CREATING A MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING THAT LEADS TO A BETTER LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS’ RELATIONSHIP IN MELBOURNE, AUSTRALIA: THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTERNATIONAL AND LOCAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Melbourne is known as Australia’s multicultural city. Yet, does it really welcome and embrace new comers? This paper discusses about international students’ life in Melbourne, Australia. The research is to find out how they feel about studying in Melbourne and what they expect from the locals (Australians). It also investigates whether it is possible to be welcome and accepted among the locals while still hold on to their respective culture or do they have to give up their culture in order to be accepted and mingle with the locals. The data are gathered by interviewing 5 international students in Melbourne and 3 local students. This research is expected to raise the awareness of the international students’ expectation and needs and vice versa. It is expected that it will help to create mutual understanding between the international students and the local students that will lead to a better relationship between them.

Field of Research: culture and multiculturalism.

1. Introduction

Australia is a country with a very large number of international students. Melbourne is among the cities in Australia with the highest number of international students. It is not surprising, remembering that Melbourne has been in the list of the most liveable city in the world. It attracts many people to come, including students.

How about the life of the international students there? The writer is interested in investigating the life of the international students in relation to their relationship with the local students in Melbourne. Do they have any difficulties in making friends with the local students? If they do, what are the difficulties they face? Do the international students accept them as friends? What are the factors that influence the relationship between international and local students?

1.1 Multiculturalism

Australia began its support to multiculturalism in the late 1960s. “This is the period in which Australia had begun to allow the non-white immigrants. Immigrants were encouraged to ‘integrate’ rather than required to assimilate. This meant that they were to be enabled to retain elements of their ‘home culture’…” (Ratansi, 2011: 7).

As stated by Budiman, multiculturalism is living side by side with people with different culture while still holding on to their own culture (2005: 8).
“However, there is more to multiculturalism than this. The call for recognition of the equal value of different cultures is the expression of a basic and profound universal human need for unconditional acceptance” (Taylor, 1994). From this statement we can see that what is important is not only that they can retain their culture but whether or not their culture is valued as the same with the host culture.

From the result of the research we will see whether the theory of multiculturalism is really applied in the life of international students in Melbourne and whether or not other culture than the host culture is considered as equal to their culture.

1.2 Culture

“Culture is “the integral whole consisting of implements and consumer’s goods, of constitutional charters for the various social groupings, of human ideas and crafts, beliefs and customs” (Malinowski, 2009)

Kalman stated that “Culture is the way we live. It is the language we speak, the stories we tell. What do we believe? What makes our live different from the lives of others? (2009: 4)

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample and data collection method

The sample is 5 international students and 4 local students from 3 different universities in Melbourne. One of the locals participant is an alumnus that graduated last year. The international students are from Indonesia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and Colombia. The researcher chose some international students from countries with very different culture from Australian culture like Bangladesh, Indonesia and Afghanistan and also international students from cultures which are almost similar to Australian culture like Colombia. Though they have different language, but in general their culture is similar. This is to see whether people from similar culture have easier access to friendship with the local students.

The method of this study is semi structured interview that takes about 25-35 minutes each.

2.2 Instrument

There are 8 questions for the local students and 13 questions for the international students. Some of these questions were extended depending on the interviewees’ answers. Some answers need more explanation and elaboration. Therefore, the time for the interviews was varied, ranging from 25 to 35 minutes.

3. Finding & Discussion

3.1 Points of view of international students

3.1.1 Difficulties in making friends with local students

The results of the interviews show that three of the international students feel that they have difficulties in making friends with local students. Two students think that culture, the ways of live in this case, as the problems. One other thinks that language is the barrier for them. One of those two also thinks that the locals have closed groups that are difficult to get into that it makes it hard to
mingle with them. The other participant does not have difficulties in making friends with the locals. But she said it is something which is normal and understandable that people prefer to hang out with people from the same country.

From two of the students who can mingle with the locals, one of them is the one that comes from the country which has similar culture, but the other one comes from the country whose culture is very different from Australian culture.

3.1.2 Local students’ attitude towards international students

Related to local students’ attitude towards the international students, one participant thinks that local students are friendly, cooperative and helpful but still there is something about them that makes international students cannot be close to local students.

One thinks that there is no problem between locals and international students but they have a little gap, international students will socialize with international students and local students will socialize with local students. She thinks that some local students feel annoyed because many international students come to their country and do not want to obey the rules. They feel that some international students are often disturbing and create violence. For example, one international student do not want to do lab duty because he thinks that is dirty, he never did that kind of work in his country. He has someone to do that kind of work for him. In Australia, you have to be independent and do things by yourself, you cannot expect people do things for you.

One participant thinks that local students do not reject or avoid international students directly but she feels that they actually do. When she talks with them and she does not understand what they say because of her limited ability of English, they do not want to explain and they just stop talking to her.

Another participant thinks that the locals sometimes discriminate international students, especially international students from certain ethnicity. She thinks that the problem is cultural differences. But she personally thinks that the international students are discriminated because they are rude to women, as she experienced this herself, and in their culture she thinks that is a normal thing to do.

The other participant feels that local students see international students as inferior or they see international students as equal but different, especially when the local students know where he comes from. They will not be interested to talk to him anymore. If they are asked they would answer but if they are not asked about anything they would not initiate any talk with him. This is very unfortunate because he comes from a country that is depicted negatively by media worldwide when he actually is a very wonderful and respectable person with contributions to his university and community.

3.1.3 What international students think they have to do to be accepted and mingle with local students?

Two of the participants think that they need to leave some parts of their culture in order to be accepted and can mingle with local students. It is in relation to the locals’ habit of drinking. One had the experience where he was at a party and he did not drink. One of the locals at that party said to him that he should not have come if he does not drink. The other one never went to a party even though he was invited because in every party they serve alcoholic drinks.
Two others think they do not have to leave all or some parts of their culture when they live in Melbourne. It is because these two students come from a country with almost similar culture. The other one, though she comes from a country which has very different culture from Australia, thinks she does not need to leave all or some parts of her culture; international students only need to leave bad habits and need to obey all rules that are applied in Australia.

3.1.4 How the international students feel about living in Melbourne

Despite the treatment they get from the local students, three of them are excited to be in Melbourne. They love the experience they have in Melbourne. One of them feels that the local students should be more friendly and cooperative and helpful. The other one feel that university sees international students as costumer. International students pay more than the local students but the facilities provided for local students are superior to the ones that are provided for local students. For example, if international students face financial hardship, it is difficult for them to get help. It creates the feeling that international students are only for temporary in Melbourne and make him feel that he does not belong.

3.1.5 Suggestion from international students so that they feel that they are accepted

One of the participants suggests that local students to make friends with international students out of their curiosity and they should welcome international students as they are guests in Australia. The locals should introduce themselves to international students; they should be more proactive and approach the international students. The locals should also be more respectful about the norm and values of international students. They should also promote equality and he suggested that international and local students should know each other’s culture. A way to achieve this is there should be session where lecturers provide time to talk about international students’ culture and to know each other’s norm. According to him, it is very important to know each other’s culture to have a better relationship and this can be done in classroom.

One gives no suggestion as she feels that everything has been going on well. One thinks that the local students should be more open to accept international students into their group and the local should learn about international students’ culture. Another one thinks that there should be more inclusion and acceptance from local students. They should welcome the international students and invite them more to the locals’ party.

The other one thinks that whenever people go to a new country, they should adapt to its culture and rules. If people do so, they would not have difficulties in making friends. She does this herself and she feels no problems in making friends with the locals. She learnt the language, learnt to have BBQ and house parties, learnt to go to the beach, learnt to read books and even learnt how to surf. But still she suggests that the locals should be more flexible and understand that international students go through adaptation process which takes time. Locals should also be more inclusive.

From two students t who are successful in making friends and mingle with the local students, one is the one who puts the most effort to learn the host cultures and habits and the other one is the one that has positive attitudes who see the locals as good people and the interviewer can feel the atmosphere of positive attitude during the whole interview. She has positive attitude though sometimes she has language difficulties but that does not hinder her from making friends with the locals.
3.2 Local Students’ Point of View

3.2.1 How local students perceive or see international students and how they think the international students perceive them

One of the participants thinks that local students are, of course, different from local students but it does not mean negative. That can be a positive thing as they bring cultural diversity to their university. It is a good different.

One said that she loves international students and she loves engaging with people from different background. She thinks that sometimes they are a bit lost in the university or there is a divide between international students and local students.

One thinks that the international students see themselves as outsiders and probably local students see them as outsiders. She thinks that international students are different in their English but culturally the international students do not behave differently from the locals.

One local student thinks that international students as being like local students because they are all doing the same thing as students but she feels that international students have an additional layer of interest because they come from a different context and provide some different perspectives on both education and life in general. She is interested in how they see local students and how they feel about the world.

They all are aware that international students have cultures which are different from them and this awareness helps them in interacting with the international students. For example, one participant said that when he is with Muslim friends, he is less likely to go to a pub. He also expresses even people with the same culture are different.

One said that when you know others’ culture you can relate to them better, you know their social norm and taboos. One thinks that if we know other people’s culture, they will feel more understood and less assumption to be made if you know someone’s culture.

One said that she found that men from cultures that are non-European culture are not very comfortable chatting with her, possibly because she is an older woman. She stated that she does not want to make them feel uncomfortable so she is polite and speak a little but does not continue if they seem unwilling.

3.2.2 International students’ attitude towards local students and local students attitude towards international students

In relation to international students’ attitude towards the locals, one participant thinks that there are a lots of time they are very outgoing and very good in making friends with locals and sometimes they might somewhat shy and sometimes they experience cultural shock when they see locals students drink and being loud. In general he thinks that international students’ attitude towards the local is not negative at all. He thinks that sometimes international students might feel they are alone because they are different and they find it hard to make friends with local students and maybe the local students aren’t friendly or they already got friends so they don’t make the effort to make friends with the international students but according to him that’s the reality. People go overseas and that is what happened. He also thinks that some see that some international students stay on their comfort zone, maybe they are shy and stick to their own group and vice versa with the locals. He sees many
international students are in Melbourne more to get their business degree and that will help them to get a job when they go back; degree rather than to be involved in university and socializing. He wishes that more international students learn for the sake of learning not for the practical outcome like that. He thinks that everyone is different, that might be the underlying theme.

Another participant thinks that there’s no one attitude. Some just want to stay in their group, some want to meet local and seek out to interact with the locals and get experience of being in Australia, and the others want to do that but they do not know how to go about that. The locals’ attitudes are varied as well. Her group is really accepting but she is sure that there are some local students who are not welcoming. International students may be feeling unwelcome.

One other interviewee thinks that international students are friendly and lovely when they have a day where they sell food and promote their association. She buys food from them and has a bit of chat and that is great. But when she sees them at other times, she probably would not talk without knowing them but she thinks it would be for anyone. She thinks it is normal as well for other people to be nice when they have the reasons to interact, and people are not very nice when they do not have the reason to interact. On a day to day basis, she does not often meet people from other culture. It’s circumstantial. But to her personally, she would be interested to meet other students from different culture. She would be interested in their cultural differences and would love to interact with them.

The other feels there is a wall between international and local students. This is partially from her experience and partially from observing other students around her. She notices that students from one country seem to keep socially to other students from that culture. There are exceptions of course but in the majority of cases from one country would mix with students from the same country. She realises it is difficult to speak in English all the time so maybe the language is part of the problem. As a local student she always tries to get to know International students but she feels there is a resistance. Maybe it is because the local ways of being friendly is different from other cultures' ways. She notices that students all speak to each other in workshops/classes but not outside much at all and she thinks this is a pity. A couple of times International students have said they want to speak to her to practice their English and she finds that uncomfortable because they have good English and also because she is not part of the university organisation to be used. She said that she finds out those other Australian students that she talks to say that they are interested in getting to know international students. She does not think there is any bad feeling on either side; it is just that they have cultural differences. She gives an example where some international women students were enrolled and joined other local female students in sharing an office. All introduced themselves and discussed their proposed research topics.

On another day they were all in the room and she asked one woman about her family, she has two children and her husband was with her in Melbourne. However she did not ask the other local students or the participant about their families (which are polite in their culture- sharing information). Another day they were discussing education and the other local woman asked the women whether she would like to come with them to get coffee. She replied that she did not drink coffee. They were about to explain that it was not necessary to drink coffee, that was just their way of going for a short break and having a conversation; having a drink of coffee or something else was not needed. But the international student did not wait for them to explain; she returned immediately to her computer and continued working. They were being friendly but she was not aware of this cultural marker.

Also, the students did not ask the participant anything about Melbourne or how things are done there. If she were in another country, she would ask all people she met there about their city and where to find things and what to visit that is of interest. The international students whom she shared office with
spoke to each other only in their language, not in English. To Australians that is not polite. They do not exclude others from their conversations (it is not about knowing what people are saying, but it is about their culture and friendliness). She feels that these students were not intentionally unpleasant. She thinks that they either did not want to get to know the locals better or else they did not realise how to get to know them. It was a cultural barrier.

She also gets the feeling that international students do not like being in Melbourne and are anxious to return home. They do not want to know about Australia. She said that this is possibly quite wrong, it is just an impression that she has. Perhaps Australians are giving unpleasant cultural markers to international students in return and they feel that the locals are not friendly. She said that she does not know and she is pleased that this research is being conducted.

3.2.3 What international students have to do so that they can be accepted as friends and mingle with local students

In relation to whether international students have to change their habit, behaviour or attitude in order to be fully accepted as friends and can mingle with local students, one participant thinks that probably the main barrier for building friendship between local and international students is language. If they really can communicate well there shouldn’t be any reasons not to make friends, he believes that they can mingle well regardless their culture. People have different culture but we can communicate, he thinks that that is the main thing. Culture can sometimes be a barrier in some cases. But in general the main thing is language. If people can communicate then they can make friends. If people are sociable, outgoing, communicate well and they are willing to make friends, they will make friends.

Another participant thinks that international students should not have change who they are at all and local students should be embracing them how they are and they should not have to assimilate but she thinks when it comes down to attitude if the international students have the attitude of wanting to meet local students then she would hope that most of the time the local students would embrace them. But still, it depends on the group of people, always depends.

Another participant thinks that international students do not need to make changes. If there is more opportunity for people to make friends or to develop a deeper connection then local and international students probably mingle more.

The other thinks that international students do not need to alter their culture because our culture is part of all of us. But she feels that there is a cultural tension between the local and international students and there may be a cultural tension as well between international students from different countries. What is needed is the awareness of each other's culture and be more open to each other. Perhaps we all need to say more directly, "in my culture, we ... to show we are being friendly" because the direct approach may be preferable. She thinks that we all need to mingle, not necessarily to become close friends but to understand each other. We can learn a lot from each other. Basically we all need to talk to each other more often. She thinks that international and local students need to have a morning-tea break at a particular time each day and all get together for 15 minutes (and not necessarily drink tea or coffee or anything) so that they can slowly get to know each other in a non-culturally threatening way.

When asked about international students’ habits/behaviour/attitude that they find irritating and troublesome, one of the participant said that he would not go so far as saying this is annoying or he dislikes but he thinks if people go overseas and they do not make an effort to learn more about the host country and do not make any effort to and step outside their comfort zone and stick with their
own group and do not want to open their mind to new idea, they might miss out a lot of things, it will be a lost for the international themselves. It is interesting in that he mentions something that the international students do not do that he disagrees with, not what the international students do. It makes sense that it is often, it is something that is not done that is being disliked. Of course there should be enough effort if we want to achieve something.

Another said almost similar thing. She said that she loves international students but sometimes she gets annoyed with groups that are very internal and they are not interested to meet her. She feels that the international students just want to get a degree, they don’t want to talk to her. She feels like they come to use the facilities, to get the education but actually do not care about knowing and learning about her culture.

She finds it a little bit offensive sometimes when she sees signs up around the uni advertising a housemate and it is written in certain language and writing. This kind of thing makes her feel excluded. That is exclusive in a way. She gets the feeling that they want to stick to their comfort zone.

When she lives in another country, she would want to interact and mingle. When she does this, she thinks that her experience is very much richer and she had such an understanding of other culture and her friendship was so much deeper because she was friends with local girls, not Australian. People who go to another country and be very internal they don’t get experience to the level of people who want to interact with the locals.

She also added that it would be great if they could feel more confident about being here. It will be easier to build a relationship with people who do not feel shy. If they do not feel very shy, locals will be able to approach them and get closer with them. Be ready for a spontaneous conversations related to something that happens around you. For example, if you are in library, there is someone who does something annoying, a local make a comment about it, it is good if you can reply to this comment and be reactive. It can be a start of a conversation. You can feel that people are confidence when they can be reactive to that kind of spontaneous conversation.

Other ways to be able to make friends and mingle with the locals are join students club or society, start playing sport, doing music, become more involved in campus activities, do some volunteer work or get a job. These will provide more opportunities to meet more locals and make more friends. Do not just do what is easy or just do something in your comfort zone. They should go out of their comfort zone to create more opportunities for them to make friends with the locals.

Another participant stated that it is very important to have an attitude of wanting to meet and engage with people and seek out organization, seek out students groups, get involved. Those are the best way to meet people. People seem exclusive but if you try to contribute and get involved and just eager to meet people she is sure that international students will find that people are welcoming International students with open arms, seek out student clubs, that’s the best way. That is the case with any students coming to the university, unless you make an effort to get involved, it’s very difficult to actually connect with people.

It is from her own experience during her one year and a half at the university I hardly knew anyone because she did not get involved and as soon as she got involved in a club and society she was connected to this network of students and she just could not stop making friends. All of her friends at the university come from her getting involved in students club. International students can choose a club, go to meeting and just make that little bit of effort and they will find that they get connected very easily. It requires effort from both sides for sure.
In addition to having good attitude and make efforts from both sides, there should be structures and processes developed by the university to connect people together and the activities need to be advertised really well. According to her, it is best to advertise through club and societies, students. Ask them if they would involve and help organize events that are welcoming international students. There are so many in the student body and there are so many people who are eager to involve. The student club and society have such a fast network, They are the best way to reach students. Facebook is a good media as well. Connect with the leader of students and have them distribute massages of an event of idea. According to her, that is the best way to reach student population.

Club knows the best way to connect. They know what’s going on on campus, what the issues are, what the tensions are. Policy maker at university needs to connect with the students on the ground because there is so much going on on the ground that has been done by students. The manager of the uni needs to engage with that.

Other participant thinks that to create a better relationship, having event, seminar, anything interactive between them, creating situation, would benefit both groups because that can enable people to strike up conversation. For instance when association have event at agora and people can buy food, music, local students can learn a bit about other culture. If you meet them on campus again you can say hello. Sometimes people are not aware about cultural difference. When you learn about other culture makes you feel you have a better connection. It can also be done in class where people do presentation about their culture. They can use the knowledge later when they need it when they interact with people from that culture.

One participant thinks that international and local students do not have many chances to interact except when the different association hold a stall or something and she thinks a lot of local students are not really conscious of the international students around them and some international students may feel intimidated or shy about being in a new country which she thinks it is very normal in a new culture.

The other participant stated that she would like to be told how best to approach international students to let them know that she would like to mingle and be friends in a way that are culturally acceptable to them. This may be different for each culture. And on the reverse side, maybe international students should be told some of the Australian ways to be friendly. The next step is to say how this “telling” should occur. She thinks it is the students themselves who need to say this. Maybe the university can facilitate this occurring, but it is up to all the students to say publicly how their culture prefers to be approached as friends. In this way they would all know and make adjustments for each other, but not to lose their own cultures, just to accommodate others. In the end, she thinks that they would all be the richer for the experiences.

One participant stated that Australian drink a lot. Maybe that is one of the reasons they do not invite international students to come to their parties. During the interview then the participant came to realize that they could have asked “Would you be comfortable to come where everyone is drinking? It is interesting that there might be an unawareness of the cultural difference and when people have realized it the writer thinks that the best approach to overcome that awkwardness is through direct method of asking what they want and how it should be done.
4. Conclusion and Recommendation

From the findings and discussion, it can be seen that participant who comes from the country whose culture is almost similar to the host culture still have difficulties in making friends with local students. At the same time, the most successful one in making friends with local students come from the same country. Yet, the writer believes that they key to her success is her willingness to learn many things about the locals. She even learns different skills like surfing and learns locals’ habit like throwing party and doing barbeque. However, one participant who comes from a country which has very different culture from Australian thinks that she does not have to leave her culture in order to be able to mingle and make friends with local students. She can mingle and hangout with the locals despite the cultural differences. What is important is, she said, to obey the rules they applied.

From this, we can conclude that culture might influence the relationship between local and international students, but what is more important is the attitude and behaviour that respect each other. When they are ware or they are made to be aware that the cultural difference are there but if they want to be more open minded and see the world from other perspective, that is, they can learn from each other despite their cultural differences, there will be better relationship between international and local students. It is important that both sides feel the need to have a better relationship and to mingle that will lead to actions taken by both sides to create a better relationship between the local and international students.

People are also need to be educated to break stereotyping that exists in society. The need of this can be seen from the treatments that are received from international students that come from countries which are under influence of bad stereotyping from media. When people are surrendered to other than their own critical thinking to shape their opinion on people, it might create false judgement as they would judge people even before they meet them. In the writer’s point of view, everyone should be freed from assumption that comes with certain attribute like ethnic, religion, etc. Everyone has the right to be treated equally regardless their nationality, religion, nationality, etc. This is what happened to two of the participants. They come from countries which have bad image in the media. It is very unfortunate that they have bad experience because of people’s pre-judgement. In fact, they are respectable individuals that should have the same opportunities for friendship.

The writer strongly believes that open mindedness is the most important thing in order to achieve mutual understanding and better relationship between local and international students. Cultural differences, any differences, can be overcome so long as we want to. Open mindedness will lead to willingness to understand and accept others the way they are. And understanding will lead to the want to communicate to bridge the difference and learn from each other and create actions for a better relationship. Difference is good as it enriches instead of dividing; it depends on our perspectives in looking at it.

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