Supporting and Enhancing the Experience of International Students in the UK

March 2023

Contents

Introduction

This guide provides practical support for all academic and professional services staff with responsibility for, or those who engage with, international students studying at all levels, including student advisers, international officers, lecturers, quality assurance practitioners, student services managers, careers advisers, and senior managers. It has been developed to be read and used in discrete sections or as a whole, depending on your area of focus.

Where possible, we have aligned this guidance to the five principles of the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) WeAreInternational Student Charter to enable providers to map their practice if they wish to do so. The principles are numbered throughout the guidance. In addition, examples of positive working are featured in all sections (except 2.4 where we did not receive any case studies). Finally, we also interviewed a number of students to add authentic student voice and further context to the guidance. Audio clips from the interviews and full the suite of case studies are published in the QAA Membership Resources site for International Insights Members.

The origins of the guide reach back to the 2012 publication, *International Students Studying in the UK - Guidance for UK Higher Education Providers*, and, more recently, the 2015 revised guidance, indicating the length and depth of the importance of international students to UK higher education. As with the previous iterations, this review process was led by QAA, working with an advisory group comprising practitioners from UK higher education providers and representatives from higher education organisations with an interest in international student experiences (for full details of the advisory group, see 'Acknowledgements'). While this guide is not a formal part of the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (the Quality Code), it may be viewed as supplementary and complementary to it. The Quality Code is an important reference point for all UK higher education providers but is no longer part of the regulatory infrastructure in England and so it was timely to review and refresh this guidance.

The expert group for this iteration started from the premise that international students have long made, and will continue to make, a significant contribution to the cultural, educational and economic development of our institutions, regions and the UK higher education sector as a whole. Since 2015, however, there have been many changes in relation to international students including the Government's 2019 (updated in 2021) International Education Strategy (IES) which set a target of 'at least' 600,000 international students coming into the UK each year to study. This ambition was supported by flexible approaches to work-study visa options enabling graduates to remain in the UK to work post-study as well as other changes, including removing the need to register with the police from August 2022, which were part of the strategy to tackle the significant drop in EU students coming to study in the UK post-Brexit.

There has been significant growth in numbers of students applying from India and Nigeria with Chinese student numbers remaining strong. This has resulted in the sector achieving the 600,000 target in the IES 10 years early and the diversity of providers recruiting international students has also continued to grow. We are cognisant of the fact that there are many cultural and intellectual benefits gained by institutions and students from the increased diversity of our student intake, but that these may be less well understood outside higher education. Developing an inclusive global learning community enhances the experiences of home students and helps to facilitate international students' acclimatisation to the demands of living, working and studying in the UK.

This guidance explores critical elements of the support higher education providers should offer international students studying in the UK, to safeguard and enhance their experience. It has been expanded to take further account of some of the practical challenges that need to be taken into consideration by all staff with responsibility for international students or who engage with them, including academic and professional services colleagues and student union officers. The group took the opportunity to explore additional information that higher education providers may find helpful in reviewing and enhancing their own practices in relation to the experiences of international students. We have focused on aspects of the student journey that may be particular to international students who come to the UK to study on UK programmes or where particular considerations might apply. In doing so, the content is sensitive to the diversity of international students.

In reviewing the existing guide and through more recent practice and experiences, the group has built upon the good practice already in place across the sector and reflected on the diverse nature of our international student community and our engagement with it. In particular, it has been reworked with a view to assisting higher education providers in developing and maintaining an inclusive environment for international students, and meeting the challenges and opportunities associated with an increasingly international student body across different levels of provision. We aim to refresh and disseminate good practice more widely across the increasingly diverse range of higher education providers.

This refreshed sector-led guidance offers updated perspectives on the overarching responsibilities of providers, and maintained a structure based around the typical stages of the student journey, namely:

- Information: Pre-arrival and arrival
- Induction, transition, integration and beyond
- Provider requirements and external compliance

- Academic support and skills
- Professional services and non-academic support
- Belonging, integration and inclusivity
- Careers and employability

It is important that, in all aspects of provision and services, the sector seeks to facilitate a sense of belonging and integration for all students studying in the UK for the entirety of their undergraduate and postgraduate awards or as part of their programme; this approach assumed particular importance during the Coronavirus pandemic - as well as a commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion. It is also important to recognise that, as major cultural and economic contributors to the life of our cities and regions, providers are advised that they must continue to foster positive links with the local community who are key to facilitating a sense of belonging for all our students.

We hope you will find the considerations helpful in reviewing and enhancing your own practices and support in relation to the experiences of international students. While the principal focus is on aspects of the international student journey for those coming to the UK to study on UK programmes, we would suggest that much of the highlighted good practice can have a wider application to supporting students on programmes delivered overseas as well as to home students in the UK.

Relationship to legislation

Higher education providers are responsible for meeting legislative and other external regulatory requirements, such as those by regulatory and funding bodies and government jurisdictions. This guide does not seek to interpret legislation, nor does it specifically incorporate statutory or regulatory requirements. Where appropriate, relevant sources of information about other requirements and further guidance are indicated.

Maureen McLaughlin
Academic Registrar and Director of Student,
Library and Academic Services

1   Generic themes

This section comprises guidance that is applicable to each of the areas of the specific responsibility detailed within the document and is to be used in conjunction with each of them.

1.1   Levels of study

This guidance applies to international students at any level of study; however, it is important to note that different levels of study may have discreet requirements that may require more tailored support. Providers may want to consider how these requirements differ and make use of their representative systems to obtain feedback on the specific needs of students at different levels of study.

Reflective questions:

1. What are the mechanisms to ensure international students at all levels of study are supported appropriately across the duration of their study periods? Are there gaps?

2. Are there common frequently asked questions (FAQs) asked by different levels of students - how and where do we give the answers? Are we reviewing that the answers given are helpful?

3. Is it clear to international students at all levels of study where they can access guidance and information?

1.2   Training

Providers ensure staff and those in representative bodies (and student representatives where appropriate) who provide support to international students, receive regular training to ensure that accurate information is delivered in relation to internal and external signposting, processes and requirements. In addition, cultural awareness and sensitivity training (ideally including academic learning styles) will be useful to those who work with international students.

It will be important to ensure this training is thoroughly evaluated and updated in response to feedback from key stakeholders.

All staff should be aware of who to ask and where to go for advice to enable them to signpost effectively.

Reflective questions

1. Who is offered training regarding the support of international students? What is the rationale?

2. What different types of training do we offer staff and students with regard to supporting a global community? Do we use international resources and expertise in developing training?

3. Whose responsibility is it to design, deliver and evaluate training? How do we ensure it is current?

1.3 Concerns, complaints and appeals: When things go wrong

International students are overrepresented in complaints submitted to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education (OIAHE), Scottish Public Services Ombudsman and Northern Ireland Public Services Ombudsman. Institutions need to ensure they reiterate processes and signpost to support regarding complaints and appeals using different methods of communication and working in partnership with their student representative bodies. Complaints and appeals data can also be used to help providers and student representative bodies learn from complaints and anticipate common issues affecting international students.

Providers are advised to make clear to international students how they raise a concern or complaints and appeals at key points throughout the year. Providers should also offer support and guidance through different methods to build confidence about raising concerns as they occur in a constructive manner. Expectations should be managed in terms of timings and outcomes in relation to concerns, complaints and appeals, and feedback on the process should be encouraged.

Reflective questions:

1. Are we working with our colleagues who process complaints and appeals to identify if there are specific themes relating to international students? What are we learning from complaints and appeals? What are we doing with this information?

2. Are our processes for registering a complaint or appeal clear to those who are not familiar with a UK education system and may not speak English as a first language?

3. Are students aware of the initial concern stages of a complaint or appeal prior to formalising it? Do they know where to get advice? How do we manage expectations in terms of processing and outcomes?

1.4 Student voice and feedback

As with all aspects of quality in UK higher education, student voice, collaboration and partnership are at the core of enhancing the student experience. Providers are advised to obtain the feedback from international students on the quality of their academic and wider experience throughout their student journey into, through and out of UK higher education. Through working in partnership with students and their student representative body, providers in the design, development and implementation of student-facing initiatives across the institution will ensure a cohesive approach to supporting international students throughout their journey.

Providers are advised to consider their strategic aims and where the international student voice may be particularly prevalent, as they can offer their lived experiences and global perspectives - for example, those around developing student engagement, global communities or sustainability.

Reflective questions

1. How often do we meet with the student representative body to discuss the support for international students?

2. How do we ensure the international student voice is incorporated into the design development, implementation, evaluation and enhancement of services and strategies that impact international students? How do we make sure the feedback is acted on and the feedback loop is closed effectively?

3. How do we capture the impact of enhancements or initiatives that benefit international students?

Resources and wider reading

OIAHE: Case Summaries (search for 'international student')

OIAHE: The Good Practice Framework - for concerns, complaints and appeals

OIAHE: Toolkit for Providers

OIAHE: Toolkit for Student Representative Bodies

UKCISA: WeAreInternational Student Charter

UKCISA: Research and reports on international students

sparqs: Supporting international students

2 Specific responsibilities

The advisory group's work has built upon the areas for consideration given in previous iterations. It was agreed that the guidance needed to reflect areas of concern for international students and current practice across the sector. The guidance offers an overall statement, key areas for consideration and some questions for reflection; the aim is to offer a pragmatic basis for providers to enhance their practice.

2.1   Information: Pre-arrival and arrival

All information should be conveyed in a timely accessible and transparent format regarding what students can expect of the programme and location of study; the admissions and arrival processes; and what is required to secure accommodation. Providers monitor and evaluate the services of their education agents and ensure that any information provided is accurate regarding living and studying in the UK. Deadlines and timescales relating to all processes from initial enquiry to enrolment/registration should be explicitly stated with repeated signposting to where advice and guidance can be obtained.

Key points

- Clear information will help manage the expectations of students.

- The work of agents is coming under increasing scrutiny from the Government.

- Accommodation concerns are prevalent among the international student body studying in the UK.

- Dates and deadlines need to be accompanied by information setting out the ramifications of not meeting them.

'It wasn't enough...there's something about setting up life in the UK that is challenging; you go to any country and it's challenging. That communication is so important...it took me a month to find somewhere to stay, a month and thousands of pounds.'

'I checked every single email that I received from my institution [and] I did research on my own. In terms of the information that was provided, I think everything was pretty clear. They sent me lots of information about visa and stuff and what I should do when I arrived at the University and what I should pack when I was still at home, I found them really useful for me.'

Reflective questions

1. Is the initial information about the provider and its programmes, processes and the external requirements for international students accessible to students and their influencers?

2. Is our information and guidance around visas and immigration requirements up-to-date and easy to understand?

3. How do we work with our agents to ensure all information is accurate? What is the process if it is not?

4. How do we ensure our agents are delivering a good quality service?

5. Do our deadlines and processes account for time differences and major festivals and national holidays?

6. What do we need to know about the student prior to arrival (for example, any dependents, late start date required)?

7. Are the appropriate staff aware of how to signpost information, advice and guidance for applicants? Do we point students to external sources of advice and guidance?

8. Are staff and students aware of the process and of their options to secure accommodation and any potential challenges before arrival? Who has responsibility for the provision of this information?

9. Do we offer accurate information about the availability, cost and proximity of accommodation? Do we emphasise the need for applicants to consider where they are going to live/book suitable accommodation before arriving?

10. How do students access information about the financial requirements of booking long-term accommodation - for example, a UK-based guarantor or bank account?

11. Are our prospective international students aware of the evidence they may need to bring with them to get additional support for learning needs? Or, of any additional tests they may need to take on arrival/post-enrolment (for example, English language level or additional learning/medical requirements)?

12. Are our staff and students clear on what is a provider requirement and what is a legal/regulatory requirement? Are students clear at the point of arrival what their responsibilities are and what are those of the provider?

13. How do the needs change between prospective and new applicants at different levels and modes of study?

14. Who is responsible for information, advice and guidance at different points of the applicant journey? How does this change on arrival? Can a student access online information prior to arrival?

15. How can our student representative body/union help with information and signposting on arrival?

Case study: University of Liverpool

Saying hello to international students through a pre-arrival online course to help preparedness and create a sense of community and belonging

Will Moindrot, Education Developer, Centre for Innovation in Education, University of Liverpool

Xiaobei Wu, International Employer Engagement Officer, University of Liverpool Management School

Context

This project targeted Chinese non-conditional offer holders on ranked postgraduate programmes - a group where culture-shock can dominate shorter postgraduate studies, and early weeks can easily entrench traditional study habits at the expense of engaging with the wider university community and learning opportunities on offer. A pre-arrival course bridges the gap before students arrive in the country, helps students to develop an idea of what to expect, and builds the foundation of a community that they can build on when they arrive. It was hoped to have a positive impact evidenced through rankings based on employability and student satisfaction data.

Description

At the University of Liverpool Management School, collaboration took place between the Postgraduate Careers Team and curriculum designers to develop a four-week online course to engage pre-arrival students, helping to establish a supportive community of learners who are ready to engage with each other, starting to think about career readiness and getting the most out of studies and extra-curricular opportunities. The Carpe Diem learning design methodology was used to develop course activities that lead to engagement and participation.

A pilot course ran between 6 and 31 August 2018, using the Blackboard Ultra online platform to provide a modern interface that we felt would better engage students. Of importance, the system and materials were accessible to China, and the careers team brought fresh ideas for engaging learners (for example, varied activities, exclusive content, digital badging and reward system).

While only a small-scale pilot (17 students), engagement was good and it allowed the organisation to start to develop further its view of pre-arrival support to include community building.

Impact

17 registrants - 9 participated substantively (>1hr), 5 completed >80%, and 4 completed.

All four that completed:

- reported being 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with the course
- were able to list three career projects/support in which they can participate
- reported that their confidence to plan and approach their individual career goal has 'increased' or 'significantly increased'
- successfully enrolled onto MSc programmes, and each attended between 6 and 10 employability events which is significantly higher than the average student engagement rate.

Some quotes included:

'Thanks to the instructor's effort as well as every classmate's company. It's very lucky to be one of students in University of Liverpool Management School.'

'The university cares about our career, which make me feel good since I'm kind of worry about it myself and I can get a lot of help here.'

Further information

Presentation for the Durham Blackboard User Group 2019 (Catalyst Award Winner): https://bit.ly/sayinghellotointernationalstudents

Resources

British Universities' International Liaison Association: Agent Quality Framework

British Council: Become a UK agent or counsellor

UKCISA: Information and advice for international students

UCAS: Postgraduate courses in the UK - Frequently Asked Questions

UCAS: Checklist for international students moving to the UK

UCAS: Where Next? The Experience of International Students Connecting to UK Higher Education

Australian Government: National Code of Practice for Providers of Education and Training to Overseas Students 2018

2.2   Induction, transition, integration and beyond

Induction is key for all students - setting out what they can expect from the provider and what the provider expects from them. Induction and transition schedules include academic and social inclusion activities for international and domestic students and staff to help foster multi-cultural awareness on campus and in the local community. Induction activities signpost students to where and how they can obtain help during transition and throughout their studies. The outcome should be a positive experience regardless of point of entry and level of study.

Key points

- This period will develop the sense of students' institutional, academic and social belonging. It can have a direct impact on student success and retention.

- It will be important to set realistic expectations for induction and transition if students are arriving at different points throughout the year. Providers are encouraged to create an appropriate welcome experience across provision.

- Preparation for cultural/academic differences prior to arrival should help to minimise disruption once in the UK and assist with students not feeling too overwhelmed. Providers are advised to be prepared to repeat key information through various mediums with empathy and patience.

'I did feel rather welcomed, I did feel my department was trying to get us together and introduce us to societies which was great because student societies are not a thing back home....it would have been nice if they'd done this again in second year.'

'I guess I didn't feel unwelcome at the University because there are always some kind of efforts put in place...Sometimes I feel a bit unwelcome in the UK but that's not the institutions it's the wider public...But I do feel welcome here [name of University] and I do feel useful which is very important to me...I spent three years of my undergraduate studies being really homesick, I didn't feel like I belonged...I didn't feel unwelcome, but because I had the constant need to go back home often I just kind of kept thinking I wasn't meant to be here.'

Reflective questions

1. How do we support staff to ensure they are equipped to engage effectively with all students? Student engagement is largely a western term implemented by institutions in the west and can mean something different to international students.

2. Is induction a one-stop shop for all information? Do we ensure targeted events supported by the dissemination of key information through a variety of mediums throughout the year?

3. Are we working in partnership with our student representative body/students' union to develop activities for all students throughout the year beyond induction, to recognise different start dates? How can we ensure our student representative body/students' union take an active interest and role in home/international student integration?

4. Do our international students have access to peer support/mentoring and how can we ensure they have the skills, capacity (awareness, time, confidence) to engage with it?

5. Do we work with our local community to help international students transition into the local area in which they live?

6. Are we giving clear advice about what the students are required to do as part of enrolment, where and how do they access this information, now and in the future?

7. How do our sports and social clubs support different cultures and faiths? Are international students aware of how to access them?

8. How do we encourage and support those students who need to attend English language and academic sessions throughout the year?

9. How do we communicate academic integrity processes and practice to all students without 'labelling' international students? How do we ensure they understand the rationale for academic integrity and the consequences of breaching the rules.

10. Can a student obtain information about regulatory requirements, programme of study, finances, welfare support online, and are they clear how to access this?

11. How do we support students that may arrive late, or miss key induction touch points?

12. How do we know induction is working for our international students and staff? Do we seek feedback before and after transition; compare against domestic student data year-on-year to understand impact on retention rate, outcomes, and so on?

13. Are international students offered an opportunity to share aspects of their culture should they wish to?

14. Do international students have the chance to reflect and digest the information they receive during induction?

Case study: University of Worcester

Developing collaborative partnerships that foster the international nursing student's sense of belonging

Kevin Fernandez, Lecturer Adult Nursing and International Lead, Three Counties School of Nursing and Midwifery

Lauren Wright, International Student Advisor for Nursing, Worcester International

Dr Kerry Whitehouse, College Director of Learning, Teaching and Quality Enhancement

Context to the initiative

The Three Counties School of Nursing and Midwifery (TCSNM) at the University of Worcester started recruiting students globally in 2021 and currently has 234 international students from 11 different countries. This now makes up 11.75% of the total student body in the School. To support and ensure a high-quality educational experience for the increase in international student intake, we (authors Kevin Fernandez and Lauren Wright) were appointed as International Lead and International Student Advisor for Nursing. One of our fundamental priorities was to work in partnership with students, other academics and external partners. This case study provides an overview of these collaborative partnerships, both internally and externally, which have been developed to ensure an international student experience which provides a sense of belonging and inclusive integration to the course and university more widely.

The project and its impact on the student voice and experience

The fundamental and most important partnership we prioritised, and continue to develop, is working closely with international nursing students. This partnership begins before students arrive in the UK as we offer recruitment drives and pre-induction events in their home country, thus providing the opportunity for students to meet university staff in person and in a familiar environment. The pre-induction events, for offer holders, offer advice about adapting to life in the UK, and workshops on successful academic study in UK higher education. The most recent event was organised in Delhi and Kochi with 70 students in attendance. 93% of these students found the event useful with positive comments being received about the depth and relevance of the information provided.

On arrival in the UK, and in addition to the range of university-wide support activities, we offer a weekly international drop-in clinic which international students have found to be a 'safe and brave space' to share academic, placement or personal concerns that matter to them. This has been successful in that it has enabled us to better understand student needs and provide tailored support for individuals. Students regularly comment on the positive impact this has on their transition to UK academia; one student commented that 'these clinics help us navigate problems we face in the social environment' with another highlighting that these provide them with a 'social space to meet other international students from different cohorts.'

This growing partnership with international students has resulted in several student-led sociocultural events including the public culture exchange during International Nurses Day. At this event, international students proudly wore their traditional dress and spoke with members of the public about their own culture, nursing aspirations, and clinical experiences amidst the pandemic. This kind of activity has had a significant impact on the self-confidence and communication skills of students, as shown in the comment made by one student who stated, 'I feel more comfortable chatting to people as I get to talk about my own culture'.

As a team, we value working with other academic and support staff across the University to provide a collaborative and holistic approach when supporting international students. For example, working closely with the Students' Union, International Experience Team, and international students, to organise several cultural events that students would normally celebrate in their home countries, such as Diwali and Onam. This has helped them feel part of the Worcester community without losing their own cultural identities, with one student stressing that these cultural events 'Make us feel at home in a foreign land and be part of a community'.

Additionally, we have worked closely with external partners to enhance the international students' experience, enrich their nursing practice, and provide a positive social impact, specifically working with several NHS Trust partners and International Nursing and Midwifery Associations (INMAs). To commemorate Black History Month, we held a public screening of the documentary film 'Exposed'. This was followed by an open forum, with Herefordshire and Worcestershire Integrated Care System (ICS) and a member of INMA, where we discussed the racist experiences of black, brown and other migrant nurses and midwives before, during and after the pandemic. The powerful stories shared resonated with some of our international students and empowered them to speak up about concerns that matter to them. One student highlighted, 'It is important to have these conversations as it makes me feel that my voice is heard' with another stating, 'As nurses if we can't speak up for ourselves how can we advocate for our patients?'

Next steps

The International Lead and International Student Advisor for Nursing roles are relatively new posts which are considered key drivers in developing these impactful, student-centred partnerships to improve the overall international student experience. We have, to date, successfully engendered a sense of belonging and inclusive community spirit while working in partnership, which has been commended by academic staff and students alike for the robust support system that is now in place for international students. Comments - from one student: 'I feel supported in my first year in the country especially as I transition to higher education'; and a senior academic staff member: 'You have changed the narrative of our management and support of our international students at the University' - speak to this.

We are aware that this is a starting point, and we are developing a TCSNM international calendar which will highlight more inclusion events, religious observances, and heritage months to continue to foster a sense of belonging and inclusive integration for international students.

Resources

Times Higher Education: [How can you support students from induction and beyond?](#)

Australian Government: [Student Support Services](#)

Advance HE: [Induction](#)

2.3 Provider requirements and external compliance

Those who support international students have the knowledge appropriate to their role of the processes and due diligence involved in maintaining compliance with external and internal requirements for international students.

Providers make it explicit to applicants and their agents the academic and formal entry requirements, study and financial commitment required to enable them to study at the University and in the UK. Providers offer ongoing support to applicants and students to guide them through visa and academic requirements throughout their journey into, through and out of UK higher education.

Key points

- Well-timed and ongoing advice and guidance regarding internal requirements and external compliance will help to manage expectations and provide a more coherent international applicant and student experience.

- It is essential that before entering the UK, and once in the country, international students understand the ongoing requirements that will enable them to study in the UK and the ramifications for not adhering to these requirements.

- Providers must undertake due diligence to ensure agents and staff are offering current and clear guidance and have explicit processes for when things go wrong, to ensure they can offer the best support and guidance to applicants and students.

- Students should be made aware of the external requirements to enable them to stay in the UK to work or study once they have completed their award.

'I think most international students are quite aware of attendance policies and things like that as it has huge repercussions on their visas… I think the University also did a good job of telling us that 'you can only work so and so hours, make sure you don't work full time during term time.

'I remember just signing the contract, for example for the SLC for the payment of my tuition fees. There were some problems with it, I didn't know how to deal with that…it was stressful because it reached a point that they were saying I might have to sit a year out….It was a bit distressing because there were some delayed payments. I had to contact my tutor to ask what was happening and they didn't know either and they said I should call the SLC and at that point in time I was terrified of taking calls in English.'

Reflective questions

1. Do our international applicants, students, staff and agents understand where to find information about the comparability of international and UK qualifications? Do they understand the impact this can have on a student's ability to study?

2. How do we ensure international applicants and their agents are advised how the UK academic system works?

3. Do our applicants, students and agents understand the English language requirements - how do we monitor this?

4. How do we communicate any changes in visa requirements to international students and staff? What is the risk to our institution if students do not understand or do not comply?

5. Are our finance and visa teams offered multicultural awareness training in preparation for working directly with international students?

6. Do our finance and visa teams have the opportunity to disseminate information during induction and throughout the year?

7. Do we ensure our students' union/student representative body has appropriate training and information to enable it to offer advice and signposting regarding international student finance, English language and academic requirements?

8. Do our international student support teams and careers guidance teams understand the different external requirements for international students if they choose to continue with further study or wish to work?

9. What is our approach to due diligence about the implementation and monitoring of processes around internal requirements and external compliance for international students?

Resources

UKCISA: The UKCISA Code of Ethics and its Commentary

UKCISA: Student immigration: the basics

UKCISA: Brexit - immigration

UCAS: What level of English do I need to get into a UK university?

2.4 Academic support and skills

Teaching and support teams, student representative bodies and central services are aware of the processes and contacts in relation to academic support for international students at all levels and modes of study. Information regarding good academic practice is reiterated at appropriate points and processes are consistently applied. Programme teams make every effort to broaden the curriculum and offer support through inclusive assessment practices.

Key points

- International students may come from a completely different style of education. Staff may choose to focus on what this diversity brings to the cohort.

- Approaches to gaining and acting on the student voice, therefore, may have been implemented in a different way and so a clear explanation about what and why active participation in the review and development of the programme of study might be required. Students may need encouragement and reassurance to build confidence in offering feedback.

- Provider regulations and processes around good academic practice (academic integrity) should be reiterated at key points throughout the year, not only at induction.

- Recognising the diversity in higher education through the curriculum (for example, seeking out non-western scholars and research) can ensure a richer and more rounded education for all, and supports international students in recognising and engaging with the ethos of diversity at every level of their experience.

- Support through assessment, particularly during the first term, should help ease 'academic shock' and smooth the transition process(es) for all students.

- Realising the benefits of a bridging approach to enable international students to have confidence in their ability to meet the demands of UK higher education.

'The culture of education and what is tested for or what they are looking at was very different to me. I was expecting there to be more exams (I am from a very stem based background), understand the applications. I entered this field and I had to write so many essays and adapt to this academic language which is no-one's first language but it so happens to be in English...Even doing the IELS exam I was not prepared did not understand there would be a different sort of flavour in the way of writing things that I knew beforehand....I found it baffling at the time.'

'I don't know if it's true or not or maybe I am just a stereotype, but people in the UK seem to be really polite to the point where they tend to indirectly point at the problems or point at the issues that I'm having. They always start with something very nice first, but like they are not very direct, sometimes I need to think 'Is it really that good' or is there something I need to improve, maybe I'm not still doing that well.'

Reflective questions

1. Do we explicitly outline academic expectations and the academic culture of our institution to our students before and during their studies? What form does this advice take - activities, webinars, examples and exercises?

2. Are students who require reasonable adjustments aware of the process and evidence required to ensure they receive them before their first assessment?

3. For international students who require additional academic support, how easy is the process to navigate - are they aware of the evidence they may need to supply?

4. How do we encourage the international student voice in our feedback and change mechanisms throughout the academic experience? How do we work with our student representative bodies on this?

5. How do we ensure students understand and can recognise good academic practice - how is this monitored? What happens when further help is required?

6. How 'international' and diverse is the academic practice and research at our institution? Does our curriculum reflect teaching, pedagogies, research and scholarship from across the globe?

7. What is our approach to supporting international students with assessments? Is it different to that of home students? Do they understand the learning outcomes and criteria/rubrics of the modules/programme? How do we know if students understand the requirements prior to marking?

8. How are our staff made aware about the different academic cultures that our international students primarily come from and the impact this may have on their expectations?

9. How do our staff and home students view international students? Are they viewed as a vulnerable group who are somehow lacking in knowledge or as successful students who have likely excelled in their home environment and seek further challenge to study in another country?

10. Are our staff aware of the different approaches required to navigate and communicate good academic practice, academic writing and assessment practices to international students who come from a variety of academic learning backgrounds?

11. How do we develop and share good practices that are developed across our institution and wider networks?

Case study: University of Stirling

Business and academic English at the University of Stirling

Jennifer Cowell, Academic Skills Advisor, University of Stirling

Context to the initiative

Similar to many UK higher education institutions, the University of Stirling has experienced an increase in international learners (HESA, n.d.; 2022), particularly postgraduates within the Management School. Current cohorts of postgraduate business learners have shown interest in developing their academic skills and business English, to support their study and career goals. Concurrently, members of staff have noted evidence that the cohorts can experience difficulties linked to educational and social acculturation (Berry, 2015; Fovet, 2021). Therefore, optional academic skills workshops and business English seminars were trialled in autumn 2022 and repeated in spring 2023.

What the initiative/project was

In autumn 2022, eight academic skills workshops and seven business English seminars were designed in tandem, ensuring complementary support to meet the learners' needs, including awareness of their cultural backgrounds and previous educational experiences. The weekly provision could be considered a highly-bespoke and targeted form of in-sessional English for Specific Academic Purposes. These sessions are optional. A member of Student Learning Services (SLS) designed both provisions, as she has an embedded role in the Management School and a background in both academic skills and English for Academic Purposes. The workshop delivery was interactive and was underpinned by pedagogical approaches, content was relatable to daily international life, and contextualised to the discipline. The focus was on key academic skills required to succeed in the degree, particularly writing skills. Seminars were staffed by language tutors and drew on communicative methodologies, namely task-based language teaching. Their aim was to enhance the learners' verbal communication skills and confidence by using a wide range of relevant global business topics. Both the workshops and seminars were designed to offer some pre-determined content, with flexibility to respond to student queries or difficulties as they arose.

An evaluation of the impact or success

The programme was available to 220 learners in autumn. Positive feedback was received from learners, staff delivering the initiative, and disciplinary module staff. Evidence indicates increases in the learners' linguistical knowledge, fluency and accuracy. Staff also observed improvements in learners' confidence to communicate in other areas of their studies. Module grade results and rates of academic misconduct indicate that learners who engaged in the optional provision performed better than their peers on both fronts. This suggests that such provision - when designed and tailored to the cohort - can aid in an overall positive learning experience, particularly when delivered in a way which ensures learners are able to relate to it easily and contextualise it to their discipline.

Next steps

The initiative is being piloted a second time in spring 2023 for over 600 postgraduate learners within the Management School. This includes existing and new learners. It is still an optional support mechanism and has been adapted to incorporate learners' feedback from autumn. Impact evaluation will be conducted at the end of the semester, but initial observations indicate that the returning learners positively influenced new learners to ask questions, leading to a more enthusiastic and engaged learning environment.

Links to any relevant websites or further information about the project

For further information about this project, please contact Jennifer Cowell (the programme designer) at sls@stir.ac.uk

Resources

Berry, J W (2015). Acculturation. In J E Grusec & P D Hastings (Eds.), Handbook of socialization: Theory and research. pp. 520–538. The Guilford Press.

Fovet, F (2021). Developing an Ecological Approach to the Strategic Implementation of UDL in Higher Education. Journal of Education and Learning, 10(4), 27-39.

HESA (n.d.). Students 2000/01

HESA (2022). Where do HE students come from? HE student enrolments by domicile

2.5   Professional services and non-academic support

International students are clear as to where they can find support for non-academic challenges and that this information is easy to find and reiterated during the student journey. Providers identify where there is dedicated resource to support international students; and communicate the process to access this support to staff and student representative bodies who can signpost or explain accordingly.

Key points

- International students are not a homogenous group and should not be treated as such.
- Staff within advice services should have training as to how to support international students and be aware of the most frequent non-academic issues that arise and how to offer advice and guidance. These might include:
  - accommodation and utilities
  - finance
  - visa and immigration requirements
  - international students with dependents
  - mental health and physical health requirements
  - local information such as shopping, emergency numbers, attractions and travel advice
  - registration with local services such as doctors and dentists.
- As with academic processes, international students need to be regularly reminded about processes to access support and what those services can offer.
- Providers and students need to ensure they are clear as to what is dedicated support for international students and what is part of the mainstream support service.

'One thing that was difficult in the beginning was information for my family, like schools for my kids, where to find a dentist...how the health system works, things like that...But the university doesn't get involved in that so I didn't get any valuable support from them...I did try to find some answers from them but it wasn't very useful, so I had to find my own way.'

'The school sends out a newsletter at the end of the semester to point you to advice you can go to. In terms of school structure, the school is not that big ...but I know where I can get things and if I don't know and I know who to email to help.'

Reflective questions

1. What is the dedicated support service for international students at our provider? What is not dedicated support but part of the mainstream service for all students? How and when do we communicate that?

2. How do we support international students who have had their key development years disrupted by Covid, in terms of confidence, mental health implications, travel, fear, disruption to school?

3. How do we work with our student representative body to support our international students?

4. How do we monitor and evaluate the non-academic support utilised by international students?

5. How can we reduce the stigma sometimes attached to mental health support by some international students?

6. How do those with pre-existing mental health/health conditions get support, is the process clear?

7. Do we make effective use of our alumni/final-year students to promote support services?

8. Do we have a peer mentor scheme for international students?

9. Are academic teams and professional services working in partnership with clear processes to ensure students who need to apply for extenuating services or interrupt their study (for example) can be supported?

10. Are there planned approaches to foster integration and develop a sense of belonging among all students? Have home students had the opportunity to meet and interact with international students prior to starting university? Have international students had the chance to interact with and support each other? How might we facilitate this?

11. Have we considered any potential impact of the volume of international students on our local community services, such as nurseries, schools, dentists and GP surgeries?

Case study: Sheffield Hallam University

UNI KiDS

David Major, International Experience Service Coordinator, and Rachel Gordon, Senior Administrator, International Experience Team, Sheffield Hallam University

Context to the initiative

UNI KiDS is an International Experience Team led project which gives international students with families, opportunities to meet and create a network of support for each other. The project is an attempt to reduce barriers to learning for international students with young children, by helping them establish supportive networks. Unlike home students in this position, who in most cases have the support of their extended families and friends, international students need to build new relationships which they can rely on for help with informal peer support.

What the initiative/project was

Our project started in July 2022 as a pilot scheme, consisting of weekly activity sessions for families during the summer holiday and individual one-off sessions from October to December, including a Welly Walk through a country park and a Festive Family Party.

Working in collaboration with lecturers and students from the Childhood Studies and Early Childhood Studies courses, UNI KiDS provides free, planned activity sessions throughout the year, for young children and their parents. The sessions incorporate themes which maximise the children's learning experience in a fun and interactive environment. Parents attend with their children who are in-turn able to meet and socialise with each other.

An evaluation of the impact or success

To date, the UNI KiDS project has been successful, with 51 families attending at least one or more of our sessions. Both the activity sessions and Festive Party have been oversubscribed, demonstrating a need for the provision of further sessions. Feedback obtained from those who attended shows they have overwhelmingly enjoyed the sessions, made new connections and would return again.

Next steps

Additional funding has been secured from a university fund to expand the project, so that a greater number of students can benefit from this provision. We will be able to purchase relevant equipment needed to enhance the sessions. Refreshments and food will also be provided by our catering staff.

We aim to deliver 17 activities and events for 250 international students with families over the next 5 months, to provide them with opportunities to create a network of support for each other.

To recruit and train dedicated Student Ambassadors to help deliver the sessions.

The project will provide placement options for a minimum of 5 students from the Childhood Studies and Early Childhood Studies courses.

The course leader for Childhood Studies is conducting research with multilingual families and it is hoped that the international student families attending the UNI KiDS sessions will be vital in her research.

Links to any relevant websites or further information about the project

www.shu.ac.uk/goglobal/going-global-on-campus/uni-kids

Resources

QAA Membership Resources: International student experience

Student Minds: Understanding Student Mental Health Inequalities: International Students

UKCISA: Discussing difference, discovering similarities

Times Higher Education: What's in a name? The importance of getting students names right

2.6   Belonging, integration and inclusivity: Creating a global community

To facilitate a sense of belonging and integration, all students and staff (including those in student representative bodies) should receive training to enhance their intercultural competence and communication. Providers and student representative bodies are active in encouraging international students to take part in student-led quality assurance activities, extracurricular activities, and institution-wide projects. Establishing robust links with the local community will assist with facilitating a sense of belonging for international students and provide a useful forum to address any issues.

Key points

- Establishing a sense of belonging for all students will promote better engagement across all aspects of the student experience.

- Encouragement to take part in student-led activities beyond the curriculum can help to facilitate connections and networks.

- Home students should be encouraged to recognise the benefits of studying, learning, socialising and working in a global community.

- Training for all staff should help colleagues to recognise the attributes that international students bring to the provider and how they enhance the university community.

'I think it's important to be responsive, I think when you look at most individuals' emails and they have that little line 'I will try to respond to all emails within three business days'. All? I'll write you a letter instead!! Communication is massive..I'm trying to get a sense of the structure of my programme and it's just not there...I don't want to be constantly asking questions...I just want to do my work and be productive.'

'It's not just about studies and getting your degree but feeling that you are a part of the culture even though for 3, 4, or 5 years, I think it's as valuable as obtaining the degree, enjoying your time here, feeling welcome and having that feeling that you are part of the culture for a period of time.'

Reflective questions

1. What does the term 'global community' mean to our institution and provision? What does the term mean for our community outside of the University?

2. Do we refer to a 'global community' in our strategy? How do we implement this in practice - is it successful? How do we know?

3. How can we encourage home students to feel part of our global community?

4. How do we work in partnership with our students and student representative body to bring students together to create a global community?

5. What do we do to promote the international student voice? Is it prevalent in one area and not others? Why?

6. How do we work with our local community to create an inclusive environment for our students? Do we have robust links that enable us to address any challenges?

7. Do we check in with our international students to find out how they are coping with living in the UK?

8. How do we promote mobility opportunities to our students and manage their expectations about what we can deliver?

9. What are the attributes of our international student population and how do we promote them? For example, can we use our international students to offer advice about living, working and studying in a different country to home students? How would we recognise this type of activity?

10. How do we encourage our international staff to be part of our global community?

11. How do we bring home and international students together without emphasising the idea of 'difference'?

12. How do we encourage international students/staff to share their culture with other students/staff and the community? What resources do we have available to help facilitate this exchange?

Case study: University of Leeds

Buddy Scheme

Jemma Stern, Senior Projects and Activities Officer, Global Community, International Student Office, University of Leeds

Context to the initiative

The University of Leeds Buddy Scheme launched in August 2021 and aims to offer peer support to help students feel part of a community and enjoy getting involved in student life. Students of any study level (including postgraduate researchers) can apply at any time in their student journey. The project was developed in response to a policy idea passed by Leeds University Union (LUU) in 2019 which was championed by the 2020-21 International Officer and the Union's International Student Advisory Board. The initial idea was for a scheme for international students, but for various reasons, we decided it should be open to all.

What the initiative/project was

Our scheme matches students based on shared interests and motivations, rather than specific characteristics such as being a 'UK' or 'international' student. In this way, the project seeks to connect people across the perceived boundaries that sometimes exist between groups of students, and to connect people who might not otherwise meet.

The Buddy Scheme offers different opportunities to engage: a 1-1 buddy match with another student from the same study level (who is new or returning); the opportunity to join a smaller group of up to 8 buddies who meet regularly over 3-4 weeks; and opportunities to join exclusive Buddy Scheme socials. We've had 178 buddies attend 9 socials that have included a welcome picnic, crafternoon, pizza and board games, coffee and cake, and themed Christmas and Valentine's specials.

Both the small groups and larger social events are facilitated by paid student hosts. Icebreakers and activities are selected to help build intercultural connections, without this being an overtly stated aim. For example, one of our popular icebreakers (adapted from UKCISA's Discussing Difference, Discovering Similarities resource) is called 'What's in a name?' Participants are asked to share: What's your full name? What do you like people to call you? How do you say it (teach everyone)? Who gave you your name? What does your name mean? Is it a common name and how do you feel about your name? This is a low-stakes icebreaker that works well to break down potential barriers created by unfamiliar names, and participants are often surprised by how much they learn about each other.

An evaluation of the impact or success

In 2021-22 and in 2022-23 we've received a high number of applications which suggests the idea of a 'buddy' is very appealing to many students.

A number of refinements have helped to improve the quality of engagement and experience for buddies:

- Ensuring communications set clear expectations about what the scheme offers, and the diversity of students that participants may be buddied with.

- Using an automated matching system to increase compatibility and facilitate rematches quickly where needed.

- Providing opportunities for buddies to meet each other at social events and small group sessions, with interactions actively facilitated through icebreakers and activities.

Our icebreakers and activities are selected to help our participants to build connections and as one buddy said 'You will not just gain a new friend, but you get to learn about one's culture and lifestyle, and most importantly, you can share whatever you would love to share with a person who comes from a completely different background from you! You will support and get supported when you join the university. Personally, this is an experience I will never regret.'

Next steps

We are still in the pilot and learning phase of our inclusive buddy scheme for all students. However, with two years of data we have a good benchmark against which to measure the impact of future improvements.

Our learning points continue to indicate that a need for well-timed, carefully considered facilitation and support structures to help buddies make their first contact; to rematch quickly when needed; and to increase engagement with our exclusive social programme will help us continue to produce positive outcomes.

Links to any relevant websites or further information about the project

University of Leeds Global Community

University of Leeds Buddy Scheme

International Student Advisory Board

Resources

Universities Scotland: Internationally Scottish: Creating global communities

Unibuddy: Creating a Sense of Community for Your International Students

Wonkhe: Building Belonging in Higher Education: Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach

EAB: Five components of Student Belonging

2.7   Careers and employability

International students receive tailored careers advice that incorporates advice about ongoing requirements to work in the UK during and after study. Where possible, providers make use of their employer links to inform their knowledge about requirements for international students to undertake placements or graduate roles. Providers offer detailed advice and guidance to students who wish to continue to study in the UK, making use of sector-wide networks, resources, advice and guidance.

Key points

- Advice and guidance around ongoing employment or study after graduation is proven to be very important to international students.

- There should be a service level agreement as to the advice and guidance relating to careers and employability. However, it is important to stipulate at what point the provider support ends.

- Information should be provided around the impact of switching between visa types along with information about working hours.

- Information on placement opportunities and responsibilities around securing placements needs to be made explicit to international students, as should any accommodation requirements that go with it.

- Providers have extensive employer links and, as such, should be able to draw on these to enhance the advice and guidance for international students around careers and employability in the UK and beyond.

'Many of the interviews I went to were very tailored and specific to the field I was being interviewed in...When I was asked the very nitty gritty details, the careers service was unable to help unfortunately....It's very difficult to do this, I can see, as a University has so many departments how would you cover all the fields out there?'

'The professionals working on our course bring with them a lot of experience and connections. Just connecting to them increased our networks a lot and help us get to know how careers work in our field... The careers centre are quite helpful letting us know and signposting us to sites that can sponsor jobs on the student circuits.'

1. How do we widen our student employment focus to look globally beyond the UK job market? How do we manage expectations about what we can do in this regard?

2. How do we manage the expectations of our international students around advice and guidance on careers or onward study?

3. How do we manage careers information at providers overseas who offer our awards?

4. Do our international students understand how to get a National Insurance number and how taxation works? When and how often is this information imparted?

5. Do we include global employability information for destinations that we know are attractive to international graduates?

6. Where and how can students get information about switching visas?

7. Do our staff and students understand the various post-study/further study visa routes and where they can find expertise on this? Do staff and students understand that visa rules around studying and working in the UK may change quickly - if they are not confident to deliver advice, do they know where to go/signpost to?

8. How do our careers and immigration specialist work in partnership to ensure a comprehensive range of advice and guidance on careers and employability - who is responsible for disseminating different sets of information?

9. Do our careers team undertake training regarding the support of international students?

10. Are international students clear as to where their responsibilities are in terms of employment opportunities and where that of the provider ends?

11. How do we ensure international students achieve a successful work/study balance and understand any potential implications to visa requirements?

12. Do our international students recognise and articulate the skills relevant for their career obtained through part-time working alongside study?

Case study: St Mary's Twickenham

The Simulated Work Placement (SWP) - a stepping stone for international students

Lucy Steptoe, Lecturer, Centre for Workplace Learning, St Mary's University, Twickenham, London

Context to the initiative

The Simulated Work Placement (SWP) was initially created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, to ensure students could continue to gain valuable working experience despite placement restrictions. The initiative has been so successful that it is now an integral part of our offering and is a popular placement choice for St Mary's international students. These students often arrive in the UK with no connections or social capital to draw from and are eager to undertake work placements to make the most of their time in the UK. Sometimes, these students are unsuccessful in sourcing a placement opportunity but still want to build key employability skills and expand their networks. The SWP provides them with an opportunity to do both and often acts as a stepping stone for these students who then go on to be successful in a real-world placement setting.

What the initiative/project was

The SWP mirrors, as closely as possible, a real-life placement, with set tasks developed using World Economic Forum (WEF) soft skills. While completing the SWP, students work remotely to develop their professional skills while adhering to weekly task deadlines set by their 'virtual boss' (an Employability Services Lecturer). Additionally, some SWP tasks involve live briefs given by our organisational partners (examples provided below) so the students truly experience the type of projects which they might undertake in their future graduate roles. Students also take part in an Industry Insight week in which they watch recorded interviews with our employer contacts and learn about various roles in specific industries of interest. This allows them to imagine themselves in different career pathways and gives them an understanding of what to expect from various workplaces here in the UK. Furthermore, SWP students are given the opportunity to complete job research tasks, create a tailored cover letter and set up a LinkedIn Profile. All these activities aid in their understanding of the UK graduate job market and encourage them to get ahead and develop their employability while completing their undergraduate degree.

An evaluation of the impact or success

Approximately 250 students have taken the SWP since the start of the pandemic in March 2020 and it has been a successful initiative for international students who have chosen to complete it.

A final-year St Mary's student, Rajesh Chaudhary, took the Simulated Work Placement at Level 5 and has since gone on to secure two further placement opportunities at Level 6. He had the following to say about the SWP: 'I really enjoyed completing the SWP. It was a genuinely helpful opportunity for me to be part of as it has allowed me to demonstrate professional skills that have been required to secure real-life placements'.

Additionally, the SWP won the St Mary's University 'St Henry Walpole Prize' in 2021 because of its 'highly inclusive offering' with 'well-evidenced benefits to the student experience'.

Next steps

More than 20 different employers have provided real-life projects for our SWP students including (but not limited to) SPEAR, Richmond Housing Partnership, WorkL, MacAlpine Care, ROOTS Ltd, Mind, Fujitsu, SlimTek, Chelsea FC and The Black Gifted Network. We hope to continue to work with employers to offer more opportunities to our students in the future and strengthen the SWP offering year-on-year so that we better prepare our international students for the world of work here in the UK.

Resources

AGCAS: International student employability research, data and reports

AGCAS: Resources and country-specific guides to support working with international students

AGCAS: Supporting international graduate employability

Universities UK International: Internationalisation at Home - Developing Global Citizens Without Travel

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