

#WeAreInternational
Grants scheme 2022–24
Research

**Exploring opportunities
and challenges to
international students’
sense of belonging and
inclusion in the UK**

University of Nottingham and
International Students House

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UKCISA is a membership organisation that works to support international students and the institutions, students' unions and organisations who work closely with them.

The #WeAreInternational Grants scheme focuses on integrating the principles of the **#WeAreInternational Student Charter** in higher and further education institutions in the UK, to deliver a world-class international student experience, from pre-arrival to post-graduation.



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1. Introduction

Universities across the UK are world leaders in recruiting international students and have invested significantly in infrastructure and resources that support international students (Brinkert et al., 2020). However, while these efforts are appreciable, international students still face a number of challenges, such as cultural differences in systems (housing, NHS) and values (food, alcohol consumption). These differences can inculcate feelings of isolation and loneliness that have a detrimental impact on their educational experience and mental and social wellbeing. The transition to a different education system and social environment can further exacerbate such challenges, making it essential to address these students' specific needs (Crawford et al., 2016; Gbadamosi, 2018).

Research has shown that loneliness and social isolation can be significantly reduced by creating a sense of community, inclusion and connection to the university community – peers, their faculty and the institution – and are crucial for students' academic success and wellbeing. A strong sense of social belonging is associated with positive academic outcomes, increased retention rates and student satisfaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hausmann et al., 2007).

2. Research aim

Despite the efforts of university staff tasked with international student support, there is a gap between the resources provided and the student's ability to access this support. Among the challenges faced are cultural shock and a lack of understanding of systems such as housing, the NHS and education, and of social norms in relation to inter-personal interaction, and food culture. Depending on how they interact and adapt to their new environment, international students may be prone to feelings of isolation and loneliness, which may negatively impact their educational experience and overall wellbeing.

While research on social belonging in international students has made significant contributions to current understandings of the challenges they face, there are several areas that warrant further investigation. Firstly, it is critical to explore and identify the socio-psychological and academic challenges faced by students from diverse cultures. Secondly, it is important to develop outputs that can be utilised by universities across the UK to educate students about UK culture and assist them in navigating feelings of loneliness. By providing such outputs, universities can better support international students in their adjustment to a new environment and enhance their sense of belonging.

The following questions guided the research:

- A) How do international students experience social belonging and social isolation while studying in the UK?
- B) What are the challenges and barriers that international students face in developing a sense of social belonging and inclusion?

3. Summary of research outcomes

Our research explored the perceptions and experiences of international students and revealed a number of challenges and methods of addressing them, including:

Initial experiences



Challenges:

- unfamiliarity with local culture
- communicating in a non-native language
- changes causing feelings of anxiety and alienation from their own culture



Remedies:

- adapting by building new social habits and learning from every situation
- maintaining connections to own culture

Ongoing support and development



Challenges:

- a need to be taught to navigate systems such as banking and housing
- understanding typical UK career paths
- a need to understand unwritten social rules



Remedies:

- induction support and peer-to-peer connections
- exposure to UK norms, volunteering, and networking

Interconnectedness with community and sense of belonging



Challenges:

- expected to socialise while being exhausted from information overload and adjusting to their new environment after arrival
- inability to find common ground and engage with peers



Remedies:

- investing time into building new relationships with kindness and patience at the core
- familiarity and comfort in friendships with others from a similar background (sharing an ethnic, religious, cultural, or academic experience)
- finding home comforts in food and media, and participating in (preferably free) social activities

Academic integration



Challenges:

- expected levels of contact with lecturers and tutors not met
- not receiving the help they need or expect
- hesitancy to ask questions through feelings of inadequacy or lack of understanding of the system



Remedies:

- tailored support to facilitate adaption to new academic systems
- signposting to support services throughout their studies

4. Research methodology

The project employed a mixed-methods design (both qualitative and quantitative data) to answer the research questions.

Sample

The sample for the project comprised international students from London and the Midlands. Semi-structured interviews of 22 questions were conducted with 26 individuals. Survey data was obtained from 90 students over 15 questions, shared via email. 52 responses to the survey were analysed, based on the degree of completeness.

Table 1 and 2 Participants' demographic details

Interviews			Survey		
Age	18-21	3	Age	18-21	20
	22-29	18		22-29	20
	30 +	5		30 +	12
Sex	M	9	Sex	M	37
	F	17		F	15
Level of Study	Undergrad	10	Level of Study	Undergrad	22
	Postgrad	6		Postgrad	25
	PhD	10		PhD	5
Region	Middle East	4	Region	Middle East	7
	Latin America	3		Latin America	5
	East Asia	7		East Asia	8
	Europe	4		Europe	9
	Africa	3		Africa	4
	Central Asia	4		Central Asia	15
	North America	1		Not declared	3
					North America

Data analysis

Qualitative data

The study employed thematic analysis of data obtained from in-depth interviews with international students to identify and analyse recurring themes and patterns in relation to social belonging, social relationships, and support.

Survey data

In-depth descriptive analysis was conducted of the survey data. This provided valuable insights into the prevalence and impact of challenges in relation to social belonging and wellbeing for international students. The survey study explored the personal and institutional supports available to international students, shedding light on the existing support systems and their effectiveness in addressing identified challenges.

Stakeholder conference

To obtain stakeholder feedback on our research, we held a conference/round-table meeting in London in early January 2024. Professional staff, academic staff and students attended, either online or in person, and provided critical recommendations based on our results. The recommendations are currently being compiled into a toolkit for international students to access online.

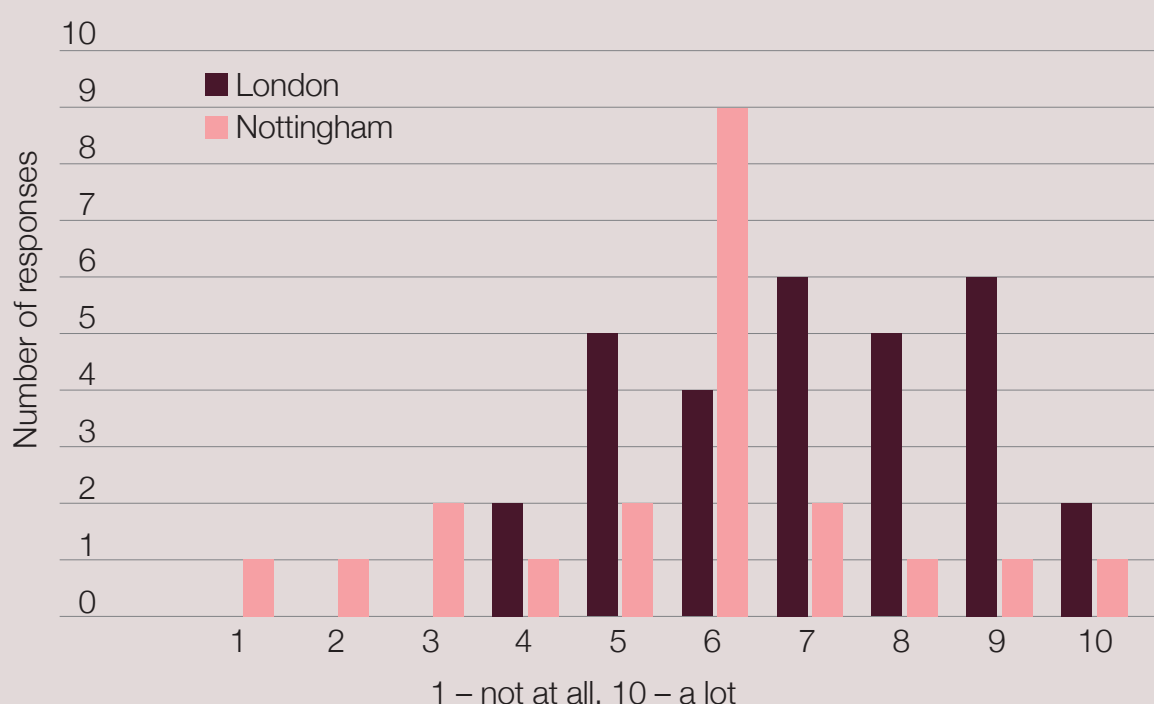
5. Key research findings

Our research has highlighted the challenges that international students face when arriving and studying in UK. It has shown the strategies they employ for dealing with them and the further support that needs to be provided. Importantly, our research has emphasised what ‘belonging’ means to students.

Adjustment and acculturation

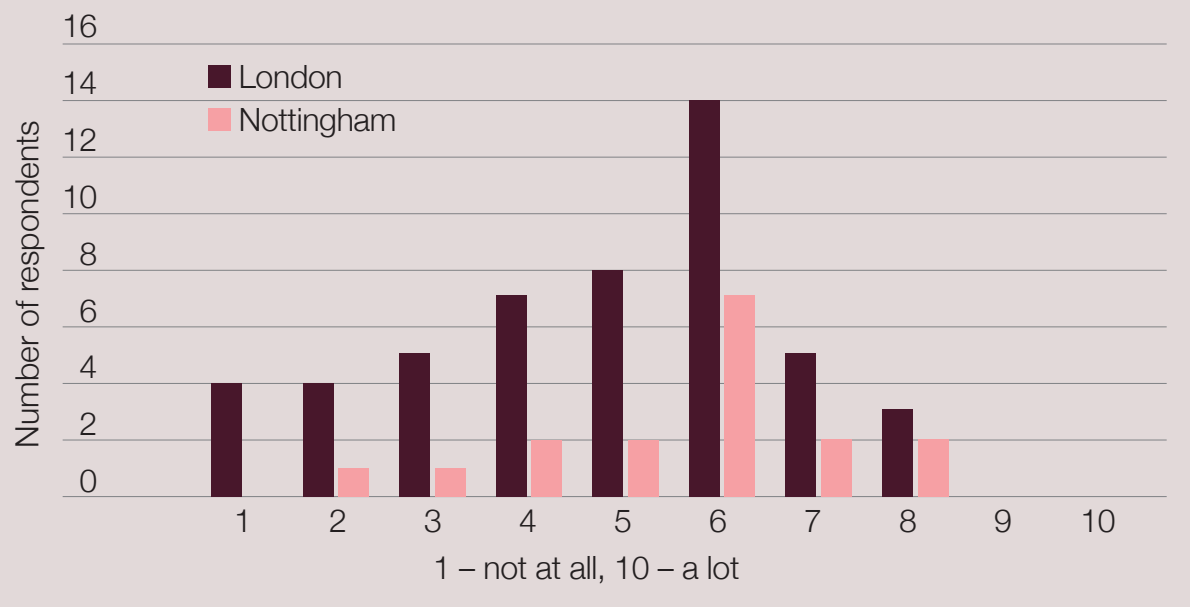
We considered how welcomed the surveyed students felt on arrival and explored their cultural overview and sense of belonging from three perspectives: the similarity between their culture and the UK’s; the degree of their cultural shock; and the extent to which they agree with elements of UK culture.

Figure 1 – Students feeling welcomed in the UK



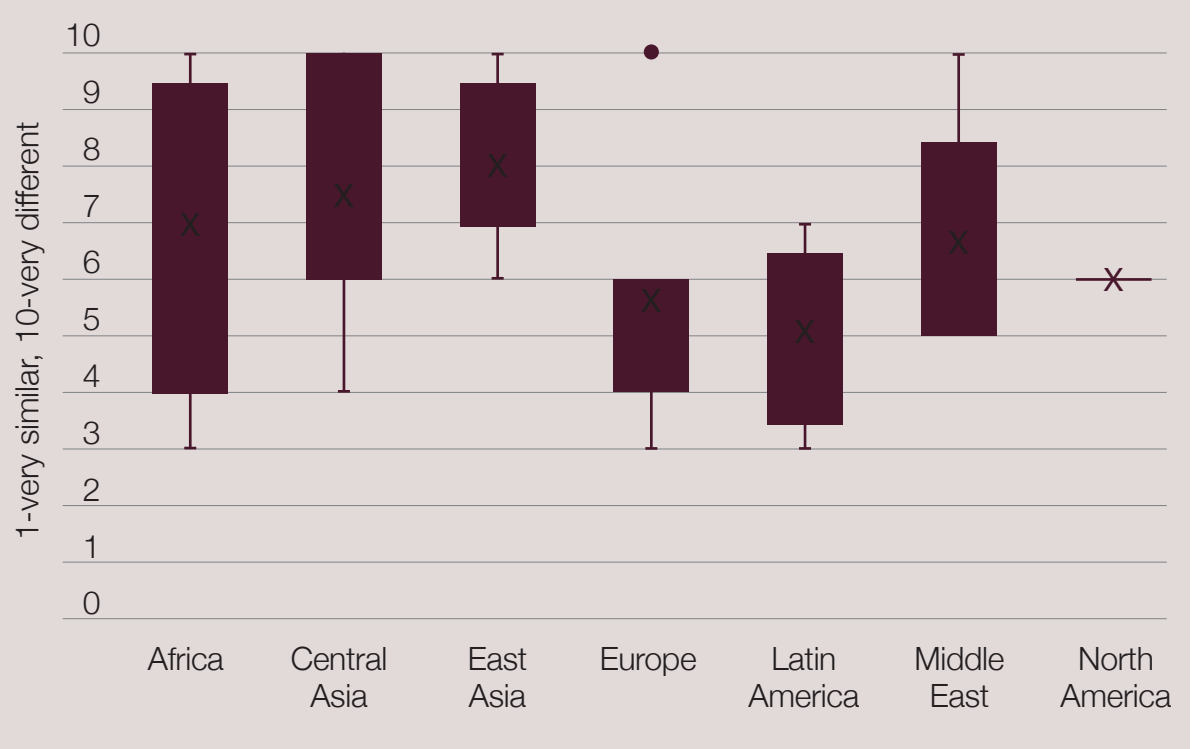
On arrival, many students suffer overwhelm and feelings of alienation from their own culture, which can have negative socio-psychological impact on their social and academic life. Cultural shock was slightly lower for London participants than those in Nottingham, with a similar trend being recorded for feeling welcome in the UK, hinting at easier integration for international students in London

Figure 2 – Students reporting cultural shock

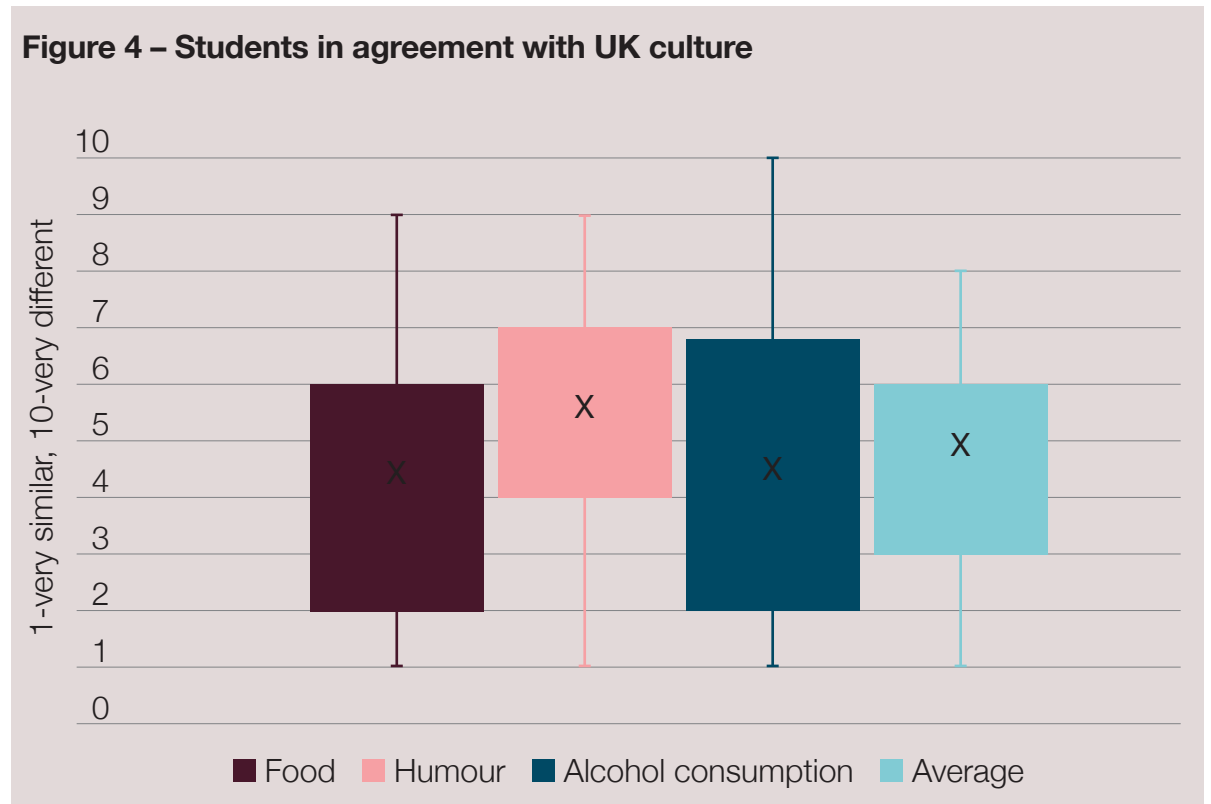


The highest cultural dissimilarity scores were seen in Asian and African students.

Figure 3 – Students' perceptions of the differences between UK culture and their own

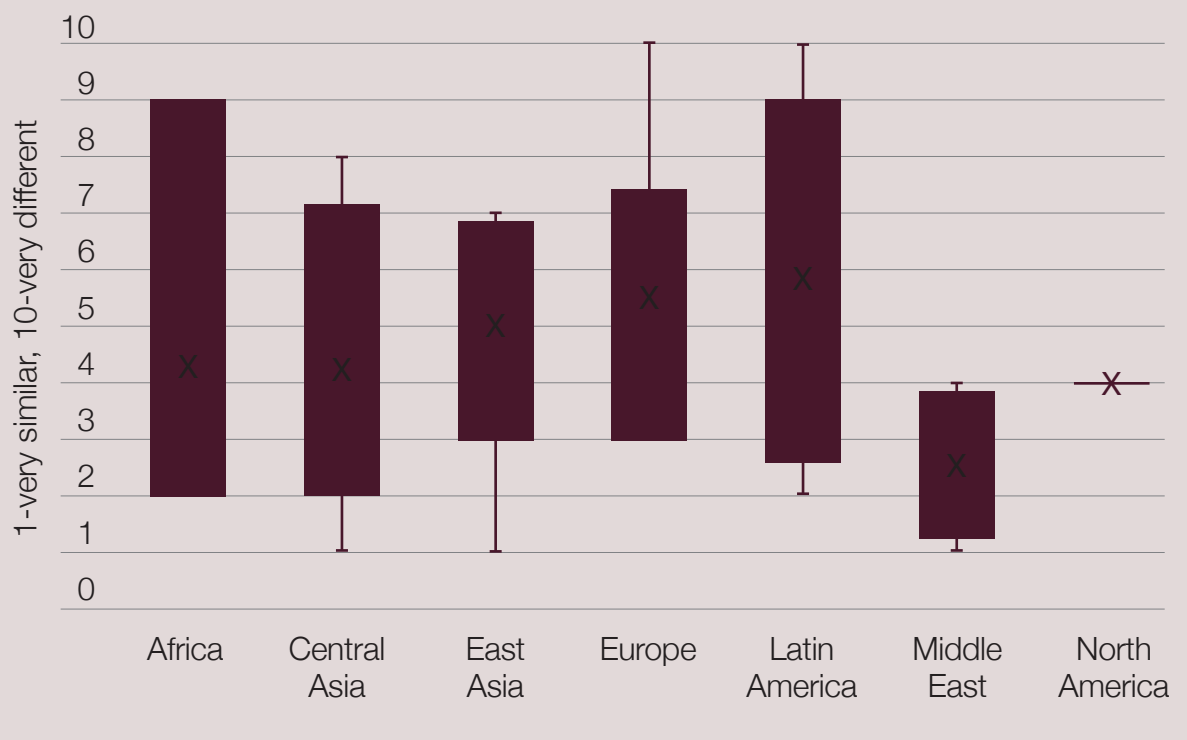


There was moderate agreement with elements of UK culture (food, humour and alcohol consumption) across universities, with slightly higher scores for London students.



Latin American students reported the greatest communication issues, despite having the best acculturation scores, suggesting that support is not fully tailored to this cohort, since they are fewer than students from other regions.

Figure 5 – Communication issues for international students by domicile



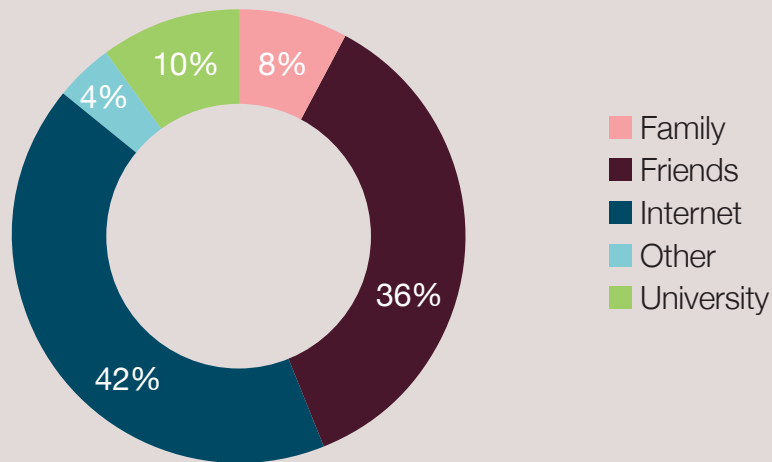
Generally, international students are extremely flexible and capable of feeling at home in the UK. They recognise that this is a process that requires a significant time investment, and many behaviours for developing belonging and integrating involve stepping out of comfort zones. However, clearly there is work to be done on how this process of finding a sense of belonging and community in UK can be further facilitated.

Information sources for international students

One of the biggest barriers to integration was cited as the lack of readily available information necessary for their long-term wellbeing, success, and independence as a student in the UK. Lack of knowledge about student unions was also cited as a barrier to engagement.

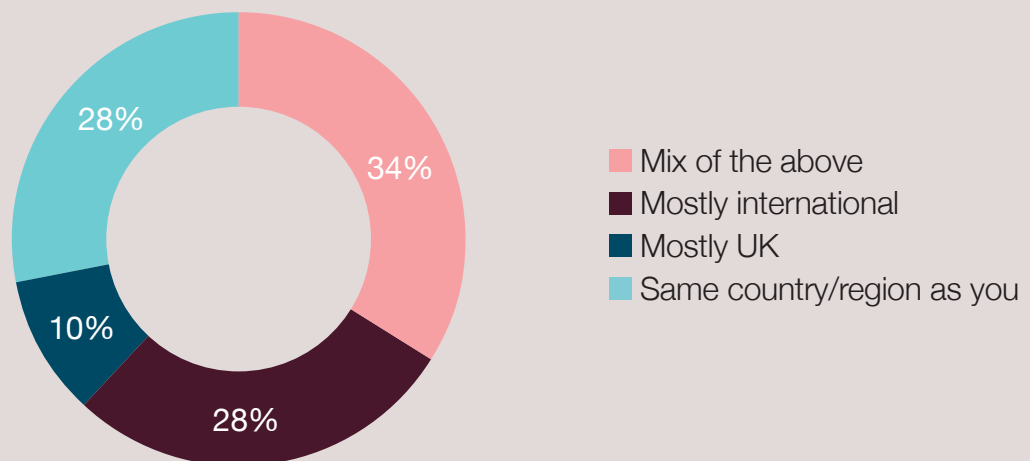
The university is only considered as a valuable source of information by 10% of students. Social networks become the main source of information with the internet coming second, and the most-quoted available resources were peer-to-peer learning, mentoring and talks with alumni. One of the caveats to building a large social network, however, is the investment of time and financial resources, which some students might not have. Master's students reported the biggest challenges due to their limited time in the UK.

Figure 6 – Sources of information for international students



Social support systems aid international students in navigating their new environment and are crucial for the development of confidence and independence. There was an almost even split between predominantly international, co-national and a mix of friendships, with a pronounced preference for these over British friendships

Figure 7 – Friendship preferences of international students



Barriers to belonging

International friendship preferences are perhaps not surprising; our research found that international students conceptualise belonging as underpinning familiarity, either by culture, religion, recreational activities or academic interests. Main sources of comfort include keeping connected with their family, culture, language and already-established social networks. They mentioned dipping back into the familiar, such as watching television in their own language and finding home food.

Barriers to connecting with other students mentioned were the inability to find common ground, even just at conversational level, especially during the hectic post-arrival period. While drained of energy, they are expected to socialise. This inability to engage fully with their peers can increase alienation. Kindness and patience are crucial to building a safe space, and all students agreed that this requires significant time investment.

Academic integration was identified as an important component to belonging. Some students come to the UK with education as their main purpose and feel neglected due to not receiving the attention they expect from lecturers. This, corroborated with differences in marking styles and academic writing, can exacerbate hesitancy to ask questions, from fear of intimidation or the expectation of receiving no useful answers, and fuel feelings of inadequacy and withdrawal.

This disconnect is also prevalent at personal tutor level: some students reported that they are not understood by university staff and not receiving the help they need but rather blanket advice. This further increases a lack of trust in the university services.

Internationalisation and university centrality

Universities should be aware of the degree of internationalisation that the city/town provides when they are engaging their students and gauging their sense of belonging. There is a fine trade-off between crowdedness and overwhelm and the diversity that provides the opportunity to find familiarity. While London students felt more overwhelmed after arrival, their cultural shock was lower, and they felt more welcome, most likely due to the ability to more easily find peers.

However, a university in a smaller city is more central to socialisation and building support systems among students. Students at the University of Nottingham reported that the university contributed more significantly to them building their networks, feeling supported and cared for and adjusting to a new life.

6. Conclusions

Our research highlights the significant challenges and opportunities that influence the sense of belonging and inclusion of international students in UK universities, which play a crucial role in their academic and social success. The findings offer a foundation for academics and support staff, allowing them to enhance current practices and develop new initiatives aimed at improving the experiences of international students. By implementing targeted support systems, fostering a culture of inclusion, and integrating international perspectives, universities can significantly enhance the academic and social environment for all students.

7. Recommendations

More approaches should be taken to allow students to explore the UK and learn from peers. Arrival can be an overwhelming time and having a 'sink or swim' approach to induction might not be effective for all students. Information regarding life in the UK should be disseminated to students prior to their arrival to minimise the shock they experience and allow them to use their time more efficiently.

Universities and student unions should provide more formal and informal exposure to pathways of life in the UK. This sets students up for success as it allows them to understand the multiple ways to engage with their new environment and make the most of it. To avoid excluding students with financial constraints, free social opportunities could be included at certain points throughout the year.

We encourage all university staff to deal with international students with patience and kindness, and to have conversations with them to discover what platform they need to fully express themselves.

8. Reflections on learning for other UK institutions

Feelings of belonging and connection help international students to adjust and adapt to academic and social settings in the UK. There is a need for UK universities to use better sign-posting to available support and to create further resources that would be beneficial to all students. Organisations like UKCISA can provide the perfect space for cross-institutional collaborations.

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