

# INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS IN UK UNIVERSITIES AND COLLEGES BROADENING OUR HORIZONS

REPORT OF THE UKCOSA SURVEY



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In association with British Council, Universities UK,  
and the Standing Conference of Principals



## PREFACE

by Dame Alexandra Burslem,  
Chair of UKCOSA's Board of Trustees



International students are vital to the current and future health of UK further and higher education: the international diversity on our campuses enriches the environment for all staff and students. Additionally, they bring in fee income, make viable courses which would otherwise close for lack of numbers, and constitute a very significant proportion of the research student population whose work is vital to maintain and renew our academic communities. They contribute to the UK economy more widely, not just to the education sector, through their spending in local communities. They provide a pool of highly skilled labour on which both universities and UK businesses call to make up for skill shortages in the domestic market. Perhaps most importantly, their familiarity with the UK will allow them to influence others – positively or negatively, depending on their experiences – both in their home countries and wherever else in the world they go. Over and above our responsibility to ensure a higher quality of experience for all of our students, as future partners in diplomacy, trade and cultural exchange, and as people likely to become influencers and decision-makers, we should take very seriously the question of whether international students' experiences of the UK are positive.

The recent British Council report, *Vision 2020*, shows that there is potential for a tripling of the number of international students coming to the UK over the next 15 years. That presents an enormous challenge to institutions if they are to enhance or even just maintain the current high satisfaction ratings international students have given in the survey. Yet, *Vision 2020* also makes clear that the market is volatile, and increases are dependent on the UK maintaining its competitive edge. Recent OECD figures suggest our European neighbours are already catching up. We hope that the UKCOSA survey of international students will become a regular benchmarking event, allowing us every few years to gauge our success in continuing to provide the high quality experience for which international students come to the UK.

In this first UKCOSA survey there is much for the sector to congratulate itself on: international students' experiences of studying in the UK were extremely positive.

Respondents were very satisfied with the experience overall, and particularly with key components such as the quality of teaching and academic facilities.

Nevertheless, the report also shows that there is no room

for complacency. As we recruit from new markets without a history of mobility to the UK, we must look again at our pre-arrival information to ensure students' concerns and uncertainties are addressed, and that prior knowledge of the UK is not assumed. We must ensure that support services are resourced to keep pace with the growing numbers, so that students can be supported through the inevitable challenges of studying abroad.

We must also address the key issue of integrating international students with UK students and residents, so that they will be part of social networks which can help them adapt to their new environment, and so they will gain a rounded picture of British people and culture.

Conversely, home students should be encouraged to mix with international students to enrich their experience, and to engage with the multiplicity of cultures and languages in their institutions, to develop their sense of being global citizens and equip them to work in an increasingly globalised world.

Government also has a role to play in ensuring students' experiences of the British systems of immigration and employment regulations demonstrate the fairness and efficiency for which the UK would want to be known abroad. It needs to put in place the regulatory framework which allows students to gain the academic, vocational and professional qualifications and experience merited by their investment of time and money in the UK, and which can best contribute to their future career success.

Many of the survey respondents wrote of the benefits they gained from studying in the UK: good academic

qualifications, a better knowledge of the English language, an enhanced understanding of British and other cultures and greater independence and maturity. The title of this report, 'broadening our horizons' however, describes not their experiences but ours: international students can "open a window on the world" for us, as Tony Blair expressed it in launching the Prime Minister's initiative in 1999. In recognition of this, we want to make international students truly feel welcome and valued in our colleges and universities.



# THE FINDINGS

## BACKGROUND

The UKCOSA survey was the first attempt for ten years to provide a comprehensive picture of the experiences of international students in UK further education (FE) and higher education (HE). Its aim was to gain information about the experiences of international students studying in the UK, in order to identify areas where institutions could improve students' experiences through more appropriate support, better information and preparation, or other means. The survey's findings were intended to help identify positive experiences as well as areas to target for improvement.

The survey respondents were almost 5000 students at publicly funded further or higher education institutions in the UK, studying on courses from pre-higher education level to doctorates. They were a reasonably representative sample of the UK's international students, although further education and the higher education college sector were under-represented.



## THE ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

87% of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied with their course. The ratings were slightly higher among undergraduates (91%) than among postgraduates (85%). 84% of undergraduates, 78% of taught postgraduates and 76% of pre-HE students were satisfied or very satisfied with the quality of lectures. More than three quarters of students were happy with the quality of small group teaching such as seminars. Academic support (e.g. tutorial systems) was also highly rated, 81% of research students, 69% of taught postgraduates, 75% of undergraduates and pre-HE students found it to be satisfactory or very satisfactory. Library and computing facilities were particularly well regarded by respondents with a third of students being very satisfied with these facilities, and a further 48% being satisfied with them. Although North American students were slightly less satisfied with library, computing and departmental facilities than East Asian students, on every other category, the latter showed lower levels of satisfaction than other groups – although still 81% were satisfied with the course overall.

*"I have been studying at an excellent University, doing a course I have always wanted to, taught by a brilliant and helpful staff, and have gotten to interact and form relationships with a large number of people with diverse backgrounds. My eyes have opened up to the world."*

Indian male postgraduate



## STUDENTS' CONCERNS

Students' two main concerns before arrival were accommodation and finance, although concern about accommodation decreased dramatically after arrival. Finance and balancing paid work with study were concerns that increased later in students' stay. Finding suitable part-time work remained an issue for 20% of students even by the time of the survey.

Before arrival undergraduates and taught postgraduates were more worried than pre-HE or research students about adjusting to UK study methods, although by the time



***“I expected a lot of racial prejudice, due to the fact that I am Muslim. I was surprised to find that there are many Muslims [here], and the locals here can accept our religion and respect our teachings.”***

Malaysian male undergraduate



***“The International Students’ Office of the University is really a bridge connecting the students together. And provides very useful information to the international students who first come to the UK.”***

Chinese female undergraduate



of the survey (April/May) they were more confident than pre-HE students, and only slightly less confident than research students about study methods.

Over 50% of students for whom English was a foreign language were concerned before arrival about language, and just over 20% still noted this as an issue at the time of the survey. A third of Chinese students were still concerned about their level of English for both social and academic purposes at this point, and half of the Japanese respondents, 45% of Thai students and 29% of Taiwanese students were still concerned about their academic English.

Concerns about homesickness and isolation and about difficulties in mixing with UK students remained higher than many others towards the end of the year, suggesting that for a small proportion of students these issues were never really resolved.

## **PRE-ARRIVAL INFORMATION**

The two areas where respondents most wanted more or better pre-arrival information were finance and accommodation. The need for better information about accommodation has been flagged in several previous reports as an issue. Students from East Asia and the Middle East and North Africa were the least satisfied with information on this topic.

Information about courses was one of the areas about which students were most satisfied, but information on both fees and cost of living could be improved.

Native speakers of English were significantly more satisfied, and speakers of English as a foreign language were significantly less likely to be satisfied with immigration information than those for whom English was a second language.

## **SUPPORT SERVICES**

70% of respondents had used their college or university’s advice service, an increase on previous findings, while 50% had made use of their Students’ Union advice service. Women were less likely than men to use most support services, and take up of services in post-1992 universities was higher than in pre-1992 universities. Institutional advice services such as international offices were most positively rated (86% of users were satisfied or very satisfied), while students were least happy with accommodation offices (73% were satisfied or very satisfied).

Nearly 80% of students had attended an induction or orientation session, a considerable increase since the HEIST survey ten years ago, and 81% of those who attended found them helpful. Research postgraduates were least likely to have attended, due to a combination of opting out and lack of knowledge about whether orientation was offered.



***“So many support systems in place here for students. I've programme tutor, year tutor, module tutor, personal tutor, international student advisor, student services... So much different when compared to back home.”***  
Malaysian female undergraduate

Our survey found higher take up of study skills classes than of English classes, and higher rates of satisfaction with them. Students on pre-HE level courses were most likely to use and to appreciate language and study skills courses and – perhaps surprisingly – postgraduate students were significantly more likely than undergraduates to take, and appreciate, them. Students from China, Taiwan, Thailand, Indonesia, Japan, Iran, Mexico and Nigeria were significantly more likely to take up study skills classes, and those from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Thailand, Japan, Iran and Spain were more likely than others to take up English language classes. Students in Business Studies and Computer Science – both subjects with large clusters of international students - had a higher than average tendency to take language and study skills classes.

Nearly 60% of students had used their careers service. Take up was lowest for research postgraduates (50%), and highest among taught postgraduates (65%). Students of engineering and business studies were more likely at all levels to have used the careers service than those studying medicine or humanities. 82% of undergraduates who had used their careers service were satisfied with the service they had received, as were 75% of postgraduates and pre-HE students.

A third of students had used their institution's chaplaincy or multifaith centre. Students from Western countries were less likely to use chaplaincy services on the whole, while Chinese students were slightly more likely to. Students who counted UK students among their friends were less likely to use chaplaincies.



## **FINANCIAL ISSUES**

Over 70% of students were paying their fees (wholly or in part) and 79% were paying living expenses from their own or their families' resources. Scholarships from the home country government were the next largest source of support for fees and living costs, followed by scholarships from UK institutions. However, whereas 95% of pre-HE students were paying their own fees, 85% of undergraduates, 79% of taught postgraduates but only 30% of research postgraduates were. 23% of research students were funded by their home government, 24% by UK government sources and 31% by institutional scholarships. 45% of research students were paying their own living costs.

Despite high satisfaction ratings with their academic experience, only 50% of respondents said they were satisfied with the value for money of their course - 64% of EU students and 47% of non-EU students. This compares to 58% of domestic students who thought UK higher education was value for money according to a survey for UNITE. There also seemed to be a correlation between the levels of



***“I am satisfied with the quality of the UK’s education system. However, tuition fees and the living cost, especially in London, is too much for me to afford. I have to struggle to find a part-time job to balance my budget without giving serious affect to my study.”***  
Chinese male postgraduate

satisfaction with value for money and whether English was a first, second or foreign language for the student: 59% of native English speakers were satisfied with value for money compared with 54% of those for whom English was a second language and 43% of those for whom it was a foreign language. Bench fees and hidden extras also caused respondents to feel they were paying too much. The message from the survey seems to be that courses are on the whole of good quality, but that there is real sensitivity about cost.

Just over three quarters of respondents considered they had enough to live on and pay their fees, while 23% thought they did not. Students with an accompanying spouse or child were significantly more likely to encounter hardship than those on their own. Research students encountered more financial problems than students at other levels, despite being more likely to be funded. Students were more likely than average to report financial problems if they came from sub-Saharan Africa or North America. Students from East Asia were less likely than other students to report having insufficient funds. The main reasons cited for hardship were that the cost of living was higher than students had budgeted (72%) and exchange rate fluctuations (50%). Higher tuition fees than expected were more likely to cause hardship for undergraduates.

Only 35% had taken out medical insurance and only a quarter of students had taken out possessions insurance, giving them little cushion against the contingencies of illness, theft or other accident.

Quite a few students mentioned banking problems. In some cases, delays in being able to open bank accounts caused students temporary hardship, while in other cases it imposed extra costs or raised safety issues. In other cases, it simply added to negative perceptions of the UK.



## **EMPLOYMENT**

Just over half of all students had undertaken paid work since coming to the UK. Taught postgraduates were slightly less likely than other groups to have worked (47% had worked), perhaps because of the intensive nature of the courses, and research postgraduates were the most likely to have worked (60% had). Students from non-EU countries found it very much harder than EU students to find work: 64% of non-EU students compared to 26% of EU students. Many of the blocks to getting work were perceived to lie not in a shortage of suitable jobs, but in employers’ unwillingness to employ international students. The mostly commonly cited reasons (for 31% of non-EU and 10% of EU students) were problems with National Insurance numbers, e.g. students being told they could not work until they



***“Through doing casual work, I got to meet people from the UK society other than UK students and this provided me with wide insights about people and how they live.”***

Zambian female postgraduate

had obtained one. 26% of non-EU students and 3% of EU students said employers were unsure whether the student was allowed to work. Students also reported a range of perceptions of prejudice against non-British applicants ranging from unwillingness to accept students’ language capabilities, overseas qualifications or experience, to racism. Five per cent of the students reported feeling that they had experienced discrimination from employers.

Thirty per cent of students found it difficult to find out even how to apply for a National Insurance number, and only just over half said it was easy to find out how to apply. 27% of students who had worked had had to wait more than six weeks to get one, and 9% had been unable to obtain one at all.

Only 29% of students had found work related to their programme of study or future career plans. However, as well as financial benefits to working 61% of students for whom English was a second language and 67% of those for whom it was a foreign language considered that working had helped improve their English



## **IMMIGRATION ISSUES**

36% of non-EU students reported having needed to apply for an extension of their leave to remain in the UK. Those who had extended their visa while in their home country, or in the UK with help from an international student adviser at their institution were more positive about the process than those who had used a paid adviser such as a lawyer or had applied for the extension independently. A much more widespread complaint was on the question of charging for visa extensions. Students were very vocal about this in the open comments section of the questionnaire, particularly research postgraduates who are one of the groups most likely to be required to make extensions because of the uncertain duration of doctoral degrees.

***“I don't think it is fair for home office to charge £150-250 for visa extension.”***

Chinese female undergraduate



## **ACCOMMODATION**

Although accommodation featured highest on students’ list of concerns before arrival, the anxiety was perhaps unnecessary since three quarters of students in HE were offered university housing at the beginning of their stay: 85% of undergraduates compared to 70% recorded in the 1994 HEIST survey. There have been improvements across the board, although there were still differentials by type of institution: 90% of undergraduates in the pre-1992 universities were offered institution managed housing (76% in the HEIST survey), 72% in post-1992 institutions (60%) and 73% in HE colleges (63%). Research postgraduates were the least likely group to be offered help, with 20% claiming they had not been offered any, compared to 12% of taught postgraduates and 5% of undergraduates. Only 65% of research postgraduate were offered institution-managed accommodation when they first arrived.



Students in institution-managed accommodation were slightly less likely than the average to encounter hardship, while those in the private rented sector were more likely to – although comments from students indicated that in some cases the institution was charging higher rents than in the private sector, which would seem to be supported by the recent NUS study of rents. Students in homestays were least likely to have financial problems.

Students with accompanying dependants reported more problems than single students with finding accommodation. Nearly half of all students with an accompanying spouse or child reported problems finding suitable accommodation when they first arrived. By the time of the survey, 4% still had not found somewhere suitable.

Four out of five students were happy with the quality of their accommodation at the time of the survey. 45% of students were dissatisfied with the cost, and respondents were more satisfied with cost in the private sector than in institution-managed housing, perhaps because they expected the latter to be subsidised rather than full cost. 28% were dissatisfied with lack of access to an international telephone line. The accommodation-related problems most often cited by respondents were difficulties with others in their accommodation, having to move out during vacations and having an inflexible contract. 26% of students in institution-managed accommodation complained about having to move out during vacations; 33% of undergraduates, compared to 15% of postgraduates complained about this.

***“Accommodation is a crucial part of a student's life – especially a foreign one – and if anything goes pear-shaped, the student can feel very isolated.”***

Spanish female postgraduate

About 10% of students reported problems with their landlord, and other complaints included high costs, poor quality accommodation, poor standards of cleaning and hygiene, inadequate security and noise. Of those in private rented accommodation, 14% complained of having difficulties getting their deposit returned.



## **SOCIAL INTEGRATION**

International students with UK friends were more likely to be satisfied overall with their stay in the UK: 93% compared to 86%. However, international students were much more closely integrated with co-nationals and other international students than with UK students, with 59% counting most of their friendships in one of these categories. Only 32% counted their friends as a mixture of UK and international students, and only 7% were friends mainly with UK students rather than international students.

Women were slightly more likely than men to have UK students in their social circle. Younger students were significantly more integrated than older students: 47% of 18 to 21 year olds had UK friends compared to 30% of those over 31. Students with



dependants were also significantly less likely to have UK friends. Students from East and South-East Asia were considerably less likely to have UK friends than average and students from the EU (except Greece), North America and Sub-Saharan Africa were more likely to. Only 15% of Chinese students said they had UK friends. It is a major concern that two of the largest national groups on campus (Greek and Chinese students) appear very likely to relate exclusively to fellow nationals or other international students on campus.

Students who had participated in any type of activity on campus were more likely to have UK friends than those who had not. When asked whether they found UK students hard to get to know, 43% agreed, although 60% also agreed that UK students were friendly when one did get to know them. More than half of students agreed that it was difficult to make friends outside the institution and 59% of students wanted more chance to experience UK culture and family life.

A number of respondents commented negatively about the prevalence of heavy drinking and the role of alcohol in social activities in the UK. It is clear that some international students find the drinking culture in the UK a barrier to integration. Comments in the open section of our survey suggest that some international students felt UK students had negative views towards them, ranging from superiority through indifference to outright hostility.

***“UK people are overall very helpful, friendly and fun to hang out with when they are sober.”***

Malaysian male undergraduate



## **STUDENTS' OVERALL SATISFACTION WITH THEIR STUDY IN THE UK**

89% of respondents described themselves as satisfied or very satisfied with their stay in the UK. Students from North America, Europe and Oceania were most satisfied with their stay in the UK, while students from East Asia were slightly less satisfied than other groups (80% were satisfied or very satisfied). The benefits respondents most commonly listed included their academic experience, improving their English, becoming more independent, meeting people from all over the world and learning about the UK and other cultures.

***“Broadened my horizons beyond expectations, with the people I have met coming from so many different backgrounds, cultures... [it] also gave me ideas, and self-exploration, knowing more what I want to do, changed my direction in life.”***

Lebanese male postgraduate

## CONCLUSIONS

The research results appear to show very high rates of satisfaction with the academic experience and in general high levels of satisfaction with student support and the wider experience of living in the UK. However, there is plenty of scope for institutions, other agencies and government to improve different facets of the experience for international students.

**INSTITUTIONS** will want to benchmark their own performance against the points raised in the report, which cover a wide range of topics, including teaching and learning issues, language and study skills; resourcing and take up of support services; provision of information pre- and post-arrival; policies relating to fees and financial support; accommodation issues; and integration of international and UK students.

**GOVERNMENT** might consider addressing topics such as information about and process of issuing of national insurance numbers; better publicity for employers about working regulations and rewording of stamps and vignettes in passports; and proceeding with caution in imposing additional charges e.g. for visa extensions.

**OTHER AGENCIES** will, according to their remit, wish to consider some issues such as providing improvements to pre-arrival information on immigration issues; national initiatives on training for academics; consideration of the availability of data to inform policies; and the need for regular monitoring of the experiences of international students to ensure the UK continues to provide world class support.

This report provides a starting point for all concerned to review and develop the many processes, procedures and services which affect the experiences of international students in the UK. We hope that by the time of the next UKCOSA survey, satisfaction ratings will have reached an even higher level.



**UKCOSA**

The Council  
for International  
Education

UKCOSA: The Council for International Education is the national advisory body serving the interests of international students in the UK and those who work with them. It does so through research, publications and guidance notes, a national training programme, dedicated advice lines for students and advisors and liaison and advocacy with institutions, agencies and government.

Its members include all UK universities, those colleges which are active internationally and a range of specialist and representative bodies.

UKCOSA: The Council for International Education  
9-17 St Albans Place  
London N1 0NX  
[www.ukcosa.org.uk](http://www.ukcosa.org.uk)

UKCOSA is a registered Charity No. 1095294 and a company limited by guarantee. Registered in England and Wales No 4507287.

© UKCOSA 2004

Copies of the full report can be obtained from the publications assistant at UKCOSA at the above address or email: [publications@ukcosa.org.uk](mailto:publications@ukcosa.org.uk)

The report can also be downloaded from the UKCOSA website at [www.ukcosa.org.uk/survey](http://www.ukcosa.org.uk/survey)



**BRITISH  
COUNCIL**



Universities UK



*promoting higher education colleges*