

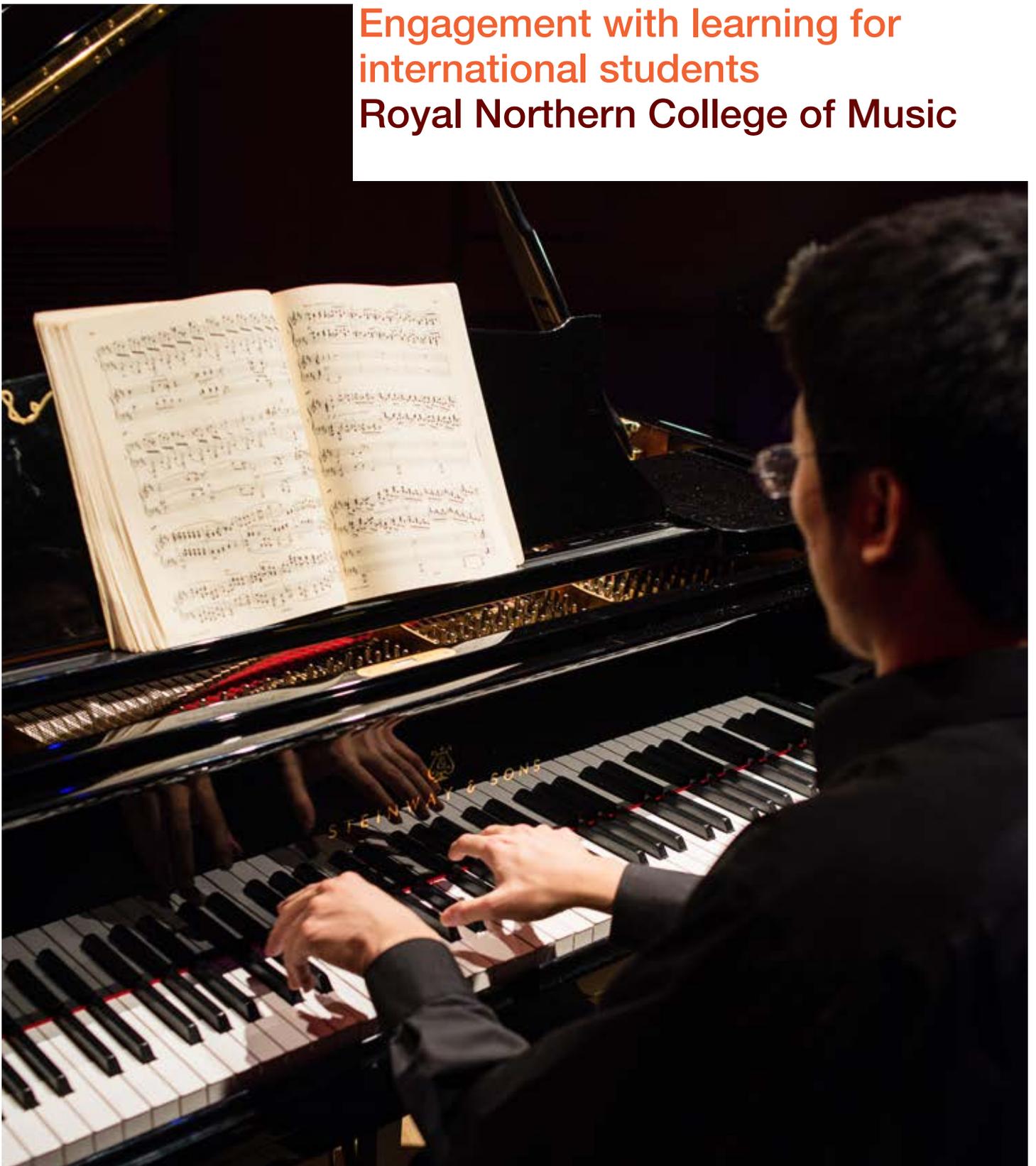
UK Council
for International
Student Affairs

UKCISA

UKCISA GRANTS SCHEME
FOR INTERNATIONAL
EDUCATION

2016-17 Pilot project
supporting the international
student experience in the UK

Engagement with learning for
international students
Royal Northern College of Music



Teaching and learning

Engagement with learning for international students Royal Northern College of Music

Aim

The aim of the project was to support International music students as they explore new and unfamiliar academic territories in a UK conservatoire.

Research carried out at the Royal Northern College of Music (RNCM) indicated that international students from diverse learning backgrounds find Western approaches to study and methods of assessment confusing. The RNCM recognises that international students are successful learners in their own country. However, learning how to operate within a UK conservatoire while navigating their way through a new language is extremely challenging for many international students. The RNCM also acknowledges that it is unrealistic to expect international students to absorb a Western approach to learning and teaching merely through the conventional teacher-led 'telling' culture of student handbooks, induction, and initial cohort lectures.

Summary of outcomes

Our Engagement with Learning (EwL) for international students project is a targeted strategic intervention which helps international students make the transition from learning in their own country to studying in a Western context. EwL allows students to use

the security of familiar experiences to learn about an unfamiliar educational context. It also allows for the development and enhancement of English language skills in a more meaningful, contextualised way. Most importantly, EwL gives students the tools to cope with and explore their new learning contexts in a structured and imaginative way, helping them to gain the maximum benefit from their study.

Background to the project

RNCM is a leading international conservatoire located near the centre of Manchester. It has 320 teaching staff, and 800 students from almost 60 countries. Our EwL course is specifically designed for Far Eastern students who have experienced a different learning background. The language level of these students is typically IELTS 5.5 /6.0 (B2 on the Common European Framework Level). The students who participated in the course are undergraduate and postgraduate students.

Organisation and evaluation

The project was originally set up by Dr Jean Ammar who is the Language Support Tutor at the college. Jean works closely with international students in support of their academic



Yan Li, one of the students involved in the Engagement with Learning project, makes her way to the stage.

work and language development and has a thorough understanding of student needs. After carrying out small scale research at the college, Jean drafted the EwL project according to the needs of the students (outlined above). She then met with Dr Fabrice Fitch who is Head of the Graduate School to discuss how the project might be put into practice. EwL initially ran as a pilot project for postgraduate students in 2015. It was well-received by students and staff and was then rolled out for undergraduate and postgraduate international students in 2016

following the receipt of the grant from UKCISA.

Timescale

The course was delivered on a weekly basis from September to December 2016 in ten sessions. The tutors were all from the RNCM. The September to December timing is essential as EwL is an introductory course for new undergraduate and postgraduate students.

The project is run as a three-strand model:

Strand 1: studying in a UK conservatoire

Learning frameworks and assessments: do they differ in your country or are they the same?

- Session 1: Learning frameworks.
- Session 2: Communicating in the college.
- Session 3: Academic assignments.
- Session 4: Principal study assessment.

Strand 2: strategies for effective study

Using the learning skills you developed in your own country in a new study context. Maintaining a healthy lifestyle; making the transition from studying in your home country to the RNCM.

- Session 5: Planning and organising your time. Dealing with change, keeping healthy.
- Session 6: Making use of resources across the college.
- Session 7: Attending seminars and lectures at the RNCM.

Strand 3: talking and writing about music

Talking and writing about music in a different language. How you can express your understanding of a piece of music in English.

- Session 8: The vocabulary of music.
- Session 9: Compare recordings of a piece.



"The Engagement with Learning project underpins the acquisition of an understanding of Western music, giving students confidence and a greater sense of wellbeing."

Session 10: Compare editions of a piece.

Strand One looks at the structure and organisation of a UK conservatoire and the support mechanisms in the college which are specially designed for international students. Assessment is discussed in detail within this strand. We feel this is extremely important as Far Eastern students frequently become disheartened when failing to achieve the high scores they are accustomed to receiving in their own country. Explaining how marking and assessment criteria is carried out in the RNCM and discussing how it might differ from their previous study contexts helps students to manage self and institutional expectations in a more realistic manner.

Strand Two is concerned with student wellbeing and acquiring a positive

mind-set with regards to time management. Resources and how they can be accessed is also discussed in this strand.

Strand Three looks specifically at talking and writing about music in a different language other than their own. Comparing recordings and editions of a piece and dealing with unfamiliar terminology are the main focus of this strand. The students will have studied parts of the Western repertoire but have little understanding of the cultural context of that repertoire. Bridging this gap is an on-going process during their RNCM studies but EwL underpins the acquisition of an understanding of Western music in the first weeks of their course, giving them confidence and a greater sense of wellbeing.

The EwL project was followed by an evaluation session where the students meet with the language support tutor to discuss what they had learnt and what they felt had been useful to them. This evaluation session provided a rich source of information, enabling tutors to match the current EwL course content to the changing needs of students. The data from the evaluation session was fed into the on-going development of the project and the RNCM Internationalisation Strategy. Students reported that they felt more confident in the college and able to participate in lectures and seminars more fully. This is illustrated by such comments as

“I feel at home in the college now”

“I feel more relaxed about studying here”

“I understand how the college is organised”

“This course helped me to understand how I can learn”

Students also related that they had a better understanding of methods of assessment and how they differ from their previous educational contexts after attending the EwL course.

Challenges to delivery

There was no challenge to delivering the project on time and within budget. Careful planning meant the project ran smoothly.

Sustainability

EwL is now an established part of our Internationalisation Strategy at the college, a strategy which places emphasis on giving support to international students within the ethos of inclusivity and integration. EwL will run at the beginning of each academic year as described above. Some tutors have suggested that the EwL model



The RNCM is a thriving conservatoire with over 800 students from 60 different countries. It hosts a live music venue offering unparalleled opportunities for students to perform regularly to public audiences and to work alongside professional musicians and visiting artists.

could be used for our home students who come from diverse learning backgrounds. This would be relevant as the EwL framework allows students to discuss new methodologies and approaches, thereby directly involving them in the shape and structure of their future learning.

Implementing learning points at the institution

Participating in the EwL project was optional in the first year that we ran it (2015) but we decided attendance had to be a compulsory part of undergraduate and postgraduate programmes if the students were to benefit from the full content of the three-strand approach. Attendance was much better in 2016 when the course was made compulsory. It was also decided that EwL had to take place in academic priority time when academic studies and course work takes precedence over music and performance commitments at the college.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

We believe the three-strand model of the project can be beneficial to other contexts that extends beyond the conservatoire environment to encompass dance, drama, performance arts and performance areas generally. For instance, while Strand Three is directly applicable to our conservatoire, we feel that the sector as a whole could adapt the content of each strand to their own particular learning and teaching situations.

Further information

The project was run by Dr Jean Ammar SFHEA, Language Support Tutor

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