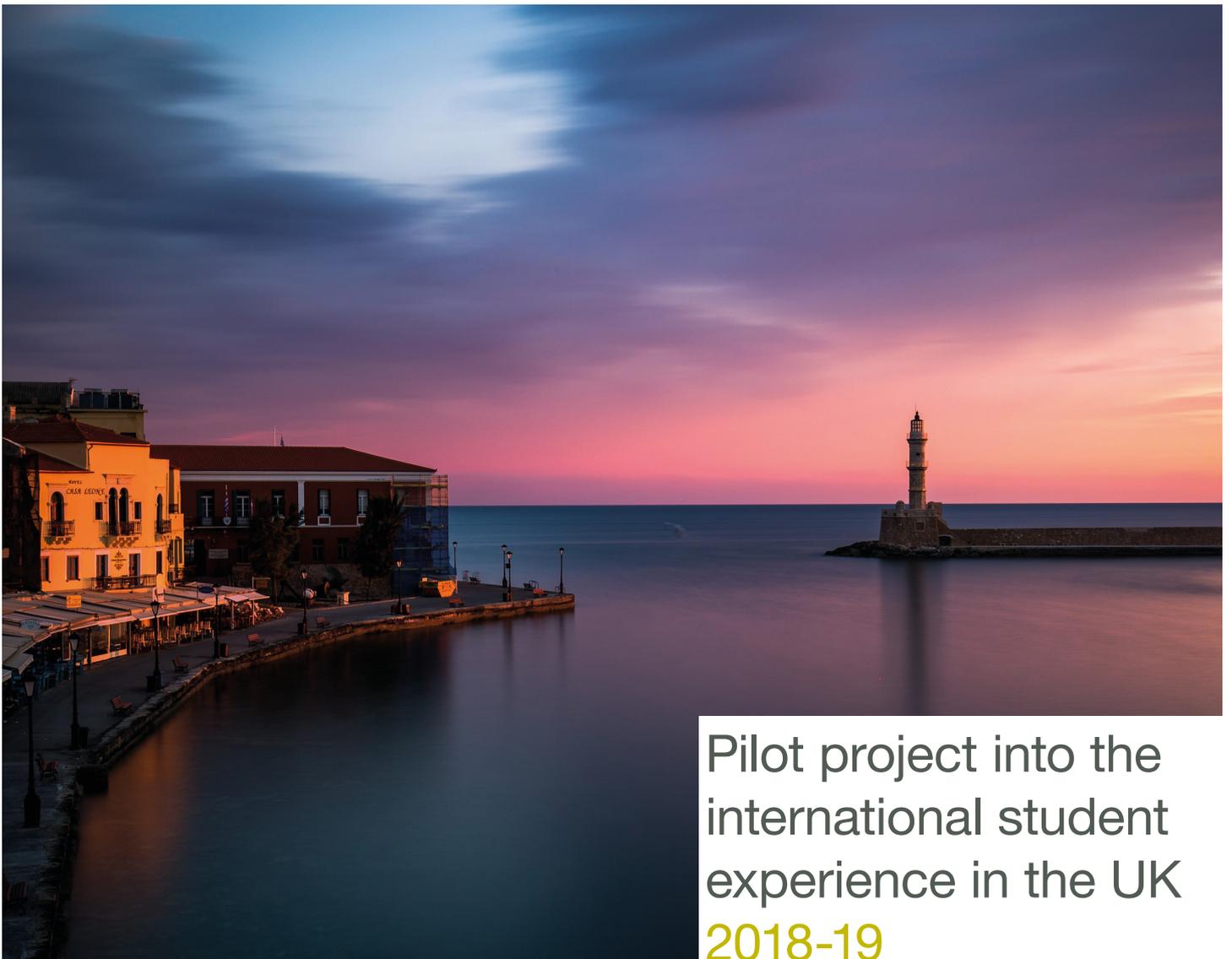


STUDENT EXPERIENCE:
student community

Pilot project

What's on your phone? Illuminating international students' lives and experiences

University of Plymouth



Pilot project into the international student experience in the UK
2018-19

**UK Council
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What's on your phone? Illuminating international students' lives and experiences

University of Plymouth

Helen Bowstead, EFL lecturer and TESOL coordinator



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1. Project aims

The incredible developments in smartphone technology have enabled millions of people worldwide to take and share high quality photographs via social media. By tapping into the cultural shift towards storying our lives using visual images, this project aimed to provide a forum for international students to communicate their identities and experiences to the University and wider community through a familiar and accessible visual medium. Students across the University were invited to submit images that they would like to be included in a public exhibition to be held on the main campus in May 2019.

2. Project outcomes

1. The opportunity for a group of students to curate and organise a public exhibition.

The exhibition was organised in close collaboration with a self-selecting group of international students from a diverse range of cultural and educational backgrounds. These five students were involved in every stage of the planning and selection process leading up to the opening event and exhibition.

2. The opportunity for international students to showcase their lives and experiences through digital images.

Almost 100 images were submitted by approximately 30 students. Submissions were received from students from countries as diverse as Taiwan, Nigeria, Iran, Greece, India, Romania, Hong Kong, Malaysia, Kenya, Singapore and Bulgaria. In total, over 50 images were selected and at least one image from every student who had expressed their interest in participating in the

project was included. All exhibitors were invited to attend the opening event.

3. The opportunity for participants to engage in dialogues generated by the exhibition with staff and students at the university and members of the local community.

Staff and students from across the University were invited to attend the opening event and exhibition. The event was included in the staff and student bulletins and posters and flyers were distributed across the campus. The exhibition was also advertised more widely using social media (Twitter, Facebook, etc.).

4. Attendance at an international conference.

A student member of the steering group will accompany the project lead to the RAISE (Researching, Advancing and Inspiring Student Engagement) Conference at Newcastle University in September 2019 in order to present an academic poster based on the project.

3. Background

Like many similar higher education institutions (HE), the University of Plymouth is committed to its internationalisation agenda. However, recent research into the experiences of international students at the University of Plymouth has found that many of the students interviewed still express strong feelings of being an outsider (McMahon, 2018). While some students do tend to retreat into co-national groupings, other students said they had tried hard to reach out to 'home' students and the local community. However, these students reported that their attempts to integrate were generally rebuffed, causing them to feel excluded and as if

their skills, knowledge and culture were not valued by their UK-educated peers. Despite some successful attempts to encourage integration at the University of Plymouth, for example through 'buddy' and peer mentoring schemes, it seems that language and cultural differences still pose a huge barrier for many students hoping to develop meaningful relationships with UK-educated students.

4. Project set up

Key to the success of this project was recruiting a group of students who would be willing to act as an organising committee for the exhibition. It seemed important to ensure that all the decisions made were student-led and that the students involved had a strong sense of 'ownership' of the project. The steering group were a diverse group of highly motivated students studying a wide variety of disciplines at undergraduate and postgraduate level. The success of the project lies almost entirely with their hard work and enthusiasm. In addition, the help and support of the University Events Team was also a crucial factor, as their professionalism and cross-university reach meant that the exhibition set up and opening event were extremely well-organised.

The exhibition opened on 23 May 2019 and ran for 10 days. The opening event was well attended with over 60 visitors and generated a lot of interest and discussion among visitors and participants. Feedback from visitors was collected via informal conversations and through comments in the Visitor's Book. Members of the steering group and participants in the exhibition were also invited to feedback electronically post-exhibition.

5. Project activities and timeline

October 2018

Application for ethical approval submitted to the Faculty of Arts and Humanities Education Research Ethics Sub-committee.

January 2019

Minor changes to the application for ethical approval are requested by the Research Ethics Sub-committee. Amendments are subject to the Chair's action.

Ethics application is resubmitted.

February 2019

Ethical approval is confirmed by the Chair.

An invitation to take part in the project is sent out to international students via various distribution lists (International Student Advice Service, Student Union, English Language Centre, Global Buddies, etc.). Five students respond and express an interest in helping to organise the exhibition.

March 2018

First meeting of the project steering group. Informed consent forms are completed and students are briefed on the aims of the project. Potential venues, dates and the format of the exhibition are also discussed.

Further invitations to submit images for inclusion in the exhibition are sent out to international students across the University.

April 2019

Steering group meeting to finalise venue, dates and the format of the exhibition. A possible space is identified and this is booked along with the display boards.

Meeting with the Events Team to discuss arrangements for the exhibition set up, opening night and promotion of the event.

May 2019

Final steering group meeting (and cream tea) to select the images to be included.

23 May 2019

Opening event and exhibition.

May 2019

Abstract submitted to present a poster at the RAISE Conference, Newcastle University,

September 2019

Student-led poster presentation at the RAISE conference, Newcastle University.

6. Challenges

The main obstacle was gaining ethical approval for the project as Faculty of Arts and Humanities Education Research Ethics Sub-committee only meet a handful of times a year. As a result, the application was not approved until February 2019. However, once this was in place, the project was fairly quick and easy to set up.

A number of students responded positively to the invitation to participate, but others stated that they were too busy and/or unwilling to commit time to the project. This may have been partly due to the timing of the exhibition, which coincided with end-of-year examinations and assessments, but it was also clear that some students found the amount of information supplied (project description, informed consent form, etc.) rather daunting and/or confusing. However, the five students who eventually volunteered to be members of the steering group were extremely committed and the meetings were always constructive and productive. A simplified version of the invitation to participate in the exhibition was sent out. Initially, there were only a handful of responses, but as the deadline approached, a large number of images were submitted. This put pressure on the project lead

and steering group as the images had to be selected and printed within a very tight deadline. It was decided to print the images on foam board to create a more professional finish. Having the printing done in-house was not possible as the print team in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities were extremely busy preparing students' work for the final degree shows. This meant the printing had to be outsourced, which resulted in a longer turnaround time.

Finding an appropriate space was also a challenge as May is a very busy month due to the number of examinations and degree shows taking place across the campus. The Peninsula Gallery, which hosts the wide-ranging public arts programme of the University of Plymouth, was not a viable option as it is only available for professional artists and exhibitions. Eventually a large atrium space in one of the university's key buildings (Portland Square) was eventually identified as being available and was booked for a 10-day period at the end of May.

7. Sustainability

One of the key aims of the HE sector is to develop graduates who will be able to contribute to a more sustainable future as informed, responsible, and active global citizens. It is essential therefore that staff, students and the local community are provided with opportunities to acknowledge and reflect on the assumptions that impact on their interactions with those from different backgrounds and cultures.

This project provides a simple, inexpensive model of innovative practice that could be adopted by HE institutions across the sector. Based on this, an annual budget of £1,000 to cover printing and catering costs is currently being sought from various stakeholders to ensure that similar exhibitions can be held in the future at the University of Plymouth.

8. Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Ensure students are involved at every stage of the project.
- Budget for catering for student meetings and opening events.
- Make it as easy as possible for students to understand how they can participate – talk to students face to face where possible, and follow up with simply worded emails and/or short posts on social media.
- Be mindful of University 'pinch points', avoid examination/assessment periods, holidays, etc.
- Enlist the help of University services – events, catering, external relations, room bookings, print and copy services, etc. early on in the planning



process – at least six months before the exhibition date.

- Aim to hold the exhibition in a venue which can easily be accessed by staff, students and members of the public

9. Reference

McMahon, P., 2018. 'Making the grade': a grounded theory explaining the student experience of Asian and Middle-Eastern postgraduates in a British university, *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 40(1), p.34-47.

10. Further information

Image archive: https://liveplymouthac-my.sharepoint.com/personal/helen_bowstead_plymouth_ac_uk/_layouts/15/onedrive.

11. Contact

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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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