THE VALUE OF INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS TO CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA

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INTRODUCTION

This paper argues that the presence of international students with the potential to promote cultural diversity and ensure sustainability in market share to universities is not being valued and explored in regional Australia. While some recognition is given to the economic benefits of the international student phenomenon to Australia, there is a reluctance to promote community engagement, which will not only enhance cultural diversity in regional Australia, but will also satisfy the personal and professional goals of visiting students, and ensure sustainability in market share for regional universities. The paper discusses community engagement as a mechanism that creates value to enhance cultural diversity with direct and indirect benefits for visiting students, local communities and universities as key stakeholders.

Under the Colombo Plan which granted scholarships as aid to developing nations between 1950 and 1985, overseas students were valued for their contribution to promoting cultural diversity and the development of lasting friendships with local Australians (Cameron 2010; Lane 2009). By contrast today, many international students express dissatisfaction with the lack of contact they currently experience with locals (Marginson 2012b), and they perceive themselves as valued only for their money (Trounson 2012a). The over commercialisation of the international education sector plus its recent rapid growth and succeeding decline in student traffic and revenue from 2006 to 2011, have prompted calls for a new paradigm to meet the Asian Century (Marginson 2012a) and a recognition of "the huge significance of the flow of young people, knowledge, experience and values" (Zegeras, 2012, p.23). As decline in enrolments lingers, the search for a new model remains a necessity (Hare 2012).

Adding to the sector's woes, Australia's export model faces a threatening storm (Gallagher and Garrett 2012b) from its global competitors requiring reliance on other motivations apart from money (IEAC 2012). These realities place more fiscal pressures on regional institutions to make up their funding deficits than their urban counterparts (Ross 2012), as well as to sustain their share of the market (Lawley, Matthews and Fleischman 2009). This paper takes the premise that regional universities are well placed to explore the potential to promote cultural diversity through innovation, including community engagement to afford them a competitive advantage and to sustain their share of the market.

POTENTIAL

Despite having only less than 1 per cent of the world's population, Australia has outclassed its major international education competitors in gaining over 7 per cent of the global market share (Cameron 2010). Four out of five of these students are from Asia with China and India together representing 40 per cent of the total number of Asian students in 2011 (Evans 2012). Yet, the potential of visiting students to promote cultural diversity in regional Australia remains unexplored. Whilst visiting students bring a level of cultural diversity to Australia, this diversity is often missing in regional centres compared to urban centres (Lee and Yiping 2008). Consequently, many rural communities are deprived of the richness of firsthand experience in cultural diversity among them (Otten 2003; Trounson 2010); and "a major

strategic opportunity" (Gallager and Garrett 2012a, p.33) is lost while these visitors remain isolated on university campuses.

The fact that Australia's economic future is inextricably linked with Asia makes it imperative that closer relations be fostered and not feared (Fitzgerald 2012). This paper maintains that the presence of visiting students provides valuable opportunities to develop such relations in regional Australia. But there remains a reluctance to take advantage of these opportunities.

RELUCTANCE

The reluctance to explore cultural diversity has been variously described: e.g. "a legacy of neglect' (Quiddington 2009), missed opportunity (Ed geworth & Eiseman 2007; Thomas, 2012), a failure to value overseas students as people (Marginson 2010), treating them as marketable and goods to be traded (Trounson 2012a; Kell et al 2008 p.11), and a lack of initiative (Lee and Yiping 2008), In addition, some visiting students perceive themselves as marginalised (Kell et al 2008), and there are concerns over community attitudes toward them. For instance, it is argued that despite the desire for closer ties with Asia and the willingness to adapt to numerous changes to facilitate the export market, social changes have been on hold (Brown 1996). A further criticism is not only Australia's disregard for its Asian geography (Broinowski 1992), but also that it maintains "an inferior copy of the Anglo-Atlantic countries" (Marginson 2012c, p.20), which has been described as "cloaked acts of colonialism" (EduWorld 2012, p.16).

According to Australian Human Rights Commission (2010 p.3), "evidence suggests that some students, particularly those from non-European and non-English speaking backgrounds, experience multiple forms of discrimination in the broader community, including racial hatred and violence." Given such evidence, the Australian Human Rights Commission has launched new guidelines to address the safety and wellbeing of international students (AHRC 2012). The issue of race has also been identified with the recent decline in student flows from Asia. This decline caused a drop in revenue from $17.7 billion in 2009 to $15 billion in 2011 (Marginson 2012a). This has meant the loss of 27,000 jobs including 7,300 in the education sector (Hare 2012). Despite these negative developments, most regional universities have been slow to respond innovatively by engaging their overseas students with host communities, which a key component of internationalisation, the rhetoric to which they espouse.

Recognised as the third wave in international education, internationalisation remains a problematic theory, not only in terms of the lack of agreement on its definition (Marginson 2012c), but also in its slow pace to meet the demands of the Asian Century (Ziguras 2012). Internationalisation has been variously described as the expansion to stability (Quiddington, 2009), efforts beyond recruitment (Todd and Nesdale 1997; IDP 1995; Ziguras 2012), focus on sustainability, diversity, quality…and social outcomes (Healy 2008); "deep cooperation and collaboration, focussing on achieving mutual benefits for all" (IEAC 2-12, p.5), as well as the ability to communicate interculturally and to view the world from Asian perspectives (Marginson 2012c). In addition, internationalisation refers to "integrating international perspectives into the curriculum and in learning-teaching, the deepening of interactions between international and domestic students, and greatly increasing the proportion of Australian students who spend time studying abroad" (Moodie 2009, p.26). There is also the concept of improving the experience of visiting students and providing services to them (Denton and Bowman 2011). However, despite efforts to promote internationalisation, universities have mainly used rhetoric while the sector remains dominantly focused to the trade paradigm (Moodie 2009).

Notwithstanding the problem of definition, this paper draws upon the features of improving the experience of visiting students through "deeper cooperation and collaboration, focussing on achieving mutual benefit for all" (IEAC 2-12, p.5). These key features of

internationalisation articulate the promotion of community engagement to enhance the value of international students to cultural diversity in regional Australia to meet the Asian Century, which will be briefly discussed.

Asian Century

As the wave of internationalisation meets the tide of the Asian Century, Australia faces the challenge of preparedness either to lead, follow, or lag behind (EduWorld 2012), which will depend in no small way on Australia's knowledge of Asian cultures. While experts ponder the response of government and businesses to bolster Asian cultural literacy (East Asia Forum 2012), it is feared that there is much to lose if Australia ignores to seize the opportunities (Callick 2012). This paper maintains that regional universities are poised to play a significant role to explore these opportunities. But owing to the lack of an integrated and holistic strategy (Rowbotham 2012), there exists a prevailing gap in action.

If Australia's regional institutions refuse to fill the gap, they run the risk of lagging behind in sustaining their share of the market in the face of an increasingly competitive market. Australia's international competitors are well aware that by the year 2030 two-thirds of the world's middle classes will reside in the Asia Pacific region (mostly in China and India) with a spending power of $55 trillion (KPMG 2012). With the recent rise and fall in the Australian market, mentioned above, it is evident that universities face a crisis of confidence (Healy 2010), and instead of focusing so much on selling education, there's a need for Australia to sell itself (Trounson 2012b). One opportune means for selling regional Australia is for regional institutions to add value to their international students "to develop the leadership skills they covet by telling us about their countries" (Gallagher and Garrett 2012a, p.33). That is why community engagement is so necessary.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

There exists a paucity in the literature concerning international student experience in rural universities (Edgeworth and Eiseman 2007; Lawley, Matthews and Fleischman 2009). It appears that few institutions invest in community engagement (Honeywood 2012). Consequently, there are apparent gaps concerning the roles different stakeholders play in facilitating community engagement. This raises questions such as, "Who is responsible to promote community engagement? Is it the university, the community, or the student? Such questions are crucial to any community engagement initiatives. Whilst there is some community engagement research from the university and student perspectives, e.g. as a marketing tool (Fleischman, Lawley and Raciti 2010), there remains a dearth of studies from the host community's perspective (Bruning, McGrew and Cooper 2006). In addition to the theoretical deficit in the literature, there is also a lack of evidence in practice. One study found that 80% of international students at a rural institution had not participated in any community engagement except for some who attended local churches (Lee and Yiping 2008).

The notion of university community engagement is expressed in terms of "a life-changing experience, both for the students and the communities in which they live and interact" (IEAC 2012, p.12). The value of community engagement is that it connects universities with their communities (Arden and Cooper 2007 26). Fleischman, Lawley and Raciti (2010 p.4) construct this limited, but useful definition:

> "The mutual creation of knowledge and value networks on a personal and professional level, via international student involvement and participation in unique university facilitated community experiences; which enriches the international student experience, assimilates local and global cultures, and yields superior value for the student, the university and the community."

For Fleischman et al, community engagement is conceptualised as value co-creation. From a marketing perspective they argue, "…value co-creation is the joint creation of value in a collaborative effort by the supplier and the consumer… not only is the aim to co-create value between the supplier (universities) and the customer (international students), but also the community, as they are three salient stakeholders." The following table offers community engagement as a mechanism to co-create value. Table 1 outlines the essence of value co-creation in the context of community engagement:

Table 1 – Value Co-creation and Community Engagement

What Value Co-Creation Is Not	What Value Co-Creation Is	Value Co-Creation-Community Engagement Nexus
Customer focus	Joint creation of value by the company and customer – not the firm trying to please the customer	Creating competitive advantage via co-creating unique community opportunities for international students to participate in
Customer is king/always right	Allowing the customer to co-construct the service experience to suit her context	Working with different types of international students and being aware that each student seeks different types of community engagement opportunities; thus, different roles/levels of facilitation need to occur by the university.
Delivering good customer service or pampering the customer with value	Joint problem definition and problem solving	International liaison committee discussing and collaborating on issues and solutions that better link international students to the community – in turn co-creating value for all stakeholders
Mass customization of offerings that suit the industry's supply chain	Creating an experience environment in which consumers can have active dialogue and co-construct personalized experiences; product/service may be the same but customers can construct different experiences	Understanding that all international students are actively participating in education as a service, but what makes the education experience unique is encouraging dialogue between the university and the student as to what they are interested in the community. This dialogue might take the form of feed forward, concurrent and feedback controls, facilitating the construction of unique experiences.
Transfer of activities from the firm to the customer as in self-service	Experience varied	Facilitating a plethora of community experiences.
Customer as product manager or co-designing products and services	Experience one	The university understanding that some students may be able to (sic) initiate community engagement on their own, only relying on the university to facilitate some initial contact on a single occasion and then step out of the way – only stepping in (sic) to facilitate if the need is communicated by the student.

Product variety	Experiencing the business as consumers do in real time	The university looking at the international student experience from the student perspective.
Segment of one	Continuous dialogue	Purposeful communication facilitated by the university and practiced on a level to correspond to various students' desires.
Meticulous market research	Co-constructing personalized experiences	Understanding the uniqueness of each student's individual needs via working with them to construct their needs.
Staging Experiences	Innovating experience environments for new co-creation experiences	Comprehending and constructing new community experiences based on reciprocated dialogue and feed between students and the community.
Demand side innovation for new products and services	Not applicable	Not applicable

Source: Adapted from Prahalad and Ramaswamy (2004, p. 8) In Fleischman, et al 2010.

Fleischman et al (2010, p.6) highlight three significant points of value co-creation in Table 1. The first is "joint creation of value" involving the mutual collaboration of the stakeholders in community engagement. The second is "continuous dialogue" involving the supplier as facilitator to uncover what the stakeholders require. And the third, "value creation experiences" that are appropriate to the unique needs of the customer. From this model regional universities may construct meaningful strategies to facilitate life-changing experiences through the interaction of international students with regional communities that produce real value for cultural enrichment and mutual benefit to the tripartite stakeholders involved.

DISCUSSION

A few salient points from the above table will frame this discussion: The first is that by co-creating opportunities for international students to connect with communities, regional universities will be creating a competitive advantage for themselves. Second, because each student is different and has different needs, the institution works collaboratively with students to establish their particular needs. Third, the community engagement process requires setting up an international liaison committee to discuss and collaborate issues to link students with the host communities. This allows for dialogue between the students and the university to uncover their interests in the community. Fourth, the university acts as a facilitator to understand, and construct new experiences for students through dialogue as well as through feed forward or feedback of students and communities.

Because communities in rural Australia will increasingly be exposed to the presence of overseas students as regional universities expand, such exposure will increase the potential for producing direct and indirect benefits through cultural contact through engagements.

These direct benefits to regional communities will include the development of trade links with Asia (Lang 2012) where there is a high demand for Australia's major commodities of "natural resources, education, tourism, and agriculture" (Australian Government 2011, p.11). For the students, community engagement will assist them to develop their own personal and professional goals in areas such as English proficiency, Australian business and cultural nuances. For the universities, it will secure a competitive advantage as they provide a total value creation experience for international students. In doing so, they will ensure

sustainability in markets of Asia, as satisfied alumni advertise to prospective customers of their institutions' good reputation. The exposure of international students will also yield indirect benefits to include growth in cultural intelligence for the communities, as visiting students share their cultural capital. These involve social cohesion of family, respect for seniors, knowledge of Asian lifestyles and cultures, and a thirst for knowledge about Australia. Communities will be able to learn to value diversity in developing global social and economic networks lacking in urban cities compared to metropolitan cities (Lee and Yiping 2008).

With the rise of the Asian Century furthering Australia's significance and competitive edge in international education (Lang 2012), it is clear that the number of international students will continue to escalate exceedingly (Forbes and Hamilton 2004; Evans 2012). Such developments will accelerate pressure on urban universities and further expand the flow of visiting students to regional centres of learning. International students will be able to achieve their personal and professional goals, as well as develop positive attitudes towards Australians as were formed during the Colombo Plan years. This is the challenge for regional institutions. However, through cooperation and collaboration with host communities and their international students, community engagement can deliver mutual benefits to all three stakeholders in the mix and will ensure sustainability in market share well into the Asian century.

CONCLUSION

This paper affirms that community engagement as a mechanism creates value to promote cultural diversity with direct and indirect benefits to the tripartite stakeholders in this discourse. Given the increasing global competition in the international sector, the fiscal futures of regional universities could very well depend on meaningful investments in the wave of internationalisation (Honeywood 2012) to navigate the tide of the Asian Century. In order to do so, institutions must decide whether they are going to lead or lag behind. This paper has demonstrated that regional institutions can make a significant difference to promote cultural diversity that enhances the personal and professional goals of their visiting students, enriches host communities, and provides sustainability in market share for them.

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