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Making Friends Not Always Easy for Foreign Students

This is the VOA Special English Education Report.

A recent story in the Chronicle of Higher Education said many foreign students report feeling lonely or unwelcome in Australia. Those feelings are among the reasons why Australia is taking a close look at its international education industry. The government has formed an advisory council to help develop a five-year national strategy for the future of international education in Australia.

But wherever international students go, making friends may not always be easy. The Journal of International and Intercultural Communication recently published a study done in the United States.

Elisabeth Gareis of Baruch College in New York surveyed four hundred fifty-four international students. They were attending four-year colleges and graduate schools in the American South and Northeast.

Students from English-speaking countries and from northern and central Europe were more likely to be happy with their friendships. But thirty-eight percent of the international students said they had no close friends in the United States.

And half of the students from East Asia said they were unhappy with the number of American friends they had. Professor Gareis says thirty percent said they wished their friendships could be deeper and more meaningful.

ELISABETH GAREIS: "Students from East Asia have cultures that are different on many levels from the culture in the United States. But then there's also language problems, and maybe some social skills, such as small talk, that are possibly not as important in their native countries, where it's not as important to initiate friendships with small talk."

She says many East Asian students blamed themselves for their limited friendships with Americans.

ELISABETH GAREIS: "The vast majority blames themselves, actually for not speaking the language well enough, not knowing the culture well enough. There were also some comments about the college environment, like many of them were in the natural sciences or worked in labs where they were surrounded by

other East Asians."

VOA's Student Union blogger Jessica Stahl did her own survey to find out how American students and foreign students relate to each other. More than one hundred students, about half of them American, answered her online questions.

Half of the international students and sixty percent of the Americans said they related as well or better to the other group than to their own group.

Eighty-five percent of the Americans said they have at least one international friend. But only about half said they have more than two international friends.

Among the foreign students, seventy-five percent said they have more than two American friends. But ten percent said they have no American friends.

Not surprisingly, Professor Gareis says students who make friends from their host country return home happier with their experience.

ELISABETH GAREIS: "International students who make friends with host nationals are, overall, more satisfied with their stay in the host country. They have better language skills, they have better academic performance and they have better attitudes toward the host country. So when they return home, and often fill leadership positions, they can foster productive relations with the former host country."

And that's the VOA Special English Education Report, written by Jerilyn Watson. I'm Jim Tedder.

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