Emerging Academic and Social Spaces: Toward a Modern Understanding of International Student Integration in Australasia

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ABSTRACT

The number of international university students in Australasia is set to increase over the next five to ten years, making the integration of this group important to the region. Whilst university lecturers continue to play an important role in this process, much of university students’ communicative behaviour with peers continues to shift more and more to social network sites (SNS), namely Facebook (FB). Using a large response-driven sample (N = 491) and structural equation modelling (SEM), this study presents a dual-path model of international student integration that illustrates two parallel processes to improved institutional commitment: (1) the staff-academic system, where staff’s genuine concern for student development improves students’ perceived academic progress, and commitment; and, (2) the student social-network-site system, where strategic integration of FB contributes to the on- and offline maintenance of close friends, and improves institutional commitment. The implications for policy and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS

Australasia, College Students, International Higher Education, New Zealand, Social Networks, Structural Equation Modelling

1. INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO, 2016) states that the number of students studying abroad continues to surge. From 2003 to 2013 internationally mobile higher education students from Central Asia, studying in Australia and New Zealand, grew from 67,300 to 165,542. While globally, the United States hosted the most students in 2013 (19%), international student inflows into Australasia also feature prominently at 6% for Australia, and 1% for New Zealand. The strong upward trajectories for both Australia and New Zealand underscore the importance of international university student integration to the region.

In Australia and New Zealand, most international university students do not come from English speaking countries and thus are likely to have different cultural backgrounds to the Anglo-Commonwealth societies of the continent. Given the likely cultural differences between international and domestic students, international university students often face barriers when attempting to integrate academically and socially into the institutional milieu (Cemalcilar & Falbo, 2008).

1.1. General Model of Institutional Integration

The study at hand draws upon the foundational work of Tinto’s (1993) Longitudinal Model and Theory of Student Departure (Figure 1) and other theories that recognise that students’ pre-entry attributes, and general academic and social experiences influence educational outcomes.

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In Tinto’s model, it is theorised that informal staff interactions (i.e., positive non-classroom interactions) influence students’ academic integration and subsequent commitment to studying in and graduating from their university. However, much of the research is based on domestic students and little is known about what drives success among internationals studying in English-speaking contexts. For example, Grayson (2008) found that although in- and out-of-class experience, event involvement, and social support contributed to domestic students’ intellectual development and overall academic program experience, these factors were significantly less important among international student’s counterparts at the same universities.

1.2. Social Network Sites (SNSs) and Higher Education
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Boyd and Ellison (2007, p. 211) define SNSs as,

…web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system...

Today, these sites continually evolve in their utility and have become a primary form of on-campus communication. Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe’s (2007) study of 286 American university students suggested a connection between engagement with the SNS Facebook (FB) and improved social capital of students with low self-esteem or life satisfaction, prompting the authors to propose that the world’s most popular SNS may serve to “lower the barriers to participation so that students who might otherwise shy away from initiating communication with or responding to others are encouraged to do so through Facebook’s affordances”.

Extending from this earlier work, Junco’s (2012) study contributes to an understanding about what specific types of FB activities might contribute to overall integration and involvement in co-curricular activities. Results suggested that use of FB to create or take part in a social event or to comment on photos of FB represents important integrational behaviours, although more trivial use
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