

“I feel a deep sense of belonging to the team”: International student experiences as peer- assisted learning advisers

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International students are an important driver of HE in Australia. Programs and curriculum are designed to support these students’ well-being and their academic development (Burdett & Crossman, 2012), and while important, so too are extra-curricular activities. This paper examines the experiences of four international students engaged in an enriching education experience as paid advisers in a peer-assisted learning program. The experiences of these international PLAs (IPLAs) are interesting in light of a number of reports indicating that international students do not work with other students outside of class (Edwards, 2010). The study draws on both the international student experience and student engagement literature. According to Radloff (2010), while higher education should facilitate the development of employability skills, it should also develop “self and civic awareness” (p. 38). On this basis, the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) General Development Outcomes for higher education (Coates, 2010) are used as a guiding principle to frame the study. These IPLAs showed increased self-awareness, an ability to solve complex problems through managing their own behaviours and student behaviours and flexibly responding to student issues. They all revealed greater self-awareness in terms of their skills and in their attitudes to others, while improving their language proficiency. The PLA program enabled them to gain insight into the host culture, enabling them to reflect on their own home cultures which led to further insights and awareness. Their work in the PLA program appears to have facilitated opportunities to interact with domestic students they would not have otherwise had.

Key Words: intercultural competence, international students, peer-assisted learning.

1. Introduction

International students are an important part of the fabric of Australian higher education (HE) and much has been written about their experiences. Their importance is often referred to in terms of the financial contribution to Australia being the “third largest source of export income” (Council of Australian Governments, 2010, p. 2). More specifically, for the 2017-18 period, “International education was worth more than \$32.4 billion to the Australian economy” (Ferguson & Sherrell, 2019, p. 1), and contributed to more than 130,000 Australian jobs (Australian Government, 2016, p. 7). While it is often acknowledged that international students are a valuable addition to Australia’s diversity (Council of Australian Governments, 2010), counter-narratives around international students exist. Recently the debate about the poor language

standards of some international students enrolling at Australian universities has led to suggestions that some universities are ignoring their own English language requirements to admit some students (Worthington, 2019). The recent suicide of a Chinese student studying in Melbourne (Dow, 2019) has also raised questions about the complexity of the experiences of international students. While the experiences of international students should be closely examined, this does not mean they should be “lumped together uncritically as a group” (Morrison, Merrick, Higgs, & Le Metais, 2005, p. 328) as may have occurred during the current negative narratives surrounding international students. In fact, the students who are the focus of this study reveal that the international student experience is a personal and individual one.

While the complexity of the international student experience in Australian HE is evident, the quality of that experience should be understood beyond simply considering the academic results of these students. Burdett and Crossman (2012, p. 208) suggest that “‘quality’ in undergraduate education encompasses the whole student experience,” not just whether they pass or fail. By considering the experiences of international students beyond simply looking at their academic achievement, a more holistic view of the experience is possible. In addition, the notion of student engagement has also become fundamental to most discussions about the student experience in HE. It is therefore important to consider how international students engage with their universities. According to Coates (2010), “contemporary perspectives of student engagement now touch on aspects of teaching, the broader student experience, learners’ lives beyond university, and institutional support” (p. 3).

This paper explores the broader student experience of international students employed as paid peer mentors, rather than focusing solely on using academic grades as a measure of the success or otherwise of the student experience. The focus of engagement is often centred within the curriculum and how students engage with it and their teachers, and efforts are made by universities to globalise their curriculum. However, this is a limited view of how quality engagement might occur, and some have argued that the “socio-academic engagement of international students” is more important (Burdett & Crossman, 2012, p. 216). This paper argues that an enriching education experience, specifically being employed as a peer mentor, contributes to the development of the international students who participated in this study.

2. PLA program outline

The four international students are employed in the Peer Learning Adviser (PLA) program which has operated at a Melbourne metropolitan university (MMU) for approximately six years. The program provides academic skills support for all MMU students. The PLAs are located in a hub within the library, offering a drop-in service for all enrolled students.

This paper considers the international student experience and student engagement in light of the Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) report and the measures relating to key General Development Outcomes for higher education (Radloff, 2010). In addition to reporting on student engagement with learning, the AUSSE report also considers personal outcomes for students. These outcomes relate to the development of “self and civic awareness” (Radloff, 2010, p. 38). The following outcomes from Radloff (2010, p. 64), will frame the discussion of the four International Peer Learning Advisers (IPLA) in this study:

1. understanding of self;
2. understanding others from different racial and ethnic backgrounds;
3. solving complex real-world problems;
4. developing a personal code of values and ethics;
5. contributing to the welfare of your community.

The AUSSE has been used as a framework in this study because it examines student engagement, not only with students’ formal studies, but also with other aspects of their experiences in

HE, offering “key insights into what students are actually doing” (Edwards, 2010, p. 2). First carried out in 2007, the AUSSE “was designed to help stimulate evidence-focused conversations about students’ engagement in university study,” with the goal “to monitor and enhance the quality of education they provide to their students” (Australian Council for Educational Research [ACER], 2012, Background section, para. 1). In 2012, 32 institutions participated in the AUSSE from Australia and New Zealand (ACER, 2012, Background section, para. 2).

3. Literature

The literature on the international student experience has long outlined the issues that these students have faced. Ballard and Clanchy (1988), in their seminal work ‘Studying in Australia’, present the main issues they believed faced international students, including: loneliness, language difficulties, and the intellectual challenges of adapting to new study approaches and pedagogies in Australian HE. Volet (2003) also discusses the importance of language proficiency, suggesting that “lack of fluency in the language of instruction restricts and slows down processing of information” (p. 6). More recently, Burdett and Crossman (2012) also suggested that the language abilities of international students varied considerably and was reported as a “major challenge” (p. 215) for staff and students. While Australian HE has come a long way in supporting international students, including standards and frameworks at governmental and university levels that aim to protect international students, they still face a range of challenges (Ashton-Hay, Wignell, & Evans, 2016).

3.1. Experiences of international students

The international student experience is a highly complex one and the importance of social interactions is frequently mentioned in the literature. Toyokawa and Toyokawa (2002) suggested that interactions with domestic students could enable international students to develop social supports at a time when they are adjusting to their new educational environment. In addition, the desire to engage with native speakers through “extracurricular activities is considered an important social context in which they may develop social networks and learn social skills, values and customs in the host society” (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002, p. 366). It also provides the opportunity to meet “host nationals” (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002, p. 365). Yet according to Edwards (2010), there is a dearth of investigation into international student engagement in the “academic or social facets” (p. 2) of their universities. He also found that in Australia, approximately 13% of international students reported that “they ‘never’ worked with other students outside of class” (p. 4). The significance of these extra-curricula activities for international students is clearly stated by Radloff (2010), who states that international students report that their HE experiences were more likely to contribute to the development of their speaking skills in contrast to domestic students (p. 37).

The importance of social supports is also raised by Sawir et al. (2008). They mention the social isolation experienced by international students occurring at a critical time in their lives as they “face a foreign language, study in a new setting, finances, accommodation, and day-to-day living problems, and they must negotiate an unfamiliar set of institutional rules” (p.149). They argue that this is why university arrival services and activities are important in reducing loneliness and/or isolation. Forbes-Mewett (2019) also outlines some of the emotions experienced by international students triggered by an unfamiliar environment, including “nerves, confusion, depression, homesickness, loneliness, stress” (p. 5).

The literature also suggests that there are limited opportunities for international students to interact in meaningful language encounters with domestic students. While Smart, Volet, and Ang (2000) argue that if education aims to prepare students for a global future, then “all our students ought to benefit from more diverse interactions and experiences ... [to] better understand each other’s cultures, learn to communicate, socialise and work together and to network” (p. 9). One of the goals of internationalising the curriculum has been to foster intercultural competencies in

various ways, such as introducing “internationally comparative approaches” (Volet, 2003, p. 3) into traditional subjects. However, these may not have the intended aims of developing international competencies. Volet (2003) further argues that this may be more successfully achieved in subjects where there are diverse student populations, which offer “unique opportunities to foster the development” (p. 3) of these competencies. Yet six years later, Leask (2009) suggests that more opportunities for informal interactions between domestic and international students should be encouraged. Still again, a few years later the problem does not appear to have been solved as “AUQA panels highlighted the challenge of social and cultural integrations within and beyond teaching spaces as a major concern for universities ...” (Burdett & Crossman, 2012, p. 213). Even more recently, Ashton-Hay et al. (2016) and Ammigan and Jones (2019) reported that international students wanted more interaction with domestic students, including opportunities to develop friendships with local students.

3.2. Deficit narratives

While this paper raises some of the issues facing international students, it does not intend to re-examine much of what has already been raised regarding deficit narratives. Straker (2016) provides an examination of the literature and explores the deficit narratives that have shaped many views of the international student experience. Straker also looks at the literature that explores the importance of language and culture as a contributor to the deficit narrative. While we may pay insufficient attention to heterogeneity among international students, we can also fail to recognise commonalities between international and domestic students. For example, “just as we should not assume all international students are studying in a foreign language, neither should we imagine that all domestic students are native speakers” (Jones, 2017, p. 935). Straker (2016) argues that discussions around international student participation and how this differs from domestic students “plays to a deficit discourse” (Straker, 2016, p. 300). Jones (2017) also suggests that beliefs about the homogeneity of international and domestic students, is misplaced. In fact, ignoring the heterogeneity of these groups creates a false binary that can blinker understanding of the needs and experiences of different students. Straker (2016) warns against looking only at what international students lack. Consistent with this view, an earlier observation by Russell, Rosenthal, and Thomson (2009) stated that “many, if not most, international students are among the brightest and best from their own countries, a highly select and motivated set of students” (p. 246), and is a reminder against taking a blinkered view of international students.

3.3. AUSSE general development outcomes

The AUSSE, an evidence-based instrument to enhance discussions about HE, also provides valuable insights into students’ experiences of Australian HE. While the academic development of students is an important focus for the AUSSE, it also suggests that “arguably a more important function [of HE] is to teach students more general skills they can carry throughout their life” (Radloff, 2010, p. 36). Consequently, the authors of AUSSE have included survey questions that ask respondents: “To what extent has your experience at this institution contributed to your knowledge, skills and personal development in the following areas?” (Radloff, 2010, p. 79). The possible responses relate not only to writing and speaking skills and job-related skills, but also include the general development outcomes listed in Section 2 that are the focus of this paper.

The AUSSE found that in some areas, such as job-related skills, the differences between international and domestic students was minimal. This reinforces often overlooked similarities between these two groups of students. However, more international students than domestic students report that their education contributed to the development of their “ability to speak clearly and effectively” (Radloff, 2010, p. 36). Language proficiency is often deemed to be lacking in international students (Worthington, 2019), so reported improvements in this area should not be ignored. According to the Good Practice Principles, “‘English language proficiency’ is the ability of students to use the English language to make and communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies” (DEEWR, 2008, p. 1). Students

should be able to “organise language to carry out a variety of communication tasks” (DEEWR, 2008, p. 1), beyond “a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure” (DEEWR, 2008, p. 1). The importance of language development in a variety of contexts is identified in the Good Practice Principles, whereby “International students are encouraged and supported to enhance their English language development through effective social interaction on and off campus” (DEEWR, 2008, p. 3). Overall, the AUSSE found that “international students report greater levels of personal development [across their HE experience] ... than domestic students” (Radloff, 2010, p. 39). The areas of greatest development are the ability to not only understand themselves, but also others from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (Radloff, 2010, p. 30).

4. Methodology

This study used a qualitative methodology to explore the perceived experiences of four international students employed in the PLA program at a metropolitan university in Australia. The program provides academic skills support to all students enrolled at the university, and historically, the majority of those employed by the service have tended to be domestic students. This imbalance between international and domestic PLAs has not been a conscious choice, instead it was based on the limited number of international students who applied for positions. In 2019 however, the service on the main campus of the university employed four PLAs who were enrolled as international students.

Ethical clearance was applied for and granted, and the potential participants were contacted to seek their participation. Contact with prospective participants was made by an administrative support person who was not connected to the PLA program, via a generic email account. The prospective participants were provided with a range of broad questions that related to their experiences as international students in Australia, and also their experiences as IPLAs. The questions were underpinned by the AUSSE General Development Outcomes. Participants were also encouraged to include any information they felt might be of interest, even if it did not fit within the parameters of the questions. They were invited to complete their responses in writing and upload them via a secure data transfer and storage portal. Prior to uploading their data, participants were asked to choose a pseudonym which ensured that their responses remained anonymous. Data were collected over a three-month period. The data were then analysed based on a range of areas including:

- the AUSSE General Development Outcomes;
- general personal information (such as enrolled course, years in Australia, first language, time employed as a PLA);
- other emergent themes (such as well-being, transition to university, employment opportunities).

The language of the IPLAs in this paper has not been edited and is presented as it was written by the participants.

The experiences of the PLAs who are also international students will be discussed within the framework of the AUSSE General Development Outcomes for Higher Education. The discussion will also consider the IPLA experiences in light of the cultural assumptions that are made about the language skills of international students.

4.1. Background for study

The university that is the focus of this study, is a multi-campus suburban university with four regional campuses. The main campus has approximately 28,000 students, approximately 5,000 of whom are international undergraduate students and 4,000 are post-graduate coursework students (La Trobe University, 2019). PLAs are employed following a highly competitive recruit-

ment process. Among the required criteria for applicants is that they must be current students with a B average. There are approximately 50 PLAs employed across all campuses, with 20 employed on the largest metropolitan campus. The IPLAs employed on this metropolitan campus are the focus of this study.

The PLA usage data for 2019, indicated that on this main campus there were approximately 1500 recorded drop-in consultations for the year, and of these, less than 10% were international students seeking support. Hence, all PLAs work predominantly with domestic students. While this is not a strategy to provide intercultural interactions between the IPLAs and other students, it is certainly an opportunity for such interactions to occur.

Of the 20 metropolitan campus PLAs employed in 2019, all four IPLAs agreed to participate in this research. The participants were asked to provide a pseudonym prior to sending their responses, and these are used in this paper to ensure their anonymity. Table 1 provides a brief background for each participant.

Table 1. Participant backgrounds.

| Pseudonym | English as first language | Years in Australia | Discipline area | Semesters as a PLA (based on a two semester academic year) |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------|--------------------------|--|
| Butterfly | No | 3 | Science | 2 |
| Tasha | No | 4 | Education | 1 |
| Lina | No | 3 | Health Sciences | 4 |
| Andrea | Yes | 3 | Commerce/Health Sciences | 2 |

5. Results and discussion

As previously outlined, the AUSSE General Development Outcomes for Higher Education will frame this discussion. The following four development outcomes will comprise the main areas for discussion: understanding of self; understanding others from different racial and ethnic backgrounds; solving complex real-world problems; and contributing to the welfare of your community (Radloff & Coates, 2010, p. 38). Developing a personal code of values and ethics will be interspersed throughout the discussion (Radloff, 2010, p. 64).

5.1. Understanding of self–awareness, confidence, and equality

The participants in this study have achieved considerable success, not only in their studies, but they have also obtained paid employment in a highly respected team in the university. Given that all PLAs must maintain a B average to be employed, it would seem that the IPLAs are among the “brightest and the best ... a highly select and motivated set of students” as suggested by Russell et al. (2009, p. 246). Despite their academic success, all reported mixed feelings about embarking on their studies as international students. Both Lina and Butterfly mentioned the friendly welcome they encountered from international services and the orientation team, with Lina also mentioning that she felt “good about choosing this university.” This reinforces Sawir et al.’s (2008) claim that the importance of these welcomes should not be underestimated.

Lina, Tasha and Andrea all reported that they were nervous or anxious about adapting to a different education system with changed academic expectations. Andrea in particular reported that not only would she have to “learn how to study” in the new environment, she would also have to learn how to “excel in a completely new educational system”. Again, this reinforces Sawir et al.’s (2008) claims that adjusting to new educational settings with new and “unfamiliar set of institutional rules” (p. 149) is an important aspect of their transition to study. Andrea’s comment

about excelling in a new educational system, highlights additional pressures international students face beyond the basic acclimatisation to their new environment.

The anxieties that are sometimes reported by international students (Forbes-Mewett, 2019) were also echoed in the comments by the IPLAs. Lina spoke of the nerves she felt at the prospect of interacting with anyone who had an Australian accent. These nerves were eventually overcome, but initially, she used email as her main means of communication and “avoided asking questions or any queries through face-to-face conversation”. In using this approach, Lina reveals considerable self-awareness in relation to her perceived language proficiency. She realised that her listening skills may not be as developed as she would have liked when she first arrived at university, and so she used her writing skills to manage her situation. The self-awareness she exhibited is considered important in terms of personal development by the AUSSE. Andrea also spoke of the loneliness and homesickness that Forbes-Mewett (2019) identified in international students. She had never lived in another country before, nor had she lived away from her family. She identified the anxiety this caused and how she felt “overwhelmed” and “lonely because I didn’t have my family and friends with me”.

Both Lina and Andrea both now feel very confident with their abilities to converse either professionally as PLAs or socially. Lina is now confident enough in her language proficiency to apply for graduate nursing positions in Australia, while Andrea applied to study at Masters level in Australia. Both were successful in their applications. This reinforces the AUSSE findings that indicate international students believe that their university education enhanced their abilities to speak “clearly and effectively” (Radloff, 2010, p. 36).

The IPLA respondents reported that their self-understanding has developed as a result of their work as PLAs. For some of the respondents, their ability to communicate effectively was something they observed as improving and this also led to improved confidence. For example, Butterfly believed that her communication skills, “*including listening, understanding and conveying my own ideas to others have improved a lot*”. Based on the Good Practice Principles, Butterfly’s ability to use language in a ‘variety of communication tasks’ (DEEWR, 2008, p. 1) enabled her to advise and support her domestic peers. Butterfly has identified and reported an improvement in her language proficiency and she also reflected that this also led to increased levels of confidence. She attributed this development to her work as a PLA. So, while Volet (2003) discusses the importance of providing unique in-subject opportunities for interactions for diverse student populations, for the IPLAs “the unique opportunities” (p. 3) have been facilitated beyond the curriculum. The unique nature of the opportunities for the IPLAs may well be in the fact that there is no predictability or uniformity to the interactions, as might be orchestrated in a classroom. Instead, their interactions with a diverse range of students are spontaneous, unpredictable, and therefore challenging from both language and social perspectives, contributing to improved language proficiencies.

5.2. New awareness

According to the respondents, working as a PLA led to greater insights into their experiences as international students. For example, Butterfly discussed the difficulties as an international student in finding a job, particularly “a good job”. She observed that the “*program provided a valuable opportunity where I can be considered equally as other local students ... working with the nicest people who would treat me with respect and integrity*”. Andrea also referred to being treated “*with the same respect, support and courtesy accorded to [other PLAs]*”. These comments reveal a level of inequality experienced by international students that echo the false binary Straker (2016) discusses, whereby heterogeneity between domestic and international students is the focus, rather than homogeneity. Once that binary was removed so that Butterfly and Andrea were given the opportunity to apply for the same prestigious PLA job as domestic students, they then reported a similarity of experience not a dissimilarity. Tasha reveals a different type of self-awareness as a result of her PLA work. Perhaps because she is a PhD student with teaching

experience in her home country, she admitted that initially she felt that she may not learn much in her PLA role. However, she found in reality, this was not the case. Tasha revealed that the work was not just about assisting students with their assessments. She realised that she came to view the job as a challenge to improve herself. Her teaching experience gave her the confidence to know how to write academically, however Tasha realised that explaining this to others was a different skill altogether. She made the observation that *“through verbalizing and articulating my existing knowledge and skills to others, I think I have also improved and acquired more skills and knowledge”*. Further to this, Tasha reveals considerable self-awareness when she adds that *“now, when I am exposed to something new, I try to learn and understand them in the ways that allows me to ‘teach’ somebody else. This makes me deepen my understanding and insights”*. Tasha’s language development has enabled her to not only expand her knowledge and her skills, but this in turn has enabled her to better support others. Furthermore, Tasha’s comments about self-improvement, indicate a strong sense of her values. Her commitment to developing herself and her skills so that she is better able to support others, indicates a highly principled approach to her work.

5.3. Understanding others from different ethnic backgrounds

The respondents also revealed improved understandings of others from different cultural backgrounds as a result of their PLA work. While most students seeking assistance from the PLAs are domestic students, international students also use the service. This provides all PLAs with opportunities to work with students from various cultural backgrounds. The IPLAs indicated enhanced understandings of other cultures (including the host culture), but they also gained insights into their own cultures as a result of their interactions with other students.

For Butterfly, the earliest introductions to the behaviours of the host culture came at PLA training and through working with other PLAs and ‘learning from them’. This new knowledge was related to business etiquette that Butterfly had not been exposed to in her home country or in other jobs in Australia. Her other jobs here were “not as formal,” so she had to learn new Australian work culture behaviours. Butterfly outlined an important difference she observed between Australia and her home country. The PLAs are encouraged to be friendly and welcoming in both verbal language and body language. Butterfly observed that when the student was seated, the PLAs would ensure that the student felt relaxed before beginning the advising session and that *“this attitude is maintained regardless of students’ identity, origin or discipline”*. Through observing the domestic PLAs, she came to understand qualities she attributes to the host culture, including being *“friendly, helpful, kind and sympathetic attitude towards international students”*. Without this experience, Butterfly may not have had the opportunity to develop these insights about the “host culture”, nor would she have expanded her cultural awareness of her home country, where she noted that *“it is quite surprisingly different from my home country, where some people can be hostile, disrespectful or even racist”*. These experiences reinforce Toyokawa and Toyokawa’s (2002) claims about the importance of social context in developing an understanding of “social skills, values and customs in the host society” (p. 366).

Tasha, who is Vietnamese, made the following observation about her work with students she identified as coming from India. Her comments are related to communication and reveal the development of cross-cultural understandings. She observed a non-verbal “head wobble” which confused her. The meaning was unclear, *“does this mean no, maybe or yes, I understand? I was lost in interpretation”*. Tasha proposed that if a Vietnamese student had made the gesture, it would signal they did not understand. She then goes on to surmise that *“correct interpretation is really important in these circumstances because it impacts on how we are going to continue the consultation”*. As a result, Tasha did some research to “decode” the gesture and is satisfied that she understands its meaning. Her insight allowed her to conclude that *“the same body language may mean different things in different cultures. Being able to read the body language right is important”*. Tasha’s comments reveal a nuanced understanding of communication and the im-

pacts non-verbal cues can have on interactions. Furthermore, Tasha has revealed an understanding that gestures related to communication can also be culturally specific, which supports Volet's (2003) claim that internationalising the curriculum can lead to the development of intercultural competencies.

Tasha also observed that South-East Asian students were less likely to express their own views or to interrupt her. She attributed this to their cultural backgrounds, whereby "*the people who offer help should receive respect*" which is "*shown through being attentive listeners rather than active speakers*". As a result of her own cultural background, Tasha had greater insight into some of the behaviours of other students from cultures similar to hers. She noted that even though these students were studying in Australia, their behaviours were more closely aligned to their home cultures.

Andrea also gained insight into herself and her own culture. She commented that after working as a PLA, she has learnt not to judge students on their appearance and 'how they present'. Andrea went on to explain that she can be judgemental, believing this to be connected to her cultural and family background where "*there is a lot of importance placed on studying and acquiring a university degree*".

Andrea was able to reflect on her behaviour where she might sometimes judge a student as "*lazy, not motivated*" or not trying "*hard enough*" if they had failed a subject or wanted to defer or drop-out. Through her interactions as a PLA and as a student, Andrea reports that she is less judgemental. Andrea's reflection has shown self-awareness, and an understanding that her values may have shifted as a result of her interactions with various students. She appears to have more insight into the consequences of judging people, and that her reactions potentially had their origins in her own culture. Perhaps too, without the opportunity to study and work in another country, Andrea's attitudes may not have been challenged.

Tasha also discussed non-judgemental behaviours she observed in domestic PLAs. After a student consultation where a student's written work had a high similarity percentage (reported through Turnitin), she observed the following occurred:

The [PLA] who talked to that student on the day was really non-judgemental, and as showing his/her understanding since this student is from an educational background where plagiarism is not seriously treated. Even though I have known this non-judgemental attitude of Australian people during my time studying in Australia, this is the very first time that I experienced this in a work-based environment. I believe this is really important in creating a safe space for students seeking ... help with their academic problems.

Tasha's comment about the difference between knowing about the non-judgemental attitudes of Australians, and observing it for herself, is perceptive. This highlights Smart, Volet, and Ang's (2000) belief that "diverse interactions and experiences" (p. 9), contribute to better understandings.

Lina also believed that her understandings of student mental health and stress and its cultural presentations developed as a result of her student interactions. She observed that stressed domestic students were more open with her in expressing their emotions, even if the problem was relatively minor. In contrast, she noted that students from Asia whose issues were highly serious, did not reveal the level of their distress. Lina believed that her cultural understanding, as someone from Asia, made her "*more aware about the cultural background one comes from*" so that she would not make assumptions about a student's "*mental wellbeing being unaffected*" just because they did not appear upset. The observations made by Tasha and Lina reveal a clear understanding of the various modes of communication and how these might differ from culture to culture, suggesting an insight into how these influence interpersonal interactions. Their comments also indicate highly perceptive observations which these IPLAs were able to then apply

to their work with students. In addition, in both instances the IPLAs were also empathic in their concern for the creation of safe learning spaces and for the student's mental health and well-being. These are certainly behaviours and attitudes that are expected of all PLAs, which again reinforces the importance of homogeneity rather than heterogeneity of experience.

5.4. Complex problem solving

It could be argued that complex problem-solving is fundamental to the work of all PLAs. On a daily basis, students seek academic skills support from the PLAs who then have to make spontaneous decisions about how to best help those students. At times the support they suggest is not complicated and may for example involve showing a student relevant resources, such as a referencing tool. However, on other occasions, the student's needs may be much more nuanced and this will require complex problem-solving. Sometimes the issue may be that the student is seeking help for an assessment task which is from a discipline area that is unfamiliar to the PLA. This may be further complicated if a student has high levels of distress or anxiety. How the PLA responds in such circumstances will require them to not only decipher the type of support relevant to an unfamiliar assessment task, but also how to address the student's emotional state (see the previous example from Lina). In forming these judgements, the PLA is involved in making a highly complex series of decisions to ensure that student is adequately supported both academically and emotionally. The needs of the students and how well the PLAs feel they have supported them are often central to the PLA's perceptions of whether they have done their job satisfactorily.

All PLAs face these challenges, just as they have to establish what support to offer all students who seek their assistance. Butterfly explained that working with some students can be challenging and requires various approaches, particularly when they are "agitated or emotional". Despite this challenge, she has realised that she has a "*natural instinct of calming people down, listening to their problems and finding out solutions while being calm and patient myself*". Tasha further observed that working with students can be much more difficult when English is not a first language. For her, having "*no idea of who you are going to talk to and what types of assignments that you are going to read*" was particularly difficult, and she reported that she "*sometimes felt a bit overwhelmed reading assignments with lots of technical terms from other disciplines (i.e. Laws)*". It should also be noted that in order to consult with students and manage challenging interactions requires a highly developed grasp of the language. As DEEWR (2008) suggests, these IPLAs are constantly "organising their language" beyond correct grammar and sentence structure to facilitate complex and dynamic communications conducted in the host language with domestic students. The abilities of these IPLAs to navigate such complex language interactions challenges the negative cultural assumptions about the level of English language proficiency of international students as a group.

5.5. Contribution to the community

The IPLAs all mentioned the feeling of belonging to a community. The community they referred to was not the international student community, though of course they belong to that. These IPLAs all reported a strong sense of belonging to the university as a whole and to the PLA community. For example, Butterfly felt a "*sense of belongingness [sic] to the student community*" because she was not only working, but she was also helping students. Her reward was the "*great thanks, smile and happy attitudes*" from the students she helped. Lina also articulated an emotional aspect to her work when she "*shared happiness and excitement with students in their happy times. I have also comforted students in their not so good moments*". For Lina, this also gave her a greater "*sense of belongingness to the students of [the university]*". Andrea also reported "*a deep sense of belonging to the PLA team*", as a result of being a member of a small team in a shared workspace. Tasha also mentioned how a shared endeavour contributed to her sense of belonging to "*a community where people are doing similar things and sharing what they have been doing and the resources that they find useful and potentially beneficial to their*

peers' future consultations". In addition, Lina raised the importance of contributing to students in general after overcoming her own challenges as an international student. She had always wanted to be a PLA so that she could "*help the new students struggling in Year 1 of their university life, so that, they do not have to undergo the same feeling and fear of avoiding communication with people [that she experienced]*". Lina's comments here reveal that she is not blinkered by the false binary Straker (2016) highlights; she wants to help all new students, not just international students, acknowledging that all students may face the challenges she faced.

For all IPLAs, their sense of belonging arose from a shared work purpose. However, Lina also reported that her feeling of community emerged from opportunities to interact during training and at the end-of-year PLA social activities. This reinforces the claims by Tokoyawa and Tokoyawa (2002) that extra-curricular activities facilitate the development of social networks and social skills. It is evident that these IPLAs have developed in a range of areas outlined in the AUSSE General Development Outcomes. In addition, their experiences reveal that through their extra-curricular work they have had the opportunities to interact with domestic students in a way that was not offered within the curriculum. These types of interactions are identified in the literature as being lacking in the lives of many international students (Burdett & Crossman, 2012; Ashton-Hay, Wignell, & Evans, 2016).

The importance of these interactions was further articulated by the IPLAs. Lina mentions that her dedication to her studies meant that she had little time to interact with domestic students. However, she continued that "*being a PLA provided me with the biggest platform to connect with a variety of students*". Butterfly also observed that commitment to her studies had a negative impact on her both mentally and economically. She was "*very busy with studying timetable, stressful about finding a stable job while trying to balance my life. There were times I felt too tired to an extent that may have led to depression*". The fact that these IPLAs were very focused on their studies with little time for social interactions, highlights the importance of Leask's (2009) suggestion for more informal interactions between international and domestic students. Butterfly also suggested that she thought depression was probably common for international students. This is reinforced in the literature and has been reported in the media (Dow, 2019). In light of this problem, the comments made by the IPLAs underscore the importance of the social contacts related to their work. This is reflected in Lina's comments about how she valued the social connections she made during PLA training and the end-of-year activities. These provided her with "*that necessary time of connecting with my fellow mates and leaders*". Andrea made similar observations about the importance of social connections, saying "*it has been quite easy to talk and make friends with other PLAs in the program*". All of the participants' comments here reinforce the importance of social contacts with domestic students for international students (Toyokawa & Toyokawa, 2002). As international students, it was through the PLA program that such regular interactions were available to them. The importance of these connections, both professional and social, reveal that these students may not be as exposed to the social isolation experienced by many international students (Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). However, their comments do imply that social isolation had indeed been experienced and the associated risks were clear in Butterfly's acknowledgement of depression. This highlights the importance, for these international students, of joining a team such as the PLAs which meant that the IPLAs became part of a strong social network. This also links closely to the literature that suggests international students desired "more interaction with native speakers" (Ashton-Hay, Wignell, & Evans, 2016, p. A11). Further to this, the IPLAs all mentioned the opportunities they had to socialise with the rest of the PLA team, which was comprised mainly of domestic students. These opportunities occurred before and after shifts, and also during training sessions and at the end of the year. Finally, the literature indicates that 13% of international students had not worked with domestic students outside the classroom (Edwards, 2010, p. 4), yet for the IPLAs, this is what they do every time they have a shift. The respondents have also provided insights into the "academic and social facets" (Edwards, 2010, p. 2) of the university.

6. Conclusion

The four IPLAs who participated in this study all identified a range of areas where they have developed various skills. All reported the importance of the job in contributing to the development of their communication skills and language proficiencies and how this led to an increase in their confidence. These IPLAs have had opportunities to interact on a regular basis with many domestic students. The literature continues to identify that the limited interactions with domestic students remains a significant concern for both the students and universities, despite efforts to address the issue. Perhaps it could be argued that these IPLAs have in fact shown significant development in a range of areas that could be explained by their participation in a program where their daily work requires them to interact with domestic students and use their written, aural and oral skills. It is not unexpected that the skills, confidence and language proficiencies of these IPLAs would develop with such regular interactions with domestic students.

In terms of the AUSSE General Development Outcomes, these IPLAs showed increased self-awareness, an ability to solve complex real-world problems through the management of the behaviours of others and in the flexibility with which they responded to student issues. They all revealed greater self-awareness, not only in terms of their skills, but also in their attitudes to others. Their work also provided opportunities to develop their values. While the PLA program enabled them to gain insight into the host culture, and other cultures, it also allowed them to reflect on their own home cultures, which led to further insights and awareness. Their work in the PLA program appears to have afforded them opportunities to interact with domestic students that they would not have otherwise had. And as alluded to above, they also had the opportunity to socialise with domestic PLAs and gain insights into the host culture that again, they may not have had otherwise.

In light of the development and insights reported by these IPLAs, it is understandable why the literature continues to emphasise the importance of international students being provided with opportunities to interact with domestic students. With the developments and the improvements in language skills reported by the IPLAs, it could be argued that regardless of the language proficiencies of international students, interactions with domestic students would lead to improved skills and insights. It is therefore, imperative for universities to continue to look for more opportunities for international students to interact with domestic students. While the opportunities within subjects should continue, these interactions may be somewhat orchestrated. The value of the opportunities for these IPLAs has been that their interactions with a diverse range of students, including domestic, were spontaneous and challenging from both language and social perspectives.

This study, while small in scope, reveals experiences of international students that offer a counter narrative that does not focus on the negative aspects of the international student experience. Although the IPLAs are an exceptional group of high achieving students who undergo a rigorous selection process to become PLAs, their experiences are important in highlighting that international education can be the positive experience that it is often touted to be. The opportunities afforded to this small group highlight the need for a range of experiences for all international students.

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