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Stepping Forward to Learn: Thai Students Reflect on Hosting Australian International Exchange Students

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Abstract

The value of international student exchange programs is well documented – from the perspective of visiting students and sending institutions. This paper reports on research that aimed to capture different perspectives by talking with host Thai students who interacted with and translated for visiting Australian social work students. This focus on the exchange experience from the perspective of the hosting Thai students foregrounds these seldom-heard voices, highlighting the benefits of engagement and reflective learning for host students and institutions. The analysed data shows that there are numerous opportunities for host students to benefit from international exchange and to develop the attitudes, knowledge and skills that are necessary prerequisites for intercultural learning and sensitivity. The paper illustrates the high demands on hosts and can inform good practice in the planning and design of exchange programs.

Key Words: Student Exchange; Host Experience; Intercultural Learning

Introduction

Internationalisation of the curriculum is a priority for higher education institutions seeking to create ‘globally minded’ graduates (Spencer-Oatey, 2013; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Lavankura, 2013). In Australia, higher education policy explicitly promotes internationalisation of the curriculum, with student exchange seen as an important mechanism to achieve the internationalisation agenda. For example, the strategic plan of Universities Australia promotes “an internationally engaged higher education sector that encourages students to include an overseas, particularly Asia-Pacific, internship experience as part of their study” (Universities Australia, 2014, p. 8). Claiming similar goals, the Australian

Government's 'New Colombo Plan', announced in 2013, provides scholarships and grants for Australian students to engage in international internship or exchange opportunities in the Asia Pacific Region. While there are numerous purported goals associated with student exchange programs, significant literature (Deardorff, 2011; Ahn, 2014) highlights the expectation that international exchange will contribute to the development of "intercultural competence and qualities for global citizenship" (Trede, Bowles & Bridges, 2015, 442).

Internationalisation and its potential outcomes also receives significant attention in Thailand as the Thai Government endeavors to become an important provider of higher education in the Asia Pacific Region (Lao, 2015). Thailand is a key player in the Association of South East Asian Nation's (ASEAN) student mobility program, which aims to prepare graduates for regional employment through initiatives that foster cross-cultural understanding (SEAMEO Regional Centre for Higher Education and Development, n.d.). Lavankura (2013) reports on Thailand's goal to become a regional education hub, with a high demand for English language tuition evident among Thai students and employers. Thailand's higher education institutions participate in a range of programs to promote international mobility for students within the ASEAN region and act as an important resource to universities of the Global North as host to many international student exchange programs. Supporting the high profile of international student exchange in Thailand, the Office of Higher Education Commission (OHEC) promotes a "Best Practice in Student Exchange" award among higher education institutions using criteria that includes the alignment of the international exchange program with the Thai University's mission, the quality of inbound and outbound student exchange activities, and the commitment to collaboration evidenced through mutually beneficial conferences and other academic endeavors (Lao, 2015).

Informed by these mutual priorities, James Cook University (JCU), in North Queensland, Australia, developed a systematic approach to 'internationalising' the social work curriculum through strategies that include increased international content in the social work degree, two-way staff and student international exchange, cross cultural skill development in preparation for globalised practice, and international joint research projects (Harris et al. 2017). Part of this internationalisation process has been the development of a collaborative relationship with International Affairs Office and the English language department of Nakhon Ratchasima Rajabhat University (NRRU) in Thailand.

The JCU/NRRU Student Exchange Program

JCU and NRRU have worked in partnership to develop a sustainable international student exchange program over many years. Australian social work staff visit NRRU frequently to build and sustain the foundation for a long-term, multi-dimensional partnership and to foster a mutually beneficial student exchange program. The relationship was formalised through a Memorandum of Understanding in 2010 and in 2011 five JCU social work students traveled to Thailand on exchange. Since 2012 over 60 JCU students have undertaken the exchange and engaged in a range of activities including an immersion in a local Thai village (Ban Non Wat) and visits to local social welfare organisations and agencies, such as Probation and Parole and The Home for the Destitute. Each year further opportunities are included as the experience and expertise of both NRRU and JCU staff evolves. A range of experiences are now offered during the program, including intensive in-country language and cultural programs that are facilitated and sustained by NRRU's International Affairs Office and by NRRU undergraduate students. The NRRU students are most commonly studying an English language major and act as key liaison officers and translators during the exchange program. The importance of the liaison students' contribution to the visiting students' experience has

become increasingly evident in each exchange program, as students are ‘buddied’ with each other to promote relationship building and intercultural sharing. The popularity of this ‘buddy’ role has grown, resulting in increased numbers of Thai students seeking to participate in the exchange as liaison students. In 2015 the NRRU International Affairs Office introduced a formal training program and selection process for English major students wanting to engage with foreign visitors and actively sought additional translation/ liaison opportunities. NRRU students now also act as liaison /translators for ‘EarthWatch’ volunteers who visit to participate in archaeological excavations at Ban Non Wat (see for example <http://au.earthwatch.org/expeditions/origins-of-angkor>) and with international sporting teams who visit Nakhon Ratchasima.

Host Student Perspectives in Student Exchange

The literature about short-term international student exchange programs report many positive benefits for travelling students such as the development of intercultural knowledge, open and more sensitive attitudes to other cultures, and the capacity to engage and work with people from diverse backgrounds (Ahn, 2014; Soria & Troisi, 2014). However, research that explores student perspectives about these experiences is limited with much of the literature focused on the description of exchange programs, and the perceptions and motivations of academics leading internationalisation projects (see for example Bell & Anscombe, 2012; Trede, et al, 2015). Where analyses of students’ experiences do exist (see for example Pawar, Hanna, & Sheridan, 2004; Forsey, Broomhall & Davis, 2012) it is the experiences of students, usually from the Global North, travelling as visitors into different cultural contexts in the Global South. Razack (2002) particularly addresses this when she questions the language of ‘exchange’ highlighting the unidirectional flow of both social work knowledge and practice from the Global North to the Global South as a potential pitfall of student exchange programs.

Addressing this unilateral focus of exchange programs was of particular importance to the collaborators in the JCU-NRRU partnership. While we recognized that learning from the exchange experiences of both visiting and host students potentially contributes to mutually beneficial partnerships, the literature that focuses on the experiences, aspirations and learnings for host students is particularly rare. An exception is the work of Jon (2012, 2013) who explores the interactions between domestic and international students on a Korean university campus, from the perspective of the local students. Jon (2012) also highlights the rarity of research on domestic students' experience, particularly in the context of non-English speaking and non-Western countries, and points to the potential of this absence to mask “the Westernization and recolonization of Asian higher education” (Jon 2012, p. 443). This paper aims to contribute to efforts to address this gap.

Anecdotally the Thai students involved in this exchange program, reported very positive outcomes from their experience as hosts. However, our capacity to understand and intentionally foster and enhance these outcomes was limited in the absence of specific knowledge and frameworks of analysis. Therefore, ethical permission was sought and granted to interview NRRU students who participated in the international exchange program as hosts, liaisons and translators to the visiting social work students and other groups of visitors. We were particularly interested in what students felt they learnt and achieved through the exchange and their perceptions of their own intercultural learning. The paper now considers the literature and research that offers some insight into how intercultural learning, as facilitated within international exchange programs, is understood.

International exchange: facilitating meaningful contact

While there is literature that claims a focus on ‘host experiences’ in international exchange, closer examination reveals these are usually the reflections of institutions of the Global North

exploring their own experience as hosts of international students. This literature consistently emphasises the overestimation of the level of connection between international students and their hosts. International students in English speaking, host universities usually find themselves grouped with other international students, isolated from host students and excluded from multi-cultural groups (Summers & Volet, 2008; Leask, 2010). Similar evidence arises from research conducted with international students on university campuses in the Asia-Pacific region such as China, Korea and Japan. For example, Umino and Benson (2016, p. 758) identify the ‘peripheral participation’ of an international student from Indonesia during a study exchange at a Japanese university. The student’s initial interactions primarily consisted of contact with other international students and paid Japanese support staff; rarely, if ever, did the student develop close relationships with domestic Japanese students during the first two years of his stay. While they note that new relationships became easier over time, Umino & Benson’s work demonstrate the issues for short term immersion programs where international visitors are usually positioned as members of homogenous groups, observing activity and culture in the host country *en masse*, from afar (Forsey et al, 2012).

Not only is the amount of contact between hosts and locals over estimated, Spooner-Lane, Tangen, Mercer, Hepple & Carrington (2013) claim that many exchange programs assume intercultural learning will develop naturally if students from diverse cultures are merely placed in shared learning spaces. They point to research that demonstrates that unless this shared time is well structured and meaningful, students miss opportunities to develop intercultural skills and enhance their intercultural learning and competence. Trede et al (2015) go further claiming that exposure to intercultural experiences without adequate structure and the preparation that facilitates students’ capacity to make sense of their experience, can result in negative learning outcomes. Deliberate and structured interventions

that promote reciprocal learning are vital (Spooner –Lane et al 2013; Trede et al, 2015); active and engaging tasks increase students learning from each other and increase mutual respect and understanding. Jon (2013) further supports this view and highlights the need for institutional intervention in the development of structured activities to bring international students into contact in meaningful ways with domestic students. Jon’s work highlights the benefits reported by domestic Korean students when the university developed campus-wide strategies such as structured buddy programs and language exchange programs, both purposefully aimed at increasing the meaningful contact between domestic and international students.

International exchange and intercultural learning

For the purposes of understanding the nature of intercultural learning for students, the literature around intercultural competency is relevant, especially the work of Deardorff (2011) who advanced a process orientated model for assessing the development of intercultural competence. This model, like many others (see Perry & Southwell (2011) for a systematic review of this literature), considers the development of relevant and appropriate attitudes, knowledge, and skills as integral to intercultural competence. The development of respectful, open and curious attitudes; knowledge about one’s own and other cultures; and listening, observation and evaluation skills, all contribute to an internal frame of reference shift which ultimately leads to changed and more desirable behavior in intercultural interactions (Deardorff, 2011).

While it is widely used, the concept of intercultural competence has many important critiques and pitfalls inherent in its uncritical application. Gopalkrishnan and Pulla (2016) contend that even the word ‘competence’ suggests the acquisition of a set of behaviors that can be clearly identified, accurately measured, and successfully performed. This focus on performance and measurement promotes the potential for practices and interactions that lack content, meaning

and genuineness. Achieving cross cultural competence in interpersonal interactions positions one person as more informed, with 'better' attitudes and the capacity to act in ways that always address differences. Dean (2001) suggests a better process is to claim cross cultural incompetence, and from this position work to engage in mutually respectful relationships where understanding is negotiated and gradually developed as it is relevant for particular interactions. This process of ongoing and interaction-specific negotiation acknowledges that culture is not static; it is dynamic and constantly developing and changing (Gopalkrishnan & Pulla, 2016). A dynamic notion of culture takes into account that not all members of a cultural group share the same understandings or ideas, and to consider otherwise risks stereotyping and dangerous over-generalizations.

Instead, Gopalkrishnan and Pulla (2016) suggest that no one can ever be totally proficient in cross cultural interactions; rather each interaction provides an opportunity to learn about that specific context and situation. Cultural knowledge must always be considered inadequate and verified through respectful discussions and negotiations (Shalabi, 2014). With this more nuanced understanding of intercultural 'competence', the attitudes, knowledges and skills required for positive interactions are potentially developed by all parties engaged in an intercultural experience, not just visiting students from the Global North.

Research Aims

Informed by the concepts discussed in the literature above and strongly motivated by what is absent in the literature, this paper reports on the experiences of Thai students engaged as liaison/ translators in an international exchange program, contributing to the understanding of international student exchange by:

- Considering a previously unheard voice;
- Interrogating assumptions about unidirectional learning; and

- Exploring the potential learning benefits of international student exchange for host students.

Language is an important aspect of the liaison/translator role and NRRU students are required to competently translate either from Thai to English or from English to Thai. In preparation, the students participate in a formal program, which includes practicing their English through active involvement in a local Toastmasters group. The Thai students receive specific orientation to the Australian students' university, the goals of its exchange activity and the Australian cultural context. NRRU has also expanded the role of Thai liaison students to include translating for EarthWatch volunteers who travel from Australia, USA and Europe to participate in an archaeological dig in small Thai village (Ban Non Wat) close to the university. A number of the students involved in this research drew on these varied experiences in their responses.

The Thai students usually work in pairs and together provided support to one or two Australian students for the three-week exchange. They also collectively facilitate formal language and cultural classes, accompany the Australian students on all cultural visits, and participate in all activities the Australian students engage in, including volunteer work in social welfare institutions. The Thai liaison students also accompany the Australian students to the village immersion component of the exchange at Ban Non Wat.

Method

This research relied on a qualitative methodology, and the data gathering method was the qualitative semi-structured, in-depth interview (Glesne and Peshkin, 1992). Seven Thai students, each enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (English Major) at NRRU, participated in this study. Two students were male and four were female. Students volunteered to participate after information about the research project was distributed to all student liaison officers

immediately following an exchange experience in July 2014. Ethics approval for this study was received from the James Cook University Human Ethics Sub-Committee.

Each respondent was interviewed once with interviews lasting approximately one hour.

Interviews with Thai students were conducted by one Thai and one Australian academic both of whom had been involved in administering the exchange programs in their respective countries. Interviews with Thai students were conducted in English however some participants sought clarification and advice in Thai from the Thai researcher, before composing their English response.

Research on the nature of cross cultural interviewing highlights the important influence of culture and language on data generation through semi-structured interviews. Issues encountered during cross-cultural research interviews such as these, are not only “a problem of language but also a problem of understanding a culture” (Verhoeven, 2000, p.2). It appeared to the Australian academic that the interviews were an intense and even tiring experience for the Thai students, as they listened intently to the questions asked in English and diligently considered their responses. Morren, Gelissen & Vermunt (2012, p. 272) comment on this issue:

Each respondent is assumed to go through five stages: Interpreting the question, retrieving information, generating a judgment, mapping the judgement to the response and editing the response...Especially for minority students, responding to a... statement requires several decisions ... Cross cultural differences in responding may result if respondents seek to avoid the complexity.

The researchers therefore allowed sufficient time for complex interviews. The process was aided by the relationship and rapport developed between both interviewers over a number of years, and with the students through the experience of the recent exchange. Participants were

asked to describe their experience as liaison/translators particularly highlighting surprising, challenging or personally valuable encounters. Students were also asked why they volunteered to become a liaison student, what makes a good liaison student and what advice they would provide a friend considering the role.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using the grounded theory techniques of coding and theme development (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Throughout the process of drawing interpretations from the students' narratives, the researchers recognised research methodology as a way of knowing, that is inextricably linked with culture, language and styles of communication (Ling, 2004). The researchers reviewed each transcript and brought their sometimes differing perspectives together, guided by the Thai researcher who shared her interpretations of the language, thoughts, and feelings expressed by the participant students, recognising that “the subtleties of interaction and language can be lost through the linguistic mediation” (Whiteford & McAllister, 2007, p.78). The insight offered by the Thai researcher helped diminish, although not entirely eliminate, these misinterpretations. Throughout this process the goal of analysis was to move beyond objectivity and subjectivity, and to examine the data from a position of reflexivity: “a constant examination of the use of self, how we as researchers have impacted on the research process, how we have impacted on the informants and the resultant impact on ourselves” (Ling & Fejo-King, 2014, p. 111).

Findings

This research project focused on the experiences of Thai students engaged as liaison/translators in an international exchange program. Students reported that this experience offered meaningful opportunities to engage with foreign visitors and contributed to extensive intercultural learning opportunities. Participants described the impact of these opportunities

on their future aspirations, and on their own understanding of intercultural competence. These experiences are presented in participants' own words, differentiated by pseudonyms. The work of Deardorff (2011) and Gopalkrishnan and Pulla (2016) discussed earlier has been useful to frame commonalities and develop themes.

Courage to engage

While literature indicates that meaningful relationships between visiting and local students is necessary for visiting students to have opportunities to develop intercultural learning (Lough, 2009; Summers & Volet, 2008), there is little that acknowledges the enormity of this expectation for local students. All the students interviewed for this project talked about the need for courage and bravery to take on the task of buddying and interacting with the visiting exchange students.

I wanted to get experience and to practice English with the foreigners. I wanted to get courage and to be brave. (May)

If it's possible I surely recommend others do liaison... but everybody needs to be brave to learn more. (Benz)

You must have a first time for everything. Without the courage for that first step you cannot get to the end of the journey... so don't step back even if it is difficult. Step forward to learn. (Eve)

So while the opportunities provided through the liaison role were enthusiastically accepted by these students, a number felt daunted by the prospect. Their reliance on each other, initially at least, was evident throughout their comments and is an important consideration when organising meaningful cross cultural interactions. On one occasion when a student was not paired, her liaison experience was negatively impacted.

When I went to the village and I did not have a partner, I felt lonely. I felt lots of pressure to be the translator on my own. To do all the listening as well. I did not have other people to talk to about what would be the best way to work it out. I prefer in the future to have someone with me. (May)

Difficult situations and hard work

The literature that reports on visiting students' experiences describe difficulties such as culture shock, loneliness, and being the 'other' (Pawar et al, 2004; Forsey et al 2011).

However, the multiple difficulties encountered by students who step forward to accompany and support visiting students are rarely acknowledged. In these interviews the students shared narratives revealing the high expectations and hard work encountered in their role, much of which was invisible to and unacknowledged by their visitors.

One visitor needed new shoes but the place to buy shoes was far away and difficult without a car. She kept demanding I take her and did not understand it would take me two hours to get there... I tried to stay kind and not show how stressed her demands made me. (Eve)

I was very worried about the details – how can I translate with details, and how can I tell them all about the agency and also how can I tell them about myself. (Nan)

At first it was very hard because I have never done it before – the accent and language of the foreigners made it very hard... At night my partner and I practiced our vocabulary that we did not know... I would ask them to write it down and then I would do research at night back at the hotel. I would look up a word and then the next day I would tell them what I had found. It was hard work – like studying. (Arisa)

These comments highlight the importance attributed by the Thai students to the role of liaison and their sense of responsibility to perform the role well. The stressors involved in the role are not evident to the visitors who at times have unrealistic and unreasonable expectations of the students. Continuing to alert and educate visiting students about the significance of their hosts' efforts is a clear learning from these reflections.

Learning for the future

As identified in literature that examines the experience of visiting students, these host students were aware of the learning possibilities offered by these intercultural experiences.

The students talked about the importance of these experiences for their personal development and future careers.

I decided to volunteer because I need to practice my English skills and my cooperation as a worker. I think if I want to be a teacher I have to gain new experiences to show and inspire my students in the future. (Benz)

Now I am more confident with language but also with my personality – I am braver now to do new things and try new things. (May)

I have learnt to speak well and also I have learnt about an adventurous lifestyle. I have never been to another place on my own without my family – I learnt to be more independent. (Arisa)

Research examining the impact of international exchange on the career prospects of visiting students from the Global North consistently indicates that such experiences impact “employability skills...[and have] career-related benefits such as improved future career prospects and increased ...passion for their chosen career direction” (Potts, 2015, p. 441). However, there is little that illustrates the impact of these learning opportunities for host students. The accounts of the students in this study indicate that they too consider the exchange experiences important to their further aspirations and personal development.

Intercultural competence

Australian universities (and those in the USA and UK) cite the development of intercultural competence as a major goal of their internationalisation strategies and objectives. While acknowledging the contested nature of the concept of ‘competence’, it is nevertheless useful to consider the attitudes, knowledge and skills reportedly developed by the Thai students during their engagement as hosts in an international exchange. This section unpacks the ways in which the students have demonstrated aspects of Deardorff’s (2011) model, highlighting the one sided application of intercultural competence models and drawing our attention to the unacknowledged complexity involved in intercultural interactions. These insights support Gopalkrishnan and Pulla’s (2016) ideas about development of collaborative and inclusive relationships that foster mutual intercultural learning.

Attitudes

Deardorff (2011) asserts that respectful, open, and curious attitudes are antecedents to the development of desirable intercultural behaviors and mutually beneficial relationships. These attitudes were present in the interviews with the Thai students.

I didn't know before what we will meet or what we will gain but I tried to do everything to my best every time... if I can meet many groups of foreigners, I can learn the many styles of the people around the world. I can learn culture and different things from them.
(Gan)

Somebody told me it's hard to prepare ... but I think it looks like more of a challenge... About the unexpected problems - it happens all the time. When I was liaison I didn't know somewhere in Khorat. But I have to search and ask information. One time someone needed ice and I had one hour to provide it. Fortunately I have a phone number for a factory. I just picked some up with a motorbike taxi... I think I am lucky to get this chance. (Benz)

These students demonstrate the curiosity and openness to discovery highlighted as so necessary to positive cross cultural interactions.

Knowledge

The central importance of cultural self-knowledge is identified by Gopalkrishnan and Pulla (2016) and Spencer-Oatey (2013) as a precursor to the development of erudite cross cultural practice models. This aspect of cultural knowledge development was particularly evident for these students, many of whom had never visited the agencies or the village areas to which they accompanied the Australian exchange students.

Usually we just study at the university in the same environment, so this is something very different. The first day I went to the Home for the Destitute, I had never been there before and I did not know anything about it – I was shocked, all the people had physical disorders or mental disorders... When I go there I learn that I can help – it is just a small thing but I can help.... I talked to my friends ... and they didn't know about it either. Next week we will buy some food to give together to them. (Nan)

Another thing I did was I went to Ban Non Wat- even though I only stayed for a few days ... I had a lot of fun and I learnt a lot. I had never been to a village before – my home is in the city. (Natch)

The old women came to teach the local people and the students how to make a pot and I learnt this as well.... It was an interesting part of Thailand history that I did not know.
(May)

The acquisition of cultural knowledge in the development of intercultural sensitivity and awareness particularly highlights the importance of socio-linguistic awareness – an understanding of the social meaning of language in another culture (Deardorff, 2011). This aspect is one of the most difficult skills to acquire in learning a second language (Bishop, 2008) but comments from the Thai students indicate that within the supportive and collaborative partnerships created on their exchange experiences, they developed insight about the complexities of speaking another language.

I learnt many things about my translating and I also learnt about my relationships ... I feel like the relationships with the JCU students and the staff at the home were for me very enjoyable... My speaking in English is better now and my listening and understanding is much better and improved. (Natch)

I would recommend to be a liaison, I would suggest they practice speaking, but I would tell them that it is a way of seeing another way of life and to see another part of Thailand and learn about other things in Thailand. (Arisa)

To be a good liaison you need good language but you need to be adaptable too and do problem solving... you need patience and flexibility, not just language. (Eve)

Skills

Deardorff (2011) suggests that the skills of listening, observing, evaluating, analyzing, interpreting and relating are all fundamental to intercultural competence. Those critiquing the concept like Gopalkrishnan and Pulla (2016) and Dean (2001) claim these skills are critical to respectfully negotiate cross cultural interactions. Gopalkrishnan and Pulla's assertion that these skills are needed and indeed used by all stakeholders in intercultural interactions is supported by the descriptions of skills used by these Thai students. Their efforts to listen, observe and decipher are clearly evident as is their willingness to engage in relationships to improve both their own and the visiting students' experience.

At lunch I would eat rice with the local people and sometimes the foreign students would come and join us. Foreigners did not like chilli – they would say it was hard to eat but they wanted to try. Sometimes the local people do not understand the foreigners so I would translate so they could be friends. I was the link between them. (May)

Sometimes working in groups or in pairs is very hard because everyone has their own ideas, sometimes that makes me sad and I think how can we work together if everyone has different ideas. Different people have different personalities and ideas – sometimes I think I can't work in this group but then we could work it out and work together. (Nan)

I volunteered to be a liaison to practice my English – practice, use, improve my language speaking. But what I did was help people find understanding between each other. (Eve)

Discussion

The comments and ideas presented above indicate that Thai students highly value the opportunity to act as liaison officers/ translators in cross cultural settings and as a result expand their own learning and development. Like many students, these participants were actively seeking experiences which increased their knowledge of global issues, fostered their appreciation of cultural diversity and enhanced their capacity to interact with people from other cultures (Jon, 2013; Spencer – Oatey, 2013; Altbach & Knight, 2007; Forsey et al, 2012). While these goals are discussed most often as the personal growth aspirations of students who travel to undertake study abroad and international exchange experiences, it is unlikely that opportunities to travel are present for the majority of Thai students in our study. However, the data presented here indicates it is possible for these competencies to be developed through global experiences on the students' home campus, particularly as the students reported that they had multiple liaison opportunities with visitors from various countries.

This supports the outcomes of Jon's (2013) work with Korean domestic students purposively linked with international students visiting their home campus. The international education goals of domestic Korean students such as intercultural learning, personal growth and expanded goals for the future were facilitated by the active promotion of meaningful relationships with international students on their home campus. As in Jon's research, the data

from this study indicates that the purposeful development of preparation activities and intercultural learning opportunities for domestic students can have a positive outcome for the development of intercultural skills for non-traveling students. In fact the international visiting students can be considered an important resource in fostering intercultural learning and skills for domestic students and can potentially address the inequity in international education opportunities between travelling and non-travelling students.

The students who participated in this study reported a number of positive outcomes and attributed this in general to the opportunity to experience intercultural contact and connections. The work of Allport (1954) on the importance of frequent and in-depth contact between people of different cultures to foster harmony and reduce intergroup stereotyping and prejudice, is relevant here. He highlighted that meaningful contact opportunities where all participants were able to engage in cooperative activities were more likely to lead to positive results for participants (Soria & Troisi, 2014; Spencer –Oatey, 2013). Subsequent research has supported Allport’s findings and identified that when structured opportunities to get to know each other are provided, intercultural friendships can develop between individuals as a result of the intercultural contact. This highlights the effectiveness of integrating opportunities for interpersonal relationship building into all intercultural contact endeavors (Hewstone & Swart, 2011).

The contact between the Thai students and the Australian students in this study reflect many of the elements deemed necessary for positive intercultural experiences. As advocated by Hewstone & Swart (2011) the promotion of intentionally designed curricular and co-curricular activities that structure opportunities for interpersonal interactions and that foster “foundational attitudes of respect, openness and curiosity” (Soria & Troisi, 2014, p. 265) are included in the exchange process. The impact is experienced not just by traveling students

but also by the host Thai students and their experiences reveal the presence of these attributes as well as a burgeoning confidence in communicating in a pressured environment.

However Allport's (1954) work also concluded that cross cultural interactions were most likely to have a positive impact when participants were of equal status. The reflections of the Thai students in this study suggest that the expectations of visiting students were at times unrealistic and indicative of perceived power differentials. Jon (2012) found similar outcomes when examining the role of Korean students as hosts of international students from Western Europe. A number of the Korean students identified that their role as 'buddy' to international students was hard work, with many of their contributions being taken for granted and unappreciated.

Visitors' high expectations of host staff and students to meet their needs is evident in the data from Thai students. Much of the pressure and stress of these expectations was invisible to the visiting students and unacknowledged in the context of the exchange. The dominance of Western models and the prioritisation of Western students' goals and aspirations is evident even in an exchange program that strives to embed mutuality and equity. The entrenched dominance of Western models and the focus on English as the language of exchange, functions to empower the visiting students at the expense of Thai hosts. The benefits for Thai students are often accrued in proportion to the level of self-initiative taken and as many of the participants in this study shared, this requires great courage and some sacrifice –values that are not always noted or understood by the visiting exchange students.

Conclusion

Within dominant neo-liberal contexts, higher education institutions may view internationalisation through a range of economic and social lenses. The goals of internationalisation can vary significantly, definitions of a 'global citizen' can diverge, and

universities' role in promoting international education lacks explicit debate around the reasons for promoting "global graduates" (Leask & Bridge, 2013). The *mutual* benefits of exchange both for sending institutions and visiting students, and for the host organisations, staff and students are not well documented and the idea of genuine reciprocity in exchange receives scant attention in the internationalisation discourse.

This article aimed to address that situation and explored an international student exchange program facilitated through a long-term reciprocal partnership between JCU and NRRU, from the perspective of students on the host campus. The findings reveal that international exchange programs that intentionally and purposefully create opportunities for host students to meaningfully engage with international students can promote the international education goals and aspirations of non-travelling host students as well as the travelling exchange students. However these opportunities must be embedded in programs that acknowledge the expectations and subsequent workload placed on hosts and consciously interrogate assumptions of mutual benefit and equal status between parties.

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