

Lonely path for overseas students

Two out of three international students experience problems of loneliness while studying in Australia, a recent study has found.

In addition to the usual loneliness faced by all students living away from home, international students, face loneliness triggered by being away from their cultural and linguistic environment, the report jointly compiled by Monash and Melbourne University researchers says.

Two hundred international students from more than 30 different nations, at nine Australian institutions were interviewed for, *Loneliness and International Students: An Australian Study* by Erlenawati Sawir, Simon Marginson, Ana Deumert, Chris Nyland and Gaby Ramia.

isolation, at a time when they need more than the usual support. They face a foreign language, study in a new setting, finances, accommodation, and day-to-day living problems, and they must negotiate an unfamiliar set of institutional rules.

"They often face issues of personal autonomy and the recreation of identity in the new setting. Often, the physical and cultural environment is very different, with new social customs and norms.

"International students must establish themselves as foreigners staying for a time, as neither inside nor outside. They must deal with unpredictable encounters, idiosyncratic communications, and problems of racial discrimination, largely on their own.

"Personal loneliness, both routine

'extremely debilitating and related to a loss of motivation', resulting in academic attrition."

Same-culture networks are often crucial for international students. Yet same-culture networks are not a universal panacea.

Relations with locals though might be the key to moving forward on loneliness. One of the strongest findings of the study was that there was a strong correlation between the incidence of loneliness and problems with cross-cultural relationships.

"Two thirds (65 per cent) of the students who reported feelings of loneliness or isolation in Australia had faced barriers in making friends across cultures, compared to 36 per cent of the non-lonely students. In other words, same-culture networks, however necessary, are not sufficient to overcome

loneliness."

Many interviewees wanted to connect to people like themselves but found obstacles to social networking.

"If we expect (international) students to set aside core elements of their identity when undertaking foreign study, we must recognize that this carries with it potentially severe individual, economic, and cultural costs.

"To put the problem bluntly, should they have to acquire not just English but an ideology of possessive individualism, and a reduced commitment to the extended family, to cope with being in nations like Australia? Should they have to drink alcohol to mix successfully with local students?"

One set of implications (for universities) is that friendly classrooms, competent administration, and sensitive student services are more significant for international students



Computer science student Feng Qin from Shanghai, China helps organise Orientation Week activities at RMIT's Carlton campus. Photo by RMIT.

"Should overseas students have to drink alcohol to mix successfully with local students?"

Australia educates nine per cent of the world's international tertiary students. In 2004, there were 228,555 international students enrolled in Australian higher education institutions providing 15 per cent of university revenues.

"These students are not simply enrollment units administered by universities, nor merely customers of a large-scale services export industry, nor members of a classroom; they are also human beings," the report says.

"Newly arrived international students suddenly find themselves in 'relational deficit', if not social

and profound, is often endemic to the international student experience."

Early feelings of loneliness are intense even for students in regular contact with people from their own city or culture, the report says.

"In most cases, this intensity diminishes in time, as students' expectations and patterns of life change and as they learn to cope to extend their social circles and make new kinds of friends.

"If this transformation does not occur, the intense loneliness becomes emotionally entrenched as social alienation. This can become

than for domestic students.

"It is essential that universities resource student servicing and classroom strategies adequate to help students with personal and social loneliness, especially in the early stages," the report says.

"Among these university services, none is more important than assistance with learning English, a vital ongoing condition of survival and academic success.

"Second, students should be supported in their personal and social relationships and in maintaining continuing contact with family and friends back home and developing social networks. Universities should promote mechanisms that trigger networking, such as student clubs and buddy systems.

"Another strategy of local bridging lies in forming relations

with same-culture people outside the universities. In the present study, one interviewee suggested that universities might ask people living in the city of study, of the same national origin as the students, to meet with the students when they arrive and play an ongoing nurturing and mentoring role.

"Universities could also conduct regular "network audits" reviewing the social supports available to each individual international student."

There can though be advantages for international students facing loneliness.

"The student world is open, fluid, flexible, and cosmopolitan; its freedoms are alarming and attractive.

"Losing networks provides opportunities." □



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