

Supporting international students' connection and belonging in universities

Hundreds of thousands of international students are arriving in Australia this year. Libraries across the country are ready to welcome their return. Dr Trent Hennessey and Kylie Tran from the University of Melbourne reflect on the role libraries play in shaping international students' experiences and the opportunities ahead.

If there was a word cloud capturing current sentiment in the higher education sector, 'recovery', 'renewal', and 'revitalisation' would feature prominently. In classrooms, on campuses, at libraries, and in our communities, the presence of international students has been missed after three tumultuous years responding to the challenges of the pandemic.

For some international students, 2023 marks a return to Australia to re-establish their lives and continue their studies. For others, this year represents a transition from studying remotely to on-campus or commencing studying in Australia for the first time. Whether students are onboarding, transitioning study mode, or returning to study, universities recognise the need to personalise and strengthen their support for international students.

Sense of connection

Part of ensuring that international students are set up for success is developing their sense of connection and belonging in the university community. As the heart of a campus, libraries have a powerful role to play here.

Reflecting how important libraries have been to their experience of university life, international students have variously described academic libraries as 'a safe space', 'a productive zone', and 'a home away from home'. These meanings reveal the personal connections that international students have had with libraries, with these relationships further evident in the social media content they have created in and about libraries.

Pre-pandemic, libraries were international students' preferred study spaces on campus. Contributing to this preference was the

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availability of friendly and helpful staff, extended opening hours, the amenity of study spaces, and easy access to collections.

Unpacking this preference further, we discover that international students valued the learning commons of academic libraries as unique spaces that enabled connection with other people sharing the space while providing them with the solitude to think, write, reflect and read. The scholarly environment created was both motivating and empowering – an antidote to the loneliness and digital distraction that international students can experience. Far from family, friends and the familiar, international students relied on libraries.

As international students arrive in Australia this year, a key opportunity for libraries is to update their understanding of international students' perspectives, needs and user behaviours. This understanding is crucial to our ability to evolve library services and spaces for international students to ensure we are positioned for relevance and resonance.

Collaboration

Our willingness to listen, learn and co-create with international students is particularly important after the past three years of accelerated change in the design and delivery of higher education.

For example, new forms of peer, social and technology-enhanced learning are already being observed in students who have returned to campus. On the ground, this has translated to high demand for library meeting rooms as students form study groups to watch online lecture recordings together. In these rooms, immersive learning environments are being created as students simultaneously engage with textual, sonic and visual learning content (videos, transcripts and lecture slides) they display on multiple devices. Real-time collaboration is evident with students creating notes in shared online documents. Students are also customising their learning experience, dynamically adjusting play speeds of lecture recordings to suit their learning styles.

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Importantly, these trends may surface widely, with international students being active users not only of academic libraries, but school, public, state and national libraries too.

Every service interaction we collectively provide has the potential to boost an international student's confidence and influence their subsequent help-seeking behaviour and use of library services and spaces. We so often get this right for international students because diversity and inclusion, lifelong learning, and access to education are core to our professional values.

Our library doors are once again open. To Australia's international students we say: Welcome. We are here for you. We want to learn with you and from you and create the future together. ●



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Top 5

What can libraries do to support international students?

1. Welcome international students with engaging orientation programs and a commitment to creating positive first-service interactions.
2. Understand international students' perspectives and new user behaviours and be ready to evolve library services and spaces to meet their changing needs.
3. Enhance discoverability of library services and resources on search engines (eg Baidu) and social media (eg Weibo and WeChat).
4. Ensure international students' voices are represented in library communications, websites and learning resources.
5. Create professional opportunities for international students through employment in the library and students as partners projects.