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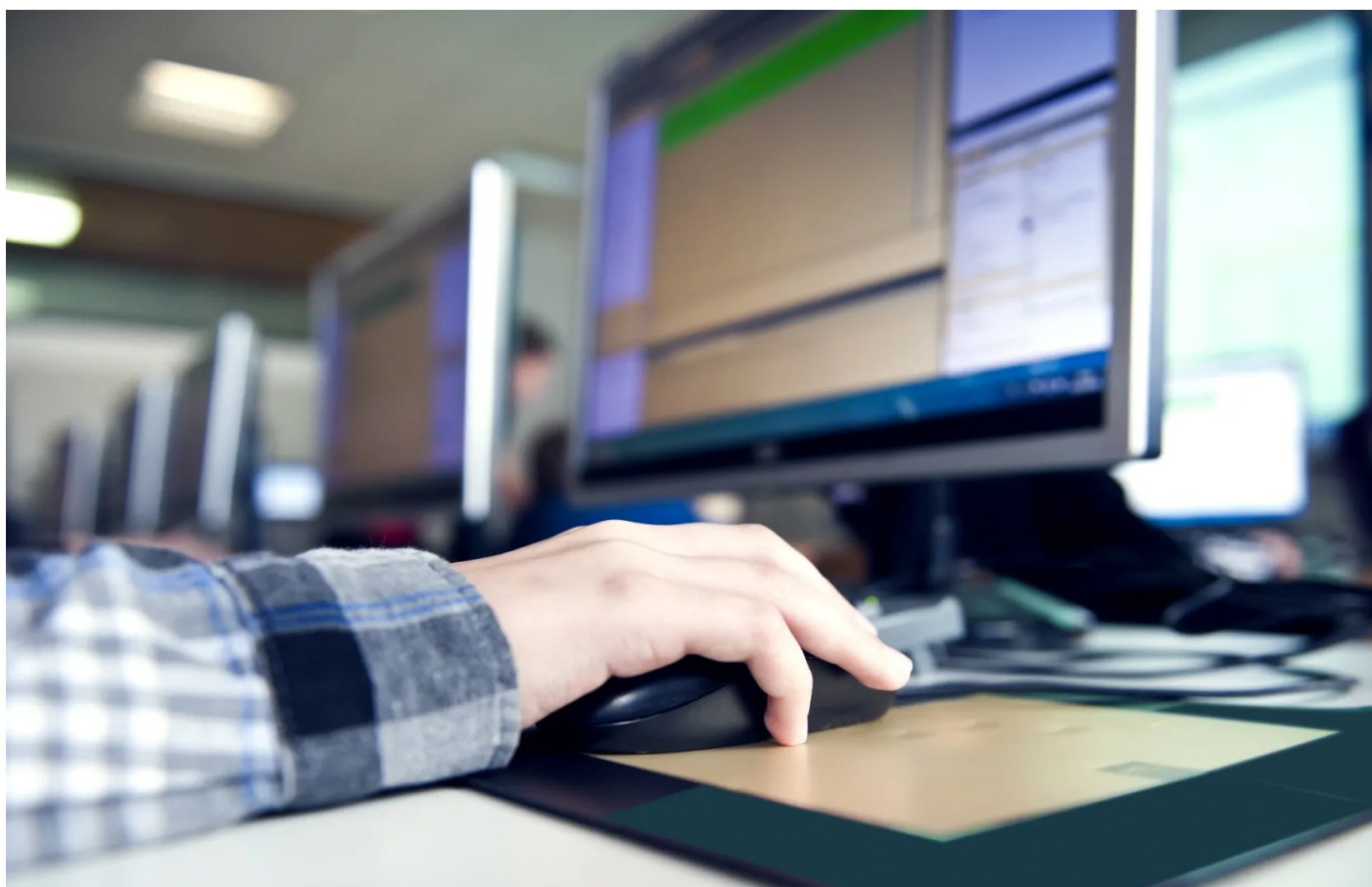
POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Communication challenges and tips for international students working in Australia

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6 MINUTE READ

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Cong cups his hand to his ear and squints, trying to make sense of what he's hearing. The conversation is moving quickly and filled with idiomatic fluency, nuance and expression; correct without being too formal.

Cong, from Vietnam, has a good command of the English language, having started learning it as a foreign language when he was 12 years old, but mostly his English learning was in the classroom.

Despite this, he says working in an English-speaking environment as a non-native speaker still poses several challenges related to communication.

“I noticed that in Australia, people value a contributing culture where you are expected to share your ideas and opinions actively and confidently. In other words, the turn-taking in conversations here is much shorter and faster than what I was accustomed to.”



“When having lunch or chatting with my colleagues, I often felt left out because I did not have the necessary knowledge to join the conversation,” he says.

“I did not know much about Australian lifestyle, slang, sports, games, or travel destinations. I also did not understand some of the jokes or references that they made.

“ Although I had a good command of English in general, I still struggled with some aspects of language use in a professional context.

“I sometimes had difficulty understanding different accents or expressions that my co-workers used. I also encountered difficulties in expressing my ideas clearly, effectively, and professionally in spoken or written communication.”

The value of international students

International students are a valuable and diverse segment of the Australian population who enrich the society and economy in various ways.

[According to the Department of Education, Skills and Employment](#), international students generated 882,482 enrolments in Australian education institutions in 2020, accounting for 33.6% of the total enrolments.

Many of these students aspire to work or seek work in Australia after completing their studies, either temporarily or permanently. However, working in a new country and culture poses many challenges for international students, especially in terms of communication skills.



Communication skills are vital for professional success, as they involve not only language proficiency, but also cultural awareness, interpersonal skills, and social competence.

This is particularly crucial for international students who are entering a new work environment and culture. However, despite the importance of communication skills, Cong says there's a gap in literature and practice that specifically addresses the needs and experiences of international students.

[A study by Tran and Hartz \(2020\)](#) found that employers had negative perceptions about international students regarding their communication skills and cultural fit, and expressed doubts about their long-term work commitment versus the expenses associated with recruiting and training them.

Moreover, a report by [Pumble \(2021\)](#) revealed that 86% of employees and executives attribute workplace failures to the lack of effective collaboration and communication, while on the other hand, teams that communicate effectively can boost their productivity by up to 25%.

Why are communication skills important in a professional context?

Based on Cong's personal experiences, communication skills in the workplace context are important for several reasons, which he elaborates on below.

Avoiding misunderstandings

Miscommunication can lead to confusion, delays, errors, or conflicts in work. For example, if you write an unclear or ambiguous email to your team members or your boss, you might cause them to miss important information or instructions, or to misunderstand your intentions or expectations.

Learning and seek help

When you start a new job, there's a lot to learn and adapt to. You need to be able to ask the right questions of the right people using the right language. For example, if you need help with a task or a project, you should know how to approach your supervisor or colleague politely and respectfully, and how to explain your problem clearly and concisely.

Building relationships

Having good relationships with your co-workers can make your work more enjoyable and productive. You need to be able to communicate effectively with different types of people, such as your peers, your superiors, your clients, or your stakeholders. You also need to be able to participate in social interactions, such as having lunch or coffee with your colleagues, attending meetings or events, or joining informal conversations.

How can international students improve their communication skills?

- Learn how to initiate, maintain and follow up on English conversations. These skills include knowing how to start a conversation with someone you do not know well, how to keep the conversation going by asking questions or making comments, and how to end the conversation politely and appropriately. It also means knowing how

to follow up on a conversation by sending an email or a message to thank someone for their time or their help, or to remind them of something that you discussed.

- Expand your background knowledge. This involves learning more about Australian culture and society, such as the history, politics, geography, arts, entertainment, sports, etc. You can do this by reading books or articles, watching movies or shows, listening to podcasts or radio programs, etc. You can also ask your co-workers about their interests or hobbies and learn from them.
- Practise communicating your ideas clearly, effectively and professionally. This requires choosing the right words and tone for your audience and purpose, using correct grammar and spelling, organising your thoughts logically and coherently, providing enough details and examples to support your points, avoiding jargon or slang that might confuse your listeners or readers etc. You can practise by writing emails or reports, giving presentations or speeches etc, and asking for feedback from your supervisor or colleagues.
- Socialise with real people in real contexts. This means getting out of your comfort zone and interacting with different people in different situations. You can do this by joining clubs or groups that interest you, attending workshops or seminars that are relevant to your field, volunteering for causes that you care about, and making friends with local people and learning from their way of communication.

Communication skills are essential for professional success, but they're not easy to master. They require constant learning and practice.

As an international student, and now working at Monash University, Cong learned a great deal from his challenges and opportunities in communication. He hopes these tips can help other international students who are facing similar situations.

INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS AND LANGUAGE

LANGUAGE BARRIERS

COMMUNICATION SKILLS

FEATURING



Cong Ngo

Research Fellow, BehaviourWorks Australia, Monash Sustainable Development Institute (MSDI), Monash University

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