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# The Volunteer Learning Support Scheme for International Students (VLSSIS)\*

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Students who study in a foreign country face challenges not necessarily faced by local students. It could be argued that although some of these challenges are not the responsibility of the local educational institution, they can have an impact on students' academic success and their enjoyment of the new environment. It is desirable for educational institutions to provide not only learning support to students, particularly international students, but also an adequate level of personal support. In this article, the authors outline the context, management and operation of the Volunteer Learning Support Scheme for International Students (VLSSIS) within the Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD) at the University of Adelaide in Adelaide, Australia, and discuss some of the learning and personal issues facing students studying and then working in a foreign country. Volunteers within VLSSIS have found that while there is great diversity among international students, certain common themes and issues relate to their past learning and cultural experiences. The volunteers' work aims to maximise students' success by offering them an informal learning situation in which they become more confident in all aspects of local language and culture, both within the University and beyond.

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## INTRODUCTION

Education is now an international business (in South Australia, international education is the fourth largest export exceeding A\$500 million per annum). The traditional concept of *bricks and mortar* institutions providing for the learning needs of local students has been replaced by an environment of global competition for students and for the provision of educational services. Students who study in a foreign country face challenges not necessarily faced by local students. It could be argued that some of these challenges are not the responsibility of the local educational institution: nevertheless they can have an impact on students' academic success and on enjoyment of their new

environment. As such, it is necessary for educational institutions to provide not only learning support to students and, especially international students, but also an adequate level of personal and cultural support. All students have expectations and these expectations need to be seriously considered by host institutions. However, international students may have some expectations that cannot readily be satisfied without cultural and operational change in the university.

Within the University of Adelaide in Adelaide, Australia, one development that has contributed significantly to addressing the repeatedly stated concerns of international students about their communication difficulties, is a programme provided by volunteers from the local community. This programme is run and administered by the Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD), which also offers learning and formal academic language support to all students. The volunteer programme specifically addresses international students' challenges in oral communication and cultural understanding. As one PhD

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student from Thailand put it, *I am a research student and do not have much chance communicating with English native speakers. Also, most of my friends are Asian students. It is hard to pick up our mistakes as long as we are understood. This limits my opportunities of improving my communication skills.* The main aims of the volunteer programme are to increase students' confidence in all areas of English communication competence and to extend their level of cultural awareness and understanding of Australian mores and attitudes. It is believed that through regular contact with a sympathetic and sensitive local person students are more able to make the most of their time in Australia both in their studies and in the wider community.

In this article, the authors outline the context, management and operation of the Volunteer Learning Support Scheme for International Students (VLSSIS) within the CLPD at the University of Adelaide. It was deemed appropriate to locate this programme within the CLPD as it is often during more formal academic programmes run by the CLPD that students voice their concerns about their informal language skills. In situations within their study area – meetings with staff, tutorial participation, telephone conversations and oral presentations, as well as chatting with local students – they find themselves lacking the ability to make themselves understood and to understand the local idiom. The programme aims to redress some of these difficulties through regular practice with a volunteer. There is an emphasis on students' meetings with volunteers being relaxed and enjoyable, aiming at minimising the pressure which students too often feel in their academic courses.

The programme operates separately from students' coursework or research. Students' partnerships with their volunteers thus offer an opportunity to explore issues confidentially. Students may request a CLPD volunteer at any stage of their studies. While academic staff may at times recommend students seek a volunteer, it is imperative that students themselves freely commit to this involvement. Volunteers within the VLSSIS assist students with general English language development and with understanding the context of the many challenges they face within the University and beyond. Accommodation difficulties, social situations and the workplace environment are examples of areas that students find daunting. Volunteers may also work with students to develop strategies and access resources to address these issues.

## VOLUNTEERING IN SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Australia has a well-established tradition of volunteering. Volunteers provide crucial support for community and emergency services, as well as for welfare, cultural

and educational organisations. Many of the more remote communities in Australia would not be viable but for volunteers providing local services such as ambulance and fire-fighting. In South Australia, the level of volunteering in the community is increasing. Surveys by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in 2000 for the Office for Volunteers showed that some 38% of the population were involved in formal volunteering activities (ie that done for an incorporated organisation, excluding voluntary work for one's family or neighbours; an incorporated organisation is one recognised in law, such as a company, a statutory authority, eg a university, or a not-for-profit organisation, eg a sporting body) and that this figure had increased in 2006 to 51% overall and 63% in rural areas. The increase in volunteering can be partly explained by the country's demographic profile, in particular the increasing retirement of those born between the years 1945 and 1950. These people are often well qualified and experienced, financially secure, physically active and in good health and want to contribute to the community in a different way. For others, volunteering can enhance personal and work skills and is increasingly seen as a pathway to employment.

Volunteering brings benefit to both the community and the individual volunteer. Mayer reviewed a number of research reports from around the world and concluded that high levels of volunteering have an inverse relationship to crime and a positive relationship to community health, education and economic growth [1]. Ironmonger concluded that South Australian volunteers donated an additional 11.5% of gross state product in 2000 compared to 7.8% in 1992 [2].

## Legal Implications

Volunteering has been encouraged by government in South Australia through legislation and the provision of infrastructure. A traditional concern of many people has been the possible liability in common law (in Australia, common law is based on what is *fair and reasonable* and is built on legal precedence, compared to legislative law based on an act of parliament) should they cause injury to a person, even if such injury was not intended. For example, a volunteer assisting students in a university may give a student incorrect or poor advice, and hence cause injury resulting in the student seeking redress in common law. The South Australian Volunteers Protection Act 2001, subject to certain conditions, provides:

*... protection to individual volunteers from personal liability for loss, injury or damage caused as a result of an act or omission on their part while undertaking volunteering*

*duties on behalf of an incorporated organisation* [3].

The incorporated organisation is not protected from liability and needs to embed such liability into its risk management processes by providing guidelines and training for volunteers and through relevant insurance.

### Management of Volunteers

While there are parallels between the management of paid employees and volunteers, there are also important differences. Paid employees are bound to the employing organisation through the wish to reliably earn an income and this may constrain their actions. A volunteer is not similarly constrained, but is quite free to disassociate from the organisation. Paid employees may be required or even directed to undertake some task consistent with their employment. Volunteers may be asked to undertake some task consistent with their accepted role, but it is their free decision as to whether they comply. Management respects individuals' right to choose their level of commitment. Promotion is usually irrelevant for volunteers although recognition and personal satisfaction are likely to be crucial. Work conditions must also be tailored to suit individuals. Techniques for managing an effective group of volunteers are different from those appropriate for paid employees, and require a very flexible and sensitive style of management.

### VOLUNTEERING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

The state of South Australia, with a population of about 1.6 million and a land area nearly three times that of Japan, has three universities. Less than 40 years after the founding of the colony of South Australia, the University of Adelaide was established in central Adelaide in 1874. The University is a medium-sized institution with about 15,000 EFT students including some 3,000 EFT on-shore international students, mostly from Asian countries including from China (37%), Malaysia (20%) and Singapore (14%) in 2005. It has a strong research history and, over the years, its staff and students have won a number of Nobel prizes.

The University of Adelaide has about 1,000 volunteers (about the same number as academic staff) involved in a wide range of activities including tour guides, archivists, theatre enthusiasts and radio station operators. While the University has a corporate approach to volunteers, including an accepted code of behaviour and occasions to recognise the contribution of volunteers, most groups of volunteers in conjunction

with paid staff are self-organising. This allows the groups of volunteers to function more as a family or informal partnership than a large organisational unit requiring more formal structures with greater overheads. Many volunteers have had a lifetime of working in large corporate organisations, and may now want to be involved in a simpler and more personal structure where they have a measure of autonomy and their contribution is very much *hands-on*. Younger volunteers also enjoy the opportunity to have their opinions valued and to take responsibility in a new area of expertise. Flexibility is a core principle for the management of the VLSSIS, with volunteers being encouraged to make all arrangements with their students to suit their mutual convenience.

Approximately 60 volunteers are associated with the CLPD, particularly with the VLSSIS. The CLPD provides formal professional development for academic and general staff, and learning support for both local and international students. The learning support is given through written guidelines, online services, individual tuition and group workshops. This combination of activities at the CLPD allows the learning issues of students, including those identified by the VLSSIS, to reflect directly into the professional development of staff. Advice and personal support to students is provided not by the CLPD, but by the International Student Centre, a separate operational unit within the University that operates in close cooperation with the CLPD.

VLSSIS volunteers come from a wide range of backgrounds with the fundamental requirement being a willingness to spend time with an international student to facilitate his/her transition into living and studying in Australia. Included in the volunteer group are a number of retired academics, business and professional people, workers and students from various areas in the University and others from the community, who fit their volunteer work in with their ongoing work commitments. Young and old are all welcome. Due to minimal funding, recruiting has also been minimal. The main source of new recruits is through *word of mouth* by other volunteers. A testament to the level of satisfaction of the volunteers is that there are a number of the original recruits from 1995 still working with students. Very few give up their volunteer work unless health or change of other circumstances demands it.

### INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Like most Australian universities, the University of Adelaide was originally developed to extend the education and training of local students. For some 100 years, there was little student movement between universities in various states of Australia, and what

there was tended to be for programmes not available in a particular state; veterinary science, for example, has never been offered in South Australia. With changes in government policy for universities encouraging greater choice, Australian students started to seek enrolment interstate, but this did not significantly change the established student profile of the universities.

About 10 years ago, and in response to reducing government funding, Australian universities started to market themselves to international students and have been successful in doing so. International students now make up a significant proportion of students at some universities, although universities tend to retain the characteristics developed to satisfy the needs of local students. Coming from a different learning culture and experience in their home countries, international students often do not share local students' expectations of university life. They may expect a higher integration of living, study and work.

Many international students have difficulties with the independent learning style required in Australia. Almost without exception, international students are intellectually capable, highly motivated and hard working, but in adapting to their new environment, they face a number of challenges. Despite their general success, some students are at risk due to their limited English language skills, lack of independent learning skills, and difficulty in understanding the Australian academic context and Western philosophy. Some international students have to pay their own fees and costs, and are under constant financial pressure. A proportion of graduating international students decide to work in Australia on the basis of either a working visa or permanent residency, and this decision creates a new range of issues that have to be addressed. Sometimes, unfortunately, their efforts are not successful.

In summary, many of the issues faced by international students are not the direct concern of a university, but may nevertheless seriously impact on students' learning, their enjoyment of time in Australia and their future. It is quite evident that, as well as dealing with the daunting task of undertaking studies in a foreign country, many students suffer from isolation, limited understanding of Australian university culture and difficulties in dealing with the wider community.

## **VOLUNTEER LEARNING SUPPORT SCHEME FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS (VLSSIS)**

### **Development and Management**

The VLSSIS was developed in 1995 by the co-author and was partly based on earlier experiences with English

language services for adult migrants. International students share many of the same *culture shock*, language and settling-in difficulties. As the Australian Government-funded volunteer scheme for newly arrived migrants had proved so successful in helping the settlement process, it was decided to tailor a similar programme to the University's international students. Despite their relatively competent English, students repeatedly asked for assistance in communicating with local people.

With the help of a small equity grant, the programme was established with 25 volunteers working with some 40 students. Over the years, many hundreds of students have benefited. In 2006, the number of volunteers had grown to 60. People are recruited from the general community and given some briefing on their role and responsibilities. At all times, it is emphasised that the programme is intended to be flexible, concentrate on informal communication and attempt to meet the expressed needs of the students. Shared activities with volunteers is intended to help mitigate the high level of stress that many students experience in undertaking their formal studies. The qualities required of volunteers are an interest in people from other cultures, some understanding of the local tertiary education system, and a willingness to meet regularly with an international student and form an ongoing relationship.

The VLSSIS receives very low funding of about A\$5,000 per annum, which is adequate to coordinate the group of about 60 volunteers, many of whom are mature and experienced. The group is managed using relatively informal procedures relying very much on goodwill and an extremely high level of commitment from participants – both students and volunteers. Each partnership is encouraged to operate autonomously and may continue as long as the student requires. One student from Japan reported,

*I have known [my volunteer] for six years. When we started meeting, my English was very poor. However, she has been really patient with me and I am sure that my English (written and spoken) would never have improved without her. I cannot express my gratitude to her enough. What we did in our sessions, whether conversations or discussion of my work, led me to this achievement of my PhD.*

Unfortunately, not all international students who want to be involved with the VLSSIS can be accommodated, and there is a demonstrated need to expand beyond the present group of volunteers. Given the University's alumni and community support, it is likely



that the number of volunteers could be increased without too much difficulty. Obviously, additional funding would be required and, more importantly, a more formal management approach would become necessary, which would increase per capita overheads. Increased formality may result in the loss of some volunteers, most of whom want to maximise their interaction with the international students. They may not support a more formal approach by management.

Intending volunteers apply to the CLPD for membership and are required to thoroughly understand their role and responsibilities, including the code of conduct. A commitment by volunteers of at least 1½ hours per fortnight is required. A teaching or professional background is not required but flexibility, cultural understanding and sensitivity are important. Some initial training is provided to volunteers, and regular group meetings provide an opportunity to share information and experiences. Volunteers and the coordinating lecturer are in regular contact and the coordinating lecturer periodically surveys international students seeking their feedback. Difficulties between a volunteer and a student can arise, mostly through language or cultural misunderstanding. These issues are usually minor and easily addressed through mutual goodwill. At all times, the coordinator is available to assist or manage any questions or issues between students and volunteers.

### Conversation Class

VLSSIS volunteers are involved with international students in two main ways. Firstly, some volunteers and CLPD academic staff meet with international students once a week at a conversation class. Students may attend regularly or when their other commitments allow them some time. As with all the activities involving CLPD volunteers, it is considered most important that students can relax and benefit from the informal learning atmosphere offered by the volunteers.

The conversation group usually focuses on a particular topic that relates to most students – ideally, these topics are suggested by students themselves. Talk is often oriented to cultural and social practices. Discussion may include food, public holidays and social events, as well as situations that may cause dismay like group-work participation, accommodation problems, difficulties with neighbours and job-seeking. As people get to know each other, trust grows and communication is enhanced. A student from China noted, *after meeting for some time I find I can speak confidentially which makes me feel more confident and free to speak to others.*

Each student is encouraged to talk about their own experiences, and to gain some appreciation of the

cultural and social practices of other countries. To a large degree, the learning opportunity is a confidence-building exercise. Students often believe that their problems arise from a lack of language skills, but a range of other issues may, in fact, be more important and suggestions can be made as to how these issues can be addressed. Volunteers can provide a valuable link between international students and the general community, and students can ask a wide range of questions in a non-threatening environment, for example how to decline an offer politely, how to cook a particular dish or how a particular incident is interpreted by Australians and those from other cultures.

There is a lot of *fun* in the discussions, especially as students start to become aware of Australian humour and idiom. Students participate in these meetings with considerable enthusiasm and constantly comment on their value in helping them to understand students from other countries, including those countries with different political or economic viewpoints. As well, students regularly comment on the great benefit of having *Aussie* volunteers to give them opportunities to listen to and appreciate the local idiom and points of view. One Malaysian student commented: *Australians like to keep their words short and sweet. Their speaking is hugely different from what we learnt in our home countries. I can't learn this from formal lessons.* Students have often said, *I can now participate better in tutorials and group-work activities.*

### Volunteers with Individual Students

The second way that volunteers support international students is by meeting one or more of them on an individual basis, usually for one hour a week. International students apply to have an individual volunteer and the coordinating lecturer attempts to match the profile of the student with that of a volunteer. In general, international students are expected to first attend the conversation class for several weeks so that the coordinating lecturer can assess their language skills and needs, and the student has an opportunity to meet and understand the volunteers' role. While the primary function of the volunteer and individual student in meeting is to practise general informal English conversation, there are occasions when an international student requests a volunteer who is familiar with their particular field of study, perhaps *History of Western Art* or *Astrophysics*. The coordinator attempts to satisfy such requests and often a suitable, possibly new, volunteer can be found. In other cases, a volunteer may be learning a foreign language and can be linked with a student who is a native speaker of that language. This creates a very rewarding situation for both.

At times, a volunteer will be matched with a student sharing the same discipline. The main concern of the coordinator is to facilitate a harmonious working partnership that fosters ease of communication. Feedback from students has repeatedly stressed the value of the friendships they form with their volunteers. *We are not just student and volunteer*, a student from China said, *we regard each other as good friends*. Another said, *the most useful outcome for me is to make a good friend in a foreign country*.

The first few meetings between a volunteer and student are critical in building a successful relationship. Mutual respect is the key to the interaction. The meetings between the volunteer and student are voluntary, and both parties must understand that they are free to terminate the arrangement. Once a comfortable relationship has been established, it then usually continues for the academic year before being reviewed. The overwhelming majority of students wish to continue meeting with their respective volunteer the following year.

There is considerable diversity in the profiles of VLSSIS volunteers working with individual international students. Volunteers and students quickly develop their particular arrangements; some read together, some talk about cultural and social matters, while others go shopping or share other activities. Meeting places are also diverse – some meet on campus, in the city, at home as they get to know each other, or in broader group activities like bushwalking. Volunteers encourage students to take the initiative within their interaction and this in itself is a learning experience for those students from cultures where it would be usual to defer to the older or more experienced person. It is not the role of the volunteer to directly assist students with their studies, although most students want to talk about new words that they do not understand or issues and ideas associated with their studies. A volunteer may be well informed in the area that the student is studying and there is no reason why the student should not access that knowledge as from any other information source.

It is recognised that there is the possibility of conflict between volunteers working with international students and academic staff, especially supervisors of research students. The experience of the co-author has been quite the opposite and he has always been warmly greeted by academic staff, who acknowledge the valuable complementary role of volunteers.

There are a number of support mechanisms available within the University for international students and volunteers may direct students to these services as needed. Many international students find it difficult to accept that there are staff employed by the University to advocate on their behalf and students may be

suspicious of such services. Most students readily accept their volunteer, suggesting that they should talk with a specific person about an issue or accompanying them to meetings in an independent support role.

Having agreed to work with a particular student introduced by the coordinator, the co-author has found it useful to establish some initial communication with the student through e-mail if they have not already met at a conversation class. International students often find meeting and face-to-face conversation with a stranger, particularly one who is older and more experienced, quite difficult at first. An e-mail exchange of some personal information and a photo helps them to feel more comfortable.

Volunteers develop their own set of objectives for their relationship with an individual student. For the co-author, these are that the student is academically successful, enjoys their time in Australia, has cultural experiences not otherwise possible, develops an international network and obtains professional employment if they decide to stay in Australia. Likewise the co-author has set rules for meetings with international students. They agree to meet for two weeks and then in order to decide whether to continue with their arrangement; they will wait for each other for up to 15 minutes after the agreed meeting time in case either has been delayed for some reason; when they meet, the student can talk or ask about anything they like. The student is also free to e-mail the co-author and may do this several times a week, and the student is also able to phone at any time if there is an urgent need. As stated, each volunteer and student create their own parameters.

## Feedback

The CLPD coordinating lecturer regularly surveys those international students participating in the VLSSIS, and holds regular meetings and maintains frequent contact with volunteers. The feedback from international students is overwhelmingly positive: *thanks for giving me this precious chance* is a repeated refrain. The comments include common themes like appreciating the opportunity to have contact with an encouraging local person, learning new words and expressions, and understanding Australian culture. As a result of their positive experiences with the VLSSIS, some become volunteers themselves, either in the CLPD programme or as *peer greeters*, who meet and welcome new international students. Some also express the wish to set up something similar in their home countries. Volunteers are frequently invited to their students' graduations and other special events, and many international graduates maintain contact with their

volunteer for years after they return to their home country. Students clearly enjoy being in a reciprocal partnership where they are offering something valuable too.

Volunteers comment on the opportunity to learn about other countries and cultures, and to be intellectually stimulated. There is also the satisfaction of sharing with international students as they grow academically and personally. Volunteers also stress the value of being helped to view their own society through the eyes of an outsider. Volunteers in the programme can use their experience as a valuable asset in their CVs for new jobs. Several student volunteers now work as English teachers overseas.

## INTERNATIONAL STUDENT ISSUES

### Living and Culture

Many international students have not previously been away from their families, let alone overseas before. To come to a foreign country with a foreign language and culture, and to survive without the support of their extended families is certainly a new and challenging experience. International students come with expectations based on their previous social context and learning, and these unfortunately may not be applicable or relevant in Australia. Likewise, they are often amused that Australians have concerns or interests that seem absurd; an Australian's idea of heavy vehicle traffic may be quite different from theirs.

A large number of international students adapt to the new unfamiliar living environment within a few weeks in spite of adverse incidents and setbacks, such as cars driving in the opposite direction or not finding their favourite foods. For others, it is an exasperating experience. They lose confidence and do not know what to do, and unless there is some intervention, for example by a VLSSIS volunteer, they may well face failure. Family and social expectations of success add to their anxiety. Some undergraduate students are personally immature and the VLSSIS volunteer may almost become a *de facto* parent. One student from Vietnam said about her volunteer, *she gives me a good feeling as when I am with my aunty*. It is made clear to volunteers though that they choose exactly the level of involvement that suits them. At all times there are resources available to both student and volunteer to smooth the way through difficulties.

Many international students tend to live with others from their own country, which is quite understandable. However, such arrangements can be counterproductive, restricting their language development and broader experiences. Regular contact with a volunteer helps alleviate these limitations and offers

friendship, as well as language and cultural extensions. After spending time with her volunteer, one student from China said *I now know more about the people's life-style, what they usually do, where they usually go and so on. I feel myself closer to the country, to the city and to the people here through our time together. And, I receive many suggestions about my study and life-style. It is very helpful for me during [any] critical moments*, reported a student from Bangladesh.

As would be expected, international students often cannot assess risk in their new environment and may place themselves in considerable danger. Sometimes, their new found freedom results in inappropriate behaviour like gambling, or they do not realise that the car that they bought for A\$500 is not roadworthy under local law. These pitfalls and many others are minimised by sharing everyday conversation with volunteers, who can often offer a different perspective on a situation. In serious cases, University staff personnel may be called in to assist.

### English Language Proficiency

International students are required to have a prescribed level of English language proficiency before enrolment and some are required to undertake additional English courses as a condition of enrolment. Research students undertake a preliminary programme that further enhances their English skills. Even though students from some countries, such as Malaysia and Singapore, usually have very competent English language skills, there are still issues related to *Australian English* with its particular accent, idiom and style.

It often takes about 12 to 18 months for a student to become confident in conversational English. They usually make rapid progress once they start to think in English rather than mentally translating into their native language. Discussing the translation issue with their volunteer usually reduces their anxiety about not being able to quickly perfect conversation skills. Spoken English is not consistent between English speaking countries, which is confusing for students who believe that they have been previously taught the *correct* English, perhaps by a British or American teacher. The Australian idiom is particularly difficult for international students. International students are often overly concerned about their pronunciation, and sometimes assistance is necessary to help them with certain sounds and words, for example those words beginning with *w*, *z* or *y*. In all these areas of language acquisition, the ongoing relationship with a volunteer can help to increase greatly the student's confidence and competence in day-to-day exchanges. A

Japanese student commented: *When I could not find a correct word I used to give up. Now I try to find another way. The change is because my volunteer always encourages me. She always has a sense of humour.*

In students' writing, their problems may be more about structure and argument than the actual English words. Some students base their writing on the simplistic style of newspapers rather than referring to learned journals and texts. Problems include difficulties with grammar, critical analysis, plagiarism and referencing. Learning support staff at the CLPD provide assistance on these matters. At times, students try to write their assignments in their native language and then translate into English. This is quite unsatisfactory. In spite of their convenience, translating dictionaries are not adequate and a reputable English dictionary is essential. Volunteers can assist by encouraging students to refer to their dictionaries as they confront new words in their conversations. If the volunteer is willing, students share their written draft copies during their time together, but the emphasis is always to be on spoken communication. Most students develop sufficient written language skills during a higher degree to present an acceptable thesis although perhaps with some editorial assistance. This is not the responsibility of VLSSIS volunteers, although they may choose to be involved to some degree. Students are reminded that their volunteers are not intended to be editors.

## Learning Skills

The main difficulty that students have to overcome is that the current learning style in Australia is very independent, and students are expected to research subject matter and to develop their own arguments; lecturers expect students to be independent thinkers. Some international students would not usually challenge a lecturer over an issue – even if the lecturer has made an error. In their previous academic experience, many international students have been taught that lecturers should be always correct and always know the answer. Likewise, there is a tendency for students to think that they have to know everything in the course and do each assignment or presentation perfectly. This puts the student under great pressure, causing them to study for long hours to the detriment of their health and without improvement in their academic results. Initially, students are often disturbed when lectures do not follow the sequence of chapters in a textbook, when the solution to some problem is not obvious or when there is missing or conflicting data. Likewise, initial examination results are often poor because students are not familiar with examination techniques in Australia and under the

pressure of an examination, find new techniques difficult to implement. Students in the sciences and engineering are at an advantage compared to those in the humanities. The basic language and tenets of science, mathematics and engineering are common throughout the world, but Western philosophy underlying much of the humanities presents significant challenges to Asian students. In addition, language in the humanities is much more complex than in the sciences, and to effectively read and fully understand sophisticated arguments are formidable tasks.

Another common learning difficulty for international students is effective participation in tutorial work. This is evident especially where tutorial group participants are not yet sensitive to the limited language skills of some group members. In some fields, tutors are often postgraduate students towards the end of their candidature and may have English language limitations of their own, as well as limited skills in managing group dynamics. Volunteers can encourage international students to develop a few simple techniques based on group responsibility to enable their full participation and benefit other group members. These characteristics are also facilitated at the weekly conversation group sessions with volunteers. Students can practise their language and presentation skills as well as actively engage with other students.

Most students, local and international, experience considerable anxiety in preparing a seminar presentation and despite good guidelines regarding the *mechanics*, they do not appreciate the communication process. International students have the additional worry that they might mispronounce a word and find it difficult to accept the advice that should this occur, and it will, just to continue as if nothing has happened.

The majority of international students graduate despite all the issues and challenges of living and studying in a foreign environment. Intelligence and persistence wins through. VLSSIS volunteers consider it a privilege to be part of their students' success.

## Mixing and Conversation

A university provides an opportunity for students of different backgrounds to mix and learn from each other. However, for a number of reasons, international and local students often do not mix to any extent, and do not utilise the opportunity to broaden their perspectives and develop networks.

Many international students share accommodation with others from their own country and, while this provides friendship and security, it does not encourage English language development or skills in social interaction in an unfamiliar situation. It takes some



practice by both international and local students to develop successful conversation skills, and to be comfortable in saying more than *hello* to a person they do not know. However, in these days of global business, this is a critical skill in networking. Again, practising conversation *openers* with a sympathetic volunteer can benefit international students.

In some university programmes, international students are in a minority and may be excluded from already established groups of local students, who may not be aware of their behaviour. Sometimes, too, local students feel as shy as the international newcomers. In other programmes, such as coursework Masters' programmes, there may be many more international students than local students and again this can deter social mixing. It is important that academic staff take every opportunity to encourage the mixing of international and local students by managing interaction in tutorial and laboratory work, and in research groups. In the future, it may be possible for volunteers to be included in some of these learning situations to facilitate better working exchanges.

## Employment

Many international students need to work part-time to support living and studying in Australia. After graduating, a number decide to stay in Australia for several years to gain work experience whereas others decide to make Australia their home through seeking permanent residency.

Many graduates are unprepared for the market-economy driven Australian workplace. Gaining an understanding of the nature of the workplace, the need for networks, the need for initiative, flexibility and adaptability, the need to package and market oneself, the development of job applications, preparing for, and performing well in, an interview, negotiating workplace agreements, work-performance reviews, and becoming familiar with workplace laws and regulations are all additional challenges. International graduates need support and their former VLSSIS volunteer is often the person they turn to. Not all graduates are successful in gaining employment in Australia; some become underemployed, some retrain into an entirely different field while some others return to their native country.

## Adapting on Return Home

While some international graduates remain in Australia and eventually become Australian citizens, most return to their home country and again need to adapt. Even if they have been in Australia for

only one or two years, they will find that they, their families and their society have all changed. When they return to their homelands, many feel alienated, if only for a short period, just as they felt when they first came to Australia. They may find that elderly relatives have died, siblings have left home and their former friends have left the area or are now married with children. In addition, the social and economic conditions of their home country may have changed, especially in those countries in rapid development.

Most international graduates report that they have lost fluency in their native language while in Australia and tend to mix a few English words into their initial conversations. Their thinking has become Australian and while this may continue for only a few weeks or months, it can generate family disappointment. Some report that they have lost employment opportunities and promotion while in Australia, and experience initial difficulties in finding suitable employment. Unfortunately, a few feel that they cannot reintegrate, return to Australia or move to a third country to begin a new life.

## CONCLUSIONS

The VLSSIS has been successfully operating for 12 years at low cost. In that time, the VLSSIS has been able to assist many hundreds of international students by supporting their learning through language development, and sharing cultural and social information. Feedback from students clearly shows their appreciation of the personal support provided by volunteers. A 2006 Chinese student commented that his volunteer helped him *to balance my study and my life. I would appreciate if you give every international student this cherished chance*. Some students have graduated where they might otherwise have failed, while others have achieved high distinction rather than more limited success. Feedback from volunteers has confirmed that they enjoy their involvement, which adds to their own cultural experiences. Along with other volunteers, the VLSSIS forms a link between the University and the community to the mutual benefit of both. The relationship between an international graduate and their VLSSIS volunteer does not always cease with graduation, but can continue after students return to their home countries or after they enter the Australian workplace.

The VLSSIS aims to contribute to international understanding and the mutual acceptance of people in the current global environment. A Thai student reflected: *I think this programme is one of the strategies to create strength in society*.

## REFERENCES

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## BIOGRAPHIES



Josephine Sando has been Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) since the early 1970s. In that time, she has worked in tertiary institutions in Australia, Sweden, Taiwan and the Solomon Islands. Since 1994, she has been employed by the University of Adelaide and has

taught in a wide range of academic English programmes for international students. At present, she

is a lecturer in the Centre for Learning and Professional Development (CLPD) and coordinator of the CLPD Volunteer Learning Support Scheme for International Students (VLSSIS), which now involves 60 volunteers. The VLSSIS is an enterprise that has given her a great deal of satisfaction.



Ron Seidel holds a degree in electronic engineering and postgraduate qualifications in computer science and education. He has had some 40 years of experience in teaching engineering and in educational management.

Formerly the Executive Manager of the Faculty of Engineering at Regency Institute and now retired, he has been a volunteer in Volunteer Learning Support Scheme for International Students (VLSSIS) at the University of Adelaide for six years, working with mostly postgraduate international students on a group and an individual basis. Based on his experiences in the VLSSIS and in the broader engineering community, his present research interest relates to issues facing international graduates in obtaining professional employment in Australia.