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# THE AGE

## Shunned in a strange land, we should offer them more

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International students deserve our respect not our resentment, writes Alice Pung.

THEIR big apartment blocks are like pointed middle fingers scraping the Melbourne skyline. Their presence in our city is only tolerated because they bring money into our education system. They are anti-social, rich, young foreigners who "form ghettos and don't assimilate".

This is what is said about our international students, and these perceptions dangerously verge on the kind of racist rhetoric we thought had ended a decade ago. Worse, they are not true.

I have worked for half a decade as a pastoral care adviser and residential tutor at the residential colleges of Melbourne University, in some of the most privileged academic environments. I have seen my students through the beginning of their degrees when they are finding their feet in a foreign country, to their graduations and the quest for permanent residency. During this time, I have come to respect and admire their stoicism. They do not live in their own little worlds: they have opened up my world.

When they first arrive from countries such as China, India, Taiwan, Hong Kong, even as far away as Botswana, they are lonely and homesick. Feelings are the same in young adults everywhere - isolation, loneliness, need for acceptance and respect.

Orientation week is daunting and international students soon start to become invisible, because they do not go to pubs twice a week. Drinking makes my local students garrulous and extroverted - qualities that seem to earn acceptance and respect in Australia - but many international students come from cultures where drinking is not a social pastime.

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When local students go off to the pub, the college is usually empty but for the international students. In the quiet spaces of the evenings, these students have taught me how to crochet, how to appreciate anime and moon-cakes with red-bean filling, and they talk to me about their parents back home. They shyly speak about how awkward it is to adapt to the shared unisex bathrooms, the heaviness of the meals, the loudness of the music.

Some have woken in the middle of the night with heart palpitations because they felt they were four years deep into studying the wrong course. But career counsellors did not listen to the silence between their words. "Follow your heart" was their advice. Yet one of my students could not follow her heart lest it exploded. Her family had invested all their life-savings into her education - in return, she was to study hard and obtain permanent residency, to bring her parents here for a better life. She could not switch courses - it was financially and logistically impossible. This young woman sought my counsel, but she taught me more about acceptance and stoicism than I could ever teach her.

There is a misconception that all international students are cashed-up because they pay the exorbitant fees that our government extracts from them. There is also the pointed accusation that international students do not "assimilate", but this is not always a choice they are able to make. They do not "form ghettos" - on the contrary, they are largely and deeply in our community, yet they are also largely ignored. They are the students who serve our meals in Chinatown, the people who drive our taxis. They are the lowest paid and often most exploited workers, unprotected by Australian **workplace relations** legislation. We refuse to see their toils because it does not accord with our image of how our overseas cash-calves should be.

Eventually, most find company and comfort in the presence of each other. No one seems to begrudge Western students latching on to other Westerners when studying in Asia and forming insular little expatriate communities to observe the locals as if they were sociological studies instead of people who are only separated by a different culture. But somehow, we in Australia seem to demand assimilation from our temporary visitors, instead of offering acceptance and understanding.

Many international students are acutely aware that their parents back home are breaking their backs and bank accounts to send them here. It is not their duty to assimilate: many of them come here, under no uncertain terms, for an education.

It is our duty to deliver that education, but perhaps it is also our obligation to show to our young overseas visitors that we are also a tolerant society - and that we see them.

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