

International students need support to increase peer collaboration

International university students are 13 per cent less likely to collaborate with peers during their studies than their domestic counterparts, an Australian Catholic University study of more than 300 students has found.

The research shows international students are also about 17 per cent less likely to engage in deep approaches to learning compared with their domestic peers.

The findings have sparked calls for more opportunities for international students to engage in collaborative work with domestic learners including workshops on effective intercultural communication strategies for all students.

Institute for Learning Sciences and Teacher Education Senior Research Fellow Dr Feifei Han, who conducted the research at a New South Wales-based university, said it was a surprise to see the collaboration divide given the 313 first year students involved in the study were in the same computer science course.

“They all sat in the same lectures, attended the same tutorials and labs, and used the same syllabus. One of the course objectives was to develop attributes required for job-ready skills, of which collaboration and teamwork is an important one,” she said.

“To help international students actively participate in collaboration and group work, supports should be provided to them at both institutional and course levels.

“At a time when international students are returning in larger numbers post-Covid, these findings show we need to do more to improve the experience of both domestic and international students’ interaction.”

Dr Han said international students felt less confident in their abilities to express their ideas and opinions due to their English language proficiency, which was one of the key reasons preventing them from seeking collaborative experiences with domestic peers.

Additionally, domestic students were also likely to be concerned about differing educational systems and philosophies international students had experienced in their home countries.

Dr Han said international students, particularly from Asian countries of which a significant proportion of students in the study were from, were used to more didactic and teacher-centred educational approaches.

“While Australian universities encourage student-centred and participatory learning, which empower students to become independent learners, many Asian countries primarily focus on transmitting knowledge to students, hence students rely more on teachers and do not take an active role in the learning process,” Dr Han said.

The research also found about 49.2 per cent of domestic students reported using deep approaches to their learning compared with 32.5 per cent of international students.

Deeper learning was characterised by inquiry-led learning including taking initiative, critically evaluating sources, and reflecting on learning and inquiry processes.

International students were also 12 per cent more positive than domestic students about blended course designs combining face-to-face and online learning, and had more interaction with the course dashboard, and online reading and viewing materials.

Dr Han said some international students felt more comfortable using online discussion boards, for example, as an alternative way to interact with students and teaching staff, while recorded videos and notes gave them a chance to view materials multiple times.

“For instance, when lecturers talk too fast, international students may not be able to fully comprehend. Or when a slide has dense information, their slow reading speed may not be able to cope. The access to the online resources, hence, improves international students’ engagement with course content,” she said.

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