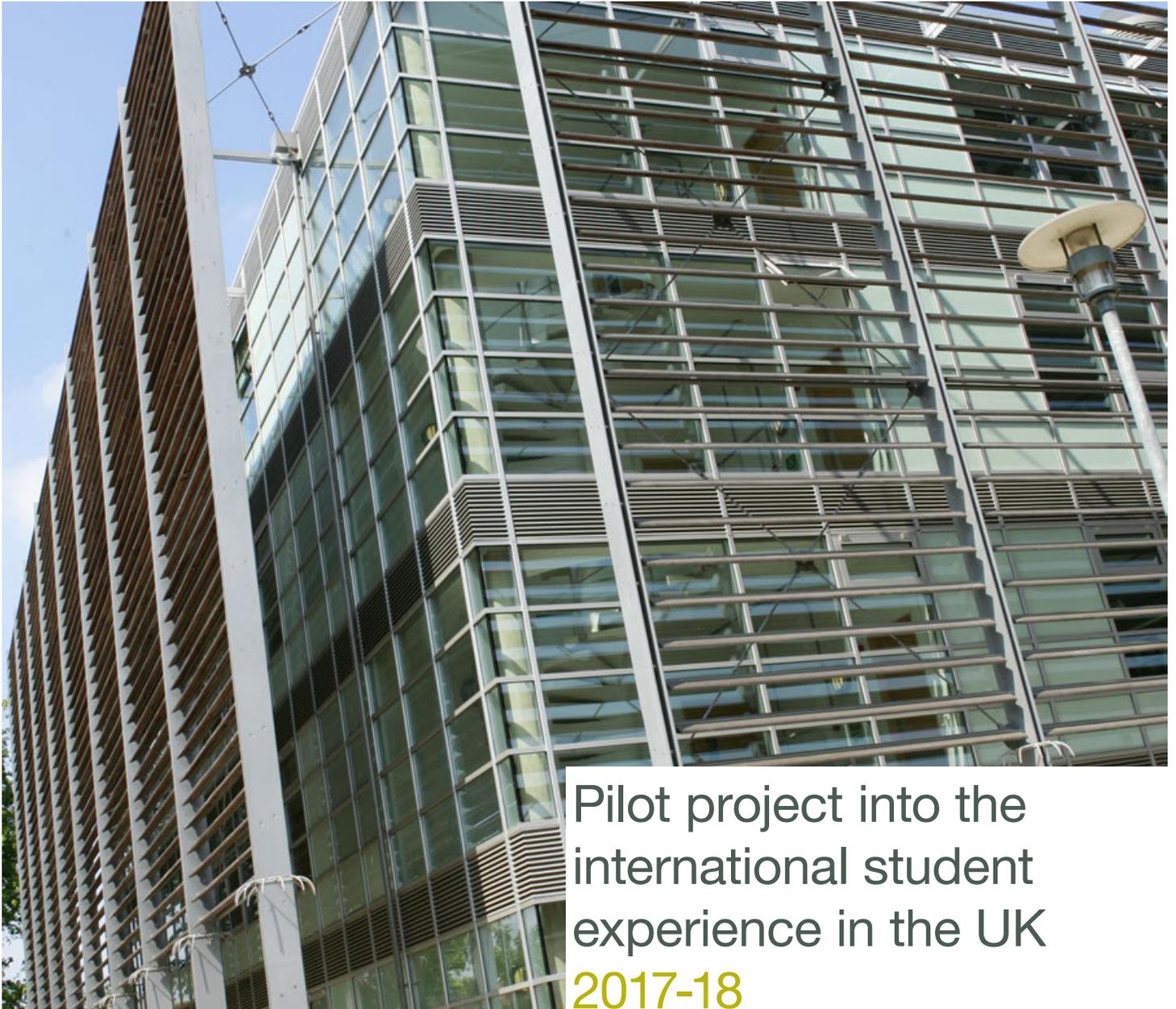


Culturally-Informed Assessments Toolkit (CIAT)

The University of Bedfordshire



Pilot project into the
international student
experience in the UK
2017-18

UK Council
for International
Student Affairs

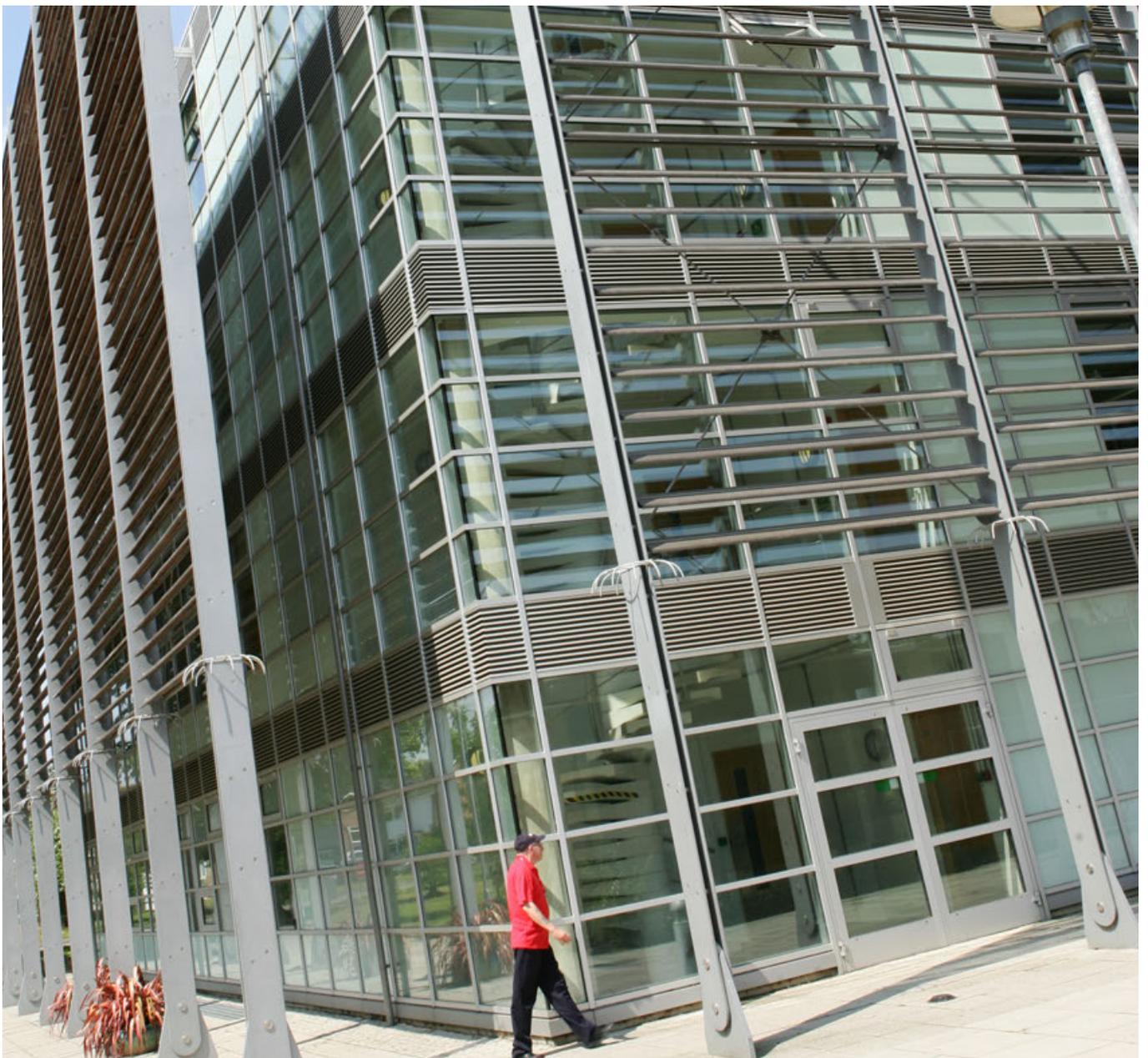
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Culturally-Informed Assessments Toolkit (CIAT) The University of Bedfordshire

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Project aims

In the literature related to teaching and learning of international students in higher education, the emphasis on intercultural teaching and learning is well recognised. What is not so evident is the integration of intercultural teaching and learning practices informing and being embedded within assessment strategies. In addition, it is not evident how academics can adapt the skills and practices they have adopted in inclusive teaching to shape and inform their assessment practices.

Furthermore, from the literature it was evident that for some international students there was a perceived disconnect in their understanding of their assessments, which was primarily due to difficulties with expectations, language used in assessment guidelines, and the cultural context of assessments.

The aim of the project was to design a toolkit which supported culturally-informed assessment practices, aiming to enhance the students' learning experience, providing an added value to their learning and potential employability. Incorporating such a process could have the potential of not only making the assessment more meaningful to the students, but also enabling the enhancement of a pedagogical approach, which triangulates teaching and learning with assessments. It is hoped the toolkit will provide support in the constructive alignment of intercultural learning and teaching with assessment strategies. Whilst there is clear evidence suggesting that assessment practices should be culturally responsive (Slee 2010), there is currently a scarcity of informed guidance on how academics should achieve this. This project seeks to contribute to the field by developing a tool which aims to support academics in designing culturally-informed assessments and enhancing their culturally-inclusive assessment and feedback practice.

Project outcomes

The CIAT toolkit has the potential for students to be important partners in their learning and development. The toolkit is a portfolio containing 15 tools designed to support both academics and students in designing and completing assessments. A number of tools are interactive and have the flexibility of being used either in the classroom as group activities, be set as individual student tasks or used online. They are triggers that academics can adapt to suit their particular needs.

Each tool has an introduction based on feedback from students and academics to set the background to the development of each tool. Suggested guidance on how the tool can be used is provided.

About the University of Bedfordshire

The University of Bedfordshire (UoB) has its main campus in Luton which is a large town and sits in the unitary area of Bedfordshire. It has other campuses in Bedford, and Aylesbury and Milton Keynes. Luton is a very diverse town in which over 120 languages are spoken. 50 percent of the local student population are students at UoB. Every year UoB welcomes over 2,000 international students, from over 120 countries.

UoB is a widening participating institution, working closely with schools and colleges and has in place supporter academic infrastructure to support the diversity of students studying at UoB. In particular, for international students the Communication Skills Department provides a breath of academic skills development and the Centre for Learning and Excellence provides developmental support in teaching and learning for academics. In addition, UoB has a student support scheme (PAL) to provide one-to-one support. Furthermore each Faculty has an Associate Dean for Student Experience and the Faculty of Healthcare has a School Lead for Internationalisation. The University has a significant number of international partnerships and therefore having this toolkit could be of valuable support for our international partners in the development of teaching and learning to support assessment development.

Delivery

Undertaking the project involved the use of questionnaires and focus groups. The questionnaire was reviewed by the Institute of Health Research for validity prior to use. To capture the students for distributing the questionnaire, the researchers accessed the Communication Skills sessions that international students attend in the first and second semesters. A presentation about the study was given to the students prior to the questionnaire being completed.

29 questionnaires were completed. The data from these were used along with incorporating the principles of Universal Design for Learning (inclusive/intercultural learning), to frame the direction of the focus groups. Three focus groups were organised; 30 international students from across different faculties (nursing, public health, social work, business, communications and IT) were divided into two groups of 15. One focus group of 15 academics (who teach international students) was also convened. For each focus group, there were three tables with specific questions and the participants rotated around each one. Ideas and discussions were captured on flipchart paper.



Following the completion of the focus group sessions, the collated data was then analysed to identify recurring themes from both students and academics. The themes then led to the identification of 15 areas requiring a specific tool (see Figure 1 below). Each tool had a similar format in its presentation. Firstly, each tool begins with a 'findings' section which contains verbatim responses from students and staff and provides the rationale for the design and development the tool. Next, each tool has information 'about [the tool]', which explains what the tool is, followed by a guide as to 'how to use [the tool]'. The tool itself is then introduced.

Fig 1: List of themes developed in the toolkit

Theme	Tool number and name
Issues with terminology	1. Jargon buster
Unclear/inconsistent instructions	2. Assignment brief template
Miscommunication of cultural concepts	3. Comprehending concepts
Gaining higher grades	4. Process for progress
Making assessments relevant	5. Let's get personal
Inexperience in certain assessment modes	6. Mix it up
Unsure how work was graded	7. Understanding marking criteria
Misunderstanding the marking process	8. Understanding the marking process
Critical thinking	9. Debate yourself critical
Understanding plagiarism/academic integrity	10. Check yourself before you wreck yourself
Benefits of peer assisted learning	11. Peer and self-assessment
Knowledge of how an assessment relates to the whole course	12. Reflecting on the assessment
International employability	13. Examining employability
Clarity of assessments	14. Creating assessment clarity
Unclear/vague feedback	15. Feedback, feedforward

The tools that have been developed are designed to be interactive, can be classroom-based, used online or offline, and in groups or individually by students. The tools are flexible and therefore can be adapted by lecturers. They are developed to provide ideas that could stimulate other creative ways of engaging students in the assessment process and developing assessments that are more culturally informed. The toolkit was created and disseminated to teaching colleagues for feedback and evaluation. This is ongoing.

Timescale

The project was delivered over a 12 month period. Timetabled activities were planned to develop the questionnaire, organise the focus groups, draft the toolkit and have it evaluated. Over the next 12 months we plan to pilot the tool, ready for a full review in June 2019.

Challenges

The pilot project faced a number of challenges, mostly related to encouraging involvement from others. Despite using several communication channels to attempt to boost interest from students, the project co-ordinators found that it was difficult to get communications to students regarding taking part in the project and the project's potential advantages to the student experience. This meant a new communication methodology was needed. Instead of using usual communication channels (ie email drops, announcements, etc) the project co-ordinators spoke to students face-to-face in order to fully explain the project, highlight the advantages of engaging and answering any of their questions. This approach had an instant impact as the workshops went from one or two attending to over 20. The students came more prepared and

ready to contribute and their appreciation for the project was clear from the start.

A further challenge was the recruitment of evaluators to complete an evaluation of the toolkit. As the toolkit became larger, it became harder to ask colleagues to take time out of their usual role to complete the evaluation. This had the knock-on effect of the project losing the time it had allocated to disseminate the toolkit outside of the University. As such, this dissemination will take place in the six months following the close of the project to ensure the toolkit has the highest possible level of impact.

Implementation and sustainability

The output of the toolkit has made the project a very sustainable one. The toolkit has already been embedded within UoB's Centre for Learning Excellence (CLE) where elements of it will be incorporated into CPD activities, such as the Postgraduate Diploma in Academic Practice and CPD route to HEA recognition. It has also been included in a larger scale resource around assessment and feedback enhancement at the University which is set to be launched in September 2018. This launch will give the toolkit even more attention and allow the impact to be measured as part of a larger scale resource. In addition to this, sharing the toolkit with the other central teams within the institution (eg StudyHub, Student Services, International Office, etc) will increase the visibility of the tools for students and further increase the project's sustainability.

The sustainability of the project also lies in the toolkit itself. The flexibility of the tools in the toolkit means that it can be used across disciplines and different modes of delivery (eg online, offline, blended, etc). This means that the toolkit (or, at least, some tools within the toolkit) can be utilised by both teachers and students across higher education, adding to its sustainability factor.

Reflecting further on the dissemination of the project, the project team realise that in order to have a large impact and fully implement the learning points, institutional buy-in from educational leaders is necessary. The inclusion of the toolkit within the institutional resource goes some way to help with this but the project team will be going even further by attaching the toolkit to other agendas within the University, such as cross-institutional committees related to student success, progression, attainment, inclusivity and teacher training.

Further to this, the project team believe that more could be done in the evaluation of the project. The toolkit was never intended or designed to be a static resource, but a dynamic one which can evolve over time. One line of further evaluation the

project wishes to pursue is to ask academic staff to report back on their use of the tools and co-develop short case studies which can add to the tool itself. This will create further interactivity, contextualise the tool for other staff and allow for good practice to be disseminated. It is envisaged that this further work will be completed throughout 2018-19 and beyond.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

The project team make the following recommendations as a result of this project:

- Student input – gaining student input was the most valuable part of the creation of the toolkit. The students gave rich, knowledgeable responses which directly related to the assessment and feedback practices of the institution. For example,

“I gain more experience completing other assessments but there's a clear difference in the education systems.”

 Students also appreciated having the opportunity to be a part of creating a resource that could enhance practice around assessment and were keen to know the impact and outcomes of the pilot:

“We would like changes to be made and appreciate the opportunity to voice our opinions. Please send an email out when this is completed.”
- Transparency for students – students were aware of their ignorance and felt that the whole assessment and feedback process within higher education could be far more transparent. The project would recommend involving students in the creation of resources around assessment in order to increase dialogue, understanding and transparency.
- Enhancing staff awareness - one thing noted from the pilot study was the students' feeling that their educational and cultural background was not considered within assessments. The project recommends to other institutions that staff awareness around this issue is addressed through increased staff/student dialogue and flexibilities within assessment setting.
- Consideration of staff timeframe – after feedback from staff, the toolkit aimed to be as simple to use as possible so as to prevent the need for a training session or long instructions of how to use it. The project recommends that any resource being created acknowledges the time constraints on staff and is designed to alleviate some time, rather than add to it. This might include having resources which have both online and offline options or designing in more flexibility to any recommended tools.

Link to toolkit

- The ‘Culturally-Inclusive Assessment Toolkit’ has been added to the Centre for Learning Excellence’s webpages on Assessment and Feedback <https://www.beds.ac.uk/cle/focus/assessment>
- The toolkit is also available on the University’s internal website and Virtual Learning Environment.

Reference

Slee, J., 2010. ‘A Systemic Approach to Culturally Responsive Assessment Practices and Evaluation’. *Higher Education Quarterly*. 64(3), p. 246-260.

Further information

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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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