

# International students and local communities – a research project by HOST UK

Caro Hart, Jenny Sheehy-Skeffington, Ingrid Charles

## Introduction

The launch of the second Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education in April 2006 included an emphasis on improving not only practical matters relating to studying in the UK, but the 'international student experience' in general. International students have a huge impact on the communities within which they reside, socially, economically and, unfortunately, in tension arising from cultural misunderstandings. Work such as that undertaken in 2005 by the University of Nottingham and others demonstrated that active integration of international students with the community to increase mutual understanding has beneficial effects. The set of skills around living in a multi-cultural society and of interacting with people with different religions, ethnic origins and values to oneself are increasingly important for people to acquire.

The UKCOSA report "Broadening Our Horizons" (2004) showed the impact of good social integration on the students' perceptions of Britain. International students with UK friends were more likely to be satisfied with their stay in the UK; the figure rising from 86% to 93% of students. HOST facilitated a workshop at the UKCOSA conference in July 2006 around social integration of international students within their local community and drew out and discussed ways in which various Universities undertake work such as befriending and mentoring schemes, international students volunteering in the community and others. It emerged that there is a strong need for such work to reduce the impact of cultural misunderstandings on both sides and foster friendship and integration.

HOST is a registered Charity which has 20 years' experience in this sector. We have a network of volunteers around Britain, who will occasionally invite an international student to stay as a guest in their home for a day or for a weekend or across a festive period. We have a unique range of experience which led us to apply for funding to undertake this study from the Department of Education and Skills, under the second Prime Ministers' Initiative for International Education.

## The study

This study was about developing ways of measuring the success of projects and initiatives aimed at helping international students to meet and integrate with their local communities in the UK. It was specifically about using these measures to evaluate several cases and about gaining an understanding of the context of work done by universities to help their students to get to know British people and thus to add great value to their time in Britain.

Taking into account previous research and the literature on the issues, the study began with three aims:

1. To measure the impacts of international students on local communities in the UK, in areas *with* and *without* institution-led community initiatives.
2. To measure the effects of institution-led initiatives aimed at improving the relationship between international students and local communities in the UK.
3. To draw lessons from the findings for the design of successful initiatives, for the benefit of further education

and higher education institutions that wish to work toward the integration of international students into local communities in the UK.

The goal of expanding the type of research already completed was combined with a recognition of the very differing local conditions to be found in the various areas in which international students live. For this reason, it was decided to conduct case studies in a select set of areas, from which to draw an overall impression of the picture on a national level, while retaining sensitivity to local detail. The impact of international students on each area was measured, along with the success of any institution-led initiatives that aimed to improve this impact. The approach to data collection in each case study area was three-pronged; surveys, informal focus groups and semi-structured interviews. We also conducted a survey among universities for more details on the sorts of schemes they run.

The universities ran a wide range of schemes to help international students integrate in or familiarise themselves with the local community. Out of the nineteen institutions that took part in the survey, seven used the HOST programme or had a similar one of their own. A further six institutions had student 'buddies', which were second or third year students showing the 'newbies' the ropes. They also had members of the staff and faculty acting as mentors. We found that one of the most successful links between international students and the local community was made at the various places of worship, or events organised by churches.



The survey discovered that a successful way of integrating international students was to encourage them to join volunteering schemes. The schemes cover a huge range of activities for both domestic and international students. For example; schemes where there are a higher number of international students include helping in charity shops; translating in schools, Doctors' surgeries and advice centres; and taking part in or initiating clean up projects in their local areas. This gives international students the opportunity to share in the responsibility for their community; helping them to feel more welcome.

International students get involved in clean up projects that cover litter patrol on local streets, in particular in the areas where the students live and there are special 'green' projects to clear areas of parkland & forests making it safe for residents, especially children to use. One international student in Middlesbrough started up a fortnightly campus litter-pick that spread to the deprived streets surrounding the university, thus forging strong links with the local council. He was nominated and won the local Citizen of the Year award in 2006 presented by the Mayor of Middlesbrough.

These schemes, and others, benefit the students because they:

- Help international students feel more confident using spoken English in real situations.
- Give them a true sense of belonging and responsibility.
- May give them their first experiences of team working & decision making.

- Help them learn new skills or develop latent ones.
- Show them as being part of the community, which is extremely important in breaking down barriers.
- Show them a side of UK culture they would not normally see on campus.
- Give international students the opportunity to represent their country and their culture.
- Make the students feel valued. They have fun and it makes their stay in the UK more memorable.
- Gives them exposure to 'real life' and they develop a certain pride in their work.

Many of the nineteen universities interviewed believed their schemes resulted in an increased awareness of British customs and culture after the students had taken part in a volunteering scheme. The participants felt more welcomed by the university, the community and the country as a whole and were therefore, more likely to recommend a similar scheme or event to the next round of international students. In the long term, they felt an affinity with the country of their study and would be more likely to suggest coming to this country to visit or study to a friend or even in the future, to their children.

### The results

This study set out to look at the international student experience from the other side. How does the presence of international students in a community affect it and how do activities which set out to increase mutual understanding benefit the communities. Other studies have emphasised the benefits to the students: 93% of international students thought meeting people from other cultures "enriched the student experience"; 67% of international students said being involved in a volunteering scheme helped to improve their English; 72% of international students said being involved in a volunteering project helped them to learn about British culture.

The difference in key measurements between groups of local residents who were involved in initiatives and those who were not, was startling:

### Knowledge of the students' cultures

Participants in schemes self-assessed as having a very or quite good knowledge of the students' cultures in one third of cases which is more than double the 15% of non-participating respondents in the residential surveys. They also assessed themselves as being able to relate very well or quite well to international students in 81% of responses as opposed to just 50% in the base-line study of residents. Clearly people gain a range of skills and knowledge through interacting with international students that are very useful in a multi-cultural society.

### The importance of cross-cultural friendship

A significant change was in what people said about the importance of cross-cultural friendships; 95% of people taking part in schemes said they thought that making such friendships was very or quite important, with none at all saying it was unimportant. In the base study, 78% were in favour of such friendships, but up to 27% thought they were unimportant. Up to 76% of respondents in the studies of the various schemes explicitly identified an overall positive change through their integration with the international students.

### Local perceptions of international students

The overall perception of the impact of international students on the local area is changed for the better by local people becoming involved in schemes involving international students; with 89% saying the international students have positive





impacts as opposed to 68% of those who are not involved holding such opinions. Interestingly, this also has an effect on their perception of the impact on their communities of students in general, going from 36% believing that students in general have a positive effect to 92% identifying such an effect. Moreover, in one study in the base residents group 100% of respondents believed that students had little impact and in one study in the participants group, 100% said that there was a positive impact. This is an outcome which must be very much sought after.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It would appear that there are great benefits on both sides to work being undertaken by institutions and by organisations such as HOST.

*"It has been suggested that a cohesive Community is one where...strong and positive relationships are being developed between people from different backgrounds in the workplaces, in schools and within neighbourhoods."* (Commission for Racial Equality, 2002)

This study has suggested some practical ways in which Institutions, communities and organisations such as HOST can work together to provide the basis for these relationships.

Many institutions recognise that active integration of international students into the local community is necessary for maintaining good community relationships and for adding essential value to their student experience. As one study

concludes:

*"The presence of international students, even in large numbers, is insufficient in itself to promote intercultural interactions, to develop intercultural friendships and to result in international understanding: situations must be structured to foster these processes."* (Ward, 2001)

There are many good initiatives out there, as evidenced by the results of the "snapshot" described above, but they are patchily administered and go unreported in the main.

The recommendations arising from this project are therefore:

- That a piece of work be done to scope out the current provision for integration of international students with local communities, the success of individual schemes and that this be made available as a resource including best-practice note and case-studies to the sector.
- That work be done to develop the ways of measuring success as described above into a standardised suite of monitoring resources suitable for use across a variety of schemes.
- That work be done to develop complementary measures in relation to the international students' perception of the community arising from initiatives that they become involved in. It was outwith the brief of this study, but work is clearly needed to complete the picture.

International students have impacts on the communities within which they live, work, socialise and volunteer. In the "Broadening our Horizons" study, 59% said they wanted "more chance to experience UK culture and family life". The impact they have on those members of local communities who interact with them is astounding; 92% of people believe that having international students in their communities has beneficial effects. Clearly it is a "win-win" proposition which presents opportunities for us all.

## References

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