

Isolation and Integration: International Student Support – Applying the Research

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Based on current research, our team developed a mentoring program (Mentors Assisting the Transition Experience – MATE) a soccer tournament (International Cup) and a workshop program (Survival Skills) to address the perceived needs of international students. This Nuts and Bolts presentation will look at the basics of running these programs, the benefits for international students and will encourage discussion on how such programs could be implemented in other institutions.

This presentation will speak to the FYHE topics:

- Exemplar practice in reaching out to FY students
- Engagement and belonging – outside formal curriculum
- Non-academic support to manage work/life/study/balance
- Enhancing equity and participation

Research

The key factors that predict well-being are:

- 1) Connectedness – ‘contact with people who know them as individual human beings, who care about them personally and with whom they can talk to on a personal level’
 - 2) Low cultural stress – address all aspects of well-being
 - 3) Depression
 - 4) Academic progress
 - 5) Involvement in risk-taking behaviours
 - 6) Cultural background
 - 7) Communication problems
- (Rosenthal, Russell and Thompson, 2006)

The programs developed by ISIS attempt to address all of these by providing inclusive ways for students to interact with other students. Through these programs a foundation is prepared for international students before they leave their home countries and this is built on through their first semester of study. Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland and Ramia, (2007) highlight the prevalence of loneliness and isolation amongst international students. They claim that “students with strong support networks exhibit better psychological and physiological well-being, particularly during periods of high stress” (p.9) The MATE Program and International Cup nurture student friendships and the building of community which ties in with the statement by Sawir et al that “most students (88%) who felt lonely or isolated turned to personal or social networks.” (p. 18)

Dr Erlenawati Sawir (2008) states that integration with local students and engaging in campus activities provides an opportunity to use English naturally and that language proficiency is best gained if there is a good balance of input from formal learning (in the classroom) and informal learning (outside the

classroom). She goes on to explain that studies of international students repeatedly reveal a low incidence of intercultural friendships and the need to develop closer integration between international students and local students is a frequent theme in the research literature on international education in English-speaking countries, particularly in relation to international students from Asian nations.

MATE: Mentors Assisting the Transition Experience

Objectives & rationale

MATE provides an opportunity for commencing international students to connect with current RMIT students via email prior to departure from their home country and in the transitional period. By creating this opportunity for a new student to have informal contact with another student we hope to ease the stress of their transition into a new country and new study environment. We hope to create a sense of community within RMIT and to embrace the diversity of our students by promoting enhanced cross-cultural awareness. Mentors receive recognition on their Transcript and a certificate signed by Vice-Chancellor.

Logistics

The program is co-ordinated by a “Champion”. Most of the program occurs via email but the Champion must also be responsible for the organisation and the monitoring of the program including: Mentor meetings, free tickets to event, Mentors’ volunteering hours.

MATE program numbers

Semester 1, 2008 – 28 Mentors & 60 Mentees
Semester 1, 2009 – 60 Mentors & 200 Mentees

Outline of Mentor’s Responsibilities/Tasks

5 hours training Mentor training occurs during semester a few weeks before semester ends.
5 hours email contact with mentees – A minimum of 4 initiated emails as well as responding to mentee’s emails. Mentors may be allocated extra mentees until beginning of Week 2 (up to 4 mentees each).
4 hours attending event with mentees – free tickets to AFL game at the MCG in Semester 1, 2009
6 hours volunteering – Housing Advisory Service – assisting students in finding accommodation.

Improvements & Follow up

Survey to ascertain isolation level among international students who participated in the above / compared with a random sample of those who did not attend.

International Cup

Objectives & rationale

The International Cup is an event focused on celebrating the induction of international students and promoting their interaction with native Australian students and RMIT staff and is therefore open to all who wish to participate. This one day event addresses the loneliness and isolation often experienced by international students. If networks are made by the student early in their academic career they will be more likely to succeed. It is a response to a need for a transition and welcoming event which helps

international students integrate with local students and staff under the umbrella of a ‘universal activity’ rather than a specific ‘get-to-know-you’ event or activity.

Logistics

Running from 10am – 4pm on a Saturday, teams play in a round-robin competition culminating in the Cup final. Prizes are awarded by the Vice-Chancellor and a prominent soccer personality. Transport to and from venue, entertainment and refreshments provided.

International Cup numbers

2008 (inaugural event) – 200 players from 27 countries

Winner – Clockwork Orange

Second Place – Colombianos

Sponsorship

A sponsorship proposal was created and sent to local and prominent businesses. Businesses related to Soccer were contacted as well as companies who would be interested in promotion to large groups of students. Gold, Silver and Bronze sponsorships were outlined and were open for negotiation.

Survival Skills

Objectives and rationale

International students can often struggle with basic elements of negotiating a new culture: communication problems; adapting to a new culture; basic cooking know-how. It is not necessarily just one issue that impacts on a student’s studies and well-being, but it can be the accumulative result of failings in a number of life-skill areas. These remedial and interactive workshops address all aspects of new students’ well-being. They will prepare the student for the rest of their time in Australia as they focus on culture shock, language, communication & basic survival skills such as cooking, safety and shopping.

This approach is not so much about the direct dissemination of important information, as covered in Orientations and the like, but about practically and actively empowering new students in a new environment. This could also be seen to be meeting ‘adequate’ support protocols as stipulated under the ESOS code, Standard 6.

Logistics

Workshops are run soon after the students enrol during lunchtime breaks over a 2 week period with a maximum of 20-30 students per workshop – a few weeks into semester to allow students to settle in. They are held on campus, or at a centrally located venue. Repeated during the year for Re-Orientation period

Recruitment and Promotion

ISIS uses a group email address for all currently enrolled international students to promote all programs. We also advertise and recruit through the use of posters and fliers, RMIT University Internet links, Orientations – Meet & Greet Programs, Power-point slides on LCD screens around the university campuses, SMS messages to mobile phones, and distribution of fliers by the Transition & Orientation Team on enrolment and festival days.

Recruitment of the MATE Mentees is through the personal email addresses supplied by the commencing students through their applications.

Registrations

The registration forms for the MATE Program and International Cup are online. The Survival Skills Workshops do not call for registrations.

Feedback

Evaluations are conducted for each program and in the case of Survival Skills they are collected after each session. We opt for uncomplicated language and a point system 1 =lowest, 5 = highest including space for comments. The evaluations might be paper-based or, in the case of the MATE Program, online. The online feedback form is useful when the program attracts a large number of participants as it is easily compiled.

References

Loneliness and International Students: An Australian Study – Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, Ramia (Nuffic) 2007

A Growing Experience – Rosenthal, Russell, Thompson (Melbourne Uni), Mar 2006

International Students and the English Language: How can we move forward? – Dr Erlenawati Sawir (<http://www.campusreview.com.au/pages/section/article.php?s=Sections&ss=International&idArticle=5827>) 2008

Session plan

- Introduction (2 minutes)
- Describe and discuss rationale based on research (5 minutes)
- Overview of three programs: MATE, International Cup and Survival Skills (8 minutes)
- Discussion: Has your institution tried any of these programs? If so – what worked and what didn't? – problem-solving / Would any of these fit into your institution? What starter information do you need? / Sharing of information in the group (successes/failures/similar initiatives) (14 minutes)
- Closing remarks (1 minute)