

# Moving across cultures in Education

## Introduction

*Cross-cultural dimensions: preparing for in-country study* is a postgraduate unit offered to teachers by distance mode through the Faculty of Education. In 2003 the unit became resource based, being housed on a CD-Rom that utilises a range of media. A web portal facilitates student interaction as part of a community of learners.

The unit offers teachers the opportunity to develop understandings about culture, and to prepare themselves and others for in-country experiences. Such experiences could include a limited length study tour; a teaching exchange; a school-based trip with students or simply personal travel. Notions explored in the unit include paradigms of culture; cultural 'locatedness'; intercultural competencies and tensions; experiential learning and reflection. The 'nuts and bolts' of preparing to journey overseas are also considered and participants are encouraged to critically appraise sources of information about their intended destination.

While the focus of cross-cultural dimensions is countries of Asia, understandings developed are transferable to other settings. In particular this unit enables participants to:

- develop a personal framework and process to observe, comprehend and reflect on their participation in an in-country experience;
- develop, apply and justify a variety of teaching strategies to enable learners to explore their understandings of their own, target and other cultures. Teachers are able to apply such strategies and understandings to curriculum development.

## What the students say

Feedback has been positive about the structure of the unit and about the ways in which participants have been able to examine their cultural perspectives and intercultural experiences.

Here one student recalls her experience as a tourist in a South East Asian context and the decisions that she makes about negotiating differences in cultures:

*Even without making a conscious decision to change my behaviour, the processes of reflecting and generalising had caused a change in my behaviour. Other decisions, however, were made quite consciously. I decided that I would still hold hands with my husband when we went for a walk. I had entered the phase in my adjustment where I was*

*aware enough of my own culture that I could decide just how much I wanted to change my behaviour to 'fit in'. Feeling able to make those decisions has been important for me in not losing my sense of identity, which Weaver (1993) sees as a contributor to culture shock.*

Another student analysed her reaction to works of art from another culture:

*My own cultural perceptions have been challenged as I have tried to look beyond the surface to see the (art) work more objectively, less clouded by my own cultural frames of reference. .... Keeping in mind some of the issues raised in modules one and two (of this unit), I have struggled to arrive at a deeper level of understanding of other cultures, by suspending judgement, asking questions, seeking to hear other voices. The stereotyped responses, which are so easy to make, need to be challenged so that meaningful communication can occur.*

## **Where to from here**

The development of a multi-media package to support the experience of Faculty of Education undergraduate students before, during and after an international exchange is a possible future endeavour. The project would be aligned with both Faculty-based and University-wide (EDGE) policies and initiatives such as the promotion of Learning Communities and internationalisation of the curriculum.

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