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## **Critical Considerations for Optimizing the Support for International Student Engagement**

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Hosting international students enriches the educational, intercultural, social, political, and economic capitals of the host communities. It is therefore a significant privilege and opportunity for education providers and host countries to educate students from other countries. But it is also the host communities' responsibility to nurture an optimal education experience for this cohort, which in turn helps strengthen international education for all. Student engagement is vital for creating a welcoming, caring and positive experience for international students.

International student engagement is often situated in physical and virtual mobilities, in-between spaces, transnational interactions with new educational, socio-cultural environment, and home-host connectedness/disconnectedness. International students' transnational movements and intersections with the new environment shape and re-shape their engagement with space, people, communities as well as cultural and academic practices (Blackmore et al., 2021; Kang & Hwang, 2022; Tran & Gomes, 2017).

International student engagement is often linked with and relies on optimal student experiences across a range of interrelated aspects, including:

- connection between international students and domestic students and communities
- engagement with support services regarding mental health and wellbeing, accommodation, finance, intercultural communication, and language and learning skills
- work-integrated learning (WIL) and employability
- engagement with face-to-face, hybrid and online learning and teaching
- international students' navigation through crises such as, health, financial, natural disaster, geopolitical crises, or war.

COVID-19 has exposed the vulnerabilities of international students as temporary residents and non-citizens in the host society and the de-valuation of this cohort (Tran, 2020). The international discourse shows three main ways in which international students are de-valued: (i) the commercialisation and de-humanisation of international students as tradable commodities, (ii) the essentialisation of international students as a homogenous and deficit group, and (iii) the othering of international students, viewing them as 'others' or 'outsiders' in 'our' country and 'our' education system. However, the pandemic has, at the same time, been a catalyst for the host communities to critically reflect on the support provision for international students and the implications for future pathways, including the role and the expansion of support for this cohort from a range of community groups and organisations beyond the education sector. Based on critical consideration of support provision for international student engagement, this article puts forward practical recommendations for optimising the design and delivery of appropriate, effective, and sustainable support for international students.

## CRITICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The presence of international students, their diverse needs, characteristics, and circumstances have created new challenges, as well as possibilities, for teachers, professional staff and communities to innovate and extend their practices and support provision (Forbes-Mewett & Nyland, 2008; Mahalingappa et al., 2021; Nyland et al., 2013; Tran & Pasura, 2019; Tran & Le, 2018). However, in many cases, staff in education providers and especially members of community organisations had to ‘learn on the job’ in providing support for international students. Many ‘good’ practices initiated by individuals or specific groups are ad-hoc and organic rather than being shared, documented, and recognized as common practices across broader levels.

Cultural appropriateness, sustainability and systemic coordination are among critical areas that warrant special attention in designing and delivering effective and sustainable support provision for international student engagement. There is concern about the cultural appropriateness of support services relating to teaching and learning, language and intercultural communication, counselling, and mental health services (Forbes-Mewett & Sawyer, 2015; Tran, 2013). There is also a need to caution against ‘one size fits all’ in developing international student support services (Darmody et al., 2022; Tran, 2013).

Grouping international and domestic students together does not automatically lead to meaningful engagement (Blackmore et al., 2021; Leask, 2009; Tran, 2013; Tran & Pham, 2016). Proximity of contact alone might just result in surface engagement or superficial interaction between international students and domestic students and communities. International student engagement is most effective when it is built on productive connectedness, which goes beyond simply providing the basic conditions for interaction between international students and Australian students and communities. It is therefore critical to foster real and well-planned opportunities for international and local communities to enrich their mutual understandings and reciprocal learning from the encounter of differences, which forms the basis for long-lasting and meaningful connections.

Over the past decade, support services beyond the education sector targeted international student engagement in work-integrated learning and employability have been on the rise. This might be driven by three main factors: the increased weight international students and families attach to employment outcomes in choosing study destinations; international students have a rising demand for work-integrated learning and employability support but they often find it challenging to secure work placements and internships; universities tend to be reluctant or struggle to

arrange WIL because it is expensive and complex, involving partnerships with industry and stakeholders which often take significant time and commitment to develop (Blackmore et al., 2015; Tran & Soejatminah, 2017). While international students' expectations may sometimes need to be managed, they need to be provided with earlier introduction to career planning so that the development of employability and professional portfolios can commence earlier, and work-integrated learning can be beneficial.

The COVID-19 pandemic has forced large-scale shifts to online learning, which presents both challenges and opportunities, with a range of digital technologies being increasingly used to assist not only with online and blended learning, but also with support provision in relation to international students' connectedness, mental health and work-integrated learning (Adachi & Tran, 2022; Humphrey & Forbes-Mewett, 2021). Various innovative practices, capitalising on digital technologies, have been introduced to support international students by education providers in partnership with EdTech companies.

Supporting international students during crises, such as health, financial, natural disaster, geopolitical crises or war, has become a critical area warranting more nuanced understandings. It is crucial to learn and share good practice examples and initiatives in developing effective and sustainable responses to crises of various natures affecting international students, and how this is situated within the institution's immediate and long-term risk management plan.

## **IMPLICATIONS**

We proposed the following recommendations for the host communities to consider in designing and implementing support services for international students:

- Placing international students at the centre in providing student-centred support services should go beyond understanding their needs and characteristics. Rather, it extends to co-designing support resources with them.
- Effective engagement with international students is based on a holistic approach and understanding of how aspects of a cross-border student life are interlinked and inter-dependent on each other, including academic performance, learning outcomes, mental health and wellbeing, employment, accommodation, finance, life plans, and aspirations. It is worthwhile to consider how supporting international students enhances experiences for

all members of the host institutions in designing for optimal student engagement.

- To position international students as a truly integral component of the host communities and create a welcoming environment, it is essential to build mechanisms to engage them not only academically, socially and interculturally, but also mentally and emotionally, especially during hard-hitting crises such as the COVID-19 outbreak or the 2003 SARS epidemic, war or geopolitical crisis, or natural disasters.
- International students tend to be overwhelmed with information, especially during the orientation period, so it is crucial to plan carefully how to clearly and effectively communicate support resources to them.
- There is a critical need to understand international students' help-seeking behaviours and the cultural and social factors impacting on those in designing effective support for international student engagement. A proportion of international students might associate help-seeking or using support services with a sense of losing face or perceptions of their own deficiencies or failures.
- To support international student engagement in the changing context, it is important to build capacity for and up-skill or re-skill staff. It is important to provide sustaining targeted professional development for staff and stakeholders involved in providing support for international students to ensure Australia's commitment to creating a welcoming, empathetic and conducive environment for international students.

To ensure appropriate support for international student engagement, it is crucial to understand enabling and inhibiting factors for support provision for this cohort, and work collectively to create a community of sharing and implementing good practices.

As part of an ongoing commitment to supporting international students, the Australian government funded Deakin University to undertake the Best Practice International Student Engagement Project. This project will identify what successful international student engagement looks like and develop a best practice guide and other resources to encourage and support international student engagement.

If you would like to share an example of good practice and be kept informed of the progress and outcomes of the Best Practice International Student Engagement Project, please send an email to [best-practice-ise@deakin.edu.au](mailto:best-practice-ise@deakin.edu.au)

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