CASE STUDY

# Partnering with students to support international students in an Australian university setting

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ABSTRACT

This case study reflects on a 2019 project involving a staff-student partnership that focussed on improving the international student experience at an Australian university. The project responded to the need for international students to feel a sense of belonging and connectedness to an Australian university as a buffer against the challenges they face that are part of the acculturation process undergone upon arrival. The project's main output was the creation of short videos destined for three target audiences: international students, domestic students, and academics who teach international students. The project's objectives were to build relationships between international and domestic students and between academics and students, as well as to minimise misunderstandings held by international students about studying at this university and misconceptions held by domestic students and academics about international students. This case study provides an innovative and practical model for staff-student collaborations in higher education.

KEYWORDS

students as partners, teaching and learning, higher education, international student transition, international student experience

The notion that teachers have much to learn from their students is evidenced by the recent growth of scholarship relating to collaborative staff-student partnership projects designed to develop teaching and learning projects, produce research, and initiate institutional reform (Cook-Sather et al., 2019). Cook-Sather, Bovill, and Felten (2014) remind us that university students "have insights into teaching and learning that can make our and their practice more engaging, effective, and rigorous" (p. 12). Our project began from this premise and is informed by Healey and Healey's (2019) *Essential Frameworks for Enhancing Student Success: Student Engagement Through Partnership*. It sought to enhance the student experience by providing opportunities to develop relationships between students and academics and between domestic and international students, thereby facilitating a sense of belonging to the university and to their faculty.

Scholars agree that belonging and connection are foundational elements in a successful student experience (Cook-Sather et al., 2019). This is particularly the case with the international student experience (Cheung & Yue, 2013; Rosenthal et al., 2007; Tran & Pham, 2017), where connection and belonging can counteract the challenges faced as part of the acculturation process undergone upon arrival in a new country and a new educational institution. Smith and Khawaja (2011) identify five types of challenges: educational challenges, sociocultural challenges, practical challenges, language challenge, and challenges due to discrimination; this categorization provided a framework for the project's main outputs: two series of short educational videos destined for three target audiences.

With its focus on enhancing the student experience, this project spans several of the four partnership areas identified by Healey and Healey (2019): learning, teaching, and assessment; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of learning and teaching; and curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy. The project aligns closely with student-experience initiatives developed by The University of Queensland (2020) in the engagement of students in the conceptualization, design, and implementation of a student and staff support system. Cook-Sather et al.'s (2014) definition of a student-academic partnership applies to this project: "a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis" (pp. 6–7). Project participant interactions were guided by Healey and Healey's nine values that "underpin successful student engagement through partnership: authenticity, honesty, inclusivity, reciprocity, empowerment, trust, courage, plurality, and responsibility" (2019, p. 9).

In this case study, I reflect on the collaborative experience undertaken throughout 2019 with academics and students as agents of change (Cook-Sather et al., 2014) to produce two video series that endeavour to shift institutional culture (Cook-Sather et al, 2014). Given the propensity for international education across the globe, the project provides a useful model for other institutions.

RATIONALE

Inspired by the findings of a 2017 international student taskforce commissioned by the University of Sydney (2018), this project responds to four key recommendations of the taskforce report: support academic success, improve learner engagement, build social connection through transition, and provide professional learning and support for academic staff. Additional inspiration was provided by feedback received from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASS) student community and by research into the international student community in the Australian context (e.g., Arkoudis et al., 2019; Gomes, 2015; Tran & Pham, 2017) and into pedagogical partnerships with students (Cook-Sather et al., 2014; Cook-Sather et al., 2019; Healey & Healey, 2019; The University of Queensland, 2020).

The project was initially conceived with a target audience of all international students enrolled at the university, but in recognition of the domination of Chinese students in the university's international student cohort (70%, which is approaching 40% of the university's total student cohort), we decided to focus specifically on the Chinese international student community. A further source of inspiration was the desire to build relationships between international and domestic students; the university's *International Student Taskforce Report* (2018) and international students themselves identified this as an essential element of a successful international study experience. Scholars such as Arkoudis

et al. (2019) and Gomes (2015) mention the difficulty experienced by international students in making friends with locals. Results from two nationally administered student surveys in Australia in 2018, the International Student Barometer (ISB) and the Student Experience Survey (SES), indicated a downward trend in international student satisfaction (Social Research Centre, 2019) and below-average satisfaction in most aspects relating to the student experience (Bartimote et al., 2019); urgent action was needed.

My student-facing leadership role as FASS associate dean, student life, provided me with opportunities to collaborate informally with students on initiatives aimed at improving the student experience. This project allowed me to formalise the partnership and put into practice findings from current scholarship on staff-student collaborations.

CONTEXT

The project was funded by a 2019 internal university grant. FASS students were initially targeted as the primary beneficiaries of the project. However, colleagues and students from outside the faculty who have seen the videos indicated their potential broad application across the university. Several colleagues from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education) portfolio noted in 2020 that the "messages [transmitted via the videos] are very much aligned with the overall intent of the [university's] new pre-arrival program."(personal communication, January 28, 2020) Other colleagues from the Education Innovation portfolio found the resources of potential great benefit to the Chinese international student community and have facilitated ready access of the videos to colleagues across the university. Colleagues from the Student Transition and Retention (STAR) team are keen to incorporate the videos into the university orientation program.

**Project team**

Consideration was given to postgraduate/undergraduate equity in the composition of the project team and to gender equity. The team was comprised of the following members:

- Project lead: associate dean, student life, FASS
- Project manager: Media and Communications (MECO) academic
- Two postgraduate (PG) domestic student leaders enrolled in a MECO degree
- Two undergraduate (UG) domestic student leaders enrolled in a MECO degree
- Two PG Chinese international student leaders enrolled in FASS
- Three UG Chinese international student leaders enrolled in FASS and engineering
- Eight staff volunteer focus-group participants
- Ten international student volunteer focus-group participants
- One camera operator
- One female international MECO student (video anchor)

AIMS, OUTCOMES, AND IMPLEMENTATION: A PHASED APPROACH

**Aims**

The project involved as creation and design partners PG and UG Chinese international students, PG and UG domestic students studying MECO, academics, and professional colleagues. The project's principal aim was to educate staff and students and

resolve problems caused by widespread mismatched expectations about the Chinese international student community.

By engaging in a student-academic pedagogical partnership program, it was hoped that the project would facilitate relationship-building between academics and students and between international and domestic students and, in doing so, build connection and a sense of belonging to the university for newly enrolled international students.

One aim of the project was that, ideally, domestic students and academics would gain cultural competency through an increased understanding of their Chinese classmates/students. Furthermore, Chinese international students would gain a broader understanding of what challenges to expect upon arrival at the University, and how to overcome them. The transition experience for Chinese international students would thus be enhanced by accessing these videos, and domestic students starting university would learn how to be more socially inclusive with international students. Chinese international student success rates would potentially be improved through them having a better understanding of the university's expectations; this may lead to improved Chinese international student retention. Domestic and international students involved in the creation of the videos would potentially gain from working closely with staff and peers, acquiring practical skills in interpreting and translation, video production and editing, and enhancing their graduate qualities: critical thinking and problem solving; cultural competency; communication skills; inventiveness; integrated professional, ethical, and personal identity; and influence.

**Outcomes**

The tangible output of the project was the creation of two suites of sustainable multimedia resources (nine videos in total, each of approximately 3 minutes' duration). The videos identify challenges faced by Chinese international students studying at the university and potential solutions to these challenges; their titles reflect Smith and Khawaja's (2011) categorization of challenges faced by international students: educational challenges, sociocultural challenges, practical challenges, language challenges, and challenges due to discrimination.

Less tangible but equally important outcomes particularly relevant to this case study relate to the process of student-staff collaboration throughout the project. As defined by Cook-Sather et al. (2014), a partnership is reciprocal; if students involved in the project learnt much (e.g., project management, leadership, negotiation, professionalism) from academics, the reverse was also true, with academics gaining a better understanding of student perspectives and cultural differences. Increased student engagement and connection to the university was a further outcome evidenced by students' commitment throughout the year-long project.

**Implementation Phase 1 (January–March 2019)**

Phase 1 involved three steps. The first step was the appointment of a student video anchor, domestic and international student leadership team, and media-trained project manager. Students were recruited at an international student workshop; all students present were invited to submit an expression of interest.

In the second step, four international student leaders and one academic prepared questions for discussion during focus group sessions. Questions were categorized according to Smith and Khawaja's (2011) five domains of challenges.

The third step involved recruitment of a camera operator and student and staff volunteers to participate in three focus groups: UG international students, PG international students, and academics and professional staff with expertise in Chinese studies and/or experience in teaching or working with Chinese international students. Students were recruited via the international student workshop, by the university's Chinese Students' Association, and by word of mouth.

### Implementation Phase 2 (April–May 2019)

Phase 2 involved three steps. Firstly, three focus groups, each of 60 minutes' duration were implemented and filmed by MECO student leaders, to gather content for the videos. The focus groups were led by the international student video anchor, who posed questions and played a role like that to be played in the video series.

Focus group participants were firstly asked to identify challenges experienced by Chinese international students across Smith and Khawaja's (2011) five categories: language challenges, education challenges, socio-cultural challenges, practical challenges, and challenges due to discrimination. Secondly, participants were invited to suggest potential solutions to these challenges. Conversations were fluid with questions directed firstly to one participant, followed by interventions by other participants with opinions to voice. Student focus-group participants called upon their own learning experiences and that of their peers. Staff focus-group participants referred to their teaching experience and to scholarship in the field.

Step two involved the transcription of focus group data by international student leaders.

Step three involved the compilation and analysis of focus group data by academic team members.

### Implementation Phase 3 (July–December 2019)

Phase 3 involved four steps. Firstly, four volunteers from the academic and professional staff focus group were recruited to appear in the videos.

Secondly, all members of the project team were involved in designing, creating and editing the multimedia resources. Students collaborated with the project lead and the project manager, working on their own and in groups according to the task.

Thirdly, five Chinese international student partners used the focus group data to create their own scripts for Video Series 1, summarising the challenges and potential solutions according to Smith and Khawaja's (2011) five categories. Students discussed their script drafts with each other and with the project lead and project manager via email and face-to-face meetings, and edits were negotiated with a view to maintaining cultural and personal authenticity and with the intended audience in mind. The project lead and project manager created scripts for Video Series 2 for the academic staff volunteers based on research and focus group data. International student leaders translated the video scripts for Video Series 2 into Mandarin with a view to subtitling the videos in Mandarin.

Finally, the videos were filmed by MECO student partners under the guidance of the project manager, and the footage edited, initially by the MECO students, with the final edit conducted by the project manager and project lead. All videos followed a similar format (a single question posed and then answered at length) and were anchored by the same international MECO student. Video Series 1 (five videos) features the five Chinese international student leaders, each presenting one of the challenges specified by Smith and

Khawaja (2011). Video Series 2 (four videos; discrimination was excluded) features four academics who have lived in China, worked in Chinese educational institutions, or who teach significant numbers of Chinese students.

IMPACT

The multimedia resources developed as part of this partnership program have been received positively by the university's academics, professional colleagues, and students, who variously describe the videos as "excellent," "fantastic," and "fabulous." (personal communications, January-February, 2020) I presented the concept and initial findings at the 2019 Advance HE Teaching and Learning Conference (Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, UK) and was scheduled to present full findings at the 2020 Students Transitions, Achievement, Retention & Success (STARS) Conference in Australia; this was cancelled due to COVID-19. Dissemination of the videos to the university community has also been stymied by the impact of COVID-19; at the point of the pandemic's outbreak in March 2020, the university's focus turned to supporting students' immediate needs. Two years' later (at the time of writing), support services are now in place, and the university is looking to future international student enrolments for 2022.

The videos are available on the university YouTube site, (23,000 subscribers) as well as on the Education Innovation Teaching Resources Hub, which houses innovative teaching and learning strategies and resources available to the University's academic community. Series 2 videos, with a target audience of newly enrolled students, have been integrated into the university's 2022 pre-arrival, transition, and orientation programs.

Series 1 videos, aimed at staff who teach international students and domestic students who study with them, have been disseminated to colleagues via various university teaching support sites.

From a Students-as-Partners (SaP) perspective, I (the author) have maintained contact with some of the student partners in this project. The two international PG student leaders have graduated, as have two of the three UG student leaders. Although not explicitly stated by participants, the connections formed due to the project may be seen to contribute to a sense of belonging to the university and ultimately to the student participants' success at university.

KEY LEARNINGS AND INSIGHTS

### Successes

All participants reflected positively on their involvement. All professed to really enjoy being involved in the project, deriving great pleasure from working with academics, and several volunteered their involvement in future SaP projects.

The ground for student-staff partnerships had been prepared in the faculty by the student affairs and engagement team, which regularly employs students in paid part-time roles. The student voice is increasingly heard throughout the university, in part due to a 2016 policy obliging the inclusion of student representatives on all committees. This has resulted in progressively diminishing resistance to innovation across the university and a gradual redefinition of traditional roles and relationships; Bovill, Cook-Sather, Felten, Millard, and Moore-Cherry (2016) mention this challenge in their research on staff-student partnerships.

International student partners were thrilled to have a voice and have their opinions taken seriously by academics; being paid highlighted their perceived value of their contributions. Participating in a year-long project facilitated a sense of achievement and an increased sense of belonging and connection to the faculty and, by extension, to the university. They were delighted to share their experiences with others and in doing so improve the university experience for future international students. Their experiences reflect the findings of scholars researching the Chinese international student experience; see, for example, Arkoudis, Dollinger, Baik, and Patience (2019) for the Australian context and Smith and Khawaja (2011) and Heng (2019) for an international perspective. Thus, the aim of minimising misunderstandings and breaking down barriers between stakeholders was achieved.

Domestic student MECO partners were similarly happy to be involved in the project; the opportunity to be paid to contribute to a worthy project, practise their disciplinary craft, and learn from each other and from the MECO project manager was perceived as a very positive outcome.

### Challenges

The partnership project was a learning experience for everyone involved. Organisational aspects were time-consuming for the project lead and manager; university administrative constraints compounded this, due in part to blanket HR compliance processes that did not allow for differentiated rules for student employees.

Considerations around student equity also proved challenging; some students were paid, having participated in a selective Expression of Interest process, while others joined focus groups as volunteers. Gender equity was similarly difficult to obtain due to most participants—academic and student volunteers and domestic and international student leaders—being cisgender women. Bovill et al. (2016) and Cook-Sather et al. (2019) share their insights into student capacity for contribution; I found, as do these researchers, that time management is an issue for 21st-century students juggling their studies, part-time work, family, and leisure activities. Student contributions varied as well; project leaders found it difficult trying to balance allocation of an equal voice to all involved, whilst acknowledging that some contributions are more pertinent than others - and that some students are better suited to particular roles. Working through this process required and allowed for the development of negotiation and leadership skills as identified above by Cook-Sather et al. (2014) and Healey and Healey (2019): trust and respect, authenticity, honesty, and responsibility.

Further challenges involved the management of participant expectations and power dynamics, given that we were operating outside the traditional model of staff and student roles; this has been recognized as potentially problematic by other scholars, including Cook-Sather et al. (2019).

### Limitations

The project was limited by a potential lack of diversity of opinion due to the relatively small number of students and colleagues involved as either focus group participants or paid project members, as well as due to the predominance of women contributors. Furthermore, the aim of fostering better relationships between domestic and international students proved difficult to achieve in this project, as the two groups were often involved in separate tasks. However, international students had the opportunity

through their shared activities to develop closer relationships with each other and with academics and consequently developed a stronger connection to their faculty (Cook-Sather et al., 2019; Tran & Pham, 2017).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This project aimed to improve the student experience for domestic and international students at the university through the adoption of a student-staff partnership model. The multimedia resources produced are sustainable, authentic, and easily disseminated to a wide audience. The multimedia products will serve as a model for future SaP projects within the university and beyond. The experience was challenging but rewarding in terms of the quality of the final output, the strengthened relationships between participants, and the recognition that a formal partnership arrangement with students, given sufficient funding, has the potential to change institutional values, although this takes time. Regrets include not formally measuring student and staff perceptions at the project's conclusion and not seeking human research ethics approval at the commencement of the project; this would have expanded opportunities for publication of findings. My advice to colleagues wishing to embark on student-staff partnerships is to remain flexible; listen actively and encourage feedback throughout the project. Perhaps, as Johnston and Steward (2020) discovered in their project, "in the end, the experience of partnership and collaboration was . . . an end in itself" (p. 87).

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

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