

Crossing the interaction divide between international and domestic students in higher education

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One of the challenges facing higher education institutions (HEIs) across the world is to find fruitful and productive ways to increase interaction between domestic and international students. This article presents an overview of recent research in this area in order to identify ways that HEIs can make a significant leap forward in addressing this issue. This paper will outline the research into this issue and highlight the Interaction for Learning Framework (Arkoudis et al., 2010) as a significant study that is informed by research and practice that can guide academics in enhancing peer interaction between domestic and international students. The article concludes by outlining some key considerations for integrating the framework within broader institutional strategies that focus on internationalising the student experience at home for all students.

Keywords: student experience; internationalisation at home; teaching and learning; student diversity.

1. International students in Australian higher education

Australia has been a major force within the international student market. According to government statistics, between 1990 and 2007 the number of international students in Australian universities increased from 25,000 to 254, 414 (Marginson & Sawir, 2011). However, since 2011 the number of international enrolments in Australia have been declining, due in part to the high cost of living and the strong Australian dollar. In 2012, the total number of international onshore students in Australia was 402, 388, with 53.7 per cent enrolled in higher education (Australian Education International,

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2013a). This was a decrease of 5.5 per cent from the previous year in those enrolled in higher education. China was the highest nationality group, comprising 40.8 per cent of higher education enrolments (Australian Education International, 2013b).

The fluctuation in international student enrolments has caused some concern for Australian higher education institutions (HEIs). International education has been a major source of revenue for the sector from the late 1990s onwards. In 2011, international student enrolments provided 17 percent of higher education funding (Marginson, 2013, p. 64). It goes without saying that international students are an important source of funding for Australian universities. With increasing competition from places such as China, Hong Kong and Singapore, who are developing international education hubs in the Asia-Pacific region, Australian HEIs will need to address some of the concerns regarding international students' teaching and learning experiences in order to maintain and grow their share of the international student market.

With significant numbers of international students it would seem that Australian universities provide an ideal educational environment for peer engagement and collaborative learning among diverse students to take place. Australian higher education has a richly diverse student population that has largely resulted from increased global mobility over the past few decades. While this would seem to provide plentiful opportunities for internationalised learning experiences, through cross-cultural interaction with peers, evidence suggests that there are ongoing problems with engagement among international and domestic students, with limited interaction both inside and outside the classroom (Marginson, Nyland, Sawir, & Forbes-Mewett, 2010; Volet & Jones, 2012). Since 2008 the research has indicated that international students are concerned that they do not have the opportunities to interact with domestic students (Australian Education International, 2008, 2013c). Success in recruitment and the large increase in the number of international students have outpaced the development of teaching and learning approaches to utilising student diversity as a resource for intercultural interaction and learning.

This paper will discuss research that investigates ways to promote the interaction between domestic and international students in order to highlight some of the key considerations in developing approaches that enhance interaction. It will highlight the plethora of research into international student experience, which has informed our understanding of some of the reasons for the lack of interaction between domestic and international students, and identify gaps in the research regarding domestic

students' lack of interaction. Moreover, most of the research emphasises the need for academics to do more in their teaching to develop interaction across diverse student groups. Hence, we argue that the *Interaction for Learning Framework* (Arkoudis et al. 2010) offers academics practical strategies for teaching and learning contexts. The article concludes by outlining some key considerations for integrating the framework within broader institutional strategies that focus on internationalizing the student experience at home for all students.

2. Scanning the research for evidence-based practices

The large body of research on the student experience shows that student engagement with peers, academics and the university community has positive effects on student persistence, development, and academic performance. This has led to a growing focus in Australian universities on strategies to enhance student engagement with their peers and the university community. This section will provide an overview of recent research on enhancing interaction between domestic and international students. Most of the literature to date is descriptive rather than normative, focusing on conceptualising mainly international students' motivation and engagement for interaction in English-speaking contexts (see Volet & Jones, 2012 for an overview of research in this area). Much of this research has increased understanding of why interaction is a problem for international students, but very few studies appear to focus on rethinking how this issue can be addressed in sustainable and practical ways within teaching and learning contexts.

Focus on international students

In the research related to international students the focus is largely on internationalising the student experience for international students. The terms "international" and "domestic" students are used in much of the research to represent two groups of homogenous learners, even though the students within each group vary greatly in their educational experiences and English language background. The term 'international students' covers students from many backgrounds and who are on different learning pathways. It includes students studying in on-shore or offshore programs, learners who may have lived and studied in many countries, those who have never left their home country, and those who are studying overseas for the first time. It has been argued that "international" as a term does not capture the diversity that can exist amongst the international student body



(Arkoudis, et al., 2010; Doherty & Singh, 2005; Marginson, 2007). Equally, “domestic” students are also a diverse group. They are monolingual, bilingual and multilingual. They are culturally diverse. They may be from rural or migrant backgrounds, of low socio-economic status, or of Indigenous Australian background, to name just a few of the possible variations.

Much of the early research into international students suggested that the challenges students faced in adapting to different teaching and learning contexts was due to their lack of understanding of what was required of them. They are often positioned as ‘problematic’, struggling to participate due in part to their lack of English language skills and different educational experiences (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991). While there have been a number of studies that debunk this stereotype (Arkoudis & Tran, 2010; Carroll & Ryan, 2005; Tran, 2013), these views continue to permeate the sector in discussions about international students (Arkoudis, Baik, & Richardson, 2012).

For international students, increased interaction with domestic students is an important educational issue from the perspective of developing their spoken English language skills. O’Loughlin and Arkoudis (2009) conducted a study that explored the English language development of a group of students who were completing their university studies. The students had undertaken an International English Language Testing System (IELTS) test for entry to university. They also undertook an IELTS test in the last semester of their studies. One of the findings of the study was that the students’ English language sub-score was independent of their reading, writing and listening sub-scores. This seemed to indicate that speaking skills were developed separately from their other English language skills. The students in the study commented that they had very little opportunity to interact in class, and sought opportunities outside the university. The study highlights the importance of interaction between local and international students, as it allows international students to develop their everyday communication skills, which are important in terms of their future employability (Arkoudis et al., 2009).

Why the lack of interaction?

Researchers have offered a number of possible reasons for this lack of interaction between international and domestic students. Understandably, it seems that for the most part, students prefer to stay within familiar cultural and language groups. This is explained by Eisenclas & Trevaskes (2007, p. p. 421) as “the phenomenon of social categorisation and perception” (p. 421). Dunne (2009) also notes that contact occurs more often amongst students

of similar backgrounds. Wright and Schartner (2013) tracked the social interaction among 20 international students in the UK and found that while the students would engage in classroom activities, they still found it difficult to engage with domestic students and avoided it both on and off campus. Their work indicates that some international students do not move outside of their cultural groupings, even after one year of study.

Initiating interaction with peers is challenging for students, particularly when there is a lack of common ground in terms of cultural knowledge and experience. Peer interaction and engagement with the university can be particularly challenging for students for whom English is not a first language. These students may not only experience problems with language proficiency and communicative competence, they may also not have the adequate social and cultural “know-how” for informal and social interactions in various Australian contexts (Baik, 2013).

A further obstacle to interaction between international and domestic students is the amount of time students are spending on campus. For example, the 2009 National First Year Experience Survey showed for example, that first-year domestic students spent less time on campus than predecessor cohorts (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). The authors explain that this is largely due to more students undertaking part-time or casual work to support themselves through university, and this affects the level of engagement with peers outside scheduled classes.

The challenge for university educators is in designing relevant curricula that help to overcome barriers of limited time on campus and inter-cultural inhibition, and encourage meaningful interaction that has a positive effect on attitudes and approaches to learning (Baik, 2013). The biggest challenges in achieving this from the academics’ perspective were increasingly large class sizes and limited time to plan and foster interaction, particularly when subjects were ‘content heavy’. In such conditions, staff tended not to prioritise peer interaction in their curriculum planning and design (Arkoudis et al., 2013).

Why does domestic and international student interaction matter?

Much has been written on the benefits of interaction for learning, but there is little research on the particular benefits associated with cross-cultural interactions. Arkoudis et al.’s (2013) study showed the potential benefit of peer interaction across diverse cultural and linguistic groups. Both the staff and students interviewed stated interaction among students from diverse backgrounds can potentially lead to: increased awareness and understanding



of different perspectives; better preparation for the workplace; improved English language skills for international students; and a greater feeling of belonging. Also, in Gurin et al.'s (2002) study in both the University of Michigan and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program, the researchers showed that classroom diversity and interaction among students from ethnically diverse backgrounds can have a positive effect on learning outcomes. In a similar vein, Marginson and Sawir (2011) observe,

...a more diverse student body is an educational resource in itself. It creates the opportunity to enrich the education of all students, preparing them to take their place in the more global era now emerging (p. 9).

They also acknowledge that this potential has not yet been realised in Australian universities.

The issue of interaction, or lack thereof, between international and domestic students is important not just in terms of the learning experiences of international students, but the experiences of all students, particularly in light of universities' internationalisation missions. This is an issue not only in Australia, but in higher education in other Anglo-American countries (Baik, 2013; Ruble & Zhang, 2013). Over the last two decades there has been a huge expansion in both volume and scope of universities' international activities in the Anglosphere (Altbach & Knight, 2007; Marginson, 2012). However, little progress has been made in internationalising learning processes and outcomes, particularly in relation to meaningful cross-cultural interactions, which are known to be important in developing the skills necessary to achieve internationalized education.

The local student perspective

As stated earlier, most of the research efforts in intercultural interactions have focused on the international student experience. The local student perspective is under-represented in the literature and little is known about domestic students' expectations of an internationalized education, and their attitudes towards intercultural interaction (Summers & Volet, 2008). Colvin et al. (2013) point out that the literature to date has paid little attention to the "cultural positioning and role of local students in the interaction process" (p.2). While the benefits of interacting with domestic students are clear from the international student perspective, what is "in it" for the domestic student is less clear. Understanding the domestic student perspective is therefore important to make progress in this area.



In recent years only a few researchers have sought to gain insight into the domestic student perspective of internationalised education and cross-cultural interaction. Students' attitudes and beliefs affect their motivation for learning. Some researchers have argued that domestic students are the answer to enhancing interaction (Arkoudis et al, 2013; Marginson & Sawir, 2011). Zimitat (2008) was the first to conduct a large-scale study in Australia of university students' perceptions and experiences of internationalised education. His survey of 2787 undergraduate students showed that there were significant differences between domestic and international students, perspectives on these issues. International students were generally more positive about their internationalized curriculum and how well they were prepared for employment in international contexts. From their study of students' attitudes towards culturally mixed group work, Smart and Volet (2008) concluded that students' experiences at university "do not appear to be having the desired impact with respect to intercultural competence, despite the multicultural nature of the student population" (p. 369). The recent introduction of the New Colombo Plan by the Australian Federal Government may refocus attention on developing the intercultural communication skills of domestic students. This plan will send Australian undergraduates into the Asian region for study, internships and long-term diplomacy and may provide some of the impetus for domestic students to interact with international students.

3. What is needed for progress?

To date, institutional efforts to improve the interactions among diverse students have mainly focused on developing extra-curricula activities, largely designed to support international students. If genuine progress is to be made in this area, efforts to encourage cross-cultural interaction should begin from within the core curriculum. Much of the discussion above has emphasised the importance of opportunities for interaction within the teaching and learning context, and the challenge for institutions and academics to harness the potential for student diversity for learning. This raises a number of questions. What does it mean to create opportunities for interaction and how can these be achieved in a learning and teaching environment where teaching the content of the subject is seen as the main concern? These are important issues because as Ryan and Viète (2009) note, "pedagogical practices partly shape the roles students play in interaction with peers [and] teachers" (p.308).

The study by Arkoudis et al. (2010) is one of the few studies that has developed practical strategies for academics to use in their teaching, based on research that investigated the following questions:

- 1) What are the benefits and obstacles of enhancing interaction between international and domestic students?
- 2) In what ways can university teaching promote interaction between students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

The study involved interviews with academics, domestic and international students across three universities in Melbourne, Victoria. These universities were broadly representative of Australian higher education institutions. University A is part of the Group of Eight universities in Australia, which is a coalition of research intensive and comprehensive universities. University B is a dual sector institution set across multiple campuses in Victoria and two campuses in Southeast Asia. University C is a large multi-sectoral university (with higher education, vocational and further education sectors), which includes multiple campuses and offshore programs.

The general findings from the study supported what has already been documented in the research. From both the student and staff perspectives, interaction among students from diverse backgrounds potentially leads to: increased awareness and understanding of different perspectives; better preparation for the workplace; improved English language skills of international students; and a greater feeling of belonging. On the teaching side, the main impediment seems to be the limited time available to foster interaction, particularly when classes are large and the curriculum is “content” heavy. Such conditions tend to discourage staff from prioritising peer interaction within the curriculum, at least in any planned and systematic sense.

In relation to student learning, both staff and students identified a number of challenges to effective interactions. They included: differing levels of English language proficiency; limited time spent on campus due to competing commitments such as paid work; and lack of a “common ground” between domestic and international students due to differences in academic priorities and learning experiences, as well as in their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

The main outcome of the study was the development of the *Interaction for Learning Framework*. Students and academic staff interviewed for the study described a range of teaching practices and learning experiences. These examples were mapped onto a framework in order to identify and



synthesise a number of teaching strategies to facilitate and promote peer interaction for learning across diverse cultural and linguistic groups. As a result the *Interaction for Learning Framework* was developed, consisting of six interrelated dimensions, each of which represents a particular aspect of teaching and learning associated with creating the conditions for effective peer interaction. The six dimensions– *Planning Interaction; Creating Environments for Interaction; Supporting Interaction; Engaging with Subject Knowledge; Developing Reflexive Processes; and Fostering Communities of Learners*– are described in more detail in the next section.

4. The Interaction for Learning Framework

Planning interaction

The dimension *Planning Interaction* is central to the *Interaction for Learning Framework*, as it is fundamental to each of the other five dimensions discussed below. Planning interaction involves academic staff including peer interaction activities in the design of their subject. It involves designing relevant teaching and learning tasks that require interaction, and also the provision of clear guidelines for students about the learning objectives, assessment processes and the expected learning outcomes. The framework recognises the importance of assessment in developing a purpose for interaction between domestic and international students.

Creating environments for interaction

The focus in this dimension is on strategies that can be used to increase students' participation in the first weeks of classes. The main goals are to develop students' confidence in interacting with other students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and to provide opportunities for students to move out of their cultural comfort zones.

Supporting interaction

In this dimension, learners are informed about the expectations and benefits of working across different cultural and linguistic groups for their learning. Its main purpose is for students to understand the value of peer interaction and to set up the ground rules and expectations for learning tasks. Helping students understand the value of making these connections to enhance their own learning is a critical component of the framework.



Engaging with subject knowledge

The first three dimensions are important in preparing domestic and international students to work together. The main purpose of this dimension is to use linguistic and cultural diversity to engage with subject knowledge. This may include drawing on different skills, learning strategies and cultural experiences to co-construct subject knowledge.

Developing reflexive process

In this dimension learners move beyond individual understanding so that they can utilise the knowledge base available within the community of learners. The key objectives of the fifth dimension of interaction are to promote higher levels of interaction and cognitive engagement through peer feedback and assessment to enhance students' critical thinking and reflection on their learning.

Fostering communities of learners

In this dimension, learners demonstrate independence and are able to move across different cultural contexts. The main purpose of this dimension is to use diversity as resource for independent learning between domestic and international students

While the *Interaction for Learning Framework* can assist academics to develop curriculum that includes interaction between domestic and international students, this also needs to be integrated within broader institutional strategies focused upon internationalising the student experience in Australian higher education (Arkoudis et al., 2012).

A positive move in the last decade has been the increased focus on the concept of Internationalization at Home, which emphasises the importance of internationalised experiences for *all* students, international and domestic. To do this, institutions need to think about how teaching and learning can be internationalised within the core curriculum, by both internationalized course content, and also engagement with peers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. There is also a need to consider the role of cross-cultural interaction within a broader agenda for internationalising the student experience. We will consider what this means for the internationalised student experience in the final section.



5. An internationalised student experience

Defining precisely what ‘internationalising the student experience’ means is still a challenge for Australian institutions. Securing deeper agreement on definitions is one of the conditions for a forward move across the system. Commonly used definitions of internationalisation vary, but are mostly too broad and do not readily contextualise for differences in institution, discipline and student populations. For the most part they do not offer a practical framework for designing classroom processes or pinpointing desired outcomes. Concepts like ‘intercultural competence’ are often unclear.

Examining 39 Australian university websites, Arkoudis and colleagues (Arkoudis, Baik, Marginson, & Cassidy, 2012) found that while all universities used “internationalisation” in statements of their mission, or their goals and values, mostly this referred to diversity in the student body and fostering an international community. Very few universities referred to “Internationalisation at Home” and only two websites referred specifically to internationalising the student experience.

Many universities provide descriptions of the internationalisation of teaching and learning in relation to their proclaimed graduate attributes. Unfortunately, this domain lends itself to generic “all things to all people” approaches. In 2011, 27 of 39 university websites listed “global citizenship” as a graduate attribute. This meant one or more of:

- ▶ Awareness of knowledge in a global context
- ▶ Ability to apply international perspectives
- ▶ Willingness to contribute to the international community
- ▶ Demonstration of cross-cultural awareness.

These attributes can be compared to the four key components of a genuine internationalised student experience outlined by Baik (2013). She argues that a genuinely internationalised student experience will only come from deeper engagement with curriculum that builds cross-cultural skills and awareness by facilitating on-going interaction among diverse students. She also notes the importance of international content in curriculum and particularly for domestic students, integrating the home internationalised program with opportunities to study abroad, and with the learning of a foreign language. These points are further discussed below, as they relate to enhancing interaction between domestic and international students.



6. Fostering interaction through internationalised course content

The most common and straightforward way educators have internationalised curriculum is to include international course content such as international or global perspectives, or to include comparative approaches. This is an essential and beneficial aspect of internationalisation at home. Having curricula with international content not only has positive effects on students' world-mindedness and international knowledge, but Parson's (2009) study involving over 1300 students in the US and Australia also showed that students who took more courses with international content also had deeper levels of interaction with international students. They also had "attitudes, perceptions and behaviours that were more internationally aware" (p.16)

While inclusion of international perspectives or comparative approaches in course content has benefits for internationalisation, we argue that it is not enough on its own to foster cross-cultural engagement and interaction among diverse students. As Rizvi (2001) argued over a decade ago, internationalisation of curriculum should move beyond a concern for content alone to incorporate include "issues of pedagogy and cross-cultural understanding" (p.10). The task for university educators is to design curriculum (including assessment) that encourages genuine social and inter-cultural engagement (Leask, 2009). One practical framework that outlines a systematic approach to facilitating and promoting peer interaction among diverse students is the *Interaction for Learning Framework* proposed by Arkoudis et al. (2010) mentioned above.

Fostering cross-cultural interaction through foreign language learning

Another important aspect of Internationalisation at Home that can support interaction among students from diverse backgrounds is learning foreign languages. As Wächter (2003) notes, a major challenge in cross-cultural interaction is that "the foreign language element is lacking." (p.10). While the direct association between learning languages and interaction is not obvious, the multiple benefits of learning a foreign language are well known (Baik, 2013). For example, by encouraging students' interest in and understanding of other cultures and societies, the potential for engagement is increased, as feelings of empathy for students for whom English is an additional language. This greater interest, understanding and empathy fosters interaction among students from diverse backgrounds.



In Australia the trend in foreign language learning is not moving in a positive direction. Australia has the lowest level of second-country language skills of all OECD countries (McLaren, 2011) and a report *Languages in Crisis: A rescue plan for Australia*, commissioned by the Group of Eight Australian universities, warned that Australia is being put at risk educationally and economically by a decline in foreign language learning (Group of Eight, 2007). It is argued that monolingual Australian graduates will find it increasingly difficult to compete effectively in the global setting with multi-lingual students graduating from European, Asian and US institutions. Not only will monolingual graduates be potentially disadvantaged in the global arena, Baik (2013) argues that they have missed out on the numerous cognitive benefits and cross-cultural skills developed in the process of learning a foreign language.

7. Conclusion

This paper has provided several insights into developing peer interaction for learning across diverse cultural and linguistic groups. In reviewing the research into this area, it proposed that the *Interaction for Learning Framework* can offer practical guidance for academics in developing peer interaction between domestic and international students. It provides a significant move forward in addressing the concerns of both international students and HEIs. The *Framework* is informed by research and practice; focused on developing interaction within teaching, learning and assessment; and highlights the benefits of using diversity as a resource for learning in higher education. It addresses one of the main obstacles of interaction between students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, namely that students believed they have few common points of interest. Students referred to this as ‘lacking common ground’. Teaching and learning contexts can provide the “common ground” from which diverse groups of students can engage in meaningful interaction. We have also argued that the *Interaction for Learning framework* should be part of a suite of teaching and learning activities within institutional strategies that aim at Internationalisation at Home. This is the next challenge that lies ahead for HEIs.

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