

Attracting international students: equitable services and support, campus cohesion and community engagement

A summary



Equality Challenge Unit

Acknowledgments

Based on research by a team from the Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland, University of Edinburgh and the Centre for Remote and Rural Studies, University of Highlands and Islands led by Dr Rowena Arshad and Dr Philomena de Lima.

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- = University of Edinburgh
- = Glasgow School of Art
- = Heriot-Watt University
- = Robert Gordon University
- = University of St Andrews
- = University of Strathclyde

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Introduction

In an increasingly competitive international market, higher education institutions (HEIs) are adopting various strategies to attract talented students from overseas.

In autumn 2010, ECU developed a project in collaboration with Scottish HEIs to research how advancing equality and diversity can support attracting international students.

Being a student in higher education involves more than engaging in an academic pursuit; it is an all-encompassing life and cultural experience.

Student support services play an important role in this student experience and enhancing and diversifying provision can increase attraction, retention and achievement of all students, including international, and should be an important part of any institution's internationalisation strategy.

Over the years, higher education institutions (HEIs) have developed comprehensive information and support mechanisms for students, including targeted activity for international students. This has resulted in overall high student satisfaction with the effectiveness and quality of student support services. However, it is recognised that more can be done to ensure both international and UK students are supported to fully benefit from the student experience.

This is a summary of the main report of ECU's project. The main report includes fuller recommendations, illustrative quotes from staff and students who took part in the research and suggestions for further reading.

www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/attracting-international-students

Background

The research focused on three areas for providing an inclusive environment and the best experience for international and UK students in order to identify good practice and transferable learning, and provide recommendations for developing practice:

- = equity of support and professional services between international and UK students
- = campus cohesion – the relationship between international and UK students, between staff and international students and the ways in which institutions support good relations
- = community engagement – how international students engage with local communities and how institutions encourage this

The research

Research was undertaken at:

- = University of Edinburgh
- = Glasgow School of Art
- = Heriot-Watt University
- = Robert Gordon University
- = University of St Andrews
- = University of Strathclyde

In total:

- = 71 staff were interviewed
- = 199 students took part in focus groups, 120 returned monitoring forms (81 international, 39 UK)
- = 965 students responded to an online survey (306 non-EU international, 147 EU international, 512 UK)

Equity of support services

A key focus of this study was to find out whether services are provided equitably to international and UK students.

Being equitable does not mean providing the same for every student but recognising the different needs within a diverse student group and making necessary steps to ensure that services are provided in a way that meets these needs as far as possible.

The majority of students interviewed and surveyed – both international and UK – are satisfied with the range and quality of support services provided by institutions. In most cases, services are provided equitably for international and UK students although each service area identified in this study has room for improvement to ensure greater equity of provision.

Key areas for consideration include the following issues.

- = **Assess the effectiveness of communication between different student services to avoid duplication and improve the efficiency of responding to international and UK student needs.** Closer working across services facilitates the sharing of good practice and creative initiatives, while avoiding duplication of work.

Accommodation service

- = **Provide detailed online information about the available accommodation.** Include virtual tours, photos, floor plans and information about the location of the residence in relation to other institutional services. International students may not be able to visit accommodation prior to their application, so it is important to make them feel able to make a choice. As far as possible, reassure international students that they will not be segregated from UK students in accommodation selection.
- = **Provide clearer housing and tenancy rights advice for international students.** For example, information about the Scottish Government deposit protection scheme and accreditation schemes at national and local level which provide guidance specifically to international students seeking accommodation. The study found that international students are not always aware of information in relation to renting particularly from private landlords.

- = **Provide training on cultural awareness and how to challenge discrimination.** Include staff and volunteers (from managers to domestic and janitorial staff) associated with accommodation services. Review the role of wardens or resident coordinators to ensure they are proactive in providing opportunities to assist integration and have the knowledge, skills and confidence to address issues of prejudice or discrimination.

Careers service

- = **Work proactively with local employers.** For example, to enhance internship and employment opportunities for international students, particularly when visa status is not a barrier. In the same way that partnership work has been undertaken with employers and industries to break gender stereotypes, there is a need to work with employers and representative bodies to break any stereotypes or anxieties relating to diversity, language, faith and culture.
- = **Ensure transparency in recruitment and selection of students to part-time jobs or tutoring opportunities.** Some international students perceived inequity in the ways employment and tutoring opportunities were allocated within their HEI. Developing a clear framework for these appointments, such as creating a set of criteria against which tutors are selected, will reassure applicants of the formality of the process and also ensure the quality of those who are appointed.

Catering

- = **Increase provision of a range of foods from different cuisines to better meet ethnic, cultural, ethical and religious diversities.** The majority of staff and student association officers interviewed indicated that the catering provision in their institution was not sufficiently contemporary or diverse to meet the dietary needs and palates of all students.

Chaplaincy

- = **Build and consolidate chaplaincies' provision to further promote good relations between international and UK students.** Chaplaincies are highly valued by international students and are a key venue to support integration.

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- Disability and health services**
- = **Review funding for disability services so that they can promote their services to international students and meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.** International students do not have statutory funding equivalent to the disabled students' allowance. To ensure equity in service provision, disability services need sufficient resources so that they can make international students aware of the services they provide and carry out the same level of assessment of requirements for international and UK students.
 - = **Support integrated working with other departments including academic staff.** This will help to provide proactive support, particularly for students potentially experiencing mental health issues. Health staff reported that international students are particularly unlikely to discuss psychological matters, possibly due to beliefs, customs and practices in their country of origin which affect their understanding and behaviour towards mental health issues. Academic staff may be in a position to detect early signs of need for support for mental health difficulties.
 - = **Provide guidance on local health services.** Include how to register with a doctor and the range of health provision available.
- Financial support**
- = **Provide clear information for international students on hardship or emergency funds.** Include eligibility criteria, the application process and any fund limitations. International students were less aware of the financial support available through their institutions than UK students. Those who knew that their institutions could provide hardship funds were unsure whether they are available for international students as well as UK students.
- Sport, leisure and exercise**
- = **Review how sports, exercise and leisure centres, sports clubs and affiliated groups have assessed their provision in relation to the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.** Staff and students in the study found team sports to be the ideal platform to encourage mixing for international and UK students. Initiatives to consult and involve all students in the design of sports programmes provide a more inclusive service.

Students' unions or associations

- = **Adopt an international strategy as well as embedding internationalisation issues into functions and activities.** While students' unions and associations are aware of the need to take the diverse needs of international students into account, action often depends on having officers who have an interest in this area. By combining a specific international strategy with the approach of embedding international issues into all policies and practice, international students' needs can be better represented within students' unions and associations.
- = **Address the impact of alcohol on campus culture.** Students felt that many social activities are linked to alcohol, which is restricting for those that do not drink. It is important that clubs, societies, services providers and those organising events in HEIs consider this as part of the planning process. There was a particular call for students' unions and associations to be more proactive in addressing the role of alcohol within student life by creating a more café-like culture in their hospitality areas.

Support for international students with dependants

- = **Provide information about coming to the institution with children.** Include advice on schooling, areas to look for suitable accommodation, places to buy different foods, and information about the NHS and eligibility for family members. International students want more information about childcare and schooling, guidance on how the education system is organised and on costs, funding and availability. They wanted assistance from the HEI to establish links with local authorities and schools, especially for families arriving at non-standard times of year.

Support for postgraduate students

- = **Provide events and activities to enable students to feel at home quickly.** This is particularly useful for postgraduate students who might only be in their programme of study for a year. Consider a range of events to enable those with children, or those who do not drink alcohol, to be able to enjoy them fully.
- = **Ensure that the range of student services is fully available and relevant for postgraduates.** The limited time some postgraduate students spend with the institution means they can be excluded from taking part in several opportunities such as joining sports teams or taking key roles in the students' union or association. Access to services and swift and relevant advice from key services like the careers service becomes even more critical for these students.

Campus cohesion between students, and staff and students

Staff saw the increasing representation of international students in societies and at course and faculty level as assisting the promotion of good relations.

Staff described the campus atmosphere as one where students get on well together, however, three issues emerged.

- = Some subject areas consist nearly exclusively of international students, in some cases from the same country. This may limit the experience of coming to Scotland to study and present extra challenges to promoting interactions between international and UK students.
- = Potential conflicts may arise between individuals and groups, possibly shaped by the political contexts and relationships in their countries of origin.
- = It is important to emphasise the contribution of international students not only within the HEI but throughout the host city. International students have a great deal to offer and should not be perceived as merely having needs.

Key areas for consideration include the following issues.

Relationship between staff and international students

- = **Provide ongoing equality and cultural awareness training for all levels of staff.** Staff reported that they picked up cultural awareness on the job and would value receiving seminars to explore inter-cultural communication and awareness raising from people with expertise in these areas. Regular opportunities should be provided for staff to attend relevant training that provides opportunities to discuss specific concerns.

Interaction between international and UK students

- = **Provide UK students with opportunities to develop their awareness of diversity issues and understanding of different cultures and their skills to challenge prejudices, stereotyping and discrimination.** Some UK students expressed negative views towards students from nationalities they viewed to be dominating or overly vocal. Some indicated a preference for forming friendships with students they deemed to be like them – they saw European international students to be easier to connect with than non-EU internationals due to cultural and other similarities. UK students in particular said that they find it hard to discuss matters related to ethnicity, religion or cultural differences for fear of getting it wrong and being seen as insensitive or prejudiced.

- = **Consider providing sessions to help international students learn about social conventions in a UK HEI.** Information provided at such sessions could include information that would help the student to settle in to a new place. This could include where to go for more information and support on a range of areas from HEI services and also from community organisations, what to do if a student encounters a difficult situation such as racial harassment, and information about situations to avoid such as walking alone in less safe areas. Equally students should be informed of the HEI's values in relation to equality, diversity and fairness and be made aware of the institution's zero-tolerance approach to issues like sexism, racism and homophobia.

Community engagement

Engagement with local communities is an important part of the international student experience.

The study found that community relationships can include volunteering, participation in faith or leisure activities, accessing services and taking employment. Students were aware that they can access information about community activities from the HEI, however the majority of students had identified opportunities themselves rather than through guidance from their institution.

Among international students, those fluent in English were more likely to interact with local communities and engage in volunteering than those less confident in their spoken English. However, most students, particularly international students, were not actively involved in their local communities, most frequently due to the short-term nature of their course (which leaves them with a lack of free time and can make them feel guilty about being unable to fulfil a long-term commitment), and a lack of information about available opportunities and how to get involved.

Despite this, international students in particular viewed connections with host communities as a way to overcome loneliness and to establish a more stable social network while getting to experience more of the local culture and customs. They also felt that making connections with local host communities assists in improving the local community's opinion of students.

A key area for consideration includes the following issue.

- = **Explore new ways of engaging with communities in the broadest and most diverse sense.** There is definite scope for HEIs to develop better partnerships with local communities and organisations, especially those working specifically with black and minority ethnic individuals and communities, as existing relationships are usually based on individual staff awareness, knowledge and contacts rather than a carefully considered institutional strategy. These partnerships could generate another tier of support for international and UK students thereby assisting the overall student experience.

Looking ahead

The study found a great deal of enthusiasm and commitment from staff to enhance the student experience of both international and UK students.

Some innovative and thoughtful practices have been highlighted in the main report. HEIs could do more to seek out similar examples of good practice within their own institution and commend these more publicly.

The onus for creating a positive student experience for all lies with the HEI and its staff. Consideration needs to be given to:

- = raising staff awareness of how to work and react in an increasingly diverse setting to explicitly address issues of prejudice and discrimination
- = continuous evaluation of whether and how services are meeting the range of student needs, including those specific to postgraduates, and have the flexibility to adapt or adjust services to meet diverse needs
- = collaborative working between support services and academic departments to avoid duplication of work and unnecessary delay in addressing student needs and concerns
- = consideration of how to inform international and UK students of what support services can offer beyond the initial information deluge at freshers' week or during induction
- = sharing practice within institutions and across the sector on how to improve support services and promote interaction and good relations
- = developing clearer links between staff working on equality and diversity and those engaged in the internationalisation agenda
- = clearly outlining how students can put forward a complaint or report a discriminatory incident that they have witnessed or experienced themselves
- = developing partnerships with external organisations, particularly those working with black and minority ethnic people, to enhance volunteering and employment opportunities, broaden the range of specialist support services and promote good relations
- = using data from support service evaluations to arrange consultation activities and seek feedback from international and UK students to ensure continuous improvement takes place
- = working with the students' union or association to develop a strategy for promoting good relations and mutual respect between international and UK students

Equality Challenge Unit

ECU works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in further education in Scotland.

ECU works closely with colleges and universities to seek to ensure that staff and students are not unfairly excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged because of age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, or through any combination of these characteristics or other unfair treatment.

Providing a central source of expertise, research, advice and leadership, we support institutions in building a culture that provides equality of both opportunity and outcome, promotes good relations, values the benefits of diversity and provides a model of equality for the wider UK society.



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