



Deficit narrative audit tool

A critical evaluation framework for resources,
training, and practice

This resource is an output from the Collaborative Enhancement Project **Supporting Staff to Enhance the International Student Experience** supported and funded by QAA Membership.

Lead institution



Partner institutions



Introduction and conceptual grounding

This audit tool has been developed as part of a QAA-funded Collaborative Enhancement Project. It emerges directly from a series of cross-institutional workshops with staff exploring how international students are positioned and supported within higher education pedagogy, training, and institutional culture.

A central question ran through every workshop:

Who has the deficit?

Deficit narratives typically describe international students as lacking knowledge, language proficiency, critical thinking skills, or cultural familiarity with UK higher education norms. Yet workshop participants across all four institutions consistently reframed this question: the deficit may lie with the institution, with how staff are supported, with how curricula are designed, or with how training resources position the student.

This tool enables staff and staff development practitioners to critically examine both external training resources and their own pedagogic practice. It offers a structured framework for reflection and dialogue, grounded in four analytical lenses underpinning all the outputs of this project:

Lens 1: Positioning How is the international student constructed: as a remedial problem, or as a contributor?

Lens 2: Epistemology Whose knowledge and ways of knowing are centred? Who is assumed to be lacking?

Lens 3: Reflexivity Does this resource or practice invite staff to examine their own positionality?

Lens 4: Structure Does it name systemic and institutional factors, or place the burden on the individual?

How to use this tool

Two parts

Part A – Auditing resources and training materials

Use this when evaluating any training resource, CPD session, guidance document, induction material, or external toolkit used to support staff working with international students. This section can be used by individuals or by staff development teams conducting a systematic audit of their provision.

Part B – Auditing your own practice

Use this as a personal reflexivity tool. It asks you to examine not just who you are, but what you do in the classroom and in your professional practice as a result of your positionality, assumptions, and the structural context in which you work.

Rating scale

Each lens uses the following three-point scale. These are not definitive judgements. They are starting points for dialogue and professional development:

Reinforces deficit

The resource or practice frames international students primarily through the language of lack, deficit, or deficiency. It places the burden of adjustment on the student and does not challenge the assumptions embedded in current provision.

Partially challenges

The resource or practice acknowledges complexity and shows some awareness of the diversity of international students, but does not critically examine the underlying assumptions or structural conditions that produce deficit framings.

Actively challenges deficit

The resource or practice explicitly disrupts deficit framings. It positions international students as contributors and co-producers of knowledge, invites staff reflexivity, and names systemic factors rather than individualising responsibility.

Part A Auditing resources and training materials

Resource details

Name of resource or session:

Type (e.g. CPD workshop, induction resource, online module, toolkit):

Source / produced by:

Date reviewed and auditor name:

Lens 1: Positioning

How is the international student constructed in this resource?

Q1 Does the resource use language that describes international students primarily in terms of what they lack, need, or struggle with?

Look for terms such as: 'language barriers', 'cultural adjustment', 'academic deficits', 'challenges posed by international students'. Note whether these are used critically or uncritically.

Q2 Does the resource acknowledge the diversity within the category 'international student', or does it treat them as a homogeneous group?

Consider whether nationality, prior education, class, race, gender, or other intersecting markers are acknowledged. Workshop participants noted consistently: international students cannot be homogenised.

Q3 Does the resource offer any framing in which international students are positioned as contributors to knowledge, culture, or pedagogy?

Look for language of co-creation, partnership, or asset-based framing. One of our workshop participants described international students as 'a treasure that is already in the room with you'.

Q4 Does the resource acknowledge that home students may face comparable challenges, or does it single out international students as uniquely problematic?

A recurring insight across all four workshops: good practice for international students is good practice for all. Consider whether this principle is embedded or absent.

Overall rating for this lens:

☐ Reinforces deficit

☐ Partially challenges

☐ Actively challenges deficit

Notes and evidence:

Lens 2: Epistemology

Whose knowledge is centred, and whose is treated as lacking?

Q1 Does the resource treat Euro- or Anglo-centric academic conventions as universal standards that all students must attain?

Consider whether conventions such as essay writing, critical argumentation, and seminar participation are presented as neutral and objective, or as culturally and historically situated. Workshop data: 'academia is inherently Eurocentric/Anglocentric'.

Q2 Does the resource challenge or reinforce the assumption that international students lack critical thinking skills?

This assumption appeared at every workshop site. It is closely entangled with language deficit assumptions: students whose seminar participation is quiet, or whose written English does not conform to dominant academic conventions, are frequently read as lacking analytical capacity rather than as thinkers whose expression is being filtered through a raciolinguistic lens. Note whether the resource names this connection or treats critical thinking and language as separate issues.

Q3 Does the resource include, reference, or validate knowledge from non-Western academic traditions or multilingual knowledge practices?

Look for diverse reading lists, case studies, and theoretical frameworks. Are students' home academic contexts treated as relevant resources, or as obstacles to overcome?

Q4 Does the resource engage with decolonial perspectives on internationalisation, or does it frame internationalisation as primarily a cultural enrichment or financial strategy?

References to decoloniality, raciolinguistic ideologies, epistemic justice, or the coloniality of knowledge indicate active engagement with this lens.

Overall rating for this lens:

☐ Reinforces deficit

☐ Partially challenges

☐ Actively challenges deficit

Notes and evidence:

Lens 3: Reflexivity

Does this resource invite staff to examine their own positionality and assumptions?

Q1 Does the resource invite staff to reflect on their own educational background, linguistic identity, and the privileges they hold as educators in a UK HE context?

The positionality mapping activity used across all four workshops asked: Where was I educated? What languages do I speak? What aspects of the international student experience have I never had to navigate? Look for comparable prompts.

Q2 Does the resource acknowledge that staff may themselves hold deficit assumptions about international students, even when well-intentioned?

Workshop data showed that even critical, self-aware educators reproduce deficit discourses. One participant described moving from a deficit mindset to an expansive mindset. The resource should support this journey.

Q3 Does the resource support staff to differentiate between tokenistic and authentic approaches to internationalisation?

The genuine/tokenistic distinction was one of the most consistent themes across all four workshop sites. Does the resource offer tools for making this distinction in practice?

Q4 Does the resource create space for the emotional and relational dimensions of this work, including the discomfort that positionality discussions can generate?

Workshop data at one site noted that positionality discussions can generate hostility from colleagues. A resource offering only practical tips without acknowledging this leaves staff underprepared.

Overall rating for this lens:

☐ Reinforces deficit

☐ Partially challenges

☐ Actively challenges deficit

Notes and evidence:

Lens 4: Structure

Does this resource acknowledge structural and institutional factors?

Q1 Does the resource acknowledge the role of institutional structures, including workload, teaching delivery formats, programme design and recruitment practices, in shaping conditions for international students?

Workload and structural constraints were named at every institution as the primary barrier to inclusive practice. A resource offering only individual tips, without naming these constraints, places unfair burden on staff.

Q2 Does the resource acknowledge the financial and political economy of international student recruitment, including the 'cash cow' framing that circulates within the sector?

This was named directly and unprompted at every workshop site across all four institutions. Staff used the term 'cash cows' without prompting to describe how international students are positioned institutionally. A resource treating internationalisation purely as cultural enrichment, without acknowledging this structural reality, is likely to feel inauthentic to the staff using it.

Q3 Does the resource address challenges that international students face beyond the classroom, including visa restrictions, financial precarity, high stakes of failure, and exploitation risks?

Workshop data showed these pressures directly affect academic engagement. Wolverhampton participants noted that international students 'don't have safety nets to retake a year'.

Q4 Does the resource support staff to advocate for institutional change, or does it limit its scope to individual pedagogic adjustments?

Consider whether the resource includes language about collective action, policy advocacy, or systemic change. Consider whether it positions the individual educator as the sole agent of improvement.

Overall rating for this lens:

☐ Reinforces deficit

☐ Partially challenges

☐ Actively challenges deficit

Notes and evidence:

Part A summary

Lens	Overall rating	Key action or development point
Lens 1: Positioning		
Lens 2: Epistemology		
Lens 3: Reflexivity		
Lens 4: Structure		
Overall assessment and recommended actions:		

Part B Auditing your own practice

Examining your own practice through a critical lens is not comfortable work. The workshop data from this project showed that sometimes, positionality discussions can generate feelings of defensiveness, even hostility among colleagues. This tool is designed not to produce blame or guilt, but to support honest reflections that makes genuine change possible. You may find it useful to complete this with a trusted colleague, or to return to it at different points in the year.

Your positionality: a starting point

Before completing the lenses below, take a few minutes to reflect on the following prompts. This exercise was used across all four workshop sites and forms the foundation for the lenses that follow.

Where was I educated, at school and at university?

What language(s) do I speak? Is English my first language?

What privileges do I hold, including citizenship, passport power, proximity to UK academic norms?

What aspects of the international student experience have I never had to navigate?

How has my own educational journey shaped the assumptions I bring to teaching?

Lens 1: Positioning

How do I construct the international student in my own teaching and practice?

Q1 In my teaching, do I draw on what international students already know, or do I focus primarily on what I perceive them to be lacking?

Think about the language you use in class, in feedback, and in conversation with colleagues. Do you find yourself saying 'they can't...' or 'they struggle with...' more than 'they bring...' or 'they contribute...'?

Q2 Do I treat international students as a single group, or do I make active efforts to recognise individual backgrounds, educational histories, and intersecting identities?

Reflect on a recent teaching situation: did you find yourself making assumptions based on a student's perceived nationality or language background? Workshop participants consistently noted the tendency to lump students together.

Q3 Do I actively invite international students to contribute their knowledge and perspectives to the learning process, or do I assume the curriculum is the primary source of knowledge?

Consider your assessment design, seminar activities, and co-curricular practice. Is there genuine space for students' epistemological contributions, or are contributions shaped by UK academic conventions?

Q4 Have I ever described an international student's approach to learning or assessment as a problem without examining whether my own assumptions about correct academic behaviour are culturally situated?

Workshop data showed persistent assumptions about critical thinking, silence in seminars, and group dynamics. These may reflect different pedagogic traditions rather than student deficits.

Overall rating for this lens:

☐ Reinforces deficit

☐ Partially challenges

☐ Actively challenges deficit

Notes and evidence:

Lens 2: Epistemology

Whose knowledge and ways of knowing do I centre, and whose do I marginalise?

Q1 Does my curriculum (including reading lists, case studies, theoretical frameworks, and examples), reflect the diversity of knowledge traditions represented in my classroom?

Are the majority of your sources published in English by authors from the Global North? When did you last add a text from a scholar located outside eurocentric academic traditions?

Q2 Do I treat academic conventions such as essay writing, critical argumentation, and seminar participation as culturally neutral standards, or do I acknowledge them as historically situated practices?

These conventions reflect particular traditions of knowledge production. Presenting them as universal academic skills is itself a form of epistemic positioning. How do you introduce these conventions to students?

Q3 Do I make space for multilingualism as a resource, or do I treat English monolingualism as the standard that students must conform to?

Workshop data raised the question of whether requiring English in all interactions reflects a pedagogic decision or an unexamined cultural norm. What is your practice, and why?

Q4 Have I engaged with decolonial perspectives on my discipline or on higher education pedagogy in a way that has changed how I teach?

Decolonising the curriculum is not only about diversifying reading texts. It involves questioning the frameworks through which knowledge is validated, assessed, and transmitted.

Overall rating for this lens:

☐ Reinforces deficit

☐ Partially challenges

☐ Actively challenges deficit

Notes and evidence:

Lens 3: Reflexivity

How does my positionality shape how I teach and relate to international students?

Q1 Am I aware of the specific ways in which my educational background, linguistic identity, and cultural assumptions show up in my teaching?

This is not about self-criticism. It is about honest awareness. Participants across all workshop sites recognised that even critical, well-intentioned educators reproduce dominant norms. Which norms, and when?

Q2 When I work with international students one-to-one, am I approaching them with genuine curiosity about their experience, or with assumptions already in place?

Workshop data noted that students often say they are 'fine' in meetings. This can reflect language confidence, cultural expectations around hierarchy, or genuine reassurance. How do you create conditions for honest dialogue?

Q3 Do I distinguish between approaches to internationalisation that are tokenistic and those that are authentic? Do I hold myself to that distinction in my own practice?

It is easy to recognise tokenism in others. Reflect on a specific initiative in your own practice: is it genuinely co-produced with students, or does it reproduce existing hierarchies under a different name?

Q4 Do I create conditions in my classroom where international students feel safe to think critically, take risks, and challenge received wisdom, including questioning my own assumptions?

Workshop data showed that 'if they don't feel safe, they can't be critical'. Safety is not only about emotional warmth. It is about the architecture of power in the classroom.

Overall rating for this lens:

☐ Reinforces deficit

☐ Partially challenges

☐ Actively challenges deficit

Notes and evidence:

Lens 4: Structure

How do I navigate structural and institutional constraints in my practice?

Q1 Am I aware of the structural factors, including workload, block teaching constraints, visa restrictions, and assessment schedules, that affect my international students in ways outside their control?

Workshop participants noted that international students often arrive mid-block while adjusting to new cultural and academic environments and managing significant financial pressures simultaneously.

Q2 When I find it difficult to support international students as well as I would like, do I understand this as a personal failing?

Do I name the structural conditions that constrain me? Several workshop sites noted that staff become resentful when expected to address complex student needs without institutional support. This resentment is itself a structural symptom, not a personal failing. Hold both your own agency and the structural context in which it operates.

Q3 Do I take any active role, however small, in advocating for the institutional changes that would make better support for international students possible?

This might include raising concerns in staff meetings, advocating for co-created CPD, challenging deficit language in policy documents, or contributing to curriculum review. You do not have to do everything.

Q4 Am I aware of the experiences that international students navigate beyond the classroom, and do I treat these as relevant context for understanding their academic engagement?

Workshop data highlighted visa uncertainty, financial precarity, overwork, family expectations, and the catastrophic consequences of failure for some students. These are the conditions in which your students are trying to learn. Stay mindful.

Overall rating for this lens:

☐ Reinforces deficit

☐ Partially challenges

☐ Actively challenges deficit

Notes and evidence:

Part B summary and reflexive commitments

The positionality mapping exercise used in the workshops invited participants to close with one reflexive commitment, naming a specific change in thinking or practice that emerges from honest reflection. Use the space below.

Lens	Overall rating	Key action or development point
Lens 1: Positioning		
Lens 2: Epistemology		
Lens 3: Reflexivity		
Lens 4: Structure		
Overall assessment and recommended actions:		

My reflexive commitment:

I recognise that...

...and therefore I will...

This tool was developed by Dr Sumeya Loonat and Wendy Ramku (De Montfort University) as part of the QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project, **Supporting Staff to Enhance the International Student Experience**.

Contributors: Dr Hardeep Basra, Professor Richard Hall (De Montfort University); Dr Sylvie Lomer (University of Manchester); Dr Araida Hidalgo-Bastida, Professor Karen Pashby, Dr Gladson Chikwa (Manchester Metropolitan University); Julie Hughes (University of Wolverhampton).