

**UK Council
for International
Student Affairs**

THE PRIME
MINISTER'S INITIATIVE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
EDUCATION

Reports of Pilot Projects
and Overseas Study Visits
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UKCISA

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Introduction

These pilot projects and overseas study visits have been funded through the student experience strand of the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI). In previous years, as demonstrated by our evaluation report (see <ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/publications_reports.php>), they have led to a range of initiatives and innovative activities which have helped to improve the experiences of international students in the UK. This year's are no exception.

The pilot project scheme offered institutions the chance to bid for up to £5,000 to encourage innovation and develop and publicise examples of best practice in international student support. The scheme is an opportunity for universities and colleges to expand or adapt services which support international students and, at the same time, contribute to national and sector policy and good practice. This year's projects cover two major themes – student support and employability.

The overseas study visits scheme offered staff who work with international students the chance to apply for up to £2,000 of funding in order to research elements of good practice in international student support in key

competitor countries. The three reports included here cover immigration, student retention and exchanges.

This year's projects and visits are showcased with the intention that other institutions may be inspired to take some of the ideas and adapt or expand what has been started for their own purposes (links to further information are included).

For space reasons, not all the reports have been included, but they can be read and downloaded in full at <www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/study_visits.php> and <www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/best_practice.php>, along with links to supporting documents and publicity materials.

Much enthusiasm and effort has gone into the projects and visits highlighted here, and thanks go to all those involved for their commitment.

The creation of web-based materials to raise awareness of mental health issues and available resources for international students

a pilot project at Lancaster University

Lancaster University recognises the immense contribution of its international student cohort, bringing diversity and vibrancy to the overall student experience. Supporting international students is a high priority for the institution. Providing that support requires awareness of cultural practices and assumptions around mental health that might impact on international students' experience of university.

Audit has revealed that non-European international students access counselling and health services less than other students but when they do attend they are often in a deeper crisis and are often brought by others. This is something that we know is a problem in other Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as it is frequently raised on the British Association of Health Services in Higher Education (BAHSHE) mailbase and at BAHSHE conferences.

Two postgraduate students were employed to undertake research which involved an online questionnaire, focus groups and an extensive research into existing materials supporting international students. The data from this research informed the creation of the subsequent 'Mindmap', which was created by Kate Lund and Mark Lochrie.

Results of research into existing provision

Although many good examples of good practice were identified, some gaps were found to exist:

- there was a distinct lack of clearly presented online resources regarding any aspect of student mental health and wellbeing (both for home and international students)
- where institutions had separate websites for mental health resources, there was nothing specific to international students, or there was an odd reference to 'home-sickness' or 'cultural differences'
- most institutions (all of the larger ones) have separate websites for general information regarding international students; these





- websites, however did not mention ‘mental health’ or ‘wellbeing’
- most of the information which was placed under sections such as ‘problems you may encounter’ focused almost exclusively on finance, language and certain cultural points, ie transport, cuisine, religion
- in contrast to the extensive (and important) mention of visas and immigration on all of these websites, there is a lack of information on lifestyle issues such as health and wellbeing
- some universities and almost all of the institutions located in major cities have created profiles on social networking websites such as Facebook
- other media such as video, aimed specifically at international students, have been used by a few institutions

Themes arising from the resources from non-UK higher education institutions

- there is a wealth of information addressing international students from Australian and New Zealand institutions; again, however this information is geared toward

- prospective students and addresses mostly the issues around visas and finance
- in general, US and Canadian institutions had good websites dealing with general student mental health; these websites reflect the professional look of most North American based universities. The University of Connecticut has a good example, link: <<http://www.counseling.uconn.edu/index.html>>
- Harvard University has a particularly good ‘symptom checker’ application on their student health services website, it covers physical as well as mental illness, link: <www.healthwise.net/hu/Content/CustDocument.aspx?XML=STUB.XML&XSL=STUB.XML>

Conclusions drawn from search for information directed towards international students

- there is a lack of clear and readily available mental health advice and resources online, from HE institutions
- the information that is available makes assumptions that people will understand terms such as ‘depression’

- websites focusing on international students fail to deal appropriately with enrolled students
- the information available to the general student body can be confusing or irrelevant to international students
- clear and professional design makes a big difference
- website resources that attempt to cover too much information in one section often end up lengthy and unattractive to potential users

Focus group findings

Students represented in the focus groups came from Australia, China, Cyprus, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Poland and the USA.

Key Findings

- mental health concerns are generally still perceived as taboo and people with mental health difficulties are often stereotypically labelled as “crazy” and “disturbed”
- it is not quite clear to international students, or perhaps students generally, what exactly the Counselling Service does, what it offers and how it functions
- concern especially with the lack of



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- knowledge about how counselling works (ie what does consultation entail and how is it going to help?)
- the Counselling Service should highlight that mental health concerns are both accepted and normal, thereby normalising the topic, reducing negative stereotypes and perceptions as well as the taboo and stigma
- a few students suggested that they would find it useful if there could be an instant messaging service on the website that would enable students to contact the Counselling Service without actually having to meet someone face-to-face (in the context of shyness, embarrassment and privacy)
- the students said that they would like to see definitions of mental health concerns and explanations of symptoms
- a few students said that they would like to see a kind of self-assessment test on the website, which also gave positive results along the lines of eg “your stress level is normal” and offering reassurance
- the groups stressed that language used in counselling should be lay language, avoiding medical jargon, to facilitate understanding
- the participants said that they did not think that issues such as culture shock and homesickness fell under the category of mental health concerns. Thus, they would

not realise that these problems are issues the Counselling Service would address.

- the students thought that it would be beneficial to state that the Counselling Services are free of charge as this is not the case in all countries
- they said that they generally expected Counselling Services to be confidential as this was standard practice everywhere, but that it should be stated nevertheless

Suggestions as to how to raise awareness about the Counselling Service

- it would be helpful if counsellors could go to departments and lectures at the beginning of the academic year where they could introduce themselves briefly
- the students felt that this would indicate that the departments are endorsing the Counselling Service which would help to normalise the service as it would be openly acknowledged
- publicising the fact that the Counselling Service could help international students deal with issues such as culture shock, depression, homesickness and loneliness
- the Counselling Service should do more outreach work to contact international students and explain its role rather than relying on

- students to approach the Service
- departments could send out emails about services and events in the Counselling Service to raise awareness
- there should be clear directions to the Counselling Service, both outside and within the building as well as on the website

Students’ experiences

- only about half of the students who stated that they had experienced a mental health difficulty had sought professional help
- a majority of students are confident that seeking professional help could lead to successful treatment of mental health concerns
- the students felt that a lack of knowledge about the services available and concerns about embarrassment, shame and stigma prevented international students from making contact with the Counselling Service
- the students felt that they especially face homesickness, culture shock, isolation, loneliness, academic challenges and language/ communication difficulties when they come to study in the UK
- the students stated that they would be supportive towards a friend with mental health problems but would be reluctant to seek support themselves

Developing 'Mindmap'

The research findings enabled us to brief our web designers. The focus groups had liked the BBC website and its 'Moodspa' and felt that something similar would be appealing. We therefore opted for its functionality but softened the language. We decided to call it a 'Mindmap' and thought that this would entice users to try the quiz and would lead them to other links, which they might find useful.

The technicians designed and developed an admin portal enabling adopters to edit questions, weighting, and outcomes. As we set out with the goal of rolling the 'Mindmap' out to other HEIs, this is critical so the requirement for editing links at the end of the questionnaire was factored into this specification. We avoided using geographically specific language and so hardly any input is required. Because it is a web-based resource, its upkeep costs should be minimal. An alternative/lightweight version for browsers without the use of Flash technologies (auto detection) has also been created to increase its accessibility. A Google analytics code has been integrated into the backend of the site so that the Counselling Service can monitor the statistics from visitors. Documentation

will be provided on how to use this service.

The Counselling Service website is going to be redesigned extensively over the next year with an increased focus on wellbeing. The research findings from this project and the design of the 'Mindmap' will have a considerable impact on the end product. Currently the 'Mindmap' button only sits on the Counselling home page but the plan is to embed it on the homepages of as many departments as possible by the start of the next academic year.

Our technicians have also set up Twitter and Facebook accounts for the Counselling Service and these will be used to both publicise and follow relevant agencies and University members will be invited to follow us.

Further information

'Mindmap': <www.lancs.ac.uk/sbs/counselling/mindmap.php>

'Home away from home' – a student-centred support group model and project for isolated newly arrived international students

a pilot project at the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS)

This project created a support group for new international students, facilitating student-centred development and planning of further support, and developed a collaborative plan for supporting the following year's applicants, based on feedback gained.

Beginning at the start of the academic year, a series of 10 meetings involving around 100 students were organised in order to encourage students to support each other. The sessions included small group/pair work, getting to know each other, sharing experiences,

similarities and differences and practical ideas of what could be useful/would have been helpful. During the second term, outreach to isolated students was targeted via the University 'Wellbeing Week' events and via email.

Outcomes

It was found that students experienced reduced isolation, shared both difficult and positive experiences and identified ideas for the future. Vulnerable students discovered relevant resources, information regarding professional support and

self-help ideas from peers. Settled students used their experiences to help others. A plan for a support pathway for students has been developed, drawing on students' comments as a preventative measure at the beginning of the academic year and for ongoing support, including group events and buddying. More has been learnt about the enthusiasm of international students to be involved in supporting others – itself a significant outcome.

Further information

Full report: http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/case_studies_support.php

Making connections: enhancing international students' integration with their UK peers

a pilot project at the University of East Anglia

Introduction

The aim of UEA's 'Making Connections' pilot project was to develop and evaluate ways of facilitating better social and academic integration between home, EU and international students in order both to enhance international students' academic and personal development and improve intercultural understanding across the institution. We also hoped to gain some understanding of students' behaviours and motivations in respect of intercultural communication. Concerns about cross-cultural social integration have been raised across the HE sector for some years. A particular stimulus for this project was the findings of a recent UEA research project that highlighted the significant contribution that sustained and meaningful interaction with native English speakers can make to international students' academic progress and overall HE experience.

The approach to our project was evidence-based and included qualitative, quantitative and observational research. This research helped us to understand both personal and situational barriers to and opportunities for integration, and the extent to which intercultural friendships had already been established. Students' comments and the observational research undertaken over the arrivals weekend provided ideas for activities and approaches that can help improve the initial experiences of new international and home students, and offer enhanced social opportunities for students to meet each other throughout the academic year.

Of relevance to our findings is our institutional and local/regional context. UEA is a campus-based institution with just over 12,000 full-time and 2,000 part-time students, spread across 4 Faculties. There are approximately 1800 international and 400 EU students, many concentrated in three Schools in the Social Sciences

Faculty. Over 3,500 of our students live on campus, approximately 35% of whom are international students. Over 100 different countries are represented at UEA, but 68% are from ten countries: China, United States, Nigeria, India, Egypt, Japan, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam and Russia. In the 2001 census, only 3.2% of the population of Norwich declared as being non-white, which, we believe, is relevant to the experiences of some of our international students.

Project activities

The project was led by a small group of student services staff in collaboration with an academic from the School of Education. A researcher from the latter School, who had recently been an international student himself, was employed to undertake qualitative and observational research.

Our project built on findings from a survey undertaken in January 2009 of international students' English language and academic study skills and the support and guidance offered to them at UEA. We began our PMI project by surveying international Masters and Research students via an email link to an online questionnaire. The aims were to pilot the questions for our main survey, planned for the autumn term, and to capture the views of international students who had been at UEA for at least 11 months; 98 responses were received. A rapid analysis of the results was undertaken, particularly of the responses to the open questions about respondents' interactions with UK students, the challenges of making friends, and the ways in which their experiences might be improved. These latter were used to inform the final programme for the September 2009 international students' orientation programme and home arrivals weekend.

Our researcher spent much of his time over the three days that encompassed the two-day orientation programme (Friday and Saturday) and the overlapping home arrivals

programme (Saturday and Sunday) observing students as they arrived and began to settle in and form friendships. Additionally he held focus group meetings with Resident Tutors (these provide peer support to the 3,500 students in UEA residences) and with small groups of individual students in order to solicit their views on ways of improving social integration within Residences.

Although the time between reviewing the results of our preliminary survey and the arrivals and orientation dates was very short, we were able to include in the weekend programme a few new activities designed to facilitate interaction between students.

In early November, we sent an email to all UEA students, home and international, with a link to a revised online 'Making Friends and Socialising' questionnaire, to which 1,200 responses were received. Further integration activities were included in the orientation programme for students who began courses in January (at UEA these are mostly Study Abroad and PGR students).

Sustainability

The project funding allowed us to make rapid progress in an area that is an ongoing priority for UEA: the enhancement of the international student experience. While we may not be able to continue to fund the observational research that was such a valuable aspect of this project, many of the findings will continue to have relevance for us in the future. The evidence-based approach that we have used here is embedded in our student services culture, and we will use some of the most revealing questions in future surveys of our student body.

The integration activities that we were able to pilot will be continued and added to as we develop our social programme. Some activities were undertaken at no or minimal cost; we have found that as long as costs are

kept low, many students are prepared to pay for trips and visits, so we will focus on developing further low cost or free opportunities for students. Involving students in our project has also demonstrated the enthusiasm that many have for volunteering over the arrivals period and for organising social activities. Building on this project, we are now developing mentoring and buddying projects, and training volunteers to help us offer a wider range of induction and ongoing activities.

Learning points

The most important learning point from this project for us is that if you engage students in developing your provision by asking them about their experiences and soliciting their ideas, you mine a rich vein of creativity, honesty, openness and enthusiasm. You have to be prepared not to be defensive about criticisms – you will inevitably encounter them – and you may also find that some of your own prejudices are challenged. Seeing things through the eyes of others is very edifying. This became particularly apparent to us when we read the report based on our researcher’s observations of our orientation programme and arrivals weekend. All of our work has reinforced for us the crucial importance of a good arrivals experience for our students and much of our focus has been on ensuring that we offer an excellent welcome and provide a range of opportunities for students to settle in, find their feet and meet others. Some of our responses so far include:

- critically evaluating the current arrivals process and location and exploring ways of improving these in order to enhance the students’ experience (it was particularly valuable for us to view these from our researcher’s perspective)
- providing all speakers involved in the international students’ orientation with briefing notes about the audience and points to consider when presenting to newly arrived international students
- continuing to develop and promote a Facebook page for new students
- developing more activities and social events throughout the first week of the new term to create a positive experience
- delivering cultural awareness/customer care training sessions to all students helpers prior to arrival days

We piloted a number of activities designed to encourage home and international students to come together outside the academic environment.

These took place both during the arrivals period and throughout the academic year and included:

- a self-guided ‘city trail’ quiz that offered a higher prize if the winning team included home students and a mix of other nationalities. This event helped students meet each other and at the same time find out more about the city that they had come to study in
- facilitating mixed groups of students to meet for supper over the arrivals days
- setting up a Facebook group for all students remaining on campus over the Christmas break to help them make contact with each other
- running ‘games’ nights with board games, card games, other games from different countries, including the UK, in an alcohol free environment
- a ‘Go Global’ week run in collaboration with the Students’ Union
- organising a Christmas Party open to all students and their families
- organising an extended programme of trips and visits that appeal to home and international students (previously our social programme had only been advertised to international students)

While some of our research findings did partly confirm some of the stereotypical views that can be held about student groups, we were also very pleased to discover how important cross-cultural friendships are for the majority of those with whom we were in contact. For example, while perhaps not surprisingly, a much lower proportion of our home (21%) than of international/EU (41%) students said that they frequently socialise with those of other nationalities at weekends and in the evenings, 88% of international students agreed that they would like to meet more British students and 83% of home students that they would like to meet more international students. 54% of international students disagreed with the statement that ‘British students are not interested in making friends with international students’ and 73% of home students disagreed that international students are not interested in making friends with home students. Ongoing detailed analysis of research results is helping us to tease

out the key barriers to intercultural interaction so that we can make further progress in this area.

We have been concerned for some time about the shortage of alcohol-free social space available on our campus and have been looking for ways to increase opportunities for socialisation in environments that are not dominated by alcohol. While it was not a surprise to discover that 70% of international students agreed with the statement ‘UK students spend too much of their social life drinking alcohol’, more surprising was that so did 54% of the home students who responded to our survey. This finding has strengthened our resolve to pursue this matter vigorously.

Our research also highlighted clear differences in the behaviours and views of EU and international students, suggesting that different strategies and activities might need to be developed to appeal to different student groups. Survey results highlighted the potential value of promoting activities such as participation in students’ union clubs and societies and volunteering, both of which relatively few international students take part in. For many of the international students who had volunteered, this appears to have been an important way for them to make friends.

Although some of the findings of this project are specific to UEA, we expect that the methodology and at least some of the actions that we have taken as a result of our research will have very broad relevance to the sector.

Further information

<www.uea.ac.uk/services/students/International>

The international student experience – more than just academic learning

a pilot project at the University of Leicester

Aims of project

To date, considerable effort has been made to ensure that international students coming to the UK are aware of the issues and challenges that they might face related to acculturation, legislation, accommodation, studying, employment and others. These are real issues that need to be addressed in order that they are fully prepared for studying in the UK and succeed and thrive within the sector.

We felt, however, that there was a need for a resource that would inform prospective international students in particular, but also those currently in the UK, about the range of extra-curricular opportunities available to them within UK higher education and the potential benefits from these, to complement the range of materials already provided through individual universities and agencies such as UKCISA, which cover the more fundamental aspects of UK higher education and what international students might expect to encounter when they come here.

Such a resource would encourage and motivate international students to become involved and to develop in contexts beyond the academic, enabling them to gain skills and understanding that they can take back to their countries and into their future careers.

Outcomes

The project has produced a multimedia resource for prospective and current international students, demonstrating the experiential benefits to be gained from engaging with higher education opportunities beyond the degree course, including work placements, volunteering and community activities, HOST and similar visits, students' union activities, and sport and cultural activities.

This resource will encourage international students not only to develop the knowledge and skills to succeed academically in another

country, but also to take advantage of the extra-curricular activities provided in order to enjoy a fuller and more rounded experience.

Background information

The University of Leicester had 8,045 overseas students registered on its courses as at 1 December 2009, about 35% of the total student population at Leicester. Although the majority of these (64%) were distance learners, just over 36% were on full-time courses studying in Leicester.

Students from 67 countries outside the EU are studying on Leicester's full-time programmes, with the largest numbers coming from: China (37%); India (12%); Canada (6%); Pakistan, Nigeria, Hong Kong (all 5%); Malaysia (4%); Saudi Arabia (3%); Thailand and Taiwan (both 2%).

The International Office at Leicester University oversees the University's overall international strategy, including marketing, recruitment, student exchanges, and links with universities and other organisations. The University has significant support and development resources for all its students delivered largely through the Student Support and Development Service (SSDS), which encompasses Student Development (study, learning and career development), Student Welfare (financial, accommodation and personal support), AccessAbility (support for students with dyslexia, disabilities and long term conditions) and Health and Well-being (healthy living, mental well-being and counselling).

Within SSDS, there are a number of staff with significant responsibility for international students including a careers adviser and information specialist within Student Development, and three international student advisers and a visa renewal officer based within Student Welfare. All these staff liaise regularly and effectively with the Students' Union

and, in particular the Welfare and International sabbatical officer.

Project activities

The project was overseen by a project team drawn from appropriate SSDS staff plus others within the University. This team met regularly during the life of the project to make major decisions about direction, discuss issues and concerns, identify appropriate students and other partners to take part, and commit appropriate resources. Other staff and partners were brought into the project at appropriate points, for example a professional photographer, the SSDS Volunteering Co-ordinator and the director of FoSSiL (Friends of Overseas Students in Leicester).

Towards the end of the project, a group of international students viewed the final product and provided feedback. The resource was also demonstrated to key University of Leicester staff, from the both International Office and the department of Marketing and Communications, to inform final decisions about where it should be hosted to ensure its widest use. The resource will be fully operational for the new international student intake in 2010-2011, when monitoring data of the number of hits and views of the resource will help to identify key areas for future development.

Challenges

The most important challenges faced by the team were as follows:

- Identifying appropriate students to participate: the project was designed to feature students talking about their individual experiences. It was not always easy to identify these students initially or to secure their involvement with the project, particularly during holiday periods. A secondary consideration was to ensure a broad mix of students was represented which required, on occasions, seeking out students from certain backgrounds to take part. Finally, students were not always confident about performing on camera or required several



- takes before a satisfactory film was secured.
- b) Locating still pictures to complement students' testimony: the approach chosen was to illustrate students' experience through the use of their photographs. A competition was set up to try and collect together students' own material but this only produced a small number of shots and not all of these were usable. Eventually, the team decided to supplement photographs taken by team members or students themselves with those of specific events taken by a professional photographer.
- c) Technical filming challenges: ensuring that still photographs matched the content of students' testimony, combined with the challenge of ensuring that the zooming in and out created interest and did not distract the viewer, was a constant technical challenge requiring judgement, understanding and skill.
- d) Agreeing a structure and format: although the overall shape of the resource was established at an early stage, it was not clear until the final stages how the finished resource would appear in its entirety nor where it would best be hosted within the university's website.

- Advice was sought from key people within the University, in particular from the International Office and the department of Marketing and Communications, to resolve this particular issue.
- e) Personal experiences: it was important to capture students' testimony in their own words but some of their stories, whilst very engaging, reflected on very specific personal experiences. These, in the context of the resource as a whole, were judged to be unusable as the aim was to provide advice and guidance of general application to students, the institution and the sector.

Sustainability

The resource itself probably has a useful lifespan of about two years before the material appears dated. The format, however, for the resource is easily adaptable and can be readily updated through filming different students and adding new sections as appropriate. The embedded site at Leicester will include an invitation to international students to become involved in the project. It is planned to review the resource after a year to decide on any changes necessary at that point, with a view to carrying out a complete overhaul after two years. The resource will also be usable by

other HEIs as most of the students' testimony will apply to many institutions. The resource will be made available to other HEIs on a CD-Rom or through a download, and institutions are encouraged to adapt particular pages within the resource to their own circumstances.

Reflections

During the process of making this resource, several students provided anecdotal evidence that they considered the project to be an excellent idea, remarking that international students were often not aware of the opportunities available to them. Whether this approach is adopted or another, it would seem that specific marketing and tailored resources for international students are much needed and appreciated. As mentioned above, the process of producing resources such as these is often both complex and time-consuming. Being aware of other contexts in which the material might be used, and adopting flexible formats and producing broad content which can easily be adapted, is therefore very important.

Further information

<http://go.le.ac.uk/international-voices>

Developing alumni links and online resources to support international student employability *a pilot project at the University of Manchester*

The University of Manchester has a large and diverse international student population of over 7,000 students (approximately 20% of the total student population). The most popular source countries include China (1,500 students), India (750 students) and Nigeria (400 students).

The Manchester Leadership Programme (MLP), Careers & Employability Division has a history of over 10 years providing specialist resources and support for international students. However, findings from the annual International Student Barometer survey for the institution suggested that our investment in such services did not appear to be reflected in our international students' satisfaction with their employability and something more was expected. Similarly, during this time of worldwide recession and economic slowdown, our international students have been finding job-hunting more difficult and we have been looking at ways to better support them.

As expected with respect to overseas job-hunting, our knowledge and employer networks are significantly less developed than for the UK and the project aimed to explore ways to enhance them in a cost effective manner. Using a qualitative approach based upon more established connections suggested a more sustainable approach too.

Focus groups with international students at Manchester during 2009 strongly suggested that our students would prefer to hear directly from former international graduates and so alumni were involved in the process where possible.

The project aimed to explore and develop a range of online interactive resources to support international students looking to develop their employability and return to their home country. Seeking to build upon the existing country labour market information that already existed within the University and on a range of national career sites, the initiative sought to bring a university focus to its international employability resources.

Project Activity

The project consisted of six core elements brought together into a series of "country zones" where possible.

1. Online web-chats with international recruiters and intermediary agencies

Use – the web-chat facility was used to run live chats between international recruiters/experts and international students. Chats usually ran for one hour in duration, with no limit to the number of students who could register to take part in a chat. All chats were moderated by a trained member of the Division who filtered questions to the "chat expert." Questions were also filtered across multiple experts during busy chats.

Chats delivered included Careers in Africa – Global Career Company, Tesco China Graduate Programme and International Student Advisers – work visa specials

Development – after trialling a number of commercial products, an in-house web-chat facility was developed within the Division, resulting in a low cost tool useable across the Service and for different groups of students.

Advantages – chats were popular with students and were flexible enough to cater for unlimited registrations (and inevitable "no-shows"). The service was generic for use across the whole division too and needed only a minimal cost to run – just the moderator's time commitment and briefings for "chat experts". The chats could be run exclusively with University of Manchester students and graduates – housed behind a log-in screen.

Issues – the concept of an online chat generated a mixed response from recruiters particularly those based overseas and where internet connections can be intermittent or there are security concerns. Time was needed to explain the concept. Some students did appear confused about the concept of a "chat" and visual representation of what the chat "looks like" was useful. Similarly, explaining the event fully can increase turnout (this was done through the international student blog)

2. Video conferences with alumni and intermediary agencies.

Use – a series of live video conferences were delivered to international students using new conferencing technology installed within the Division’s training room.

Video conferences delivered included: The Japanese Graduate Job Market – BEO Careers Services, Chinese employability and returning home from UK study – Wang & Li (Manchester alumnus), Chinese employability – Kelly Qian – senior recruiter & head hunter (Manchester alumnus)

Advantages – the technology really did “bring the recruiter to the room” and students could interact freely with the recruiters. Feedback from the presenters was also very positive. Additional uses were identified for interviews, group exercise observations, and interview training. With a hard drive recorder also installed the sessions also could be recorded and edited for the website.

Issues – attendance at some conferences was intermittent and it was felt that some students did not necessarily understand the concept. The session content was subsequently promoted, with the video conference style of delivery as secondary. Some conferences delivered by intermediaries/alumni were less popular than those sessions delivered by a direct recruiter. There were also issues with connection – some organisations had high security settings and international firewalls meaning that they could not connect through an IP address – they needed an ISDN number for a secure connection. And time differences were a factor. Connecting to Japan required a 9am or roam session for the students (which reduced attendance levels).

3. Online one-to-one guidance to international students using LiveGuidance technology

Use – This technology was used to deliver online one-to-one information and guidance provision to international students out of core hours. Two hour slots were promoted where an “adviser” would be online and willing to chat in private. When the green button was lit, an adviser was available and a queuing system was also in operation for busy periods.

Development – This service was provided by subscribing to the “Liveperson” software currently used in a variety of sectors. The LiveGuidance offer was also made available to students at Manchester for target discussion topics or for other key groups during this time.

Advantages - the system was accessible out-of-hours for students with heavy timetables and provided the flexibility of a drop-in approach. The system operated with no additional costs (other than “adviser time”) for subsequent use beyond the initial annual subscription

Issues - the technology is probably better suited to a “many-many” service rather than “many-one” to avoid queues forming and bottlenecks. Those queuing never fully understood how long they would need to wait. However, it was possible to handle more than one query at once and switch between clients for the more confident administrator.

4. International alumni involvement in the Division’s graduate profiles and on student forums

Use – alumni contacts were encouraged to network with and support current international students through our existing “graduate profiles” pages and also via our recently established career forums. Alumni entered the forums as “guest experts” able to take questions from current students about being an international student, developing employability whilst in the UK and job hunting back in their home country.

Development – a range of alumni networks were used to develop interest. This included the development of an alumni career newsletter via Newsweaver software and the use of LinkedIn and other online university networks.



Advantages - such involvement is incorporated into a Division-wide service of profiles and forums. The use of LinkedIn enables online involvement of current students to also be maintained in future years enabling the relationship to alumni. The use of alumni careers newsletters was well received by the Alumni Office.

Issues/concerns - students were often reluctant to post questions or answer each others’ questions, tending to favour just viewing existing materials on the forum. Our alumni often had their own perceptions of how they would like to be involved or support the career development of current students. Flexibility was required to enable alumni to steer their own involvement. For example, a new programme of 45 e-mentoring partnerships between Chinese students and Chinese alumni came from the publicity at the expense of more graduate profiles/forum experts.



Amanda Conway with Chinese e-mentees

5. Piloting of an e-mentoring programme for Chinese students with Chinese alumni

Use – 45 Chinese alumni were encouraged, as members of the China Alumni Association to mentor a current student online. Matching took place in consultation with the Alumni Co-ordinator (a Manchester alumni himself) for China and an induction for mentees was provided. Mentors were emailed an induction pack. The mentoring programme ran for six months.

Advantages - the mentoring relationships were also supplemented by an online LinkedIn e-mentoring group with questions posed online for comment. The mentoring relationships received positive evaluation feedback including the opportunity to ask questions, make connections online, share ideas.

Issues - some students expressed concern about contacting their mentor and felt overwhelmed by their seniority. As a result, it will be made compulsory for students to attend an induction session prior to the mentee introduction in future years. Some mentees found it difficult to contact their mentors, or struggled to get a response. In future years, it will be

compulsory for all mentors to complete an application form to participate in the programme to confirm commitment.

6. Dissemination of international career destination information of international students

Use – the University developed an alternative approach to providing career destination information for international graduates using a survey. Instead, existing alumni data was utilised for the past 10 years to provide an alternative insight into the career prospects of our graduates. This was made anonymous, adapted to be made available through the country zones.

Advantages – this is a resource efficient response to international student demand for this information.

Issues – it is unclear at this stage how this will be synchronised with international destination data expected from the i-graduate survey pilot carried out this year (2010).

Reflections

Although a range of online services for international recruiters is positively regarded, there were still a significant number of employers who were reluctant and wanted to engage in more

traditional ways (visit the campus to meet students). Flexibility from the Division is important. Time zone differences can significantly impact when dealing with international recruiters and students. Student attendance did suffer during early morning sessions. Although the LiveGuidance technology has a value, the uptake from international students did not appear to justify out of hours sessions for the future. The alumni networks and LinkedIn groups have provided a useful platform for engaging alumni with careers support. It also enables connections to be maintained as current students become alumni.

Further information:

Country pages for China, India, Malaysia, Japan, Singapore and Nigeria
<http://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/students/jobsearch/overseas/countryinformation/>
Web-chat transcripts
<http://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/students/events/onlineandinteractiveevents/webchats/Graduateprofiles>
<http://www.careers.manchester.ac.uk/students/options/graduateprofiles/>

International Student Employability Website

a pilot project at Heriot-Watt University

Aims

A frequent hurdle for many international students is getting to grips with the UK emphasis in the recruitment process on personal or employability skills. This is evident both in their understanding of their conception and principles but also in the level to which they are required by most graduate recruiters. This project thus set out to explain the concept of personal skills, enable students to assess their proficiency in these skills, where applicable signpost students to activities by which they could improve particular skills, help students analyse their experience in terms of the skills they are likely to have developed from it and look at how these skills could be incorporated into CVs or application forms and articulated at interview.

Project development

A list of skills descriptors were developed and research was

undertaken into the activities required through which to develop them. Examples were also developed of how to integrate skills derived from work-related learning and course activities into CVs, applications and interviews. Following this preparatory work, a website was created which:

- summarises the concept and principles of personal and employability skills and why they are relevant
- enables students to assess their current level of proficiency in the main skills
- signposts students to activities through which they can enhance these skills
- illustrates how these skills can be incorporated into the job-hunting process

Sustainability

As employability skills are largely generic and unlikely to be subject to

much change over the foreseeable future the website should have a reasonably long shelf life. Now it has been created it will in any case require little effort to maintain it. This will largely entail adding and amending the references and contact details of the organisations and activities through which international students can enhance their skills.

Implementation elsewhere

The project is eminently transferable to other universities or colleges and useable by their students. The only significant work would be to tailor some of the skills development opportunities, some of which are geographically or institution specific.

Further information

Website: <www.hw.ac.uk/careers/skills/start.php>

Business networking: developing employability skills through forum theatre

a pilot project at Glasgow Caledonian University

Project aims

A substantial number of the 1,500 international students at Glasgow Caledonian University want to gain employment experience in the UK after their (mostly postgraduate) studies. Under the current economic climate these students will face a more competitive job market than in previous years. We wanted to provide them with additional support to ensure that they were aware of the essential employability skills required for the UK graduate recruitment market.

Our international students are high level users of both the Careers Service and International Student Support and we were interested in extending our collaborative activities. By developing a highly engaging and participative approach we planned to introduce students to business networking and encourage the development of interpersonal skills at the same time. We believed that this approach would be ideal preparation for entering the job market and an excellent opportunity to further develop both language and social skills in a supportive environment.

By incorporating 'forum theatre' into a workshop we introduced a drama technique that explores solutions to issues that arise in specific situations, and this was a core element of the skills based workshops. In our scenario, students observed a networking event. They watched the scene as an active audience and not passive observers, because they are invited to stop the drama at critical moments and encouraged to discuss how to improve the situation.

These highly interactive workshops engaged students in reflective techniques because they were watching networking scenarios presented by actors, and were then able to work collaboratively to devise solutions. The scenario was then replayed on a number of occasions, taking on board the 'spect-actors' comments.

The skill-building workshops were followed by a business networking lunch with graduate employers. This provided students with an opportunity to meet employers and practise their networking techniques.

We believe that we produced a winning combination of activities and this has been endorsed unanimously by the international students who attended.

Outcomes

Three highly successful and interactive Business Networking workshops and lunches for international students were organised. By using innovative 'forum theatre' techniques we have been able to develop and enhance students' employability and social networking skills in an energising, engaging and effective way.

All of these sessions culminated in a networking lunch with employers. Students then had the opportunity to demonstrate their skills to employers who were able to provide further support and feedback to students. Both the student and employer evaluations have been exceptionally positive and we have also been able to produce vidcasts for the university website.

Running the project

There were three main elements to the project that had to be brought together for each workshop – students, actors and employers.

Initially there were a number of briefing meetings and discussions with the drama facilitator to discuss the aims of the workshop and to agree on the focus for the forum theatre element and related workshop activities.

In association with the International Student Support Service, suitable dates and locations for the events were identified and the ISSS Service were responsible for advertising the event and arranging for students to register their interest in advance. For each

workshop the number of registered students exceeded the maximum capacity of thirty available places. Dates were selected to coincide with the most appropriate time for international students who may be coming to the end of their studies and for whom a networking workshop would be appropriate.

The Careers Team were responsible for identifying, securing and coordinating the employers who agreed to attend the networking lunches and liaising with Forward Role, the theatre in education group.

Evaluation questionnaires were completed by students and employers at the end of each event. There was also an informal feedback session after each event between the Careers Service and the actors to ensure that the project aims were being met at each event.

Sustainability

A major element of the funding was to involve drama professionals to design, develop and deliver the business networking workshops. As such, there is a cost involved in working with professional actors. There is no doubt that the university will explore funding similar events.

The impact of using forum theatre is being recognised as a very powerful, energising and engaging way to encourage students to explore careers and employability issues in a highly effective way. This approach has already been used with a wider student audience at a different 'forum theatre' mentoring event in April 2010 at Glasgow Caledonian University.

As a direct result of the involvement of the Careers Team with the networking event, there have been a number of benefits of this pilot project. We have now produced a networking information leaflet to complement our current portfolio and a presentation has been researched for delivery to Masters students within the Business School.

Excellent working relationships have been established with all of the employers involved and they have all indicated a willingness to support further events with international students. One of the employers involved in the networking lunch offered to present a masterclass to students and this was delivered as part of GCU's Graduates 2 Work project in March 2010.

Media resources are being created and students' stories, comments and video podcasts will be available to view on GCU's website.

Reflections

The success of this project has reinforced and further developed the very good working relationships that currently exist between GCU Careers Service and the International Student Support Service. We intend to continue to build on the strengths of both teams and to continue to explore other collaborative and innovative developments.

A number of learning points have been identified:

- language development – this project provided an excellent opportunity for students to develop their language skills in a professional business context with employers. The workshops included an exploration of how to open and close a conversation – an area of concern for students.
- making connections – this project allowed students to consider how they could network effectively at very different events
- employers' perspective – students were also able to hear employers' views on networking, and that it isn't always about asking about vacancies
- cultural differences – the event provided an opportunity for students to compare and contrast cultural differences and to raise concerns that they had about how to act in different situations
- confidence – many students commented on the value of the workshop in terms of boosting their confidence in approaching employers
- informality – the informal nature of the event gave students an opportunity to raise issues in a relaxed environment that may not have been raised in other situations
- accommodation – delivering forum theatre workshops requires the type

of space which is heavily in demand at GCU, as traditional classrooms and lecture theatres were not suitable

- target group - within the international student community we wanted to encourage a wide range of students from different countries and cultures. We wanted to offer workshops primarily but not necessarily exclusively for postgraduate students as this reflects the balance of students within the university.
- University alumni - we were extremely pleased to gain support from a small cohort of employers and alumni employers for the three business networking lunches. Nearly all of these employers attended more than one of the events and were very keen to work with students. We recognise the considerable benefits of working closely with university alumni and will continue to develop and extend relationships.

Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions

Forum Theatre technique

By incorporating 'forum theatre' into a skills based workshop we introduced a powerful drama technique that international students were able to relate to. The benefits of this technique are that it can be used to explore solutions to a variety of problems or situations and it lends itself very effectively to exploring a range of careers and employability related issues. Students have the opportunity to reflect on what they observe and to discuss different approaches in a safe and non threatening environment.

Workshop and forum theatre script

It is vital that extensive and detailed briefing sessions take place with the drama professionals to ensure that the script and activities are adequately addressing the issues that have been identified.

As we ran three business Networking workshops, we were fortunate that we were able to suggest minor adaptations and improvements after the first workshop. We would recommend that this is the best way of developing any new forum theatre activities.

Student engagement

Often a critical factor when working with international students. To ensure that we had the maximum possible attendance at the events the International Students Support

Service contacted students both by newsletter about the forthcoming Business Networking events and also by personal email.

Collaborative projects

Throughout this project the strength of collaborative working was recognised and the division of activities reflected the expertise of the individual teams members.

Cultural awareness

When running events it is important to be aware of the cultural make up of the students in your own institution. This can have a significant impact on how best to proceed with attracting attendance at new events, and how these might be organised and developed.

University Alumni

An excellent resource that should certainly be developed on a variety of different levels.

Student evaluation

At any event it is important to capture student evaluations and to use these as proactively as possible. Students will always pay attention to what other students have to say! We will be including vidcasts of students' stories about the networking event on both sections of the GCU website.

Further information

See the full report at <www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/case_studies_employment.php>.

Newcastle Careers International Videocasts

a pilot project at Newcastle University

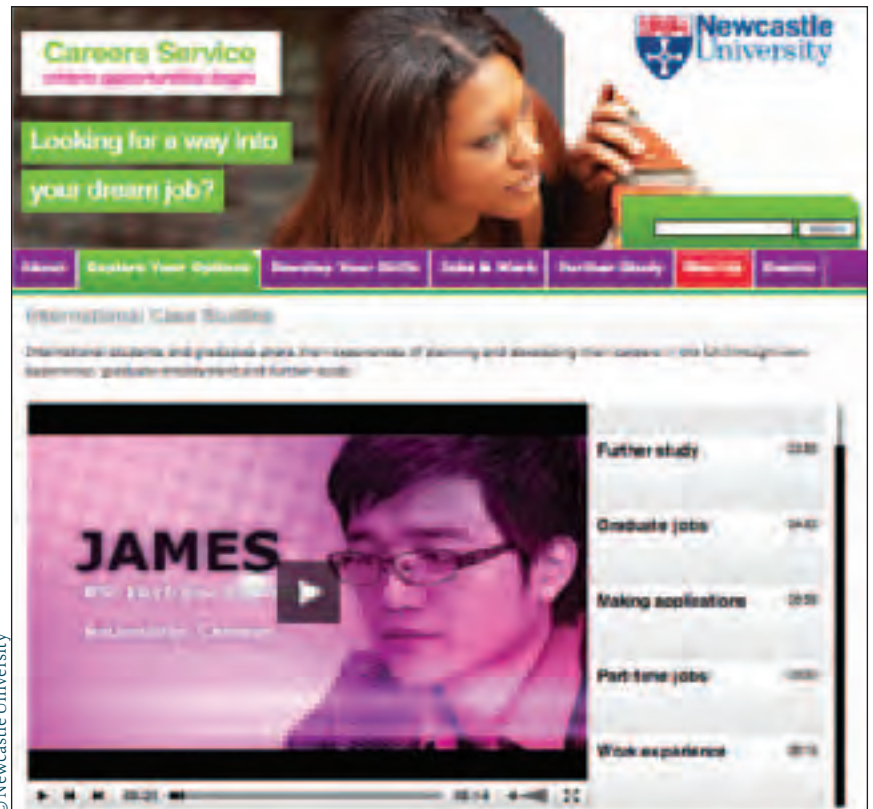
Background

Newcastle University Careers Service has a very proactive approach to supporting international students. We have developed an International Strategy and set appropriate annual planning targets. We also have an International Agenda Development Group, developed with the purpose of ensuring that we are informed about issues affecting international students and are able to disseminate information across the service. We have a range of existing resources which specifically target international students, including international student web pages (www.ncl.ac.uk/careers/explore/international), an online blog, working in the UK workshops, input on the University's International Welcome Programme and in two annual in-session English workshops, as well as employability workshops.

However, we recognised that hearing from Careers Advisers on employability issues lacked the impact that international student and graduate role models could make. In 2008 and 2009 we used a number of returning international students to contribute to welcome talks to new students and this received excellent feedback. We wanted to develop this further by recording a range of international students and graduates discussing their experiences in a realistic way that would benefit others. Recording these interviews would enable them to be accessible online whenever they would be useful to students. We recognised that in order for this resource to be effective it would need to be professionally produced to a high standard. Without external funding we would have been unable to provide this.

Project set and evaluation

The project commenced in August 2009. Colleagues in the Careers Service's International Group identified six key areas in our activities that we felt would be of interest to international students; part time casual jobs, relevant work experience, making good job applications, applying for and funding further study, graduate



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level jobs and starting a business. We also identified a range of international students and graduates who we had worked with who we felt would be excellent role models.

Sourcing production company

After making enquiries internally and externally, we sourced and hired a professional production company, Boro TV, who gave a competitive quote for filming, editing and producing the video-casts and DVDs. We met with them in early September to discuss our requirements and set out a provisional work schedule.

Sourcing case study students and graduates

Late September, October and early November are particularly busy months for the Careers Service generally because of the graduate recruitment cycle and the start of a new academic year. This year was exceptionally busy as in October we moved locations across campus to a brand new building and the Jobshop (the part time jobs provider based in

the Students Union) merged with the Careers Service which meant staff time was taken up with dealing with the move and a significantly increased footfall of clients into the Careers Service. We began to source international students and graduates from the end of October and by early December we had the final line up of candidates to speak about each area of career development. In order to prepare each candidate our International Information Officer, and one member of our Media and Communications team interviewed each student and made briefing notes of each candidate's story that we could use to prompt them during filming.

Filming

The busy run-up to Christmas and the Christmas break where the university was closed meant that we decided to film our case studies in January. Filming took place on campus and on location at various organisations where students and graduates were working. Due to the bad weather, we were unable to film all of the case studies (one of the

candidates was also stuck in India until the end of January) so we scheduled an additional day's filming to take place in early February.

Promotion and evaluation

To assist with the promotion of the resource, we worked with a group of postgraduate international students on the MA Media and Communications degree. The key activity that the students undertook on our behalf was a focus group. We identified ten participants, drawn from a variety of stages and nationalities and invited them to attend a student run focus group where they would watch the new DVD and be asked for feedback. It was felt that the results would be more objective if the focus group was conducted by other international students with no one from the Careers Service.

The feedback was very positive in nature. Suggestions were made about promoting the resource via Facebook and other social media and this is being implemented.

Challenges faced

The biggest challenges faced in this project were all logistical in nature. Balancing the availability of 10 students and graduates to be filmed in a variety of locations with

the availability of the production company was not straightforward. This was exacerbated by the fact that the planning was taking place during the busiest time of the year and immediately after moving into a new building where we were experiencing significantly increased demand for our services. The final logistical barrier was the severe cold snap making it impossible to carry out all the filming on the initial dates anticipated. Working with an external production company was difficult at times. We went with a small company who provided a competitive quote, providing good value for money. Their final output was excellent in terms of quality but at times they were difficult to pin down to make arrangements as they were balancing several jobs at once.

Sustainability

An important consideration in our choice of topics was their longevity for use on our website and as a standalone DVD. While visa regulations are likely to change, the fundamental messages behind the topics selected are likely to remain relevant for a number of years and will therefore have a sustainable impact.

Reflections

The main learning point from our experience has been the quality of international students and graduates as an exceptional resource as role models for others. The impact of the videocasts will become clear once they have been on our website for some time and have been further evaluated but initial responses from both students and colleagues have been highly favourable.

In addition, a key learning point for anyone undertaking a similar activity is not to underestimate the time required to coordinate the logistics involved. Negotiating availability of 10 students and graduates and of a production company while grappling with the constraints of severe weather, a graduate being stuck in India on the scheduled filming date and other challenges, all during the busiest time of the year and straight after a move to a new building was no small task! The enthusiasm and commitment of our International Information Officer as the champion of the project was invaluable and ensured its ultimate successful delivery.

Further information

The videocasts are available at <www.ncl.ac.uk/careers/explore/international/case-studies>

Investigating how to engage international alumni to support current international students in their career development
a pilot project at the University of Warwick

This project researched the needs of international students and alumni across HEIs in the UK and internationally. It aimed to offer a best practice guide on working with international alumni to support international students' career development and employability. Four areas were covered:

- researching and evaluating alumni support of employability across HEIs worldwide
- conducting focus groups with current international students to gauge the specific support they would like from international alumni
- conducting a survey with international alumni to identify how they felt able to contribute
- researching the use of social networking sites by students and alumni

Recommendations

- the importance of developing a robust central system to communicate with alumni, assisting with clarity and measurement of results
- the need to consider the entire alumni experience and offering from the University
- the importance of integrating stand alone initiatives such as international chapters and online networking
- the need to ensure that a clear understanding exists between alumni and students, as to the services offered; there is a need to translate student preferences towards offerings which are realistically viable
- the importance of linking where possible, international alumni to the University via their employer.

- the need to integrate the efforts and systems of multiple internal departments each benefiting from international alumni involvement and with something different to offer them
- the importance of recognising the significant potential in mentoring and the use of networks for informal support.

Further information

Full report and findings: <www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/case_studies_employment.php>

International alumni case studies at Warwick <www2.warwick.ac.uk/services/careers/hub/films>

Types, modes and timeframes of immigration advice to international students (Boston University and Vanderbilt University, USA)

by Heather Robson, International Student Adviser, University of Warwick

Introduction

Described at the 2009 UKCISA conference as a sleeping giant awakening (in terms of marketing), the United States is the primary destination for international students and the main competitor of the UK. With the introduction of Tier 4 in the UK the role of International Student Adviser (ISA) has been catapulted to a level of critical importance in terms of providing immigration support and documentation so that students can obtain a visa to take up their place on a course.

My study visit aimed to look at the types, modes and timeframes of the provision of immigration advice to international students requiring non-immigrant visas to study in the United States. I was interested in investigating how US universities balance and manage their sponsorship responsibilities and their interaction with the students as clients. I also wanted to speak with international students to understand their perception and experience of US universities' role in facilitating their visa applications and compliance with US federal law.

Summary of outcomes

I learned a lot about the US student immigration system and was able to contrast it with the UK system. This

enabled me to understand the context in which International Student Advisers work and I was able to gain valuable insight into the role of an International Student Adviser in the US. I had the chance to examine the processes and systems in place in each university. By speaking with international students and recruiters (centralised and academic) I was able to understand the interplay of decision factors in students opting to study in the US. Student focus groups gave me the opportunity to evaluate customer satisfaction.

The universities

Boston University has a large and diverse international student population with almost 5,500 students from 137 countries. Their International Student and Scholar Office boasts 17 staff, eight of whom have an immigration advisory role assisting students, scholars and their families pre-arrival as well as during and after their studies. Vanderbilt is smaller, with an international student population of around 1,000 and offers similar services on a smaller scale.

The organisational structure at each university was similar. The International Student and Scholar Office or Service dealt solely with incoming international students and

was a distinct and separate entity to the Study Abroad section dealing with outgoing students, although each was situated alongside the other with a shared reception area. There is an upper limit placed on the number of ISAs a US university is allowed to employ and Boston had the maximum number with six student advisers, two scholar advisers and a director and assistant director who also advised. Vanderbilt had three student advisers as well as a director and assistant director. Much of the work related to student work permission applications.

Both universities divided their students between ISAs - Boston by academic programme and Vanderbilt alphabetically by family name. The larger university, Boston, had a highly-structured appointments system with each adviser meeting one-to-one with students in 45 minute or one-hour appointments with a maximum of six appointments a day. Vanderbilt's student advising was less formalised, with the majority of student advising undertaken on a drop-in basis with only very complicated or sensitive issues being dealt with by appointment. At busy times Boston's appointments could be booked up to two to three weeks in advance and they therefore also operated an 'adviser on call' system rotating this duty around the ISAs. In



Wyatt Center, Peabody campus, Vanderbilt University

addition to its team of advisers, Boston had four front-line co-ordinators who ran the reception area and dealt with enquiries and letter requests. Both universities organised travel signature days for students to get the correct documentation to travel and also ran workshops on work options.

Working while studying in the USA

There were some similarities and some fundamental differences between working permissions for students when comparing the US and UK. Whilst both immigration systems allow up to 20 hours of work per week during studies, in the US this must be undertaken on campus unless permission to work off-campus is applied for and granted. Boston's computer system will not allow payment of more than 20 hours' payment to any international student to ensure compliance with this requirement. If student records and payroll could be linked in this way in the UK then we could go some way to ensuring that those students working on campus do not breach their 10 or 20 hours working permissions.

In the US there are two main types of student working permissions – Curricula Practical Training (CPT) and Optional Practical Training (OPT). CPT is work specifically linked

to the student's study, for example, recital work for a music student, and is therefore of limited scope. Students are also allowed up to one year of OPT which can be pro-rata eg half-time work over two years. This is divided into two categories: pre and post-graduation. It costs \$340 per application and can take up to three months to be granted (there is no in-person appointment system in the US). Once permission has been given it cannot be delayed and it is therefore quite a balancing act when students are approaching completion of studies but may not be sure when they will graduate. Under OPT, training must be related to the student's studies - I met a student of philosophy who was going to find it difficult to be able to undertake OPT due to this restriction! Under OPT if a maximum period of 90 days unemployment is exceeded, OPT is lost; also a student may not re-enter the US with OPT if they are not employed. Unlike post-study work in the UK, whilst on OPT, students remain the responsibility of their sponsor university.

The immigration system

The Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS) has been in operation in the US for seven years now and the government is working on the introduction of SEVIS2. Boston

has a full-time member of staff to manage SEVIS. Whereas the UK system of CAS's is currently focussed on visa applications and extensions, the focus of SEVIS is on interfacing with universities' record systems to ensure that students are 'maintaining status', for example, being continually enrolled full-time. Visas cannot be extended or applied for from within the US and even if a visa expires, as long as status is maintained, a student is there legally. To apply for a visa an offer letter from the University and a specific government document (eg I20) must be submitted. SEVIS does not extend outside the US other than payment of a SEVIS fee at the time of application. It makes the UK's Sponsor Management System look hugely ambitious with simultaneous UK and global roll-out.

US universities are also required to report 'no show' students and transfers within a specified time-frame which varies between 15 and 30 days. This is similar to the monitoring requirements of Tier 4 and, like us, they have some discretion on how this is organised. At Boston, for example, they require each student to physically sign in each semester at either the international office or their department.

Continuing professional development

In terms of training for ISAs there are parallels between NAFSA and UKCISA. Each offers an annual conference and training sessions as well as providing a network. The system of support of ISAs is less formalised in the US with experienced advisers taking on a mentoring role for others in the sector. NAFSA has an online instruction manual which deals with all aspects of student visas and to which ISAs can refer. Local arrangements had been set up; at Boston, they had 'third Thursday' meetings with colleagues in the local area, while staff at Vanderbilt met with colleagues in the Nashville area each month. This is similar to AISA regional meetings.

Systems and processes

US University Advice Services do not have a separate regulator like the OISC; they simply operate under federal law. Procedures and best practice are written up by the service and are available for all advisers to refer to. At fortnightly meetings they share experience and address any problems. Difficult cases can be referred up to the Assistant Director or the Director. At both universities client case records were part of the student record system and all interactions were fully documented and easily viewed.

With the increased responsibilities of Tier 4 sponsors we have had to develop systems to capture additional information on students such as passport and visa details on their student records. At Warwick and probably other UK institutions this has been shaped by compliance needs and is not highly developed. We keep separate databases and paper-based client case-note records for advising purposes. Whilst other institutions will have more technically-advanced or integrated systems in place, none will have one record system which serves the dual function of case-note record-keeping and communicating of 'reporting events' to SEVIS which the US fsaATLAS or iOffice programmes are designed to do.

FsaATLAS and iOffice are software packages which can be purchased by education providers to help manage their data and to batch that data to SEVIS. They are typically used by medium-sized and larger education providers. Smaller providers would tend to enter their data directly on to

SEVIS via the 'Real-Time Interactive' (RTA) interface. FsaATLAS and iOffice can be configured to be stand-alone databases where all of the input is from the international office staff, then batched to SEVIS. In this configuration, the software is used as the international office's primary record-keeping system to track and communicate with all international students and scholars.

International office staff must then monitor the school's central record-keeping system separately to know if there are changes which must be reported eg full-time/part-time course load. However, both software packages can also be configured to retrieve data directly from the education provider's central registration or record-keeping system. They include alert protocols that make separate monitoring of the institution's central system unnecessary. This configuration requires IT staff to install and maintain the system. Some larger providers have a designated member of staff to manage SEVIS, the software and the central record-keeping system to manage the flow of data between the three systems. Both increased reporting requirements and the move to an IT-centred system in the UK make the US experience and systems very relevant and one which the sector can examine, adapt and develop in order to integrate and automate these types of function.

There were other examples of advanced technology assisting the work of the US ISAs, such as appropriate automated emails to students on maintaining their status and upcoming events. Reports could be run to check that students had not fallen below a full-time study programme (other than in their final session when this was allowed). In the recruitment area, staff could check if the I20 they had issued had been activated to obtain a visa and, if it hadn't, they sent a series of emails encouraging the student to apply for their visa.

With the introduction of CAS's we will be able to follow the US example and see how many of the CAS's we have issued have been used and this will give us exciting new data on our expected student numbers. It will also enable us, as the US does, to target our conversion activities such as calling campaigns to those students who have not yet activated their CAS. Again, if technology can be interfaced as it is in the US, a series of automated emails could be sent to 'floating' students.

At both universities, I met with those directly involved in recruiting international students and was interested to see if visa considerations and perceptions of how difficult it is to get a visa impacted on their prospective students' decisions. They all said that they field surprisingly few visa queries when they are out recruiting. Both universities are private with substantial tuition fees and generally attract applicants from fairly wealthy families who are often already well-travelled; obtaining a visa is therefore not usually a concern for them.

Students' views

At the student focus groups participants said that the experience of obtaining a US student visa was time-intensive with a huge amount of documentation and there was a difficult timeline to follow. In general, other factors such as academic course content, financial awards and peer group decisions influenced their decision to study in the US rather than the UK. There was also a low awareness of work permissions prior to arriving in the US; again, this could probably be put down to the student type who does not need to work to finance their studies. The ease with which international students in the UK can work off-campus and the two years of post-study work available to them are huge selling points in promoting UK higher education especially when contrasted with the restrictions which exist in the US; however, to most of the students I met it was not a consideration until they had actually reached the US.

Although students can bring dependants with them to the US these dependants are prohibited from working or studying full-time. I met one student whose wife held both a US student dependant visa and a PSW work visa - she visited him regularly in the US but was pursuing her career in the UK. He was well-aware of the differences in the conditions and had plans to become a dependant on his wife's PSW visa so that he too could gain some UK work experience. Currently the UK has an advantage over the US with its dependant permissions; however, if the government removes these favourable conditions, as it has already started to, it may impact on the choice of destination for those students wishing to bring family with them.



Talbot Building, Boston University

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Other activities

Vanderbilt has a high ratio of advisers to international students and is therefore able to organise plenty of cultural activities for them. This includes an orientation which all new students attend; a series of free films with discussion, 'World on Wednesdays', a weekly presentation from faculty, staff or a student or community group, followed by lunch; cultural festival social activities which include activities for children such as cookie-making or card decorating; and the opportunity to have dinner in the home of someone from the local community. They also send an email birthday card to every international student!

Boston University has to devote most of its resources to immigration work; however, they also have a programme of monthly talks which cover subject areas requested by students and sometimes include an outside speaker such as an immigration lawyer talking about permanent residence.

Reflections

As a result of seeing what is done in the US we will be expanding our programme of presentations and workshops which currently cover visa extension and post-study work. We intend to set up a programme for the whole academic year to offer

appropriate sessions tailored to the time of year, for example, a session on inviting relatives prior to graduation and talks on Schengen in preparation for summer travel. We will extend this to include cultural sessions such as presentations on UK festivals.

At Warwick we deliver cultural awareness sessions at orientation and throughout the year with sessions for support staff. Vanderbilt delivers cultural awareness training to specific academic courses, for example to the MBA students, as part of the course. This is something we and other universities could look at introducing.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Boston and Vanderbilt for their wonderful hospitality and for setting up my programme of meetings so that I could undertake this study visit. I am also grateful to PMI2 and Warwick who made this visit possible.

Monitoring and reducing student withdrawals: what International Student Offices can learn from American universities (North Carolina State University and Maryland University)

by Adriana Crear, International Student Advisor, University of Surrey

Objectives of the visit

There were two aims for this PMI-sponsored visit to the USA. Firstly, to establish what can be learned from best practice in American universities with regard to monitoring the reasons for and reducing the numbers of international students who withdraw from their courses before completing their degree.

Secondly, to investigate the role International Offices can play in monitoring and preventing such withdrawals by taking an active part in the student experience and by communicating with other involved parties at the university.

Background – importance of withdrawals

In view of recent changes to immigration rules, British universities need to report to the Home Office every case of a student who is no longer participating in their studies or who has taken unauthorised absence. Reporting is one of the obligations which British universities need to fulfil in order to maintain Highly Trusted Sponsor status. Obviously reporting is a last resort and universities would like to do all they can to avoid situations which could lead to reporting.

In an increasingly competitive sector, universities need to ensure student satisfaction. They spend considerable sums on recruiting international students, and word-of-mouth remains a powerful advertising tool. Universities cannot afford to have students returning to their home countries with negative feedback. Gathering information on the reasons for withdrawals and using this to work on reducing them can result in more students succeeding and leaving the UK happy with their experiences here.

At the University of Surrey in the academic year 2009-10, around 6.7% of the international student population withdrew from their courses. Currently there is little information gathered about the reasons for such withdrawals. In my opinion, identifying these reasons could prevent some future withdrawals and avoid the same situation arising again.

Destination

The USA was selected because they have a reporting system which has now been operating for several years. This could provide a useful guide to the future demands and requirements of the UK Border Agency scheme coming into force in the UK.

I was able to build on existing contacts at the University of Surrey and arrange visits and meetings with two universities in the United States – North Carolina State University (NCSU) in Raleigh, North Carolina, and Maryland University, in Maryland, near Washington DC. Both universities have similar numbers of international students to the University of Surrey. And both universities, like the University of Surrey, have strong research backgrounds and offer similar subjects, such as engineering, science and management.

Among the departments I visited in NCSU were The Office of International Services, Enrolment Management and Services, The Graduate School, Office of Advising Support, Undergraduate Tutorial Centre and Counselling Centre.

At the University of Maryland I visited The Office of International Services, Graduate and Undergraduate Admissions, Maryland English Institute, Study Abroad Office, Office

of Student Affairs at the College of Arts and Humanities. All these offices were identified by my hosts as playing a very important part in the life of international students and as having an influence on how they may feel about a university they attend.

North Carolina University is a large university with over 30,000 students, including almost 2,000 international students from 111 countries. The largest numbers are from India (631) and China (494). It has been ranked fourth in the US Public University League table. The Graduate School is responsible for administering over 220 different graduate degrees and has about 7,400 students, both home and international.

The University of Maryland is ranked number 18 among US Public Research Universities. In total there are over 35,000 students, including 3,132 international students from 133 different countries, mainly from China (799), India (767) and South Korea (288).

Summary of outcomes

The philosophy of American education is, "Just in time, just in case". Based on my experience during my visit, this means that US universities are very proactive and vigilant in the way they deal with and care about all their students, but in particular their international students. I would highlight this aspect as the main outcome of my visit.

The visit showed the importance US universities attach to communication between various departments in a university from the point of view of international students. Good channels of communication between members of staff who are in any way connected to a student may prevent certain



University of Maryland McKeldin Library

situations which could lead a student to withdrawal.

I was also very impressed with the American sense of hospitality. In both universities, there was a real feeling that all students, especially international ones, are looked after during the whole academic year, from the moment of their arrival to the moment of their departure.

I was especially impressed with the role of academic advisers in NCSU and Maryland in communication with students, and between them and various departments during their studies. Academic members volunteer, and are trained, to be student advisers and therefore provide a valuable link between students and other offices, including the International Office.

The visit enabled me to find out how other International Offices look after their students during the academic year and how they monitor their withdrawals. Some of their ideas could be implemented at the University of Surrey and might be relevant for other institutions too.

This report will highlight three examples of this ethos of active support and hospitality towards international students and how this improves their learning experience and reduces the risk of withdrawal from the course. I would like to stress how, throughout my visit, mentoring, coaching and advising, which were described as essential to supporting students in

helping them achieve their academic goals, were helping to reduce the number of withdrawals.

Office of International Services (OIS) at North Carolina State (NCSU) and Maryland

Both universities have large and well resourced Offices of International Services (International Offices). In both universities, most international students are enrolled in the graduate schools. In NCSU, there are only 200 international undergraduate students, compared to 1,600 postgraduate students. At Maryland there are 595 international undergraduate students and about 2,537 international postgraduate students.

As well as giving advice on immigration issues, the OIS at NCSU provides pre-arrival information and deals with queries about finance and housing. The office offers a number of online orientation programmes that students are advised to access before arrival. During the academic year, the OIS organises various events such as *'Breaking Bread'*, a hosting programme which gives international students an opportunity to spend time with American families and learn about American culture.

Another programme called *'Culture Corps'* sends international students and scholars out into the Raleigh community which develops connections between the local community, international students and the university in general.

Another interesting programme offered by the OIS is *'International Friendship Partners'*. It is an active matching programme between international students and their spouses with university academics and home students within each faculty. This programme really seems to enable international students to establish friendships and social networks very shortly after their arrival on campus. In my opinion, all the above activities play a very important role in the retention of international students.

NCSU has very good retention rates at undergraduate and Masters levels. However, NCSU were very open about the drop-off rate of their PhD students. This has been an area of concern and a lot has been done to try and improve this situation. According to the experience of the Graduate School there are two important facts which determined retention - finance and mentoring/recruitment. The Graduate School has taken actions in both areas to improve retention:

Finance - stricter verification of whether international students can afford to pay tuition fees before admission and providing them with scholarships and funding. Students currently need to provide a Certificate of Financial Capability.

Mentoring/recruitment - tighter selection of international students being admitted to the University to ensure that they can meet the academic challenges. There are clear



University of Maryland OIS Team

statements in all sources of information provided by the University about the expectations and high academic standards expected of students. Most importantly, resources have been put in place to support students through additional mentoring to ensure that students are aware of the help and support they can get from their departments and the University as a whole. Mentors assist not only with academic support, but also areas such as finance or accommodation problems. This mentoring role has been developed over recent years. Each academic is trained to be a mentor and stays in touch with their students on a regular basis. This active intervention has improved retention rates in recent years.

The OIS in Maryland also plays a very active role in the lives of international students. There are five advisers who provide advice to 3,132 students.

The OIS prepares and runs a range of activities and services aimed at integrating international students to the life of the University as much as possible. They believe that by doing so students will be more open and willing to come forward with any problems or

difficulties they may have that could cause them to drop out.

These activities include: orientation programmes – students are asked to arrive 30 days before the new academic year begins. During orientation there are numerous welcome sessions, a range of workshops about employment and work in the US in general and the Maryland area in particular, issues relating to spouses, families, education, housing, health and insurance and the US classroom culture. I especially liked that the OIS actively promotes an internet chat room for the students who for two hours every day can discuss various issues with staff members.

The OIS also organises a coffee hour once a week sponsored by different departments at the University. The international students can get together with academic and administrative staff from various departments, including the OIS staff. It is a very effective social and study networking forum. The OIS also organises at least one international event each month with an online calendar which international students can access to see what is coming up.

I also liked the way that all the OIS advisers meet for about two hours on Fridays and share information about the week, reviewing events and the cases that occurred and considering possible ideas and solutions. There is a meeting with the Students' Union once a week on a Friday aimed at ensuring international students are included and engaged in the wider activities of the University. The importance of integrating the students within the University was stressed to me several times.

Retention in Maryland is high and international students rarely drop out. There are only about ten students every academic year who do not complete their courses. Staff at Maryland believe this is because of the strength of their selection procedures which are rigorous, particularly with regard to the financial status of prospective students.

Importance of academic advising - Office of Advising and Support, Information and Services (OASIS) at NCSU

It was very interesting to see the Office of Advising, Support, Information and Services (OASIS) at NCSU. The office is available to all undergraduate students

across the university. OASIS provides an extensive range of academic advice, as well as coaching and mentoring services. These can be accessed face-to-face or online. Its goal is to ensure the academic success of all undergraduate students.

Students are able to go to the office with any academic queries or concerns they may have, from wanting to change course to seeking future career advice. OASIS also organises SMART workshops on time management, note-taking, essay planning and writing, and exam techniques.

Students with particular difficulties can receive one-to-one coaching twice a month. Coaches sign a contract with each student. They meet each student for two hours at the beginning of each semester to discuss issues and review progress. Coaches need to write status forms about the students, and they then inform the OASIS as well as the OIS. The exact content of meeting between students and coaches is confidential but a record is kept that students approached the office for coaching or were referred by their department. The OASIS also runs a very successful Peer Mentoring scheme where new students can be mentored and supported by existing students. This works particularly well for international students and has proved to be an excellent way of making new, supportive friendships and contacts.

Student and Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS): monitoring students at NCSU and Maryland

The immigration regulations recently introduced by the UK Border Agency relating to international students are very similar to those already in place in the USA. It is the responsibility of the OIS to provide the link between the university and the US government.

The US Immigration Service requires the following information each semester on every international student from every Student and Exchange Visitor Program (SEVP) certified school:

- name, date of birth, country of birth, country of citizenship, source and amount of financial resources, academic program, level of study, program start and end dates
- arrival and enrollment or failure to enroll

- a change of the student or dependent's legal name or address
- graduation prior to the end date listed on their visa
- academic or disciplinary actions taken due to criminal conviction
- registration for less than a full course of study without prior authorization
- termination date and reason for termination
- other data generated by standard procedures such as program extension, school transfer, change in level of study, employment authorization, and reinstatement
- failure to complete the academic program or program objective

The SEVIS database therefore contains the students' biographical data, address, and place of study, as well as course start and end dates. Within 30 days following the deadline for enrolling for classes, the OIS is required to report if students have failed to enrol. Moreover, during each term or session, schools are required to report within 30 days details such as whether a student dropped below the minimum number of hours of study for a full-time course without prior authorisation, or failed to advise on their current address.

Within 21 days, schools are required to report any 'reportable events' such as: failure to complete the programme; change of name or address; early graduation or completion of programme; any disciplinary action taken by the university and/or any criminal convictions. The OIS is also required to respond within 21 days to any other request made by SEVIS with respect to the current status of any student.

The Department for Homeland Security has argued that these details have been kept by schools and universities for decades. The difference introduced by SEVIS is that this data is now collected centrally on a live database and can be accessed by a range of governmental bodies in the US and abroad. Failure to comply with the demands of the above can lead to a student's SEVIS record being terminated. Without a SEVIS record, students are unable to finish their courses and are required to return home. Ultimately, universities could lose their SEVP certified status if they fail to meet the demands of SEVIS.

During my visit I was advised that while the database was now working well, SEVIS had been an extremely

complicated IT system to introduce, with numerous technical difficulties. Once the system was up and running, the fact that data had to be transmitted on a regular basis had proved time-consuming to OIS staff. It had been costly and time-consuming for the OIS to enter all of the student data into the system and develop applications that could handle the new data needs. Initially, there had been some difficulties with students not being granted entry to the US because of issues relating to SEVIS or because information had been entered erroneously.

It was clear that the OIS at both universities saw close links with international students and their departments, their course tutors and academic advisers as a way to track students and keep up to date on their status. In this way they were able to maintain accurate records and manage their workload and attempting to avoid fire-fighting issues as they arose.

Reflections

At the University of Surrey we have a low number of international students who withdraw from their courses, only 6.7%. Through our meet-and-greet, orientation and other events organised through the year we establish close links with our international students. It is unclear at this stage how the new UK Border Agency and Home Office regulations will impact on our working routine and workload in the International Student Office. It may however have a significant impact.

From my visit to North Carolina State and Maryland Universities, I believe we could learn from the proactive approach of their OIS's in terms of the range of activities they organise for international students and the efforts they put in to building and maintaining links with other academic advisers, departments and faculties. Monitoring of students will improve by being proactive and by building closer relationships with students and departments.

The benefits are even happier and more successful students, a reduced number of 'reportable events', such as withdrawals, that need to go to the immigration departments and as a result a more manageable workload.

Support and integration of exchange students at the National University of Singapore and Hong Kong University

by Polly Penner, International Student Adviser, King's College London

Objectives

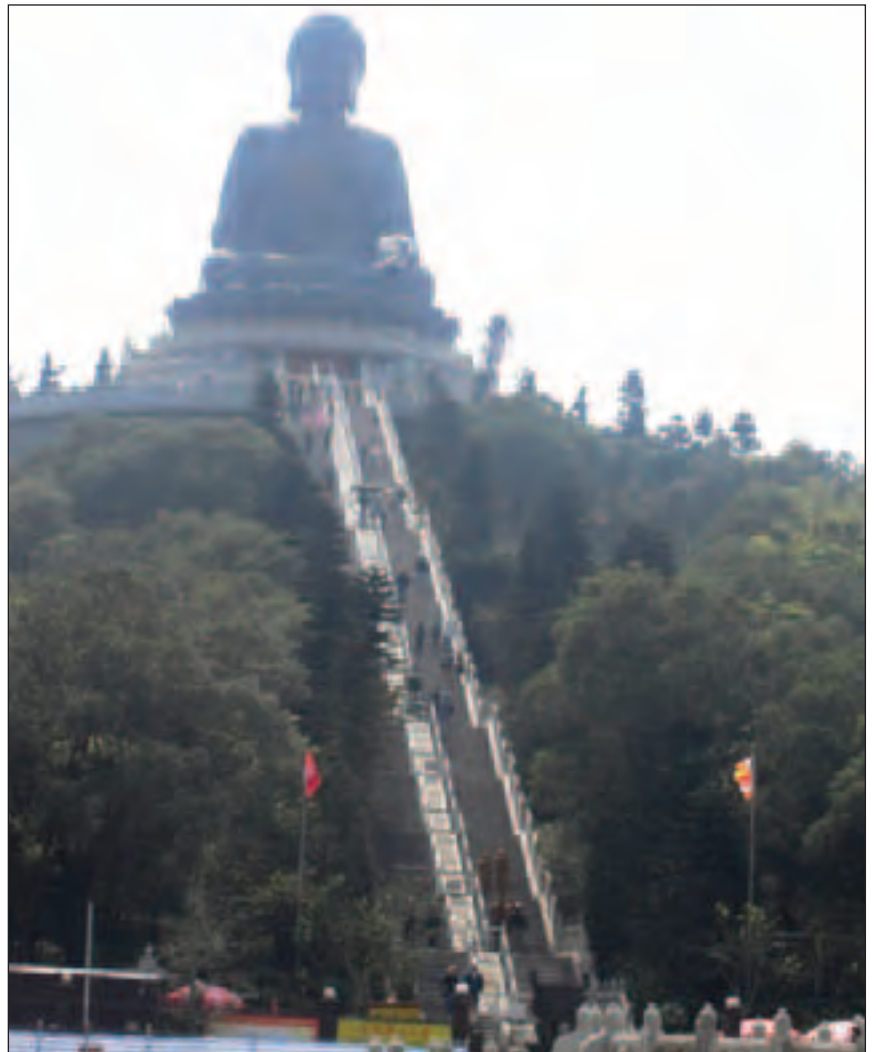
As the International Student Adviser at King's College London I am heavily involved with preparing new international and exchange students for their arrival in the UK, running Orientation activities for them upon arrival and providing support for them throughout their stay in the UK. Both the National University of Singapore (NUS) and Hong Kong University (HKU) have a strong international ethos and are also exchange partners with King's, so I was keen to see how they support students, and in particular seek to integrate students into the wider community, especially those who were only visiting the institutions for a short time, and who had arrived in the second or third years of study, when arguably a community had already formed there. During both visits I spoke to current exchange students as well as students who had returned from visits in the UK to discuss their experiences, toured the campuses and met with staff to discuss in detail support and activities on offer.

Main outcomes

The staff and students I spoke to at both institutions were keen to stress the importance of providing students with a good all-round experience, encompassing academic, cultural and social elements, and as such have developed many services and policies to assist with this, some of which are already common in many UK institutions. In particular, I found the Buddy schemes at both institutions, and the use of a 'Global Lounge' space at HKU, to be innovative and of great benefit to the students there, and both ideas which could potentially be adapted by institutions in the UK.

Introduction to NUS

NUS has a strong international ethos. 20% of its undergraduate students and 75% of its research staff are



Big Buddha, Hong Kong

international, with around 1,000 exchange students additionally each year. It has over 200 partner institutions in 30 countries, and in 2008/09 20% of NUS undergraduates experienced an international visit of some kind. Its aim is to send 50% of its students on an international visit of some kind (including exchanges, internships and summer schools) by 2012. Many of the students have therefore had experience as international students elsewhere themselves, and as such many I spoke

to felt the community as a whole was more receptive to the needs of overseas students.

Exchanges are co-ordinated by the International Relations Office who provide briefings and support for outgoing students. Incoming students are supported by the Office of Student Affairs which assists with immigration matters, provides detailed information both on and pre-arrival (described by one current exchange student as



Polly Penter with National University of Singapore students

where students can visit families within the city and participate in local festivals and celebrations (eg Chinese New Year). They also hold an annual student festival, 'In-Fusion', showcasing different cultures. As in the UK there is also an active Students' Union.

The i.Care Programme ("International Connect And Relations Enthusiasts")

The iCare programme is a volunteering scheme for students providing support for other international students at NUS. It covers three main areas:

Buddies

Incoming students who opt to have a 'buddy' are allocated to current students two to three weeks before arriving at NUS. Their buddy will be in touch with them via email. (The University's Sharepoint system allows potential buddies to see anonymised information about incoming students so they can pick which students they might like to meet – rather like online dating! This system means that students are likely to be well-matched with their buddy).

Buddies perform a number of tasks. As well as helping to prepare students

for their arrival, incoming students can also opt for their buddies to meet them at the airport and travel with them to NUS. Students who were currently on exchange said that they found this service extremely useful and comforting, and students from NUS who had returned from UK exchanges and not been met at the airport felt that this was something which should always be offered. Buddies are then on hand for the first few weeks following the students' arrival, and are encouraged to meet with them informally for coffee to see how things are going, and take them along to events to help them settle in.

Students who volunteer for the programme usually buddy two or three students, and have often been on exchange themselves. They receive a briefing prior to their charges arriving, and attend cross-cultural training. Buddies are unpaid, but receive expenses to cover reasonable travel costs. Buddies are also useful as they can be used as a student's emergency contact where they don't already have a contact in Singapore.

Event associates

These are students who arrange activities such as food tours and visits to famous sites such as local mosques and temples, etc. They receive support from the Office of Student Affairs, but activities are student-led. Again, participating students have often been on exchanges themselves so know what sort of activities students may want to do. One great benefit of event associates is that it ensures that activities to help introduce students to their new home and culture continue beyond Orientation week. Many institutions in the UK do not have the capacity to run or oversee events post-orientation due to a high workload. The lack of such events was one of the criticisms raised by NUS students who had returned from exchanges in the UK.

Conversation peers

These are students who meet up with overseas students outside of classes to practise English conversation. This is arranged by the students and often takes place in social settings on campus.

The buddying system at NUS seemed to have huge benefits both to the students who were 'buddied' and the students

who volunteered. Incoming students said that they felt a huge burden of responsibility was lifted by the fact that they were told by students in advance what sort of things to bring with them and what to expect, and that they were met at the airport. They felt that it helped them to integrate with local students as the impetus was on the buddy to introduce them to people and activities, rather than on them to take the initiative themselves at a time when they were trying to get to grips with so many other things.

Buddies themselves felt they benefited in that they had the opportunity to mix with students from other cultures. This was particularly valuable to students who were planning to go or had already been on an exchange themselves. Students also felt the opportunities offered by the programme enhanced employability, both in terms of the work undertaken and the exposure to different cultures. One student said she felt *“a personal belonging to NUS”* as a result of her involvement in the programme, and another described it as *“an enriching and rewarding experience and a fantastic opportunity to learn new things and add more vibrancy to one’s life.”*

Further testimonials from volunteers can be found at <www.nus.sg/osa/international/icare/icare.html>

NUS has a system whereby if second or third year students wish to remain in on-campus housing they must earn points in order to do so. Points are earned for participation in the life of the community, for example organising events. NUS students felt this was a good incentive to building community spirit as students were always eager to get involved in and take the initiative in organising different activities.

Introduction to HKU

HKU has over 180 exchange partners in 25 countries throughout the world. Currently around 20% of its students are from overseas (including mainland China) with around 800 incoming and outgoing exchange students each year, but they are actively looking to increase this. Like NUS it provides structured, comprehensive support for its overseas and exchange students, with incoming students supported by the Centre of Development and Resources for Students (CEDARS) who provide detailed information in advance, which students I spoke to felt covered everything they needed to know, and a basic Orientation programme.



Global Lounge, Hong Kong University

A large Students’ Union arranges sports and other activities (one student described facilities on campus as *“fantastic”*), and a special ‘Global Launch’ team organises trips and activities throughout the year open to overseas and local students that explore the local region and culture, including celebrations for Christmas, Chinese New Year, St Patrick’s Day and other festivals. Staff in the Global Launch team felt that exploring festivals from other cultures was a valuable way of encouraging integration and internationalisation amongst the student community as a whole.

Buddying Scheme

Like NUS, HKU operates a large buddy scheme open to all international students, including exchange students to help with the transition to a new culture. They felt that, particularly for students from markets such as the UK and USA, this was particularly important as such students were more likely to experience culture shock in their new, unfamiliar environment than, say, students from mainland China, so having students from that region as a guide was useful. Students volunteer for the programme over the summer, and those who have been on exchange themselves are particularly targeted to help as it is felt they can empathise with incoming exchange students.

Buddies undergo training where they are given various facts and figures, as well as cultural awareness training, to ensure they are able to answer most questions they may be asked

by incoming students. They are then encouraged to contact their students several weeks before the start of the year to answer any questions or concerns they may have. Like NUS, students can be met and taken by their buddy to HKU, and travel expenses are refunded, though students arrange meet-ups at Central Station because it has proved difficult to find suitable meeting places at the airport. Students are encouraged to use the airport shuttle service into the city.

Global Lounge

The Global Lounge at HKU is a large, multi-purpose space which is open to all students, all day, including at weekends. As well as incorporating a large social space (the room has a café at one end and is full of comfortable sofas as well as informal work space, and there are several televisions showing programmes from around the world) the room is also large enough to host talks, small events and club and society meetings. Throughout the week many events such as talks, cultural showcases and meetings are held there, though the rest of the space remains open as a social space. The space also acts as a library, holding materials from all HKU’s partner institutions for students considering studying abroad, and also including lots of travel and tourism information both on the local area and countries within travelling distance of Hong Kong, to encourage students to explore and make the most of their time there.

Of the students I spoke to, several agreed that the lounge was *“a really*

useful place if you're lonely or feeling homesick, because you always know you'll find someone from your own country or close by that you can talk to" and all had used it at some point during their exchange.

The students I spoke to at HKU on the whole did not seem to feel as integrated within the university community as those at NUS, and they felt it was up to exchange students to make a concerted effort to get to know local students and participate in activities. This is in contrast to NUS, and could perhaps be explained by the large number of NUS students who have themselves participated in some sort of exchange. Local students I spoke to at NUS felt that the fact that they and/or many of their peers had experienced life as an exchange student meant that they were both more willing and better equipped to empathise with and support incoming students.

Module adjustment initiatives

Staff at both HKU and NUS acknowledged that an issue faced by exchange students was making the correct module choices. Due to anxiety about the different academic systems and the complexity of credit transfers, students I spoke to said they were tempted to opt for more familiar courses, rather than taking the risk of trying courses which may be more challenging or interesting or perhaps unique to the institution in which they were studying.

Both institutions have introduced administrative procedures to deal with this – known as 'Module adjustment' at NUS and 'The Add/Drop period' at HKU. Under this system students are allowed to enrol for up to two extra modules at the beginning of the semester and drop two at a later, agreed date, having been able to attend classes and make an informed choice as to which modules will be best for them. This is a good system and encourages people to be more adventurous, and takes away the administrative burden of actively changing courses. The exchange students I spoke to found this system very valuable.

Recommendations for King's College London and other institutions

Both NUS and HKU have introduced various innovative ideas and practices to the implementation of their exchange programmes and support of

the students who attend them, both to the benefit of the students on exchange and the university community as a whole. Some of these ideas could be adapted to benefit students attending exchange programmes in the UK:

- Consider introducing new exchange opportunities rather than just one semester/year, for example Summer Schools, so there is a broader range of choice. Students at NUS didn't all want to be away from home for a whole semester/year, but would have been interested in a summer programme; others were keen to go to more than one institution, and wished to attend one institution for the academic year and another for the summer. It is also worth considering the benefits of encouraging a higher proportion of Home students to undertake exchanges themselves. This could help in making UK institutions a more attractive option to potential exchange students.
- At King's, and no doubt at other institutions, difficulties sometimes arise with regards to module choices. Students unfamiliar with the UK system and concerned about how their grades will translate into their own system are often unsure which modules to take, and sometimes play safe with regard to module choices. Although there will of course be administrative constraints, it's worth considering whether it is possible, like at NUS and HKU, to allow students to take one or two extra modules if desired, and then drop the one they do not wish to take by an agreed date later in the term.
- Consider introducing a 'buddy' scheme. This will allow institutions to cover certain areas not covered by other, overstretched services, (eg airport pick-ups), create opportunities for the students participating and help ease exchange students into their new environment. At King's, for example, we do not run airport pick-ups as we have found no practical way of doing this. Students can arrive into any of the four main airports around London, and will be travelling to residences and campuses all over the city. Matching individuals to new students and requesting that they meet them on arrival, perhaps at the main railway station where the Express trains arrive, may be a way of addressing this and providing a valuable service to students. Buddy schemes

also have the benefit of providing valuable experience to students who volunteer, and could be run in conjunction with Students' Unions at many UK institutions.

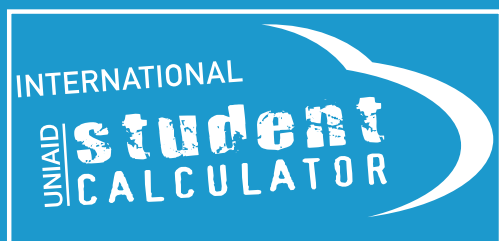
- Although space in many UK universities is at a premium, and facilities dedicated to social interactions and activities may not be given priority in terms of economic and space planning, the provision of a combined social/information space for overseas and exchange students could be considered where possible as it served many purposes and brought many benefits to the students who used the space at HKU. Such a space could potentially cut down on some of the workload of other services as much of the information is available there without students needing to ask for it. It would also be a useful space for students both to find out about and encourage one another in activities such as travelling within the UK and Europe.

Conclusion

I am extremely grateful to the PMI, through UKCISA, for providing me with the opportunity to visit these institutions, and to the students and staff at NUS and HKU for being so welcoming and providing me with so much information. The visit served to highlight many areas for possible innovation and improvement to our own services, and gave me some interesting insights into how such improvements could be addressed to improve the experience offered to Study Abroad and other international students, particularly during a time where many institutions are increasing the number of both incoming and outgoing exchange students.

Useful Links

National University of Singapore: <www.nus.edu.sg>
 Hong Kong University: <www.hku.hk>
 i.Care Programme: <www.nus.edu.sg/osa/international/icare/icare.html>
 Hong Kong University Office of International Student Exchange: <www3.hku.hk/oise/eng/intro.php>
 CEDARS: <www.cedars.hku.hk/cedars>



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www.studentcalculator.org.uk/international

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www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk

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