

# Myth Busting Stereotypes: The Connections, Disconnections and Benefits of International Student Social Networks

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International students, particularly those from Asia, are often perceived as maintaining social networks primarily with other international students from their home nations. Moreover, established research in the area of international wellbeing in Australia also point out that international students who make friends only with other international students from the home nation are unhappy with their overseas experience (e.g. Sawir et al. 2007; International Graduate Insight Group 2014). Research also suggests that integration with local students makes for happier and healthier individuals (e.g. Sawir et al. 2007). Here international students who have local friends note that they experience less culture shock, feel less homesick and are generally better-adjusted than those who have few or no local friends. This paper however questions if international students in Australia really mix solely with other international students from the home nation and if extending their social networks to include local friends is the only source of their happiness. By looking at the findings of data collected from an online survey of 6699 international students in Australia in 2014 and from in depth face-to-face interviews with 60 international students in Melbourne in 2013, this paper suggests that we cannot stereotype international students under one umbrella when it comes to their social networks. Our work instead reveals that there are distinct groups of international students whose social networks differ from each other (e.g. there is a group whose friends are mostly international students from other countries and a group whose friends are mostly international and local students). Moreover we note that there are increasing numbers of international students whose social networks are dominated by fellow international students who come from countries other than their own. Our research also shows that increasingly international students are having more diversity in their having international students as friends is beneficial since this allows respondents to navigate everyday life in Australia while creating a sense of belonging to a community that is global in makeup yet locally based. However, this paper also found that international students such as those from Asia do not make friends with locals who come from the same ethnic groups as them since they find little in common with Asian-Australians for reasons that include an inability to identify with locally-born or raised Asians.

## Introduction

International students in Australia are often stereotyped as having only fellow international students in their social networks. In other words, that they have no local friends. Moreover the literature on the health and well-being of international students warns us that international students who only have other international students – particularly those from the home nation – in their social networks leads to loneliness and unhappiness. Having local friends, the literature argues, helps international students become better-adjusted and enjoy their overseas study experience. In addition, work on migration and diaspora in Australia and elsewhere often inform us that new (permanent) migrants are absorbed into established migrant communities in the host nations. This work also tells us that diasporas form connections with each other while outside the geographical boundaries of the nation of origin. In other words individuals and groups are bound by their nationality, ethnicity, culture, history and/or faith while outside the home nation regardless of current place of residence and time away from the country/place of origin. Our research however questions these assumptions.

By asking the question ‘*What are international student networks and how do they benefit international students?*’, we embarked on two separate but complementary studies. One study took place in 2013 which saw 60 international students in Melbourne take part in in-depth face-to-face interviews and the other was an

online survey distributed Australia-wide which provided us with 6699 responses. The 2013 study was part of a bigger project looking at transient migrants (international students and white collar workers) in Australia and Singapore while the 2014 study was also part of a broader project looking at the information-seeking behaviour of international students in Australia and that of potential students coming to Australia.

## **Background**

### **Significance of making local friends**

In 2014 a report by the International Graduate Research Group (2014) was released on the satisfaction levels of international students in Britain, Australia and the United States (Reddon 2014) revealed the significance of friendships during their study experience. The report which surveyed 60,000 international students across 48 universities revealed that levels of satisfaction varied across national groups. Most of the international students were generally happy with their overseas education experience, but those who were not said they would not recommend their institutions to others. While the study does not suggest that unhappy international students will lead to the downfall of our lucrative international education industry, it does prompt us to ask why they are unhappy, and what can be done about it. One of the key reasons which the survey revealed for respondents' unhappiness is that they had no local friends. While the report noted that international students generally have friends from other nations, it also highlighted that certain groups of students such as those from China only had other international students from China as friends.

The report correlates with previous work on international students and their social networks. Numerous studies on international student well-being in Australia and elsewhere for instance have shown that students benefit from having support networks in the host nation (e.g. Sawir et al.; Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune 2011). The importance of local-international student interaction is also recognised by academics who feel that such interactions can also be promoted within the curriculum and classroom. Arkoudis et al (2013) for instance, discussed the challenges of enhancing such interactions within the academic context and the need to scaffold activities that could promote them. They argued that such interactions are important for the development of global competencies amongst graduates.

### **International student aspirations and the role of diasporic communities**

At the same time, Gomes (2015a) posits that international students thrive on mobility with ambitions to live and work in the financial capitals of America and Europe. These students consider their fellow international student friends as incredibly important in terms of future mobility and work opportunities. The international student network formed in Australia in other words, is of great importance to their future. In addition, international students, according to Weiss and Ford (2012), consider themselves 'better' than Australians. Here Ford explains that they consider themselves as being more cosmopolitan because they have more experience with transnational mobility.

A possible way for international students to connect with local students is through ethnic and cultural similarity. Theoretical studies on diasporic communities and cultures for instance often state that individuals and groups who live outside the geographical boundaries of the nation are linked to each other and to the home nation through what Benedict Anderson (1983) famously coins 'imagined community'. In other words, diasporas are still able to maintain a connection to the original home nation because of the memory of a shared national history, a shared national culture, similar ethnicity and sometimes a shared religious affiliation. An example of this can be seen in the way in which the Jewish diaspora is connected to each other through a shared (traumatic) history and a faith that is part of their cultural (and arguably ethnic) identity despite being spread throughout Europe, America, Australia and elsewhere for centuries.

While this paper does not disagree with the significance and benefits of making local friends, it highlights the organic necessity for international students and indeed, all students to make friends where they can and that depending on the motivations, the personality, ability and confidence of each student, their social networks can be quite diverse in nature. It is not true to say generally that international students only have friends from their home country, or that they only have friends who are other international students. This paper also considers some of the barriers that occur that prevent significant interpersonal relationships from

taking place between international students and local students.

### **Methodology**

The data for this paper come from face-to-face interviews and from an on online survey.

#### **Part 1: Face-to-face interviews**

Sixty international students in Melbourne took part in a series of face-to-face interviews in 2013. The face-to-face interviews looked at the self-perceived identities, social networks (friendship groups) and media and communication use of international students in order to understand the social and cultural spaces they occupy while in transience. These interviews were part of a bigger Australian Research Council funded project examining the strategies temporary migrants (international students and white collar workers) in Australia and Singapore utilise to cope with life in transience. The international students who took part in the face-to-face interviews were all enrolled at university as undergraduate or postgraduate students.

#### **Part 2: Online survey**

In 2014 6699 international students in Australia responded to an online survey hosted on Qualtrics and focused on identifying and understanding the relationship between social roles and identities of international students and the way they access, use and share information. International students who responded to the online survey were enrolled in universities (undergraduate and postgraduate degrees), technical college/community college/TAFE/vocational institutions (certificate and diploma), pathway programs, English language courses, high schools, secondary schools and undertaking other diploma/certificate courses.

Both projects received ethics approval from RMIT University. In this paper we specifically look at the social networks of international students in Australia. In other words, the friends that they make while in Australia.

The following tables capture basic demographic information from respondents. Table 1 provides us with information on gender, age range, time in Australia and regions or origin from both groups. It shows us that more female respondents than male respondents took part in both projects with little discrepancy between the difference between male and female respondents in each group. Most respondents for both groups were aged approximately between the ages of 18 to 29. The demographical information is largely representative of the international student profile in Australia with most students falling within the 20-24 years age range followed by the 25-29 years age group (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2011). The period of time respondents have stayed in Australia tends to be under 2 years. From the data, the majority of respondents come from Asia and are of an Asian ethnicity. In the online survey, 128 countries were listed as the home nations of the respondents with the majority (67.46 per cent) coming from the Asian region. The strong Asian presence of international students in this paper is also representative of the country of origin of international students in Australia with the top 5 sending countries – and in order of importance - being China, India, Malaysia, Vietnam and Indonesia (Institute of International Education 2015).

**Table 1. Demographics of respondents in online survey and face-to-face interviews.**

	Online survey (per cent)	Face-to-face interviews (per cent)
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	48.68	41.6
Female	51.17	58.3
<b>Age range (yrs)</b>		
< 18	0.26	
18-22	37.21	
23-27	35.93	
28-32	16.14	
33-37	6.81	
38-42	2.34	
43 and above	1.3	

19-24		53.3
25-29		40
30 and above		6.6
<b>Time in Australia</b>		
< 6 mths	24.64	21.6
6-12 mths	24.51	10
1-2 yrs	19.3	25
2 yrs	10.23	18..3
3 yrs	9.46	8.3
4 yrs	5.34	13.3
5 yrs	3.15	0
6 yrs	1.77	1.6
7 yrs	0.57	1.6
> 7 yrs	1.03	0
<b>Regions</b>		
<b>South-Eastern Asia</b> (i.e. Singapore, Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam, Philippines and Burma/Myanmar)	27.8	36.7
<b>Eastern Asia</b> (i.e. China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and South Korea)	25.15	21.7
<b>Southern Asia</b> (i.e. Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Iran)	10.06	20
<b>Western Asia</b> (i.e. Bahrain, Lebanon, Oman, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Israel, and Turkey)	4.44	0
<b>Northern America</b> (i.e. USA and Canada)	26.63	0
<b>Central America</b> (i.e. Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico)	2.37	0
<b>Latin America and the Caribbean</b> (i.e. Trinidad and Tobago)	0.30	0
<b>South America</b> (i.e. Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, and Venezuela)	10.65	10
<b>Eastern Africa</b> (i.e. Kenya and Mauritius)	1.18	0
<b>Southern Africa</b> (i.e. South Africa)	3.25	0
<b>Central Africa</b> (i.e. Angola)	0.30	0
<b>Western Africa</b> (i.e. Nigeria)	0.59	0
<b>Northern Africa</b> (i.e. Algeria)	0.30	0
<b>Western Europe</b> (i.e. Belgium, France, Germany, Netherlands, and Switzerland)	10.06	5
<b>Southern Europe</b> (i.e. Spain, Portugal, Italy, Croatia, Serbia, Cyprus and Greece)	13.91	0

<b>Northern Europe</b> (i.e. United Kingdom, Ireland, Denmark, Iceland, Norway and Sweden)	16.86	0
<b>Eastern Europe</b> (i.e. Bulgaria, Hungary, Czech, Poland, Russia and Ukraine)	4.73	1.7
<b>New Zealand</b>	16.8	1.7
<b>Melanesia</b> (i.e. Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea)	0.59	0
<b>Micronesia</b> (i.e. Marshall Islands)	0.30	0

## Results and Discussion

### Significance of social networks

The results of both projects tell us of the significance of social networks in the everyday life of international students. In the face-to-face interviews, for instance, all respondents told us how important it is to have friends in Australia particularly for day to day living. The online survey showed us that a large proportion of respondents state that they have friends in Australia (95.6 per cent). Respondents generally reiterated that ethnicity did not matter to them when it came to making friends. They felt that they were already exposed to different ethnicities in the countries they came from such as the Singaporeans and Malaysians whose nations both consist of multicultural, multiracial and multilingual societies. While other nations such as India, China and Vietnam are themselves multiethnic nations, respondents largely described themselves according to their nationality rather than specific ethnic groups. Moreover, respondents generally felt that since they live in a globalised world, ethnic differences when it comes to social interaction should not matter. Some explained that only other international students understand what life is like being an international student and are able to advise on issues only international students face. Fellow international students, as respondents noted, are significant contacts to have when they first arrive as the following students explained:

I meet the same people, with the same condition as me, I mean they're international students from Asia or from Africa, from ... I think even though I feel upset, that I don't meet any Australian, but then I become like – with the group of people, that at least we have the same experience, even though we're from different countries. But then, I come to my university at ..., that I find some of wonderful friends from Indonesia, I think they help me a lot, especially to deal with the accommodation and sort of things. Because there is some consideration for me, myself, to think, where should I live?...Because we have the same interests, that makes our bonds stronger. [*Indonesian female/pgrad*]

and

When I came here the first day, I knew no one, and this [Sri Lankan guy] .... was the guy who came .... and spoke to me. .... It was my first day in Australia, so I was a bit tensed out like stressed out, like what to do, what not to do, stuff like that. This guy...calmly .... spoke to me – so it's like, you get to meet someone like who's very friendly...it's difficult to forget those kind of people. [*Indian male/pgrad*]

The above quotes clearly show the significant impact of having friends and meeting people who are fellow international students primarily because of the shared experience as foreign students in Australia. In particular, they reveal that fellow international students help with acculturating to Australia through interpersonal relationships and practical assistance especially for new students. However, a concern which is raised by the Indonesian postgraduate student is not only her lack of local friends but her inability to meet local (students) despite her intentions to do so. Both students also revealed that while being international students bonds them closest with others, these international students are not necessarily co-nationals. Instead, they are a mixture of international students from the home nation and from elsewhere as in the case of the Indonesian postgraduate student.

### Diversity among international students and their social networks

Table 2 below is based on the online survey and shows that there are distinct groups of international students whose social networks differ from each other.

**Table 2. Which of the following statement BEST describes your group of friends in Australia?**

	<b>Total Responses N=6699</b>
They are a mix of international students and local students	1989 (29.69per cent)
They are mostly international students from my home country	1985 (29.63per cent)
They are mostly international students from other countries	1388 (20.72per cent)
They are a mix of international students and local students who have similar ethnic backgrounds to me	683 (10.2per cent)
I don't really have a group of friends in Australia	297 (4.43per cent)
They are mostly local students	295 (4.4per cent)
They are mostly local students who have similar ethnic backgrounds to me	62 (0.94per cent)

The table reveals that the two most distinct groups are respondents who felt that their social networks were dominated by a mix of international and local students *and* respondents who stated that their social networks are dominated mostly by international students who were co-nationals. However, the findings also show that only 4.4 per cent state that most of their friends are local students despite almost a third of respondents noting that their social networks are a mix of both international and local students. There are two interrelated assumptions that perhaps can be made here: that international students who state that they have a mix of local and international students in their social networks are most likely dominated more by international students who are co-nationals and that international students need other international students whether co-nationals or not, to be part of their social networks.

It is thus significant to note that a fifth of the respondents stated that their social networks were dominated by international students from other countries other than their own. Diversity of international students in respondents' social networks is expressed by the following two students:

My friends is mixed we all from different cultures and different countries so we also run like every Saturday a movie night or we go out dining or sometimes we got to a park or some place to just enjoy the nature if the weather is good or if the weather is not good just like relax around the place we stay. [*Chinese female/pgrad*]

and

[A]ctually have a handful of friends I would say about 6 or 7 friends whom I usually meet with and they're from different backgrounds, 2 of them are Canadians but one is an Indian Canadian and one is a Canadian Canadian .... and then I have a friend who is from Sri Lanka but she's an Indian [*Indian-Sikh female/pgrad*]

Here both students reveal that not only are their social networks made up of international students from outside their respective countries and cultures but that there is a sense of pride with this diversity. In our online survey, respondents admitted that the friends they made in Australia were significant in terms of who they communicated the most with. While almost half of our respondents said that they communicate equally with friends made in Australia with friends back in the home nation, more than a third stated that they communicated more with friends they made while in Australia. Only a small percentage (12.36 per cent) said that they communicate more with friends back in the home nation. See Table 3 below, based on the online survey, for a snapshot of who survey respondents communicated with the most while in Australia.

**Table 3. Which of the following statements BEST describes your communication with your friends?**

Answer	per cent
I communicate equally with friends I made in Australia and friends I made back home	45.27
I communicate more with the friends I made after I came to Australia.	38.53
I communicate more with my friends back in my home country	12.36
I only communicate with friends I made after I came to Australia	2.31
I only communicate with friends back in my home country	0.92
Other, please specify	0.61

**Ethnic Disconnections**

Less than 1 per cent of the international students surveyed make friends with Australians who are of similar ethnic backgrounds to them. While 4.4 per cent state that most of their friends are local, we can assume that these friends are not ethnically similar to them. Respondents in the face-to-face interviews explained they generally did not have Asian-Australian friends since they perceived the latter as only wanting to be friends with white Australians and not with them. They also commented that they did not have much in common with Asian-Australians because they felt that this group was more Australian. They felt that Asian-Australians had more in common with white Australians than they did with Asian international students. The following male student who is a PhD student from India expresses such sentiments in relation to Indian-Australians. He generally feels that the Indian-Australians who have grown up in Australia are out of touch with India and that they are culturally more Australian than they are Indian. He states:

I found that people of Indian origin who have been outside India for one generation or so, have lost their touch with India to such an extent that, for me seeing from this perspective, there's not much of a difference between a person who is not a native Indian at all and a person who is settled out of India except for one generation or so. Even for example people settle in Australia for more than one generation, they can speak my language, understand me, facial expressions are similar and all, but for me they're as good as local Australians.

For this student, the Indian diaspora in Australia is too far removed for him where he finds it hard to identify with them, least of all have interpersonal relationships with. So in this case while Asian transient migrants may be ethnically, and in some ways culturally, similar to Asian-Australians, both groups have evolved differently to each other due to varied communal experiences based on time and place.

**Discussion**

The combined data we collected shows us that we cannot stereotype international students under the same umbrella when we talk about social networks. This is because international students have diverse social networks. Moreover, there is diversity in those social networks. In other words, there will be separate groups of international students whose social networks are dominated by international students from the home nation (co-nationals), international students from elsewhere, a mixture of both international and local students and only local students. Our research also shows that international students whose social networks consist of fellow international students (co-nationals and those from outside the home nation) are not maladjusted. Instead, having other international students as friends is a beneficial strategy that helps respondents navigate everyday life in transience in Australia especially when they first arrive. In particular, respondents stated that having international students as friends is important to feeling a sense of belonging in Australia as fellow international students provide emotional (e.g. help alleviate loneliness) and practical (e.g. accommodation advice) benefits. Moreover, respondents feel that ethnicity does not matter when it comes to making friends with other international students who are not co-nationals. Our findings also tell us that ethnicity does not matter when it comes to international students making friends with locals who are ethnically similar to them. Here international students such as those from Asia do not make friends with locals who come from the same ethnic groups as them since they find little in common with Asian-Australians for reasons that include an inability to identify with locally-born or raised Asians.

**International student stereotypes busted**

The findings show that we cannot stereotype international students as having only international student friends particularly from the home nation. Instead we see that international students can be grouped into categories in terms of their social networks. Moreover, while the findings show that almost a third of international students are friends with international students from the home nation, an equal portion have their social networks dominated by both international and local students and a fifth have social networks dominated by international students from other nations other than their own. There are international students in other words that *have* local friends and there are international students whose friends don't come from the home nation. However, we are not going to proclaim that international students have integrated with local students since our findings indicate that only a small percentage have social networks dominated by local students and respondents in the face-to-face interviews still say that they lack local friends.

### **Social networks: Global friendships in Australia**

Work in the area of international students both in Australia and elsewhere (the United Kingdom and the United States in particular) have looked at the social networks of these students as heavily dominated by their fellow countrymen and countrywomen as well as their lack of interaction with locals. Often the work argues that international students keep to themselves (Kashima & Loh 2006; Kashima & Pillai 2011) with others stating that international students crave for local friends (International Graduate Insight Group 2014). However, the work barely alludes to international students not feeling happy with friends from the home nation. Instead, work that we have done at different times suggests that international students may find solace and comfort with friends from the home nation (Martin and Rizvi 2014). Our research suggests that international students indeed find comfort from friends from the home nation in the same vocation. Respondents feel that these friends are able to understand what they are going through because of the shared transient experience as well as the comfort of being in social networks from people not only from the home nation but also experiencing the same transient experience as them. However, there is a dearth of studies making correlations between social networks almost exclusively dominated by friends from the home nation with happiness in the transient experience until this study by the Graduate Research Group.

In their study of international students in the United States, Portes and DeWind (2004) found that international students in the U.S. felt that Americans did not understand their experiences as foreigners, while they could not relate to American culture such as interests in sports. As noted by Hendrickson, Rosen and Aune (2011), international students are not only comfortable with fellow international students from their home but also with international students from their region and sometimes elsewhere. Likewise, respondents in this study also maintained that they made friends with fellow Asian international students and sometimes elsewhere for practical reasons. They rationalised that they were able to connect and identify more with non-locals because of similar and shared experiences of being foreign students. For instance, some respondents note that when they come to Australia they actively seek fellow international students from their home nation, Asian region and sometimes elsewhere to help them adjust to Australia. Turning to fellow international students for advice and help comes about because respondents believe that these friends would have gone through the same issues they face and hence they are able to advise these friends accordingly. Yet, respondents are disappointed when they are unable to make local friends

Drawing on Giddens' (1991) theorisation that an individual's identity is not merely based on past experience but is an ongoing narrative, what we see here is that international students create a sense of identity for themselves based on their transient experience in order to form a community of needs. This community of needs is dynamic, empowering yet exclusive, because it allows international students to be linked to the culture and people of their home nation/region while at the same time also connected to their host nation but on their own terms. Making friends with fellow Asian international students thus provides a sense of familiarity in the wake of the trauma of being (voluntarily) uprooted while at the same time contributing to their ongoing narrative in transience as they navigate their shared experiences as transients in Australia.

Additionally while respondents barely made friends with Australian students who were of similar ethnicity(s) to them, they felt that they were blind to ethnicity (and thus nationality and culture) when it came to making friends with other international students. So while respondents cited that they found it difficult to identify with Australians who were of similar ethnicities as themselves, they found international students from different ethnicities, cultures and countries as adding a richness to their social networks. In other words, there was a sense of pride that they had friends from different nationalities. Experience as foreign students in other words is more significant for making friends than ethnic similarity. Having fellow international



students as friends in Australia not only has emotional and practical benefits for respondents. Such relationships also means that respondents have ethnic and therefore national diversity in their social networks in Australia which may bode well for them in later years in terms of future connections for work, business and travel as argued by Gomes (2015a) on the aspirations of future mobility by international students.

### **Lack of Local Friends: Expectations meet Disappointment**

Only a small percentage of respondents in the online survey state that their social networks are dominated by local students. Moreover, respondents in the face-to-face interviews reveal that this lack of local friends is a disappointment to them since they had the expectation of making friends with Australian students prior to their arrival. Some of reasons for the lack of local friends could be because of location and circumstance. Studies (e.g. Gomes 2015b) show that international students in Australia tend to live in areas where there are high numbers of international students. Often international students live within walking distance of their institution. In Melbourne for instance, a number of universities and residential colleges are located within the city area with a few within the Central Business District. Hence Melbourne city becomes not only a business and finance district but also a residential area densely populated by international students while local students often live with their families or in shared houses outside of the CBD. A very popular place for making friends with fellow international students takes place in the classroom, which supports the findings and work of Arkoudis et al. (2013) where the classroom is an important place for social networking. Research has shown that international students make friends with other international students because their courses are strongly if not exclusively dominated by international students. Related university disciplines such as Business, Accountancy and Economics attract healthy international student numbers. In an earlier study, Gomes (2015b) for instance found that international students usually made friends with the people who they sat next to at lectures and tutorials. International students here explained that only Asian international students tend to take the front seats during lectures and tutorials so this becomes an incidental way of getting to know other international students. Other places which international students may meet and make friends with fellow international students might be in international student associations. These can be nationally based (e.g. Indonesian Students Society) or interest based (e.g. Overseas Christian Fellowship).

### **Local (Ethnic) Disconnections**

The findings show that common ethnic roots do not lead to friendships between international students and Australian students with less than 1 per cent of international students in the online survey stating that their social networks are made up of local students from the same ethnicity as them. The findings from the face-to-face interviews clarify that this is the case because of an inability to identify with Australians who are ethnically similar to them. For the Asian international student respondents in the face-to-face interviews, the common factor in forming friendships is their experience as international students rather than national and thus arguably ethnic and ethnic cultural similarity. Asian respondents in the face-to-face interviews explain that they see Asian-Australians more culturally as Australian rather as Asian. While the respondents come from Asia, they find it challenging to identify with Asian-Australians and Asian-Australian issues because of the fundamental differences in direct circumstance and experience.

Some respondents in the face-to-face interviews provided the explanation that Asian-Australians are more Australian than Asian and hence have more in common with White Australians than they do with Asian international students. However, the international students also do not identify with Asian-Australian issues such as the high profile discussion in the media about the lack of diversity on Australian television. While the respondents come from Asia, they found it challenging to identify with Asian-Australians and their issues because of the fundamental differences in direct circumstance and experience. They commented they felt that Asian-Australians had more in common with white Australians than they did with Asian international students. So while Asian international students may be ethnically, and in some ways culturally, similar to Asian-Australians, both groups have evolved distinct cultural identities. Identity based on common (national) experience as trumping ethnicity and ethnic culture across ethnically similar and/or nation-based diasporas is further emphasised by real world examples outside of international education.

### **Implications for Practice**

There are some implications for practice from these results. It is not surprising that social networks (friends) are crucial for the ongoing wellbeing of international students. However, the nature of these social networks can be diverse amongst international students. In understanding this diversity, practice needs to reflect how institutions engage with their international students.

First, institutions should not assume a 'one size fits all' and that the only desirable social network should be the ones where there is a mix of international and domestic students (29.69 per cent in the current sample). Other social networks exist within the student community, including ones where there are a mix of diverse nationalities (20.72 per cent in the current sample). The often criticised 'single country social networks' represented only (29.63 per cent in the current sample). Whether students form social networks across cultures depends very much on their motivation, inclination, skills, and educational and living environment. Institutions could be providing support in developing some of these skills and opportunities for interaction within and beyond the classroom.

Second, the assumption that common ethnicity with local communities has been challenged in the current paper. This means that there are some clear differences between settled migrants and international students despite similarities in ethnicity or country of origin. Institutions seeking to engage with the local communities to support international students need to be aware of these differences and attitudes, and acknowledge their potential impacts on the success of programs.

Third, a small number of international students continue to be disconnected, reporting they do not really have any friends in Australia, and some 13 per cent indicated they generally communicated mostly with friends in their home country. This indicates a level of isolation when these students are in Australia and worth highlighting here.

Lastly, while the focus of the paper has been on international students' social networks, it is important to consider implications for Australian students. If only a third of the survey sample indicate they had local friends (of any ethnicity), it also suggests that the local students' social networks need to be explored. Are they only making friends locally with no international networks? In a globalised world, can Australian students afford not to connect with the international students on campus? Institutions might have to consider this in practice and think about preparing Australian students for an internationally connected job market.

## **Conclusion**

The literature on international students particularly those in Australia argue that international students suffer loneliness and are generally unhappy during their sojourn because of a lack of local friends. Moreover, the work suggests that international students will be more well-adjusted and emotionally healthier if they had local friends in their social networks. While we do not disagree with the importance for international students to make friends with domestic students, our research points out that international students actually see benefit from their social networks consisting of not only international students from the home nation but international students from elsewhere. Moreover, our study reveals that while international students have local friends in their social networks, they are less inclined to be friends with Australian students who are of the same ethnicity as them. International students in other words feel a strong sense of identity and commonality with other international students regardless of country of origin than with locals who share ethnic similarities to them because of the experience of being international students. For our respondents, this experience presents itself with more emotional and practical benefits with implications that such connections would lead to future benefits for respondents in terms of work, business and travel.

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