Case Study

LACE (Language and Cultural Exchange): Easing Transition for International Postgraduate Students

June 2010

Cheryl Lange and Siri Barrett - Lennard
The University of Western Australia
Perth, Australia

© The Observatory on Borderless Higher Education
LACE (Language and Cultural Exchange): Easing Transition for International Postgraduate Students

Abstract:

LACE is an intercultural friendship programme open to all postgraduates and staff at The University of Western Australia (UWA). Attendance at its regular, free social events helps dispel the loneliness and isolation felt by many international postgraduate students new to Australia and contributes to their feeling a greater sense of belonging to the UWA community.

The Authors:

Dr Cheryl Lange is an English Language and learning Skills Adviser. She is looking forward to another year of coordinating LACE and would like to find ways to increase the interaction between local students and international students

Ms Siri Barrett-Lennard is an English Language and Learning Skills Adviser. Siri runs face-to-face sessions for students wanting to improve their English language skills, develops resources and programmes for international students, and collaborates with UWA staff on ways to foster academic English skills development at UWA. Siri has particular interests in university transition for international students.

About The University of Western Australia

The University of Western Australia was established in 1911 as Western Australia’s first university. It was also the first free university in the British Empire, actively promoting equal access to tertiary education for all social classes.

It is a member of significant international networks of excellent research intensive universities, including the Worldwide Universities Network and the Matariki Network of Universities as well as a member of the Australian 'Group of Eight' research universities.

Further information about UWA is available via its website. URL: http://www.uwa.edu.au/
LACE (Language and Cultural Exchange): Easing Transition for International Postgraduate Students

Introduction

The University of Western Australia (UWA) is one of Australia’s leading universities and has an international reputation for excellence in teaching, learning and research. UWA has about 21,000 students enrolled across nine faculties – Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts; Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; Business; Education; Engineering, Computing and Mathematics; Life and Physical Sciences; Law; Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences; and Natural and Agricultural Sciences – and the School of Indigenous Studies.

Recognising that its reputation needs to be supported by strong and enduring links to the international community, UWA recruits postgraduate students from around Australia and overseas. In 2010 international postgraduates make up 33.2% of the postgraduate cohort with most (434) students coming from Asian and Middle Eastern countries, compared with 58 from European countries.

Moving to a new country to study is both an exhilarating and daunting experience so at some time during their stay students are likely to experience some form of culture shock or disenchantment with their new life. During their first days – and sometimes weeks – at UWA, most postgraduates appear to be positive about their new circumstances. However, once the semester begins and the reality of being a postgraduate student and having to work in a new academic culture and in a new language sinks in, that initial excitement is, in many cases, replaced by anxiety, loneliness, sleeplessness, and sometimes identity conflict.

The majority of international postgraduates come to Australia without the familial, cultural and linguistic supports they had in their home countries. Adjusting to new cultures and customs can be challenging; for this reason, LACE (Language and Cultural Exchange), a social networking programme, was set up to ease the transition of international postgraduate students into UWA life. The programme, an initiative of the STUDYSmarter team, which is part of UWA’s Student Services, provides opportunities for both course work and research postgraduate students and staff from different cultures and language groups to interact socially within the university context.

LACE began in 2005 with a UWA Diversity Initiatives Fund Small Grant and was able to expand the following year with a further grant to establish an online presence (www.lace.uwa.edu.au), which is updated after each fortnightly event. From an initial group of 45, LACE has grown to close to 400 registered members who between them speak more than 45 languages and come from over 50 countries. The programme is becoming well-known around Australia with the University of Adelaide piloting a similar programme in 2009.

---

1 Data are from UNISTATS, an annual statistics publication detailing student enrolments and load, course completions, staff, finance and research of the University of Western Australia. See UNISTATS website.
5 The University of Adelaide’s Language and Cultural Exchange (LCE) is designed to facilitate interaction and mutual exchange between international students and local students and staff at the University. See the University of Adelaide’s website for further information.
LACE activities provide postgraduate students with opportunities to develop social and academic connections beyond their field of study. They also encourage greater awareness of other university-run programmes, thereby engendering a sense of belonging to the university community. According to one member, LACE events foster “an excellent environment for international students who might feel lonely to make new friends.”

1 Activities

LACE events are varied and almost always include food and drink. The twice yearly barbeques on the Matilda Bay foreshore of the Swan River across the road from UWA are the most popular. Members, frequently accompanied by their spouses, friends and children, cook the sausages and onions, and butter the bread in groups thus providing plenty of opportunities for chatting in a relaxed and alcohol-free atmosphere. Judging by the amount of hot chilli sauce that is consumed at each barbeque, that chatting almost certainly includes talk about the blandness of Australian food...

Members register their interest in attending the barbeque and at the same time indicate any dietary restrictions. Attention to this detail and clear explanations of where, for example, the halal, non-beef and vegetarian options are being cooked ensure that members with religious or cultural dietary constraints feel welcome and included in this popular Australian pastime.

LACE-organised guided tours of UWA’s heritage listed Winthrop Hall and Tower and its various museums and art galleries attract members eager to find out more about their university, Australian history and the artistic endeavours of Australian and overseas artists. The annual tour of Winthrop Hall and the trek up the 46 metre (150 foot) high Tower attracts large numbers as it is a photographer’s delight at the top of the 184 steps.

Donning three dimensional glasses and exploring seldom known facts about the origins of Australia and getting tips about where to find gold in the state keeps members engaged when visiting the Earth Science Museum, as does the promise of afternoon tea at the UniClub afterwards.

Members use LACE events in an informal way but there are also possibilities for them to engage in more formal presentations, for example, at Orientations and Welcome ceremonies. Each year during Teaching and Learning Month LACE hosts a session at which postgraduates from around the world provide their perspectives on a particular theme. In 2010, it is Teaching in Times of Change. Participants from places as diverse as Brunei, Chile, Iraq, Pakistan and Sri Lanka will present their thoughts on the topic. Each presentation is followed by questions and then all gather for a late afternoon tea featuring culinary delights from around the world. Such activities give members experience speaking to audiences from a range of disciplines and can be added to their curriculum vitae.

---

6 Unless specified, all quotes are from the 2009 LACE evaluation.
Films, such as *Australia* and *Rabbit Proof Fence*, which deal with Indigenous issues usually attract large numbers as they present perspectives and insights into historical Australia which many postgraduates might not come across as part of their academic study.

Even though LACE students interact with local students in tutorials and seminars, some LACE members would like more opportunities to interact with local students. As one member put it, “more friendly Aussies would be better”. To address this gap, a soccer match with the Postgraduates Student Association (PSA) was organised and the activities of the PSA and the Diversity at University group are advertised in emails sent to all LACE members.

2 Making it Work

LACE numbers have grown through promotion in a variety of ways. Talks at Orientation and Welcome ceremonies, flyers included in give-away bags and staff and member recommendations have all been effective forms of advertising. Membership is free and all prospective members need to do to join is to fill in the online registration form. Students’ details, including their email addresses, are then downloaded onto an Excel spreadsheet. Personalised emails using a mail merge function inform LACE members of each activity.

Finding a time to hold events which suits all, or even most, members is impossible. At present, events are run at the same time and on the same day each fortnight: Friday afternoons from 3:00 pm – 5:00 pm. Changing the time and day for each event may get a more varied crowd but because a core of members usually turns up for most events, constant change has the potential to inhibit the cementing of friendships.

LACE activities are mainly run during semester and finish before 5pm. In evaluations of the programme, some members have indicated they would also like activities to be held after hours and on weekends. This has been made possible through our collaboration with the Council for International Students Western Australia (CISWA), whose weekend excursions and day trips are promoted through LACE emails.

3 Benefits

International postgraduate students have identified a range of benefits from their participation in LACE. These include:

- Easing their transition and improving their participation and engagement in UWA life;

[I like the] opportunities to mingle with some of the STUDY Smarter team members who have tremendously helped the international students in making their student-life more meaningful.

[I like] meeting people from different countries, and sharing with them the experiences of trying to adjust in Australia.

- Assisting them to form friendship networks both within and beyond their own discipline areas;

I liked opportunities to widen and strengthen one’s circle of friends.
• Improving their ability to converse in English;

[I like the] opportunities to enhance [my] speaking skills in the use of English as a Second Language.

• Improving their cross-cultural awareness and sensitivities; and

[I like the] opportunities to learn and understand better the culture of other…students.

• Providing them with a greater sense of belonging and commitment to the university. In the 2009 LACE evaluation, 43% strongly agreed, and 57% agreed, that LACE helped them feel more connected at UWA.

LACE taps into the potential of international students to serve as a resource to promote intercultural understanding. The Associate Director, Equity and Diversity at UWA recently remarked that LACE provided “an important element in this University’s aspiration to create ‘citizens of the globe’ who are emotionally and intellectually comfortable with difference”. Local students see an advantage in being a LACE member. As one Australian-born member commented “I’ve always wanted to travel and never been able to. LACE gives me the opportunity to travel without leaving home”.

In addition, staff benefit through their involvement in LACE, as it provides them with insights into, and a better appreciation of, the breadth and diversity of the international student community within UWA.

4 Keys Lessons Learned

• The success of LACE indicates that a modest initial investment is sufficient to set up a successful network which has positive cultural, educational and social outcomes for both staff and postgraduate students.

• International students find interacting with other international students reassuring and beneficial.

• LACE is used most frequently by new international postgraduate students. It helps in alleviating their initial loneliness and sense of isolation.

• Regular attendance at LACE events over a period of weeks provides opportunities for new postgraduates in particular to establish friendship networks which help sustain them throughout their studies and into their working lives.

• Introducing members to places of interest within UWA encourages a greater sense of connection to the university.

• Providing food to suit a range of dietary requirements is an effective way to attract large numbers of participants.

• It is impossible to find a time to hold events that suit all; the use of student surveys to find the best possible time is recommended.

8 Data are from a 2006 evaluation undertaken by LACE.
References


