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SUPPORTING SOCIAL BELONGING AMONG INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Adapting to a new culture, language and way of life while taking on a considerable study load can impact the mental health and wellbeing of international students, especially in regional areas.

"Some international students find it hard to settle into life in Australia. Homesickness is prevalent and can impact their mental health," explains Louise.

To counter this, pre-departure interactive webinars designed specifically for international students provide reassurance and information that will help them prepare for life in Australia.

Run live in three different time zones, the webinars have a chat function that allows students and parents to submit questions for staff to answer in real-time.



"The pre-departure webinars are great for managing student's expectations. We cover everything from the weather to what to pack," says Louise, who believes the webinars enable students to feel more confident and help alleviate any stress associated with their upcoming move.

Pre-recorded videos are also available and enable current students from a variety of different cultural backgrounds to share insights about studying in regional Queensland.

While JCU runs a well-established mentoring program, Louise saw a need for a specific program targeted towards international students, who make up 10 per cent of students on campus.

As such, CROCS was launched in 2018 to meet the unique needs of students arriving from overseas. Mentors are established international students who have completed training that provides them with the knowledge and skills needed to set appropriate boundaries and make referrals to support services.

CROCS mentors are involved from the moment a student arrives in Queensland. Instead of airport transportation being provided by an external company, CROCS mentors travel to the airport

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to greet arriving students, provide their buddy with a welcome pack and accompany them to their accommodation. CROCS mentors also meet their buddy on campus for Orientation Day.

From letting new students know where to get keys cut, to sharing where the best curry in Townsville is, CROCS mentors make the transition easier for international students by facilitating supportive conversations and forming social connections – which help to enhance their university experience and wellbeing.

CROCS mentor Taruna Venkatachalam is studying a Master of Science (Professional) in Tropical Biology and Conservation.

“I joined the CROCS program to make new students feel more comfortable because I remember feeling overwhelmed and alone when I first arrived,” says Taruna.

“For those students that find it difficult to settle in, I’m serving as a starting point – a friendly face to help them before they find their feet ... it feels amazing to be a CROCS mentor.”

Louise points out that the program delivers mutual benefits for the mentors and mentees.

“It’s a two-way street. The program is beneficial for the mental health of the mentors too, as they are giving back and developing confidence,” says Louise.

“For those students that find it difficult to settle in, I’m serving as a starting point – a friendly face to help them before they find their feet.”

**TARUNA VENKATACHALAM, MENTOR, CHAMPIONS
RESPONSIBLE FOR ORIENTATING COMMENCING STUDENTS**

COMING TOGETHER AT CAFÉ INTERNATIONAL

Louise explains that language barriers, family problems, and unrest in their home country can impact on international students’ ability to concentrate and study. She also notes that stigma is prevalent.

“Many international students are reluctant to seek help. Often, we have to talk to them numerous times before they agree to see a counsellor,” says Louise, before adding, “some students voluntarily come in for a chat because they know we can offer them support. But often we don’t find out until their academic progression has been impacted.”

After International Student Barometer data revealed that international students found it difficult to meet people, JCU launched a weekly, social event to bring students together.



CROCS mentoring group

Image: JCU

Started in 2013 and held on both the Townsville and Cairns campuses, Café International is a casual event that gives international students the opportunity to socially engage with peers and staff in a relaxed atmosphere. Free tea, coffee, chai and snacks are offered, as well as a range of games and activities to encourage casual interaction.

“Shy students might not want to introduce themselves to others. Sitting down at a table and contributing to a puzzle isn’t as confronting as trying to make small talk,” says Louise.

Recognising that financial insecurity often impacts the mental health of international students, Café International also features a clothes rack filled with free clothing and a jobs board showcasing part-time and casual jobs in the area.

“Lack of employment opportunities, particularly in regional areas, creates financial stress and then that causes mental health concerns,” says Louise.



Rachelle Brown, a US citizen who is currently studying a Master of Science in Tropical Biology and Conservation at JCU, says visiting Café International has often helped boost her mood.

“Every time I’ve gone to Café International I’ve had a wonderful time. I see old friends, meet new people, and enjoy the snacks and beverages on offer,” says Rachelle.

“I love how laidback it is, and the staff are always so cheerful that my day can’t help but be a little better.”

Attendance numbers are monitored to measure the success of the initiative, with 60–100 students attending Café International each week.

Staff are encouraged to attend also, especially members of the Student Equity and Wellbeing team, making the event a helpful conduit for staff to reach students who are reluctant to seek help.

“It’s a good opportunity for students to get to know staff. Then it’s not so daunting for them to come see us if they’re having trouble, because they already know us,” says Louise.

“Some students may be reluctant to make an appointment with us, but they’re more likely to talk to us in an informal environment. Often, we solve issues over a cup of coffee at Café International.”

“I love how laidback Café International is, and the staff are always so cheerful that my day can’t help but be a little better.”

RACHELLE BROWN, INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY STUDENT

FIND OUT MORE

Contact Louise Myers, Manager, International Student Support, James Cook University at internationalsupport@jcu.edu.au

[University Mental Health Framework.](#)

LINKS TO THE FRAMEWORK

James Cook University offers a range of accessible and appropriate services and supports that respond to the mental health and wellbeing needs and complexities of its international student cohort.



This aligns with **principle five** of the [University Mental Health Framework](#)

Programs and initiatives to support students’ mental health and wellbeing typically involve a range of different practices. This case study also draws on other practices described in the framework by:

- ensuring students are active in peer support roles. CROCS mentors share experiences, facilitate access to supports and increase connections within JCU;
- supporting student connectedness and facilitating participation in university life; and
- taking approaches to student mental health and wellbeing that are informed by a range of accessible data sources, such as the International Student Barometer.

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IN MIND** *orygen*

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