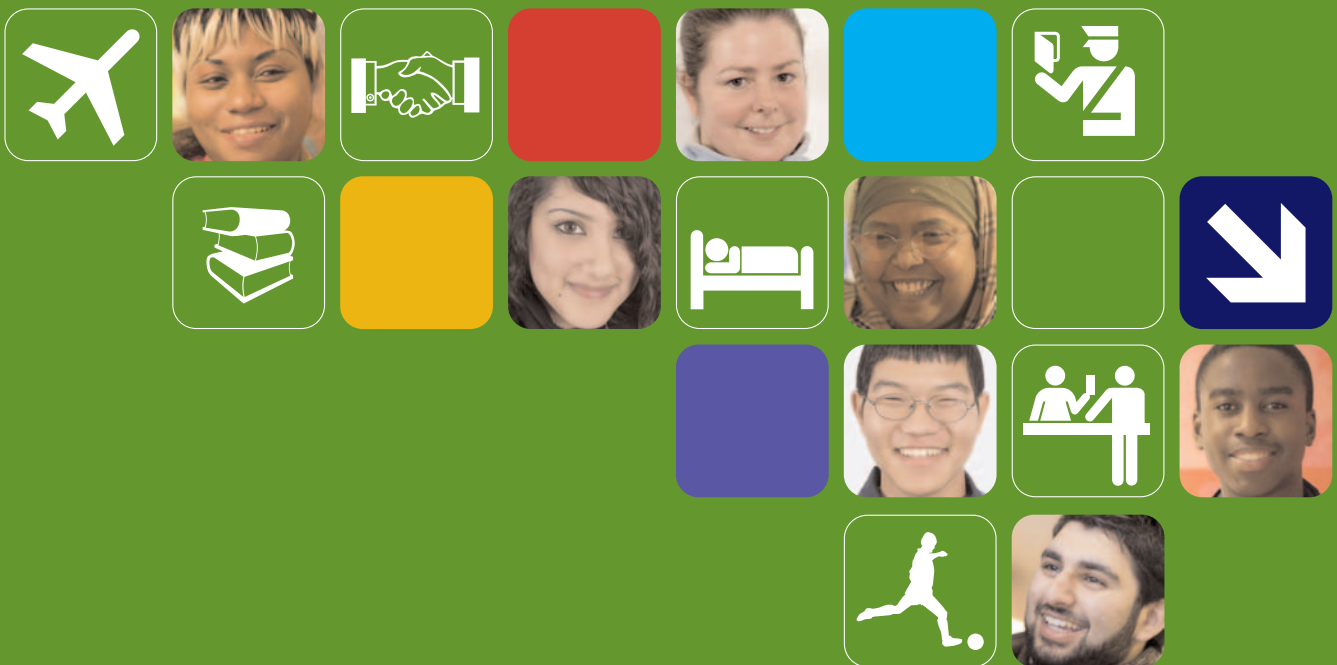


THE EXPERIENCES OF
INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN
UK FURTHER EDUCATION COLLEGES

NEW
HORIZONS

REPORT OF THE UKCOSA SURVEY



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In association with the Association of Colleges,
the Association of Scotland's Colleges,
British Council and English UK



FOREWORD



Geoff Pine,
Principal,
Greenwich Community College

International students in UK colleges are a small but important group. Their diversity is striking – 641 students from 88 different countries responded to the UKCOSA survey, some under 18, others over 40, on a diverse range of courses, at colleges across the UK. Yet, despite this diversity of characteristics, a strong common experience emerges from the report: students improving their future life chances by gaining new skills and qualifications, improving their English in particular, developing their independence and experiencing, perhaps for the first time, a truly international and multicultural environment.

There is much in this report of which the sector can be proud. International students show a high degree of satisfaction with studying in UK colleges, on a par with the satisfaction shown by their peers in our higher education institutions. They rate extremely positively the support from teaching staff and advice services. They appreciate the particular strengths of UK further education in offering skills-based practical training. Those in host families are particularly appreciative of the warm welcome they receive.

Nevertheless, in a competitive international market place, we cannot afford to be complacent, and the report also identifies areas where colleges can give themselves a competitive advantage: helping students develop their employability by securing appropriate part-time work while studying; helping students better budget and manage their money; offering improved social opportunities and facilitating contact with UK students and other locals.

Government and national agencies, too, have their role to play in removing unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles, and ensuring the “official welcome” balances compliance with customer service. The report identifies a number of areas for action.

In the last couple of years, the sector has demonstrated the priority it gives to the quality of the international student experience, by the introduction of the Association of College’s Charter of Excellence in International Education and Training in England, and the International Student Recruitment and Support Good Practice Guidelines in Scotland. These provide frameworks against which colleges can continue to benchmark themselves, particularly in the light of data from this report.

It is also timely that this report appears just as work is beginning on the second phase of the Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education (PMI), allowing the findings and subsequent discussions in the sector to influence development of the PMI, and in particular the strand focused on the student experience. We hope that this “New Horizons” report will provide a useful starting point for colleges collectively and individually to reflect on and share best practice, for government, regional and national agencies to reflect on their roles, and for all players to ensure the UK continues to extend the warmest possible welcome to international students.



FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

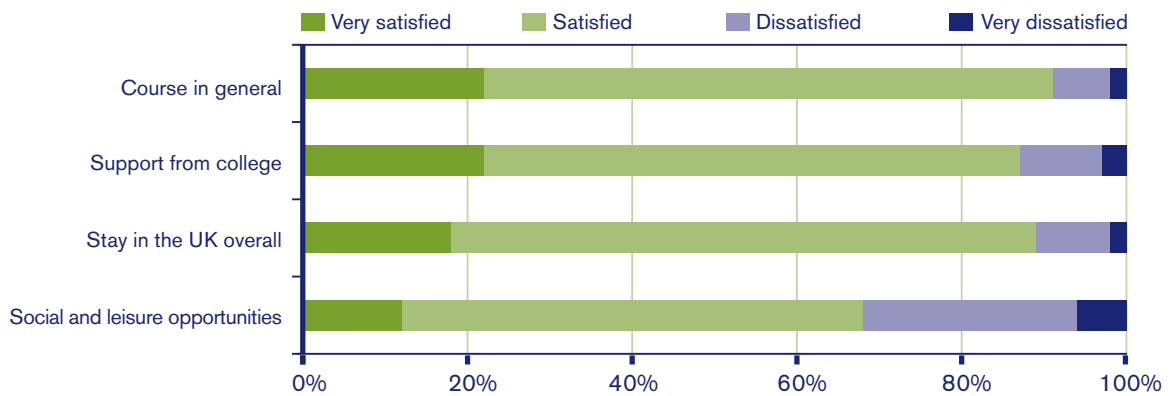
UKCOSA, in association with the British Council, the Association of Colleges, the Association of Scotland's Colleges and English UK, decided to undertake a survey of international students in UK further education, to improve our knowledge of students' aims, expectations and experiences. It is hoped that the outcomes will help colleges to identify their strengths and tackle areas with scope for development, and will help government and national agencies to identify areas where they can make a difference. The survey was completed by 641 international (non-UK) students on a range of courses at 25 FE colleges in Scotland, England and Wales, and provides the first national data of this kind.

"I really love the course I am doing and especially the teachers who are friendly, helpful, enthusiastic and caring. My teachers have encouraged me a lot in my course and in my results."

OVERALL IMPRESSIONS

In general there was a high level of satisfaction with the experience of studying in the UK. 88% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with their course. 80% of students were satisfied or very satisfied with the support they received from the college. Levels of satisfaction with social and leisure opportunities were noticeably lower, with only 59% being satisfied or very satisfied with these. In terms of their stay in the UK overall, 82% of students were satisfied or very satisfied.

Satisfaction with aspects of stay in the UK





THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Students showed a high level of satisfaction with their learning experience, with 88% describing themselves as satisfied or very satisfied with their course in general, on a par with the 87% satisfaction level found in UKCOSA's survey of students in higher education (UKCOSA, 2004). Support from teachers was very highly rated, and generated positive comments from students, as did the nature and quality of the UK's education system. However, almost one in three rated the cost of the course "Worse than expected".

Whether they were taking English courses or not, learning English was a key factor in students' decision to come to the UK, and a highly rated part of their experience. The opportunities for using English outside the classroom, although not always as plentiful as desired, were clearly of great importance to students, who saw English as a key skill for future job prospects and quality of life.

Students' initial interest seemed to be more about getting experience of living in a foreign country (38%) than experiencing British culture in particular (28%). However, when asked about the best aspects of their time in the UK, 22% mentioned British culture, tradition and lifestyles.

19% of students mentioned unprompted the benefits of meeting people from many different cultures and countries. It seems colleges should note this as a positive characteristic to promote to prospective students, either in terms of their college, their locality, or both.

Many students focused on the progress they had made in their own personal development, in terms of independence and broadmindedness. Although "Becoming more independent" was not students' main focus in coming to the UK, 29% agreed that it was one of the things they had aimed to get from their stay and 12% specifically mentioned it as one of the best aspects of their stay.

"The practical approach to most of the concepts that you study in class. The student/lecturer relationship is awesome. The best thing about studying in the UK is that I can have more practices than in my home country not just theories."

"The main reason I am here is to improve my English and make my life easier for me and my children in the future. With good English I can find better job."

"Experiencing a new culture. Freedom. I think UK is one of the most free countries. Experiencing the advancement in technology. Experience living with different races."

"My view is widened, so has my knowledge."



STUDENT SERVICES: MEETING PRACTICAL NEEDS

“I feel pleased and unworried in the UK. Whenever I asked for help everyone was helpful and close to me. I never felt loneliness either at the college or at my house.”

“I get all the support needed from the International Student Office.”

Accommodation and security were of concern pre-arrival, and both before arrival and in the first few weeks of their stay students' main worries were the use of English (both social and academic), homesickness, food and mixing with home students. Students' concerns about these aspects decreased to a great extent once they were further into their stay. Finance and part-time work remained a prominent concern throughout students' stay, and visa and immigration issues rose in prominence towards the end of the academic year.

The main sources of information students used before coming to the UK were the college's website (42%) or prospectus (33%). Agents were used by 26%.

When students received information from the college, they were generally satisfied with it – over 90% of students who received information about applying to the college, living and studying in the UK, what to do on arrival and immigration issues, found it helpful. Satisfaction was slightly lower with information about accommodation and fees and costs of living, although still 80% or over. 15% or more students said they had not received information on these topics.

The support services which students were most aware of, and made most use of were college advice services such as the international office or student services. Language and study skills courses and social activities organised by the college were also well used. Levels of awareness of accommodation offices and careers advisers were marginally lower, and lowest of all was awareness of orientation programmes. Students on English language courses were least likely to know whether an orientation programme was offered.

Among students who had used support services, levels of satisfaction with advice services were exceptionally high, with 94% of students rating them as “Helpful” or “Very helpful” – 51% of whom rated them “Very helpful”. Satisfaction with orientation programmes was almost as high. Students' associations and accommodation services were rated slightly less highly.



ACCOMMODATION

Students were generally happy with their accommodation with respect to ease of travel to college (71%), quality (72%), warmth and comfort (74%), but only 49% agreed that the cost was reasonable.

“I like living with a host family because it helps me to experience UK culture.”

A large number of students (42%) made their own accommodation arrangements without asking for help. 21% were placed in homestays on a long-term basis, 14% were put in temporary accommodation with a homestay or in a hotel while 9% were given places in a hall of residence and another 9% were given help finding somewhere in the private sector. A very small number (2%) said they asked for help with accommodation but didn't receive any.

81% of students in homestay accommodation agreed that their hosts were friendly and welcoming, and students who went into long-term placements with homestays when they arrived were more satisfied generally with their accommodation than those in halls of residence (80% versus 66%).

21% of students were unhappy with the accommodation they had when they first arrived, while only 8% were dissatisfied with their current accommodation. One third of students said they had had to move at least once to find suitable accommodation.



SOCIAL AND LEISURE ISSUES

Over 50% of respondents indicated that social activities were available and they had used them, but 20% were not satisfied with what they had been offered and 9% of respondents raised the issue of improved social opportunities in the open section of the questionnaire. A significant minority of students (37%) rated the opportunities to meet UK students at college as “Worse than expected”, 24% of students found the social activities and trips organised by the college “Worse than expected”, and 31% found the opportunities for sport, music, drama and similar activities failing to meet expectations.

“[It would have improved my experience] if I had got to know more British people my age.”

A key finding from the open comments was that meeting more British students and/or British people was one of the two things students said would most improve their experience, on a par with the related issue of improving their English language (each mentioned by 11% of students). The survey found that respondents were more likely to mix with their co-nationals and with other international students than with UK students or other local British people – only 27% of students included UK students and locals among the category of people they mixed with most often.

There was a perception amongst the respondents that it was hard to get to know British students, although only a small proportion disagreed with the statement that UK students were friendly once one got to know them. Respondents tended to agree that the UK was a welcoming and tolerant society.



VISAS AND IMMIGRATION

Two thirds of students who required a visa found applying for one easy and straightforward, but 18% found it a lengthy and difficult process even though their first application was eventually successful, 8% were initially refused but received a visa on a second application and 5% received one after appealing their initial refusal.

31% of students said they had had to renew their leave to remain since being in the UK. A third of those who extended their leave found the process slow and/or difficult.

Students were asked whether the increases in visa and leave to remain extension charges would affect their decision to study in the UK in the future. 10% said they would definitely not study in the UK in future if faced with these extra costs, and a further 35% said they would look at other destinations if the charges were lower there.

“Government should understand the problems rather than just minting money from us.”



PART-TIME WORK

More than half of students had looked for work, with 20% having looked for but not found a job and 33% having found part-time work. 28% of respondents said the work was relevant to their future careers. 77% said that the work had helped them improve their English.

While a similar proportion of EU and non-EU students had looked for work, non-EU students were twice as likely to say that they had faced difficulties in finding work as a result of being international students.

Students reported that the most common reason for difficulties in finding work was being told that they couldn't work until they had obtained a National Insurance number. This incorrect belief among employers was compounded by the difficulties of obtaining one: 21% said that it had taken more than six weeks to get one, and 6% had not managed to get one at all.

Other difficulties included employers being unsure about their right to work (30% said), or citing the student's level of English as a difficulty (27%). Some difficulties for students were similar to those faced by UK students, including a lack of jobs in a particular place, students' own lack of experience, employers wanting someone longer time or full-time and the difficulty fitting in work around studies. However, a particular issue for international students was employers' and agencies' unfamiliarity with other countries' systems: they were either unwilling or unable, according to some students, to evaluate foreign qualifications and overseas experience. A few respondents wrote of discrimination or lack of trust.

Students worked an average of 16 hours per week. The average for EU students who were not constrained by a limit on their hours was 22 hours per week.

“Help us more about getting a job and National Insurance number.”



About half of students who looked for work sought help from their college. Students who were unsuccessful in their search were even more likely to seek help (61% did), but their level of satisfaction with the help available was low (two-thirds were dissatisfied with the help received), and even among students who successfully found work and sought help from the college to do so, there was only marginally more satisfaction with the help the college provided.



“If the cost of tuition was less, it would be a lot easier for me to study. Tuition fees is about what I earn annually, so it really is difficult to study because I have to work a lot.”

FINANCIAL ISSUES

The majority of students were self-funding, with 69% having their fees paid by their families and 20% paying their own. Only 5% had fees covered by a government scholarship and 4% by an employer. 3% received some form of discount or scholarship from their college. The pattern for living costs was similar with 72% receiving funding towards these from their families, 31% contributing to them from their own resources, government scholarships contributing towards them in 3% of cases and employers in 2% of cases.

A third of students reported financial problems as a result of the cost of living being higher than they had budgeted for, 19% because fees were higher than they had budgeted for and another 19% having expected to find jobs but not been able to. 16% of respondents were affected by exchange rate fluctuations, 16% were hit by unexpectedly high costs of visa applications and extensions and 5% of students had difficulty when money from family and sponsors failed to materialise. Just over a third of students said they had had enough money to live on.

Students' comments revealed a recurrent theme of surprise at the actual costs of living and studying in the UK, although for some the real problem seems to have been money management.

Students rarely had much cushion against unexpected difficulties: 53% had no form of insurance, only 30% had medical insurance, 14% had travel insurance and 11% had personal possessions insurance.

Half the students questioned said that opening a bank account had been easy or very easy, but 20% found it difficult, 17% found it very difficult and 2% had not been able to. Only 9% of students had not tried to open a bank account. The main reasons for any difficulties were difficulties in providing the documents requested (22%) and difficulty providing proof of address (19%). 11% of students reported that they were required to provide too large a deposit, and 11% were told their courses were too short to be able to open an account.



EXPECTATIONS AND REALITIES: WHETHER STUDENTS GOT WHAT THEY CAME FOR

***“I dreamt of an experience
before coming to England and
it is beyond my expectations.
This is a year in which I realise
all my dreams and just enjoy
every second!”***

One of students' main reasons for choosing the UK was the quality of the UK's education system in general (56%). Since 88% of students were satisfied with their course, it appears that the sector is delivering the quality expected.

Wanting to learn British English (51%) was another key reason for choosing the UK, and students also said one of their main aims in coming to the UK was to improve their English (75%). Although the desire to improve their English was strongest among EFL students (90%), it remained a significant factor for all students, half to three quarters of all other students still quoting it as a reason for studying.

Again, the data suggests that students were achieving their objectives: respondents rated improving their English as the best thing about their UK experience, followed by experiencing British culture and lifestyles, and mixing with people from other cultures. However, having further opportunities to use and improve their English was also top of students' list of what would have improved their experience, suggesting there is still scope for further improvement.

Choice of college was most frequently driven by personal recommendations (43%), the courses offered (34%) and location within the UK (22%). Again, the levels of satisfaction with course provision and support from the college indicated that students' choice of college was delivering well.

The most common intention after the current course was further study in the UK (59%), compared to only 9% intending to study in another country. 24% of respondents planned to work in their home country and 11% hoped to work in the UK. We have no data to indicate how many of the students who were preparing for further study were successful in progressing, nor how many successfully found work; these might be useful areas for further research.

At the time of the questionnaire, students rated developing more independence as highly as they rated getting a qualification, despite the former having been less of a priority on entry. This suggests that after the experience of studying abroad students see a wider range of benefits than they did when they started out. New horizons have indeed opened for them.

RECOMMENDATIONS

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NATIONAL AGENCIES

- **The LSC, SFEFC, Fforwm and DENI** should make the domicile field in the student record mandatory, in order to provide reliable national level data about international students in UK FE.
- **UKvisas** should address the problems encountered by one third of students in obtaining visas (18% found it a lengthy and difficult process even though their first application was eventually successful, 8% were initially refused but received a visa on a second application and 5% received one after appealing their initial refusal). They should also review whether visas are issued for appropriate periods of time, given that 31% of respondents had to renew their leave to remain during their time in the UK.
- **The Government** should reconsider the proposed removal of appeal rights for visa applicants in the light of the finding that 5% of our sample received a visa only after appeal. Johnes (2004) estimated overseas tuition fee income to FE institutions (excluding EFL) at £38.9m and other related export earnings at £331.5m. 5% fewer students could therefore potentially represent £18.5m in lost earnings to the UK.
- **The Home Office** should, when reviewing charges for leave to remain applications, take account of the fact that
 - 31% of students said they had had to renew their leave to remain since being in the UK (a third of whom found the process slow and/or difficult).
 - 10% said they would definitely not study in the UK in future if faced with the increased visa and extension extra charges, and a further 35% said they would look at other destinations if the charges were lower there. Students from East Asia were most likely to be put off by the thought of higher charges – 13% said “Definitely not” and 45% “Maybe not” to paying higher charges.
- **Government** should address the problems faced by international students seeking work with regard to obtaining National Insurance numbers, difficulties with employers over recognition of foreign qualifications and experience, understanding of students’ permission to work, and perceived discrimination.
- **British Council** should make use of the positive feedback from students about teaching and learning styles as a unique selling point of UK FE, and the potential for direct quotes from students to send a powerful message in students’ own words about student-centred learning. They help to convey the satisfaction students feel when theory and practical work are well integrated and taught.
- **UKCOSA, British Council and others** should ensure future questionnaires include questions about extent to which students have met their goal of improving their English.
- **UKCOSA and British Council** should aim to make realistic and comprehensive information about cost of living and tuition fees more easily available to students.
- **Further research should be undertaken** to test how many students achieved their aims of further study or work, to measure the extent to which their UK FE experience was delivering what was intended.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGES

- Ensure **ongoing orientation** continues over the period of the student's stay, with a changing focus e.g. continuing finance/budgeting advice, finding part-time work, visa and immigration issues.
- Explore ways of ensuring all students receive **comprehensive pre-arrival information**.
- Improve **information about tuition and living costs**, and manage students' expectations about these; help students with budgeting and managing money; and put in place hardship funds to help when students have been hit by hardship caused by factors which could not have been foreseen.
- Provide information to students about **medical, travel and personal possessions insurance**, and ensure students are aware of the limits of NHS provision.
- Consider how best to manage students' expectations about the **cost and quality of accommodation**, including temporary arrangements on first arrival, provide flexibility where possible and advice and support for students wishing to change.
- Increase **awareness of accommodation offices, careers advisers and orientation programmes**. Explore whether students' experience of students' associations and accommodation services can be improved.
- **Improve social activities** and trips and opportunities for sport (in particular), music, drama and similar activities including consideration of budgetary implications, or manage expectations about what colleges are resourced to offer.
- **Improve opportunities to meet UK students and locals**, especially for students not in classes with UK students, taking this as part of the learning experience rather than a purely social activity. The sector might make use of pilot schemes to explore the effectiveness of a range of models.
- Take account of the role of both designated support staff and teaching staff in providing support, and the importance of a **whole-staff approach to welcoming and keeping international students**. Colleges should therefore ensure there are appropriate opportunities for staff development for all those in contact with international students, as well as encouraging the sharing of creative approaches to teaching and learning.
- Ensure the **availability of specialist staff and continuity of service**, in order to maintain the high levels of satisfaction with support services recorded in this survey. Note that recruiting international students requires long-term commitment to building relationships with partners and establishing a reputation built on satisfied former students, and act to address the turbulence in the sector which frequently results in the loss of expertise.
- Provide more advice for international students and **help with finding part-time work**, and other ways of helping improve their employability. Colleges should explore ways of improving employer awareness of the skills brought by international students.
- Note the problems students encountered in trying to open **bank accounts** (difficulties in providing the documents requested, proof of address, size of deposit, length of course) and work with local banks to ensure awareness of BBA guidelines, and with students to brief them on what their options are and what will be required.
- Note as **selling points** the multicultural nature of their campuses and the opportunities for developing independence and self-confidence. Also to note the vital role of personal recommendations (43%), and concentrate on supporting their current students as the best way to generate positive word of mouth.
- Conduct **regular research into international student satisfaction** within their own colleges to inform policy and practice.





UKCOSA

The Council
for International
Education

UKCOSA: The Council for International Education is the national advisory body serving the interests of international students in the UK and those who work with them. It does so through research, publications and guidance notes, a national training programme, dedicated advice lines for students and advisers and liaison and advocacy with institutions, agencies and government.

Its members include all UK universities, those colleges which are active internationally and a range of specialist and representative bodies.

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