

Report on the second PMI Student Experience Summit, 19-20 February, 2009, Cumberland Lodge

Cumberland Lodge at the heart of Windsor Great Park made a fitting location for the second UKCISA summit on the international student experience.

The historic house has been a place for quiet reflection since 1947 when King George VI handed its use over to an education charity. In the post war years it was hoped that affording lecturers and students the quiet and space to bring critical judgement to bear on the great issues of the day would help prevent another rise of fascism.

More than 60 years on, as delegates from universities, colleges and associations countrywide gathered at the Lodge for the two day summit on the student experience aspects of the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI), the world was once again facing a period of economic uncertainty. The conference took place amid widespread concern over the impact on international students of the campaign to protect "British jobs for British workers" and the introduction of Tier 4 of the Points Based System (PBS).

Despite the success of the PMI, now in its second phase, and the many accounts given during the summit of innovative measures to improve the already high satisfaction ratings of students, there was also clear concern over the "chaotic" introduction of the PBS alongside other immigration measures, such as identity cards, biometric testing and continued police registration.

Baroness Usha Prashar, President of UKCISA, said she knew there were serious concerns about the impact of the PBS on international students which she was raising in Westminster. "It is very important that students leave this country with a positive view of it and I am here to listen to your deliberations," she told the 50 delegates, who included senior academics, directors of international offices and recruitment managers.

The issue was central to the conference which heard of the plight of students forced to travel long distances for the new biometric tests in order to renew their visas. One made the journey all the way from Northern Ireland to Croydon in Surrey, only to find the office shut because of the snow, the meeting heard.

But the first speaker lightened the mood with a presentation of the British Council's new publicity campaign to persuade students that all would turn out well in the end. Helen Clews, the Council's adviser on external relations and immigration, outlined the message going out to staff. "From April 2009 it will be easier and quicker, simpler, safer and fairer...OK, it's gone up to £145 but this is the first increase in over five years and includes biometrics! It represents best value for money – you are not going to have to reapply. Remember, you are just

two steps away from gaining 40 points and a visa issued in one or two days,” she said.

Behind the presentation was a serious point, she explained. While the British Council worked behind the scenes to help iron out the difficulties, its 7,000 staff in 110 countries needed to stress the positives or risk losing potential students to institutions in other countries.

Dominic Scott, UKCISA’s chief executive who chaired the summit, stressed the need to be positive and not get lost in the problems: “We are not against the Points Based System. We are not against immigration controls. But we can’t ignore the fact that we have multiple systems which have been randomly introduced at different times now coming together and causing chaos for the customer,” he said.

The difference between perception and reality developed as a theme of the summit as delegates debated student satisfaction, the careers services and the nature of teaching and learning. Integration was explored, both in relation to the provision of student services and the need to ensure that learners from overseas had opportunities to mix academically and socially with home students and to make links with the wider community.

Delegates agreed that they had not just a professional responsibility, but also a moral duty at a time of recession and credit crunch to look after and stand by their international students.

Motivation, perception and reality

The first thing that Will Archer did when he reached Manchester station on his way to a recent conference was turn the wrong way. The hotel was not on his satellite navigation system so he rang the reception desk, which sent him in the wrong direction. What has this got to do with the student experience? “By the time I got to my room it didn’t matter what it was like, or what the bar was like. I found 14 things wrong before I left,” Mr Archer, the director of The International Graduate Insight Group (i-Graduate) told delegates.

The hotel could have been the best in Britain but his perception of it was coloured by the difficult arrival. “The student’s perception of their time at a UK institution is the reality we have to work with,” he said. “However good we know our institution is, however unfair we think the comments, we have to work with the perception. If the perception is poor then you either have to change the reality or the way people perceive it.”

Not every problem can be solved, but the way it is addressed makes all the difference, said Mr Archer, whose company tracks student perceptions and expectations on behalf of 70 universities using the International Student

Barometer. He related how a coach-load of students from America turned up at a UK university on a Sunday evening when everything was closed. The first person they approached as the coach drove away said "Sorry, you'll have to come back at eight in the morning." But the porters took pity on the students, took them into the gatehouse and put the kettle on while they rang round to find bed and breakfast accommodation. Six months later, when asked about their experience at the university, every one of that group remembered how they had been helped that first night. "It's about a mind set and there are little things we can do which will make a big difference," he said.

Delegates wanted to know about the Barometer. How satisfied are international students with UK institutions? The good news is that 76% would recommend their experience to others but further scrutiny of the responses raises some important questions, he said. Of the 76% only 26% were "ambassadors" who said they would actively recommend their institution. The other 50% said they would recommend, but only if asked. It is possible to work out the "net promoter score" of an institution by taking the ambassadors and deducting from them the students who say they definitely would not recommend in order to produce a positive or negative rating, he said. But he emphasised that one unhappy student can tell thousands with the click of a mouse, so colleges and universities must focus their attention on addressing negative perceptions.

Tony Millns, chief executive of English UK Ltd, the language teaching association, wanted to know how institutions could harness the positivity of their ambassadors. "Do we ask them for a reference? Or is there a more sophisticated way of doing it?"

Different institutions have different strategies said Mr Archer. "What the students say is beyond your control but I think there could be more done with that positive group." Around 85% of students surveyed say they would be happy to answer more questions. "For some universities, we have contacted the ones who would recommend the experience and said "the university loved your comments. Would you re-connect through their website and tell your story so others can learn from it?"

Sometimes the things that make the most impression are the easiest to get right. For the vast majority of students the most important part of the living experience is ease of internet access, which is just as well as it gets one of the highest satisfaction ratings. "You will be pleased to hear that satisfaction is high with the English spoken by academic staff in England. But satisfaction is slightly higher with the English spoken by academic staff in Scotland, and higher still in Holland," he said to laughter.

Generally, students in 2007/08 were more positive across the board than those in the previous year. The changes were small but statistically significant, he told delegates. There was a huge jump in concern over accommodation costs in

2006/07 but it was significantly down in 2008. Around 30% said they used the careers service, but 28% didn't even know where it was.

He ended on a note of caution: When asked whether or not they were satisfied overall with their experience of UK education, more than four in five said they were but there were big differences between nationalities with some significantly less satisfied than others. In some areas of the world a significant proportion of students were indicating that they had not got what they had wanted and would not recommend the experience.

UK Education Plc – the positives and the negatives

The most satisfied students are usually those who are engaged with their learning, according to Prof Philip Garrahan, Pro Vice-Chancellor of Sheffield Hallam University, who chaired a focus group on teaching and learning.

So, in the spirit of engagement, it was time for the 50 delegates to work in groups and identify the negative and positive aspects of studying in the UK. These were the main points they chose to highlight:

Positives

- The high standard of teaching with its culture of continuous improvement and engagement with each student
- Career advice
- Student support services
- High quality courses completed in a relatively short time
- A range of innovative courses to meet students' needs and assist their employability
- A secure environment
- The British Council
- An international experience

Negatives

- Insufficient integration between home and international students
- Not enough early career advice
- Not very good at embedding internationalisation across the curriculum
- A weak customer service model
- The immigration juggernaut
- Not starting where the students are - expecting them to fit in with the way teaching and learning is done here
- Insufficient, regular performance feedback
- Balkanisation of service delivery
- Lack of scholarship provision

There was broad agreement over most of the points selected by the delegates but the third negative stirred Prof Garrahan into an appeal for a "self-denying

ordinance” over the use of the concept of “internationalisation” of the curriculum. “Can I enlist you to the ‘banning the i-word’ party which seeks to ban the concept because there is no understanding of what it means. The meaning of the word varies from researcher to researcher,” he said.

Asked what was meant by a weak customer service model, Paul Rossi, the Head of Advice and Guidance at the University of the Arts, described it as: “Go to that desk over there and then go to the building down the road on the left and then come and see me before five, but not at lunchtime.”

Lack of integration of student services is a problem in some institutions said Mike Winter, the Director of International Affairs at the Institute of Education. “Balkanisation of service delivery is a serious problem. If you haven’t got a one-stop-shop it is confusing for students being sent from pillar to post. If you are not delivering together, then you are not planning together which means there could be a deeper problem.”

Views differed as to whether it was better to offer services for home and international students in the same place or at a dedicated international centre. But delegates agreed that more effort was needed to help students from overseas integrate with home students and the local community so they could go home with an experience of what it was like to live in the UK and, hopefully, with friends for life.

Delegates were concerned at the lack of scholarship and hardship funds to help international students, especially considering the amount of money they were bringing to the institutions. American institutions did it much better.

The omission of scholarship provision is a UK weakness, agreed Mr Scott. “This is the time to demonstrate that we understand financial problems are hitting everybody and we are going to have to put some additional resources into it for all sorts of reasons.”

Managing expectations: employment v. employability

Thoughts turned to the use of terminology. Using the word “international” to refer to students from many different countries can be misleading and even harmful if it persuades people to treat them as a homogeneous group, delegates agreed as they exchanged their experiences. One told how it was not uncommon for students from India to turn up without any accommodation arranged. On the other hand, those coming from the USA very often expected to have everything sorted out and waiting for them, even down to their dietary requirements.

Though students from most countries adapted easily to the interactive learning style in the UK and the emphasis on self-study, students from places with a

formal knowledge transfer system could find it difficult and needed support, said delegates.

Good quality, pre-arrival information is essential, delegates agreed, though sometimes too much could overburden and confuse the student. There was a danger of raising false expectations through marketing hype, they agreed; of over-promising and under-delivering.

Prof Garrahan called for more clarity in the use of language. Very often international students not only expect to be able to take advantage of the permissions to work but also expect that you will find them a job, and that it will be a graduate level job, he said. "There is a distinction between employment and employability but the words are bandied about as if they were the same thing. Many international students come here not just for a degree but for work experience that is related to their degrees and we need to address this so they don't arrive with false expectations," he said.

When institutions promise that a course will improve employability, students see the first six letters and think the word ends in "ment" said Fiona Drew, Sheffield Hallam's Head of International Academic Development. "We have to tell them that, actually, we don't mean getting you a job, we mean helping you find one which is right for you."

Permission to work after the end of a course had created the idea that employers would provide a "finishing school" for graduates. Some students wanted to stay to earn money so they could repay their debts more quickly than they could in their own countries while others were more interested in using work in the UK to improve their employability on their return home.

Data provided by Margaret Dane, the Chief Executive of the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS), suggested the employment picture in the UK is bleak, but not appalling. Not surprisingly, the number of jobs in banking, investment and construction are plummeting, but some sectors are actually predicting more vacancies. A recent survey by the Association of Graduate Recruiters suggested jobs in fast moving consumer goods would be up by 13%, engineering by 8% and opportunities to join the public sector by 3% over the next year.

Despite these growth areas, finding work for students was going to get more difficult during the economic downturn, she warned, making it even more important to foster links with local employers who were sometimes put off by their perception of legal difficulties and red tape over the employment of non UK nationals.

Asked whether the Fresh Talent: Working in Scotland scheme – now part of Post Study Work – had resulted in the employment of more international students, Ms

Dane said many students had benefited from it, but the evaluation of the project had been “gloomy news” because 60% of those who found employment were in casual work with very little relevance to their educational backgrounds. One of the weaknesses of the scheme was that the leave to remain lasted for two years, rather than the three it took to qualify in many chartered professions. In any event, the scheme was prompted by the desire to counter the falling population when one of the reasons it was falling was the lack of employment. “If you bring in more people and there aren’t jobs for them, you don’t have to be a rocket scientist to see it is not going to work perfectly,” she said.

If the UK couldn’t always satisfy students’ desire to get relevant work experience then perhaps more could be done to find information about opportunities in the students’ home countries, she suggested. Many of them had lost contacts and up-to-date information about the jobs market back home. Ms Dane believed a lot could be learned from case studies of successful initiatives. Brunel University’s “Going Global” online initiative focussed on employment for international students at home and abroad, including country-specific information on careers, overseas jobs and an alumni network keeping students up to date with developments in the economy and job market in their home countries.

Alumni can be a good source of information, work experience opportunities and even jobs, she said. A PMI2 project being run by AGCAS, the Higher Education Careers Services Unit (HECSU) and the National Association of Student Employment Services (NASES) is setting up an employer database for jobs abroad online. Opportunities for staff training and development are being provided specifically for those involved in advising international students.

PMI – Not just about numbers

The second phase of PMI launched in 2006 has an ambitious five year target of attracting a further 70,000 international students to higher education in the UK and an additional 30,000 into further education. It also seeks to double the number of countries sending more than 10,000 students to the UK.

But the strategy is not just about numbers, Celia Partridge, UKCISA’s PMI Projects Development Manager told delegates. Projects have been put in place aimed at improving the overall quality of all aspects of the international student experience from first enquiry to graduation and beyond.

UKCISA co-ordinates the student experience strand of the PMI and manages a range of associated projects and events. It plays a role in identifying and promulgating good practice which has a direct impact on the students. Recent initiatives include the *International Student Calculator* (www.studentcalculator.org.uk) to help with financial planning and *Prepare for Success* (prepareforsuccess.org.uk), a website developed by the University of Southampton to help students prepare for study in the UK before they arrive.

The Points Based System et al: A zigzagging juggernaut

The Tier 4 regulations do not come into force for new students until the end of March but delegates said those already here were struggling to renew their visas because of the disorganised way in which the new requirements have been introduced.

It was important to distinguish between the Points Based System and the other immigration measures which had been tacked onto it, said one delegate, who described the new entry rules as “several juggernauts going in different directions”. Sadly, its introduction had coincided with biometric testing, identity cards, continued police registration and changes to the categories of workers allowed into the country, she said.

The point was taken up by Mr Millns. “The original intentions of the Points Based System were fine and good. But as time goes on a bureaucratic accretion has made it impossible to deal with. As civil servants have bored down and down into the policy and put even more onerous requirements on institutions, what started out as quite a desirable policy has become something where words such as juggernaut are perfectly understandable.” A system which might have helped international students was in danger of becoming a huge burden for them as it became tangled up with policies on immigration, he said.

Confusing messages and requirements from different government departments was putting a huge burden on student support within the institutions, said delegates. “It’s taking a whole raft of staff time to help students through it. It’s bad enough for one student but when you get a wife and five children as well, just think of the amounts of evidence and bits of paper that have to be accumulated.”

Mr Rossi said university staff were doing the work of the immigration service. “Could you check my photos again because the last ones were rejected because the background wasn’t grey enough? It’s taking us away from dealing with the things we are employed to do but you can’t turn them down because the students have nowhere else to turn.”

Ms Dane said the conflict of interest between different government departments was a huge problem because decisions made by one department had a huge implication on what was happening in another. Catherine Marston, policy adviser for Universities UK, said institutions were being put in a new, formal relationship with the UK Border Agency. “We are moving into a contractual relationship with UKBA, which is challenging and a huge corporate risk for institutions. We’re faced with lack of information, partial information and changing information which makes it very difficult.”

However, the introduction of Tier 4 of the PBS could have benefits, such as the requirement to record attendance and progress, said a delegate. It would help staff to identify early on those students having problems and support them, she said. The impracticality of expecting individual tutors and lecturers to know which of their students were on visas meant that institutions might have to start keeping detailed attendance records on all their students. If that happened then additional resources would be needed. "Once we know they are in difficulty, we have a duty of care to support them," said Debora Green, the Assistant Director of Student Services at the University of Sheffield.

Other issues – teaching & learning and CPD

The conference heard and debated the new plans to develop a national resource centre on teaching and learning for international students (TALIS) and the various ways in which it will support both staff and students and share information on actual and perceived barriers and challenges. Assuming the PMI Programme Board agrees the enhanced allocation when it meets in mid March, it is hoped that the centre will open – most probably in association with, and additionally supported by, the Higher Education Academy – by the summer.

Continuous Professional Development for all staff working with international students was also seen as a key priority. Prof Christine Humfrey was completing an in-depth review of current provision and future needs especially as they related to the Certificate for International Education Professionals offered by UKCISA in association with the University of Nottingham. More widely, plans were also discussed for a new qualification in the 'Management of International Activities' which, it was hoped, might be introduced in the autumn.

Conclusion

Concluding the summit, Mr Scott said it was clear that the confusing way the Points Based System was being introduced alongside a raft of other immigration measures posed a real risk to the success of the PMI. The difficulties could no longer be solved at a bureaucratic level and needed to be addressed urgently by politicians. "We need to get that message across in a constructive way."

But the summit had shown, he said, that there was a relatively extensive list of other key issues and recommendations for the future, including:

- All the aspects which had been outlined in the PMI Student Experience forward plan
- A recognition that, at a time of economic downturn, hardship and scholarship funds might need to be augmented
- Better integration of international student systems

- A renewed focus on structures and systems which encouraged and enabled better links between UK and international students – and local communities
- Even greater investment in advice and support services – and especially as the new Tier 4 regulations are introduced
- New approaches to both training & development and teaching & learning
- More important than ever for colleges and universities to track the expectations and perceptions of their international students

As the taxis wended their way through the trees and the snowdrops to collect delegates, the Lodge appeared to have worked its magic. One delegate summed up the mood: “My head is buzzing with ideas. I just hope I can keep them alive when I get back and not get bogged down by the day to day crises.”

This report was written by Liz Lightfoot, a freelance journalist and a consultant for Media FHE, the education media consultancy.