Karen Commons and Xiaodan Gao –Learning Advisers

The Commerce Faculty is the first at Victoria to introduce the new initiatives in internationalisation. Two of the key experts guiding the Internationalisation @ Home project, Student Learning Support Learning Advisors Karen Commons and Xiaodan Gao say there’s now a need to develop the programme in more courses to help meet the challenges of a burgeoning international student population, and an increasingly globalised world for New Zealand graduates.

The substantial influx of Chinese and Vietnamese students post-1997 signalled that more assistance was needed if they were to see significant value from attending Victoria. Exit research indicated graduating international students wished they had spoken more with English-speaking students and made more connections. “They said they hadn’t met enough Kiwi students,” Karen said.

By 2005 Karen and Xiaodan had been trained in the ExcelL processes designed to assist the integration of international and domestic students. The next few years saw Student Learning Services running workshops and forums for international students using their New Zealand peers as coaches.

“Then two years ago Vicky Mabin, as Associate Dean Teaching and Learning for the faculty, started looking at the Internationalisation aspects. Things started happening. She knew the training was effective and she felt we needed to be doing something in the classrooms and not just these forums,” Karen said.

Last year saw the first sessions of ExcelL in lectures and tutorials. “Commerce was the first faculty. We think this will help internationalisation across the university,” Karen said.

“We can’t say it’s a success yet,” Xiaodan said. “This is only the beginning. We need to look at curriculum, course structures, lectures and tutorials. Because of limited tutorial time, and so on, it’s very hard to do this, but if we tie this to the course content and assessment students will see this as relevant. The expectations of students is that they want the answers to pass the assignment or pass the paper, but with relational learning such as we suggest, where they get to know each other, and learn from and with each other, the learning outcomes can be far better and longer lasting.”
Besides getting alongside course coordinators, Xiaodan and Karen want to spend more time with tutors in tutorials. “We’d like to get them to really plan and then do the active learning as a first tutorial, so that there is participation, and engagement by all students is expected and respected,” Karen said. 

“If students feel confident in the first year, they will continue to work together. If we get the fundamentals right then, international and domestic students will be more engaged and more willing to take part. We’re looking to create a place where all tutorials are a place where all students participate. That we’ve created a better sense of community.”