

Promoting participation and engagement in city life through a youth-driven approach – City of Melbourne Welcome to International Students

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Studying in a foreign country can be a challenging experience as students adjust to their new environment, find accommodation, look for work, make friends and adapt to a new educational system. The increasing presence of international students in the city has contributed to a resurgence of city living and council works closely in partnership with tertiary institutes, peak bodies and international students themselves to ensure that their health and well-being needs are met, and they have opportunities to participate and engage in the social and cultural life of the city, particularly in their first year of study.

In 2008, the City of Melbourne held three stakeholder forums which provided valuable information that can be used by government, researchers and educational institutions to understand the health and wellbeing needs of international students.

Key issues that were identified include:

- social isolation and loneliness
- difficulties connecting with other international students and/or domestic students
- safety
- access to affordable accommodation
- difficulties accessing social support services
- cultural barriers and language difficulties

The City of Melbourne Welcome to International Students event, an idea developed through forums and consultations with representatives from tertiary educations, private providers, international student groups and international students is an important project to connect with newly-arrived international students as they commence studies in Melbourne. This event addresses the above-mentioned observations and investigates the implementation of an orientation program for International students which complements, not duplicate, the activities that are run within their home institutions.

The 2009 City of Melbourne Welcome to International Students was held on Sunday 1 March and attracted over 3,500 students to Federation Square, Melbourne. Focusing on a 'dance' theme, students were entertained by music and dance from various continents, activities that transcend cultural and language barriers – as recommended by stakeholders. The event offered students with the opportunity to connect with other students, feel engaged with city life, and provided them with relevant information of the various support available to them during their stay in Melbourne.

This event was an ideal culmination of all the various international student initiatives run by the City of Melbourne. It was a distribution point for the Discover Melbourne Guides, launch of the Essendon Football Club *GLoBALL* program and drew together organisations such as the Victoria Police, Ambulance Victoria, Melbourne Fire Brigade, SYN FM and the Australian Federation of International Students [AFIS] to a central location where they can connect and interact with other local and international students.

11 young people, consisting of local and international students were recruited to be part of InterCoM3 – the organising committee for this event. It was essential to council that this welcome event was an event driven by students for students and was framed by a youth-participation approach. This youth-driven initiative involved over 40 volunteers and emphasised the elements of social inclusion and the promotion cultural understanding and teamwork between local and international students. The event strives on flexibility, a practical, work-based approach, and a participative, collaborative multi-modal learning environment. The event empowered youths to shape the event that suits their peers best.

This presentation will detail some of the challenges of this approach and what were the key learnings in developing the event. The presentation will also include a DVD presentation of the event followed by discussions with the audience in addressing some of the issues around promoting and marketing such an event to new international students and how institutions and organisations can be more actively involved in this city-wide initiative.