THE NORWOOD MORIALTA HIGH SCHOOL

MANAGING GROWTH AND DIVERSITY IN SCHOOL BASED INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMS

Until the recent past most government schools had few, if any international fee paying students. Furthermore, they could assume that these students were academically talented and conversant with English. Increasingly neither assumption is to be relied upon. The new international student population is not only far larger but far more diverse and their intended, or even eventual destinations, have broadened out from the traditional pathways like Law, Medicine and Engineering in to Business, Marketing, IT and Hospitality and Tourism. These eventual tertiary providers are no longer the traditional universities but may include TAFE Colleges and private providers.

If this was not enough to challenge schools, it is that this new market is largely controlled by factors outside the control of schools. Our international student programs are subject to a number of national, state and local frameworks and influences, most of which are quite outside our control. This year, especially, has brought home how apparently random factors like SARS and terrorism can impact on us.

Regulatory Frameworks, Recruitment, Selection and Allocation of Students.

In South Australia government schools have some limited control over selection and recruitment of international students. International students can nominate that they would like to be placed in our school, based on direct marketing, sister school relationships, recommendation by friends or family or the advice of an agent. These requests are usually accommodated. However, all processing and final allocation is done by IES, International Education Services, our umbrella organisation for state schools. Generally we respect the protection that we gain from operating under this framework and we certainly would not want to assume responsibility for DIMIA compliance rules. This year, all travel by school based personnel for what could be termed recruitment purposes, has been embargoed, even before SARS, as part of a restructure of DECS. The reality is, and always has been, that schools do not operate in isolation.

One of the biggest uncertainties for us at present is the proposed DIMIA condition for granting visas to students from China only when a student has reached an IELTS level of 5.5. This, added to the age restrictions which have also recently been enforced, could see our China market dry up almost completely, at least in the short term, while market forces adjust to the new rules. Given that the China market is both the biggest and fastest growing sector, this has serious implications. It would certainly make many ISEC courses redundant since students with an IELTS level of 5.5 would assume the right to enter mainstream classes, regardless of the fact that there are many other independent and resource based learning skills which they would not have despite their IELTS level.

Entry to the international market can be difficult for some schools. Quite clearly, schools who have established programs with good reputations more readily attract students. Schools with an ISEC class also have an advantage in being able to take students on arrival but of course there is a catch here in that you need to have an average cohort of at least 12 students across the year for the ISEC class to pay for itself so it is not necessarily an easy entry point. There could, however, be merit in two or three schools cooperatively setting up a cluster ISEC class as a strategy to break into the market.
In South Australia, certainly there has been a perception that a small number of schools attract a large number of students and that these schools are largely in a circle in close proximity to the city. The Norwood Morialta High School, where I am the Assistant Principal, International Services, certainly fits this image. My previous school, Banksia Park International High School provides a contrast though. It has a large and well established international program but is situated to the north east of the city, near the regional shopping centre, Tea Tree Plaza.

Economies of scale are certainly possible with larger student numbers and if programs like ESL are already established in the school then clearly, it is easier to integrate international students into both the classroom and social environment of the school.

There are ways in which schools can help to grow their international markets. Established sister school relationships can build a climate of cooperation and can give students a first point of contact which may result in a long-term commitment. While the intent of sister schools is cultural enrichment and understanding, schools can also establish client school relationships with a commercial emphasis. This works particularly with high demand countries like China and is usually based on all the students from the particular school overseas being directed to the one school here. This has definite advantages in the fostering of school to school ties and the monitoring of students but does need to be looked at in relation to the larger issue of the size and composition of the international cohort.

The short term visit market also provides a good entry point for schools into the international market. These programs, usually of two to three week’s duration, allow the school community to experience home hosting and can frequently involve younger students in the school in being buddies and mentors. From this exposure, long term relationships can be built. Schools in regional and rural locations, which may struggle to attract long term international students also have much to offer and students may become aware of the possibilities of returning long term. Currently in South Australia all schools who have expressed an interest in hosting short term visits have been able to access this program.

Size and Composition of the International Cohort

Given that schools do not have complete autonomy over the selection of their students, it can be difficult for schools to control the blend of nationalities in the International Student Program. While there has been some talk of increasing student numbers from Eastern Europe, South America and Mexico, it seems likely that the largest market, at least in the short to medium term, will continue to be the Asian countries, especially China. Although, having spent a month in China in each of the last two years, China is making rapid strides in meeting the previously unmet demand for university places which has been a significant factor in fuelling the Sino-diaspora. The other factor, the desire to learn English and experience a different lifestyle, will continue to see considerable numbers of students study overseas even when there are places for them at home.

While most schools say that what they most desire is a good mix of races and countries of origin, we also recognise that this is difficult to achieve in practice, especially in ISEC classes where it is unlikely that you would find many European students since their English is usually so good that they can join mainstream classes on arrival.

If schools develop client school relationships this can further skew the balance, with potentially significant numbers of students coming not just from the same country but from the same city and same school. There can be the danger of developing an enclave. This does not just apply to
client school relationships but has wider implications. This year we have had increasing interest from Korean agents in placing students in South Australia because they are saying that the Melbourne market is becoming saturated and that Korean parents do not want to send their children to a mini-Korea. This same argument could apply to any situation where too many students from one particular place gather. It is interesting though that this is the opposite of the normal expat experience where parents actively seek out the school which has the closest links with ‘home’!

The question of the ideal size for an international student population is rather like the ‘how long is a piece of string’ conundrum and has as many variables. Most of these variables have more to do with the school and its community than with the international students themselves. There are questions of physical space. While we have room for a quite large international student population on our Senior campus, we are actively trying to reduce even local numbers in our Middle school because the physical facilities are stretched. One school I spoke to recently acknowledged that they did not take international students who wished to seek university entrance because they felt this made unreasonable demands on the teachers. The composition and attitude of the local community is also very important and this is addressed later. It is possible to try and set targets or a maximum percentage and it seems that a figure of around 10 to 12% is often considered to be a size which allows some economies of scale without swamping the local flavour of the school.

**Broader Student Base.**

Not infrequently schools discover that, even after a reasonable length of time to learn English and the broader range of independent learning skills needed for success here, a student simply ‘doesn’t get it’ and may have been sent here to avoid ‘loss of face’ resultant from academic, behavioural or personal problems in their home country. Not only are these problems unlikely to disappear in a new country, they are likely to be exacerbated by imposing a whole new set of stresses along with the loss of established support structures and an entirely different language. It has been pointed out that we usually have less knowledge about the educational, social, emotional and health background of the students we take on for two, three or four years, than we do for local students on a three day camp!

Some recent changes in DIMIA rules have made our positions more difficult. Students who enter Australia under an established contract for secondary education cannot now transfer to TAFE until their original secondary school Letter of Offer has been completed, and then only successfully. This leaves schools in a difficult position. In good faith we have accepted a student for a course of study which they may, also in good faith, be incapable of completing. All too frequently academic issues become attendance issues. What are we to do?

**Placement Options**

One potential solution is to allow schools or umbrella providers like IES to negotiate with DIMIA, alternative placement to a suitable vocational TAFE or private provider course, carefully supported by a range of assessments and recommendations from the current providers. With the awareness that a few unscrupulous private providers have exploited transfer rules, the recommendation for transfer would have to come from both the current provider and the prospective one.

Another way to deal with this is for schools to develop their own networks which recognise areas of strength in different schools and to negotiate movement of international students to
best suit need, just as we do for our local students. As an example of this, my current school is a high-end academic provider and we acknowledge that we do not serve a vocational base as well as other schools for whom this is their area of expertise. My previous school has excellent links with Le Cordon Bleu and is the preferred secondary provider for international secondary students wishing to access this pathway.

Schools have increasingly faced the impossible challenge of being all things to all people within their local community and have responded by developing specialist programs and pathways. While, in the past, moving international students to a different school to access a different pathway was not often necessary, it is increasingly so now.

As the international market expands and becomes even more diversified, there will be increasing opportunities for specialist programs catering to the wider market. Anyone who has lived as a local in Asia will attest to the fact that standards in nearly all trade areas could be greatly improved and that there is a significant market prepared to pay for higher standards in, for example, electrical, plumbing and automotive trades. There are great opportunities for international students to return home with superior skills, immediate employment prospects and small business management skills. This potential has been realised in the Tourism and Hospitality industries but yet has to be exploited more widely. One of the best possibilities offered by this more divergent way of thinking is that it opens the international market to a far wider range of schools and to those schools with a special vocational focus, which may have previously been excluded.

**Packaging**

Added to this is the evolving idea of offering ‘packages’ which offer international students a guaranteed school/university or school/TAFE pathway. For a number of students and parents this will offer some certainty. Given that many of our international students come from families who own a business, there is often a clear intent that the students will access an education option which allows them to return to the family business ready to contribute to its being able to access the possibilities of international trade, or, in the case of China, new WTO arrangements.

Of course, for schools this may be a double edged sword. If we become too closely allied to a particular post secondary provider, will this cause other students not wanting that option to desert us? Do we opt for a range of packages, seeking different tertiary providers? As with all other initiatives, the message is to proceed cautiously. Explore a couple of different pathways, perhaps in fairly innocuous ways like joint badging of promotional materials and joint hosting of delegations. At about here we reach another problematical area, that the lead time for any new development to show real ‘bums on seats’ results is often measured in years, not months. Fortunately though, in schools we are at the bottom of the food chain, so students accessing packages will come to us several years ahead of the intended tertiary provider!

**Local Cohort**

While we in schools share a number of other issues with the tertiary market, we have one major way in which we are different. We are far more closely related to our local communities. For generations universities have had overseas students supported by initiatives like the Colombo
Plan. There have also been private international students too and no-one has questioned their placement (well, not perhaps until the recent erroneous ‘they’re taking our places’ wail).

Universities have never been seen to belong to a local community. Instead they belong to a city, state or perhaps, more recently to a region. It is both a blessing and a curse that schools, both public and private have strong associations with their community. A local community can decide to embrace the international programs of their school or to see them as an imposition. Private schools maybe a little more fortunate in that they have always faced a greater challenge in covering costs and so may be more receptive to the financial benefits of international students who, in turn, may keep fees down for local students. It is only in the new era of local financial governance that state schools are looking at the ‘icing’ that may come from ISP’s. Terribly misguided though is any school which sees international students as cash cows to be milked. The ‘cows’ are a discerning herd who will soon desert for greener pastures if not provided with quality pastures!

Local opposition to, suspicion of, or even disinterest in international students provides a challenge. In the government sector, private home stay is the preferred accommodation option both for the language acquisition and personal support it offers to students. The availability of good home stay accommodation in reasonable proximity to the school remains a limiting factor on ISP’s. Allied to this is the local community attitude. In schools with a predominantly white Anglo population it can be difficult for international students to be accepted or integrated. It can be all too easy for the community to fall back on racist stereotypes and assumptions that international students are favoured over local ones. Even well meaning teachers may be challenged by the additional communication difficulties. Quite self-evidently, a relatively affluent, multicultural local school community provides an easier base from which to build but the long term benefits of starting small and turning community attitudes around may bring even greater long term good to initially suspicious communities.

Some schools worry that the international students seem to clump together and frequently do not form close friendships with local students, although they get on well in the classroom. This concern is misguided, I believe. If I was an international student grappling with learning in another language, what I would most want to do at recess would be to slip into a comfortable language for fifteen minutes to rest my brain. This was most noticeable in school in Singapore, where although the language of instruction was English, most students used Chinese, Malay, or Tamil for their informal interactions. Consequently the canteen area of the school was almost exclusively organised in ‘same language’ tables, which reflected friendship groups.

Buddy and mentor programs can be useful, especially for newly arrived students but we must remember that friendships take time to develop, cannot be forced and are based on shared interests and understandings so it is unreasonable to expect instant integration. The international student grapevine is a double edged sword. While it is great for finding information about students, rumour and misinformation can spread like wildfire through the group and be difficult to counteract. There is a regrettable tendency for new students to believe the ‘expert’ international student who has been in the school for all of six months, rather than the teacher who has been there for many years!

Accreditation
For a variety of reasons several forms of international accreditation or curriculum frameworks have become increasingly popular. Their relationship to ISP’s needs to be considered. Given that we are not international schools in the traditional sense (i.e. high fee paying expat schools
in offshore locations) but local schools with an international student population, the current yardstick needs to be what international accreditation or curriculum frameworks will mean to our local population.

Coming from a school with CIS and IBMYP (but not IB Diploma) accreditation, these mean far more to our local population than to our current international population. We are situated in the ‘leafy eastern suburbs’ with two similar government schools and four private schools in our immediate catchment area so we actively compete in an aware and articulate market where external accreditation provides evidence of excellence and ongoing commitment to improving standards. At this point, external accreditation means very little to our international market. External accreditation in Asia, our major market, is restricted to the international schools and largely unknown in the wider communities. Personal contact, recommendations by friends or family members or even by an agent are far more powerful and likely to remain so in the immediate future.

It is important to acknowledge that international accreditation involves considerable on-going cost and commitment and, in the case of the IB, the obligation to provide an additional curriculum framework which may be accessed by only a small number of students. The vast majority of these are not likely to be international students, not least because of the language rich and Eurocentric nature of the accreditation organisations. Should this sound like an attack on international accreditation, let me acknowledge that an important part of my role is managing the CIS process in my school and I am fully committed to this as a quality assurance program but as yet do not see it as integral to the success of our international student program. One thing we do know though, is how quickly the international market is developing in both size and discernment and it may not be long before membership of an accredited body will become a valued yardstick for prospective international parents.

A Business or a Service?

This perhaps is the biggest challenge we face in our rapidly growing and increasingly diverse market. The very word ‘market’ encapsulates part of our challenge. As educators, the business imperatives have previously been far removed from our concerns, provided we remained within our budgets and our schools continued to maintain their numbers.

Suddenly I find myself questioning whether a Masters in Business might not have been more useful than my Masters in Education, given my current role. Our international student program deals in incoming and outgoing amounts of money which are quite outside any domestic or faculty budget I have ever managed. Yet, everyday I deal with international students who share the same concerns and problems that our local students have always grappled with, just from further away and with less support. My hope is, that while I manage a thriving and increasingly diverse business, I will never lose sight of the fact that I am an educator, fortunately placed in the most vibrant and interesting place to be, at the forefront of the good side of globalisation!

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September 2003