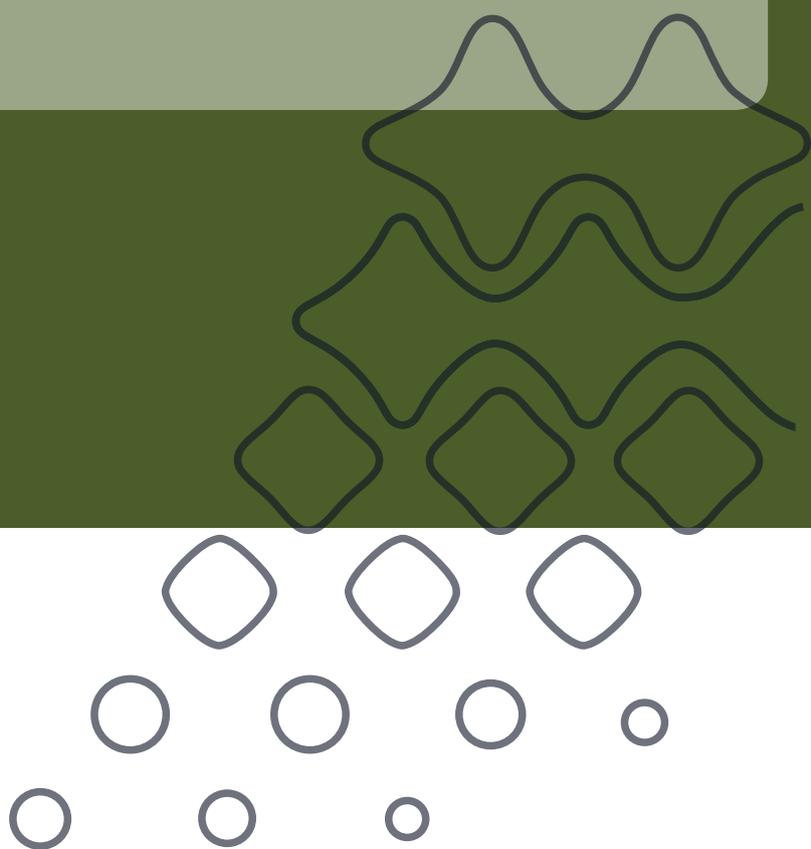


# Finding Common Ground:

enhancing interaction between  
domestic and international  
students

*Guide for academics*



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**Finding Common Ground:  
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## Overview of the project

A feature of higher education in Australia is the cultural diversity of the student population. The absolute number of international students studying in Australian universities has increased dramatically in the last decade, as have the number and diversity of countries represented among the student populations of our universities. This diversity provides great potential for all students – both international and domestic – to interact with peers from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Evidence suggests however that successful peer interaction cannot be assumed simply because students share a campus or a course (e.g. Anderson, 2008; Fincher, Carter, Tombesi, Shaw & Martel, 2009). So, what more can be done to harness the potential of student diversity? In particular, in what ways can university teaching promote interaction between students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds?

These questions were investigated through a 2008-10 project supported by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). The project, originally titled *Enhancing Domestic and International Student interaction*, explored the benefits of, and obstacles to, interaction among students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The project also sought to identify examples of practice that were successfully enhancing such interactions within Australian university teaching and learning environments.

Findings from the study highlight the potential benefit of peer interaction for learning across diverse cultural and linguistic groups. From both the students' and staffs' perspectives, interaction among students from diverse backgrounds potentially leads to: increased awareness and understanding of different perspectives; better preparation for the workplace; improved English language skills of international students; and a greater feeling of belonging.

The study also identified several potential obstacles to student interaction, from both the teaching and the learning perspectives. On the teaching side, the main impediments seem to be the limited time available to foster interaction, particularly when classes are large and the curriculum 'content' heavy. Such conditions tend to discourage staff from prioritising peer interaction within the curriculum, at least in any planned and systematic sense.

In relation to student learning, both staff and students identified a number of challenges to effective interactions, including: differing levels of English language proficiency; limited time spent on campus due to competing commitments such as paid work; and lack of a 'common ground' between domestic and international students due to differences in academic priorities and learning experiences, as well as in their linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

Despite these potential obstacles, there are ways in which peer interaction can be promoted in teaching and learning to tap into the potential benefits of our diverse student communities. Students and academic staff interviewed for the project described a range of such teaching practices and learning experiences. These examples form an important component of the project's findings.



A key outcome from the Enhancing Domestic and International Student Engagement project was the development of a six-dimension conceptual framework, the **Interaction for Learning Framework**. The six dimensions of the framework are:

- › Planning interaction
- › Creating environments for interaction
- › Supporting interaction
- › Engaging with subject knowledge
- › Developing reflexive processes
- › Fostering communities of learners

The framework underpins each of the resources produced through the project. The suite of resources developed for use by academic staff in Australian universities forms an integrated package consisting of:

- › The **DVD Finding Common Ground** (20mins), featuring the voices of academic staff and university students from a range of Australian universities.
- › The **Guide for Academics**, offering practical suggestions for enhancing practice, and illustrated by specific examples.
- › The background paper **Finding Common Ground: Challenges and opportunities for enhancing interaction between domestic and international students**. This paper describes the approach taken in the project, and presents the findings from both a review of the literature, and from interviews with academic staff and students from a variety of disciplines at three Australian universities.
- › A flyer for students, highlighting the benefits of involvement in culturally diverse peer groups.

The resources are presented in this publication and are also available from the CSHE website:

[http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/projectsites/enhancing\\_interact.html](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/research/projectsites/enhancing_interact.html)





# PART A

## **Enhancing peer interaction among students from diverse cultural backgrounds:**

### **A guide for academics**



## Introduction

The first section of the Guide presents the *Interaction for Learning Framework* developed for this project. This is followed by six sections explaining, in turn, each dimension of the framework. A range of teaching strategies and examples is presented for each dimension.

The particular strategies implemented will depend largely on the specific institutional and disciplinary teaching and learning context in which academics work. Users of this guide are encouraged to consider multiple approaches to designing teaching and learning activities to foster peer interaction and enhance learning among students from diverse cultural and learning backgrounds.

The teaching strategies and examples presented in this booklet address the potential impediments to peer interaction, and will assist academic staff to help students realise the potential benefits of student diversity.

### Interaction for Learning Framework

This Guide is framed around the following conceptual framework, developed through the *Enhancing Domestic and Student Engagement* project.

The *Interaction for Learning Framework* consists of six, interrelated 'dimensions'. Each dimension represents a particular aspect of teaching and learning associated with creating the conditions for effective peer interaction between students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The dimension *Planning interaction* is central, as it is fundamental to each of the other five dimensions: *Creating environments for interaction*; *Supporting interaction*; *Engaging with subject knowledge*; *Developing reflexive processes*; and *Fostering communities of learners*.

Each of these dimensions is explored further in the following sections of the guide.

### Core principles of the framework

The *Interaction for Learning Framework*:

- › Acknowledges and capitalises on student diversity as a resource for learning and teaching;
- › Engages students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds within the learning context in a variety of ways;
- › Embeds interaction in curriculum planning and links to teaching, learning and assessment;
- › Promotes peer engagement through curriculum-based activities; and
- › Recognises the variety of ways that interaction can be utilised across different learning contexts.

## Planning interaction

Planning is the first important step in fostering peer engagement among students from diverse backgrounds. Research and university experiences show that without such a purposeful approach, students will tend to aggregate into culturally similar groups, hence the potential benefits of interactions between students in diverse groups are unlikely to be fully realised.



Planning interaction involves incorporating interaction as part of the course/subject design, as well as linking the objectives of intercultural interaction with the course/subject learning outcomes and the assessment process (Leask, 2005). This means developing relevant learning tasks that require interaction and also the provision of clear guidelines for students about the objectives of peer learning, assessment processes, and expected learning outcomes.

Formalising peer interaction within academic courses can be achieved in a number of ways. These include:

- › Incorporating interaction among students from diverse backgrounds as a course objective and making this explicit in published course outlines;
- › Designing and structuring teaching and learning activities that require students to communicate and engage with peers from diverse backgrounds; and
- › Designing assessment tasks that align with the objective of student interaction and peer engagement. For example, these tasks may require students to work with peers from different backgrounds in order to consider or compare different perspectives on an issue or topic, and to then critically reflect on the group process.

## Examples from practice

The following examples illustrate how academics in various disciplines have planned and incorporated interaction into their course designs. While the particular strategies adopted reflect specific institutional and disciplinary contexts, they are of more general relevance insofar as they address a range of widely shared challenges in planning for interaction.

### Problem-based learning, with interaction embedded in curricula

In problem-based learning, 'real world' problems are used as the starting point for learning.

Example: Chen, an engineering lecturer, structures his course in such a way that requires problem solving in small groups from the start of the course. Some of the group activities are assessed tasks. The specific aim of such joint tasks is to foster peer interaction and capitalise on the range of abilities and diverse experiences students bring to the class. Because students are instructed to form groups on the basis of a diverse set of skills and experiences, the objective and the logic behind interaction are made explicit. And, importantly, because groups are formed at course commencement and continued throughout the course, interaction becomes a core component of the curriculum.

### Team-based learning, with purposefully constructed syndicate groups

Team-based learning is a term used to describe curricula where all or most of the learning activities throughout a subject centre around established groups of students.

Example: Melanie, a lecturer in law, structures the learning activities in her course such that students work in syndicates or teams for the whole semester. Rather than allowing students to form their own teams, she allocates students to syndicates, ensuring that there is a mix of international and 'local' students in each team. All class discussions are based on the syndicate groups so students soon become accustomed to working together with their

### Planning for interaction

*I think the interaction is dependent on whether the faculty or the course coordinator makes you do something like work with the person next to you, or work with another student for an assignment. But very few teachers did that.*  
(Student)

*I do not feel local and international students get much contact unless they are made to. I think if we did mix more, it would be a good thing.*  
(Student)

### Working in syndicates

*We had to work within the same e group for the whole semester, so we start to feel more comfortable and then we really work well together and become like friends.*  
(Student)

### Assessed team projects

*When students' projects (which are assessed) depends on the knowledge and insights their peers can provide, they quickly see the benefits of peer learning and they start to see each other in a different light.*  
(Academic)



team members. One of the assessment tasks requires the teams to conduct research for a group presentation and written report. After a few weeks of working in the same teams, students build good working relationships with their peers and some form additional study groups for exam preparation.

### **Project-based learning, with students interviewing students**

In project-based learning, a group project is the starting point and focus of learning.

Example: Elaine, a marketing lecturer, structures the first half of her subject around a large project involving students conducting research and developing a marketing strategy. Students work in pairs to interview (in depth) two students from different cultural backgrounds as research for designing an advertising campaign targeting young people in those students' countries. For example, Sam (an Australian-born student) was paired with a Jisoo (a Korean international student), and they decided to design an advertising campaign for young people in Hong Kong and Singapore. Sam and Jisoo then interviewed peers from each of these countries. The project requires integration of course materials/content and data collected from interviews. The assessment is based on students' presentation of their campaign and a written report.

### **Designing an interactive tutorial or laboratory program**

A number of lecturers in our study reported designing tutorial or laboratory programs that required students to work regularly in pairs or small groups to discuss questions, solve problems or conduct experiments. Although these exercises do not usually involve formal assessment, one of the explicit aims is to enhance peer learning through interaction with students from diverse backgrounds.

### **Creating environments for interaction**

Students generally feel more comfortable forming friendship groups and interacting with others from similar backgrounds (Dunne, 2009). This is true for international students as well as for local students. While this means that students may appear reluctant to move outside these familiar social groupings in class, feedback from students suggests that they expect and value opportunities to have meaningful, structured learning interactions with peers from different backgrounds.

In creating learning environments conducive to interaction, it is important to:

- › 'Start as you mean to continue', with conditions for effective interaction created from the outset;
- › Purposefully generate situations, within learning and teaching activities, that require students to interact;
- › Actively encourage students to move out of their regular social groups; and
- › Support students to develop the confidence in interacting with other peers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Initiating interactive teaching and learning activities at the early stage of a course helps to create a learning environment where peer interaction is valued by students. Activities in this dimension are about 'setting the scene' for students, and it is therefore important that they reflect the approach to be adopted through later stages of the course. Initiating interactions early can be applied to individual teaching sessions, as well as the course overall. The logic is the same – to create the desired environment from the outset.

### **Design of the tutorial program**

*The tutorials and classes are very important to create this conversation starter.*

*The ways the tutorial is set out is really important. It is about how it is designed.*

*(Student)*

### **The first class**

*Some tutors go straight into teaching in the first tutorial but some try to make the first half of the tutorial to be more interactive or get the students to play ice breaking games.*

*It is helpful as it helps everyone get to know each other first.*

*(Student)*



## Examples from practice

A range of strategies can be used to create a positive, initial environment for interaction. Some of these are outlined.

### Introductions and ‘icebreakers’ in the first session

The first session is crucial to setting the tone for the rest of semester. The aim is to create a welcoming, supportive atmosphere in which interaction among students is both encouraged and expected. To achieve this, it is important to devote time in the first class to introductions. This may simply involve asking students to introduce themselves to their neighbours, perhaps with a focus on discussing a particular aspect of themselves, such as their cultural background, interests or some aspect of their previous experiences. In addition, or alternatively, introductions can be achieved through more elaborate icebreaker activities.

As start-up activities, icebreakers can be a useful way of creating a relaxed, informal atmosphere for interaction. They can help students feel comfortable with each other and create openness and trust. A simple activity such as asking students to talk to another student for five minutes, learn three interesting facts about the person and report back to the whole class, can be useful in helping students become acquainted with others in their class thus weakening the barriers to interaction. This in turn will assist in creating a learning environment that welcomes multiple perspectives and stimulates interaction.

When planning icebreaker activities, academics need to consider the amount of time available and the year level of their students.

See the *Resources* section for further examples.

### Beginning each class with a short peer-learning activity

A very useful starting activity is to ask students to spend a few minutes reviewing in pairs or small groups, the main points from the previous lecture or tutorial, perhaps using one or two trigger questions as an incentive for students to ‘test themselves’. This is perhaps easier in a small-group teaching environment such as a tutorial or practical class, but can also be used at the commencement of a lecture.

These kinds of activities: a) are practical, in that they take only a few minutes and focus students’ attention on the learning task; b) provide an effective means of encouraging early interaction, even in large classes; and c) can be implemented such that staff monitor students’ understanding of important material covered in the previous session.

This strategy is not specific to encouraging interaction between students from different cultural backgrounds. The benefits are wider in terms of engaging students with the subject, and providing feedback for students and staff.

Activities of this kind provide a purpose for early interaction that may initiate interactions between students who may not otherwise have cause to speak with one another.

### Encouraging students to move beyond their regular social groups

The establishment phase – whether of a class, a group project, or a course – is the optimal time to encourage students to move beyond their regular group of ‘like’ students. Various strategies can be used.

For example, allocating seating or asking students to sit with someone they have not met before can be effective. Structured activities that require students

### Facilitating early interaction

*A lot of my students do not really know how to start talking to other students in their first class. I see that as part of my work to break that barrier among students from the very first class.*

*(Academic)*

### Mixing up the groups

*I felt trepidation about being interventionist, about mixing up the groups, but I found if you don’t do it at the start in a structured sort of way, it’s not going to happen.*

*(Academic)*

*It is good that the teacher mixes up the group. In my class we have so many Germans, we have maybe only five Australians and the teacher would say it would be good to have one Australian per group.*

*(Student)*



to work with peers from different cultural backgrounds also serve to encourage student 'mixing'. When forming project groups, one helpful strategy is to allow students a few minutes to write down what qualities they could offer to a group, as preparation for talking to students they do not know, and explaining what they could bring to a group project.

## Supporting interaction

The focus of this dimension is on assisting students to understand the purpose and appreciate the value of broadening their peer interactions, and then helping them to develop the skills to work most effectively with people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Many students, regardless of their background, do not fully appreciate the potential benefits to their learning that interacting with peers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds can bring. It is therefore important that staff explain these benefits, ideally in the context of the particular learning objectives of the course, and acknowledge the various areas of interest and aspirations among the student group.

Convincing students of the benefits is, however, just one aspect of supporting interaction. Of equal importance is developing students' confidence and skills in working effectively with peers from diverse backgrounds. Staff play an important role in setting expectations and providing guidelines for respectful interactions, and in helping students develop the skills necessary for effective collaborative learning (Cohen & Sampson, 2001).

### Examples from practice

There are numerous ways academics can help prepare students for effective interaction and learning across diverse cultural groups. A number of suggestions are presented below.

#### Setting clear expectations regarding peer interaction

Being clear about the expectations for peer interaction and groupwork is an important part of supporting peer learning. Students will be most committed to collaborative learning if they understand the purpose and are convinced of the potential benefits of engaging with peers from diverse backgrounds. What kinds of group activities will students be expected to participate in? How will these enhance their learning – in other words why should students participate actively in these activities? How can students interact effectively? What are the expectations or rules for interaction? This includes expectations about respectful ways of communicating, including turn-taking and acknowledging diverse perspectives.

See the *Resources* section for further examples.

#### Incorporating a session dedicated to peer learning

Facilitating a short workshop on peer learning can be an effective way to help students become familiar with the types of peer activities and group processes they will be engaging in during the semester/year. Class time devoted to establishing peer interactions or group work gives students the opportunity to:

- › Discuss the potential benefits of peer interaction across diverse cultural and linguistic groups;
- › Consider the relationship between peer learning and the particular, intended learning outcomes of the course;

#### **Setting expectations**

*I found that setting expectations was the key thing about engaging students from a range of backgrounds. Simple things emphasising that it is important to ask questions and also that they can learn a lot from their peers.*  
(Academic)

*Setting expectations for interaction upfront and continuing through the semester is about building confidence, encouraging all students to participate and maximising opportunities.*  
(Academic)



- › Discuss their individual roles in peer learning activities;
- › Set, as a group, the guidelines or rules for peer interaction and group work;
- › Form groups for team projects and start to build rapport with their team members;
- › Practice essential communication skills for interaction, including focussed listening, turn-taking, questioning, negotiating, and giving (and receiving) feedback;
- › Start to learn how to build upon peers' knowledge and experiences to extend views and co-construct knowledge; and
- › Raise questions about group work.

### Providing groupwork resources for students

In addition to time spent in class establishing the bases for peer interaction, students can benefit from ongoing access to relevant supporting resources. The numerous groupwork resources available to staff (see *Resources* section) can serve as a base, although ideally they are presented in a way that is directly relevant to the student groups, the task and the discipline area. Although the specific strategies and suggestions will vary according to particular course/subjects, the resources may include information and advice that address the following broad questions:

- › Why should students interact with their classmates from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds? What are the benefits to their learning?
- › How does peer interaction fit with academic expectations and future workplace needs?
- › What are the different forms of peer interaction for learning?
- › What are some strategies for working effectively in multicultural groups?
- › How can students monitor and evaluate their own progress in developing teamwork skills for working across diverse cultures?

## Engaging with subject knowledge

Dimensions 1-3 of the *Interaction for Learning Framework* are important in preparing students to engage actively in collaborative learning activities. The main purpose of this fourth dimension is to encourage students' engagement with the subject content through peer learning activities and to create a mutually respectful atmosphere and sense of shared purpose and collaboration.

Various structured collaborative activities can be used to promote peer engagement and enable students to learn from each other's knowledge, experiences, and cultural norms and values. Students benefit when they are encouraged to explore both similar and differing perspectives on issues and problems, as well as by sharing their diverse experiences. Activities designed to provide these kinds of collaborative learning opportunities include (but are not limited to):

- › Discussion-based activities requiring students to discuss an issue, analyse a case study, present an argument and/or provide examples from their own experiences;

### Group formation for diversity

*We had to go around and talk to everyone in the class to decide who is in our group for the project. Each group had to have people from at least two different backgrounds. It was kinda fun.*  
(Student)

### Workshops for groupwork

*I run a couple of workshops where students work in their project groups. The whole idea is actually to get students to value each other's opinion, so they will see that diversity in the group is a positive thing because they can draw from this experience.*  
(Academic)

*Our lecturer got us to talk about our role in the group and we had to plan and decide our team's rules for meetings and communication and what to do if anyone doesn't do the work. It was really good especially for the shy students cos it empower them a little bit.*  
(Student)



- › Problem-solving activities requiring students to pool their knowledge and work through a problem or set of questions;
- › Group projects requiring diverse perspectives and a range of skills; and
- › Practical activities requiring students to apply technical/practical skills (e.g. conducting a chemistry experiment, constructing a model, giving a presentation, preparing an artistic performance etc).

The types of peer interaction activities used will depend largely on the learning objectives of the particular topic/session as well as the teaching and learning context (including class size and time constraints). Below are three examples illustrating how academics from different disciplines use various activities to foster peer-learning and enhance engagement with subject knowledge. In addition, there are numerous useful resources on facilitating peer interaction and group work. Some of these are listed in the *Resources* section of this guide.

### **Engaging with subject content**

*I want the international makeup to also be seen as a resource, and not for it simply to become anecdotal, where people tell stories about their home country, but where they actually are able to connect their own cultural experiences and their cultural background to the content.*  
(Academic)

## **Examples from practice**

### **Discussion-based activities, with an emphasis on multiple perspectives**

Many academics, from a range of disciplines, employ small-group discussion activities as a way of facilitating peer interaction in class. To encourage peer learning among students from diverse cultural backgrounds, discussion questions may ask for different perspectives or approaches to examining the issue/problem, or they may require students to present evidence from various perspectives.

Example: Sarah, an academic teaching first-year science, commences each session with a question that students discuss in pairs or groups of three. Throughout the session these students work with their partners (sometimes joining another pair of students) to answer the questions. Students are encouraged to ‘work with someone different’ each week. Sarah explained:

*Students can learn so much from each other. When they have to explain something to their partner, you know they understand it, and you can see some people go “Oh, now I get it” or “I hadn’t thought of that” when they discuss questions ... And most students really enjoy working with students that they have not have known previously.*

### **Group projects, with knowledge of different cultures as a core component of the project**

Group projects are commonly employed by academics to facilitate peer learning, and such projects can also be purposefully designed to enhance peer interaction among students from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Example: Patrick, an academic teaching a postgraduate course in consultancy, has students undertake research projects in teams. The teams are formed to include students from diverse cultural backgrounds. As a group, the students identify ‘clients’ – industry or other partners outside the university – and work with them to understand a particular ‘problem’ worthy of research. International students are also encouraged to select data or research problems from their home countries. Each group needs not only to draw on the relevant data from the organisation, but also to explore the relevant context for the problem. In this way, many students are exposed to unfamiliar cultures. Each student



has a specific and significant role in the project, yet the project also requires collaboration throughout the whole process, from data collection to analysis and reporting. Patrick notes:

*Students are very pleased with the experience as they interact with peers and clients from diverse backgrounds and learn about different cultural perspectives.*

### **Student peer review, and its role in developing subject knowledge, generic skills and graduate attributes**

Student peer review involves collaborative learning where students evaluate each other's work and provide feedback. It can be used to evaluate a wide range of student work, from written tasks and oral presentations, to creative artwork, designs, performances, and the list goes on.

When engaging in peer review, students are required to analyse, review and comment on each other's work. This helps to clarify and reinforce students' (both reviewers and reviewees) knowledge and understanding of the subject and promotes the development of critical thinking and higher-order cognitive skills (Pearce et al., 2009). By engaging in peer review with a number of students, learners are exposed to a diversity of perspectives and approaches. In addition, through giving and receiving feedback, students practise and further develop a range of important social and communication skills, including verbal and written communication, negotiation skills and diplomacy (Topping, 1998).

In addition to these benefits to student learning, engaging in peer review can enhance group relationships through increased interactivity, self-confidence and empathy for others. The process can also influence students' attitudes about peer-learning as they start to see their peers as "legitimate sources of knowledge" (Gehring et al., 2005, p.321).

Peer reviewing is a complex skill and students need guidance throughout the process. Staff should consider how they will prepare students to give constructive feedback as well as the methods of review to be used. There are a number of resources that offer useful suggestion on implementing student peer review (for example: Pearce et al., 2009).

See also the *Resources* section of this guide.

### **Team-based learning and a particular approach that harnesses the potential of shared knowledge**

As discussed under dimension one, 'team-based learning' refers to the design of the learning activities in a subject around groups or teams of students. There are numerous variations of team-based learning: from courses where students work in syndicate groups on major projects as the main learning component of the course, to the more transient incorporation of teams as the basis of learning activities.

The project identified a particular form of team-based learning that is gaining supporters in a range of disciplines. This involves students testing their knowledge, individually, using a set of subject-specific questions – in the form of a short quiz – and then working in teams to resolve the areas of difficulty identified. This effectively encourages peer learning, and also highlights to students the value of collaboration to their individual learning.

The 'Readiness Assurance Test' (RAT) is a learning tool, developed by Larry Michaelsen (2004), which supports this particular approach to team-based learning.

### **Learning from diverse perspectives**

*In our course, it is always good to get a different point of view. Everyone has so many different ideas...Getting opinions and listening to people talk and think wow I never thought about that.  
(Student)*

*I can see the obvious benefits of diversity of opinions and diversity of thinking styles that my students bring into the classroom. It is important for both cohorts (international and local) to be confident with each other and get prepared for the similar relationship at the multicultural workplace.  
(Academic)*

### **Peer review**

*Each week, I ask students to provide critical feedback on their teams. When they have started to know each other, they can critique their friends' work much more openly and freely.  
(Academic)*



Example: Lu, an academic teaching a communication subject uses this strategy in his teaching. Based on the week's readings, students are required to complete the RAT individually at the beginning of each class. Then, in intercultural teams, students complete the quiz again, discussing and debating the questions to arrive at team answers. Usually, students will find that their team performs better in the quiz than any individual had.

Lu explains:

*Peer teaching is naturalised, it becomes part and parcel of the subject. All students are required to contribute and they interact effectively immediately because they are compelled to do so.*

See also the *Resources* section of this guide for more information on the RAT.

## Developing reflexive processes

The specific objectives of this dimension of the Framework are the promotion of higher levels of interaction and cognitive engagement, and the enhancement of students' critical, reflective practice.

Peer interaction for learning requires students to confront any differences in each other's current understanding of a topic as well as their differing attitudes or perspectives. In an environment conducive to interaction, exposure to alternative perceptions and conflicting views can serve as a motivation for further discussion in order to resolve the cognitive conflict. Through explaining and defending their views to others, conflicts can be reconciled, and students arrive at "negotiated meanings" (King, 2002, p. 37).

In addition, peer learning is enriched when learners take steps back and reflect on the learning process. Reflecting on their own role and contribution to a group project, for example, encourages students to develop skills in self-assessment, important for learning both within and beyond the course. Students can also be encouraged to reflect on the overall group process, evaluating the strengths and weaknesses (or areas needing improvement) of their group's approach. Through sharing their reflections and exchanging ideas about their learning, students are encouraged to develop their own approaches to learning, and are likely to develop a heightened sense of empathy for their peers (Welikala & Watkins, 2008, p. 59).

### Examples from practice

Academics play an important role in encouraging students to critically reflect on their learning. While much attention is given in university teaching to developing students' critical thinking skills, the focus is typically on the course material and core concepts relating to the discipline. The following examples focus on another important aspect of critical thinking – that is, critical reflection on the learning process itself.

#### Using questions as triggers for reflection

Effective collaboration can be encouraged by asking students about their interactions – before, during and after a peer learning activity. For example, when facilitating a group project students might be asked questions such as:

- › (pre-activity) What are the skills and qualities you can bring to the group? What are the biggest challenges of working in groups for you?

#### Critical reflection

*When students are asked to think about what they're learning in the group process, they start to look at the world from a non-self perspective. They start to be more open-minded and then they learn intercultural interaction skills and interact with students from different backgrounds that way. (Academic)*



- › (during project) What have you and your group been doing well? What could you and your group be doing better? What will you and your group do to achieve this?
- › (post-activity) What have you learnt about the way you work with your peers? What issues/challenges did you face in working with others? How could you do better next time?

Asking students to think about questions such as these can lead to increased self-awareness and the development of important skills in critical thinking and reflection. Encouraging students to share and discuss their reflections can also lead to more effective peer learning by promoting honest communication among students and increased understanding of others.

### Using reflective written tasks

Reflective writing can be a useful way of encouraging students (through assessment) to analyse critically and reflect on their assumptions, values and beliefs in relation to peer learning. In reflecting writing assignments, students can also be asked to synthesise different perspectives they have learned from the literature and their discussions with other students. Examples of reflecting writing assignments include:

- › Reflective essays requiring students to reflect on the group work process including their initial assumptions and attitudes to groupwork, their own roles within the group process, and how they worked with their peers in the group project.
- › Learning journals requiring students to write frequently about their engagement in the subject including how they interact and engage with their peers.
- › Short reports requiring students to write responses to a series of questions about their role in the group project and what they learnt from the group process.

### Using self- and peer- assessment

Increasingly, self- and peer-assessment tasks are being used to assess group work, particularly group processes. This is because these kinds of tasks encourage critical reflection and involve students more actively in the assessment process, especially if they are directly involved in developing the assessment criteria.

The types of self- and peer-assessment tasks vary in length and complexity; from asking students to complete a checklist or itemised scoring sheet, to asking them to write reflective essays evaluating their own as well as their peers' involvement in and contribution to the group project. These kinds of self- and peer-assessment tasks require students to critically analyse and reflect on the group learning process, including how they interacted with their peers and how they incorporated and negotiated diverse perspectives and approaches to the group activity/project.

*Once the students are engaged in reflective tasks, their commitment to the group activity just increases quite dramatically. They want to be part of it and they want to learn a different way of learning. Once the students get a bit of a taste of what the possibilities are, they take it on board and embrace it.  
(Academic).*

### Learning from group experience

*We ask students to discuss the group process. What worked, what didn't and why? These are important questions in helping students learn from their experience.  
(Academic)*

## Fostering communities of learners

The ultimate goal of peer interaction across cultural groups is to encourage students to collectively form a community of learners in which they share a passion for peer interaction, support each other, generate knowledge



and develop a shared practice (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). The sense of connectedness gives students a sense of 'membership' and opens up communication. Students with a stronger sense of community are likely to demonstrate more efficient and effective collaborative learning outcomes and higher course satisfaction (Rovai, 2002). This becomes evident when study groups decide to continue to work together at the end of course or develop other forms of initiatives for peer learning.

## Examples from practice

### Initiatives specifically designed to build learning communities

Structured activities can be effective in encouraging continued peer interaction across cultural groups. For example, in *An Action Planning and An Action Project Assignment* (Zuniga et al., 2007), participants identify three actions they are willing to take to foster peer interaction for learning across cultural groups. They partner with someone else to share their ideas, ask questions, identify the support needed to carry out these actions, and create a time line for implementation.

### Online collaborative tools

Online tools such as discussion boards, wikis or blogs can be used to create an online community of learners. For example, students may be asked to respond weekly to questions or to each other's posts, and their contributions may form part of an assessment task. Giving students the opportunity to communicate online has numerous benefits, particularly for those who spend little time on campus due to competing work or family commitments. Online interaction may also be beneficial for students for whom English is a second language, as they have more time to consider and formulate their responses.

### Peer mentoring programs

There are many kinds of peer mentor programs offered by universities. Some are directly related to the learning in courses, such as the Peer Assisted Study Schemes (PASS) (see *Resources* section). These are generally semester-long programs that centre around subject-specific study and revision groups, facilitated by a trained leader or mentor who is typically a high-achieving student in a senior year in the course. In most PASS programs, the leaders or mentors are a mix of local and international students who support students across different cultural and linguistic backgrounds in the subject. The established peer contact at the beginning of a semester is maintained during the semester.

### **Reflective journals**

*Asking students to regularly write in their journals helps students identify and address any issues in the process of group work. (Academic)*

### **Interaction beyond the classroom**

*Students in my class are really wanting to engage a bit more as a result of interaction within the classroom. One student said that we needed to meet more beyond these few classes. We should make a time for coffee etc. They were really wanting to engage a bit more as a result of interaction within the classroom. (Academic)*



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- Wenger, E. & Snyder, W. M. (2000). Communities of practice: The organizational frontier. *Harvard Business Review*, January-February, 139-145.
- Zuniga, X., Nagda, B. A., Chesler, M., & Cytron-Walker, A. (2007). *Intergroup Dialogue in Higher Education: Meaningful Learning about Social Justice*. San Francisco: Wiley Periodicals.



## Resources

### Facilitating group projects

Baik, C. & Harris, K-L (2009). Guidelines for Effective Group Projects at the University of Melbourne. The Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne.

[http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/Guidelines\\_Group\\_Projects.pdf](http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/Guidelines_Group_Projects.pdf)

Davis, B.G. (2002). Collaborative Learning: Group Work and Study Teams.

<http://www.teaching.berkeley.edu.bdg/collaborative.html>

Groupwork (including the assessment of relative individual contribution, with case studies)

<http://www.bioassess.edu.au/assessment-types/groupwork>

Matthew, A. (2003). Co-operative Student Learning in Undergraduate Law: Fostering Teamwork Skills in External Students. E Law Online Journal.

<http://www.murdoch.edu.au/elaw.issues/v.10n2/matthew102nf.html>

Molla, A. (2007). Facilitating student interaction in a group project: Experience with the Use of Blackboard.

<http://www.ascilite.org.au/conferences/singapore07/procs/molla.pdf>

### Ideas for the first class

Baik, C. (2009). The Melbourne Sessional Teachers' Handbook: Advice and Strategies for Sessional Teachers. Melbourne: The Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/Sessional%20Handbook%202009.pdf>

Forbess-Greene, S. (1983). The Encyclopedia of Icebreakers: Structured Activities that Warm-up, Motivate, Challenge, Acquaint and Energize. San Diego: University Associates, Inc.

Icebreakers Guide, Nottingham Trent University

[https://www.ntu.ac.uk/CASQ/quality/welcome\\_week/resources/85183.pdf](https://www.ntu.ac.uk/CASQ/quality/welcome_week/resources/85183.pdf)

101 Things You Can Do the First Three Weeks of Class, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

<http://honolulu.hawaii.edu/intranet/committees/FacDevCom/guidebk/teachtip/101thing.htm>

Ten Things to Make the First Day (and The Rest) of the Semester Successful Warm-up exercises and Icebreakers, The University of Sydney.

[http://www.edsw.usyd.edu.au/groupwork/implement/prepare/warm\\_up.shtml](http://www.edsw.usyd.edu.au/groupwork/implement/prepare/warm_up.shtml)

### Peer assessment

Assessing Learning in Higher Education website, The Centre for the Study of Higher Education, The University of Melbourne

<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/assessinglearning/index.html>

Boud, D., Cohen, R., & Sampson, J. (Eds.). (2001). *Peer Learning in Higher Education: Learning from & with each other*. St Ives: Clays.

Falchikov, N. (2005). *Improving Assessment Through Student Involvement: Practical solutions for aiding learning in higher and further education*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.

Peer and self assessment, Australian Learning and Teaching Council

<http://www.bioassess.edu.au/assessment-types/peer-and-self-assessment>



## Peer mentoring and study schemes

Peer Assisted Study Scheme (PASS), The University of Manchester  
<http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/tlao/.../peersupport/pass/>

Peer Assisted Study Sessions, The University of Sydney  
<http://www.econ.usyd.edu.au/learning/students/pass>

Student mentoring and peer tutoring, RMIT University  
<http://www.rmit.biz/browse/Our%20Organisation%2FScience%20Engineering%20and%20Health%2FFor%20Students%2FStudent%20mentoring%20and%20peer%20tutoring/>

Why peer mentoring? University of Adelaide  
[http://www.adelaide.edu.au/student/new/docs/Why\\_Peer\\_Mentoring.pdf](http://www.adelaide.edu.au/student/new/docs/Why_Peer_Mentoring.pdf)

## Peer review

Integrating Writing into Your Course: Advice on Incorporating Peer Review In Your Class, University of Wisconsin  
<http://mendota.english.wisc.edu/~WAC/category.jsp?id=20>

Pearce, J., Mulder, R., & Baik, C. (2009). *Involving students in peer review: Case studies and practical strategies for university teaching*. Melbourne: The Centre for the Study of Higher Education.

Peer review and feedback forms, The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa  
<http://www.mwp.hawaii.edu/resources/wm7.htm>

Using student peer review, Colorado State University  
<http://writing.colostate.edu/guides/teaching/peer/>

## Reflective learning

About Reflective Learning, University of Derby  
<http://www.derby.ac.uk/dbs/coaching/reflective-learning>

Brockbank, A., & McGill, I. (2007). *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education* (2nd ed.). Maidenhead, England; New York: McGraw Hill.

Learning Journals, University of Worcester  
[www.worcester.ac.uk/studyskills/documents/learningjournals.pdf](http://www.worcester.ac.uk/studyskills/documents/learningjournals.pdf)

Keeping a Reflective Journal, The Open University  
<http://www.open.ac.uk/skillsforstudy/keeping-a-reflective-learning-journal.php>

Reflective Writing, Bournemouth University  
[http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/study\\_support/reflective\\_learning.html](http://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/study_support/reflective_learning.html)

## Teaching students from diverse backgrounds

Arkoudis, S. (2006). *Teaching International Students: Strategies to enhance learning*. Melbourne: Centre for the Study of Higher Education.  
<http://www.cshe.unimelb.edu.au/pdfs/international.pdf>

Carroll, J., & Ryan, J. (Eds.). (2005). *Teaching International Students: Improving Learning for All*. London: Routledge.

Racially diverse classrooms: Tips for Teachers, Harvard University  
<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/TFTTrace.html>

Teaching Diverse Learners: Equity and Excellence for All, Brown University  
<http://www.alliance.brown.edu/tl/tl-strategies/crt-principles.shtml>

*Pseudonyms have been used for staff and students.*





## **PART B**

### **Finding Common Ground: Challenges and opportunities for enhancing interaction between domestic and international students**



## Introduction

A feature of Australian higher education over the last ten years has been the increased numbers of international students. In 2009, 631,935 international students studied in Australia, an increase of 16.8% from 2008 (Australian International Education, 2010). The increase in the number of international students has resulted in Australian universities incorporating internationalisation into their strategic planning (Leask, 2009), which includes internationalising the curriculum. This usually involves two domains: internationalising content and internationalising learning and teaching processes (Arkoudis, 2006). While internationalising content is considered relatively easy to address, the greater challenge has involved internationalising teaching and learning strategies, and one of the central issues has been increasing interaction between domestic and international students (Marginson, 2007; Prescott & Hellstén, 2005). English medium universities in other countries have also struggled to address this issue (for example, in the UK see Hyland, Trahar, Anderson, & Dickens, 2008; in Hong Kong see Tsui, 2008).

The presence of large numbers of international students has led to increased opportunities for developing interaction between domestic and international students within the learning and teaching environment. The challenge that exists for academics, is to know how to use these opportunities and to enhance student learning. Generally it has been assumed that academics and students can work through the challenges with little informed support to guide their practice. However, in their study of the impact of international students on university life at three Victorian Universities, Marginson and Eijkman (2007) concluded:

*... the internationalisation of the curriculum content, and the potential pedagogical, curricular and other implications of greater diversity of national origins, native languages, cultural backgrounds and educational preparations in the student body, appear to be underdeveloped. Perhaps there were simply not the resources to create more inventive approaches to pedagogies and curriculum in now more multi-cultural classrooms. (Executive Summary, p. 6)*

What can be done to harness the potential of student diversity? In particular, in what ways can university teaching promote interaction between students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds? These questions were investigated through a 2008-10 project sponsored by the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC). The project, *Enhancing Domestic and International Student Interaction*, explored the benefits of, and the obstacles to, interaction among students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. A key outcome from the project was the development of a six-dimension conceptual framework, the *Interaction for Learning Framework*.

This background paper reports on the main findings from the project, which informed the development of the resources mentioned above. There are two main sections to the paper: the first discusses the literature and presents the *Interaction for Learning Framework* developed for the analysis of the data; and the second discusses the main findings from the study using the framework. Much of the discussion below draws on research into increasing student participation, which is familiar to many who teach in higher education contexts. The particular focus of this project is on embedding student participation within teaching, learning and assessment, where diversity can be used as a resource for learning.



Why do academics need to concern themselves with increasing engagement between local and international students within their teaching, learning and assessment practices? The main reasons are that many universities claim that their graduates are developing attributes that will allow them to work anywhere in the world. This means that in their professional lives, graduates will work in linguistically and culturally diverse situations. Increasingly the onus is on universities to produce graduates who are work-ready and have the disciplinary knowledge and the skills to work in their professional fields. Academics are teaching to large numbers of students, who come from diverse backgrounds, therefore peer learning can be used to encourage students to interact and learn from each other. Cultural and linguistic diversity within the learning environment can be used by academics as a resource to develop students' awareness of other students' perspectives and experiences, and to develop skills for communicating and working effectively with diversity. As such, using diversity as a resource for learning can assist students in achieving the learning outcomes of the subject, and potentially enhance students' engagement with teaching and learning in higher education.

## Theoretical background

In this section a selection of the existing research about enhancing interaction between domestic and international students is presented. It provides a brief synthesis of the work to date in this area. The main aim of the literature review is to identify what the perceived benefits and obstacles might be concerning international and domestic student interaction, and then develop a framework to assist in the analysis of the data gathered in the project.

The terms 'international' and 'domestic' students are used in much of the research to represent two homogenous groups of learners, even though the students vary greatly in their educational experiences and English language background. The term 'international students' can be used to refer to students studying in on-shore or off-shore programs, with learners who may have lived and studied in many countries, those who have never left their home country, or learners who are studying overseas for the first time. It has been argued that 'international' is not an appropriate descriptor, and other terms such as transnational or sojourners (Dogherty & Sing, 2005; Marginson, 2007) provide a more appropriate description for this mobile group of learners. Although issues around definitions are not the primary concern of this project, it is noted that there is some general muddiness around using the term 'international' to refer to students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Equally, 'domestic' students also comprise a diverse group of learners, as they can include students who are mono-lingual, bi-lingual or multilingual. These students can be culturally diverse, and include students from rural backgrounds, refugees, low socio-economic status or koorie background, to name just a few. While acknowledging the unclear definitions associated with 'international' and 'domestic' students, these terms will be used in the project as they are widely used within Australian higher education. The point that needs to be emphasised is that international and domestic students increase the linguistic and cultural diversity that is present in university learning environments and offer a variety of opportunities for using diversity to enhance teaching and learning.



## The benefits of interaction

Research indicates that increasing interaction between international and domestic students in teaching and learning contexts has a number of benefits. For students these include developing cognitive skills, effective communications skills and cultural awareness. In addition, increased interaction can assist in developing greater independence for students as they are not as reliant on academics if they have the opportunities to learn from their fellow students. This in turn decentralises roles and allows academics to utilise diversity in the classroom to facilitate learning. However, in order to achieve these benefits, interaction needs to be planned and incorporated within curriculum design.

## The benefits for students

Research shows that student interactions are important to developing cognitive understandings (De Lisi, 2002; King, 2002; Welikala & Watkins, 2008). Given that students bring different educational experiences and disciplinary backgrounds to the learning task, research has found that interaction is an important arena for the development of individuals' cognitive ability (Ryan & Hellmundt, 2005; Sheets, 2005) and offers opportunities for learning (Ryan & Viète, 2009). In addition, peer interaction can provide learners with a greater sense of belonging and support, which may have a positive impact on student retention and learning achievement (Eames & Stewart, 2008; Huijser & Kimmins, 2008).

For example, in group-learning environments, individual learners often discover the extent to which their own perceptions, facts, assumptions, values, and general understanding of the material differ from those of their peers. Upon recognising these differences, individual learners have opportunities to negotiate their understanding and meanings, and reconcile these differences with their peers (King, 1996, p.88). Individuals engaged in such negotiations with others are continually reorganising and restructuring their own knowledge and thinking processes. This approach is collective, reciprocal, supportive, cumulative and purposeful and plays a role in shaping thinking and in securing engagement, learning and understanding in higher education (Hardman, 2008). However, as pointed out by King (1996, p.89), students do not often engage in this level of discourse unless prompted to do so.

Interaction is also considered a valuable means by which students can develop better awareness of their own and other cultures. Culture is not a fixed entity, where particular characteristics can be attributed to people from particular cultural backgrounds (Doherty & Singh, 2005; Holliday, 2005; Signorini, Wiesemes, & Murphy, 2009). Rather, intercultural understanding is developed through interactions with others. As Barro et al. point out:

*Culture is not something prone, waiting to be discovered but an active meaning-making system of experiences, which enters into and is constructed within every act of communication. Through interaction, individuals become more aware of (their) own cultural norms and make them explicit, a process that can be described as 'making the familiar strange'. (Barro et al., 1998, p.83, cited in Eisenchals and Trevaskes, 2007, p.416)*

One of the effective ways of enhancing cultural learning is through good communication, by asking rather than assuming, and listening to experiences rather than culturally stereotyping people (Welikala & Watkins, 2008). Such interactions between students are important for developing cultural understandings and intercultural communication skills, and the cultural diversity



within the university learning environment can be an important resource in facilitating this. The challenge lies in how to achieve this within teaching and learning and assessment tasks.

### **The benefits for academics**

Large classes have become a feature of teaching and learning in higher education and it is often difficult for academics to offer individualised attention to students. For example, one-third of first year students comment that they do not receive helpful feedback from academics (James, Krause, & Jennings, 2010). Interaction promotes student-centred learning that can encourage students to challenge each other and consider alternative view points (Boud, Cohen, & Sampson, 2001). As a result, students have more opportunities to discuss their interpretations with their peers. This in turn means that students receive peer feedback on their work, which assists in their understanding of subject knowledge.

Peer review allows students to take an active role in managing their own learning, through interacting with fellow students and exposes students to greater diversity of perspectives than those of their tutor or lecturer. (Biggs & Tang, 2007; Liu & Carless, 2006). It can assist in providing feedback to students in large classes, where it may be difficult for academics to provide timely feedback (Rubin, 2006). In addition, studies have emphasised the benefits to learning from student involvement in reviewing and providing feedback on peer's work (Falchikov & Boud, 1989; Topping, 1998; Van den Berg, Admiral, & Pilot, 2006). However, to achieve these benefits peer interaction needs to be planned and organised within the teaching and learning activities that are linked to learning outcomes and assessment (Biggs & Tang, 2007).

### **The obstacles to interaction**

Despite the various benefits discussed above, both anecdotal and research evidence suggests that interaction between peer learners across culturally and linguistically diverse groups of students is still minimal (Anderson, 2008; Fincher, Carter, Tombesi, Shaw, & Martel, 2009; Sawir, Marginson, Deumert, Nyland, & Ramia, 2008). A number of reasons are proposed for the lack of interaction. It appears that preferring to stay within familiar cultural and language groups is one of the main reasons that there is little interaction between domestic and international students. This may be due to "the phenomenon of social categorisation and perception" (Eisenclas & Trevaskes, 2007, p. 421). In other words, students prefer to stay within familiar cultural and language groups. Exploring this issue further, Dunne (2009) has noted that contact occurs more often amongst students of similar backgrounds.

China and India were the top two key source countries with a total of 45.6% of international enrolments in higher education in 2009 (Australian International Education, 2010). Greater numbers of students from particular regions and cultures also mean that the need for interaction across cultures is less urgent. These interactions may not be perceived as a priority as students are able to comfortably interact within their cultural and language groups.

The attitude of academics is perhaps a further obstacle in developing interaction between domestic and international students. As stated above, the use of terms such as 'international' and 'domestic' students has not proved useful. In particular, these definitions have framed international students as lacking the English language skills required for university study (O'Loughlin



& Arkoudis, 2009). It is simply not true that all international students will encounter difficulties with their English language skills while at university. What has been silent in the discussion is that local students also can encounter difficulties in developing academic English language skills while at university (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Messinis, Sheehan, & Miholicic, 2008). Given that the use of academic English language is discipline-specific, it follows that most students, irrespective of whether they are local or international, will need some assistance with developing their academic English language skills. Planned interaction activities in the classroom environment offer opportunities for all students to use English as a means of communicating their ideas.

The above discussion reveals that while there are perceived benefits for students and lecturers, there are also a number of obstacles that may hinder the development of interaction between domestic and international students. Central to teaching and learning in higher education is the issue of student engagement. Also important is the need to develop students' ability to work with people from different backgrounds and cultures, as universities aspire to prepare students to work anywhere in the world. But, the challenge is how to address the issue of domestic and international student interaction. What does it mean to create opportunities for interaction and how can these be achieved in a learning and teaching environment where teaching the content of the subject is seen as the main concern? These are important issues because as Ryan and Vieta (2009) note, "pedagogical practices partly shape the roles students play in interaction with peers [and] teachers" (p.308).

## The Interaction for Learning Framework

This section presents the *Interaction for Learning Framework* that was initially developed as a conceptual framework, drawing primarily on research into student participation, group work and peer learning, and then refined through the analysis of the data collected for the project. The project team drew on a number of models in its development. Some suggestions may seem self-evident as they represent widely-accepted principles of effective teaching in higher education. What is different is that these suggestions are offered within an overall framework that can be used to plan interaction within learning, teaching and assessment. The development of the framework was informed by the following studies.

Green (2005) proposed a framework for evaluating the professional influence of an individual on the learning of others. It included five interconnected and interdependent dynamic spaces, which were, spaces of action; spaces of explicit discourse; spaces of learning; spaces of practice development; and spaces of trust. Using the idea of scaffolding described by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), the framework explains the process involved in supporting learning. Although Green's work focuses on the professional influence of an individual on a community of qualitative researchers, the collaborative and reflective nature of learning could be extended to the context of peer learning within university teaching and learning when incorporating the cultural dimension to peer interaction for learning. Sheets (2005) proposes activities that emphasise the importance of connecting culture and cognition in teaching and learning (p.19). Furthermore, Welikala and Watkins (2008) propose a discourse approach to intercultural learning that promotes the concept of learning "as a set of interactions and embraces diversity as a resource" to address the needs of learners (p.55).

By extending the past studies discussed above, the current research project



identifies and synthesises a number of teaching strategies to facilitate and promote peer interaction for learning across diverse cultural and linguistic groups. As a result, the *Interaction for Learning Framework* was developed, consisting of six interrelated dimensions, each of which represents a particular aspect of teaching and learning associated with creating the conditions for effective peer interaction between students of diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The dimension Planning Interaction is central, as it is fundamental to each of the other five dimensions: Creating environments for interaction; Supporting interaction; Engaging with subject knowledge; Developing reflexive processes; and Fostering communities of learners.

The Framework is underpinned by the following core practice principles. The Interaction for Learning Framework:

- › Acknowledges and capitalises on student diversity as a resource for learning and teaching;
- › Engages students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds within the learning context in a variety of ways;
- › Embeds interaction in curriculum planning and links to teaching, learning and assessment;
- › Promotes peer engagement through curriculum-based activities;
- › Recognises the variety of ways that interaction can be utilised across different learning contexts.

## The Interaction for Learning Framework

### (1) Planning interaction

Planning interaction involves academic staff including peer interaction activities into the design of their subject. It is the linking between the learning outcomes, and planned teaching and learning activities that draw upon student diversity to develop subject knowledge and skills in working across cultures. The framework recognises the importance of assessment in developing a purpose for interaction between domestic and international students.

### (2) Creating environments for interaction

The focus in this dimension is on the strategies that can be used to increase students' participation in the first weeks of classes. The main goals are to develop students' confidence in interacting with other students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, and to provide opportunities for students to move out of their cultural comfort zones.

### (3) Supporting interaction

In this dimension, learners are informed about the expectations and benefits of working across different cultural and linguistic groups for their learning. Its main purpose is for students to understand the value of peer interaction and to set up the ground rules and expectations for learning tasks. Helping students understand the value of making these connections to enhance their own learning is a critical component of the framework.

### (4) Engaging with subject knowledge

The first three dimensions are important in preparing domestic and international students to work together. The main purpose of this dimension is to use linguistic and cultural diversity to engage with subject knowledge. This may include drawing on different skills, learning strategies and cultural experiences to co-construct subject knowledge.



### **(5) Developing reflexive processes**

In this dimension learners move beyond individual understanding so that they can utilise the knowledge base available within the community of learners. The key objectives of the fifth dimension of interaction are to promote higher levels of interaction and cognitive engagement through peer feedback and assessment to enhance students' critical thinking and reflection on their learning.

### **(6) Fostering communities of learners**

In this dimension, learners demonstrate independence and are able to move across different cultural contexts. The main purpose of this dimension is to use diversity as resource for independent learning between domestic and international students.

## **Findings from the study**

The aim of the current study was to develop and disseminate strategies to improve domestic and international student interaction within the learning environment. The data collection was conducted in two phases: the first entailed an online survey for academic staff working in Australian universities; the second phase involved group interviews with academics and students from the University of Melbourne, RMIT University and Victoria University. The main aim of the data collection phase was to refine the Interaction for Learning Framework and to gather practical examples of activities in teaching and learning contexts that enhance international and domestic student engagement.

### **Data collection**

#### **Online survey**

The online survey was developed and pre-tested in January 2009. The web link of the online staff survey was then distributed to the Promoting Excellence Initiative (PEI) representative of the ALTC at each Australian university. A total of 95 academics from 10 Australian universities participated in the survey. While the online survey did not yield a high response rate, the responses were representative of the different groups of academics working in Australian universities. Nearly two-thirds held either lecturer or senior lecturer positions, and about 63% of respondents worked full time. The results indicated that 60% had at least 10 years teaching experience, with 26.3% having 11 to 15 years and 33.7% more than 15 years. The majority of the respondents taught undergraduate courses (77.5%) and were from a broad range of disciplines.

The survey sought to elicit responses regarding what academics perceive as the benefits of and obstacles to interaction between domestic and international students within the teaching and learning context, and elicit examples of strategies used to enhance interaction in their teaching. In general, the majority of academics agreed that interactions between international and domestic students could result in enhanced learning for all students. About two-thirds agreed that they considered it their role to plan and develop interaction between students in the teaching and learning tasks. Only half indicated that international and domestic students interact with each other in the classroom. While the numbers are too small to be able to generalise, it appears academics believe that interactions between international and domestic students can result in learning benefits and consider it as their responsibility to support interaction within the teaching and learning environment. The open-ended question



yielded detailed responses regarding the perceived benefits, obstacles and the strategies used in teaching practices. Responses have been included in the analysis section of this paper.

### **Group interviews**

Academic staff and students from the University of Melbourne, RMIT University and Victoria University were involved in group interviews.

At the University of Melbourne (the oldest university in Victoria and the second oldest in Australia) most of the courses are taught on the main campus, near the city of Melbourne. There are a total of 44,000 students enrolled, including about 11,000 international students from 113 countries. This represents the largest international cohort on a single campus of any Australian university. In terms of country of origin, 25% are from China, 18% from Malaysia and 12% from Singapore.

RMIT University is a dual sector institution with multiple campuses in Victoria and Vietnam. Across its Victorian campuses, RMIT has more than 54,000 students including 10,000 international. A further 16,000 students study at RMIT campuses offshore. Within the Higher Education sector, the cultural diversity of the domestic RMIT students in Melbourne include 5% from a non English speaking background; 21% overseas born; and 0.3% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Students studying at RMIT come from more than one hundred countries and Asia provides the 'Top Ten' source countries for international onshore students, with 26% from China and 10% each from India and Malaysia.

Victoria University (VU) is a large multi-sectoral university with higher education, vocational and further education sectors that deliver a diverse range of educational programs to more than 50,000 students across eight main campuses located from the City of Melbourne westwards. VU has almost 10,000 students enrolled in off-shore programs. In Melbourne, the VU student body in higher education programs is extremely diverse culturally and socially. Altogether there are 21,000 students enrolled in higher education programs. 23% of VU's higher education students is categorised as low socio-economic status, and many are the first in their family to participate in higher education level studies. 41% of VU's Melbourne-based higher education students self-identify as speaking at least one other language in addition to English, with more than 80 different languages being represented. 14% of the students in Melbourne are international students coming from more than 70 different countries, but with the largest groups from China, Vietnam, Malaysia, Germany, Saudi Arabia and Sri Lanka.

A purposeful sampling method was used to select the academics for group interviews. Email messages were sent to the Associate Deans of Teaching and Learning within schools and faculties to request assistance with identifying academics involved in developing teaching practices that emphasised interaction between domestic and international students. In addition, members of the project team used their networks within their universities to identify academics for the group interviews. The questions for the group interviews were aimed at identifying teaching, learning and assessment activities that enhanced interaction between international and domestic students; the benefits to both international and domestic students that resulted from interacting with each other and the obstacles to achieving increased engagement between international and domestic students. In total, six academic staff group interviews were held, two at each of the three universities involved in the project, with a total of 40 academics across eight broad discipline areas participating (see Table 1).



Table 1: Profile of academics involved in interviews

<b>Broad Discipline Area</b>	<b>Number of Academics</b>
Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences	3
Business, Management & Economics	14
Creative & Performing Arts	7
Education and Human Service Professions	4
Engineering & Technology	1
Health, Medicine & Veterinary Science	2
Law	4
Science	1
Language & Academic Skills	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>40</b>

Student interviews were conducted at the three participating universities. The aim was to interview both international and domestic students at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and from different discipline areas. Academics who participated in the interviews were asked to identify potential participants for the study. Interviews with international students and local students were conducted separately to allow them to speak freely about their experiences. The students were asked to describe the extent to which they interacted with either local or international students in their classes, what their teachers did in class to encourage local and international students to work together, and the benefits of and obstacles to interaction across cultural and linguistic groups.

A total of 35 students from the three universities participated in the group or individual interviews, of whom 20 were undergraduate students and the rest postgraduates. They were from seven broad discipline areas with the majority from Business, Management and Economics (see Table 2 for more details). Nearly half were Australian, while the rest were from 11 countries where English is used as a second language. The recruiting of students stopped when the research team felt that no new information or themes were emerged from the interviews.

Table 2: Profile of Student Group Interviews

<b>Broad Discipline Area</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>
Arts, Humanities & Social Sciences	5
Business, Management & Economics	14
Creative & Performing Arts	2
Engineering & Technology	2
Health, Medicine & Veterinary Science	5
Law	4
Science	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>35</b>

The group interviews were digitally recorded and either partially or fully transcribed. The team members involved in the interviews conducted the initial data analysis. Themed analysis was undertaken and the main findings were



mapped onto the *Interaction for Learning Framework*, thereby reviewing and refining the framework. The results are presented below.

## Data analysis

In the analysis that follows, the benefits and obstacles are discussed, followed by presenting examples of teaching practice under the six dimensions of the framework.

### Perceived benefits of peer interaction for learning across diverse cultural and linguistic groups

Increased awareness and understanding of different perspectives, preparation for the workplace, improved English language skills of international students and a greater sense of belonging were the potential benefits frequently mentioned by academics and students.

#### ***Increased awareness and understanding of different perspectives***

Most of the academics and students interviewed stated that the diversity of opinions and experiences that students from different cultural backgrounds bring to the learning environment is beneficial to both international and domestic students in terms of expansion of knowledge, increasing awareness of each others' worldviews, and having an internationalised experience. Working with people from other backgrounds was perceived by academics as enhancing the learning outcomes of all students.

Many students stated that interaction between international and domestic students increased their awareness and understanding of different perspectives. The majority perceived student diversity as a resource for learning. They told stories of how they benefited from interaction with their peers. For example, a domestic medical student commented on learning about cross-cultural issues in clinical practice from a South African student:

*It was interesting because it increased my worldview to see medicine from another perspective, not just an Australian way of doing things.*

Similarly, an international student talked about the potential benefits of interacting with Australian students:

*Getting to know Australian ideas is actually very important. It helps broaden our mind, makes us more understanding and also from a commerce student's point of view, we are in a very globalised world. One needs to know how to do business with different types of people. Australia is a good economy so if you don't hang out with Australian people, you don't know the ways they are doing things.*

#### ***Preparation for the workplace***

Many academics and students recognised the potential benefits of interaction between domestic and international students in terms of preparation for the workplace. It was perceived as being important for both cohorts to learn to communicate and work with each other. This can lead to the development of cross-cultural communication skills, as well as extending knowledge that can prepare them for working in multicultural settings, both in Australia and internationally. This aspect of the tertiary learning experience was seen as influencing graduates' professional life. The following two quotations are representative of comments made by the academics interviewed:



*I guess in my case, accounting is a very vocational-based degree course that the students believe is good preparation for your workplace. In all likelihood students will work in a culturally diverse team...so it's important for domestic and international students to learn from each other how to work together.*

*Australia's society is multicultural and my Australian students have to work here too and they're not going to always have to work with people like themselves. They have to work with people whose first language is not English and be able to explain themselves and what they want clearly and well.*

International and domestic students also mentioned that interaction with peers across cultural groups would help them gain confidence in working with people from diverse cultural backgrounds.

### **Improved English language skills of international students**

Somewhat predictably, the majority of academics who were interviewed or completed the online survey indicated that the more the international students interact with the domestic students, the more their English language skills improve. International students agreed with the academics' observations. For example, one student stated that when he could not understand what his teacher said in class, he would discuss it with his Australian friend who provided further clarification. His Australian friend also helped him check grammatical mistakes in his assignments and helped improve his written English.

### **Greater feeling of belonging**

A number of academics and students acknowledged that interaction can foster friendships between domestic and international students. The development of personal relationships between students provided a greater feeling of belonging and encouraged the students to interact beyond the classroom. An international student said that she had met a lot of her friends from the first week's tutorial, which was designed solely for that purpose.

In general, the findings from the data collected in this project were similar to findings from past studies in terms of articulating the perceived benefits of interaction between international and domestic students (e.g. Eames & Stewart, 2008; Huijser & Kimmins, 2008; Welikala & Watkins, 2008).

### **Obstacles and possible underlying reasons for the lack of interaction**

The interviews and online survey revealed that there were a greater number of benefits than obstacles. It appears that the obstacles mainly involve:

- › Institutional practices that influence interaction, such as large class sizes;
- › Diversity as a barrier to learning, where students have different educational experiences and academic skills; or
- › The changing nature of the student life on campus, where large numbers of domestic students spend less time on campus resulting in a large number of international students having limited opportunities to talk and work with domestic students.

The main obstacles identified in the interviews are discussed in this section.



### ***Institutional practices***

Findings from both the on-line survey and interviews revealed that large class sizes and the intense teaching content requirements hindered the development of peer interaction. About half of the academics commented that the number of topics covered in any unit encouraged lecturers/tutors to concentrate on ensuring that they had taught the subject content. As one academic stated:

*It's not my role to increase the social life of the students. They are here to learn the content. My job is to teach the content.*

External influences, such as professional bodies, were also perceived as driving the content in the curriculum and therefore limiting what academics could do in the classroom:

*Our courses are accredited and we need to be sure that we cover the content. So I don't have much time to think about getting the students to interact.*

Large class size was also perceived as an obstacle to students working in diverse groups. A number of academics noted that it was difficult to get students to work together when they were lecturing to large numbers, and tutorial classes had also increased in size.

### ***Weak English language skills of international students***

Some academics commented that international students' weak English language skills was a major issue for communication and inhibited many of them from interacting with domestic students. They observed that many international students were shy about speaking to domestic students because they knew that their English language skills were perhaps not as good as they would like, and the students interviewed made similar comments. They pointed out that many international students found oral interaction difficult. A few of the domestic students interviewed stated that their interaction with international students was difficult because they believe international students had weak English language skills that inhibited communication. On the other hand, some international students attributed their difficulty in interaction to a lack of common experiences between domestic and international students, rather than their English language level.

### ***Lack of common ground***

Many international and local students indicated that even when there were opportunities for them to interact, it was often very difficult. One student referred to this as the lack of "common ground". When asked about what made the interaction difficult and whether there were opportunities to interact, the majority of both international and domestic students admitted that everybody remained with their own group and did not want to cross their cultural comfort zones. Many of the domestic students commented on the difficulties from their perspective:

*...stick with friends from high schools because you can relate a lot, such as talk about sports. International students don't follow up sports so no common ground to talk about things.*

Another domestic student made a similar observation:

*My friends and I talk about a TV show and that excludes international students...also popular culture and movies. They wouldn't understand and have a blank expression on their face. I just don't interact with them enough because I have no stories we can share.*



A domestic student provided a different experience. He found that it was easier for him to interact with some international students because he could speak their language. The language offered the common ground for their interaction:

*I seek out international students who speak Mandarin. It helps to improve my skills in the language and I explain things to them in English. It's good for me and for them.*

It was clear from the domestic student interviews that it was the lack of common ground, rather than lack of English language skills that was one of the main obstacles to interaction between international and domestic students.

Many of the international students voiced similar concerns regarding a lack of common ground. For example:

*No common topics with local students. They talk about TV shows and celebrities. We don't know much about it.*

*I want to talk to Australian students but after I say "hello" I don't know what to say. I don't know about AFL [Australian football] and they don't like my football [soccer]... so nothing to say.*

*When an Aussie comes up to you and says "how are you doing?" and walks past, you are not supposed to stop and answer but just say "good" and continue walking instead of telling him your entire day...it is just a way of saying hi.*

*I don't think they [domestic students] like to work with us as maybe we're talking about different things or a different culture they don't find interesting. International students will also use their own mother language, so that's the reason why they don't want to join.*

Several students felt that their college residential experience made the interaction with domestic students a lot easier as they met domestic students in the kitchen and the hallways and could plan activities together. There were also some suggestions regarding ways of forming common ground such as participating in extra curricular activities, that include mentoring and volunteering programs. A few students indicated that perhaps subject learning could bridge the interaction gap between local and international students:

*...sometimes you don't know what to say, after you talk about the weather, there is no common topic. The tutorials and classes are very important to create this conversation starter.*

Most of the student comments involved outside classroom activities, although it would appear that there is potential for fostering "common ground" through interaction within their teaching and learning.

### ***Different learning experiences***

Many of the academics in the interviews and online survey revealed that different learning experiences and cultural differences could make interaction difficult amongst students. The following comments by academics capture the general perceptions that attribute international students with certain learning experiences that potentially limit interaction:

*Students who come from South East Asia are different ... every voice of authority is taken unquestionably, so we have to spend a lot of time saying that questioning is okay.*

*International students from Asia have problems with critical thinking. So when I ask them to discuss the readings in groups, they have nothing to say because they don't think there is anything to discuss. This limits interaction.*



Some of the international students interviewed alluded to the influence of different learning experiences on interacting with domestic students:

*In my country, there was more teacher directed study. So the teacher came to the class, gave instructions and we did the work. When I came here first I was struggling with the things we have to do because we had to discuss our work and critique the readings. I didn't know how to do this. I had to learn.*

The domestic students did not mention learning experiences at all in the interviews, indicating that they did not consider it as a major obstacle for interaction with international students. However, many of the academics stated that different learning experiences inhibited communication between students in class.

### **Work commitments and limited time spent on campus**

Most domestic students have part-time work and this limits the opportunities for interaction between students. It appears that domestic students are simply not around the campus. As one of the academics observed:

*If you look around the campus late in the evening you rarely see a domestic student. The people inhabiting the library and campus are generally overseas students. So if the locals are not on campus that makes it difficult for the engagement too... a lot of international students are on campus because of the pressure to study and succeed.*

While this was an issue for undergraduate students, it seemed to be a bigger issue for postgraduate students. Some of the postgraduate international students commented that a key obstacle to interaction was that domestic students spend only the class time on campus as they work full time and have their own life. This was perceived as a problem for interaction both in terms of learning and in developing social networks.

## **Teaching practices fostering interaction between international and domestic students**

Despite the challenges and obstacles discussed in the sections above, the interviews revealed that academics used a number of strategies to develop interaction between domestic and international students. As stated earlier, the aim of the analysis was to map the strategies against the framework and to refine the framework by aligning it with the teaching and learning practices that emerged from the interview data. The discussion below deals specifically with analysing the main findings within each of the six dimensions of the framework. While many of the strategies are not new, the development of the framework offers academics a conceptual model for developing their practices. For practical examples from the study, please refer to the booklet *Enhancing peer interaction among students from diverse cultural backgrounds: A guide for academics* and the DVD titled *Finding Common Ground*.

### **Planning interaction**

One of the main findings of the project was the importance of including interaction within curriculum planning. This involves the inclusion of relevant teaching and learning tasks that require students to interact with other students from diverse cultural backgrounds. It also means linking assessment tasks to learning outcomes. The assessment component is a critical aspect of planning for interaction, as this emphasises the relevance of interaction with achieving learning outcomes to the students. As one academic observed:



*In higher education we throw all of these cultures into the classroom and we expect them to work ... cross cultural skills do not happen by magic. They have to be inculcated, they have to be valued and they have to be built into the curriculum.*

The key points that emerged from the data were:

- › Incorporating interaction among students from diverse backgrounds as a course objective and making this explicit in the subject outlines;
- › Designing teaching and learning activities that require students to engage with others from diverse backgrounds to gain the information necessary for completing the tasks; and
- › Incorporating assessment tasks that involve peer feedback.

The academics indicated that if interactive activities involving students from diverse backgrounds were not planned in advance within teaching and learning activities, then they would not occur simply by osmosis:

*We need to plan for situations where students are getting together with [diverse background] students, and not just hope that this will suddenly happen by itself.*

In addition, some of the academics commented on the lack of course mapping across the degree to where and how graduate attributes are assessed. It appeared that there was very little of course mapping that occurred in the three universities in terms of graduate attributes, and therefore even less in relation to increasing complexity of both learning and assessment of interaction across the year levels.

### **Creating environments for interaction**

The findings indicate that students feel more comfortable forming friendship groups and interacting with others from similar backgrounds. This is true for international students as well as for local students. Incorporating activities in the first class of the semester can create a learning environment where students from different cultures and backgrounds interact. Strategies such as the use of icebreakers, social tutorials and allocating seats or tables in classes all helped the mixing up of the class, open up communication among students, increase their confidence in communicating with students beyond their own cultural groups and move them out of their regular social groups. Most of the academics who participated in the group interviews, identified these as important strategies to utilise in the first week of classes.

### **Supporting interaction**

While gaining confidence to speak to students from different cultural backgrounds is important, most academics also stated that students needed to develop the skills necessary for peer interaction. The key points that were made in the interviews include:

- › Setting clear expectations about peer interaction;
- › Respecting and acknowledging diverse perspectives;
- › Assisting students to develop rules regarding interaction within their group;
- › Informing students about how engagement with diverse learning will assist their learning;
- › Providing group-work resources for students.



Several academics noted that it was important to emphasise throughout the semester the benefits of peer interaction in achieving subject learning outcomes. They also observed that group work was a reality when working in a university setting with large class sizes, and that it could be “very painful” for the academic and the students if it did not work effectively. Therefore, academics indicated that they took the time to support students working in groups:

*I think the worst thing you can do is to tell the groups what you want them to do, and then there's no buy-in [from the students]. So what I do is tell the students to spend about five to ten minutes working out three or four simple basic group rules [to work effectively as a group]. ... When I've done that over the last three or four years ... I have had no group complaints.*

Both international and domestic students also reported that they thought support was important if they were to develop the confidence and skills needed for them work together.

### **Engaging with subject knowledge**

The previous three dimensions prepare students to engage in collaborative learning activities. Academics are familiar with using group work in their teaching and learning contexts. It was emphasised in the interviews that diversity could be used as a resource for engaging with subject knowledge. The key points from the interviews included:

- › Organising activities that encourage students to draw on the diversity within the group to complete the task;
- › Designing group projects that require students from diverse backgrounds to pool their knowledge as they work through a set of problems; and
- › Incorporating peer feedback to support learning.

Some academics highlighted the learning benefits for local students. For example:

*I don't just put the students in groups to discuss. I give them questions to prompt the discussion and each of the students in the group needs to offer their opinions based on their own experiences. Sometimes in setting up a business for example, there are issues that might not be important here in Australia, that are critical in countries like Malaysia. That way, they broaden their views.*

The academics' comments reflected their disciplinary backgrounds. For example, academics in humanities-based subjects focused more on using pair and group work to discuss different perspectives on the issue. Academics from practical subjects emphasised the effectiveness of group work in assisting students to learn. This included developing skills in constructing a model, conducting a chemistry experiment and preparing an artistic performance.

### **Developing reflexive process**

The interviews revealed that academics play an important role in encouraging students to critically reflect on their work. The key strategies that academics used were:

- › Analysing and synthesising ideas to prepare feedback for peers;
- › Offering constructive feedback that supported student learning; and



- › Reflecting on their own knowledge and the different perspectives that informed them.

Most of the academics interviewed stated that using peer interaction to develop reflexive processes was an effective strategy for teaching, particularly when peer feedback involved the assessment tasks. For example, one academic had a large tutorial group of 40 students, and felt that it was very difficult to offer them detailed feedback on their work. He organised his tutorial so that the students completed sections of their assignment, and they would then arrange to meet outside of class to discuss their work and offer feedback to their peers. Any issues that emerged would be discussed in class the following week. His teaching evaluation found that the international and domestic students believed that the quality of their work improved because they were required to think about international perspectives when completing their assessment tasks.

Another academic included in the assessment criteria the requirement that students work with others from diverse language or cultural backgrounds:

*So what I say ... [to students] when they are forming groups is ... "You have to think about the diversity of the group because that's a strength in the kind of assessment I'm giving you. I need differences in perspectives. I need you to be able to understand and analyse things from different perspectives, including cultural and international perspectives". What I found when I did that ... was that there was not a single group where it was all just international students for example. So they had all spread out and most of the groups were quite heterogenous*

In general, there were fewer examples offered by the academics in this dimension, compared to the previous four dimensions.

## **Fostering communities of learners**

As with the previous dimension, only a few examples were offered relating to fostering communities of learners. These mainly involved online collaboration and peer mentoring programs linked to learning within the curriculum. These programs tended to include all dimensions of the framework, and were particularly linked to assessment tasks for the subject. An example of the online collaboration is offered below:

### **Collaboration between international and domestic students in a virtual learning environment**

*In the Department of Information Systems, all two-year Master of Information Systems students are required to complete a subject called Fundamentals of Information Systems. This represents an opportunity for the program to create a cohort experience for the postgraduate students. In the last three years, the majority of students in the program have been international students from diverse countries, including China, Indonesia, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cyprus, Pakistan, India, Kazakhstan, Mongolia and Saudi Arabia, as well as a number of domestic students. Some of the enrolled students have work experience while others have recently completed their undergraduate studies.*

*The subject is primarily conducted in an online learning environment through the extensive use of the Discussion Board. The subject has four face-to-face lectures in the semester, where students get to know each other and interact. Otherwise, all interaction is conducted online.*

*The approach was particularly successful, producing an average of between 730 - 780 postings from 27 students and one lecturer in a period of three weeks. International and domestic students all participated to a greater or*



lesser extent in this environment. The students often critically discussed case examples from different countries.

For the online intercultural learning environment to work, scaffolding had to be provided in the following ways:

- › In the first week, students were introduced to each other in a 'low content driven' lecture. Substantial opportunity was given for students to interact with one another, so that they got to know each other from the start.
- › Students were given a set of Readings to discuss each week and asked to provide their own examples of how they might apply the ideas from the Readings.
- › At the start of each week, a list of questions was submitted by the lecturer to start the on-line discussion. By answering these questions, the students started to share their different perspectives of the cases and concepts. This exercise assisted them in providing a response to their assessment for the subject, which was in the form of case study reports.
- › The lecturer continued to encourage the students to respond to each other's post, so that it was not just a two-way conversation between the facilitator and individual students. While this occurred in the first week of the semester, students later interacted with each other with minimal interruption from the facilitator.
- › The students were awarded marks (10%) for their efforts and this contributed to their overall score in the subject.
- › The role of the lecturer was to moderate the environment, encourage the low users, refer the students to other relevant resources, challenge the students' thinking and correct any misconceptions in relation to the readings.

The workload for the academic averaged to about 4 – 5 hours a week, reading through the multiple postings of students, determining the quality for assessment and responding to direct questions from students. The students reported that because of the nature of the subject where online discussion was ongoing and graded every three weeks, they had to consistently keep up with the readings for the subject each week. Feedback from the participating students was positive and many found the environment challenging, educational and reflexive. The students indicated that the discussion boards allowed them time to think about the concepts/theories and cases, and frame a response in a supportive but challenging environment. It also allowed them to look at how students from different cultures worked and communicated. A number of the posts indicated intercultural learning and breaking down of stereotypes.

## Discussion of findings

The above research findings provide several insights into developing peer interaction for learning across diverse cultural and linguistic groups. Firstly, the *Interaction for Learning Framework* can guide academics in developing peer interaction between domestic and international students. It is informed by research and practice; focused on developing interaction within teaching, learning and assessment; and highlights the benefits of using diversity as a resource for learning in higher education.



Secondly, academics play an important role in structuring peer interaction with students from diverse backgrounds. Efforts made in this aspect of teaching should be recognised and documented in the performance review of academics. The *Interaction for Learning Framework* developed in this project is an important tool that can be used for documenting practice.

Thirdly, the terms 'international' and 'domestic' separated student groupings and lead to assumptions being made about the knowledge and skills of each of the two groups. As we enter a phase in Australian higher education where the focus is placed on internationalising teaching and learning activities through curriculum planning, it may be useful to refer to the diverse cultural and linguistic background of students, rather than as international and domestic students.

Fourthly, one the main obstacles to interaction between students from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds is they believed they had few common points of interest. They referred to this as "lacking common ground". The practical examples gathered in this study provide evidence of the potential in developing points of common interest through subject learning.

Finally, most of the practical examples that were collected seemed to concentrate on dimensions one to four of the framework. Very few examples were found in relation to dimensions five and six. This may be due to the fact that the first four dimensions largely involve teaching and learning activities designed to engage students in learning, whereas the last two dimensions are more closely linked to assessment. This would suggest that more work needs to be done in incorporating interaction into assessment practices.

## Conclusion

This background paper aimed to gather practical examples of activities in teaching and learning contexts that enhance international and domestic students engagement, as well as information about potential benefits of and obstacles to engagement. A conceptual framework underpinned by past studies was developed to assist in mapping the practical examples collected.

Several potential benefits of peer interaction emerged from the research findings. Peer interaction across cultural and linguistic groups was recognised as a way of enriching learning experiences in terms of an expansion of knowledge, increasing awareness and understanding of worldviews, preparation for the multicultural workplace and improving English language skills of international students. Students engaged in peer interaction also experience greater feelings of belonging that may have positive influences on their academic achievement.

A number of challenges were also identified. The challenges to teaching perceived by academic staff members include, lack of time to foster interaction due to large class sizes, and the need to focus on subject content, as well as a lack of planning interaction activities for learning within curriculum design. With respect to student learning, both staff and students pointed out a number of challenges including, the poor English language skills of international students, work commitments and limited time spent on campus, a lack of common experiences among diverse student groups.

Most of the research findings with respect to potential benefits of and obstacles to engagement identified from the current study are consistent with those of past studies.



However, what distinguishes the current study from previous studies is the development of the *Interaction for Learning Framework*. The framework was developed to address the challenges identified in the study and provide academics with strategic ideas for integrating peer interaction activities in the teaching and learning context to optimise student learning.

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## Appendix 1:

### Enhancing Domestic and International Student Engagement: Strategies for influencing attitudes and behaviours – ONLINE SURVEY

Plain Language Statement   Stage 1   Stage 2   Stage 3   Stage 4

Thank you for your participation in this survey. The information will, in part inform the development of resources for this project, which will be available at the end of 2009. The survey should take about 15 minutes to complete.

This questionnaire is designed to be completed in one session, however there are no time restrictions on the length of the session. Please use the menu buttons at the top of the page, and the navigation (“next” and “back”) buttons at the bottom of the page to complete the questions. Your responses to the questions may be edited as many times as you like.

When you have completed the questionnaire, please click on the “Submit” button, located under “Stage 4”.

1) What is your current position at the university?

- Tutor/Associate Lecturer
- Lecturer
- Senior Lecturer
- Associate Professor
- Professor
- Other (please specify)

2) What is the broad discipline area that you teach in?

3) How many years of teaching experience do you have? (this includes any work as a tutor/sessional staff member)

- Less than two years
- Two – five years
- Six – ten years
- Eleven – fifteen years
- More than fifteen years

4) Please indicate your employment time fraction

- Full Time
- Part Time
- Sessional



5) Please indicate your university

6) On average, can you estimate the proportion of international students in the classes that you teach this year?

- Less than 10% international
- Between 10 - 30%
- Between 30 - 50%
- Between 50 - 70%
- Between 70 - 90%
- Greater than 90%

7) Please indicate the year level where the majority of your teaching is currently conducted:

- Undergraduate
- Graduate Certificate/Diploma
- Masters
- PhD

8) Indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements:

	(5) Strongly agree	(4) Agree	(3) Neither agree or disagree	(2) Disagree	(1) Strongly disagree
International and domestic students interact well with each other in my classroom	5	4	3	2	1
I think that there are learning benefits for domestic students to interact with international students	5	4	3	2	1
It is important that domestic and international students interact in the classroom	5	4	3	2	1
I think that there are learning benefits for international students to interact with domestic students	5	4	3	2	1
In my teaching, I plan for international and domestic students to interact in my classroom	5	4	3	2	1
I see it as my role to foster interaction between domestic and international students	5	4	3	2	1



	(5) Strongly agree	(4) Agree	(3) Neither agree or disagree	(2) Disagree	(1) Strongly disagree
I have changed my teaching strategies to cater for the learning needs of international students	5	4	3	2	1

9) Please provide a description of the strategy and explain how effective it is. You can provide more than one example by clicking the 'yes' button.

Do you have further examples that you would like to share?

10) Does your university provide any resources to assist staff in optimising interaction between domestic and international students.?

- Yes
- No

11) From your experience, what, if any, obstacles are there to international and domestic student engagement?

12) What do you think the learning benefits for international students of enhancing interaction with domestic students within the classroom?

13) What do you think are the learning benefits for domestic students for enhancing interaction with international students within the classroom?

Please leave your name, position and contact details if you would like to participate further in this project.

Name:

Email:



# PART C

## Student flyer

The student flyer was designed for dissemination in the first week of classes. It can be used to discuss the benefits of using diversity as a resource for learning.







# Making Connections

Part of getting the most out of your time at university is making connections with people and interacting with students from different cultural and language backgrounds.

## Why is this important?

“In our course it is always good to get a different point of view. Everyone has so many different ideas ... Getting opinions and listening to people talk and think ... helps me to develop my own ideas.” (student)

“Interaction with international students does help with learning. It helps that when you go to a workplace there will be other cultures there and it will help you communicate better because you have that experience. You learn to explain things in a way that everyone else understands as well.” (student)

## To feel connected

We know from research that students today spend less time on campus than they did in the past. Increased numbers of university students spend less time on campus. They are less likely to be involved in activities around campus and seem to keep more to themselves at university. Therefore, it would seem that the classroom is an important place to make connections with fellow students, using your studies as a common reference point for discussions.

## For learning

Students have different educational experiences that inform their view of the material that is being taught. Through discussion with fellow students, you can discover the extent to which your perceptions, assumptions and general understandings differ from those of your peers. This enhances your own knowledge and thinking processes, which supports learning.

## For developing skills

Employers want graduates who can communicate effectively with people from diverse language and cultural backgrounds. There are many opportunities for you to develop these skills at university.

## What can I do?

Here are a few suggestions:

- Try to move outside your own cultural and language group in classes
- When forming groups to discuss work, try to include students who may offer different perspectives based on their diverse cultural/language background
- Respect the views of other students and listen to what they have to say before offering an alternative view
- Ask for clarification, if you are unsure of the points that have been made
- Reflect on the value of interacting with diverse students for your own learning









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