

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT WITHIN THE WIDER COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

In the current climate of globalisation, the ESL student represents the largest and fastest-growing segment of the adult education population. Australia, along with other countries, has seen a dramatic increase in ESL students, and as the importance of community involvement throughout education becomes more evident, the engagement of ESL students within their new communities must be incorporated into the experiences provided by schools. In doing this, schools will attend to students' basic human need for belonging, and link the English language that has been getting taught in the classroom to using it in the real, wider community. Research, on why student engagement is important, and data, collected in the form of surveys at a Perth college, results in a convincing case for developing an engaging student experience program in schools. The implementation of this program would assist schools to delve further into changing their strategies in-sync with what is needed in the 21st century. It would also provide opportunities for students to learn English through authentic situations outside the classroom and dealing with any challenges which they face in becoming a part of their new communities. Schools are now able to take the first steps in implementing an engaging student experience program within their schools, to create an engaging environment inside and outside the school, and make a direct link between their schools and the real world for their students.

INTRODUCTION

Educators are concerned with many facets of the learning journey of students; academic progress, wellbeing and social acceptance are only some parts over which teachers play a major role in the students' lives. As children begin formal education at a young age, one of the main concerns of leaders is to engage with children and their families from the beginning to respond to growing evidence that early engagement with children and their families deliver strong outcomes for society as a whole (Gestwicki, 2015, Couchenour, & Chrisman, 2013). It is generally acknowledged that families are children's first teachers and as a result engaging with families and communities in the early years is important (Couchenour, & Chrisman, 2013). However, the engagement of members of society within communities does not stop at the end of schooling. Even after becoming adults, the engagement of students regardless of their age is vital to the smooth running of communities. Building a sense of community contributes significantly to people's well-being which in turn has a positive impact on the smooth running of communities (Pretty, Bishop, Fisher, & Sonn, 2006). Furthermore, with a large number of immigrants leaving their countries every year to study English, successful acculturation and adaptation are important in ensuring the smooth running of diverse and multicultural communities present in the current setting. The relations between host countries and immigrants are affected by the acculturation strategies in place, whether adaptation and integration are encouraged, and the role of English in the adaptation process cannot be overlooked as a major factor in successful settlement and integration within their new community (Burnett, 1998).

In the current climate of globalisation, there is a large number of adults studying English and "the adult ESL student represents the largest and fastest-growing segment of the adult education population" (Crandall, & Sheppard, 2004, p.7). ESL is the study of English as a second language, usually in a country

where it is the native language. “In the past couple of decades Australia, along with other English-speaking countries, has seen a dramatic increase in international students enrolling in intensive English language programs” (Hatoss, 2006, p.47). The Australian English language sector has significantly grown as a destination for overseas students wanting to improve their English language skills and Australia is ranked number 4 in popularity after the UK, the USA and Canada (English Australia, 2015). As the importance of community involvement throughout education becomes more evident, the engagement of ESL students within their new communities must be incorporated into the experiences provided by the schools. While research has shown that student engagement within the community is important, it is important to assess this within the specific context of ESL adult learners in each city and ask them in what ways they want to be engaged within the community. This was already done at a school in Perth, Australia; the research question was “How important is it to engage new international students within the Australian community and how do we do it?”

Research PROCEDURE

It was expected that teachers and students would have differing opinions on the subject and thus two surveys were created; one for the teachers (Survey 1) and one for the students (Survey 2). The aim of creating two surveys was to identify whether teachers and students differ in: their opinions on the importance of student engagement within the Australian community, and in the ways to do it. Both surveys consisted of five questions of which three asked participants to rate their response from 1-5 (1 meaning ‘not important’ and 5 meaning ‘very important’). The other two questions required them to write a short response in the space provided.

Survey 1. Teacher Survey

**Please complete questions 1-3 on a scale of 1-5 (1=not important, 5=very important).
Please circle your response.**

1. How important is it for new students to become part of the wider community in Perth?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5

2. How important is it to provide opportunities for new students to do this?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5

3. In your experience, how important is it to the new students?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5

Please complete questions 4 and 5 by writing your comments in the space provided.

4. In your experience, what opportunities are provided to new students to do this?

5. What opportunities could be provided to new students?

Survey 2. Student Survey

Please complete questions 1-3 on a scale of 1-5 (1=not important, 5=very important).

Please circle your response.

1. How important is it for you to become part of the Australian community?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5

2. How important is it to be given opportunities to do this?

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5

3. In your experience, how important is it to the people around you? (teachers, friends, homestay)

1 _____ 2 _____ 3 _____ 4 _____ 5

Please complete questions 4 and 5 by writing your comments in the space provided.

4. In your experience, what opportunities are provided to you to do this?

5. What opportunities could be provided to you?

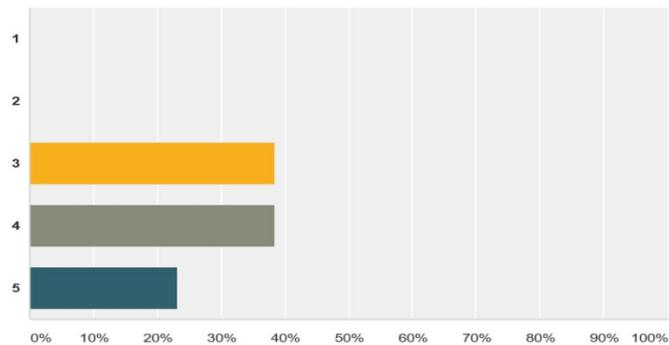
RESULTS

The surveys were distributed in paper form; to the teachers in the staffroom and to the students in the classroom. A total of 13 teachers and 24 students completed the survey and they ranged in age, nationality, English proficiency, work experience and other factors. Their responses were collected and manually entered into the online survey software provided by Survey Monkey. Their responses to the first 3 questions were charted below (Charts 1 to 6).

Chart 1. Question 1 and Teacher Responses

How important is it for new students to become part of the wider community in Perth?

Answered: 13 Skipped: 0

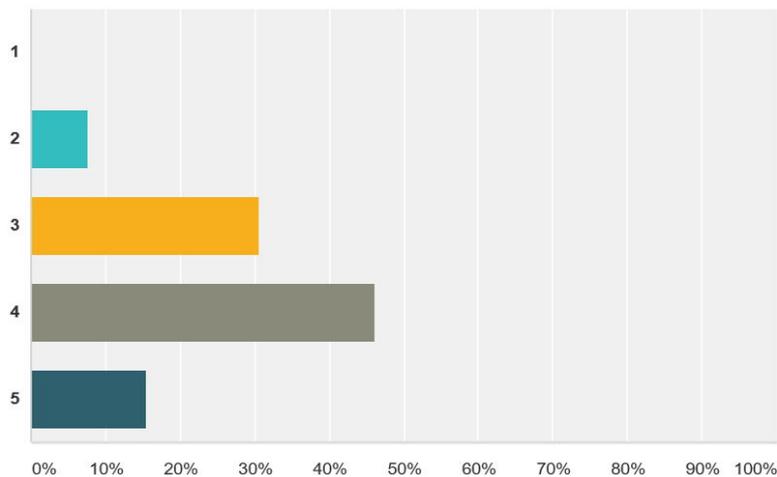


It is evident that the majority of teachers (76.92%) believe that it is *quite* but not *very* important for new students to become part of the wider community in Perth. Therefore, while teachers rated student engagement as important, they did not identify it as a vital aspect of the students’ lives. This was not expected as it is not consistent with research which shows that student engagement within the community is very important. However, this may be due to a small teacher sample and/or teachers completing the survey without having the experience of feeling outside a community in order to personally understand the importance of it.

Chart 2. Question 2 and Teacher Responses

How important is it to provide opportunities for new students to do this?

Answered: 13 Skipped: 0

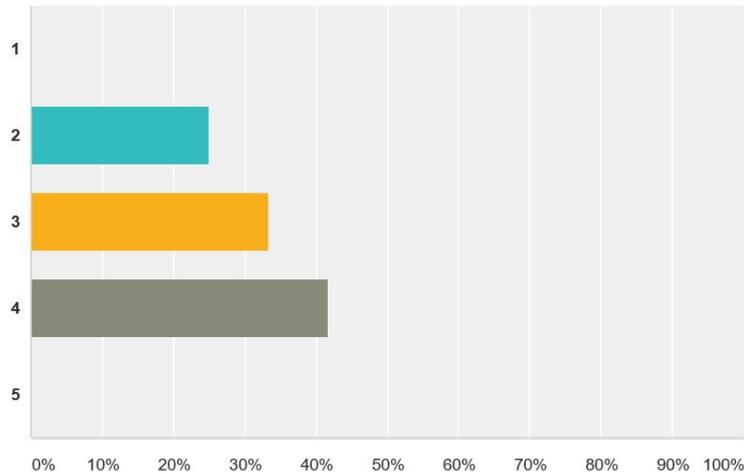


A large number of teachers believe that it is *quite* important to provide opportunities to the students to allow them to become part of the wider community in Perth. This means that the school should provide English language lessons as well as work with others to provide other opportunities. This is directly linked to research by Crandall and Sheppard (2004) who found that “programs achieve the most if they work with allied programs and other service providers toward a common purpose” (p.20).

Chart 3. Question 3 and Teacher Responses

In your experience, how important is it to the new students?

Answered: 12 Skipped: 1

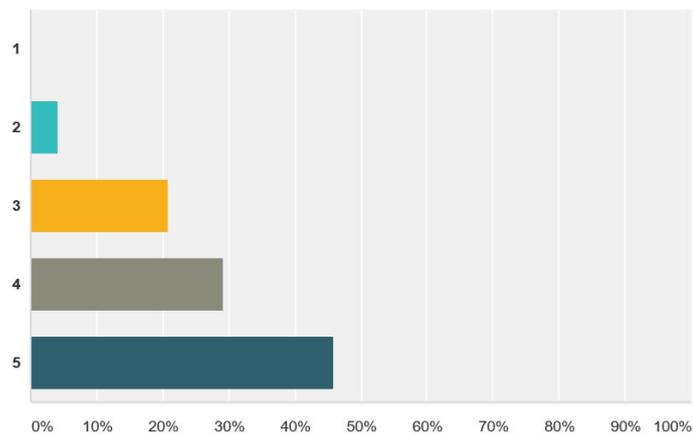


The majority of the teachers believe that students rate it as *quite* important to become part of their new communities. It is very interesting to note that no teachers rated this as *very* important on the behalf of the students. This is the opposite of the response recorded by the students (as seen below in Chart 4) as a large number of students rated this as *very* important. This indicates that there is a gap between teachers and students, as teachers are not aware of their students' wishes.

Chart 4. Question 1 and Student Responses

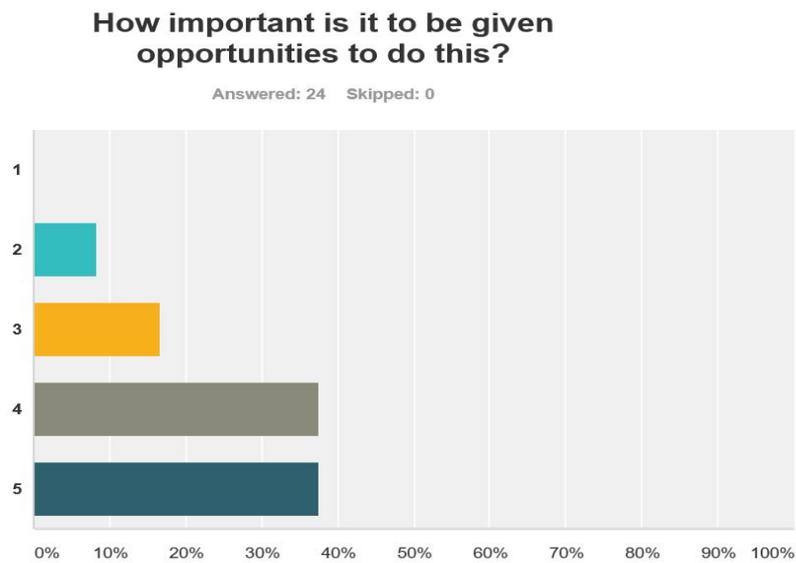
How important is it for you to become part of the Australian community?

Answered: 24 Skipped: 0



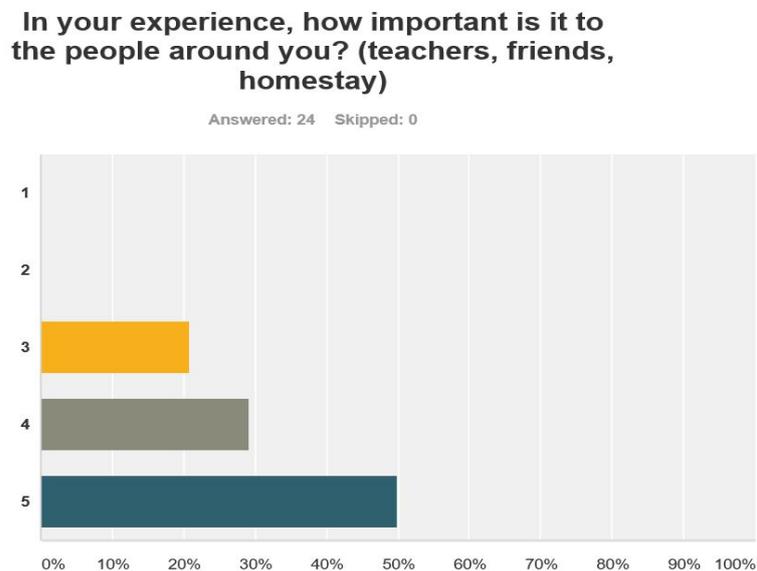
The majority of students find it *very* important to become part of the wider community in Perth. This was expected as this group of students has chosen to come to Australia to study English for an extended period of time during which they live, study and sometimes work as the locals do. It is therefore vital to them to become part of the community within which they now live in order to find jobs, meet locals, contribute and enjoy the same quality of life. If they are left struggling in their new environment, this will no doubt affect the others around them.

Chart 5. Question 2 and Student Responses



The majority of the students (75%) also think that it is *quite* to *very* important to be given opportunities to become a part of their new communities. This was expected as students who come to Australia may have very limited English proficiency skills resulting in difficulty in finding opportunities to engage and interact with their new communities. It is therefore very important for the schools, often the first point of contact for students in Australia, to provide opportunities for them to engage within the community.

Chart 6. Question 3 and Student Responses



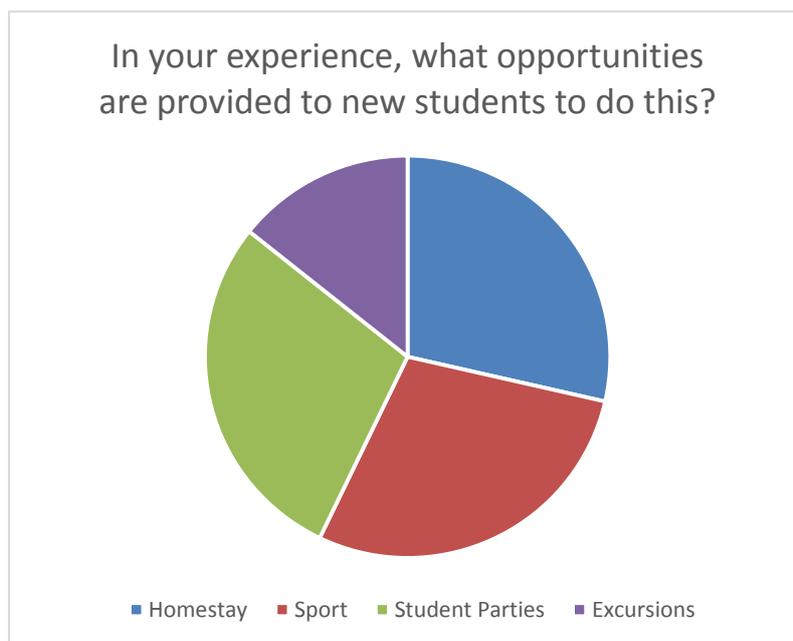
As seen from the data, 50% of the students believe that those around them also think that it is *very* important for them to become part of the wider community while the other 50% is split in the *quite* important categories. However, overall, they believe that others find it important for them to become part of the wider community. While this includes many others such as friends and homestay, it is interesting to note that teachers do not feel that it is very important to them for students to become engaged within the community. Therefore, this once again reinforces the gap of understanding between students and teachers, students believe that it is more important to those around them than it actually is.

When analysing the data, it is important to note that the sample was quite small and more students than teachers completed the survey. In addition, there was no particular group identified and chosen between the students and teachers. Perhaps it would be beneficial to do this in the future as different groups may have different opinions. For example, students between the ages of 18-25 may be less interested in becoming part of the Australian community and more comfortable in staying within their cultural group. On the other hand, students between the ages of 26-33 may be more interested in becoming part of the Australian community in order to find career opportunities for example. Similarly, younger or less experienced teachers may not see the importance of student engagement early on in their career and vice versa.

In answering the question, how important is it to engage new international students within the Australian community, it can be stated that it is *very* important, particularly to the new students who come to Australia to study English as adults. This can be seen from the data collected from question 1 in both the teacher and student surveys, as 61.54% of teachers and 75% of students rated it as *quite* to *very* important.

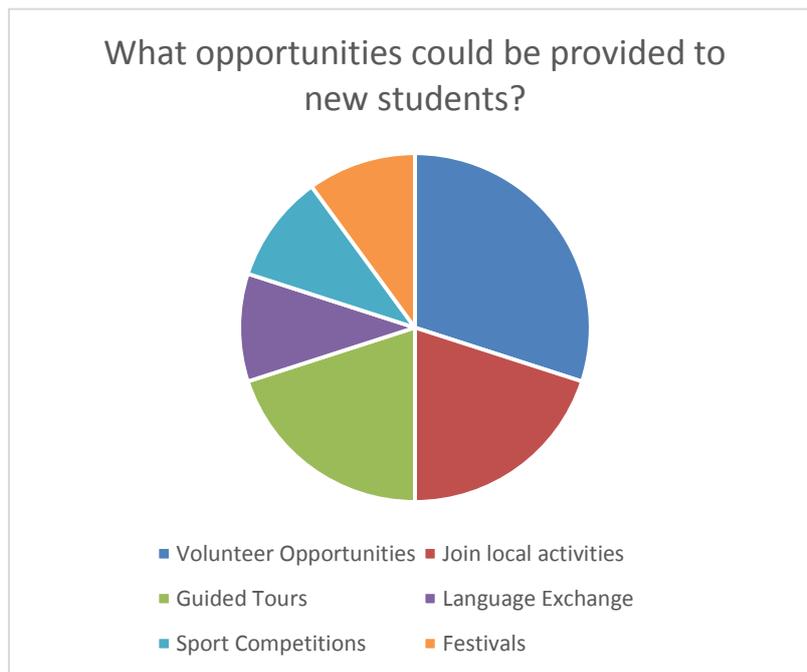
In order to analyse the data collected from the short answer responses (questions 4 and 5), a qualitative data analysis was undertaken to identify the most common responses. Once identified, the most common responses were inputted into pie charts. These were split between teachers (Pie Charts 1 and 2) and students (Pie Charts 3 and 4).

Pie Chart 1. Question 4 and Teacher Responses



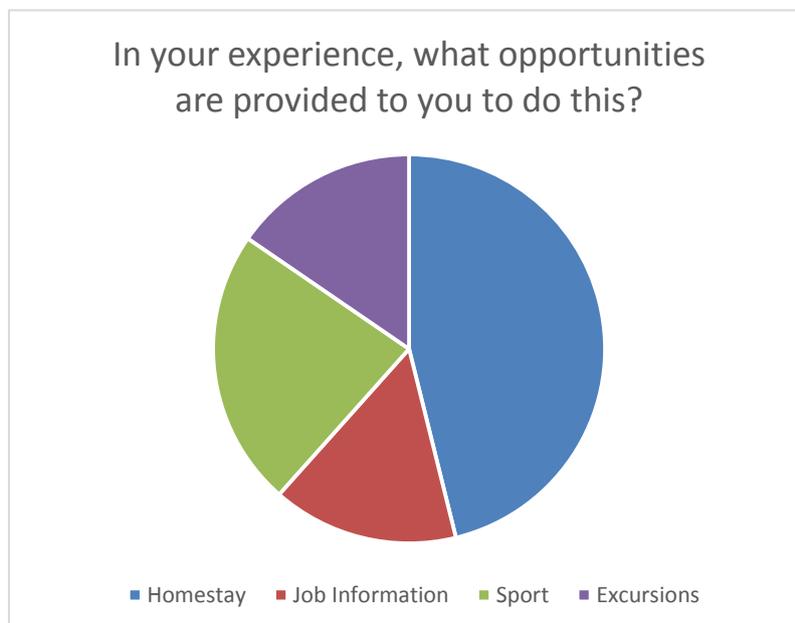
Looking at this pie chart, it is evident that teachers identified homestay, sport and students parties as the biggest opportunities provided by the school to students in order to become engaged within the Australian community. Excursions organised by the school were also mentioned by many teachers.

Pie Chart 2. Question 5 and Teacher Responses



When teachers were surveyed about possible opportunities for the future, it was interesting to note that they voiced many ideas which were not currently in place at the school. Teachers mostly stated that volunteer opportunities should be organised by the school in order to put students into contact with locals and expand their networks. Teachers also suggested that students should be directed to join local activities where Australians would also be present.

Pie Chart 3. Question 4 and Student Responses



Interestingly, the most common responses by students were homestay, followed by sport and excursions, and job information. Teachers identified that the school provides more opportunities promoting student engagement than the students did.

Pie Chart 4. Question 5 and Student Responses



In contrast, students were able to identify many more opportunities which could be provided to them in the future in order to become engaged within their new communities. Interestingly, students voiced that they wanted to be provided with opportunities to meet locals, closely followed by the school initiating a language exchange. Their most common responses also centered on job information, volunteering opportunities and tours. Finally, students also suggested attending parties and sport competitions where locals are also present instead of exclusive events for students of this school.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to compare these results with previous findings as there is currently no research on ESL adult learners and their engagement within their new communities. Perhaps this is an underestimated area in the field of education as the importance of student engagement is acknowledged throughout the schooling years of children but not in the continuing learning journey as adults.

CONCLUSION

In moving forward, the importance of engaging international students within the community cannot be discounted. The need for ELICOS schools to introduce activities which allow their students to achieve integration is exceptional, and in the current climate of globalization and international movement, it will soon be considered essential. There is considerable evidence that community engagement provides positive outcomes for all. As schools come into contact with a variety of students on a daily basis, they can act as a key starting point in initiating contact between their students and others around them. The creation and implementation of a Student Engagement Program, based on existing research and data collected from each school, provides a framework for schools to work with, which can significantly improve educational practices around the world, leading to excellent educational services as well as a great sense of community and well-being within the diverse communities we live in.

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AUTHOR

Ms. Athanassia IOSIFIDOU became interested in languages at the age of 13 when she moved to Australia from Greece. Learning English motivated her to pursue more languages leading to her learning French and becoming qualified to teach French and Greek. Always looking for opportunities, she completed the CELTA and she has been teaching English ever since. She has worked in public and private schools, in Australia and France, as well as at a university and various Perth ESL colleges. She has just completed a Master of Education and presented at the 2017 IATEFL Annual Conference, and loves teaching English in Perth.

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