With government investment in higher education continuing to decrease, Australian universities are becoming more and more financially reliant on international student fees.

As has been the case for a number of years, students from the People’s Republic of China are the largest group by a wide margin, and there is every indication are that they will remain so into the foreseeable future.

Universities like to frame the internationalization of the student body as evidence of Australian higher education’s global outlook. This image of the university as a crucible of cosmopolitanization is marketed to both domestic and international students.

Against this backdrop, I am currently conducting a five-year study of the social experiences of a large group of Chinese students studying in Australian universities. My findings suggest that we have a long way to go before our dream of the university as a place that fosters students’ cosmopolitanization can be realized.

This is not some culture-specific problem with the Chinese students. Before they leave China, all the students I have spoken with are looking eagerly forward to making Australian friends and gaining a deeper understanding of western cultures through immersion and integration into Australian society.

But the majority of Chinese students leave our universities disappointed with the social experience they have there. They haven’t managed to make local friends; despite their best efforts they have not obtained meaningful work opportunities in local businesses; and overall their time in Australia has been marked by social isolation and much less cross-cultural engagement than they had hoped for.

This situation raises two key challenges for Australian governments and universities.

The first is the ethical challenge of providing holistic social care for international students. To have a valuable cultural experience here—even just to significantly improve one’s English-language skills—cross-cultural socialization is key. But students of widely differing cultural backgrounds do not automatically self-
cosmopolitanize simply by being placed in the same classroom, and to date universities have not supported any systematic response to the challenge of enabling international students to access local social life. Other organizations tend to step in to fill the gap including, notably, Christian churches.

Existing responses to this problem from universities are patchy: some run buddy programs pairing up new international students with a peer who has been in Australia longer; individual lecturers may try to mix up students of different nationalities for classroom work; universities’ international offices do what they can but don’t generally try to mix local and international students.

A recent policy report from China Matters makes some good concrete suggestions for more ambitious initiatives that could be trialled. But doing so will require far more concerted and systematic action and greater resources than have been available to date. Given that international students pay on average three times the fees of their domestic peers, it doesn’t seem unreasonable to invest some of this income in improving their social experience.

The second challenge is a related one, but concerning domestic students. Universities should make the most of the opportunity that international students bring to build the cosmopolitan engagement of all students.

Among the commonest statements made by Chinese students is that, despite their own efforts, their Australian peers appear simply indifferent to pursuing friendships with them.

There seems to be a disconnect, here, between this generation’s keen awareness of the opportunities promised by the “Asian century,” and their evident lack of skills in forging cross-cultural connections that could be deeply personally enriching if not also professionally valuable. This generation of local students wants and needs to develop a sophisticated understanding of the cultures of our regional neighbours, but the most obvious resource—their own peers from those countries who share the classroom with them—is being overlooked for local students’ lack of cross-cultural social skills.

A well-informed and systematic approach to training domestic students (and indeed academic staff) on how to make the most of the rich social, cultural and learning opportunities afforded by the internationalized classroom would certainly be valuable in this regard.
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