

Research into the international student experience in the UK 2016-17



Manchester Metropolitan University
Sheffield Hallam University
Lincoln University Students' Union
University of Glasgow

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Introduction

This publication brings together four research projects funded by UKCISA in 2016-17 with grants ranging from £5,000 to £1,000. The grants scheme is a key element in UKCISA's work to initiate and encourage research which helps to identify key issues for future investigation and development. The research reports provide many practical suggestions which will enable the findings and the ideas to be implemented across the education sector. The reports are also available to download individually from the UKCISA website.

The **Manchester Metropolitan University** research poses new questions about the recruitment of international students and assesses how students themselves respond to recruitment materials and how this impacts on their actual experience in the UK. This makes an important contribution to the research already available on international student decision making. This excellent research won the **Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2017**.

The **Sheffield Hallam University** research fills a gap in our understanding of the international student experience with its focus on family relationships. It highlights the fact that closeness is not always a positive and distance is not always a negative and explores the many ways in which international students are impacted by their individual family relationships during their time in the UK.

The research carried out by **Lincoln University Students' Union** tackles the challenging and ongoing question of international student engagement with students' unions. The research explores the barriers to international student engagement and offers an array of practical solutions which can easily be adapted by students' unions across the sector and adds significantly to our understanding of how international students relate to students' unions in the UK.

The final report in this collection focusses on International Summer Schools. The **University of Glasgow** reports on a timely survey of international summer school staff across several countries including the UK. The report lists students' expectations, challenges to summer school staff along with a list of practical solutions.

Questions about the UKCISA Grants Scheme should be addressed to Julie Allen, Director of Policy and Services at dps@ukcisa.org.uk.

Manchester Metropolitan University

Between expectations and lived experiences: recruitment strategies and their impact on international students' academic and social experiences in UK HE

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Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2017

This award was created in 2016 in memory of the late Director of SOAS and Chair of our Board, Paul Webley. It was presented to Manchester Metropolitan University at the UKCISA Annual Conference at the University of Exeter in June 2017.

MMU's research looked into the recruitment strategies and their impact on students' academic and social experiences in UK HE. The research used in-depth student focus groups at three Manchester-based universities. The researchers encouraged reflection and dialogue between the students giving the students themselves a learning experience as part of the research. We were told they enjoyed it so much, they were sad for the research to end!

The judges noted the lack of research on how international student marketing materials are perceived by the students themselves, and so this research will provide evidence for a 'sobering reality check' and could have significant impact on recruitment practices across the UK. UKCISA also wanted to mark this research as the ultimate beneficiaries will be international students themselves who, we hope, will receive more realistic and better quality guidance and information as they start on their student journey.

1. Introduction

This research project investigated how international students are affected by UK higher education online marketing strategies and the extent to which such strategies shape students' expectations of life in the UK. The study first analysed the marketing discourses used by three UK higher education (HE) institutions in one of the main UK super-diverse cities. Next, it featured student voice through individual and group interviews to explore whether or not students' expectations of life in the UK match their lived experiences and the implications of any mismatches on their overall student experience.

This research aimed to provide useful information about transparent student recruitment which has the potential to affect marketing and recruitment strategies in the sector.



The Paul Webley Award presented to Dr. Khawla Badwan, Manchester Metropolitan University, by Professor Sir Steve Smith, Vice-Chancellor of Exeter University (left) and Professor Koen Lamberts, Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of York and Chair of UKCISA's Board of Trustees (right)

2. Rationale for research

Internationalisation has become a key strategic goal for many universities in different parts of the world (Taylor, 2010). In fact, it is rare to find a university website that does not include words such as international or global integration (Rhoads and Szelenyi, 2011). In the UK, internationalisation is firmly placed on the education agenda (De Vita and Case, 2003) and international student recruitment is one of its major manifestations.

Unfortunately, with increasing economic pressures on universities in the UK, tensions arise between 'promoting themselves attractively and giving honest information to prospective students' (Harris, 1997, p.38). This has resulted in constructing a contemporary 'market abuse' discourse surrounding international student recruitment. Some of the characteristics of this discourse are: using international students as a revenue source in climates of budgetary strains (De Vita and Case, 2003), focusing on disembodied student narratives for the sake of imposing 'one-size-fits-all educational prescriptions' (Sidhu and Dall'Alba, 2012, p. 415), and suggesting that international students are exposed to market abuse and exploitation which favours Western universities (Chowdhury and Phan, 2014).

The study responds to this discourse by taking a step towards building ‘intercultural dialogue’ defined by the Council of Europe (2008) as ‘a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect’. To this end, the project was based on the premise that international student voices had to be represented in order to understand the trajectories of these students, starting from reporting on their decisions before joining UK HE until the end of the academic year 2016-2017.

The investigators believe that the findings of this research project need to be communicated to higher education practitioners and policy makers because students’ perspectives are also part of the ‘intercultural dialogue’ this project aimed to achieve.

3. Aims and questions

This exploratory research aimed to:

- a. analyse the online marketing discourses of three universities based in the same city in the UK;
- b. understand how these particular discourses influence decisions pertinent to student mobility, and the impacts of these discourses on students’ expectations of imagined life in the UK;
- c. raise students’ voices by asking them about the differences between their imagined and lived Britain and the factors that might contribute to creating a gap between these two visions;
- d. suggest ways of enhancing universities’ professional practices when they market their courses to an international audience, if they are to reflect a more ‘real’ lived experience.

Specifically, the study asked the following questions:

1. What do we (in UK HE) say to international students to attract them to study in the UK?
2. What is the impact of what we say on student mobility?
3. What ‘promises’ do students infer from our online marketing strategies?
4. What do students say about the promises made to them during the recruitment stage?
5. Are there any mismatches between students’ expectations and lived experiences? If so, what cause these gaps?

6. Are students mainly attracted to UK HE because of their exposure to UK HE marketing discourses? Or are there other reasons underpinning student mobility?
7. How can universities in the UK recruit international students on more ‘transparent’ grounds?

4. Methodology: plans and challenges

The project was conducted in one of the UK’s super-diverse cities (see Vertovec, 2007 on super-diversity). The city has three universities: a Russell Group HE institution (henceforth U1), a 1990s university status institution (U2), and a 1960s university status institution (U3). The names of these three universities have been anonymised due to the competitive nature of the higher education sector.

The project had four main stages:

Stage 1:

A multimodal analysis of the marketing strategies featured on the three universities’ websites. This stage involved looking at verbal, visual and video data on the universities’ websites focusing on the following sections: Homepage, Why study at x university?, Information for international students, Student life, and other sections that stand out about university ranking and plans for expansion. This stage also aimed at investigating how different or similar are the marketing tools used by these three universities.

Stage 2:

Conducting recorded group interviews with international students during the first term of the 2016-2017 academic year. This stage involved interviewing 34 participants studying in the three chosen universities. Table 1 lists the details of the participants and their university affiliation.

The recruitment of the research participants took different paths. Some participants were recruited via convenience sampling (where the researchers recruited newly arrived students whom they already knew), others through snow-ball sampling (where the recruited participants were asked to recruit others from among their acquaintances). Participants were recruited also by contacting gate-keepers to allow the interviewer to either speak directly to students or to leave an announcement with them. The participant recruitment stage was rather

Table 1 Participants' interviews in Stage 2

Interview no.	University affiliation	Number of interviewees	Length of interview (mins)
1	U2	2	21.55
2	U2	3	31.42
3	U2	5	28.16
4	U2	5	26.01
5	U3	1	10.53
6	U1	3	30.53
7	U1	1	15.51
8	U1	1	15.33
9	U1	1	16.20
10	U1	4	26.59
11	U1	2	14.36
12	U1	1	16.19
13	U1	2	13.43
14	U3	3	21.55

challenging as it meant frequent inter-city travels, addressing different gate-keepers and dealing with their delayed or no responses, and completing necessary protocols that vary from university to university and from one department to another within the same university. Another challenge was having potential participants who verbally agreed to take part in the study after being given an information sheet but they never responded to emails inviting them for interviews. Having taken multiple participant recruitment routes while factoring in possible drop outs, this stage resulted in the participation of 34 students who were interviewed towards the end of the first term October-December 2016. As seen in Table 1, it was sometimes difficult to arrange group interviews because of students' differing timetables. Some interviews therefore were in pairs and a few volunteers were interviewed individually.

Students tended to respond better in group interviews. They appeared to feel more confident supported by their peers and were not under pressure to respond to every question. They were also able to draw on others' responses which fuelled the discussion. A few students commented that they had enjoyed the discussion as the questions had made them think more closely about the reasons for their university choices. Some students welcomed the opportunity to practise speaking English with a native speaker. Some postgraduate students were appreciative of the opportunity to observe how interviews were conducted as they would have to do this for their own research. Thus, it can be argued that the design of the study not only helped nurture 'intercultural dialogue'

between students and higher education researchers but it also encouraged intercultural dialogue within the recruited student population.

Stage 3:

Conducting recorded semi-structured individual interviews with a sample of the recruited participants at the beginning of the second term of the 2016-2017 academic year. While factoring in possible dropouts, the plan for this stage was to email all 34 participants to invite them for interviews in February-March 2017. 19 students accepted the invitation to be individually interviewed. Table 2 shows the participants' affiliation.

Table 2 Participants' interviews in Stage 3

Interview no.	University affiliation	Length of interview (mins)
1	U2	15.00
2	U2	19.34
3	U2	23.22
4	U2	10.28
5	U2	22.43
6	U2	13.53
7	U2	18.03
8	U2	14.24
9	U2	26.58
10	U2	15.25
11	U1	22.45
12	U1	16.22
13	U1	19.22
14	U1	15.58
15	U1	12.30
16	U1	14.01
17	U1	10.16
18	U1	09.56
19	U3	10.54

Stage 4:

Conducting recorded focus group interviews at the end of the academic year 2016-2017. This summative stage involved inviting all 19 participants to take part in one last round of group interviews. 18 students from U1 and U2 took part in this stage. The only student from U3 dropped out due to study commitments. Table 3 below lists the details of the last stage interviews:

In addition to the traditional question and answer format, the interview structure for this stage included some different approaches from those in the previous stages. This was primarily to inject some variety into the process and to employ a range of strategies which could enable

Table 3 Participants' interviews in Stage 4

Interview no.	University affiliation	Number of interviewees	Length of interview (mins)
1	U1	1	19.12
2	U1	4	30.41
3	U2	3	28.14
4	U2	3	29.37
5	U2	1	10.50
6	U1	1	19.29
7	U2	1	12.11
8	U1	2	15.35
9	U2	1	13.24
10	U2	1	07.22

1. The information presented here has been updated based on the online content of the three universities during June 2017.

students to reflect analytically on their experiences. Here is a list of the different approaches:

1. The participants were sent links to their university webpages for international students, and asked to look at these before attending the interview. This was to refresh their memories as it was unlikely that they had looked at these webpages since applying for their course. When interviewed, the participants were asked to reflect on the webpages' content.
2. Participants were asked to grade some of their responses on a Likert Scale to provide some quantitative data.
3. Participants completed a short survey asking them to identify the influencing factors in selecting their university, and requiring them to write a few sentences summarising their academic and social life in the UK.

Those interviewed in a group were asked to brainstorm a list of advice for future students from their home countries who were considering applying to their university. The participants developed a list which they then handed to the interviewer who read the list, engaged with it and started another dialogue asking the participants to expand or explain their views. Those interviewed individually completed this list in dialogue with the interviewer.

It was wise to ask students to peruse the relevant webpages before coming to the interview. For some students, it refreshed their memories. For others, it was the first time that they had viewed these pages.

The survey and short statement provided a welcome break from the question and answer format. The group debate and follow-up

discussion with the interviewer led to some lively and truthful responses.

Overall, most participants said that they had enjoyed sharing their views with the interviewer and several asked to see the final report. A few of them had used the process as a model for their own research projects. Our relationship was now well established and it was difficult to tell them that the project had come to an end.

5. Key research findings

Stage 1 Key findings¹:

This stage entailed developing a multimodal analysis of the online marketing strategies outlined on the websites of the three universities. This included analysing verbal, audio and visual data to see how universities market themselves to their local and international audience. It is also worth mentioning that some of the photographs were used as prompts during the two group interview stages (stage 2 and 4) to see the impact of these visual representations on students' expectations of life in the UK.

This stage highlighted some of the striking similarities between the online marketing discourses adopted by these universities. Overall, it appeared that there are at least six similar strategies:

1. **An attractive city:** all three universities use the geographical location of the vibrant, super-diverse city as a key attraction tool, featuring some of the landmarks of the city and tapping into its demographic diversity as a resource. This is also closely linked to promises of an exciting 'student life'.
2. **Facilities on campus:** another common strategy is to upload photographs and virtual tours (videos) of university campuses. However, as a Russell Group university, U1 presents its campus in a different way by emphasising two key points: a) both old and modern style buildings and b) the large-scale investments in improving and expanding the existing campus. Both U2 and U3 present their modern-style, high-tech facilities while showing some photographs of older buildings in an attempt to appeal to students seeking both exciting modernity and rich heritage.
3. **Diversity on campus:** this appears to be a common strategy, very relevant to all three

universities given the diverse population of the city as well as its international recognition which also makes it a key tourist attraction. Diversity on campus is displayed by showing photographs and videos of students from different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. Across the three universities, numbers of international students are shown with no further details about major sending countries.

4. **Testimonials from former students:**

another common strategy is to show videos of former students talking about their time at their chosen university as well as talking about their experiences in their chosen city. Most of these videos emphasise how this super-diverse city allows them to find a wide range of things including different cuisines and shops. In addition to videos, there are also written testimonials and students' blogs talking about students' courses and how their degrees helped them move on with their career paths after graduation.

5. **Promises, opportunities, investment:**

although this is also a common marketing strategy, the three chosen universities present it in different ways. To start with, U1 uses two elaborate tools to persuade their prospective students. The first tool features a positive and personalised marketing discourse. The second lists details of future opportunities such as internships, volunteering activities, and opportunities to contribute to research centres.

U2 uses a different approach to this strategy by presenting statistics of graduates in employment. It also lists details of job fairs, and 'meet employers' events.

U3 employs this strategy in a more general way commenting on the contribution of its graduates to different domains of public life.

6. **University recognition:** this strategy highlights the extent to which a university is recognised for its ranking, impact, teaching and support reputation. Even though the three universities have very different research profiles, they seem to emphasise a similar discourse which can be due to pressures from evaluative systems such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). These messages are reflected both verbally and visually, showing photographs of laboratories, high-impact projects, and modern facilities. In addition to that, high

teaching quality and student support are indicated.

Overall, it is evident that the three universities used similar techniques to promote themselves online. These, we argue, are means of creating attractive brands. Branding, (Moore, 2004), is about promises of customer experiences and the strategies outlined above can be easily interpreted as promises of positive student experience.

Stage 2 Key findings:

This stage involved 34 recorded interviews across three universities. Where possible, interviews were in groups or pairs. Some participants were interviewed individually owing to timetable constraints. The key findings are:

1. The website does not appear to play a critical role in determining students' choice of university. A few reported that they perused the website in detail, but many claimed to have ignored the pages for international students. They tended to focus on the web pages relating to their course, to entry requirements and to finding accommodation.
2. The main driver for selecting U1 tended to be the university's world ranking. Many students chose U2 and U3 on recommendation from alumni or from an agent. Some believed they would receive more support at U2. Others wanted to pursue a specific practical course. Notably, the reputation of the School of Art at U2 was a significant draw. Students' IELTS score was also a key determinant bearing in mind that different universities and different courses require different entry IELTS cut-off scores.
3. The city's reputation as an international city was a key factor in student choice. Students cited also the city's lower cost of living compared with London. The majority of students prioritised the university and the course over the location. For several however, the universities' location was of equal consideration.
4. Students at U3 were surprised at the number of students from one particular sending country on their respective courses. For a few, this was a comfort; for the majority, it was a disappointment because they wanted to mix with students from differing nationalities.
5. Students from all participating institutions reported some difficulty in adapting to the independent, interactive, multimodal teaching

and learning styles prevalent in UK HE, compared with the traditional didactic style employed in their home countries.

Stage 3 Key findings:

This stage consisted of 19 individual interviews mostly from U1 and U2 with only one participant from U3.

1. Participants generally reported feeling more settled in this second semester because they were more familiar with life in the UK and with university systems and study routines.
2. With regard to assessments, most students said that they had received good, clear and thorough feedback so that they understand how to improve.
3. Students appeared to be adapting to UK teaching styles saying that they preferred the UK approach to study as they felt it had improved their critical thinking skills and had enabled them to become independent learners. Several students liked the tutorial system, whereby they were able to discuss and ask questions in small groups. One student was critical of the 'inefficiency' of discussion groups and one student suggested that UK teachers were not strict enough by allowing students to talk over the teacher.
4. In the main, students reported good academic support in the form of workshops and tutorials and commented that teachers were more approachable than in their home countries. Some however, would have appreciated more individual tutorial support and more support in securing work placements.
5. Some students were surprised at the theoretical bias inherent in their courses and had assumed, because of the course title, that there would be a practical element.
6. A few students took part in activities organised by the students' union in their respective universities but most were unaware of what the students' union had to offer. Students were complimentary about the activities organised by the International Society. Several students from a particular nationality commented that it was not within their culture to go out and meet strangers.
7. Students commented that it was difficult to socialise with British people because they did not understand the cultural references and could not participate in the conversation. Many students, in particular, tended to socialise with co-nationals with whom they

'felt more comfortable'. One student would have liked a 'buddy system', whereby international students were paired with UK students to practise speaking English and to become more au fait with UK culture.

8. Unsurprisingly, those who spoke English most of the time reported an improvement in their fluency, whereas those who conversed mostly in their native language reported little or no progress in spoken English.

Stage 4 Key findings:

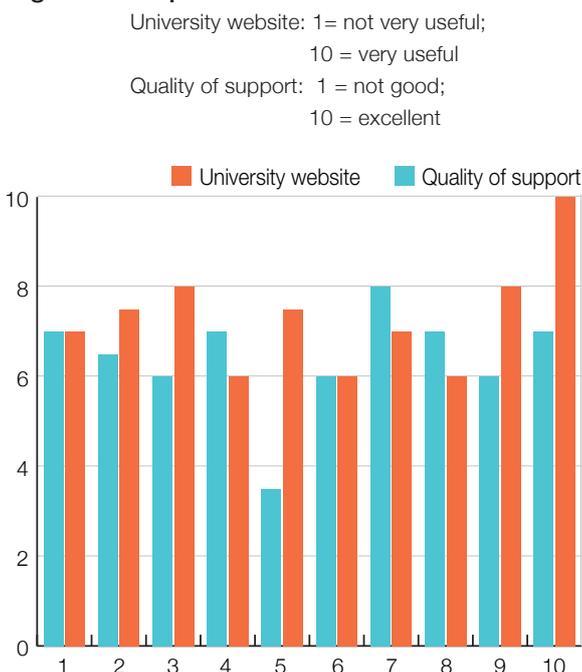
This stage involved 18 students from U1 and U2. The U3 participant dropped out due to study commitments. Where possible, interviews were in groups or pairs. Some participants were interviewed individually.

This stage was designed to be a summative round in which students commented on their overall experience throughout the past academic year. Prior to the interviews, they were also asked to revisit university websites to comment on how useful the presented information was. They were then asked to rank the usefulness of the websites of their respective universities on a scale from one to ten. During the same interviews, they were also asked to rank the level of support they receive on a similar scale. Figures 1 and 2 summarise the results for both U1 and U2:

Figure 1: responses from U1 students

University website: 1= not very useful;
10 = very useful
Quality of support: 1 = not good;
10 = excellent



Figure 2: responses from U2 students

Overall, many participants stressed that university websites can be difficult to navigate. The following response seems to be representative of students' views, 'we can find everything on it but we just don't know how'. In addition, the majority of students indicated that they visited the websites to find out about accommodation, student life, and details about their courses. Some felt that the university website for their respective university did not include sufficient information about the units/modules on their course. They wanted more details, in advance, about how they would be assessed as they thought these details would allow them to have a clearer idea about how they would spend their time in the UK, particularly because their length of stay was subject to visa restrictions.

In addition, some participants reported some mismatches between their expectations based on website details and their lived experiences in the following areas:

- There are more optional units on the website than the students are actually offered;
- Photographs of university accommodation are not always accurate;
- There is some outdated information about old courses with irrelevant reading lists.

With regard to student support, the participants, overall, seemed more settled as they were approaching the end of their third academic term. Many reported that they expected more

contact time during classes and more one-to-one tutorials with their tutors. Although they seemed aware of the different sources of support available, many felt that they had to wait a long time before being able to seek advice on academic writing, assignment-related queries and counselling advice. As expected, responses varied within institutions.

The students were also asked to tick the factors that influenced their decision to choose their university. More than one answer was allowed. Table 4 refers to responses from U1 students and Table 5 refers to responses from U2 students:

Table 4 factors influencing U1 students' decision to choose their university

What or who influenced you to choose this university?	Response
U1 University website	✓✓✓
Course content	✓✓✓✓
Students	✓
Your IELTS score	✓✓✓
University ranking	✓✓✓✓✓✓✓
University reputation	✓✓✓✓✓✓✓
Fees	✓
Parents	✓✓
City's reputation	✓✓

Table 5 factors influencing U2 students' decision to choose their university

What or who influenced you to choose this university?	Response
U2 University website	✓
Course content	✓✓✓✓
Students	✓
Your IELTS score	✓✓✓✓
University ranking	✓✓✓✓✓✓✓
University reputation	✓✓✓✓✓
Fees	✓✓✓
Parents	✓
City's reputation	✓✓✓✓✓

Other factors were mentioned by three participants:

- Recommendations from recruitment agencies
- Interview with tutor who was very likeable
- A teacher who is a former student
- Offer came through quickly
- Scholarships

Whereas the research started with the assumption that international students are guided/affected by the online marketing

strategies of HE institutions in the UK, the data presented here indicates that this is just a partial understanding of the bigger picture. The geographic and demographic advantages of the city were key pulling factors. However, the distribution of students across the three universities was significantly linked to other factors. This stage has highlighted that student recruitment is not a one-way process where universities advertise themselves in the educational marketplace in order to attract students. Rather, it is a dynamic process whereby the students are affected by multiple factors which do not necessarily include universities' marketing strategies.

Here are other key findings:

1. Students generally appreciated the depth of their UK HE experience. Many compared their UK university facilities and resources with those in their home countries to emphasise how developed and established their UK universities are.
2. Some students continued to believe that class discussions 'wasted' their contact time and demanded shorter group discussions with brief summaries/commentaries outlining major points.
3. Many students suggested that, while the university ranking tables can be useful, it is best to look at how the university is ranked for their own subject. Some even advised future students not to be too rank-driven.
4. Many students advised future students to actively engage in classroom activities and to familiarise themselves with activities on campus in order to meet new friends and know more about life in the UK.

6. Conclusion

These findings suggest that international student recruitment is a dynamic process affected by multiple factors. University websites tend to be populated with information that creates a 'brand' with a lesser focus on the detail of what to expect regarding academic life in the UK (styles of delivery, modes of assessment, support mechanisms, relationship with tutors, etc.). Our findings suggest also that the majority of the participants who visited the university websites were not interested in reading about what universities say about themselves. Instead, they were concerned with the practical elements of their applications, such as the course content,

accommodation options and student life. University ranking and reputation continue to be major factors, but it seems that students refer to sources other than university websites for this information. Some of these sources include word of mouth (recommendations from former students, parents and friends) and/or published ranking tables.

7. Recommendations for practice

This project puts forward the following recommendations, some of which are best practice employed by some universities and/or their departments:

1. Summarise key information on university websites in different languages including short video testimonials from alumni. Multi-lingual websites can reflect the multilingual, multicultural spaces on UK campuses.
2. Emphasise the practical applications of courses, career paths and future job prospects.
3. Provide a handbook for international students with information such as:
 - an explanation of the teaching and learning styles which they will encounter
 - whom to contact for support with academic work and how early to make contact
 - contact details for other areas such as counselling, pastoral support, accommodation and finance
 - an explanation of workshops and courses available to students, eg language courses, research skills, etc.
 - details about how assessment works in UK HE
 - a description of the students' union, what it is, what it does and how to access its facilities and activities
 - a list of contact details of international societies
 - description of the types of accommodation available; an explanation of the geography of the city and how to apply for accommodation
 - information about the diverse profiles of the students who have typically studied at this institution in order to prepare students for the diversity they will experience on campus.
4. Ensure that course details state clearly if courses are entirely theoretical or if they have a practical element.

5. Present a clear timeline with an overview of what students will study and the activities and tasks they are required to complete. This may help to minimise anxiety by removing the fear of the unknown, and also to enable students to make the most efficient use of their possible visa-restricted time in the UK.
6. In the case of practical subjects, ensure that international students understand how to obtain workshop induction training and how to access workshop space.
7. Ensure international students have sufficient support for finding compulsory work placements.
8. Provide a departmental support tutor for international students; preferably someone who has been an international student.
9. Raise intercultural awareness among university staff to ensure that they are sensitive to the needs and expectations of their international students.

8. Areas for future research

It is believed that there is a need for further research to investigate how international students can be better equipped to make the most of their sojourn in the UK. This project could be developed by interviewing not only students, but also teachers and support staff, to ascertain their perception of the reasons for and barriers to international students' academic success and social integration. The investigators suggest also a research project which trials and evaluates one or more of the recommendations in Section 7 to provide some tangible evidence of strategies which may enhance the experience of international students in UK universities.

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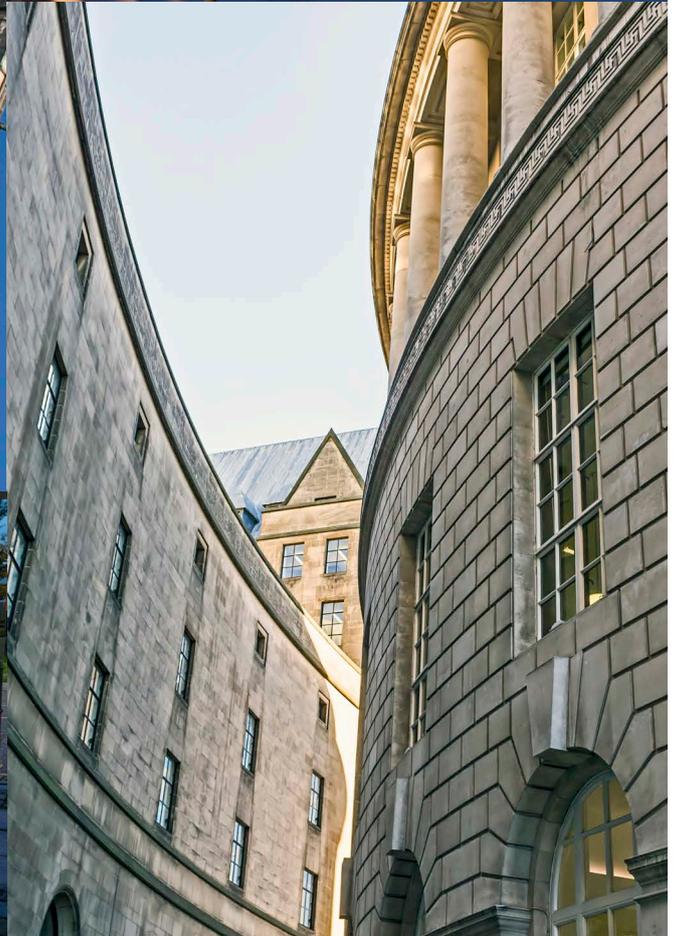
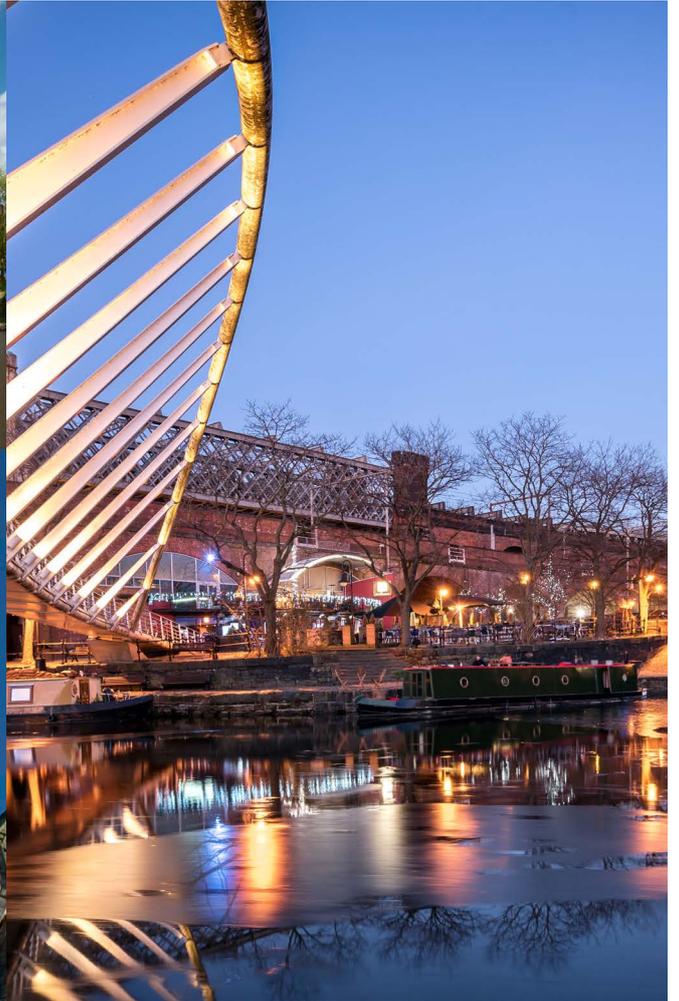
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City of Manchester attractions (clockwise from top left): former industrial canal with Beetham Tower in background, the Castlefield inner city conservation area, Library Walk, a Metrolink tram, City Council Town Hall.



Sheffield Hallam University

Mobilising family support: implications for the academic resilience of international students

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1. Introduction

Research has highlighted the importance of family in enhancing UK students' retention and success (Stevenson, 2015, Stevenson and Clegg, 2011). Family support is, for example, mobilised at the point of access to HE, to enhance students' academic success, to enable students to pay for (aspects of) their studies, and to facilitate access to employment post-graduation. In contrast, research with over 500 UK undergraduate students estranged from their families found that a lack of access to familial economic, material, social or emotional support meant that many of these students were at risk of homelessness, were struggling financially, and were working long hours to fund their studies. Unsurprisingly financial stress was the main driver of estranged students withdrawing from their current course, followed by health issues and wellbeing (Bland, 2015). This has significant implications for students' ability to be academically resilient.

Although international students share both the same reasons for estrangement from their families as UK students do (Blake and Bland, 2015), and are likely to have many of the same economic, material, social or emotional needs for family support, little is known about the importance of family to international students, whether closely connected to their families or not. Problematically this means that those tasked with supporting the retention and success of international students may be doing so with an insufficient awareness of the risks to their social and academic resilience as well as their academic, or other, support needs. This, in turn, has significant implications for retention and success.

2. Research aims

In order to fill this gap, the aim of the research was to evidence the (variable) importance of family support to international students, to help inform practice and enhance international students' retention and success.

The research questions were therefore:

1. What forms of family support do international students mobilise during their studies?
2. What are the points in the student life-cycle when access to family support matters most?

3. What factors may inhibit international students from being able to mobilise family support?
4. What impact does distance from family have on emotional and social wellbeing and/or feelings of connection and estrangement?

3. Research methodology

The research primarily took place at Sheffield Hallam University, one of the UK's largest universities with a population of over 4,000 international students. Full ethical approval was gained from the university in advance of the data collection.

Stage one: piloting the data collection tools

Recognising the sensitivity of collecting potentially very personal information as well as the need to ensure the questions were appropriate and unambiguous, a focus group of nine estranged students (connected to Stand Alone) were invited to a one day event. The students were interviewed as a group about their own experiences and then worked together to refine and pilot the survey and interview questions.

Stage two: the electronic survey

The survey (developed using SurveyMonkey) was sent to all home and international students at the research site university. Overall response rates were higher than anticipated but the response from international students was lower.

Towards the end of the data collection period the researchers were contacted by the University of Sheffield who asked to be included in the data collection. Further ethical approval was gained and the survey sent out to University of Sheffield students. The response rates were low and only around 200 survey responses were received. The survey data has, however, been included in this report.

In total there were 1,696 survey responses of which 230 responses were from international students.

See Appendix 1: survey questions; Appendix 3: survey respondents' demographic data (Tables 1-5)

Stage three: interviews with students

21 interviews were undertaken with international students. All those who indicated in the survey that they were willing to be interviewed were contacted. Further contact was made with these students until the 20 interviews had been undertaken, with one further interview held after that point to ensure that all those who wanted to be interviewed were given the opportunity¹.

The sample includes students from different countries, of different ages, ethnicities, religions, gender and sexual orientation, and studying on different courses and at different levels. The sample also includes students with differing levels of connection to family (both overseas and with them in the UK). See Appendix 2: interview questions; Appendix 4: demographic data (Tables 1). A further 21 interviews took place with home students

Except for the charts relating to conceptualisations of and relationship to family, only data relating to international students has been included in this report.

consider friends to be family and to include community contacts and relationships as being part of their extended family. Community connections were formed primarily through faith-based organisations. (Chart 1)

Relationship to family

International students were slightly more likely than home students to say they were extremely/very close to family OR extremely/very distant from family. (Chart 2)

Closeness to family was not always a positive in the students' lives, however, nor was distance from family a negative. Rather, being either close or distant could have both positive and negative implications.

Close - positive

Most of those international students who were close to their families, and remained so throughout their studies, saw this as nothing but a positive opportunity to gain the forms of support that would enable them to be successful in their studies. Family gave the students both financial and emotional help and advice, shared their successes, and helped them through times of failure or disappointment:

“My family is my support system. They are always there for me. Their support gives me mental satisfaction and it helps me to do my work/study properly and not worry about anything else.”²

(Survey respondent)

1. At the point of writing this report there are a further three students wanting to be interviewed. This data will be used when further dissemination of the research findings take place.

2. Slight grammatical or typographical changes have been made to a number of the direct quotes .

4. Key research findings

Conceptualisations of family

In response to the question “who do you consider as your family?” international students have the same conceptualisations of family as home students but are slightly more likely to

Chart 1 Descriptions of family: Who do you consider as a member of your family?

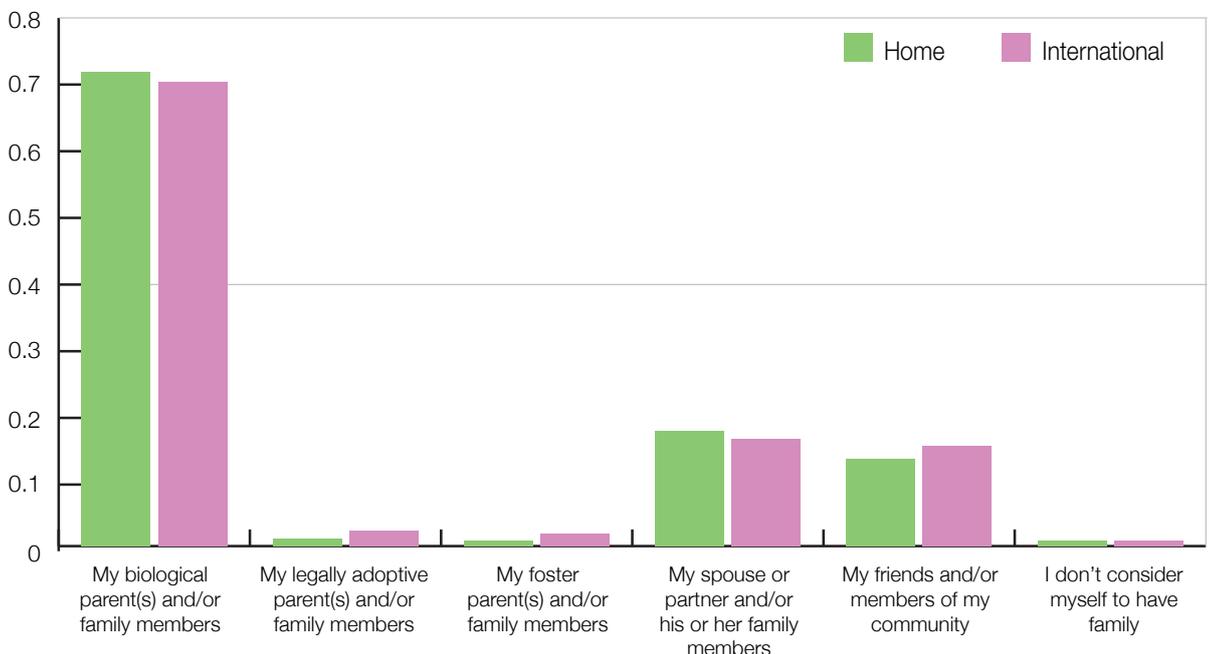
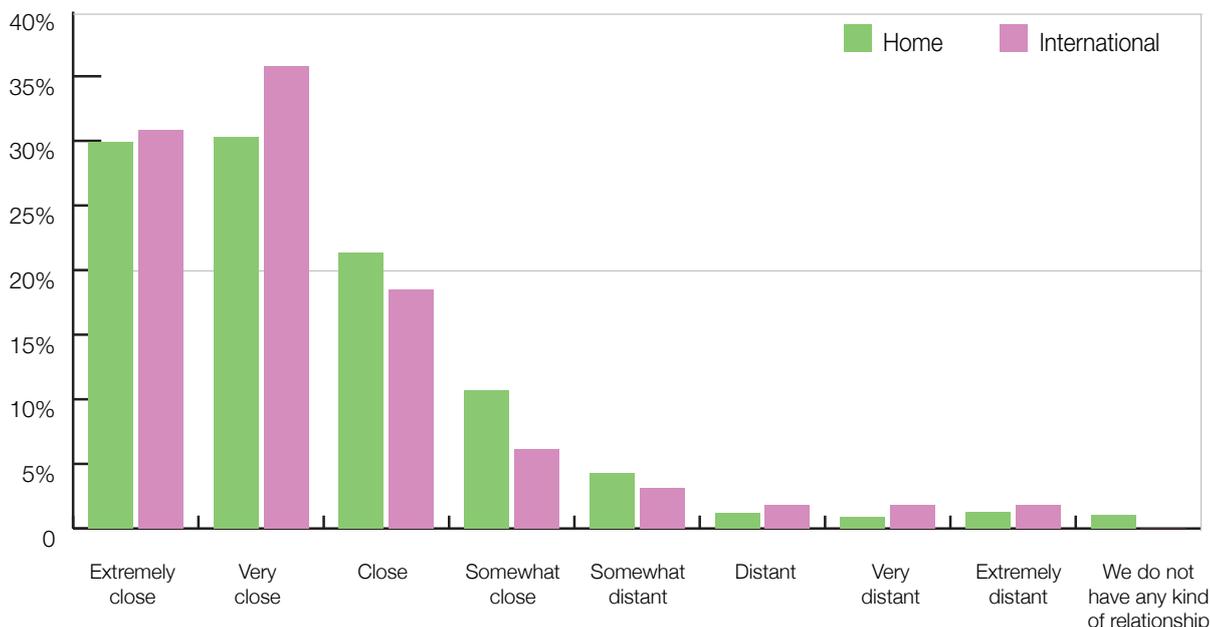


Chart 2 Relationships with family: how would you describe your relationship with your family and your family members?



The support from mothers, in particular, was a strong refrain across the data (although for other students this same closeness to mothers also brought an added pressure of not wanting to let them down):

“I think that having my mother believe in me helps me with my performance as a student. While I do not have confidence in my abilities, despite looking confident to my friends, internally I am always feeling “not good enough”. My mother helps me alleviate that feeling and encourages me to be positive.”

(Survey respondent)

Overall, most students were close to their families and, in turn, for most of these students this closeness was largely or wholly positive.

Close - negative

Being close to family had its downsides. In particular, sustaining and maintaining family commitments could be a considerable struggle. Many students were still expected to support other family members from distance. Such support included both financial and emotional contributions. For some students this led to excessive pressure, particularly around exam periods, or when a major incident occurred within the family:

“My brother had an accident and he was injured, he was in the hospital for few days and had a brain surgery. He is my only brother and I could not be there with him

because it was an exams period, also I missed my sister wedding and while the time passes I feel weirder and weirder.”

(Survey respondent)

These multiple expectations were particularly challenging for international students with a very close family network or who had a close connection to their parents:

“I don’t want my mum to worry. I want her to be content, so I try to cover here and cover here so that she is not worried, because I don’t want her to worry about the children, the grandchildren, because when I speak to her she has said ‘oh what is going to happen to the future of this one?’ I don’t want her to think like that. I want to say ‘don’t think about that, their education is covered. I am doing everything, you concentrate on enjoying life. Enjoy your life, enjoy your life, I do not want you to worry about this’. I want my mum to be content.”

(Interview respondent)

For some students, the pressure to support the family at home was compounded by being expected to carve out a more prosperous future for their family through being successful in their international studies:

“I feel a sense of expectation; that they so want me to succeed and that can make me feel very stressed at times. I can’t fail.”

(Interview respondent)

Distant - positive

It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that having a distance from family could be positive, as it freed up the students, emotionally, to be able to concentrate on their studies:

“I feel it’s been easier for me to study abroad because I’m not close to my family.”

(Survey respondent)

For some students there was a level of freedom in not having strong connections to family in terms of making educational choices and retaining responsibility for their own successes. For such students decisions around choice of course were not made collectively, and their decision to study abroad often did not involve their family.

Moreover those with a distant family felt a relative sense of freedom around how they spent their money, and were often working to support their studies rather than relying on family.

In addition, international students with a distant family, did not feel the same need to support other family members emotionally. They cited less pressure to please or be responsible for the progress of their family. During their studies most of these students were able to compensate for not having close family relationships by drawing on emotional support from their friends and peers.

In short, for some international students not having close family relationships was seen as bringing a sense of freedom around choice of course and spending/financial choice making, and not having emotional demands made on them. This meant that, overall, they were subject to less pressure than those with close ties.

Distant - negative

For other students, however, being physically distant from family was in itself a cause of stress:

“Most times, thinking about the fact that I cannot have a deep conversation with my family makes me depressed and I tend to lose my focus.”

(Survey respondent)

For those who were both physically and emotionally distant from family this stress was magnified resulting, for some, in quite significant psychological consequences:

“I don’t have a “safety net” if something goes wrong with studies/work and I can

never really just take break. I think that makes me more anxious about the future and generally more stress-prone.”

(Survey respondent)

It is complex!

Distance is not necessarily a binary relationship (close or distant) rather some students’ relationships to family were more complex:

“When is distant I miss them, when I am with them, I want to leave and ‘open up my wings’.”

(Survey respondent)

Finally, of course, family is not always at a distance and many international students had both family members in their home countries and had family with them in the UK. This brought its own stresses:

“I can’t afford childcare so sometimes I come to uni with my kids when a tutor would allow me bring them into class. Other times I miss lectures cos I have no one to stay at my kids. Sometimes I bring my kids to uni hoping to see anyone who would just stay with them for a few while I go in and listen to a lecture but once I did this and university staff spoke very rudely to me that my children were disturbing and I should take them out of the university.”

(Survey respondent)

Changing relationship to family during studies

International students’ relationships to family were less likely to change during their studies than were home students’ relationships to their families.

Where students’ relationships to family changed over time this was, for some, a part of the normal evolution of family relationships which occur when parents in particular have to deal with their children leaving home, with of course in these cases the added worry of them moving overseas:

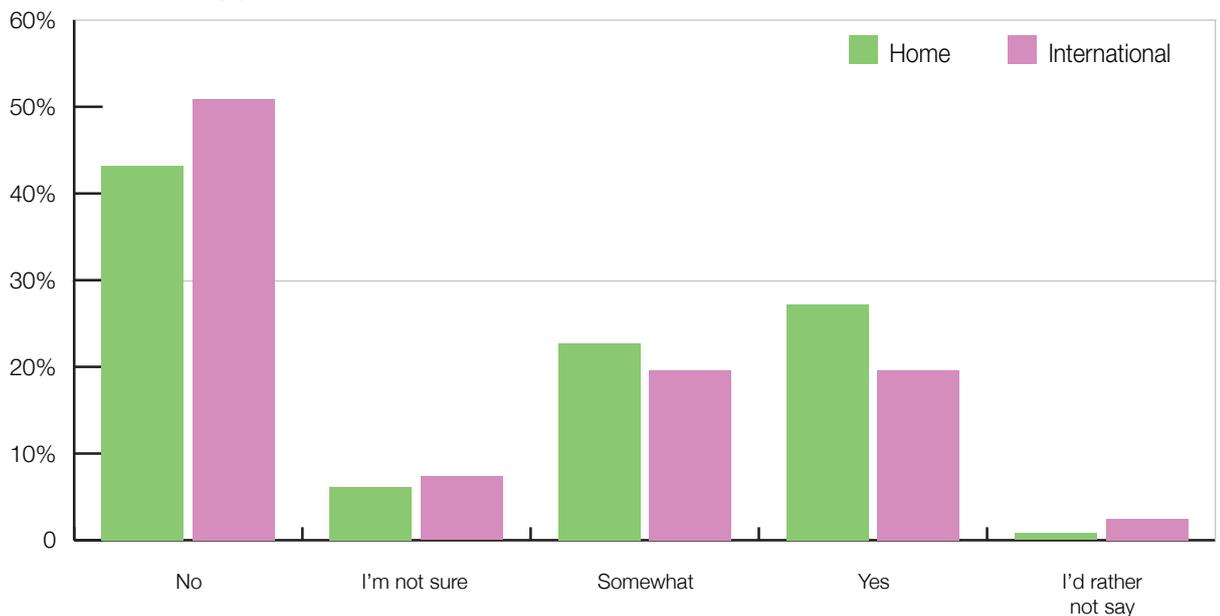
“At first they were on the phone all the time but now it has calmed down.”

(interview respondent)

For others there was a more deliberate disentangling from family as this enabled the students to focus on their studies:

“My parents, they spend all their life now after I was born, they worry about me, they take care of me so I just want them to be relaxed and to enjoy their life, to don’t

Chart 3 Changing relationship with family: has your family relationship changed since starting your studies?



think too much about me. If I need help I will call them. If I need something I will call them. I need some time and some space to be alone, to get along with myself, my friends, and they worry about me too much which makes me feel very terrible. I feel upset now. So I want them to let me go. It's very hard, especially for Chinese parents."

(Interview respondent)

"It was important to me to become slightly more distant from my family during my undergrads and now PhD. Family problems can be a bit heavy on me especially when I know I can't do anything since I live far away from home."

(Survey respondent)

This was particularly so where family relationships were negative and/or destructive:

"It takes me days to recover because emotionally I get drained and it takes time to recover. I end up wasting precious time on nothing."

(Survey respondent)

The majority of students more positively maintained their relationships over time, however, with technology playing an important role. Using Whatsapp and Facebook in particular enabled international students to keep in touch with close family - although there were downsides to the ready-access to social media with some students commenting that they had to turn their

phones off to keep family at bay while they studied.

Research question one: forms of family support

For those students who had connection to family, family support was made up of emotional support, financial support, psychological, spiritual, or moral support, and practical support, and for some it was all of these:

"All of it. Whatever I need. Love, talking time, being there when you just want to complain, money if needed, hugs, encouragement."

(Survey respondent)

The importance of emotional support from family was mentioned by almost all respondents, other than those with a distant relationship:

"Listening, taking my mind off of negative situations, encouraging me to venture on."

(Survey respondent)

"They remind of all the reasons to be happy."

(Survey respondent)

Where students had a more distant relationship their friends and their wider community provided emotional support:

"My friends provide most of the emotional support and guidance which is especially important since I don't know that many persons who did this level of study and I am a distance student."

(Survey respondent)

The financial support that came from family was, for many, decisive in whether they could take up the experience of studying in the UK. Of note, however, being in receipt of family money could also be a negative: those with a close connection to family often wanted less financial support from their family than they were receiving and cited a sense of guilt over spending family money on items or experiences they perceived to be frivolous.

“It’s not good! Because when you spend money you have to think, ah, this is the money my parents try their best to earn this money, so I can’t waste them, I have to use it where it should be used, even I go out to the restaurant to eat with my friends, I feel if this restaurant is very expensive, maybe I won’t consider, I won’t think about this or I prefer to cook at home because it’s more cheap, because England really is more expensive than China. So I feel it’s such, how to say? Burden?”

(Interview respondent)

For many international students, however, family provided psychological, spiritual, and moral support. For those from strongly religious backgrounds shared faith and the celebration of that faith was particularly important:

“Love, prayer and inspirational words.”

(Survey respondent)

“The support which they provide is encouragement, discussion, taking an honest advice and praying.”

(Survey respondent)

Finally, many students, particularly those who had family with them in the UK, received substantial practical support from their families. This was of particular importance to student parents:

“They also do everything they can to make my life easier and reduce my burden as I am studying full time and also working 20 hours.”

(Survey respondent)

Research question two: when does access to family support matter most?

Unsurprisingly, access to family support was therefore most important:

- At academic ‘pinch points’ such as during exams/assessments, as well as when international students needed to discuss feedback

- In relation to other academic insecurities/ workload /other academic queries such as ‘de-coding’ academic language
- When international students were wavering and needing support, encouragement, motivation to continue
- When international students were feeling lonely/homesick
- When international students were needing financial/fees support
- When international students were feeling stress/anxiety/depression (which might of course relate to some or all of the above)

“I get tons of economic support, they pay for my tuition because I only saved up for a few years so that was enough for me to go to Italy and now I’m working but I still make ends meet with my own pay cheque. I do get emotional support I would say from my mum, my dad is absent in that sense. But, you see, that’s the thing, through my dad’s economic support, that’s the way I realise he shows me that he cares. He’s very proud of what I’m doing but it’s not something he voices. He shows it, let’s say. My mum on the contrary, she does in contrast, she calls me every other day, she asks me about my whole life. I can tell she cares.” (interview respondent)

Research question three: what inhibits mobilisation of family support?

The single biggest reason that respondents gave for not accessing family support (even where it was possible to do so) related to worries and concerns about elderly parents/other family members:

“When I feel that one of my sister’s or brother upset or sick and I cannot do anything, I keep thinking of how to cheer them from a distance or how to make them talk to me.”

(Survey respondent)

Following on from this was the desire not to be a burden to this same family. This was particularly important where parents were elderly, were not affluent, or were experiencing personal or family difficulties. Many students spoke of not feeling able to share their own concerns in these circumstances:

“Times I needed to talk about my struggle on the course and times I felt lonely but haven’t wanted to tell them.”

(Survey respondent)

A second significant concern related to the desire not to be drawn in to family difficulties as doing so interfered with the students' studies

“Sometimes my Mom does crazy things and talk bad about my dad and it really gives me a hard time. I am supposed to focus on my assignment, but I just can't and it drives me crazy.”

(Survey respondent)

Finally, many students were reluctant to ask for further financial support when parents or other family members had already made significant sacrifices to financially support their studies. For some students, however, not asking for further support left them in relatively impoverished circumstances:

“They have given me so much already how can I ask for more? I would rather just do without than ask for more.”

(Interview respondent)

Research question four: impact of distance

The key impact of distance, for those who had close connection to family, was emotional impact. A significant number of respondents described feelings of drifting apart from family or of loss of the family connection they used to have:

“It's not easy leaving your comfort zone and the people you hold dear and constantly are in communication with. It has changed from driving to or simply walking in to the next room for some of my family members to relying on phone and text messages.”

(Survey respondent)

“Absence is a great obstacle that upsets my relationship with spouse and children.”

(Survey respondent)

“Loneliness is a new feeling. Living in a house full of people and suddenly on your own has definitely had a toll on me emotionally to my surprise. After a two month depression phase where I struggled to study and focus, I have overcome it for the most part thankfully.”

(Survey respondent)

For other students the impact of distance from family was on a more practical level but the emotional consequences were just as profound:

“I cannot function to my best capabilities because of the emotional and

psychological and physical stress of having to work and study and raise two children and worry about meeting all financial responsibilities. My mind is constantly whirring and thinking of how to afford the next meal for myself and kids, how to pay rent (currently owing two months' rent) and my grades this year have suffered. I literally have no time to even mix with other students or take advantage of the study environment.”

(Survey respondent)

For many students the distance from family, and the stress and anxiety this engendered, was perceived as having a significant impact on their academic studies:

“I am not able to put 100% effort in my studies somehow it stops me.”

(Survey respondent)

“I miss them all the time and worry about them constantly. ‘Where are they, what are they doing, are they OK?’ Sometimes I have to stop what I am doing and phone home just to check everything is ok and then it is hard to get back to work.”

(Interview respondent)

This made them highly vulnerable to failure and withdrawal. This was compounded by the fact that when the going got tough a fair number of international students were asked by their families if they just wanted to ‘come home’ and abandon their studies. For some students – stressed, impoverished, lonely and worried about family back home – the temptations to do so was high, placing them at risk of early withdrawal.

5. Conclusions and ideas for further research

Data for this study was collected primarily across one university and further research to look across the sector would be beneficial. In particular, research which could compare international students' experiences across different types of institutions e.g. pre- and post-92s, large and small institutions, and those with a large number or a small number of international students would be helpful. Moreover, a larger data set would allow for an exploration of both disciplinary differences as well as differences between

students from different countries of origin. This would be helpful in nuancing and disaggregating both experiences and potential institutional responses.

6. Informing enhancements to professional practice

Understanding when and how family support is required and mobilised, or not, by international students is fundamental to understanding:

- which students might be at risk of leaving early from their studies, and/or
- which students may struggle to attain academically, and/or
- which students may struggle to build and maintain effective social and emotional relationships

There are, therefore, specific implications for retention, success and student satisfaction. With this in mind, the following recommendations are designed to guide the development of institutional responses. Three exemplar case studies have been developed (see below). This guidance will be tested and then disseminated across the sector along with further case studies developed over time and used to inform institutional good practice. These will also be made available on the UKCISA website.

Recommendations

- **An increase in awareness** around students and their family life is necessary for those working with international learners, which may bust certain myths around international students and their families.
- **Financial support:** international students are not solely from families with wealthy backgrounds. Family networks abroad can make severe financial sacrifices to send a student to study in the UK and their fees may be made up from a patchwork of donations from across the extended family. Expectations built around this family sacrifice can place heavy pressure on students, which, in turn, can have an impact on student success.
- **Emotional support:** international students may still retain substantial caring responsibilities for their family whilst studying abroad, formally or informally. Students may struggle to balance the pressure of emotionally supporting a family network in their home country, with the demands from their studies in the UK.

- Similar to certain vulnerable student groups, international students could benefit from a model of support that spans the **student lifecycle**, from recruitment in their home country through to graduation. This may help those with little family support, and those with caring responsibilities or expectations to retain and succeed whilst studying in the UK.

Support recommendations: pastoral

- Universities should consider putting in place a single point of contact, who can deliver pastoral support, and advocate for the student across the university, in particular with health and wellbeing and finance issues.
- Universities should ensure that there is ease of access to counseling for international students, who may need to discuss and process difficult feelings around their family, lack of family, or the intensity of their formal or informal caring responsibilities.
- Universities and staff who support international students should be aware that some students may not wish to be in contact with their family, and thus support staff should avoid becoming a messenger for unwanted family contact, or encourage a student to get in touch, who does not want to be in touch with a family network.

Support recommendations: financial

- University staff working in finance should be aware of the complexities around international student financial support. International students may be funded through a patchwork of family contributions, and therefore are not always able to provide fees in one lump sum.

Support recommendations: academic

- Academic staff and personal tutors should consider the whole picture of the learner, and be pastoral in approach, asking basic questions which can help the student to feel a sense of trust and confidence in confiding any extenuating circumstances which may relate to family caring responsibilities, and/or family difficulties. Such trust and confidence can be built by communicating their understanding of the different challenges that family networks (or lack of) may provide for international students.
- Academic staff should offer clear and consistent signposting to institutional support services, and make explicit to students how they can evidence family circumstances (financial, emotional etc.) which may be

impacting on their academic studies

- Academics facilitate the integration of international students with home-UK students in group project and partner work.

Recommendations: the university community

- The international student community has, by nature, an inbuilt element of transience, which can prohibit international students from making long-lasting friendships within this community alone, which are helpful for students to draw on. Traditional practices of housing and pairing international students together (creating a silo effect for international learners) may not stimulate students to feel a sense of belonging within an institutional, local or national community.
- Universities should consider providing academic and non-academic mentoring programmes for home students, in addition to international student pairings.

Policy level recommendations

- Institutions and governmental organisations should consider a more robust collection and analysis of data from those international students who fail to retain, which may indicate key reasons for their withdrawal or suspension, and opportunities for the building of institutional support around family circumstances.

A set of 10 case studies are being produced, showing different students' experiences and what forms of intervention might make a difference. Three of these are included below. The case studies will be used to develop guidance/professional development materials for those working directly with international students (academics/international office staff/counselling services, etc.). They will be piloted and tested across a number of institutions before being made freely available across the sector. They will also be made available on the UKCISA website.

7. Case studies

Case study one: Anja³

Anja is a 30-year-old Masters student from the Netherlands. She has a distant family, with little physical and emotional connection to either parent. Her parents divorced earlier in her life, and both have since remarried. She has three sisters who are settled in the Netherlands. Anja has no relationship or connection with her mother, who has tried to reach out and reconcile

with her since being at university – in an unwanted way. Although she has a more natural bond with her father, he does not play a strong role in her life and they are not in regular contact. Her parents were thus largely removed from the process of decision-making when it came to accessing higher education and moving to the UK.

“I never talked about it I think. They never really asked me what I wanted to do or checked if I was on the right track. It wasn't a topic I think. It was really just my own personal process and I never realised that maybe it is not normal. I didn't realise that other people did discuss that with their parents, I was just really on my own and very independent in that way. My parents never checked with me how I was doing at school and I think they never really knew what I was doing, so I think that's still the same today and it was during my bachelor as well... I've always had to do it on my own and I have a lot of willpower.”

Anja doesn't get any financial help from her mother, although she was paid an allowance from her family during her undergraduate degree in the Netherlands. Moreover during her transition from the Netherlands to university in Sheffield, she depended more on her partner's family for emotional support than her own.

“When I first started looking into it, it was more me on my own and I was in a relationship then, and I think his family supported me, but I didn't tell a lot of people in the beginning because I wasn't sure if I was going to get a scholarship, I wasn't sure if I was going to get in and didn't want to get anyone's hopes up, because basically everyone always assumes that I'll be fine and I'll be okay and things always go right for me because I am very independent.”

Since being at university, she has depended on the services that the institutions offer and the community of the university to support her, and be there for her as a safety net. It is clear that her friendships have also served as a form of family capital, and she draws on them in a way that other students may draw on their family for emotional support and approval.

“One of my friends said, ‘What I really like about you is that you really appreciate your friends. I don't know anyone else who

3. All case names are pseudonyms; any information which might make the research participant potentially identifiable has been removed.

appreciates their friends that much'. I think it's really important because of the situation that I grew up in, because I'm just aware that not everyone's got a safety net at home or a lot of support from their family...I think it's important to have a backup if you don't have that, because I didn't have it and I have some friends who didn't have it either so I want to be there and do whatever I can and I want them to know that I'll be there as well."

However, at times the support services at university have let her down, particularly when she was feeling extremely isolated and had a very difficult mental health issue, which she felt required immediate attention.

"I did go to the services, like university counselling service and I felt like - I mean I got an appointment in two weeks... but considering what I told them and the forms that I filled in, I think they misjudged the situation."

Students like Anja, who have little family connection or support, are unlikely to be able to draw on forms of family capital when it comes to making decisions about university and studies, and are relying on their own tenacity and independence to get them through their studies. In addition they are far away from the friendship networks that can replace the emotional support of a family member or parent. It is therefore crucial that universities recognize the importance they may hold for such students, in particular the sense of safety net that their staff and services can become for students. Finally it is clear that students like Anja need friendships, and university staff should both realise the importance of student unions and academic groups in helping students find new friendships closer to home and facilitate students' access to them.

Case study two: Paulo

Paulo is a 27-year-old Italian Masters student. He is from a close family who has fully supported his studies and his move to the UK. He is an only child, his parents have been married for 30 years, and he communicates with them once per week using Skype. His parents are not wealthy, but he receives financial support from his family each month to help meet the costs of living in the UK despite the fact that they are not wealthy.

"Both my father and my mum weren't so rich, I mean they can live well but not so

rich that they went to a university or something like that."

He originally refused financial help from his parents, as he felt his own money would be enough, but his parents insisted on helping.

"They support me also in this part, in the financial part, but I wanted them not to, because it was my decision so I say, 'okay, no, I want to earn money for the Erasmus now.' Just because, okay, I think it's that I will like to be more independent. Maybe my parents from one hand they know that I want to be independent and they try to make me more independent, but on the other they always ask me, 'do you need something?' Every time! So yeah. I receive financial support. If I really need it I will receive it."

Paulo also had to adjust to a different way of studying, as Italian higher education does not have the same focus on assignments.

"The Italian university and the English university are quite different in the way you pass the exams. In Italy we have written exams or oral exams and you don't have to do assignments, whereas here I just have to do assignments, so it was quite different but I receive a lot of support from the lecturer. I think friendly is the correct way to describe them, compared to my Italian teacher."

In addition he felt he could not call on his parents for help with academic matters, as they had little experience of studying.

"So I haven't asked my family because they have never (studied) - Okay, they have studied but they have never done a university, so for them it's like a foreign environment, strange environment. So they don't really know how a university works, especially a foreign university which is quite different from mine."

Although Paulo is unlikely to struggle financially during his studies, it is clear that he does not have access to academic capital outside of the university. Students on postgraduate courses, however, may be seen as having gained the requisite academic capital they need to be successful in their studies. This is, of course, not necessarily the case, particularly for those students who have not previously studied in the UK or have not undertaken English pre-sessional

courses. Paulo needs to be made aware of the different expectations between UK and non-UK courses, in terms of modes of assessment, academic writing styles and standards, referencing protocols, construction and development of arguments, use of linguistic style and terminology. They also need to be made aware of the academic support available to them and how to access this. This needs to happen throughout their studies.

Case study three: Tijal

Tijal is 36-years-old and from Nigeria. He is studying a postgraduate course in communications. He has an extremely close family, a wife and children who are at home in Nigeria. He speaks to his family every day and he still plays a strong role within the family, albeit over Skype. He was an accountant in his home country, but decided to come to study in the UK as it would offer himself and his family better prospects. He is financially supporting his family in Nigeria.

“My daughter is already in secondary school, so today they had the open day. She is in school but she is- I keep buying boarding so she will learn ... she should learn to strive on her own just like I did... you have to call them, you have to know how they’re doing and then you have to face with also your activity here and it wasn’t easy with me.”

However, reflecting on family brings up mixed feelings for Tijal, who has to balance the emotions of intensely missing his family, and the loneliness of living without them, with the pressure and responsibility of interacting with them from distance and giving emotional support and maintaining his position as their father.

“I found it quite challenging, and at times just...essentially I had been bored, because where...so you hardly see anyone, so only you inside the room, or doing studies. After then, comparing to when I am back in my country I am used to see my daughter ‘Ah daddy’. I have to call them every day they come back from school, call them, the video, call. ‘Do you have any homework?’, ‘Yes’, ‘okay, do it’, after they do it they say ‘daddy, I finish’, I say ‘okay, get mummy to check’ you understand. You need emotional satisfaction, you understand, but you don’t have that here. So these are the things that you have to battle with it.”

However, Tijal found support with an advisor from the university, who helped him to find a social life and to integrate outside of the university and in the locality. This gave him a sense of support and acceptance, away from the issues of family life.

“The student support adviser, yes, Anne. She talks like a mother and perhaps because she is married she understands it and she was like okay, try and go to the society – she gave me recommendations to be going to societies and going to these conversation clubs and some other things like that, which I did try and it’s okay.”

There are periods outside of university where Tijal experiences intense loneliness, however, because the routine of school and studying does not exist to fill his time:

“Because when the weekend comes, no school activity, no one to talk to...just time to wait until the next week when you can go back. Weekends are long.”

Tijal also noted that there were issues with making friends who were from a different culture to his own, as he was concerned about where the parameters may sit with regards to what was socially acceptable.

“Imagine maybe if you have a friend, you try to, like in my country I can be very free, talk to anyone, you understand. But here I have to be very careful. Number one age-wise – you never can tell, you understand and then number two, so what you say it might also be offensive to the person.”

Students like Tijal need support with the adjustment to living outside of a very close family network, and the transition from family life into life living on their own. Universities should not underestimate the importance of helping students to replace the kind of emotional capital that Tijal has left behind at home in Nigeria with friendships and connections locally. Alongside this, institutions should consider a more comprehensive sense of support with the cultural transition to enable students like Tijal to confidently form friendships outside of their home culture. It is clear that advisors, of the kind that Tijal found, make a huge difference in helping students who are used to a close and collective family life, to transition. It is wise for universities to invest in those staff who can facilitate more cross-cultural interaction.

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9. Contact details

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Website: <http://standalone.org.uk/>

Sheffield Hallam University

Appendix 1

Survey questions

- Are you an undergraduate or postgraduate student?
- Who do you consider as your family? (Please tick all that apply)
 - My biological parent(s) and/or family members
 - My legally adoptive parent(s) and/or family members
 - My foster parent(s) and/or family members
 - My spouse or partner and/or his or her family members
 - My friends and/or members of my community
 - I don't consider myself to have a family
- How would you describe your relationship with your family and family members?
 - Extremely close
 - Very close
 - Close
 - Somewhat close
 - Somewhat distant
 - Distant
 - Very distant
 - Extremely distant
 - We do not have any kind of relationship
 - Other (please specify)
- Is your emotional connection to your family positive or negative for you? (Likert scale)
- Can you describe the amount of physical interaction you have with your family or a family member?
For example, seeing and talking to your family or a family member face to face.
- Is this physical interaction largely positive or negative for you? (Likert scale)
- If you communicate with your family or family members, what do you use to maintain communication? (Please tick all that apply)
- Can you describe the amount of non-physical interaction you have with your family or family members? For example, emailing, texting, Skype or speaking on the telephone
- Is this communication largely positive or negative for you? (Likert scale)
- Has your family relationship changed since starting your studies? (Likert scale)
- If it has changed, how has it changed?
- When has having a close or distant relationship to your family been of most importance to you as a student?
- If you feel connected to your family or family members, what kind of support do they offer you?
- When have you most drawn on their support and why?
- If you do not feel connected to your family or family members when has this been most problematic for you as a student?
- Has this affected your student experience? (Likert scale)

- If yes, please let us know more
- Are you aware of any support available to you at the university? (Likert scale)
- Has the university offered you support at any point?
- If yes, what support were you offered?
- What is your age?
- What is your gender?
- Is this the gender you were assigned at birth?
- Are you married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting with a partner?
- How would you describe your sexuality?
- What is your country of origin?
- What is your nationality?
- How would you describe your religion?
- Would you be interested in taking part in a short interview to tell us more about your family support and your experience at University?

If you answered yes, please leave us your first name, telephone number and email address so we can get in touch

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Appendix 2

Interview questions

1. Could you tell me a little bit about your programme of study? Why did you choose this institution/program/course? Do you study full-time/part-time?
2. Can you tell me a little bit about your family? Who makes up your family? Has this changed over time?
3. Do you have a connection to your family? How would you describe your connection to your family? How much physical connection or support do you feel you have from your family? Why is this? How much communication do you feel you have with your family? Why is this? How do you maintain this communication?
4. How would you describe emotional connection to your family? How, if at all, do your family support you emotionally? What, if anything, has this helped you to overcome? what might have been different with more or less emotional support from family?
5. Has your relationship with your family changed since starting university? If so, why is this?
6. When has this relationship or lack of relationship been of most importance to you as a student?
7. Can you give some specific examples; what happened? What was the outcome?
8. What effect has family, or lack of family, had on you: As a student? On your studies? On your social experiences of university?
9. How might things have been different for you? What would have made a difference?
10. Have you accessed any support from your university?
11. Have you thought of withdrawing from your studies? What prevented you from doing so?
12. What if anything has the university done to support you? What could the university have done to support you?
13. Do you feel cared for by your university?
14. Have there been times when you have felt 'wounded' by the university (for example feedback)? how have you dealt with this?
15. What other strategies have you adopted to be successful at university (and thinking beyond)?

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Appendix 3

Demographics of those surveyed

Table 1 Level of study

Level of study	%age
Undergraduate	36%
Postgraduate	62%
Pre-sessional English	2%

Table 2 Gender

Gender	%age
Female	55%
Male	43%
Non-binary	<1%
Prefer not to say	1%

Table 3 Sexuality

Sexuality	%age
Heterosexual	58%
Homosexual	5%
Bisexual/questioning	3%
Asexual	<1%
Prefer not to say	33%

Table 4 Relationship status

Relationship	%age
Single	48%
Married	20%
In a relationship	23%
Co-habiting	5%
Prefer not to say	4%

Table 5 Religion

Religion	%age
Christian	41%
No religion	34%
Muslim	11%
Buddhist	7%
Hindu	3%
Jewish	<1%
Sikh	<1%
Prefer not to say	2%

Table 6 Country

Country	%age	Country	%age
China	10%	Ireland	2%
Malaysia	6%	Portugal	2%
India	5%	Spain	2%
Nigeria	5%	Thailand	2%
Cyprus	5%	Hungary	2%
Germany	5%	Australia	2%
Poland	4%	Hong Kong	2%
Pakistan	4%	Indonesia	2%
Italy	4%	Iran	2%
Greece	4%	Libya	2%
Ghana	3%	Romania	2%
Bulgaria	2%	The Netherlands	2%
France	2%	United States	2%
(Other) Argentina; Brunei; Canada; Congo-Brazzaville; Czech Republic; Ecuador; Gibraltar; Japan; Jordan; Kenya; Maldives; Malta; Mexico; Nepal; Oman; Romania; Saudi Arabia; Singapore; Slovakia; Somalia; Tanzania; Taiwan; Vietnam; Zambia			17%

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Appendix 4

Demographics of those interviewed

Table 7 Demographics of those interviewed

	Level of study	Connection to family	Age	Gender	Country	Religion
1	Undergraduate	Very Close	21-25	Male	Italy	Christian
2	Postgraduate	Very Close	26-34	Male	Malta	Christian
3	Undergraduate	Somewhat Distant	18-21	Male	Romania	No religion or belief
4	Postgraduate	Extremely Close	21-25	Female	china	No religion or belief
5	Postgraduate	Extremely Distant	21-25	Female	The Netherlands	No religion or belief
6	Postgraduate	Extremely Close	26-34	Male	Ghana	Muslim
7	Postgraduate	Extremely Close	34-40	Female	Libya	Muslim
8	Postgraduate	Very Close	41-45	Male	Nigeria	Christian
9	Postgraduate	Extremely Close	41-45	Female	Nigeria	Christian
10	Postgraduate	Extremely Distant	41-45	Female	New Zealand	No religion or belief
11	Postgraduate	Very Distant	26-34	Male	Russian	Christian
12	Postgraduate	Very Close	21-25	Male	Ghana	Christian
13	Postgraduate	Very Close	34-40	Male	Nigeria	Christian
14	Postgraduate	Close	26-34	Male	Cyprus	Christian
15	Postgraduate	Somewhat Distant	26-34	Male	Nigeria	Christian
16	Postgraduate	Very Close	26-34	Female	Germany	No religion or belief
17	Postgraduate	Close	34-40	Male	Nigeria	Christian
18	Undergraduate	Distant	21-25	Female	China	Christian
19	Undergraduate	Distant	21-25	Female	Pakistan	Muslim
20	Undergraduate	Distant	18-21	Female	China	No religion or belief



O travellers from
somewhere else to here,
Rising from Sheffield Station
and Sheaf Square
To wander through the
labyrinths of air,

Pause now, and let
the sight of this sheer cliff
Become a priming-place
which lifts you off
To speculate
What if..?
What if..?
What if..?

Cloud-shadows drag
their hands across
the white;
Rain prints the sudden
darkness of its weight;
Sun falls and leaves the
bleaching evidence of light.

Your thoughts are like
this too: as fixed as words
Set down to decorate
a blank façade
And yet, as words are too,
all soon transferred

To greet and understand
what lies ahead –
The city where your
dreaming is re-paid,
The lives which wait
unseen as yet, unread.

WHA
And

Poem on façade of
Sheffield Hallam
University:
WHAT IF?
Andrew Motion,
Off The Shelf 2007



Lincoln University Students' Union

Are students' unions' activities, events and opportunities accessible and used by international students?

Rachal Lilley, Advice Centre Manager

Jennifer Barnes, Student Voice & Impact Manager



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“For me this is my first year to study abroad and the biggest problem is the culture and language barrier so when I first come here I have no more energy.”

1. Background to the research

1.1 Lincoln Students' Union

The University of Lincoln Students' Union (ULSU) is committed to the advancement of education of students at the University for the public benefit by:

- Promoting the interests and welfare of students at the University during their course of study and representing, supporting and advising students.
- Being the recognised representative channel between students and the University, and any other external bodies.
- Providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of its students.

The Students' Union (SU) is a democratic, student-led organisation, and has five elected Student Leaders (Sabbatical Officers) who represent the Union's members and lead activities and campaigns which act in the best interest of students. The SU is a unique organisation in that it is both a charity and a limited company. It offers both commercial services in the form of bars, pubs, club nights, events and a bed and breakfast to students (ie, Tower Bar, Engine Shed, The Swan); and charitable services which are informed by the needs of the members and are intended to improve their experience, ie, student representation, activities (sports clubs and societies), an Advice Centre and employability opportunities including volunteering.

Historically, international students have shown little engagement with services offered by the SU, and the SU is committed to changing this. The information gathered through this research project and detailed in this report will be shared with the University of Lincoln, specifically its International Office, English Language Centre, Student Services and Advice Service to inform and encourage a commitment to best practice, and to support an institution-wide improvement of understanding and engagement with international students. It is hoped that the findings will also help students' unions across the sector to increase their engagement with international students.

1.2 Introduction of VP International

In 2016, the SU successfully applied to the University of Lincoln's Vice Chancellor for funding to introduce a new Student Leader position – Vice-President (VP) International. For the 2016-17 academic year, 10.5% of the student body were international students, demonstrating the importance of having a student leader specifically to support the needs of these students. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, the student elected to this role had to withdraw from their position in November 2016, affecting the SU's capacity to place a high focus on the representation of international students. During the time the elected VP International was in post they were able to provide significant insight into the experience of international students, but this was not continued or developed when they withdrew from the role. This research enables us to gain a much deeper insight into the international student experience and, with the appointment of a new VP International, there is now significant opportunity to positively impact the international student experience through delivering the actions outlined within this document.

1.3 Previous research at ULSU

The strategic research carried out by the SU in 2015, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, identified that the support and engagement of international students is a significant development area for the SU and, by extension, the wider University of Lincoln community. This research identified that there are various issues with the engagement of international students in comparison to home students at the University of Lincoln, and that this remains a gap which needs to be bridged. The strategic research found that:

- UK students are more likely to say that the SU enhances their university life, and that they are more satisfied with the SU than international students.
- UK students are more likely to say they know exactly who the SU members are and what they do.
- UK students are more likely to say that they enjoy living in Lincoln and that they are pleased they chose to study at the University of Lincoln.
- UK students were found to be more likely to use the SU for support with issues relating to their course than international students.
- International students feel it is important to get the opportunity to meet and make friends with British students.

“The first problem I have to overcome is the language barrier so I need to try to understand what are my friends saying.”

Overall, international students were found to be less engaged with the SU than UK students on almost every measure. They are less satisfied, less likely to be involved, less likely to feel the SU is relevant and less likely to vote in elections. From this, the SU identified that there is significant room for improvement in terms of the Union’s engagement with international students. This research aims to identify why this is the case and to aid in creating measurable recommendations and actions for improvement.

1.4 LUSU data

These findings have been further supported by analysis from the SU’s membership management system; Students’ Union Management System (SUMS). This identified lower engagement from international students across a variety of SU services. Of the international students enrolled for the 2015-16 academic year, only 49.2% engaged with the SU in any way, in comparison to home students where engagement levels were 65.33%. More specifically, course representative positions were held by 2.8% of the international student population, 10.7% attended events, 12% were members of a sport or society and 2% used the Advice Centre. Similarly, only 33% of international students voted in any election.

This further emphasises the necessity for a better understanding of what international students need, as well as continuing to highlight the importance of adapting and developing, both at SU and university level, the support for and engagement with international students. Equally, it is important for all students that international students are engaged and integrated so that as a student body, an awareness of different cultures is gained – an important awareness in an increasingly globalised world.

Key objectives for the SU have been developed as a result of the strategic research. Firstly, the SU will support the integration of home and international students to create a diverse multi-cultural experience for all. Secondly, the SU will support the positive experience and integration of members into the University of Lincoln community. Some aspects of these objectives have already been addressed, but it is hoped that this research will build on this further and more can be put in place in order to achieve these objectives. Through the research, the SU also aims to identify additional areas for the enhancement of the experience of international students.

International student engagement has increasing importance for both the SU and the University. For the SU, it is important that all members are able to interact effectively with all services during their time at university. It is hoped that this research will:

- Inform the understanding of how international students currently engage with the SU and how they view that experience.
- Highlight barriers which prevent international students from accessing activities, events or opportunities and offer suggestions how the SU could further improve engagement and the student experience.
- Gain insight into what students actually want, to ensure future developments are evidenced rather than based on assumptions.
- Identify strategies for longer term engagement with, and integration of, international students at the University of Lincoln.

The SU will, therefore, gain a more in-depth understanding of international issues and the barriers to engagement so it is able to make positive changes to improve its services and support for international students. Such strategies will directly impact on the student experience and wellbeing of international students in order to support them in reaching their potential, both at university and in their own life.

Lincoln SU is not aware of any research which has been conducted into how international students engage with SU services and opportunities. Consequently, this research has the potential to offer sector-wide insight, which may help to improve the experience of international students while at UK universities.

2. Research methodology

The research was carried out using questionnaires and focus groups.

2.1 Equipment

A paper consent form and short questionnaire were provided to all participants in the focus groups (noted below) with refreshments provided as an incentive for taking part. A voice recorder was used to record the discussion for the purposes of transcription. The online survey (also below) was emailed and a prize draw for a £25 Amazon voucher was offered as an incentive to complete it.

2.2 Participants

A total of 21 students took part across five focus groups and a further 26 students completed the online survey. All participants were international (including EU) students currently enrolled at the University of Lincoln. All international students were invited to take part in the focus groups by email (see Appendix 1¹), and were also given the opportunity to sign up to the volunteering opportunities page of the SU's website. In addition, participation was promoted through the established student network of the International Students Association (ISA) and on social media. Information about the focus group was also disseminated by the University of Lincoln International Office and administration staff in colleges and schools with high numbers of international students.

2.3 Procedure

Focus groups

At the beginning of each focus group participants were given a verbal briefing explaining the purpose of the group and how their responses would be used, as well as being informed that the recording was for the purpose of transcription only. Each participant was required to sign to indicate their informed consent (Appendix 2¹) before completing a short questionnaire (see Appendix 3¹) in order to establish base level knowledge about the SU. A semi-structured approach was used to give students an opportunity to ask further questions. Planned questions were asked on five topics: Sports and Societies; Volunteering and Employability; Support and Advice, Commercial and Events; Student Voice and Representation (see Appendix 4¹).

Survey

Feedback from early focus groups suggested that a language barrier and the possible accompanying anxieties may prevent some international students from wanting to have a face-to-face conversation but also that reading and writing in a second language may be easier for some. As a result, it was decided that an online questionnaire may be appropriate in the interests of gathering more feedback, in a more accessible way. An invitation to take part was sent out to all international students by email (Appendix 5¹). The questions followed a similar format to those in the focus group (see Appendix 6¹ for questions used) and were both open and closed. The survey was also used in order to gain an increased number of responses,

improving the reliability of the results, as well as providing the opportunity for distance learners to participate.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Focus group questionnaire

Prior to each focus group, participants completed a short questionnaire. Responses suggested there was a general understanding of the purpose of a SU and what it stands for; however knowledge about specific services was relatively limited. This is consistent with findings from the ULSU Annual Membership Survey 2017 (AMS 2017) which measured satisfaction and knowledge about the SU across the entire student population at the University. This survey indicated that only 54% of all respondents felt they knew exactly who the SU was and what it does. This suggests there are potential problems with accessibility of services due to lack of awareness across the whole student body. This may particularly be the case for international students and offer some explanation for the lack of engagement with SU services.

3.1.1 Student Leaders

Overall there was a lack of knowledge about who the Student Leaders were and their role. Similarly, the AMS 2017 indicated that only 56% of respondents felt that the Student Leaders were available and easy to contact. This suggests that Student Leaders have not been visible enough and consequently it was unclear what their role was. This is particularly troublesome as the position of VP International was introduced specifically to improve Student Leader (and subsequently the entire SU) engagement with international students. It is possible that perception of the Student Leaders may have been influenced by the early departure of two of the 2016-17 Student Leaders and this could have altered the messages and responsibilities of those remaining.

With a full team of new Student Leaders starting their role in June 2017, a key aim of the next academic year is to have Student Leaders out and about talking to students more in order to increase awareness and gain student feedback. Increased presence on campus should result in Student Leaders being more recognised and their role being clearer. In particular, increasing the new VP International's presence on campus will hopefully improve the engagement of

1. See the online report at www.ukcisa.org.uk/lincolnappendices for links to the appendices.

“In China we don’t have the habits to go to the bar or the club regularly so that’s why maybe some people don’t join in with some activities.”

international students with the SU, and also provide another point of contact to offer support to students or, at least, be able to signpost to appropriate services. Additionally, the VP International 2017-18 already has an established network of nearly 400 international students on the social media platform WeChat which gives direct access to this population.

3.1.2 Communication

Additionally, the questionnaire asked about communication from the SU with their members. A total of 57.14% of respondents thought communication from the SU was effective. Likewise, 45.2% of respondents to the AMS 2017 felt that communication was effective. However, it is important to note that 42.85% of respondents and 54.8% of AMS 2017 respondents indicated either ambivalence or that communication was ineffective, suggesting changes to methods of communication may be beneficial.

Do you feel that the SU communicates effectively with you?

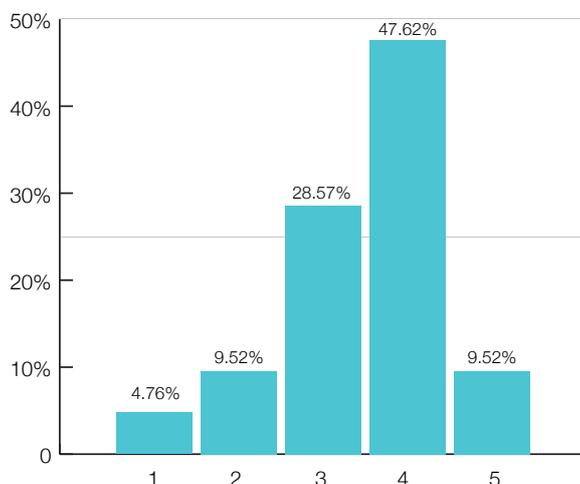


Figure 1: perception of effectiveness of communication from the SU

1 = not effective;
5 = very effective

All students should receive communication where relevant and appropriate. These findings suggest that the success of this varies. Communication with students was an area mentioned in nearly all focus groups and in the online survey as an area which could be improved.

Methods of communication preferred by students vary. However, some have specifically mentioned not seeing or receiving emails which

had been sent to all students. Consequently, it may be necessary to consider other methods of communication that would ensure that all students receive the information they need. Some suggested more emphasis on posting on social media. However, as all key events and information are already posted on the main SU Facebook and Twitter page it may, instead, be the case that more students need to be guided to these pages.

In January 2017, a new Head of Marketing and Communications at the SU was recruited who has been creating a strategy to ensure that the SU’s marketing and communications improves. This has included the purchase of Falcon software, a customer experience management platform which ensures that communication and social media presence can be as effective as possible for every group. In addition, the new VP International should result in an increased social media presence specifically for international students which may help to resolve this issue. Furthermore, if students are unable to find information on social media, a feature on the SU allows online chat and then directs them to where this information is. This, again, may be a feature which needs to be highlighted and promoted more.

4. Sports and societies

4.1 Reasons for joining

Those who had joined either sports teams and/or societies highlighted that the main reasons for doing so were: taking part in an activity they had an interest in; joining in with home students; and making new friends. Many mentioned that joining sports or societies helped them to adapt to the new culture after moving to Lincoln, as well as the UK more generally. Equally, academic societies were considered to be beneficial if they offered support for students’ studies as well as the opportunity to make connections within their course. However, across participants, only a small number had at any point been part of an activity, with even fewer continuing participation throughout their time at university.

4.2 Barriers to participation

Participants identified a number of barriers which may prevent international students from becoming involved with activities.

“Most of my foreign friends I met them in my lectures and a few from the English language centre but actually I don’t know how to make friends with native people.”

4.2.1 Time

Many mentioned they were too focused on their studies and assessments to have the spare time required. Many expressed difficulties with language when completing university work, making it considerably more time-consuming than, perhaps, for home students or those with a greater English language ability. As a result, the time commitment required to be part of a sports team or society can be a disincentive. This was particularly the case for those who were only at the University for one semester and, therefore, were focused on settling in, both to the university and a new country, and completing university work. The possibility of flexible membership or simply highlighting societies which require less of a time commitment may enable students to take part in social activities without detracting from their university commitments. An increased number of one-off or ‘give it a go’ sessions and opportunities run by the sports clubs or societies may also help to engage international students.

4.2.2 Cultural differences

It is also pertinent to consider the variety of education cultures that international students have come from. For students who have previous experience of university education in countries other than the UK, some experienced culture shock. It was found that some international universities focused entirely on a student’s studies but coming to Lincoln and being part of the SU provided an opportunity for students to also have an enriched social life. Those who were part of an activity, or had been previously, were keen to describe not only the benefits of meeting new people but also being introduced to, and welcomed into, a different culture. It would be useful to gather case studies of those who have benefited from being a part of an activity in order to promote their value.

4.2.3 Making friends

However, it must be noted that many international students do not have a positive experience. Responses overwhelmingly indicated that the reason many international students did not join an activity is that they felt they were not welcomed by home students. In addition, those who had wished to join for the purpose of making friends felt that often members already had established friendship groups and were less willing to incorporate new members. This was particularly the case for those international students who are only at the University for one semester, for example, having started in January

rather than September. As a result, there seems to be a suggestion that many international students perceive societies and sports teams as being exclusively aimed at home students.

Students reported they felt they were approached less at Freshers Fayres and some societies did not respond to emails or messages about joining. At events such as the Freshers Fayre, it was viewed by some that UK students were less likely to try and engage with them as international students than perhaps they may have been with fellow home students. It may be that there is a potential language barrier, potentially making it more difficult for students to engage with one another.

Whilst there were few suggestions for how to combat language issues, students emphasised the importance of bridging the gap between cultures in order to alter how home students view international students wishing to join a society, but also to increase the perceived accessibility of activities for international students. A recommendation in order to combat this may be to provide cultural/inclusion training for sports club and society committee members in advance of Freshers Fayres to raise awareness of this barrier and perhaps prevent this from remaining an issue in the future.

4.2.4 Lack of information

Another significant barrier to international student involvement with the SU that was identified was a lack of information. Some participants stated they did not feel they had enough information to be able to make an informed decision about whether to join an activity, or what joining would actually entail for them. Likewise, the information about how to join was not felt to be clear enough and in some cases there was a lack of communication from societies when students had asked questions. As a result, students emphasised increasing advertising and promotion of which sports clubs and societies are available to all students, as well as outlining the benefits of joining. It was suggested that this could include information in poster or leaflet form about all societies and what they offer, but particularly from those who are unable to hold stands at the Freshers Fayre.

It is also important to consider that, with international arrival dates, there is always the possibility that late arriving students may miss Freshers week in September or Refreshers week

“Students might have language difficulties and also cultural barriers and some international students just don’t get involved because of that.”

in January, and thus may not have the chance to find out about activities or miss the trial periods in order to be able to find out more or get involved.

The overall impression gained was that information about societies was not obvious enough, and this perceived lack of information simply prevented individuals joining an activity. Giving as much information as possible to international students in their welcome week or a welcome pack was suggested in order to make students aware from the beginning of their time at Lincoln what activities are available to them, the possible benefits of joining, and how they can do this. Additional suggestions included adding positive testimonials from international students who are part of a sports club or society, as well as collaborating with the International Students’ Association (ISA) to help organise events and to promote joining an activity. It was also suggested that the ISA may be able to hold joint social events with different activities in order to boost engagement with sports and societies and this could result in increased membership.

4.2.5 Cost and payment arrangements

A further barrier identified was cost and the financial implications of joining an activity. International students have significant financial commitments on moving to a university in a new country which can include paying a large proportion of accommodation costs or university fees upfront. International students have higher university fees to pay and, therefore, may not have the resources required when they arrive in

Lincoln to also pay membership fees upfront. Even if they do, the financial implications may potentially be greater especially if they wish to join more than one activity.

Having to pay joining fees as a lump sum may have significant financial implications, particularly for activities with higher joining fees, and hence prevent individuals from becoming involved when they start university. It was suggested that the option of offering payment of fees in instalments or perhaps paying for shorter periods of time (ie, smaller, more regular payments) would allow more students to join.

In addition, for those international students who are only in Lincoln for a short period of time it would allow them to join an activity without having to commit to a year-long membership. Longer trial periods or even the option to swap activities if they paid for one they were not enjoying was suggested as a way to combat the daunting aspect of committing financially to something they were not entirely certain about. The practicality of such a change would need to be assessed and further research would be required in order to establish if this is viable.

However, it is important to note that with many activities, it is already possible to join at any point within the academic year and pay for only that semester. This needs to be advertised more to ensure all students are aware of this option. Additionally, a membership refund within seven days is offered, allowing students some flexibility in swapping activities. Equally, as suggested



earlier, this problem may also be reduced by introducing more one-off events for non-members to join in activities.

5. Volunteering and employability

There was an overall sense that international students were aware of the benefits of volunteering. They frequently described it as a valuable experience and an opportunity to gain or develop skills in order to list on their CV. It also allows them to give back to the community and the chance to meet new people. Despite this, engagement has generally remained low with approximately only 5% of all international students enrolled for the 2016-17 year involved in volunteering. Those who had part-time jobs or who volunteered appeared to be more likely to take part in things on campus, so there needs to be some consideration as to whether or not they feel there is a lack of assistance in terms of looking for positions elsewhere.

5.1 Barriers to participation

There are a number of barriers which may prevent participation in volunteering or undertaking employment, and these need to be considered in order to understand why international students may not be engaging with volunteering and employability services.

5.1.1 National Insurance number

Those who were able to work in the UK explained difficulties or confusion surrounding gaining a National Insurance (NI) Number. There was a general impression that few international students were aware that a NI number was required in order to work within the UK and those who had heard about it tended to be unaware of the full process required to get one. The vast majority of participating students agreed it would be helpful to have this information, for example in an international student's welcome pack. Additionally, for some students it would be necessary to travel to another city to gain a NI number which presents issues in terms of both cost and missing lectures and/or seminars in order to attend appointments.

5.1.2 Lack of awareness of the 'Work Ready' scheme

As part of both the focus groups and online survey, every participant was asked whether or not they had heard of the SU's 'Work Ready' initiative. This scheme covers developing

employability skills whilst at the University of Lincoln. The findings indicate that very few had knowledge of what it consisted of, with only 21.28% indicating they had heard of it (see Figure 2). There was also little understanding of what the scheme actually entailed from those who had heard of it.

Have you heard of the students' union's 'Work Ready' scheme?

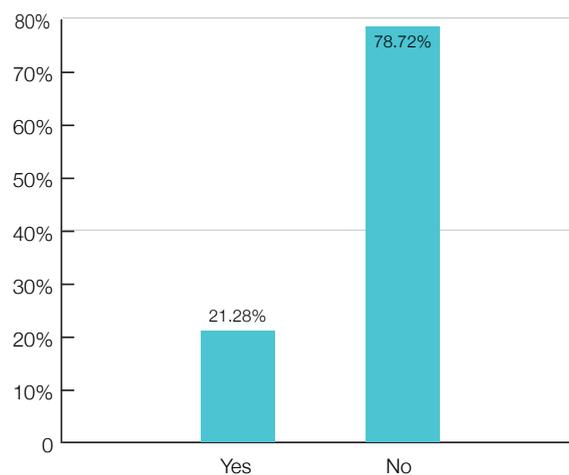


Figure 2: respondents who have heard of 'Work Ready' scheme

This finding has not been limited to international students. Throughout the student body there appears to be a lack of knowledge about the 'Work Ready' scheme, with only 37.2% of respondents in the AMS 2017 having heard of it. This is not an unexpected finding as the scheme is relatively new.

As a result of this feedback, a number of plans are already in place in order to increase awareness for the 2017-18 academic year:

- The SU website will have a section dedicated to the scheme which will encompass everything related to volunteering and employability. This should make the information easier to access.
- The volunteering and employability department within the SU will be focusing much more on 'Work Ready' and therefore it should become more widely known. For example, when entering the SU building all new signage for the department will detail it as 'Work Ready'. Volunteering will also be included so there will be more activities for students to take part in.
- At present there are workshops held as part of the 'Work Ready' scheme and in line with proposed changes these will cover more topics, for example, finance and the Duke of

Edinburgh Award. This should be helpful to a wider population of students.

- Volunteering drop-ins currently held by the SU will be rebranded as ‘Work Ready’ drop-ins as they will address both volunteering and employability, and there will be an increased number of these across the university campus, not solely in the SU building. This, again, should increase awareness and make ease of access to information significantly better.
- The ‘Work Ready’ scheme has recently improved its social media presence having set up both a Facebook and Twitter page dedicated entirely to the scheme in order to continue promotion of the scheme over the next academic year.

5.1.3 Careers and employability: the SU and university services

In line with these findings, a key message from the feedback received from students was that careers and employability information needs to be better advertised. There appears to be some confusion about what the University and the SU respectively offer in terms of support with employability. The information has been described as difficult to find, most likely contributing to the perceived confusion as to what services are available from which organisation. Some stated not knowing about such services until they had been at the University for some time when it might be too late to fully benefit from them. Better advertising and promotion of services would give students access to the relevant services according to their needs and inform them where to go for the most appropriate assistance.

When asked how individuals would begin to look for employment, most focused on actively seeking employment in the local area or searching online. There was very little mention of using university or SU services in order to find employment or volunteering. This again emphasises that advertising of services may need further development. Similarly, opinions were mixed in terms of whether international students felt that their university life was preparing them for working life post-university.

The AMS 2017 indicated that 38% of respondents felt their SU and university experiences have enabled them to develop employability skills, further supporting that promotion of careers or employability services should be of paramount importance to help

students. This may feed directly into the increased promotion of ‘Work Ready’, as this should make it clearer what the SU offers. However it remains an area which needs to be developed across the University community more widely.

5.1.4 Brexit

Brexit and the uncertainties surrounding this seem to be a recurring reason for students not to stay to work in the UK after completing their studies. Whilst this remains an ongoing concern for many university communities, and best efforts are being made in order to make students feel more at ease, it is possible that this uncertainty has contributed to international students choosing not to become involved in services which they may perceive as focussed on working in the UK.

5.1.5 The Lincoln Award

In terms of promoting both volunteering and employability, many students were keen to emphasise the benefits of completing the Lincoln Award (this is an employability award designed to engage students in activities that will make them more employable as graduates. See <https://lincolnsu.com/lincolnaward>).

Many felt that an increased emphasis should be on the benefits to international students of completing the Lincoln Award. Those who completed it gained skills from volunteering as well as having the opportunity to attend employability events that they felt they struggled to access otherwise. It was suggested that key information and contacts related to employability services could be included in information given to international students including information about the Lincoln Award. It may also be useful and beneficial to international students to include information about ‘Work Ready’ and the benefits of the scheme.

6. Advice and support

The general consensus from students who participated in the research was that most would try and seek guidance and information online or from a fellow student before they would approach a member of staff or an advice service. While discussing the advice and support an international student might need, a number of international students told us they weren’t aware that help and support was available to them and

there was some confusion over the services that were offered by the SU and the University. Some examples given were help with essay writing, signposting to the chaplaincy, anti-stress advice, housing & accommodation advice and mental health.

6.1 Barriers to usage

6.1.1 Location of SU Advice Centre

Few international students seemed to know where the SU Advice Centre is located or even that the service existed. In contrast to this, 89.7% of respondents to the AMS 2017 were aware of the services of the Advice Centre. This suggests that international students in particular appear to have a lack of awareness of the Advice Centre. Upon further discussion within the focus groups, there appeared to be significant confusion surrounding the difference between the SU Advice Centre and the University advice service. This indicates that there is a need for increased promotion about what each service offers.

Suggestions included a guide which could be offered to students clarifying where to go for particular issues and the support that is available. Clarity seemed to be key in order to avoid students being directed from place to place as a result of not knowing which service to go to. In line with this, the lack of knowledge of, and limited promotion of services, was identified as a major barrier in terms of students choosing to use services or seek support. Similarly, it was felt that the chaplaincy tended not to be recommended to most students as a source of advice and support and this may be a relevant source of support for international students with a faith.

6.1.2 Cultural differences

Nearly all international students expressed the sense that home students lacked an understanding of international students' experience of university. The concerns of an international student can often be different to those of a home student, so feeling that support is available to them is important. For example, international students who move into new accommodation with mostly English students can find this daunting. Many suggested that home students are less aware of how hard it may be for an international student to be in a new country and not have the family support that students from the UK may have. For this reason, they may not offer the kind of friendly support

that can make this transition easier. This can contribute quite significantly to feelings of loneliness or isolation. In order to try and prevent this, the Advice Centre has planned the re-launch of the international friends and buddy system. This should help to reduce this area of concern for international students, while providing international students with a person who is able to understand the issues that they experience.

6.1.3 Academic context

The NUS report entitled *Student Perspectives on International Students*² highlighted the greatest opportunity home and international students have to integrate is on their course, with approximately 80% indicating this is the case. This is compared to only 40% who integrate with international students as part of sports clubs or in halls of residence. It is important, therefore, to address home students' perspective of international students as part of their course.

During this research a specific example given of home students responding negatively to international students was in the context of group work or group assignments. Many felt they were perceived as being lazy or not wanting to join in, when in fact they were simply struggling to keep up with the speed of conversation between UK students. Many felt they were not able to adequately explain that they might need extra support or did not know where to go to ask for help.

The Advice Centre offers support for academic issues and has planned lecture shout outs for the next academic year which could be tailored towards schools with high numbers of international students in order to highlight where the support can be found. Additionally, promotion of these advice services through Academic Representative networks may aid this further, whilst also ensuring reps identify themselves as another source of support for academic issues. This could also be an area where working with the University directly may be of great benefit. Highlighting this issue to programme leaders and encouraging them to educate students about taking international students potential conversation speed into account when working together could help to reduce this as an area of concern.

2. See online link in references on page 51.

“Especially when you are in a group with people at the beginning they might just talk slowly but then they get faster and use more slang then you don't understand anything and are isolated.”

6.1.4 Issues particular to international students

Additionally, it was suggested that perhaps some areas within the University could be considered in more depth in terms of the impact on international students. For example, the issue of exams not being scheduled far enough in advance; or last minute timetable changes impacting on booking flights home, and the increased costs associated with late flight booking or having to make changes to flights. Having to pay a significant proportion of fees or accommodation upfront, which home students are not required to do, also causes some distress to those with limited financial resources. Furthermore, it was frequently mentioned that as the majority of student tenancies are set to end shortly after the end of second semester, international students do not have anywhere to live until graduation. Support is therefore necessary in relation to housing issues affecting international students. Further research is required in order to find out what sort of additional support international students would find helpful in relation to this from the University and the SU.

6.1.5 VP International and Student Leaders

Feedback suggested that the introduction of a VP International was beneficial in terms of providing a figurehead that could act both as a source of support but also as someone who is able to signpost to the relevant support services. The VP International provides a figurehead and can inform the Advice Centre on relevant issues of support and how the SU can make positive changes. At the start of the new academic year, the increased presence of Student Leaders on campus should ensure that international students know there is someone specifically dedicated to helping with issues they experience and who can offer guidance as well as being able to appreciate their unique experience as an international student.

6.1.6 Reluctance to seek help

When discussing what may prevent an international student from seeking help, even when they know about the available services, a number of other barriers were identified. The key theme was a fear or anxiety; of being looked down on or feeling stupid for seeking help. There appeared to be a sense that what they wanted to know may be obvious to home students, but there was also a perception that staff do not understand the needs of international students.

6.1.7 English language

A language barrier was an expected obstacle, with difficulties in English contributing to the perceived embarrassment or even potentially to the lack of understanding from staff or other students. Language was also described as a factor which contributed to a lack of confidence in approaching advice services and members of staff. In order to try to reduce this issue it may be helpful to explore the practicality and cost of a contract or using pay-per-minute with services such as LanguageLine® in order to have access to a telephone or video translator. In addition, it may be of great benefit to recruit more Student Advisor volunteers within the SU who are either bilingual or multilingual to help direct international students to access the correct services, or even act as an interpreter if requested by the student.

6.2 Future plans for improvement

Over the next academic year, the SU Advice Centre has planned a number of measures in order to increase the awareness of the service, and a place that international students feel they can approach. Results from the AMS 2017 indicate that of the students who have used the Advice Centre 69.3% would recommend using it to other students. Further work is being considered to develop the Advice Centre to ensure that students have a clear understanding of what the service does. Suggestions include a pop up Advice Café's to ensure the Advice Centre is more visible. As previously mentioned, lecture shout outs, promotion through the course representative network and relaunching of the international friends system are also planned. There will also be bitesize workshops for specific issues open to all students. Through these measures it is hoped that awareness of the SU Advice Centre and the services it offers will improve, and that international students will feel it is somewhere they are comfortable approaching. These measures and the (hopefully) improved engagement with advice services will directly impact upon the student experience and wellbeing of international students, supporting them in reaching their full potential.

7. Commercial and events

Of those who participated in the research, attendance of SU-organised events was very mixed. The majority of students explained they generally attended events in Freshers week or towards the beginning of the year (the

international welcome party was specifically mentioned as a success), but rarely attended events later in the year, if at all.

7.1 Barriers to attending

Reasons for not attending events were similar to reasons international students gave for not engaging with sports teams and societies. These include commitment to academic work and deadlines, lack of knowledge or awareness of events and on a more general level, a lack of interest in attending.

Students can find events information on the Lincoln SU website <https://lincolnsu.com/events>. Information is also posted on the SU Facebook page and related Facebook pages. There are also posters and poster boards outside the venue and around campus. Event information is also e-mailed to all students in a newsletter. Most participants indicated that they were aware they could look for information on the SU website but suggested the information was not necessarily easy to locate.

7.2 Benefits of attending

Largely there appeared to be a feeling that international students were more willing to attend events they felt they would gain something from. For example, many expressed an interest in attending events which would aid with employability rather than evening social events. Similarly, moving to a new university can be very daunting and students suggested an event entirely for the purpose of meeting people and making friends would be of great benefit in helping them get to know people and settle in to university.

7.3 Cultural events

As previously mentioned, many students explained that international universities do not tend to have any kind of focus or contribution toward students' social life. For some students this can make a pleasant change when they come to a UK university. However, for others it can potentially present a culture clash. Consequently, it may be important to take into consideration cultural implications of events and how they could be perceived. Many students expressed a desire to see more cultural events hosted by the SU, such as the Diwali and Chinese New Year events which are already held. It was suggested that students advise on the organisation of cultural events to ensure they are

sensitive to the culture and are not unintentionally disrespectful or encourage cultural appropriation.

Most international students who participated in the research indicated they would be either likely or very likely (65.95%) to attend a regular event for international students hosted by the SU (Figure 3).

How likely would you be to attend a regular international student event hosted by the SU?

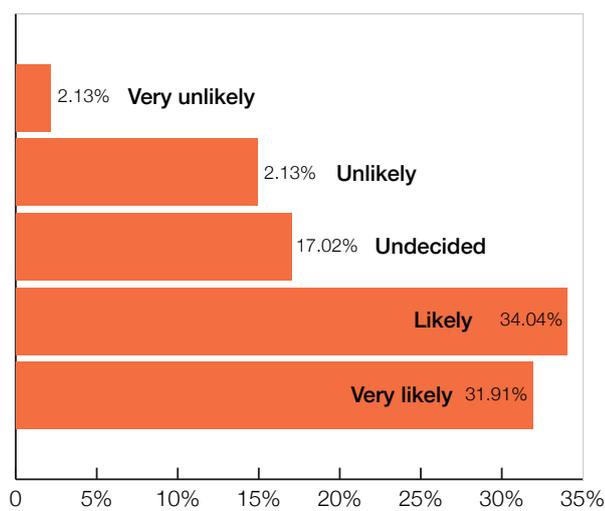


Figure 3: respondents who would attend a regular event hosted by SU

Suggestions for potential events included tea parties to allow students to socialise without alcohol being present, or an increased number of cultural events. The main idea suggested by people in every focus group was cross-cultural events in order to provide the opportunity to meet other international students as well as home students. This could involve sharing food, culture and music in order to bring everyone together.

When asked how international students usually socialise with their friends, many mentioned hosting movie nights, cooking food together or just arranging to meet up every week more casually, for example going to a cafe. Taking this into consideration may aid in developing frequent events for international students that are separate from the weekly SU club nights and more in line with interests they already share. Again international students emphasised the time commitment on academic work and students may be less likely to attend frequent events. They suggested spreading events out, for example, no more frequently than once a month.

8. Student voice and representation

Almost 50% of international students knew who their course representative was, as depicted in Figure 4. In contrast, in the AMS 2017 73.2% of undergraduate students and 64.8% of postgraduate students indicated they knew who their course representative was. Similarly, general awareness of the academic representation system was 78.2%. This suggests there is a lesser amount of awareness among international students, and that this is something which may need to be addressed.

Do you know who your course rep is?

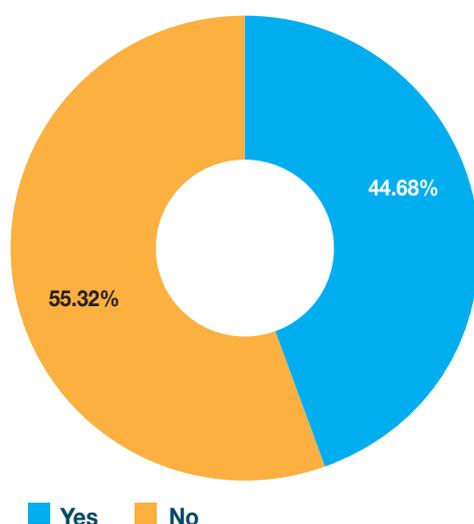


Figure 4: respondents who know their course representative

8.1 Barriers to participation

The Academic Representation System is an important mechanism for resolving course problems or discussing difficulties. However, most international students who knew who their representative was suggested they would only communicate with them if they were already friends or if they were also an international student who, they thought, appreciated the problems of international students. This finding reflects the barriers that were identified in preventing international students from seeking advice and support. The perceived lack of understanding from those who are not international students and feeling like someone cannot be approached prevents international students from seeking support for course issues.

Similarly, it was highlighted that international students can often be older than home students,

meaning that if the Rep is significantly younger it can become even harder to approach them with problems. It is possible that the relaunch of the International Friends schemes will aid with this and provide a route for raising issues. In addition, Academic Representative training could raise awareness of issues facing international students and also the difficulties they may face when approaching a Rep. Highlighting the need for the Rep to be proactive and patient in approaching international students could help to bridge the gap between Academic Reps and international students on their course.

8.2 Improving participation

When discussing how the voice of international students is heard by the SU, many felt that this was already good, with incentives to participate in the survey. This encouraged people to take part and share their opinions. Equally, most felt they would feel comfortable approaching academic staff on their course.

To improve how the SU specifically could hear the thoughts of international students one of the ideas proposed was a suggestion box. While theoretically this could work, it may not be the most practical for all enrolled students to access, particularly those who are distance learners. It may be more appropriate to direct students towards the pre-existing system of 'SUGgestions'. This online platform allows students to make suggestions and also have their say on suggestions from other students and see the progress of ideas which have been previously raised. 'SUGgestions' has been promoted before, however the apparent lack of awareness of how to make suggestions means it may still be necessary to take this more directly to international students. This could be done through increased marketing, through Student Leaders out on campus and through Representative networks.

A further suggestion from students was to host drop-ins they could attend, however, the practicality of doing this would need to be assessed before anything could be formally implemented. It may be possible to trial specific drop-in times with the VP International, but there is a question over whether it is actually of the greatest benefit to students. Similarly, as previously mentioned, Student Leaders will be required to spend more time out on campus talking to students over the next academic year. They will also promote where the VP International

“I just usually feel stupid and don’t ask questions”

will be and this will provide the opportunity for international students to discuss issues with them, negating the need for specific drop-in sessions.

8.3 Creating an inclusive environment

It was established that one of the biggest problems for international students is that they often do not feel as included within the university community as home students. Consequently, a key area for discussion was how it may be possible to further promote inclusivity, respect and understanding amongst all students, regardless of their background. The key point is that anything which helps to make home students seem more welcoming towards international students would be of great benefit to the international student community. Whilst many felt that efforts were already being made, or were successfully in place, there were suggestions that may help to develop this further. This included the recurring suggestion of multicultural events in order to let students mix together and network, showcase the variety of international student cultures and also introduce international students to British culture. Many mentioned that a contributing factor for them coming to university in the UK was to meet different people from different countries. Subsequently it was important to them that events were not separated for home students and international students.

It was felt that the main barrier between home and international students was a lack of understanding, and that events encouraging students to join together would help to bridge this gap and aid in promoting inclusivity and respect. Additionally, it was felt it would be of great benefit for these events to provide the opportunity for international students to engage with British students which may help them settle better into life in Britain.

It was also suggested that it may be helpful to create a guide to help international students learn how to live on campus, perhaps including a basic guide about the SU. This is because many students are from countries where SU’s do not exist and so they do not understand how they work. Better understanding of this may help international students to discover the measures which are in place to help them have their voice.

9. General comments

9.1 International student arrivals

Overall, it was suggested that information was not clear enough or easy to find.

The International Arrivals Lounge was proposed as the best way to initially get information out as every international student is required to go there when they start at the University of Lincoln. (The International Arrivals Lounge is an annual event that runs from Freshers week until the first week in October. It’s where all international students need to enrol for the academic year and it also acts as their welcome to the university (www.lincoln.ac.uk/home/welcomeweek/international/arrivalsguide/).

An in depth welcome pack with all the information about services available at both the SU and the University was suggested as a highly beneficial way of setting an international student up in the best way possible and enabling them to access and use services that will support and help them throughout their time at university.

It was felt by some that there was a lack of information about what to do when students first arrive. For example, they don’t know where things are, both on campus and in the city more generally and they don’t know that they need to enrol on blackboard in order to see timetables and make module selections as soon as possible. It was highlighted that some other universities send out comprehensive guides to international students about where to go to register and details about everything they may need to know about enrolling or services available once they arrive.

The VP International’s presence at the arrivals lounge will help to put a face to a name as soon as students arrive, perhaps having the effect of increasing engagement with the SU over the following year. Using the arrivals lounge in this way may give international students information about services that they have available to them so they feel that they are supported from the beginning.

It was also suggested that the possibility of the arrivals lounge opening earlier, even if just by a couple of days, may provide international students with the opportunity to get to know both Lincoln and the University at their own pace



before classes start and campus gets very busy. Likewise, this may mean that international students may have more of an opportunity to explore the different SU and university services and find where each of these are located.

9.2 An app

In addition, many participants discussed the idea of an app being developed in order to help make information more obvious. This would need to be concisely summarised and would need to ensure everything is in one easy-to-access place. The ability to purchase tickets or merchandise via an app was also suggested in order to make attending events easier, with the possibility of a full events calendar linking to phone calendars. This may increase awareness of events and boost attendance. Developing such an app may result in more people engaging with the SU. An app should therefore be developed, working in partnership with the University, to ensure the maximum positive impact on students.

10. Research limitations

Despite using a number of methods in order to promote participation, and a number of incentives being offered, only a very small percentage (3.36%) of international students actually took part in the research. This further demonstrates how engagement with the SU is

very limited within the international student community at the University of Lincoln, and that improving on this is of the utmost importance to ensure that international students have a positive experience at Lincoln.

Despite the small sample of students who gave feedback, it can still be used to boost engagement. Arguably, the fact that there was consensus amongst the responses and it was possible to identify recurring themes across the different focus groups suggests that these feelings are held more widely across the international student body, and thus generalisations can appropriately be made.

11. Research application: key action points

- Student Leaders will be significantly more visible to their students, via Facebook Live activity, increase ‘Go Out and Talk’ activity, and greater use of their social media channels, so that students are aware of them and what they do. In terms of this particular project, this is particularly important to the VP International.
- The SU will develop an in-depth International Welcome Pack to provide students with information as soon as they arrive in Lincoln, including information about SU and University services and more general information about

Lincoln. The Arrivals Lounge will be used as the base for distribution and for introducing the VP International.

- The SU will work in partnership with the University to ensure there is clarity about what support and information services are available to students, and will ensure that students are signposted to the most appropriate staff or service
- The SU will increase advertisement and promotion of all SU services and support available to students; specifically, information about 'Work Ready', the Advice Centre, 'SUggestions', events and activities.
- The SU will strengthen the relationship between the International Students Association and Student Activities (Sports Clubs & Societies), by ensuring they are aware of each other and have opportunities to collaborate, to encourage international students to join sports clubs and societies.
- The SU will provide cultural awareness campaigns for all students, but in an effort to encourage awareness, respect, and inclusivity between all students.
- The SU will incorporate within both Academic Representative and Activity Committee training information about how to be proactive and patient in approaching international students and will include information about difficulties faced by international students.
- The SU will ensure that communication is as clear as possible to prevent misunderstanding or confusion, considering alternative methods of communication, including signposting to various different social media outlets where appropriate. The SU will continue to develop the SU website and how it is navigated to support this.
- An App will be developed, working in partnership with the university, to create a new platform which will increase awareness of our services.
- The SU will deliver an increased number of cultural events, organised by students of the respective culture, to promote cross-cultural understanding.
- The SU will promote the use of the Academic Representative system directly to international students to help resolve academic course issues. This will include working with university staff.
- The SU will relaunch the International Friends scheme in order to provide another source of support for international students and use this

as a platform to help to promote other SU services and guide students to appropriate SU and university services.

- The SU will evaluate the cost-effectiveness of a contract with a telephone translation service in order to improve the accessibility of all SU services, but more specifically the Advice Centre.
- The SU will actively train volunteers who are Student Advisors or a part of the International Friends Scheme to be empathetic to the issues of international students and where possible encourage multilingual students to apply for volunteering opportunities.

Research implications

Initially, research findings with minimal impact on resources and pre-established plans can be added to the VP International Operational Plan. Where additional resources or financial commitments are required these will be incorporated into annual budgets and operational plans. These larger requirements are most likely to affect existing departments within the SU, such as the Advice Centre or Student Voice. In order to use the data for the benefit of students, the SU may also need to work with the University to make changes within their services and processes.

Recommendations for action from student feedback will be planned against an appropriate and achievable timescale. Many recommendations are within areas the SU is already aware of and plans for implementing changes have already been considered for the start of the new academic year. Follow up research may be conducted to gather more information using, for example, the New Starters survey, the NSS, or the SU management system, SUMS for insight into data.

12. Recommendations for other SUs

Top Ten Questions your SU needs to ask about supporting international students

1. Do you have a dedicated point of contact for international students?
2. Do you offer welcome events for international students?
3. Do you provide information for international students before they arrive in the UK?

4. Do your student-led sports and societies offer flexible membership options for international students?
5. Do you offer a series of inclusive educational cultural events through the year?
6. Do you offer a regular forum for international students to get together/ share opinions/ socialise/share experiences?
7. Do you offer support and advice on how to get a National Insurance Numbers? (UKCISA has useful advice at <https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Working/Employers-income-tax-National-Insurance>)
8. Can you measure engagement of international students via a membership management system where you can track activity?
9. Do you promote volunteer opportunities specifically to international students (perhaps those that are based on campus)?
10. Do you work with university staff to support cultural differences within the curriculum?

13. Conclusions

The key learning point from the research project is that the SU's Activities, Events and Opportunities (including Academic) may be less accessible to international students than desired, and there are a number of barriers that prevent international students from engaging in these. The main conclusion is that information about services is not as clear as previously perceived by the SU. Implementing recommendations and adapting existing plans in line with the findings of the research should increase international student engagement with the SU. We hope this will result in improved overall student wellbeing and that enhanced support for students will enable them to reach their full potential while studying at the University of Lincoln.

14. References

Student Perspectives on International Students, NUS 2017 <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/Student-perspectives-on-international-students>

15. Contact details

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University of Glasgow

A report on a survey of international summer schools: student expectations

Lexy Docwra, Senior International Officer and ISS Manager



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1. Motivations for the research

There is very little discussion or formal sharing of information amongst the institutions that host international summer schools (ISS). The research for this UKCISA-funded project focused on trying to better understand the needs and expectations of incoming summer school students, and identifying common patterns. It is hoped that this research will help to determine the challenges and opportunities associated with supporting international students, within the context of short-term study.

2. Methodology

The initial method of gathering information was through an online survey that was designed and disseminated through SurveyMonkey.com. There were 80 recipients: key study abroad and exchange partners of the University of Glasgow, of which 22 replied positively. The 22 university representatives spanned 12 different countries, notably France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Poland, United Kingdom, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, India and Mexico. Almost all participants were from institutions which were established post 1990: from 1996-2015, except one institution founded in 1969.

This report will be shared with all participants.

See Appendix 1 for the full breakdown of survey questions sent to the participating institutions.

3. Key survey findings

From the results, it became clear that the combination of nationalities within a summer school varies according to the host country. British universities mostly host students from Asian countries (notably Japan and China), USA, Europe and Saudi Arabia. In China, participating ISS students originate from Australia and USA. European universities host predominantly local students. North American institutions largely welcome students from Asia and Europe.

3.1 Why attend an ISS?

In order of importance, the main reason why students applied to attend a summer school were to:

- gain academic credit and/or work experience*
- experience a new country and culture
- make new friends
- gain a taster of the host university/pursue PGT/PGR study
- combine studies with recreational activities and travelling
- learn another language

*Some schools offering short-term internships and the opportunity to gain work experience as part of the summer programme prove to be the most attractive to prospective students. However, this is not an option in the UK for non-EU nationals whose visa will usually prohibit them from working.

3.2. ISS Preferences by student nationality and age

One of the survey participants from the UK explained that according to their experience, participating students from North American institutions tended to pay more attention to the opportunity to gain extra credits during the summer school, more so than students from any other nationality.

Another important reason for students wishing to attend a summer school was to gain an initial taster of the host institution. It was found that a number of students attending summer schools already hold an offer from the institution, but wished to experience the university and evaluate the services and campus life.

Two universities from UK and Belgium wrote that there was a connection between age and preferences. It was clear from the findings that younger students attending a summer school wanted to experience a comprehensive social programme, learning in class in the morning and doing activities or visits in the afternoon. Older students tended to focus on studying language classes in the afternoon.

3.3 ISS Student Support by Nationality

From the findings it was clear that nationality also played an important role in the expectations for on-campus student support:

- Prospective students from Asia and North America expected guidance and student support through the entire end to end process and applicant journey.
- Students of Islamic faith indicated that the option to skip Friday classes for prayers would be welcome.

- Chinese students were interested in a package deal arrangement, with all costs (including travel and meal plan) included in the overall price.
- Parents of North American students want to know what their child is doing or want to make sure that the child is performing well.
- Mixed student accommodation is not always popular.
- Food preferences and restrictions. As ISSs fall outside term time, providing a meal plan/ catering was an issue (no pork and Halal food for Muslim students, for example).

3.4 Common issues hosting an ISS (and the associated solutions)

Across the institutions participating in this survey, a pattern of common problems emerged:

- Most universities are not fully prepared to host disabled students over the quieter summer period. A common occurrence was that the institution's **Disability Services** were not fully equipped to provide accommodation and support outside term-time.
- **Sport facilities** and access to the campus gym – some universities do not provide access to the gym over the summer period.
- **Accommodation** – lack of space for incoming summer students, especially on city campuses. As a result, some universities engage with host families to accommodate students during the summer (this is very popular with Japanese students).
- Almost all universities faced problems in **processing visas**. The common solution is in the provision of ongoing support, guidance and providing sufficient information throughout the applicant journey, and not just at the point of registration.
- One of the participating UK institutions noticed that if there are **too many students of one nationality**, there is a tendency to interact only with each other in the home language. This can have a detrimental impact on student integration and student experience.
- **Differences in methods of learning and teaching** – academic approaches can vary and expectations vary across nationality and age. Some students (for example, from North America or East Asia), are not as familiar with the flipped classroom approach as, say, students from Europe and the UK.
- **Medical insurance** – students require detailed information regarding healthcare and health insurance, as provision varies tremendously between countries. Failure to do so has at

times proven to be extremely disruptive and costly.

Participants shared their solutions to combat the above issues:

- Provide detailed information on what level of disability support the institution can provide over the vacation period. Engage with students at the application stage to provide contact details for Disability Services.
- Run thorough cultural awareness sessions in both pre-departure events and during the first days of an ISS. Make these engaging by incorporating activities.
- Aid student integration by encouraging more joint activities and excursions for students across all summer school programmes
- Hire a team of student advisers to support with logistics (including airport arrival), integration (informal ice breaking sessions) and as a touch point for ISS students requiring assistance and support.
- Keep participating students busy; students should study “actively” (less lectures, more student activities). Offering different formats such as hybrid courses (both online pre- and post-lectures and one week on campus for example), can occupy students who have more of a thirst to learn than others.
- Try to best meet learning and teaching expectations by publishing course information in advance, and updating web content and promotional materials to reflect this. Some institutions provide applicants with the opportunity to engage in web chats or online information sessions prior to arrival. Visa information can also be disseminated through these channels, via online pre-departure events, which have proven successful. The majority of participating universities cited social media as the most useful channel to distribute useful information both prior to arrival and during the period of study.
- The option to mention dietary restrictions could be included in the application form (for university canteen).
- To combat problems with language barriers, hiring a native speaker (perhaps a current student) for the first week to mitigate issues and provide support.

It is hoped that the findings from this survey will help to inform institutions of the common issues and recommended solutions when providing short-term study opportunities. The demand for short-term study continues to grow rapidly, and

is expected to continue to increase as institutions develop their internationalisation strategies.

4. Conclusions, ideas for further research and lessons learned

Conducting the research for this project was both reassuring and rewarding. As a summer school manager myself, I felt reassured that I was not alone in facing a multitude of issues and problems on an almost daily basis. I found comfort in knowing that I was not the only one having to find solutions and think on my feet, and that every day was, essentially, a school day when managing short-term study for international students.

Whilst conducting this research, a number of lessons were learned:

- More time is required to research this subject in more depth. My colleague and I were on a relatively tight turnaround, and requesting institutions to participate in an online survey counted on someone from that institution having the time to open my email, respond, and then finding further time to fill in a relatively lengthy survey.
- Face-to-face interviews and focus groups with the participating institutions would have proven more valuable – however, time and budget did not allow them. It became apparent for my counterparts, as was the case for myself, that managing their institution's summer school was not their only

responsibility, and participants simply did not have enough time to complete or fully contribute to the online survey.

- It was hoped that individual case studies would be obtained to provide more specific information for this report. However, for the reasons detailed above – that participants were already stretched to complete the survey – it is recommended that for future research, face to face interviews are conducted.

Going forward, as the demand for short-term study options is predicted to continue to grow globally, it would be beneficial that there was continued support to conduct further research on this growing trend within higher education.

See Appendix 2 for a checklist of key considerations when running an international summer school.

5. Contact details

Lexy Docwra, International Partnerships Manager, University of Strathclyde

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Note

Lexy Docwra led on this research while working as Senior International Officer and ISS Manager at the University of Glasgow. She moved to the University of Strathclyde in October 2017 and can be contacted there.



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Appendix 1

Survey questionnaire

The survey consisted of eight open-ended questions:

1. Number of students participating in your summer schools for the last two years (approximate amount)
2. Year that your summer school was established
3. Approximate percentage of nationalities distribution among your students.
4. Approximate percentage of gender distribution among your students.
5. According to your observations what are the main expectations of the international students on short-term summer programmes? If you have any examples of different requirements of students from various groups (geographical areas, gender, age, etc.) please add these in the comments section.
6. In your experience, what problems in the delivery of core services for international summer school students do you face?

If possible, please provide examples that apply to certain student groups (geographical areas, gender, age):

- Enrolment and registration process
 - Pre-arrival engagement
 - Orientation programmes
 - Delivery of disability services
 - Provision of sport facilities
 - Learning processes
 - Accommodation
 - Entertainment, socialization
 - International student support
 - Medical services
 - Other
7. Besides the core services (listed above) provided by summer school staff, what further needs do international students have according to your records? Please include examples concerning various groups of students if you had any.
 8. What solutions and approaches have you identified to address these particular needs of international summer school students?

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Appendix 2

International Student Support: a checklist

From the information submitted by the 22 survey participants, a pattern emerged which detailed the most important provisions as requested by international summer school students:

- Detailed course information (including teaching methods, required reading, method of examination and credits obtained)
- An acknowledgment that the credits obtained would be recognized by the home institution
- Clear and detailed information on the applicant journey, including language requirements and accommodation provision
- Information on visas (if required)
- An opportunity to submit dietary information and contact disability and chaplaincy services (if required)
- Prior information on campus life, the local area and useful services.
- An opportunity to contact current students or summer school alumni to better understand the student experience and campus life
- Course timetables in advance
- Information on medical care and provision
- Airport arrival information
- Information on 'things to do' and recommended trips for those on short term study programmes
- For those whose English is not a first language, provide language support from day one to combat issues of settling in and class enjoyment
- Information in advance regarding the social and cultural programme
- Detailed and user-friendly information on academic and financial registration, as well as applying for housing/accommodation

Providing information in advance: an important note

Summer schools are by nature short-term – therefore, those institutions that participated in the survey made it clear that students required the majority of information in advance in order to avoid facing problems and finding solutions on arrival. If a typical summer school programme lasts three weeks, and a student had an issue with registration or accommodation, the issue could take the full three weeks to solve, which can prove highly disruptive to the student's academic experience and overall enjoyment. It was widely acknowledged, however, that providing information prior to arrival was recommended and of high importance, but that students very rarely read or acted on this information. This could be combated by further use of social media channels to disseminate important information – a closed Facebook or WeChat group, for example – and by encouraging applicants to participate in online web chats and/or pre-departure events.

Research funded in 2017-18

A third series of projects and research is now being funded in 2017-18. The research topics are listed below and findings will be published in the second half of 2018.

Institution	Research title	Description
The University of Edinburgh	Mental health and wellbeing of global access students	Exploring the psychological and emotional needs of African scholarship students from disadvantaged backgrounds.
University of Kent (in collaboration with six university partners)	Pathways to success	Investigating the experiences of successful international pathways students studying as part of the Universities Pathways Alliance.
The Open University (in collaboration with Dundee University)	Social support through transitions: a student-led and cross-institutional investigation of international postgraduate student experiences	PG students as researchers into their own lived experiences through a guided ethnographic investigation. Seeking to understand the role of holistic social support networks in international students' educational transitions.
University of Plymouth	International students' perceptions of personal tutoring – are we hitting the mark?	Research into student perceptions of the role of personal tutors in order to improve communication and develop specific personal tutor training.
University of Stirling Students' Union	The impact of Brexit on the international student experience at Stirling	Examining the impact of the 2016 EU referendum on the international student experience in Scotland. Aim to inform targeted support for EU students studying in the UK.
University of Sussex	An ethnographic examination with research of the experience of international students living in the private rented sector to guide further practice	Investigating and comparing the experiences of international and home students renting private sector accommodation in Sussex.

For a list of all funded projects and to download individual pdfs go to www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-schemes

The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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