an emerging literature that identifies the particular challenges faced by international students (Sawir et al., 2008, Sawir, 2005, Marginson et al., 2010). However there is only a limited literature that focuses on international education from the perspective of international students themselves (Sherry et al., 2010), and no literature that explores the perspectives of international students, local students and the educational community. This is a gap in the literature that needs to be addressed because it is through the interaction between these different perspectives that students and the community come to interpret the experience and value of international education (Crichton & Scarino, 2007, Kingston & Forland, 2008). Central to these understanding these different perspectives are the languages and cultures that are at play (Liddicoat & Crichton, 2008, Scarino, 2011).

The purpose of the project was to explore how students (both local and international) and the school community perceive the value of international education. For local students, it has examined how they engage with students from other cultures, both local and international. For international students, it has examined how they experience coming to and learning in a new language and culture. For teachers and the school community, it examines how they facilitate teaching and learning and student well-being in the context of diversity.

The project has sought to address the following research questions:
1. How do local students engage with students from other cultures, both local and international?
2. How do international students experience coming to and learning in a new culture?
3. How do teachers and the school community facilitate teaching and learning and student well-being in the context of diversity?

The study has involved a collective case study of the following three schools:

**Glenunga International High School** is a long-established international secondary school in Adelaide. In 1990 it introduced the International Baccalaureate and international fee-paying students’ program and in 2002, it received international accreditation through the Council of International Schools. Over the last decade, it has had between 70 and 136 international students enrolled in the school. It has a culturally diverse student population, with over 60% of students being from non-English-Speaking backgrounds. Its statement of purpose states that the school inspires every student to develop their potential as an internationally-minded, creative thinking, responsible citizen.

**Linden Park Schools** welcome international students who come to the school for varying periods of time, working both within mainstream classes and within the Intensive Primary English Course Unit. The schools are also an Authorised International Baccalaureate World Schools and support, value and develop international mindedness within the school community. The vision for the Schools is: “A community of learners working toward global citizenship and the achievement of personal excellence in all that we do”.

**Norwood Morialta High School** is also a long-established international secondary school in Adelaide. The student population is highly diverse, with students who come from over 50 different cultural backgrounds. International students come for different periods of times (from 3 months to a full year) to participate in a range of subjects including English. The vision of the school is that: “Every student will graduate with international awareness and the knowledge skills and capacity to meet the challenges of a changing world”.

Although small in scope the project has yielded valuable accounts from all participants who describe their experience of working in the context of international education. Above all, it is an account of how participants and the school as a whole have changed in order to work with linguistic and cultural diversity in learning in their programs and learning how to best work with each other.
Methodology

The study drew on qualitative methodology, an approach to research which involves the study of ‘phenomena [in their natural settings] in terms of the meanings people bring to them’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) in which the research process is ‘inductive, emerging and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analysing the data’ (Creswell, 2007). Taking this approach enabled the study to explore and be sensitive to the meanings that participants attach to their own experience of international education within the broader context of the school community.

In line with this methodology, the study involved an investigation of participants’ experience at four schools that are together representative of the broader school sector. In taking this focus, the study represented a ‘collective case study’ (Stake, 2000); that is, a group of individual cases which are known in advance to share a common characteristic which is the focus of the investigation. The rationale for collective case study research is that understanding a group of cases will provide a basis for understanding the more general population represented by these cases.

The design of the study combined a grounded, iterative, ongoing approach to data analysis with an inductive, exploratory approach to data collection.

The primary data collection method was group interviews. These focused on addressing the research questions and were conducted at each school with groups of administrators, counsellors, teachers, parents and international and local students by members of the research team. The interviews were semi-structured, audio recorded, and designed to invite participants to elaborate their particular perspectives on their experience of international education.

Data analysis was ongoing and focused on identifying and elaborating themes that address the research questions. The analysis drew on grounded theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) because this emphasises the development and evaluation of findings based on inductive, systematic procedures for interpretive analysis. It involves the researcher as ‘an active sampler of theoretically relevant data’ (Glaser & Strauss, 1971), and enables the development of findings to proceed as ‘a constant and flexible accompaniment to the incremental collection of data and the unfolding nature of the research’ (Layder, 1993). The process involved ongoing collaboration between the research team, participating schools and DECD. Emergent findings were refined and validated through discussion with participating schools and with DECD.

“One sentence for me will just be embrace the difference… to cultural, racial or linguistic, so just embrace the difference.”
(Teacher)
The value of international education

While perceptions of the value of international education were differently nuanced across the groups interviewed, the overarching consensus at the schools was that the value of international education lies in the unique opportunities it provides for enriching learning, understanding and the curriculum, grounded in the immediacy of personal experiences and new relationships that span languages and cultures, and that this ‘opens up the world’ for all concerned, creating a ‘global community’ of learning. Allied to this very positive perception was the message, underscored throughout the interviews, that the value of international education is not a given, is not without risks, and that it cannot be taken for granted but requires ongoing commitment to engagement, learning and understanding by ‘the whole school’, among students, staff and parents and the broader community.

Key themes that emerged in the perceptions of staff and students of the value and benefits of international education are summarised below.

There was a broad consensus among staff, who emphasised the value to be both professional, personal and for both international and local students and the school community as a whole. For example principals, teachers and administrators emphasised how international education and in particular the presence of international students and the polices put in place to support them had promoted the growth and learning of the school as a whole, foregrounding and strengthening core values such as ‘harmony’, ‘tolerance’ and ‘international mindedness’. Teachers commented on how they valued the presence of international students in the school and in their classes because it had led them to reflect on how they taught both local and international students, how they as teachers had learnt from the diversity of experience and cultures, how this ‘profound’ awareness of diverse experiences in the classroom and the school had motivated and provided opportunities to be both more inclusive and to broaden the scope of teaching for all students. Teachers emphasised, for example that international education ‘makes your teaching richer... because you do not just look at one perspective, you look at lots of perspectives’.

This perception of value went beyond learning how to address the particular needs of international students and involved reflecting on and development of teachers’ own practices and assumptions about their perspectives on learning and teaching. Relevant here is the fact that international students bring their own prior experiences and cultures of learning in their home countries into the classroom. Teachers spoke about how for themselves and for local students, coming to understanding these different approaches to and values of learning had led teachers to become more aware of the cultural context of their own assumptions about learning, and more alert to the perspectives of both international and local students, to incorporate international perspectives and connections into their teaching, and that, for example, this made visible the ‘bar’ that they were aspiring to reach, and that ‘it enriched my teaching, and I can see it enriches the children in my class’.

“For local students, it just opens another new world for them, the same as international students.”
(Parent)
When teachers spoke about the value for local students, they emphasised learning in relation to subjects in which, for example, students ‘need real life scenarios to engage and we have them here’. However, teachers also gave prominence to broader values. These included the way that international education extended the horizons of local students, commenting, for example, that it ‘just opens another new world for them the same as international students’. Allied to this, teachers emphasised that local students were more likely to question their own stereotypical assumptions through an awareness of ‘multiple perspectives’ and being ‘open-minded’, and a stronger sense of responsibility to and for others, along with increased tolerance and respect. There were numerous stories about how local students had supported and formed relationships with international students.

When it came to the value of international education for international students, teachers also emphasised the development of students’ cultural awareness, and the formation of relationships with local students, but tied this strongly to the need to learn English language and culture. Teachers emphasised the great value students and their parents place on the learning of English – as the major reason for students studying in Australia. In doing so, they emphasised that the learning of English brought with it the need to learn to understand and live within Australian culture, and the value of taking a whole school approach to supporting international students. On this point, teachers perceived the learning of English language and culture to be the key challenge and value for international students, emphasising that it was this area in which the school community had a central role to play in understanding and supporting them.

Across the schools, teachers highlighted the complexity of gaining the value of international education for all concerned, that there are risks, that the benefits for international students and the schools community are hard won, and that concerted, ongoing individual and organisational learning is required. Examples of this complexity including the potential for tension between students, the risk of isolation of international students – of their getting ‘lost’ - and the question of how international students manage when they returned to their home cultures after studying and living in Australia during their formative years . The key message here is that international education can be of immense value for the whole school community and that this value will only accrue if accomplished through a commensurate commitment to learn and develop appropriate support systems by all concerned.

Both local and international students perceived international education, with regard to academic learning and for their personal growth, as offering prodigious value, but the benefits to each group were perceived differently and – as with the teachers – the message was that these gains are a significant accomplishment that requires substantial personal commitment to developing understanding and learning.

From the perspective of international students, the key value and challenge of international education was learning and studying in English and the opportunities for further study and careers that this would open up of them, for example, to gain admission to a good university in an English speaking country. This central value was linked to the importance of English language support and was often referenced both to the students’ own values and to those of their parents. While studying in a new language and culture was perceived to be very challenging, with risks of isolation and homesickness, this was where the key benefits of international lay for the students, expressed as becoming more independent and ‘proactive’ in their studies, becoming familiar with new ways of learning and teaching that contrasted with those in their home cultures, and new, more ‘applied’ emphases in the development of subject knowledge that they perceived would be of value in their further careers.

As well as these academic and personal benefits, the students spoke of how they perceived international education to be of value to the school as a whole, commenting for example on how teachers had responded to them, and citing examples of how their experience had been acknowledged in class. The value of forming relationships with
local students was also commented on, both as a matter of developing new friendships and enhancing understanding of language and culture, though students also spoke of the challenges posed to becoming part of established groups because of linguistic and cultural differences. These were clearly important to them and provided further illustration of the importance of English language proficiency in their experience. The homestay experience was also valued as a way of developing understanding of language and culture, and through this forming new relationships. International students saw the benefit for local students as being to make them more aware of other languages and cultures which would help them in the future. However, there was some hesitation about the extent to which local students took up these opportunities, in large part because of the barriers to relationship formation created by the differences in languages and language proficiency among local and international students.

For local students, the overall perception was that the presence of international students could put them in touch with the world beyond Australia in a way that would not otherwise be possible, and that they very much appreciated the value of going to a school with an international education program. The two key benefits perceived for international education were the opportunity to meet and form relationships with people from a world that lay beyond their experience and, and to develop their understanding of the diverse cultures that were representative of the world in which they would be living and working in the future. For example, students commented that ‘you are with other cultures on a daily basis, so that becomes part of normal everyday life. It’s like, you know, you just become friends’ ‘you can learn from other cultures’, ‘it really does help education’, and ‘it’s like going overseas here in the school’.

Local students commented less on the value that international education had for international students but were aware of the challenges that studying in English posed and the value of supporting them. For example, one student commented that ‘there were some kids that don’t speak English, and it’s really, really difficult’. There were also numerous stories about how local students had helped and befriended international students, a point that underscores the comments from principals and teachers about the role of international education in developing core values. The perception overall was that relationships with local students were valuable and that, for example, ‘they will generally find friends very quickly’. Allied to these benefits was the perception that the whole school gained from the presence of international students, that it supports a school as ‘international’ and ‘multicultural’, not only in enriching the content of learning in classes but also systems designed to foster understanding and support among students, such as ‘buddy’ systems and ‘friendship benches’.

International education is clearly highly valued by all concerned at the schools that participated in the study. Those interviewed placed particular importance on their schools as sites of global contact for international and local students, staff, administrators, parents and the school community more generally, with perceived benefits including enriched learning, understanding and curriculum, enhancement of whole school values, and personal and professional development. It was also clear that the value of international education is a significance accomplishment at all levels, dependent on a deep, ongoing and coordinated commitment from the whole school community to learn from the experience, and in particular to understand and acknowledge the perspectives of international students.
The necessity of change

“Working in international education gives me a window on the world, but not static images; they are evolving images”

This quotation from a teacher captures well the notion of ongoing change that international education necessarily brings. The introduction of international education programs in schools has changed the profile of each of schools. The schools see themselves as ‘international schools’, in title and in their changed practices. Internationalisation has become a core focus that has altered the life of the school in many aspects.

First and foremost, the profile of the students has changed. Each of the schools attracts a large number of international students such that they are a visible presence in the schools. The teachers are highly aware that, given the changed student profile, their own work has had to change. They are aware that they need, for example, to consider their own use of language to ensure that all students understand the task at hand, and that they need to draw on the highly diverse life-worlds and experiences that their local and international students bring to their learning.

The whole orientation or outlook of the schools has changed. The schools see themselves as open to working on international education and its diversity. As one of the teachers stated: “We get different perspectives from everything... more of a global community”. They see that the international students’ program has changed their positioning in the educational system. They also noted the change in the responsibilities and attitudes of teachers. Schools have changed their statements of values to foreground respect for diversity.

The program of activities of each of the schools has changed. There is a focus, for example, on profiling the diversity of student experiences at school assemblies. There are ‘multicultural’ days and other celebratory events. There is an open-ness to exchange through activities such as study tours. For many of the local students there are opportunities to host students who come to their school on study tours or to offer homestays to longer-term international students. At Glenunga International High School, a deliberate and highly effective change involved in appointing an international student as a school leader to ensure that their particular experiences, needs and interests could be brought to the major discussion forum of the student body. Schools have also created clubs such as the Chinese club. Sister or partner school arrangements are in place and these open up the opportunity for mutual visits and exchange. These exchanges are occurring at a level which is now quite visible.

Accompanying the changes in profile and orientation are related changes to school policies. Whereas previously schools implemented policies towards ‘multiculturalism’, ‘inclusivity’ and ‘anti-racism’, now, building on these, schools have developed policies towards ‘internationalisation’, ‘global citizenship’ and ‘global mindedness’. These notions were used naturally by the administrators, teachers and local students, indicating that they have become an integral part of the ‘talk’ of the school. What exactly is meant by these phrases and how exactly they are realised in the practices of each school may vary. Nevertheless, these terms are invoked as useful labels to characterise the change in various dimensions of the activity of the school. Interestingly, it is worth observing that these terms do not seem to have become a part of the way in which the international students talk about their experiences. This indicates that these policies and terms will need to be teased out further in order to develop shared understandings of what they mean and how they can used to galvanise learning for all.

There are many changes at the level of curriculum, teaching and learning, as well as the extra-curricular program of the school. All schools make provision for English as a Second Language (ESL), recognising the centrality of the
English language to the experience of international education. It is clear that international students develop a particularly strong relationship with their ESL teachers. Support services, either as dedicated services for international students, or as services for international students within mainstream provision, have been appropriately expanded. For young learners especially, these services provide the necessary pastoral care that is integral to meeting their needs.

The curriculum, teaching and learning have changed. Many teachers described the international students as a resource in classroom teaching and learning; they provide a constant source for comparative cultural perspectives on topics, ideas, and practices discussed in the classroom. There is no hesitation on the part of teachers to include examples from diverse cultural contexts in the curriculum and to canvass the diverse perspectives of the international students. As one of the teachers said: “I personally give them a lot of opportunities to show home cultures … to everyone... rather than just ignoring it (i.e. differences) or pretending it doesn’t matter”. These opportunities for comparison were seen as valuable by teachers and students – both international and local students alike. There was also an appreciation that, through collaborative work in the classroom, students have a direct experience of diversity. Classroom teaching and learning in this context is understood as a lived experience of diversity.

Although the changes brought about by international education programs were welcomed and appreciated by all participants, there was also some degree of tension. The major lens through which all participants talked about their experience of international education was the lens of ‘similarity’ or ‘difference’. In seeking to describe their experience of international education, several students and teachers acknowledged linguistic and cultural differences between local and international students. They noted differences but did not necessarily appreciate that the differences that they observed, taken together, represented multiple ways of seeing and doing in the world, and that this multiplicity itself represented a valuable resource. Others stressed that at a more abstract level: “we are all the same”. In invoking our common humanity, however, there is a risk of minimising cultural differences that are real and can be generative of the kind of diversity of perspective and practices that is highly productive. Equally, invoking only differences would deny the commonality. Few participants seemed to entertain the possibility that the reality of the experience of international education is such that participants will find both commonalities and differences, and that both can be productive.

There was a strong sense in which teachers and students as participants in international education, are engaging with complexity. The schools desire and the international students themselves seek to ‘fit in’ socially and educationally but learning in a language and in a cultural context which is not their own is not something that is accomplished with ease. Local students derive benefit from learning and experiencing international education and albeit in very different ways from the experience of the international students, they too are challenged by new experiences. The appreciation of the experience of international education does not diminish the fact that it is also a complex undertaking that needs to be understood.

The teachers acknowledged that the experience of international education is best seen as a work in progress. Many observed that: “We’re still learning.” Teachers play a crucial role as they are the ones who work continuously with their students, bridging their diverse experiences and understandings, mediated through language and culture.
Substantial change has been accomplished in all schools. At the same time, it is necessary to develop an ever stronger understanding of the experience of international education itself. This will require a critical questioning of the ‘isms’ (internationalism, multiculturalism) and to create new ways that move away from a surface notion of ‘inclusivity’, ‘tolerance’, ‘acceptance’, useful though these terms are. A shift is needed towards a deeper sense of engagement with the experience of diversity in ways that recognise its power to change the way we understand knowing and learning in multilingual and multicultural contexts. As one of the teachers stated as he reflected on his students’ learning: “I think learning can be really simple and can be profound... it makes our students realise that the world that we have here is not the only world. There are many worlds and ways of trying to learn.” Such an understanding of knowing and learning, requires the constant and sustained drawing of connections across experiences and reflection that develops in all participants a deeper engagement with diversity. Another teacher stated: “International education is about valuing memories and experiences.” Through reflecting on lived experiences and re-examining memories of past experiences, students and teachers continue to develop an understanding of diversity that is based on their lived experience in this way is an enormous undertaking and one that is, indeed, best seen, as the teachers recognise, as an ongoing work in progress – it is an evolving process in which coming to understand commonality and difference will necessarily involve an ongoing process of negotiation of knowledge and multiple perspectives.

The place of English and other languages

That language and culture are central to learning was perceived by all participants. There is an appreciation that international students, at all levels, have to achieve success in learning in a language that is not their own. International students in Australian schools enter an environment in which English dominates, not only in school but out of school as well. In fact, much of their experience of Australia is as a monolingual English-speaking society. Exposure to English is an important reason for choosing to study in Australia but, at the same time, it can represent a significant challenge in the daily lives of students. As adolescent learners of English, international students typically face limitations in their ability to use English that mean that their ability to participate in schooling is less than it would be in their first language. Many teachers and local students tried to put themselves in the shoes of the international students and imagine trying to learn through a language that is not their own. The international students were acutely aware of the crucial role of language. For some, learning involved a constant process of translating from English to their home language and back to English. But, as some international students noted, sometimes they did not have time to process the information given in English through translation into their first language and back. They appreciated that their experience changed over time and that gradually they came to understand more and more in English.

Teachers recognised the role of language and the need for them to modify their language to ensure that international students understood. Their first impulse was to monitor their own language in offering explanations and generally to simplify their language use. There was less appreciation of the fact that, at times, it is not a matter of simplifying but rather what is needed is exemplification or indeed elaboration of language to ensure understanding.

Although language is recognised as a problem for international students, schools and individual teachers appear to have varying attitudes to the use of international students’ first languages. Schools
were often quite proud of their multilingualism as it was manifested in social interactions around the school and frequently referred to the presence of multiple languages in the school as evidence of their international status.

The teachers saw language as a barrier to both learning and the social experience of forming friendships in learning. Many saw the use of home languages as important for socialising for international students and felt it was an important part of what they were trying to achieve. Other teachers recognised the use of their first language as a necessity. They appreciated that in the classroom it can be a part of coming to understand the concepts and tasks at hand. For some teachers, the languages of their current international students were a resource for helping new students to adjust to the school. One teacher reported how she had had difficulties communicating with a newly arrived Japanese student and so she found others Japanese students in the school to talk to the new student: “I said ‘could you ask her if she’s got any worries or problems because we don’t know sometimes what’s going on’. They asked and ‘no everything is alright’, she was alright.” Even so, there was a minority voice that suggested that multilingualism was viewed by some people as a problem, as representing isolationism and a lack of willingness to engage with the new culture in Australia. Some also noted that the international students tended to prefer to use their own first language; “they do tend to stick to their own”. This, however, should not be surprising. This negative attitude to the languages of international students seemed to result from the perception that the use of languages other than English represented a barrier that could not be crossed by local students – that is, assimilation to the English-language monolingualism of local students was understood as ‘openness’ to cultural diversity while maintaining home language and culture was seen as ‘closure’ to others. Those who viewed multilingualism as a problem therefore depicted language use in rather black and white terms and did not recognised the nuanced possibilities for adapting to other languages and cultures.

Attitudes to other languages in the classroom also varied. They ranged from people who felt that the classroom should be an English-only environment to those who made space for other languages in class work. Those who felt that the classroom should be English-only typically emphasised that international students were in Australia to learn English and that this was best achieved by using English at all times. As one teacher said, “it’s not helping their English much”. Such teachers saw it as a problem in that, in their view, the students are not taking the opportunity to maximise the development of skills in and use of English. In addition, some teachers expressed concern that when students were using their first languages in class, it was impossible for them to know what students were talking about and whether or not they were on task. Thus, linguistic diversity was often seen as a problem for classroom management by teachers who were monolingual in English. What is important in relation to this issue is to recognise the fact that international students will often rely on their first language to process information and explanations given in English. As such, the use of the first language is integral to understanding meaning.

Those who felt that students should be able to use their first languages in class focused more on the role of language in learning and felt that, if discussing ideas in another language assisted students in working with the material they were using, then the language was a useful tool in the classroom. International students themselves said that they used their own languages in the classroom to get help from peers when they did not understand something that was presented in English and so they saw the ability to use their whole language repertoire in class as important for their
learning. In such a view, the first language can be a resource for learning and a basis for work in English: “We encourage them to look at the information in Chinese and they do the research in Chinese as long as at the end their assessment task is produced in English”. In some cases, teachers had knowledge of the language of some of their international learners and said that where this was the case they used the language in their teaching when they felt it was needed. These teachers appreciated the value of being able to work ‘bilingually’. Some teachers also saw the value of support in more than one language. Although some would see this hybrid language practice as controversial, it is worthy of further consideration as a way of working with the complex learning situation. In order to come to understand, students need to connect new learning to existing learning and this learning is best mediated by all the languages available in the students’ repertoires.

A few teachers recognised their students’ multilingualism as a resource that was not being developed well as it could be by international education. They reflected on the students’ return to their own countries after their experience of international education in South Australia and students needing to use, in their home languages and cultures, the learning they had developed in English:

“…we are aware of international students coming here to learn and then go back to work in their country. So I’m thinking how can I connect the knowledge they have before they come here and the knowledge they’ve got here and they’ve learned from you… how do they get to communicate that knowledge into part of their knowledge? So that was the big thing I was thinking about. How would I do that better? Because it isn’t useful to learn all that knowledge in English and not being able to communicate that knowledge into, you know, their home language?”

This reflective comment describes what might be called a relational view of learning across languages and cultures, that is, a way of learning that consciously takes into account the fact that students are learning across languages and cultures. This view of learning should become the norm in teaching and learning in ways that maximise meaningfulness for all students.

It appears that there is a tension around the roles of English and other language in international schools. The tension is, at least in part, the result of different understandings of the role of language in learning. Where learning is understood in terms of acquisition of English, then there is less tolerance of students using their own language. Where learning is understood as developing understanding of content, then other languages are more likely to be tolerated. These views however overlay more complex views about the nature and use of languages that are influenced by individual experiences of monolingualism or multilingualism. Teachers who are multilingual appear to be more open to the multilingualism of their students and to see it as a resource, while those who are monolingual tend to see linguistic diversity in the classroom more as a problem.

### Engagement between students

An important element in realising the intercultural learning in international education is the development of engagement between students both in and out of class. Opportunities for in-class interaction are usually easier to establish as these are required by the pedagogical practices of regular classroom activities, especially those based on group work. Out-of-class interactions are more complex, and often more demanding socially and linguistically.

One variable that influences the ease of developing social relationships is when international students arrive at the school. Students who arrive in Year 8 often find it easier to integrate as they arrive at a time when both they and their peers are new to the school and where all students are involved in the process of forming new friendship groups. Students who arrive later, enter a situation in which friendship groups have been established and may have
been in place for a considerable period of time. These students face greater challenges in establishing relationships, especially with local students, as they need to enter into already established groupings.

The schools had a number of strategies for fostering engagement between students. All schools have established ‘buddy programs’ in which local students are paired with newly arrived international students. The prime focus of these programs is to assist new students to navigate the practicalities of studying at a new school. The program seems to be valued by international students as a form of orientation that focuses on some of the key basic needs to students in their early days in the school. The students may also work together in group work in class, although this did not always happen as buddies did not always share the same classes. The program by its nature establishes interaction between a local student and an international student and attention seems to be paid by school in matching students with similar ages, interests and study profiles, where possible. There is some evidence that school ‘buddies’ may develop friendships. However, it does not seem that buddies usually become friends, rather friendships depend on other connections the students make with each other. The buddy programs can therefore be best understood as a strategy for integrating international students into the school by providing a peer-led orientation program for each student. They may also contribute to in-class interactions, but appear less likely to develop out-of-class interactions over the longer term.

Developing out of school relationships is actually much more difficult for schools than developing in-class relationships, however schools did have some strategies that sought to do this. Glenunga has developed a strategy that seeks to develop closer connections between students themselves in out-of-class contexts by requiring students to join clubs. The clubs typically include mixed groups of students who come together around sporting and other interests. Norwood-Morialta has more informal approach to integrating students into extra-curricular activities that involved encouraging or inviting students to participate in certain activities within the school (e.g. drama). Involvement with groups seems to be a useful way for international students to get to know other students with shared interests and provides a point of connection for new students in establishing friendships.

For some international students home stay provided opportunities to develop quite strong friendship groups outside the school. This was especially the case where the home stay family had children about the same age as the international student. Such students seemed to become integrated quite quickly into the local social world outside the school. This opportunity depended very much on the circumstances of the home stay and so was not equally available to all students. It appears that international students living with relative in Australia tended to have fewer opportunities for interacting with local students outside class than most other groups of students, but this was offset by closer family connections at home.

Local students on the whole appear to be open to interacting with international students both in and out of class. They viewed friendships with international students as opportunities to learn new things and to have new experiences. Most local students said that one of the most positive aspects of studying in an international school was the opportunity to meet people from other countries and to learn about other cultures. As one student said, “you get a lot of opportunities to meet people from other countries, so you get to know like what is their culture... so it’s really a big opportunity”. Local students did however perceive some barriers to establishing such friendships. One barrier was communication – they felt it was difficult speaking with students whose English was limited and they did not always know what to speak about. One student expressed the experience of engaging with international students as ‘daunting’: “I suppose it’s a bit daunting at the start, ‘cos you don’t really know them and they probably don’t speak English properly, so I guess with some it’s uncomfortable to speak to them”. Few local students could communicate with international students in their own language, even at a very basic level. A second barrier to establishing friendships with international students was a perception that international students from the same
country tended to form groups and that these groups prevented interaction between local and international students, especially because they used their own language within such groups. As one student said, “There are quite a few from Hong Kong and they speak Cantonese, so they generally speak the same language, they hang out together... they don’t really make Caucasian friends”. They believed that students who did not have home country peers in the school were more open to interactions with them, largely because there were fewer alternatives for socialising: “A lot of Asian international students, because there are a lot of them, kind of hang out in groups together. Whereas if you get students who come from Europe or America, because they just come one at a time, there are not many. I think they integrate into friend groups easier”. Some students viewed such groups as natural for people with a shared language and culture, but others viewed these groups as indicating a lack of willingness to engage with local students, which in turn further strengthened the perceived barrier to interaction. It emerged that local students often felt it difficult to establish spontaneous interactions with international students and where they did establish friendship with them it was usually the result of some structured situation that provides a basis for establishing interaction, such as a school activity or sport.

International students said that they had established in-class relationships with both local and international students and that they generally worked well with other students regardless of background on classroom activities. However, they perceived problems in establishing out-of-class relationships with local students, but often understood the situation in quite different ways to local students. As with local students, international students found communication a significant barrier to interaction. International students were very aware of their own limitations in English and as a result found initiating interactions difficult, both linguistically and psychologically. One of the international students summed up this experience as: “It was strange. I didn’t know a lot of English and people were all new to me. It couldn’t really like being with them. It was sad”. Some students stated that they not only found difficulty in communicating in English but also did not know what to talk to local students about and what topics were appropriate for establishing interactions with others. One student said “I just don’t know what to say at first”, but acknowledged that school work could make it easier to establish interaction with local students: “but after, if you start to do subjects and you start asking them questions, it might be easier to talk”. International students did not find local students to be sympathetic interlocutors when they did interact with them and felt that some local students made fun of their limited English or withdrew from interactions that they found difficult. One student related an experience that seemed to have been common for other international students: “sometimes when the local students ask me some questions that I can’t understand, I tell them ‘could you repeat it using simpler words or simpler sentences which can make me understand’, but they don’t. They just laugh. Sometimes this makes me feel very embarrassed and sometimes it makes me not want to talk to them anymore”. They felt that some students had little tolerance for communicating with language learners. These experiences often led students to feel embarrassed about communicating in English and increased the stress involved in using the language, especially in social contexts. Students stressed that this was not true of all local students and many had established friendships with local students, however, all of the students agreed that they had experienced such reactions when they arrived at the school.

International students did nonetheless value opportunities to interact with local students but to do so they needed assistance in establishing connections. They found it easier to interact in situations in which there was a shared focus, and especially where the English language requirements were not too demanding such as in sporting activities. Students reported that sporting groups were particularly important for them in establishing relationships with other students because the language demands of sport were easier to negotiate and their participation in sporting activities was not limited by their language abilities. International students from all schools identified sporting activities as the most important site for making contact and developing relationships with local students, whether such activities were supported by the school or not. As one international student said, “I played soccer for the school, so that’s the way we met”, and this was a common response from students who had established relationships with
It appears that providing structured opportunities for international students to engage in extra-curricular activities provides an important opportunity for international students and local students to interact at a more personal level.

International students strongly valued opportunities to interact with students from their own countries. The opportunities to interact in their own languages were less stressful and less demanding than interacting in English: “you don’t feel stressed or you don’t feel nervous when you talk to someone whose English is similar to yours. So you can just talk and they don’t notice your grammar mistakes”. In such contexts, students were able to express their ideas, feelings and experiences fully and adequately (“I can say everything”), something that was not possible for them in English, especially at the beginning of their time at the schools. Students from their own country also shared interests and tastes and had knowledge that local students did not. For international students, interactions in their own language represented “down-time” from their more demanding interactions in English. Interactions with students who had been at the school for a longer time was also an important resource for students as they adapted to the new language and culture of Australian schools: “they can help me to know what to do...what’s different here”.

International students also valued interactions with international students from other countries, with whom they interacted in English. With such students, they felt they had much in common because of their similar experiences and that they could discuss things that were important in their lives but were not part of the experience of local students. These students often were able to provide advice and information for each other that helped students deal with the problems of living in a foreign country. In these interactions, speaking English was felt to be less stressful than it was with local students because their interlocutors were also learning English and were more patient and more tolerant of their limitations. Such interactions were especially important for those students who had few opportunities to interact with students from their home countries.

International students viewed all of their relationships with other students as important and interactions with each of the groups involved (home country students, other international students and local students) placed an important role in the negotiation of their lives as students in a foreign country. The different types of relationships also placed different levels of demand on the students themselves, and of all relationships, they found those with local students the most difficult to establish and maintain. Teachers and local students often said that it was important for international students “to make themselves available”, as one teacher framed it, for interactions with others, however international students said that they did know how to do this and felt they needed help in establishing interactions. There seems to be an expectation that it is the responsibility of international students to initiate interactions with others and this is seen as entering into a new culture. This expectation places most of the burden of establishing interaction of those who are least equipped linguistically and culturally with the resources to do it.
Concluding comments

This project has shown that all participants in international education – teachers, international students, local students – see that international education has value, although they may see the value differently. Teachers see value in the experiences they can provide for students because of the diversity of their classrooms, but also in the ways that involvement in international education has developed their own teaching practice. Local students see value in the contacts they have with others and the opportunities this provides them to develop capabilities that they do not believe they would acquire in other schools. International students see value in the opportunity to learn English in an English-speaking country and so to develop new opportunities for their future. This diversity of emphases in the value of international education underlines its potential to achieve different things for different groups through a common program of teaching and learning.

There is a sense that international education is challenging and in each school there was much emphasis on how their approach had been developed over time as they responded to the various complexities of the situation. None of the schools saw their work in international education as a finished product but rather acknowledged that it was always in development as schools sought to address changing contexts and needs and to improve learning opportunities for all their students. All of the schools had worked consistently over time to develop their work and had achieved significant developments in their processes and practices over time. They also realised that progress in international education led to new understandings of its nature and practice and that each new development opens the way to addressing new needs and issues. This means that there is no particular practice in international education that can be considered to be ‘best practice’, but rather exemplary work in international education involves not only being constantly open to new ways of working but also actively looking for points of innovation in thinking and practice.

Suggestions for future development

1. Both local and international students have commented on the difficulties involved in establishing connections with each other. Schools can create structured opportunities that assist local and international students to develop relationships between the groups outside the classroom and to provide support for each group in understanding how to engage with the other.

2. Teachers commented that working in international education has led them to change their practice and that they now perceive themselves as better teachers because of this experience. It appears that working in this way promotes a sense of reflexivity about teaching because teachers have to think through new challenges and opportunities. It would be useful to document in detail the ways in which teaching practice has developed to serve as a resource for the professional learning of other teachers, whether they are involved in international education or not.

3. Schools appear to be still working through issues around the comparative roles of international students’ home language and cultures of learning in their programs and there appears to be a need for sustained work in developing stronger interculturally oriented approaches to issues around language and culture to further strengthen schools’ work in international education.
References


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