

**STUDENT EXPERIENCE:**  
student community

**Research**

The impact of Brexit on the international student experience at Stirling

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The University of Stirling  
Students' Union



Research into the international student experience in the UK  
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**UK Council  
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# The impact of Brexit on the international student experience at Stirling

## The University of Stirling Students' Union

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## 1. Introduction: the impact of Brexit on UK HE

Brexit is an important topic in the current political climate, impacting every aspect of British systems of living, trading and governing. Its impact on Higher Education (HE) especially in Scotland, is unquestionable, causing concern about potential restrictions to the movement of students and academics from Europe to Scottish institutions, and future funding opportunities and partnerships for Scottish research. The recognition of a threat to the international competitiveness of UK, and more specifically Scottish HE and its institutions led to the publication of a report in April 2017, by the House of Commons Education Committee *Exiting the EU: challenges and opportunities for HE* which examined the challenges and opportunities for HE following the UK's exit from the European Union. In its wake, the Department for Business, Energy & Industrial Strategy, Innovate UK and Jo Johnson MP issued a press release on July 4, 2017 confirming that the UK government is investing £100 million to attract highly skilled researchers from India, China, Brazil and Mexico to the UK. While this was certainly an encouraging initial step to safeguarding the UK's HE sector against any detrimental impact following its exit from the European Union, the UK government has not moved to alleviate the fears of international students about their immigration status, inclusion in net migration figures or potential increases in tuition fees following the aforementioned departure.

## 2. Research aim

The project aimed to demonstrate the need for increased support to be developed to ensure that international students seek out a Scottish university education, feel welcome at our institutions during their studies, and believe that their Scottish degree will still enable them to be competitive in an international job market following graduation. Using the University of Stirling, an institution which has been recognised for its welcoming and inclusive environment for all students, as a case study, the project aimed to gather and analyse students' perceptions of their experience in Stirling after the referendum to leave the EU, and to suggest improvements that the University of Stirling and the University of Stirling Students' Union could make to their current provision of support for international students (*International, Global Position* University of Stirling, 2018).

## 3. Motivations for research

There has been a clear demand for research into the potential impacts of Brexit on the lucrative UK HE sector since the EU referendum. The University and College Union undertook a survey in early 2017 to question its membership on the impact of Brexit on their jobs. The survey found that 76% of non-EU

UK University academic staff members are more likely to leave the UK HE sector and that 29% of respondents already knew academics who had left the UK (UCU, 2017). The results of Hobsons' International Student Survey 2017 highlights the need to consider the influence of the 2016 referendum on the recruitment of international students and their experience at Scottish institutions. Hobsons found that 42.7% of the 43,919 respondents said their decision to study in the UK had been affected by the UK's decision to leave the EU. The majority of those respondents (82.9%) said they were less likely to study in the UK, whilst 17.1% said they were more likely to study in the UK. Additionally, they found that 82.9% of international students are less likely to study in the UK due to Brexit and that the most common reason given was the perception that the UK is less welcoming to international students than before (Hobsons EMEA, 2016). While this research into prospective student and current staff feelings surrounding Brexit is highly beneficial to our overall understanding of its far-reaching impacts, there have not been any studies of the feelings and experience of current international students. As the top university in Scotland for welcoming international students, according to the 2016 ISB, and its large international student population (23%), the University of Stirling was the ideal institution and student community in which to consider the changes to international students' experiences following the 2016 referendum (*International, Global Position* University of Stirling, 2018).

## 4. Summary of research outcomes

The research project resulted in a greater understanding of the diverse experiences of the international student community at Stirling, the development of specific and directed support for international students, and an increasing emphasis on the value of cultural exchange between British, EU and international students within the student community.

## 5. Research methodology

A mixed methodological approach was chosen because it provided a greater complexity to the information that could be gathered about international students' experiences following the referendum to leave the EU and their perspectives of Brexit.

### 5.1 Student survey

In Autumn 2017, a 10-question survey, was advertised to the University of Stirling's international student community. The survey was advertised online on the Students' Union website, and flyers (see below) were put out in the Students' Union offices. A direct post was made to the international society Facebook group and an all-student email



was sent out to increase the number of respondents.

The survey asked students to reflect on whether their experience as a university student in Scotland had changed following the June 2016 referendum. It asked students to suggest ways that the University of Stirling and the University of Stirling Students' Union could improve the support that it provides to its international student community. The survey was completed by 159 respondents, 111 of whom were from the European Union. International students outwith the EU and EEA were the second largest group to respond with 36 respondents, followed by students from within the EEA (four students) and Scotland (four students). Three respondents did not disclose their nationality and one respondent was from a country within the European Economic Area.

### 5.2 Focus groups

In Spring 2018, a series of small focus groups and individual interviews were run to create a more complex picture of the differing experiences that international students have had in Scotland since June 2016. The focus groups and interviews were primarily run by the student researcher and when this was not possible they were run by the Union President and Democracy & Research Coordinator. Four focus groups were held during the academic semester, which had 17 participants across all four focus groups. The focus groups ran for a duration of half an hour to one hour, and asked students to reflect broadly on their experience as an international student at the University of Stirling and in Scotland.

### 5.3 Interviews

Following the conclusion of the focus groups, seven individual interviews were run to delve further into the individualised experience of international students. Most of the interviewees were also participants of the focus groups, however there were a few students who did not attend a focus group who were interviewed. The interviews were not as directed as the survey or focus groups. Instead, the interviewee was invited to reflect on the opportunities and challenges that they had experienced, and to speak about any support that they had sought from the University or the Students' Union.

## 6. Key research findings

Several key themes emerged from the survey, focus groups and individual interviews, three of which will be detailed in this section: the challenge of transitioning to university, the benefit of a welcoming community, and fear of the unknown.

### 6.1 Challenge of transitioning to university life

International students, much like British students, can find the transition to university life challenging. Students spoke of the time that it took them to get used to living in a new town, a new country and experiencing a new culture. One student spoke particularly about the role that cultural differences played in their experience of transitioning into university life. It was quite common for the students to discuss cultural differences or cultural change within the context of their educational experience. One student spoke specifically about the different understanding of the Student Awards Agency for Scotland (SAAS) between international and domestic students. They went on to say:

**“And, just, like finances, but not to do with the universities, but, like, just money generally, because you’re not used to that currency, so obviously it’s a bit harder to get.”**

Others spoke of the challenge of speaking in a second language, even if they felt confident in their ability to speak and understand English. One student stated that:

**“It’s like, whenever, you can have excellent English skills, according to your school, and then you arrive and you are just like nope!”**

Another student supported the idea that the language barrier could be an initial challenge for international students by explaining that:

**“It’s kind of the little things, and, like for me, the language was kind of hard for me in the start. Like, even though most lecturers are talking plain, simple English, the accent, there are still words that you don’t quite understand.”**

However challenging undergoing a university education in a second language can be, many students acknowledged that they had chosen to attend the University of Stirling because the degrees were taught in English.

One student also acknowledged that the transition to university life was not unique to international students, but that, in some cases, it was heightened because it was not easy for them to go home:

**“I’m pretty sure a lot of students go through these things, absolutely. I have some friends that are from, say, Shetland, from the UK in general, from England or from Scotland. They come from, say, Glasgow or Edinburgh, which is literally not that far to Stirling and they also mentioned that it was quite difficult at the beginning. They really wanted to go home too and, just, it was kind of daunting at the beginning. I guess it’s quite a uniform experience for everyone, but I guess it’s just a bit stronger for international students.”**

## 6.2 Benefit of a welcoming community

Most of the students who participated in this research project identified the significant benefit of the welcoming community to their experience at the University of Stirling and, more broadly, in Scotland. A large contributing factor to students feeling that they were part of such a welcoming community was the number of other international students at the institution. Students commented:

**“It’s really interesting when there’s so many international students, so many nationalities, it’s really cool, and I just think the atmosphere is really welcoming to it.”**

**“It’s very multicultural and that’s really important for international students.”**

Indeed, many students commented that because they had met students from around the world, their university experience was enriched by different cultures and perspectives. Many international students felt that multiculturalism was important to them and central to their university experience.

The topic of international staff was also raised several times during focus groups and interviews. Students felt that having a multicultural learning environment both in terms of their peers and lecturing staff was a great asset. It seems that students valued the varying cultural experiences and background in and out of the classroom and viewed as a great asset to students’ learning. One student stated:

**“There’s so much variety [speaking about staff and students at the university of Stirling], I find that a big source of richness.”**

Several students mentioned that they had met someone else from their home country, which they had not expected but that they had welcomed. One student spoke of arranging to meet up with students, who were from a similar geographic area to celebrate cultural traditions that were not celebrated within the UK. While many students spoke of the benefits of meeting international students from all over the world at Stirling, many also identified meeting people with a similar cultural background to be a source of comfort and that it provided them with opportunities to celebrate their culture in the absence of their family. Additionally, some students spoke about the fact that other international students were unlikely to go home during the weekends, unlike their British counterparts. Shared experiences at university such as the distance from their home and being unable to travel frequently, was noted by many international students as a bonding experience.

When discussing how the referendum to leave the EU impacted on how welcome students felt within Scotland and the rest of the UK, many students expressed a comfort in Scotland, but not necessarily within the wider United Kingdom. One student said:

**“I just feel, like, really welcome here, and I feel more comfortable here than I do back home.”**

Another student spoke of changing perceptions towards international students in the UK, following the June 2016 referendum:

**“It’s [perception of the UK] definitely changed towards, like, a negative rather than a positive because we don’t feel as welcome as we did probably like two years ago.”**

Another student said:

**“I feel more scared in general now, like, I feel like, yeah, I think I would be anxious maybe down in England.”**

Many students expressed the view that they felt welcome in Scotland, due to its overwhelming wish to remain within the EU. In stark contrast, many students expressed negative feelings towards the rest of the UK and a growing feeling that they were unwelcome there. It is clear that, for many international students (particularly those from EU countries), the June 2016 referendum impacted their sense of belonging within the wider UK, but not within Scotland.

## 6.3 Fear of the unknown

For some students, how they feel within the UK is closely linked to the lack of certainty and clarity they have about their status, and rights following Brexit. When asked about potentially wanting to remain in the UK after graduation, one student said that:

**“I just don’t know because, it’s Brexit next year, I don’t know what rights I will have, I don’t know if I need a special visa requirement, some kind of ribbon around my arm.”**

A feeling expressed by many students who participated in this research project was their frustration surrounding the lack of information about Brexit and its impact on their lives. Immigration policy, student loans, tuition fees, visa requirements, the period of time that students could stay post-study, the ways that students could stay within the UK, work and employability were all topics mentioned to be lacking clear guidelines and information, and identified as causes for concern and anxiety.

Many students’ concerns were about the unknown and the uncertainty surrounding their futures, because of Brexit. When asked how they felt about Brexit and its potential impact on their lives, one student said:

**“Well that’s the thing. I don’t know what’s going to happen after Brexit. I’m kind of impatiently waiting if I’m going to be destroyed or not [laughs]. Will they kick me out or not? Will I be able to stay or not really? Because I’m kind of, uh, I’m kind of dependent on funding and scholarships and grants because of my family finances.”**

The uncertainty about the implications of Brexit make international students unable to plan for the future or, in some cases, wary of any kind of future planning.

Additionally, several students mentioned that not knowing about future financial support, for example from SAAS and other funding opportunities, could negatively impact on their pursuit of a postgraduate degree. This lack of clarity, many stated, discouraged them from planning to pursue further educational study within the UK. When asked about future planning, one student said:

**“Absolutely [Brexit] comes up a lot and people are concerned about how it’s going to affect their, um, education and so on.”**

Another stated:

**“Well, um, I still don’t know, especially in terms of immigration for EU students. Also, funding for EU students or, um, the exchange programmes.”**

The uncertainty surrounding the UK’s withdrawal from the European Union has already fundamentally impacted the experience of international students – a continuing lack of clarity around the implications of Brexit on international students within the UK more broadly, and Scotland specifically, will

continue to negatively impact our international student communities. Summing up an important issue for many students, one said:

**“I wouldn’t say I’m worried about, that you’re going out of the EU. I’m more worried about, like, not having enough information about it, if that makes sense?”**

## 7. Conclusions and ideas for further research

This research project found that international students, much like their domestic counterparts, can struggle with the transition to university. For many international students, regular challenges in transitioning to university are heightened by the distance between themselves and their families, communicating in a second language, and adapting to a new and unfamiliar culture. However, students felt that the welcoming community that they found within Scotland and at the University of Stirling helped them to feel comfortable and enjoy their university experience. In the same way that the University of Stirling works to support students in their transition to university and to foster a welcoming community for international students, a growing focus of work, in Stirling and at other UK HE institutions, is to provide its students with as much clarity as possible during this uncertain period. During the Brexit process, universities need to ensure that their international student communities are provided with as much information as possible about the future.

This research project was undertaken at a Scottish HE institution with a positive record for welcoming international students. Further research should be undertaken within English, Welsh and Northern Irish HE institutions to understanding the differing impacts that Brexit has had on international student communities across the UK, and their varying support needs.

## 8. Application of research findings at the University of Stirling

Since the start of the project several actions have been put into place to help support international students throughout the Brexit process. Students clearly identified the need for clear communication and information surrounding Brexit. Leaflets, posters, and business cards have been made to inform students of the findings of the UKCISA-funded research and where they can get up-to-date information on Brexit. The business cards will be given out specifically at a welcome event for international students to send a strong message that the Students’ Union is doing everything it can to support students throughout and beyond Brexit.

These publications will also include a link to the jointly organised (between the University of Stirling

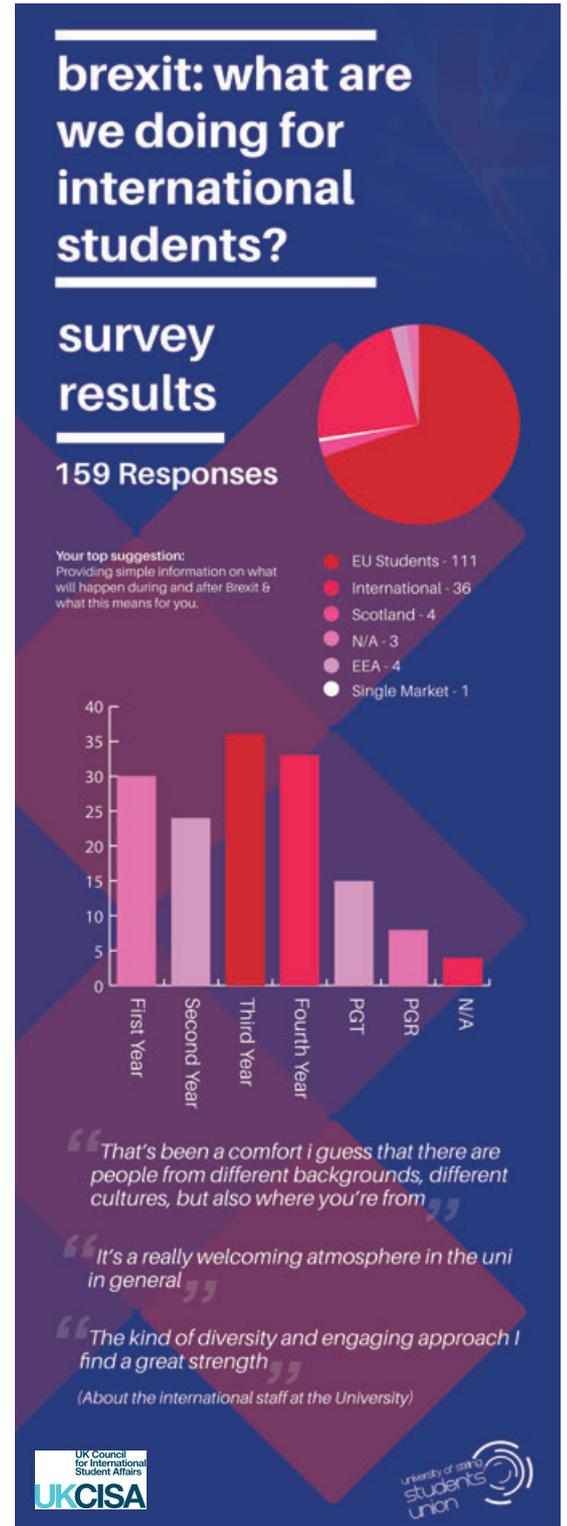
Leaflets, posters, and business cards informing students of the findings of the research and where to get up-to-date information on Brexit.



and the Students' Union) Brexit information sessions for students. Four sessions have been organised and are due to take place in September, November, February, and April in the academic year 2018-19. These sessions will be led by a specialist immigration lawyer to update EEA/European students around developments within the Brexit process and what options students have to secure continued UK residency. It will also advise students about their post-study options; how long students can stay after graduating, employment issues, and eligibility to work.

International students also said they wanted to see more international-focused events. In response to this the University and the Students' Union are working together to organise a "Dialogue Dinner" which invites all students to come and share a national cuisine and to discuss an intercultural topic.

An event has been organised to present the results to the Principal and several other members within the senior management team, as well as those university staff members who work directly with EU and international students (eg immigration team, Director of Learning and Teaching). Several international students have been invited to attend. This event will give staff the information needed to take any relevant steps to support international students. There will be time left after the presentation for a discussion.



### 9. Reflections on learning points for other UK institutions and links

It is important that all UK HE institutions proactively work with their international student communities to ensure that they are providing necessary support for their students. In the case of the University of Stirling, the international student community identified a need for clear communication and information about Brexit, increased international-focused events and ensuring that Stirling remains a

welcoming environment for future cohorts of international students. It is important that other UK institutions use these findings as an initial stepping stone or as suggestions, and not as prescribed steps to supporting their own international student community. The responses of UK institutions should be as unique as their university-environment, international community, and geography.

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## 11. 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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