

International Student Talent Pool

University of Portsmouth



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

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International Student Talent Pool University of Portsmouth

Janet Woolnough, Careers Adviser
Luke Hahn, Information and Employment Adviser

This report was written in July 2018 before the project was completed. An update will be available on the UKCISA website in December 2018.



Project aims

The aim of this project was to work with local businesses to find paid internships suitable for international students at the University of Portsmouth (UoP). During 2016-17 the University ran a project exploring employability support for international students. This involved cross-University collaboration, gathering feedback from academics, students and other key stakeholders. The project found that international students were finding it hard to find paid, professional work, despite their visas enabling them to work either part-time during their programmes or full-time after their programmes. A clear need was identified through this project for a targeted offer to international students, including support with finding professional work experience.

Having liaised with a local International Trade Adviser at the Department of International Trade, a need was also identified on the part of employers, who did not feel confident to do business globally because of language and/or cultural barriers. The project sought to address both challenges by linking international students with local companies to support their global business activities.

Project outcomes

The International Student Talent Pool developed paid internships for international students with businesses, primarily in the local area. In order to meet the diverse student need and to fit within Tier 4 visa restrictions, the project sought to find summer internships for undergraduates and autumn internships for Master's graduates. Through employer engagement, 15 new roles have been created, the majority of which have sought specific language skills. Through student engagement, 90 applications have been submitted to the project. To date, 10 students have been placed and the project will continue to run for the remainder of the calendar year.

Context and project rationale

In 2017 the University of Portsmouth had an international student cohort of 2,947 students of which 1,695 were new (56%). This represents just over 17% of the full-time student body. The top 10 nationalities comprise 68% of the total international student body, but 32% come from other countries which demonstrates that the University recruits from a very large number of countries. 58% of the 2017 intake of international students were undergraduate and 42% postgraduate. The top four countries represented within the student body in 2017 were China (33%); Nigeria (8%); Malaysia (6%); and India (4%). International students study programmes across the University, but the majority of students are found in the Business and Law, and Technology Faculties.

Whilst the Faculty Placement teams support students with placement-year activities and some shorter work-based learning and the Careers and Employability Centre offer support to graduates with local job opportunities, there was no bespoke offer for international students who often found it hard to compete for generic opportunities. Within the Careers and Employability Service there were good links to employers in the local area, and these networks proved valuable during the project.

Project development and timeline

The project team, Janet Woolnough and Luke Hahn, are based within the University of Portsmouth Careers and Employability Service. The project involved working collaboratively with Bobby Mehta, International Director of UoP Global and with Paul Govier, International Trade Adviser, Department of International Trade (DIT), both of whom recognised the value of enabling local businesses to benefit from the skills of international students to support their global activities. The project was shaped in discussion between all parties to ensure the needs of all stakeholders were met. The delivery of the project was undertaken by the project team and the International Director was active in referring potential employer contacts. The International Trade Adviser worked with colleagues within the DIT to promote the project to companies in the local area as a resource to support their export activities and global business development. The intention was to seek vacancies relevant to the subject and language backgrounds of the UoP international student base. Roles were sought for the summer period (suitable for undergraduates) and the autumn period (suitable for postgraduates.)

Project set-up and launch (October 2017- February 2018)

The initial planning stages took place in autumn and early spring, working closely with the colleagues mentioned above and with Careers and Employability and University colleagues to establish opportunities for joint working and sharing of contacts. The next phase of the project involved raising awareness of the project to local businesses. This included the creation of a leaflet to be used in employer engagement and the organisation of a business launch event, held in February 2018. Administrative processes were developed to underpin the project, including the development of a vacancy template, liaison with the UKVI Student Officer regarding compliance, and the development of spreadsheets to record employer and student activity. You can view and download the leaflet for employers and the vacancy template with the online version of this report.

Employer and Student Engagement (March – July 2018)

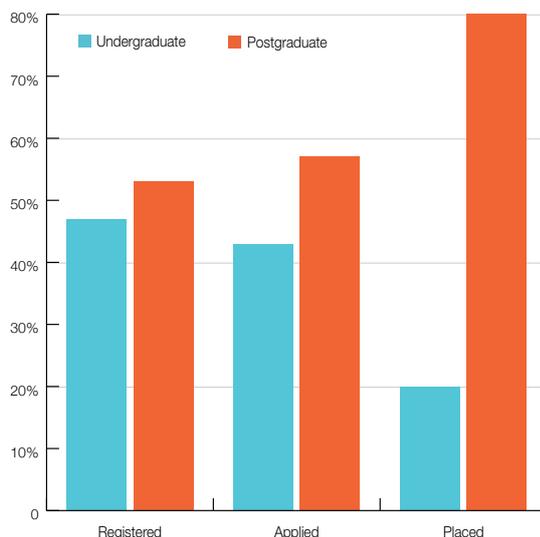
Marketing to businesses was undertaken in a number of ways including:

- undertaking extensive engagement at business networking events;
- following up referrals from University colleagues (International Director, placement colleagues, employer engagement colleagues);
- direct approach to ‘target companies’; following up of opportunities advertised elsewhere that would work well for the project.

‘Target companies’ were identified as those that had clear ‘global’ activities either in terms of exporting, or in their core business activity, for example language schools. To date, we have met with or spoken to over 50 employers. Of these, 10 employers offered placements through the programme across 15 different job roles. Carrying employers’ initial interest through to a tangible outcome has proven one of the most challenging aspects of the project.

Student marketing was undertaken initially by creating a registration form for students to express their interest in the project. This included questions about language skills and national background, course studied and area of career interest (see the online version of the report to view and download the registration form). The data from this proved very helpful when talking to employers, as it showed the range of language skills and cultural experience available to them. As vacancies were developed, opportunities were directly targeted at registered students, using the database. Vacancies were also marketed directly to students with direct emails using information on their nationality and study area and course level via the University’s own online jobsboard.

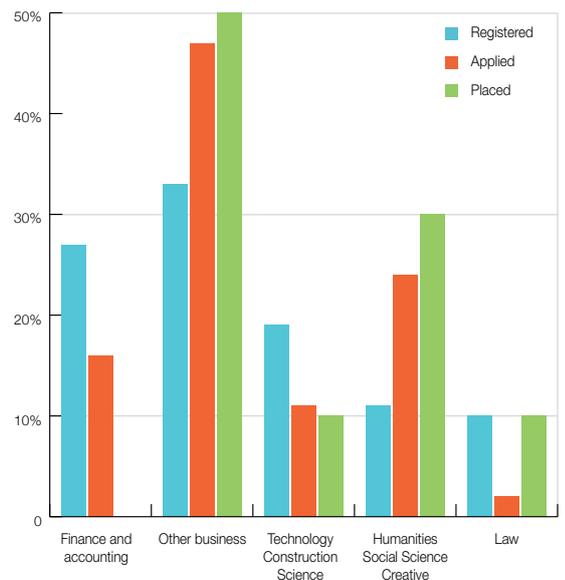
Fig 1. Student registrations/applications and placements by degree level.



In total, 166 students registered their interest through the online registration form. 53% of these were postgraduates (Figure 1).

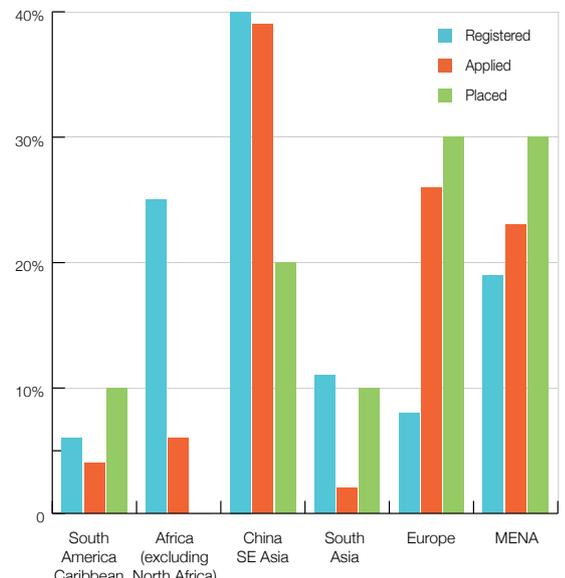
Over half the registrants were from business and finance courses. 50% of those placed were from business-related programmes and 30% were from Humanities and Social Science backgrounds. (Figure 2).

Fig 2. Student registrations/applications and placements by subject area.



The nationality of registrants was very diverse, with students coming from over 40 different countries. 25% were from China and South East Asian Countries and 25% from African Countries (not including North Africa); and 19% from MENA. The largest numbers of registered students were Chinese and Nigerian, which is representative of the student body at the UoP (Figure 3).

Fig 3. Student registrations/applications and placements by nationality



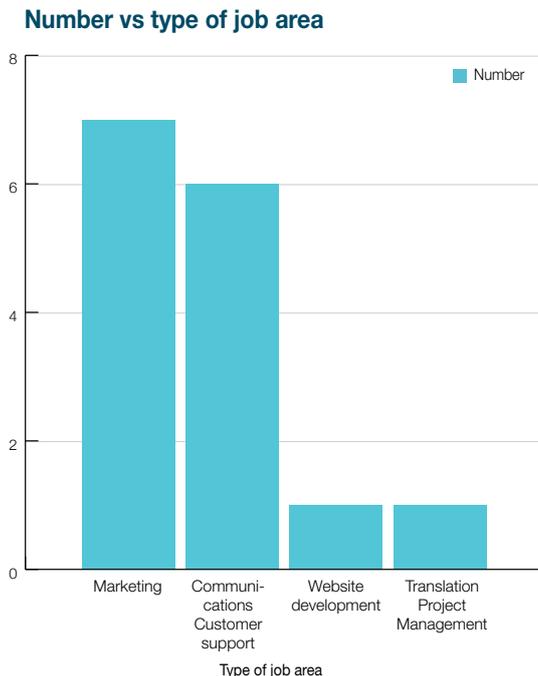
Vacancy management and promotion (April – July 2018)

Vacancies were developed with employers using job profiles which were uploaded onto the vacancy system. As vacancies were developed, the database was used to directly target registered students with opportunities. Academic contacts were used to promote opportunities, which proved to be a successful approach. Applications were sent to the project team and students were required to complete a cover information sheet, providing information on their course and visa end dates with a declaration that they understood their visa restrictions.

Interest in the roles themselves was broad, with 90 separate applications received from 64 different students. These applicants came from 27 different countries (see Figure 3) and were split between undergraduate (43%) and postgraduate (57%) courses (see Figure 1). Though well over half (63%) of the applicants study finance, accounting or other business-related courses, there were applications from across the spectrum of courses offered at the University including 24% from humanities, social sciences or creative subjects (See Figure 2).

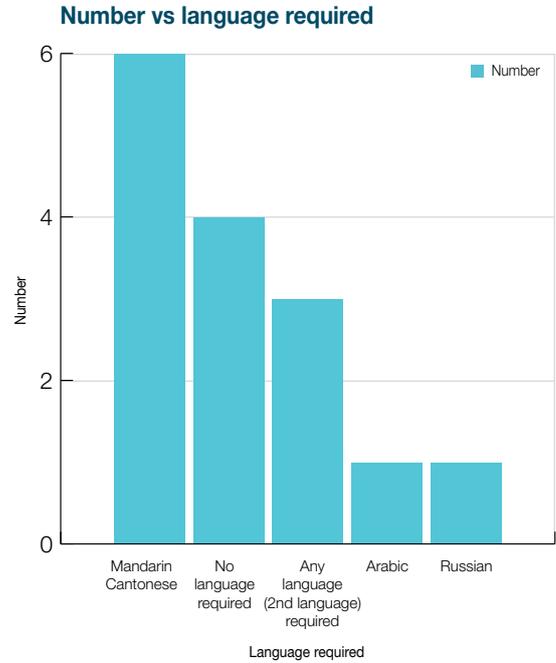
To date, the project team has placed 10 students in roles and is currently managing six further vacancies for the summer period. Of the 15 roles that were advertised, seven were marketing-based with six in more general communication and customer-support roles. One focused more on website development and one was a translation project management internship (see Figure 4).

Fig 4. Talent Pool vacancies by job area needs



73% of the vacancies required language skills with 40% specifically requiring a Mandarin/Cantonese speaker (Figure 5).

Fig 5. Talent Pool vacancies by language requirements



Evaluation and future developments (June – December 2018)

Engagement with employers is continuing to create further opportunities for the autumn period, suitable for postgraduate students. As placements are now underway, the project team will start an evaluation process with employers and students which will continue until the end of the year. The project team is recruiting students to film employers and students in situ to build video case studies to support promotional activities and dissemination. (The online report will be updated with links to these after December 2018). The final evaluation will be completed at the end of the calendar year 2018. The Project Team has started to link with another local university regarding dissemination of the model and employer links. A dissemination event for all local universities will be organised at the end of the autumn term to share information on the project and enable attendees to also share good practice.

Project challenges

One of the challenges has been to convert initial interest into actual job opportunities. There appears to be a variety of reasons behind this:

- the timing of students’ availability compared to employer need
- the logistics of getting new roles through HR
- employers having existing internship programmes that took precedence



Chinese website developed by Qian for Landsec



University of Portsmouth student Qian, working as a Marketing Intern, at Landsec

A key part of the employer engagement strategy was to maintain close dialogue with companies to establish the likelihood of a job role materialising and making a clear decision to drop leads and refocus efforts elsewhere.

The planned budget anticipated using the majority of the funds to employ students to promote roles to the student community in the early stages of the project. The decision was taken to undertake student marketing in a more direct way using the project team for several reasons. Firstly, as vacancies started to become available from April onwards, core teaching had finished, meaning student marketing needed to be through emails rather than direct engagement. Similarly, the cultural and national societies in the Students' Union's were no longer active as it was the end of the academic year.

This led to an under-spend of the project budget. Discussions took place with UKCISA to gain permission for a reworking of the original budget plan to include other costed activities. The remaining budget will be used to:

- Support the employment of students to video case studies of the students and employers
- Support the employment of students to promote opportunities during the autumn term
- Support continued travel expenses to enable business engagement
- Provide travel bursaries for students in less local placements

- Organise a dissemination and good practice event for local universities in autumn 2018

A final project report outlining completed activities will be available on the UKCISA website after December 2018.

Future developments and sustainability

There has been a real appetite for this project, both from employers and students, and strategically within the University, as it links closely to the University's Global Engagement Strategy.

Close partnerships have been developed with local employers and it is likely that there will be ongoing opportunities and collaboration. It is intended that the programme will continue and develop on the basis of evaluation received. The project has been successful, it has enabled businesses to use a previously untapped resource and enabled our students to have opportunities targeted at them for the first time. There was no financial support provided to employers but this did not deter them. The project team is confident, therefore, that employers will continue to be interested in the programme.

“I am glad that I applied to this program. It has allowed me to get hands-on experience and to apply some of the knowledge I have gained in my course at an organization which embraces flexibility and patience, leading to mutual development”.

Caridad, Sales Account Intern at Training Vision
(Dominican Republic)



University of Portsmouth student Caridad working as a Sales Account Intern at Training Vision

“I thought it would be very difficult for an international student to find an intern in the UK. But staff members of the talent pool have been keeping me updated with job vacancies which fit me well. It is really helpful and efficient to target the potential positions rather than just sending CVs everywhere. They also monitor the process of interviews, which made me feel very supported”.

Qian, Marketing Intern at Landsec (China)

“I was keen to confirm that our Intern, who has worked for us the last couple of weeks, has been absolutely fantastic and a real pleasure to have in the office. She has translated our website, which is nearly complete, and has started on some of our Centre literature.”

Talent Pool Employer

“We got great support from the team in order to advertise our positions and hire the right students for our project. We have now put together a team of four students of different nationalities, speaking different languages, covering sales positions. We’ve found the students extremely skilled, ready to work, interested in the roles, extremely reliable and with fresh ideas to implement in our business. We are very pleased with the service that we’ve received and also we would like to strengthen our cooperation with the University in order to get the chance to host more students in the future.”

Federica, Work Placement and Training Director at Training Vision

Reflections on the project

Breadth of opportunities

The initial intention was to find roles suitable for a wide range of students, representing their language backgrounds and career aspirations. It became clear very early in the project that this was unlikely to happen. All the roles fell into two categories:



University of Portsmouth student Murthadha presenting to employers at the project launch



Luke Hahn from the Project Team, meets with Fran Downton from Tourism South East

marketing/communications/translation and customer engagement. The project encouraged students from all disciplines to apply for roles, to see the experience as business experience in the broadest sense. As a result, students as diverse as financial accountants, education and civil engineering applied for marketing and customer roles. Employers were equally flexible, focusing on the skills rather than the subject background of the applicants.

It also became clear that employers were interested in students with specific language skills, in particular Mandarin, and to a lesser extent, Arabic. Other languages were sought, but to a lesser degree. This became an issue for students from other backgrounds such as from Nigeria, who were ‘excluded’ from the majority of the roles. Negotiation with some employers resulted in language requirements being dropped, and opening roles to a broader talent pool.

The initial intention had been to find full-time three-to-four-month internships to fit the post-study period of students in the summer and autumn. It again became clear that employers wanted greater flexibility than this with many seeking part-time employees. Other employers wanted the role to be for a shorter or longer term employment, and this was accommodated.

International-only student roles

The project group sought the advice of the University legal team and identified that if the internships were ‘positive action’ to support a group that were struggling, then this would be legal. If the focus was on supporting employer needs this would not be legal. As the primary driver was to improve the student experience, this was permitted. However the project took the decision to open opportunities to home/EEA students if they met the job requirements and they were not offered exclusively to international students. Consequently, UK and EU students also applied and one UK and two EU students were placed through the programme.

Breadth of engaged companies

It was interesting to note that education agencies, language schools and other similar organisations were particularly interested in using the project to support their work.

Payment for interns

The project provided no salary support to employers but this did not prove to be a barrier in relation to employer interest. All the participating companies were happy to pay the UK minimum wage or above. Providing salary support could have set an unhelpful precedent for future sustainability as if employers receive salary support once, they may be more likely to expect it in future.

Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Do it! There was a clear demand for this kind of project in Portsmouth, and this is likely to be replicated across the country
- Collaborative working is crucial for the success of a project like this, for example working with colleagues across the University, international office, research and innovation, placement teams
- Be active and engage through local business networks and direct meetings and phone calls. This tended to be more successful than email marketing to businesses
- Regarding compliance, if you are managing the recruitment process, your institution may be responsible for ensuring students meet their visa working conditions. It is worth putting systems in place, therefore, to ensure that both students and employers have a clear understanding of their responsibilities regarding right-to-work and visa issues. The project team received guidance from a UKVI compliance colleague at UoP to develop processes including a student and employer declaration
- A project such as this needs staff resource, in particular for set-up and implementation. It is important to think about the sustainability of the work, particularly if there is a desire to scale-up and offer a larger number of opportunities

Further Information

Contact **Janet Woolnough**: janet.woolnough@port.ac.uk, and **Luke Hahn**: luke.hahn@port.ac.uk
University of Portsmouth
Portsmouth Careers and Employability Service
See the online version of this report for example vacancies.

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.

UKCISA
1st Floor, Noble House
3-5 Islington High Street
London, N1 9LQ
T +44 (0)20 7288 4330

www.ukcisa.org.uk
@ukcisa

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