

Student Experience Project

Student-led Friendship Groups University of Worcester

Why this project?

At the University of Worcester, we have been aware for some years that students who are in tight monocultural groups are not taking up opportunities to participate fully in university life and consequently may not be fulfilling their potential academically and socially.

In particular, we noticed that many Chinese students who attend our 10 and six week pre-sessional courses were struggling to integrate once they started their degree courses. Most of them do not know each other before they arrive at the University, but because they spend 10 or six weeks studying together as a monocultural group they soon form a close network and will spend a lot of their spare time together outside of classes talking in Chinese. Many then choose to live together in accommodation outside of the University. This means they tend to spend time together speaking Chinese and they can become isolated as a group. They may be reluctant to speak in English as they are afraid of making mistakes and often a more confident English speaker will become the spokesperson. We are also aware that many students are under family and peer pressure to do well in their year at Worcester and many plan to continue to study for a Master's degree.

We were aware of research on international students in the US highlighting the impact non-integration may have: Gareis, Merkin and Goldman (2011) state that



“intercultural friendships with host nationals...have a significant positive effect on students’ general sojourn satisfaction, academic success, and intercultural as well as foreign language growth”.

We were interested that their research showed students who integrated performed better academically, and consequently, we have looked at the results of this year’s pre-sessional students.

Gareis, Merkin and Goldman (2011) also state that “more than one third of the respondents had no close American friends and would have liked more meaningful interaction with host nationals. Although personal factors on the part of the sojourners and hosts play a role, some accountability for international student satisfaction lies with the host institution”. This statement prompted us to try, as an

institution, to create situations where Chinese and home students have an opportunity to develop relationships.

Project overview

We developed an innovative approach to student-led friendship groups. We encouraged Chinese students to form friendships outside their national group by giving them responsibility for choosing their own social activities. Student Ambassadors were trained as leaders for small friendship groups and decided together with the group what activities they would undertake outside class time. The Student Ambassadors developed leadership and negotiating skills while the target group developed language skills and were motivated to participate in a range of unusual activities and to engage with the community at Worcester and in the region.

Initial challenges

We intended to start friendship groups in July 2015 with our Chinese pre-sessionals students. We recruited Student Ambassadors to work with us during inductions and run small groups for us but most of them went home during the summer leaving too few ambassadors to run the programme effectively. The ambassadors ran large group events with limited success.

Students had a busy programme and when not in class wanted to study. In fact, some of the students who failed the pre-sessionals did not engage in any social activities, as they did not see the benefits of speaking English socially.

Next steps

In October we re-launched with new ambassadors who were trained to lead and to train others. With four ambassadors in place we decided to focus on the small number of students who initially had failed the pre-sessionals course and who had to take further intensive English classes before being allowed to enter the degree programme.

Few students attended initial meetings as they were very busy but also as they didn't see the value of the social activities.

Project achievements

We established four groups but one ambassador became ill and we were unable to replace them.

Two ambassadors met with their students, but less often than we had anticipated as the group found it difficult to find a time when they could all meet together. However when they did meet, the group reported having a good time and enjoyed the experience.

The final ambassador met her group on a regular basis. They met at least once a month for the whole day and sometimes twice a month. Her group took part in different activities together: they went to the Malvern Hills, they watched films, did craft activities and they cooked together.

Social impact

Both the ambassador and students benefited. The ambassador reported that it helped her make friends at the University, as she lived at home and travelled to Worcester. The students were on an international-only nursing course and one chose to sit with the non-Chinese students in her class and to work with them.

Academic impact

Unfortunately there was insufficient evidence to show that the project had made an impact on the nursing group's academic results and a few students failed the course. The student who attended the group the least had the worst results and that may indicate a lower level of engagement with the course. Of the Business School students who took part, the friendship group students performed better, gaining second-class degrees.

This may suggest that friendship groups can improve results. We also noted students who did not take part in the friendship groups failed one or more modules. Further research on this is needed to draw any firm conclusions.

The future

The University will support the project for at least one more year.

Learning points

- We accept that what we are trying to create is artificial; we are trying to create friendships between small groups of Chinese students and paid home or EU students. This depends on the willingness of both groups of students to mix together.
- We now expect our ambassadors to write short reports on the activities that they organise.
- We have stopped using Facebook as a means of communication and will use WeChat instead.
- We have asked the Language Centre to build friendship groups into the timetable in order to make it an accepted part of the course.
- We will work with university and Students' Union groups to recruit UK and EU students to work as ambassadors. The benefits to them include increased cultural awareness and employability skills.
- We will carry out further research in partnership with an academic colleague to attempt to identify a clear link between Friendship Groups and improved academic success.

References

Gareis E, Merkin R and Goldman J *Intercultural Friendship: Linking Communication Variables and Friendship Success*. In: Journal of Intercultural Communications Research vol. 40, No 2, July 2011, pp. 153-171.

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