

Benefits of online interaction and engagement: Postgraduate international, domestic students and academic staff experiences in Australia

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Introduction

567,505 international students studying in Australia (Department of Education, 2024)

International education was worth \$40.3 billion (Department of Education & Training, 2020)



Background

Quality of student experience for international and domestic students is vital

Higher satisfaction if relationship between these two cohorts is of quality (Aydin, 2020; Gresham & Clayton, 2011)

Kuh's (2003) student engagement theory: "the time and energy students devote to educationally sound activities inside and outside of the classroom and the policies and practices that institutions use to induce students to take part in these activities" (p. 25).

Leads to global competency skills, such as intercultural competence through intercultural learning.



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Background

Interaction and engagement between international and domestic students and staff members remain minimal (Arkoudis et al. 2013; Singh et al., 2022).

- a) International students tend to mix with similar cultural groups to aid transitional and adjustment difficulties (Gresham & Clayton, 2011; Owens & Loomes, 2010),
- b) Language barriers impact communication (Willoughby-Knox & Yates, 2022) and
- c) Differing culture and values (Aydin, 2020).

Previous studies have focussed on face-to-face settings.

Most also focused on international students' perspectives only (Cruickshank et al., 2012; Dai & Garcia, 2019; Tavares, 2021).

Aim:

What are the benefits of online interaction and engagement between international and domestic students and academic staff members in Australia?



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Research Methodologies

Research Type: Exploratory study

Method: Qualitative Approach

Instruments: In-depth semi-structured interviews

Total number of participants: 15 postgraduate international students, 7 domestic students and 11 academic staff teaching at an Australian university

Recruitment technique: Purposive and Snowball sampling

Average interview time: 35 min

Findings

- Cultural understanding
- Personal growth and skills
- Academic online discussions
- Social online catch ups



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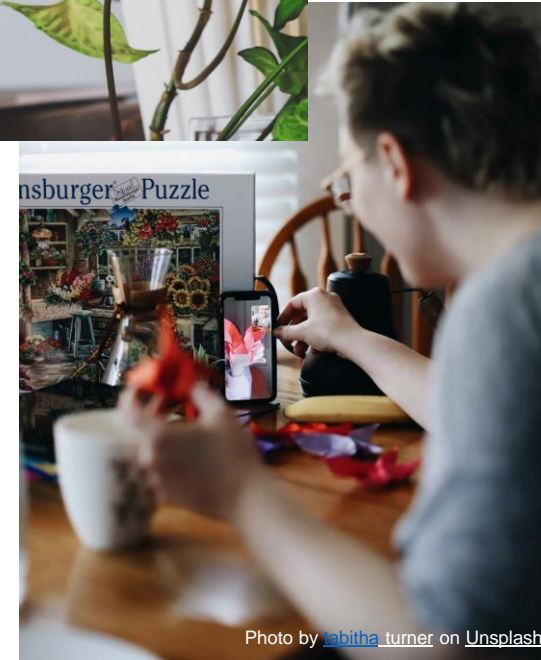


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Finding 1: Cultural understanding

There is a student in Toronto and a student in California. **It is just that awareness that the way that we look at things in Australia is not necessarily the way that things are looked at overseas.** But the fact that I never had thought about studying with a university on the other side of the world for myself. **And I think that there is an opportunity to gain insight from people who live and work in other regions.** (DS 12, Masters)

There is a programme called **Emerging Leaders programme** that got me interacting with domestic students a lot. There was an **industry mentoring** challenge where I interacted with domestic people. There was a **difference in opinion. The way they do the work and then we do the work is totally different.** But we got to know that the thinking process, though it is different, it is aligned to a single point, which is that **we need to get the work done perfectly.** (IS 1, Masters)

Finding 1: Cultural understanding

The **more examples that we give about the industry**, the **better the learning experience**. So, from that point of view, it is pretty good because **internationals students get to get a sneak peek into local culture through case studies**. And not just culture as in social culture, but also local **work culture and corporate culture**. And the **same goes with domestic students**. They get to learn a lot from the **diverse classroom, because that opens doors to their future international endeavours**. Because they have seen, they have got a sneak peek into **what the international work community** might look like, based on what they see in the classroom. (AS 4)

Finding 2: Personal growth and skills

I will just give this **credit to the Zoom online class**. Had they been face-to-face and had the class been on campus, **I do not think I would have gotten the courage to step up and ask the domestic student, do you want to pair up with me for a group assignment? I do not think I would have gotten that courage**. But since it was Zoom online classes, nobody had their videos on. Only by that virtue, **I could confidently step up and ask a fellow student who is a domestic student to pair up with me in a group assignment, and that naturally happened**. But **I showed that I have interest and I have knowledge and I have skill and I am good in the classes**. That is how I **became more credible and accountable to others**, others being both domestic and international, so I think I played my part clearly in that. (IS 2, Masters)

Domestic students are very particular about doing stuff as early as possible. They do not want to extend it to the end moment like our **Indian students who will just be procrastinating until the end of the day**. So, you must **manage time when you are working with the Aussie people via group work**. I have learned **time-management skills from them**. (IS 1, Masters)

Finding 3: Academic online discussions

It is important to know people from other areas, parts of the world, backgrounds, experiences, all of that. **I would say in terms of research I feel like it is a good way to interact with other people's experiences of your topic and what you are doing and your methodology.** I think that comes from growing up in other parts of the world. **It helps I think sometimes with international students to be able to communicate that.** (DS 18, PhD)

Everything was limited, so the **group assignments were the only way of interacting or collaborating with other students and seeking help.** You know **in the Zoom breakout rooms, you would get to work on a case study with domestic students as well.** (IS 2, Masters)

Finding 3: Academic online discussions

We sign up to interactive games. We make links and then we form students into different groups and then each group must undertake the quiz and then we announce the winner. So, it is just to bring that group feeling at times. The same goes with breakout rooms: they are given certain questions to do as a group and then present back to the online class. That is the time when they interact with each other. (AS 4)



Finding 4: Social online catch-ups

The Department has this **social club on Fridays** so that is the other way to connect with other people. And sometimes, they do this **online coffee catch-ups** as well within the department. (DS 21, PhD)

Having people that you can interact with, both **international and domestic students who become your friends, who become a source of emotional support.** In my own case, I do not know how my experience as a PhD student would have been without those people who at some points were my support and my friends. I think it would have been extremely hard. (AS 9)

Conclusion

- Gained multiple perspectives of students and academic staff.
- Extended Kuh's (2003) student engagement theory in exploring benefits of online interaction and engagement experiences of postgraduate international and domestic students.
- Challenge the traditional grouping and stereotyping of students (Lee et al., 2019).
- Universities and academics responsibilities.
- Student agency.



Thank

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