



## So...podcast – Episode 17

### Philip Liu

*You're listening to So...podcast with John McKenna*

John: Hi, John McKenna, So...podcast. I just thought I'd give some background about my conversation with Philip Liu that you're about to listen to in this episode. For many years, I've had some really meaningful interactions with international students as people who have worked with me as support workers. Over the years I've heard many of their stories about how hard it is to feel accepted in the community. So it was great to discuss these challenges and more when I was talking with Phil. I do hope you enjoy it.

I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of land on which I am making this recording. I pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be listening in Victoria, Australia.

My guest on this episode is Phil Liu. Phil, how are you going mate?

Philip: Yeah, great John. How are you?

John: Good, good. Thank you so much for coming on to the So...podcast. Phil, I will be asking you to introduce yourself but using things like LinkedIn and Word of Mouth. It's very clear you're a great advocate for international students in Australia and we've got some discussion points that we're going to cover. So I'll throw it over to you Phil, just to tell the audience a bit more about yourself.

Philip: Thanks John, and thanks for the opportunity to have a chat with you as well. I too also want to acknowledge that we're here on the land of the [0:01:56.0]. I pay my respects to the elders past, present, and the emerging. As you're already introduced, I'm Phil Le Liu. I was fortunate enough to be identified as one of the under 40 most influential Asian





Australians in 2019. I'm also a company director, but also I'm a councillor at Melbourne City Council. But also more fundamentally, for this discussion anyway, I'm a big advocate for international students here in Victoria, in Melbourne, because I feel they are such a vital part and important part of our community.

John: Phil, can I start by defining the definition of an international student. We all hear it all the time but what does it mean? What's the classification of an international student?

Philip: It's someone who's decided to come here to study, whether it be one of our many other international education providers, I think in the most simplest terms. They're usually quite young and they come here to try and gain extra knowledge and everything. So in the very short term, that's pretty much how we define them. Yes, I know we talk about international students but when I see them down the street, I know we have many here down in Melbourne but I don't actually see them as an international student. I see people. Because Melbourne is such a multicultural city, I just see people who want to learn, who want to better themselves, who would like potentially a better future, and to learn and make new connections. So for me, that is what I think international students who are in Melbourne are. But no matter what, I always think of them as a Melburnian.

John: And that's how it should be for sure. And naturally, the contribution they give to Melbourne and Australia, I'm sure there's lots of data out there, but do you want to touch on that a bit more as far as you know, you were speaking earlier off air about international students working across a number of careers, medical research. So they're definitely out there playing a really crucial role and of course, this episode is all about Covid, but I noticed in the media we saw that even the government have acknowledged the support from international students and changed some of the rulings around that. Is that correct, have I got that right?

Philip: The federal government are discussing about how they can help support international students. I think it's still being discussed at the moment. It





hasn't been finalised last time I checked. I'm not too sure, I haven't been across all the news so far. But just going back to your question John, yes, they contribute so much. I know that especially during this time of Covid-19 crisis, many of them are actually in the front line of helping Australia and the community. Whether it be as a nurse in hospital, whether it be as a researcher in the laboratory to try and find a cure. What a great story that would be if we can actually say "An international student studying here was able to help in partnership with Australian universities, find a cure for Covid-19." That would be such a great story to hear. But I also note for example, in the UK, when the UK Prime Minister, Boris Johnson was sick, the two nurses that were asked to look after him were both foreigners. One a New Zealander and one was from Portugal. It just shows the contributions they make but we don't really see that. It's a good and bad thing because people don't see the classification. No-one's really been walking around as an international student but what they contribute is just amazing piece which we don't even scratch the surface. What I said to you John, what I always tell people, if we define people by citizenship and an allegiance to the country by how much they contribute, we swear an oath and everything, surely when we look at some of the international students, the contribution sacrifice that they have made and all the other things, surely you can tell me that they are no less than anybody else who's contributing a lot to our society. So international students play a big part in the advancement of Australia.

John: Mm. And I think we are up against mainstream media which will commentate on many things of course, but sadly we're always hearing about international students are just a great income for Australia. That personally pisses me off big time.

Philip: Yep.

John: Secondly, I just love the culture that comes from this country. So we need to learn about, think differently about, you know like talking about Asians compared to Westerners and all that. Everyone has got their own view on this but I guess as someone who has a disability, [0:07:28.2] struggle into





the mix, the caring nature where, even if we look at aged care, Western culture will very quickly put people into aged care facilities. Asian community is all about supporting their own family in their own homes. So there's all that sort of stuff which I think is not identified enough.

Philip: No, I totally agree with you John. They're not a commodity, they're people. And I think we shouldn't view them otherwise. I really love what Duncan Maskell, the Vice Chancellor of Melbourne Uni, he'd say we should never see them as any kind of commodity, or economy, we see them as people. And you're completely right, the contribution they make, because they bring their culture and also they bring a new way of thinking. When I was at uni and what I really loved was the fact that I can have somebody from South America, somebody from India, somebody from China, somebody from the UK and somebody from the US, that's where it really benefits the local community, the local students because they are able to build a global network which will help their careers. And I imagine being able to pick up a phone later on, when you're in the workforce to say "Hey look, I don't know what's happening in the US at the moment but hey, can you tell me what's happening" because of the bond that they share. So we need to, Australia, because we're so kind of far away from the rest of the world if you want to put it that way, the fact that we have such a multicultural and international community here in Melbourne, it's amazing. And I think we take for granted some of the things that they bring.

John: Obviously everyone is listening to this, I hope. Looking closely at the word anxiety and confusion, I think I've met many international students over the years and they arrive and they learn quickly and they try to learn what do I need to do to assimilate. They do lots of research, the website, talk to lots of people. But right now I think, not just Covid, there are lots of other types of conscious and unconscious bias going on. When we talk about anxiety and confusion, as your role as an advocate and working one on one but even at a systemic level, how are we handling making people have that level of comfort around anxiety?





Philip: That's a real good question. I think that we, given the kind of climate, especially with crisis with Covid-19 and everything, people are very, it's in their nature to be very fearful. And as a result we have seen, especially for international students, they do build a lot of anxiety, confusion and also sometimes they just need a bit of support. If you really want to see that support come down to Melbourne Town Hall where international students have just lined up to pick up a \$200 voucher to get essential food. So it's quite important that we acknowledge that not every one of them, because they're away from the comfort of their home, they're away in a different environment, so they definitely feel I think the anxiety and confusion. And sometimes when you have the media and the miscommunication it just adds other levels on top of that which I think is really unfortunate because we do, I think all levels of government, regardless, and I think it's taken out of context in some cases, but all levels of government really are very supportive and very supportive of international students. I think the anxiety and confusion is mostly come from the fact that it's always a hard thing to move to another country to start your life and to kind of build that for three to five years and potentially even more. And when you're alone here you can only count on some of your friends but then when your friends are also who are trying to learn and also trying to find their way I think it's also difficult. So I think there's a real anxiety because a lot of support the government have given, they fall through the cracks. They're not eligible for many of the support that they have. So I think the fear and anxiety and confusion sometimes come from the fact that they tend to be forgotten when things happen, and it's something that we shouldn't try to forget.

John: Where international students make the decision to perhaps connect with locals, and I'll say the word locals as Australians, and I don't want to use the word mentor, oh mentor is alright. Being a mentor, you see it in the workplace. But your thoughts on the value of connecting with locals that you trust?

Philip: I always encourage people, when I was, me personally, I always loved working with international students because it gives me a different





perspective from, one, it helps me build a new connection globally without having to leave Australia. But also the fact that I learned something new in terms of culture and different things. For example now whenever I meet any of my friends from the Middle East I always go As-salamu alaykum, and if they actually say anything I'll say Walaikum Salam. I know how to greet and I know the culture and everything so I think it's quite important. I think local students or locals have a real great opportunity to really, because Australians are a multicultural country, we're built on that.

John: For sure, yes.

Philip: And I think that is so important. And if you look at the growth of the last few years and also the percentage of our population and where we get it from, majority of that is actually from international students who've spent their time here who've loved it so much that they've decided to stay. And I think Australia is richer because of that. I think we are better because of that and that's why it's so crucial to ensure that in the time of crisis we don't forget the international students and we show they've made a decision to come here, then it's now our turn to really push and to support them in this time of need. And I always say, I spoke to one of the international students and their parents. For me, I was an international student as well when I did my gap year. To think that if I was a parent here and my kids are overseas, I want to have that confidence and relief that if anything does happen they are looked after. So I think it's only fair that I think we should also do the same because it's the right thing to do, and also it's the best way to do.

John: So you've spoken about locals connecting but from an international student perspective, what advice do you give them who want to connect with locals? It's not just about going for that coffee or the pub or to the football?

Philip: I think many, many international students have never heard about the pub and parma and everything but after one or two years here I think they really do love it. And there's some great stories connected to that. Look, I





think, I just say look, be who you are. Don't try to pretend that you're something you're not. Something that you're comfortable with. I always say sport is a great way because it's a team building exercise and it's why Australia is so, and especially here in Melbourne, we're a sport loving capitol and we're so passionate about it that I think a lot of the students that I've spoken with love playing cricket with a lot of the local community groups. I would say sport is a great way to connect. One of the things I've actually seen recently is also the charities and also giving back. That's a great way. A lot of the students really, you know. And I think that's really shameful that a lot of the conversations about students come here, they don't do anything, they don't contribute, a lot of them do help charities, they do help put a lot of effort into that. And so I would actually say that's a really great way to meet new people. Because a lot of Australians have been very kind and it's one of the very few [0:16:00.7] that actually looks at charities and philanthropy. So that's what I'll be saying.

John: Sure. And we're talking volunteering of course, so that's a really important mix. Volunteering is good for everybody, of course, it's good for the heart, good for the soul, and it's not all about going to get that statement to say would you please sign here that I volunteered, do it because you want to do it. Do it so it's meaningful. When it doesn't happen to land on your CV it looks fantastic. I know different people that I've interviewed it's one of the first things they'll do to, it's not so much about their certificate blah blah, but tell us more about your volunteering world there, what do you get of it? Why do you like it? I think that really exposes about a person's personality and their belief.

Philip: Yeah, and you learn so much through volunteering and charity work and I'm a big advocate, even for some of the young graduates, I say it's no longer the highest score or anything, it's actually more how rounded you are in terms of not only academically but also your contribution and I think charity or volunteering has always been a great way not only to make yourself feel really good about the contribution but also to meet new people and to really be passionate about a course, something that you might not have found. I always say try different volunteering to ensure that





you find the one because not everyone will have one particular one and it's only through a journey that you really see what you want to do. But yes, volunteering is one of the big things I recommend and people always find it strange because a lot of the countries that I've spoken to, volunteering is not very big and so it's a real eye opener for some of them.

John: But at the end of the day, volunteering has to work for that person too. Okay, they could go there because they're following their heart and soul, there's no guarantee that you're going to be received well and that's just life, isn't it?

Philip: Yeah.

John: Whether you go to a coffee shop or go to any sort of business environment, you'll hope that you'll be received in the right spirit, doesn't always happen. Philip, it's been fantastic talking with you. I would like to close by acknowledging again that people are overseas listening to this who may be considering coming to Australia, or that are international students who are really struggling right now with unconscious racism, conscious racism, just feeling really uneasy, any simple tips that you might want to share based on your advocacy experience?

Philip: I just really want to add, 99% of the people I've met and also here in Australia are some of the kindest people who I've ever met in all my travels. I always say if I ever did get, touch wood, get sick or get in trouble in some way I really hope it's in Australia because the people here, it's just been absolutely amazing. I've seen many times, yes, there have been attacks on some of the students and everything but also what is not reported is the amount of support that is shown or given to them. I think Australians, if you are going to come here to study there is no better place in the world. Australia is one of the most kindest countries in the world in my opinion, if not the best, but I'm biased. What can you do about that. But at the same time I think also if you do come here you will learn so much not only because of yourself but also there are so many other students that come from other countries that I think that you will be able to really absorb







itself in this melting pot of multiculturalism that is Australia. So I think definitely consider it and we really would welcome you.

John: Phil, thank you so much for coming onto the So...Podcast. For my listeners, just a reminder all my episodes are available on my website, johnmckenna.com.au. They're available also on YouTube for people who would like to connect to captioning and transcription. So Phil, thanks very much for your time today.

Philip: Thanks John, appreciate it.

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