A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience

William Archer
Elspeth Jones
Jessica Davison

UK Higher Education International Unit
Research Series 6
March 2010

About the UK HE International Unit
The UK HE International Unit coordinates, promotes and undertakes activities to support UK universities in a globally competitive world.

The UK HE International Unit is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Department for Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland), GuildHE and Universities UK.
Contents

Foreword

1 Executive summary

5 Recommendations for universities

7 Summary table

Introduction

11 Overview

11 Aims

12 Themes

14 About i-graduate and The International Student Barometer™

14 Methodology

15 Measuring the effect of the Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education (PMI2) on the international student experience in the UK

Application and arrival

17 Application

23 Arrival

26 Immigration and visa advice

26 Welcome and pickup

27 First night

27 Academic registration

28 Formal welcome at the university

28 University orientation

28 Local orientation

29 Application and arrival: actions to consider

30 Case study

International student arrivals: Teesside University

Cultural and social integration

31 Making friends: on arrival and during the programme

34 Student advisory services

34 Counselling service

34 Sports and social activities

35 Student unions

35 Opportunity to experience UK culture

36 Cultural and social integration: actions to consider

39 Case study

Integrated orientation – a sense of belonging: University of St Andrews

40 Case study

Integration: Loughborough University

41 Case study

Volunteering as part of a holistic approach to integration at the University of Warwick
4 Accommodation and living

43 Accommodation
47 Faith-based provision
48 Health centres
48 Disability support
49 Transport links between university locations
49 Campus eating places
50 Safety
51 Accommodation and living: actions to consider
52 Case study
   Accommodation and living: Sheffield Hallam University

5 Learning infrastructure and environment

53 Libraries and learning spaces
56 Internet access and technology
58 Learning infrastructure and environment: actions to consider

6 Teaching quality and learning support

59 The English language
61 Academic induction
62 Academic feedback and assessment
64 Learning styles
65 Multicultural academic experience
66 Teaching quality and learning support: actions to consider

7 Fees, finance and funding

67 Funding
68 Finance on arrival
69 Cost of living and financial support during study
71 Fees, finance and funding: actions to consider
72 Case study
   Financial support: University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

8 Careers and employability

73 The importance of careers support
74 Work experience
75 Employability
75 Careers advisory services
76 Other careers advice
77 Careers and employability: actions to consider
78 Case study
   Careers: Robert Gordon University

Annex 1

79 Useful links
The UK HE International Unit has gained, among its core clientele at UK universities, a reputation for producing research reports that are practical and accessible. With this new guide it has also produced an explicitly student-centred piece of work. It is no bad thing to be reminded that even as higher education develops into an international business on a large scale, what students expect, and what they think of what they get, are close to the heart of the enterprise.

This guide focuses on the perceptions of international (including European) students and presents a wealth of data from the International Student Barometer™ (ISB), the flagship research tool of the International Graduate Insight Group (i-graduate). The purpose of the ISB is to help universities to manage risk through the provision of data on what drives student satisfaction. It has, in a few years, become the largest ongoing study of international students in the world. For this guide it records what they think is important, how satisfied they are with services provided, and juxtaposes these views against those of domestic UK students and an international index. It also places these data against those from a few years earlier.

UK universities are in the most difficult fiscal climate for decades and no relief appears to be imminent. When this is combined with a student visa system in a period of upheaval, there is a danger, as the guide says, that the UK could be seen as a less welcoming destination for international students. To counter this, the guide draws attention to those things that can be directly influenced by universities, and it goes on to dissect in great detail the main variables in student satisfaction. These include first impressions of the orientation process, getting a bank account, and the quality of seminar rooms, accommodation, sports facilities and student societies. Recommendations for universities are distilled from the data.

This guide is all about hard data but the i-graduate team have interpreted and presented it in a concise and readable format. The process of interpretation was assisted by a superb steering group composed of practitioners from those parts of universities represented by the data; their names are given at the back of the guide. The International Unit itself was of course involved at every step of the way and this piece of work adds another string to their bow.

I hope that all UK universities will use this guide to inform their discussions of and strategies for delivering the best possible learning experiences to international students. If they do, I have no doubt that the recent improvements in service provision shown by the data across the whole sector will only continue. The UK higher education sector shows little complacency in regard to its international activities. This guide is another means of helping to keep it that way.

Professor Steve Smith
President
Universities UK
This guide appears at a time when the total economic output of the UK higher education sector is some £59bn, the output generated directly by international (which in this guide means EU and non-EU) students is £3.26bn, the export earnings of the whole sector is £5.3bn, the number of jobs generated is about 669,000, and the number employed directly as a consequence of international students and visitors is about 30,000.¹

The new points-based immigration system, however, is perceived as setting new barriers to recruiting international students to the UK. Competitor countries are reviewing their regulations and Australia, for example, is making it easier for international students to stay in the country after graduation. The United States is engaged in a review, the aim of which is to strike a better balance between security and openness and the result of which will be a more welcoming regime for international students.

There is a danger that the UK will be seen as a destination which does not welcome students. Universities can help to counter that view by doing all they can to provide an excellent experience for their own recruits. At the same time, better facilities and services for international students can benefit domestic students, who of course also pay fees. The recent HE framework document from the UK Government will require universities to provide more information for all students as paying ‘customers’.²

Many universities already go beyond basic services and much of the information in this guide will affirm existing good practices. Universities value international students not only for their economic contribution, but also for the cultural diversity they bring and their support for the internationalisation of the curriculum. For these reasons, it is crucial that universities understand how best to work with international students and to ‘raise the game’ of UK higher education in the face of greater competition from other countries, including those outside the English-speaking world that can compete more effectively on price alone.

The good practice identified in this guide complements other sources of advice such as the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA). Equally, the PMI2-funded ITALIS project (Improving Teaching and Learning for International Students) of the Higher Education Academy will provide information in support of good assessment, learning and teaching practice for international students. i-graduate’s International Student Barometer™ offers the direct views of international students, not only in the UK but around the world, and compares them to the voices of domestic students. This gives us a guide with unique insight.

The themes which recur in this guide are the need for better communication, coordination of services, appropriate use of technology, flexibility, and managing expectations. The majority of recommendations could be applied to all students.
The main points in each chapter are as follows:

**Application and arrival**

The need for clear electronic and written communications is paramount. The evidence is that students are often disappointed that reality does not always meet expectations. Customer-relationship management and the use of automated technology will be crucial as prospective students have ever-higher expectations of online services. Engaging existing students and alumni in the arrival and welcome processes can create bonds between domestic and international students and lead to better alumni relations. Provision of meet-and-greet services out of hours, pre-arrival information that meets requirements and a 24-hour helpline are not optional extras. Effective orientation to the city or local community, and maps to match, help students to settle in.

**Cultural and social integration**

The integration of student groups, not only between international and UK but between students of different nationalities, is an issue for many universities. The messages are: begin early, ideally before arrival; involve existing students, student unions, clubs and societies, including those designed for international students; continue social integration opportunities throughout the year; promote them better. The range of needs by nationality, age, and level of study also bears further consideration.

**Accommodation and living**

Advance communication and a point of contact on arrival are key to ensuring student satisfaction with accommodation. Accurate representation of costs and facilities is essential. Careful placing of students and flexible accommodation packages clearly respond to student needs, as do good transport links and a secure environment. University food services can offer a variety of international cuisines and use them to celebrate international diversity on campus.

**Learning infrastructure and the learning environment**

While this is an area of relative satisfaction for international students, there are always enhancements to be made. Students expect instant internet access, even before arrival, and this may challenge existing practice. For libraries, speed of response in reviewing physical and online stock, in effective inter-library loans and short-loan collections, are all important. Longer opening hours seems to be a key expectation of international students which is not always met.

Many universities are investing heavily in their built environments and the responses here show just how important this is to students.
Teaching quality and learning support

Different academic cultures in different countries may be at the heart of some of the issues raised in this chapter. Again, enhancing practice for international students also leads to enhancements for domestic students, including those from non-traditional backgrounds. Better promotion of existing support, such as the Prepare for Success initiative (an interactive pre-arrival learning tool for UK-bound international students), can help universities with more limited resources. Providing early access to reading lists and setting up social networking sites are relatively easy and inexpensive responses. But it seems that however much feedback is given, students always want more. Managing expectations is therefore important.

Fees, finance and funding

This chapter offers realistic advice on what can be done in regard to perceptions of costs. It seems clear that international students value those universities which have a broader view of internationalisation and see students not only in economic terms. Scholarship schemes not only reinforce that view but are also effective promotional tools. Advance communication on banking difficulties may help to offset frustrations on arrival in the UK. Closer working relationships with local banks and the promotion of part-time job opportunities are also key.

Careers, work experience and employability

Managing expectations and better coordination of services have a role to play, whether in regard to work placement, international careers or opportunities to work in the UK after graduation. Individual courses and the careers service can offer information on employability. Alumni networks can be engaged to offer contextualised career advice.
Recommendations for universities

1. Start student mentoring schemes prior to arrival, including through online social networking sites, to facilitate early integration. Provide students with email addresses and log-in details so they feel part of the university before they arrive.

2. Communicate clearly with international students ahead of their arrival to ensure that they are aware of the procedures for opening a UK bank account. Ensure that university staff establish and maintain close relationships with local banks to facilitate this process.

3. Work with student unions to promote the benefits of volunteering to international students. This enhances employability and integration with the student body and the local community.

4. Ensure that sports provision covers the widest range of activities of interest to international students. Review any charges for sports facilities and consider either adding a one-off annual membership fee to the international tuition fee, or absorbing the charges to maximise participation. This enhances integration.

5. Ensure that there is sufficient variety in formal and informal social activities to encourage a high level of engagement from international students and reflect a spectrum of cultures. Balance alcohol and non-alcohol events.

6. Communicate explicitly the costs of accommodation and related expenses ahead of arrival, including comparing university with private accommodation to give the clearest possible picture.

7. Develop a university-wide strategy for assessment and performance feedback for both international and domestic students. Where examples of best practice already exist in faculties or departments, adopt these at university level.

8. Establish cultural awareness and intercultural communication training as a requirement for all staff.

9. Ensure that accurate and realistic messages about opportunities for part-time work, work experience and employment after studies are provided to education counsellors, agents and international students throughout the recruitment process.

10. Develop effective engagement with alumni to ensure that students are aware of career outcomes and have better access to local and international employment opportunities.
A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience

### Summary table

#### Table 1
Summary of student responses in this guide

* Students are not asked to rate importance in the Arrival section of the ISB in order to reduce survey length.

Base numbers are the maximum number of international respondents in each section of the ISB questionnaire.

International Index is calculated from a mean of scores from each university participating in the ISB in Netherlands, Australia, Singapore, USA, New Zealand and Denmark in 2008. International Index base number reflects total number of international students who responded to the ISB from all non-UK countries.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrival</th>
<th>Important to UK students*</th>
<th>Satisfaction UK students (17,182)</th>
<th>Satisfaction International Index (11,089)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arrival average</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival overall</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation office</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bank account</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>63%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance office</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First night</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formal welcome</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home friends</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host friends</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local orientation</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meeting staff</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other friends</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registration</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Study sense</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uni orientation</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welcome</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning</td>
<td>Important to UK students (46,571)</td>
<td>Satisfaction UK students (44,737)</td>
<td>Satisfaction International Index (29,177)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning average</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning overall</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academics’ English</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers advice</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employability</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language support</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning spaces</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning support</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multicultural</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performance feedback</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>94%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work experience</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>66%</td>
<td>61%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living</td>
<td>Important to UK students (42,175)</td>
<td>Satisfaction UK students (40,812)</td>
<td>Satisfaction International Index (27,791)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living average</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living overall</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation cost</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation quality</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Earning money</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial support</td>
<td>84%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good contacts</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>74%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host culture</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Host friends</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet access</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living cost</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>61%</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other friends</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety</td>
<td>95%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Similar friends</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social activities</td>
<td>77%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social facilities</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport facilities</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport links</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transport links uni</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visa advice</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Worship facilities</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Usage indicates percentage of international students who stated that they have used the support service. Only students who have used the service are asked to give a satisfaction rating.**

***Recommendation rating is the percentage of international students who said they would encourage people to apply to the university.***

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Support</th>
<th>Important to UK students**</th>
<th>Satisfaction UK students (23,011)</th>
<th>Satisfaction International Index (22,446)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support average</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support overall</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation Office</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Careers Service</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>87%</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Catering</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>76%</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clubs/societies</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselling</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith Provision</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance Office</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>81%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Halls Welfare</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Centre</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>89%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Office</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>92%</td>
<td>87%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IT Support</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student Advisory</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>90%</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students’ Union</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Important to UK students</th>
<th>Recommendation UK students (45,398)</th>
<th>Recommendation International index (25,459)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation***</td>
<td>n/a</td>
<td>81%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overview

This UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience is a project of the UK Higher Education International Unit and i-graduate. It is a practical document for universities that draws upon data from i-graduate’s bi-annual International Student Barometer™ (ISB). As such, it represents a selection of the views and opinions of international students. Through the ISB, the guide allows us to hear the voices of the most important participants in the business of international education: those of students. This guide combines the opinions gathered in the ISB with the input of practitioners in the field to offer a comprehensive study to support strategic decision-making in international education.

‘International students’ in this guide refers to both EU and non-EU students, unless specified otherwise. Most UK universities have many years of experience in enrolling and teaching international students, and most therefore have a strong tradition of offering support services. There is plenty of good practice out there, and the findings of the ISB in this guide will, it is hoped, confirm this. For universities renewing their efforts in international student markets, or focusing on how to allocate resources so as to improve the experience of their international students, this guide aims to offer practical advice.

Aims

The overall aim of this guide is to inform universities of key trends and practices in supporting international students and to advise on strategies for best practice with the ultimate aim of enhancing the experience of international students. The specific aims of the research are to inform the practice of international student recruitment and support in UK higher education around:

- **Key trends from the International Student Barometer™:**
  Where are the key areas of importance and (dis)satisfaction? What matters and what does not? What does and does not work?

- **The bigger picture:**
  Expert views of the implications of the data regarding key issues to inform best practice and policy-making on campus.

The guide offers recommendations for international offices, student support services, senior management and those elsewhere in the sector concerned with the international student experience. The guide is intended to be accessed by all levels within universities; and offers best-practice case studies from numerous UK universities to illustrate how the experience can be enhanced.
Themes

Some of the themes emerging from the guide are around how universities might most usefully:

- **Manage the expectations of international students**

  This is particularly relevant in the recruitment and arrival phases. Given that the recruitment phase is also the most competitive between education providers, it makes commercial sense for universities to devote effort to understanding and addressing issues that might interfere with efficient and effective recruitment and admission processes.

  In a recession, affordability is even more important to students and their families. Given the investment international students make, expectations around career outcomes should be afforded particular attention. The connection between both the services that universities provide and the relevance of the academic programme to a student’s chosen career path is highlighted in responses to the ISB. It suggests that while UK universities are performing well against the international index, there is more to do.

  The impact of the recession on international students’ personal budgets is explored in Chapter 4 of this guide. The chapter suggests ways that universities can respond to these issues: provision of hardship funds, fee discounts and scholarships, for example. These also serve to demonstrate the university’s commitment to students and internationalisation goals.

- **Ensure the integration of services that affect the international student experience**

  The delivery of appropriate and timely services to international students is, of course, critical to student satisfaction. A key message is that successful universities are not necessarily those that are best-resourced (though adequate resourcing of international activity is essential); they are those which have a coherent and integrated service for international students. Universities can choose to provide services in a number of ways, but it is most useful for there to be a central point within the university, whether a group, committee or office, that has overall responsibility for the international aspects of the university’s mission.
Focus on those areas that have the strongest impact on the international student experience

The recession not only has an impact on the ability of international students to afford higher education; it has a big impact on university budgets too. In difficult economic times, it makes sense to focus strategic attention on improving those areas that matter most to students. In the ISB study, international students indicate which aspects of learning and living matter most to them. Overall, the learning experience is the key driver for international students to recommend the university to other students. UK universities typically differentiate themselves from the global competition by the quality of the academic experience, and expectations in this dimension will therefore be high. The provision of quality learning spaces, technology, internet access and online infrastructure to support the learning experience must all be priority issues for universities. UK universities generally outperform the international competition in those aspects of the experience that concern relationships with academic staff. This is an extremely positive finding, given the importance that students – and particularly international postgraduates – attach to the academic experience.

Communicate clearly

The ISB indicates that international students are more likely to have a positive impression of universities if they receive accurate and timely communications that focus their expectations. Signposting of services available to international students is as important as it is for domestic students. The ISB shows that take-up of some services could be higher.

Provide ‘customised’ services appropriate to different student groups

While it is useful to identify international students as a discrete group with reasonable expectations that universities will provide services relevant to their needs, we should understand that there are differences in the expectations, circumstances and experiences within that group. The guide identifies some issues that resonate for particular groups – by nationality or level of study for example. While it is unhelpful to categorise all students from one country as having identical needs in the delivery of course material, universities would be well advised to understand the education systems and cultures of the countries and regions from which their students come. This may help the university identify potential problem areas and anticipate support which may be required.

The notion of ‘customised’ services helps us to appreciate that international students have a great variety of interests, intentions and goals, from integrating with local and British cultures, to succeeding academically, to gaining valuable career experience. Student satisfaction with these aspects relates to a wide range of aspirations, and the ISB illustrates the important role universities play in facilitating awareness of the variety of opportunities on offer as part of the international student experience in the UK.
About i-graduate and the International Student Barometer™

i-graduate is an independent benchmarking and research service that delivers comparative insights for the education sector worldwide. i-graduate’s consultants and advisors are experienced professionals in international education, recruitment and market research.

i-graduate’s flagship research service, the International Student Barometer™ (ISB), is the largest annual study of international students in the world. The ISB is an independent and confidential feedback process for education providers. It tracks the decision-making, perceptions, expectations and experiences of international students. Data from the ISB are used throughout the sector to target resources and investment in order to improve services, teaching and support for international students.

Since the conception of the ISB in 2005, i-graduate has gathered feedback from more than 500,000 students in 16 countries through a standardised questionnaire that captures key information and allows for national and international benchmarks. To date, 267 institutions worldwide have engaged the ISB. It has run in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and continental Europe; here in the UK, 104 universities have used the ISB process to track and benchmark the experience of international students.

The ISB has been continually refined through 12 cycles of the process and is considered the industry standard for tracking the international student experience.

Methodology

‘International students’ in this guide refers to both EU and non-EU students, unless specified otherwise.

This guide interprets longitudinal data collected through the ISB at UK universities on a range of issues that impact on the international student experience. The majority of universities engaged with the ISB collect feedback from their entire non-UK cohort. ISB data used in this guide were collected in autumn 2008 and based on feedback from 56,828 international students then studying at 66 UK universities. Twenty-four UK universities also ran the Student Barometer (SB), i-graduate’s parallel study of UK domestic students, in autumn 2008. Where comparisons with UK domestic students are made, the base is 32,380. Each chapter includes aggregated top-line ISB data from international students and breakdowns by demographic criteria when appropriate and when differences are marked.

The guide contains numerous comparisons of the UK ISB aggregate data against an International Index. This is a mean of the mean scores from the Autumn Wave ISB from universities in Australia, New Zealand, Singapore, USA, Denmark, and the Netherlands.
Measuring the effect of the Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education (PMI2) on the international student experience in the UK

The ISB measures satisfaction year on year and has been adopted, as part of PMI2, by the UK government as the official measure of the international student experience. Across the first three years of PMI2 (2006–09), ISB data show measurable improvements in the international student experience across 20 of 21 measures.

The strongest satisfaction increases were seen in the following areas:

- careers service (satisfaction rate increased from 78% to 85%)
- visa advice (74% to 83%)
- language support (77% to 85%)
- employability (71% to 79%)
- counselling (81% to 87%)

The only variable that exhibited a decline in satisfaction from 2006 to 2009 was the opportunity to earn money (from 60% to 57%) which may reflect the global recession that started in 2008.
International students and their parents invest much time and money in selecting universities. This chapter looks at the critical first impressions international students have of the universities they apply to, from the service they receive during the application process to the arrival phase at university. Particular focus is given to the welcome and orientation international students receive at universities in the UK. Attention is drawn to the factors that make this experience as positive and effective as possible.

2.1 Application

International students are increasingly sophisticated both in the methods they use to short-list prospective universities, particularly through the networks they consult, and the ways in which they consider offers of admission. As with other commercial sectors, the speed and effectiveness with which enquiries are handled is a growing factor in the decision-making process of international students. Similarly, the responsiveness with which universities process applications is important in securing registrations. Fast response times to both enquiries and applications help to ensure that students feel positively towards the university and are less likely to seek alternatives.

2.1.1 Contact response time

The average time it takes for a university to reply to a student’s initial enquiry is three weeks, comparable to the time taken to respond to domestic students. The 85% satisfaction rate for this suggests that a three-week wait for a response to an initial contact is acceptable. Twenty seven per cent are very satisfied. Interestingly, however, the satisfaction levels are lower among international students when compared with their domestic counterparts.

Figure 1

Contact response time
Estimated number of days from student making initial enquiry to getting a response from the university.

- SB (n = 11,480)
- ISB (19,901)
Response time is slower for international students applying to undergraduate programmes (25 days) than postgraduate programmes, although this is also true of domestic students.

The greater the proportion of international students at a university, the longer is the time to respond to initial contact. Where international students constitute a quarter or more of the population, the time is 26 days. In a competitive international market, this may be a most critical issue for universities that attract a large number of enquiries, as there is a danger of losing students to more efficient competitors. Traditional ways of replying, perhaps using international office or admissions staff, may not be as efficient and service-orientated as technologies such as customer relationship management software. With an increasing number of enquiries, the need to respond in a timely and accurate manner may prompt universities to consider commercial solutions to manage this process more effectively, such as those offered by Hobsons, QS Top Apply and others.

Using new technologies in enquiry management has significant resource implications for universities, both in terms of budget required to purchase a commercial software system or develop an in-house equivalent, and the time required to train staff to use it. Where a large number of enquiries are received, consideration could be given to semi-automated processes. Irrespective of whether a university is able to utilise technology in this area, minimum levels of service should be introduced to ensure that all enquiries are responded to in a fixed period of time and the details of enquirers captured for future marketing.
Effective communication can help manage expectations throughout the enquiry phase. Universities should publish and maintain accurate entry requirements and guidance in target markets, and these might ideally include average response times. These help to filter out superfluous enquiries. Universities could additionally review their websites from a student perspective, focusing on the ease of navigation and content in areas such as admission requirements, application guidelines, programme content, and financial aid and scholarships.

In the initial enquiry phase, the provision of appropriate information for prospective students is crucial and, although much of this will be obtained from marketing literature complemented perhaps by a direct request for further information, there is rarely a substitute for first-hand experience offered by a peer. Universities could try, therefore, to utilise current and former students wherever possible in providing tailored information for particular constituencies. A range of successful UK universities already employ existing students to respond to enquiries and publish student views on their websites. Such an approach bridges the gap between the university and the individual in a personal and meaningful way, reassuring them that the university they are considering is focused on them as an individual student. Furthermore, the use of new technologies such as peer-to-peer social media network groups and student blogs can add great value to the information-gathering experience of the prospective student, often anticipating questions a student would ordinarily direct towards the university.

Universities should aim to take a proactive approach to enquiry management, with an emphasis on establishing regular communications with prospective international students, through newsletters, automated emails, current student activities or alumni-led initiatives. With online and other technology-related developments already impacting on the higher education sector, consideration may be given to how such developments can improve the way in which individual universities react and manage the enquiry process. A greater integration of recruitment and communication strategies will, in most cases, reduce the need to react to peak levels of enquiry, and ensure that prospective students are not waiting for information at critical points during the enquiry and application process.
2.1.2 Offer response time

The time it takes to make a decision on a completed application and issue an offer of admission to an international student is perhaps even more critical than the service provided to a student in the enquiry phase. By submitting applications, prospective international students demonstrate that they consider those universities to be viable choices and that their applications will be considered in an efficient and serious manner. By establishing such a relationship, every prospective student demonstrates a level of expectation that a university must meet and often exceed.

The length of time it takes a university to respond to a completed application can vary substantially, although a slower response time does not automatically impact negatively on a student’s perception of the university. The critical issue here is how expectations around the timing and efficiency of the application process are managed. Clear communication of procedures and timings can take the edge off lengthy application and response processes. International students reserve most criticism for those universities that appear disorganised during the application process or fail to communicate where application material is in the admissions process at any given time.

The average time it takes for universities to offer international students places is 45 days and comparable with the response time for domestic students (48 days). Student satisfaction with the time taken from application to offer of admission is reasonable, at 76% (22% very satisfied), although in the increasingly competitive environment in which students apply to universities in different countries, UK universities could invest more in response times to ensure service levels remain world-class.
The extent to which processing times vary by university, type of student and other factors is worthy of discussion. There is a suspicion that in the application process and decision phase, UK universities are at risk of losing well-qualified students to more efficient international competitors. For example, many UK universities operate either a permanent office or a representative operation in India or Pakistan. The effect of this on the processing of applications is notable: students from the Indian sub-continent receive offers more quickly than students from other parts of the world (India 32 days, Pakistan 35 days). In addition, there is anecdotal evidence that some universities respond to completed applications within 24 hours. At the other extreme, students from Australia and New Zealand wait the longest (62 days on average), which in part reflects a preference for applying to large universities, most of which take longer to process international applications.

Satisfaction with the application process is higher for domestic students (84%), despite the fact they have to wait slightly longer on average for admission offers. Students from Asia appear least satisfied with the time taken: only 70% of Malaysian and 72% of Chinese students claim satisfaction with the offer process.

International and domestic postgraduate taught students also benefit from quicker offers than their research equivalents and undergraduates; they average 40 days, which is five days less than the overall international student figure. This may reflect university practice being more focused on taught postgraduates and the fact that making offers to postgraduate research students requires more academic input and the assignment of a research supervisor. Interestingly, however, these variations seem to have little impact on satisfaction with this part of the process.

Figure 4
Satisfaction with offer response time

- SB (12,847)
- ISB (21,493)
The proportion of international students within the overall student body has a clear impact on offer response time. At universities in which this is one in ten or fewer, offers reach applicants in five weeks on average (34 days). However, when a quarter or more of the student population is international, offers can take almost twice as long to arrive (59 days). A similar impact on domestic students (33 and 64 days respectively) can also be seen. Unsurprisingly, students at universities with smaller proportions of international students are more satisfied with offer times. Four-fifths of international students where one in ten or fewer are from overseas are satisfied, and a quarter are very satisfied. This drops to 72% and 19% respectively at universities where a quarter or more of the population is international. Those very universities that most depend on international students therefore serve them least well in processing applications and issuing offers.

Such differences in processing times may well be the combined result of a large number of applications and a rigorous, time-consuming academic assessment procedure for international students. However, in a competitive global market, existing practice does need to be reviewed and monitored. Response times may be reduced through a greater use of administrative staff to screen applications, so that only those with a realistic chance of meeting requirements are passed to academic departments. Irrespective of the approach adopted by individual universities, the need to establish agreed service levels between central administrative units and academic colleagues is essential in ensuring that the processing of applications is completed in an optimum timeframe.

### 2.1.3 Application method

There are four main application methods used by international students applying to UK universities: directly online (used by 28% of students), via UCAS/UKPASS (28%), directly using a paper application form (20%), and through the services of an education agent (13%).

Although in Europe the UCAS/UKPASS route is prominent, almost half (47%) of recruitment from India is through local agents. University representatives are also important in that market, as they account for a further 14%. Agents also have a significant role to play in China (25% of recruitment) and Pakistan (14%), which drives home the point that in some markets universities cannot simply rely on direct relationships with prospective students to generate applications.

Because there is no mandatory national application system, both international and domestic postgraduate students are much more likely to apply directly to universities. However, among international taught postgraduates, the use of agents continues to be a relatively important channel to facilitate applications (22%).
Direct applications to smaller universities are more likely to be submitted on paper (28%) rather than online (17%), which simply reflects a lack of online application systems in many smaller universities. For some applicants, this could well be a deterrent to applying. It is certainly clear that the greater the proportion of international students, the more likely a direct online application is submitted. Conversely, those universities with a smaller proportion of international students are relatively more likely to make greater use of education agents to recruit and facilitate the application process.

Arrival

The arrival experience is a critical point in the relationship between international students and universities. Arrival can mean many things: pre-departure information, arrival at the airport, induction and orientation into university life. The importance of each stage will vary according to individual experience and circumstances. What remains true for nearly all, however, is that they are entering an unfamiliar environment in an emotionally charged state where simple things such as a friendly face can make a world of difference in how the initial experience is perceived.

2.2.1 Overall satisfaction with arrival

More than four in five (85%) of international students have a favourable view of the arrival experience, although only one in ten are very satisfied. Nonetheless, this compares favourably with the international index of satisfaction (82%) and indeed is better than achieved by all major competitor countries. Domestic students are even more satisfied overall (90%) than their international counterparts, and they are much more likely to be very satisfied (28%) with the arrival experience. This suggests that opportunities exist for universities to improve service levels for international students in this regard.
Satisfaction with the arrival experience varies little across international student communities. The minor differences relate mainly to nationality, which may perhaps reflect cultural expectations. International students on short courses have a less satisfactory arrival experience than those on longer courses (81% versus 86% satisfied). The situation is the same for domestic students, however, which perhaps indicates that the integration of short-course students into mainstream events needs assessment and action.

There are a number of ways in which the overall arrival experience can be improved for international students. The positive satisfaction rate indicates that in most universities the activities and structures supporting arrival practice works well. Where dissatisfaction exists, however, it tends to come from those who fall outside the normal parameters. For example, some students unavoidably arrive late, by either hours, days or weeks. Those who arrive late at night may lack transport and access to accommodation. A number of UK universities supply welcome packs containing essential food and other items unavailable to students outside of working hours. Such a simple service is appreciated by students and can make all the difference to their experience of their university in their first few hours. A 24-hour hotline is another possible solution in such cases, although significant cost may be involved.

Indeed a one-stop shop solution, in which key services are offered from a single point, is preferable for new arrivals. The following comment is typical of many who arrive outside of normal hours:

*My friend and I arrived at midnight and we appreciated that two students picked us up at the airport, but after we arrived on campus, there were no arrangements for where we would stay for the first night. We had to live in emergency room.*

*Undergraduate from China*
Those whose arrival is delayed for a longer period, because of a visa problem, for example, may miss the entire welcome and induction process. One solution is to offer a ‘Re-Freshers Fair’ several weeks later. An additional benefit is that students are less busy and more likely to participate.

Students can also arrive early – in the day, or days or weeks before the start of semester. The latter tend to be postgraduate students with families who hope to settle before studies begin. These students can often feel particularly unsupported in a system that appears geared towards young, single undergraduates. While they may, in some cases, have unrealistic expectations (for example, early access to accommodation), the more effectively these expectations are managed, through timely communication and information provision, the better the arrival experience.

I arrived earlier as I wanted to organise things in advance, but unfortunately I found out that the university could not process my registration in advance. Nobody let me know that these procedures could not be implemented beforehand, so I had to wait more than a month.

**Taught postgraduate from Bulgaria**

Other ways in which universities can facilitate the arrivals process are online pre-departure briefings and virtual campus tours for incoming students or posting DVDs with pre-departure information (as is done by the graduate school at Loughborough University).

UK universities now commonly use Facebook and other social networking sites to create a sense of community and share information. Input to this from current students and recent alumni could also be useful. Podcasts to describe the route to campus or other travel information constitute another possible approach.

In sum, universities can provide pre-departure information through a number of channels, though to rely purely on the internet could disadvantage those without regular access to it.

**I would have liked more information provided between acceptance and arrival, including immigration rules, contacts for other students, course requirements, textbooks required, etc.**

**Taught postgraduate from India**

It is, however, impractical to plan for every eventuality. A mentoring or buddy system using existing students from either the same nationality or the same degree programme could help to alleviate the pressure of diverse cultural expectations in the arrival phase and beyond. Engaging UK students in such buddying would help to contribute to integration efforts and an understanding of what international students bring to campus. It could also have benefits in marketing and recruitment activities. Online buddyng is yet another approach that can begin even before arrival, although it should not be used at the expense of face-to-face contact.
2.3 Immigration and visa advice

The ability of UK universities to provide good advice and service to students in this area is a function of resources. To keep up to date with ongoing changes in visa and immigration systems, universities have had to work hard to have the right staffing and information systems in place. Organisations such as UKCISA also provide information and support to students and their families; Universities UK does the same for member universities.

Immigration and visa advice is a key service to international students and one which the UK currently performs better than others. The provision of accurate and appropriate advice is rated important by 83% of non-EU international students. Satisfaction rates for this service are also high, at 85%, and vary little by nationality. UK universities in fact excel here, and outperform the international index in satisfaction by 7%.

2.4 Welcome and pickup

The satisfaction rate for the welcome and pickup experience is reasonable, at 73% (30% are very satisfied), although an increasing number of universities are directing additional resources to it. The international index for the welcome is 71% but a number of countries achieve 80% satisfaction. Of ten key nationalities, students from China (70%) and Pakistan (68%) are least satisfied with their welcome. The need to improve this aspect of service provision is also heightened by the significantly higher satisfaction level of 87% among domestic students.

International postgraduate students are marginally less satisfied with the welcome than their undergraduate counterparts. However, this pattern is more pronounced among domestic students. There is also evidence that students at universities with the highest proportion of international students are less satisfied with the welcome they receive. One wonders whether this indicates complacency in attitudes.

Only 65% of international and domestic students attending universities in London are satisfied with their welcome. This may reflect the more daunting initial difficulties that London presents.

There are actions that universities can take to improve satisfaction. The Meet and Greet phase is critical and forms an important component in creating the right impression. Universities should collect information about student arrival times to ensure there is someone available to greet them, including for those arriving outside of normal working hours, who may be more vulnerable and in need of assistance. Some universities operate a booking system for airport pick-ups, while others operate a flexible, rolling system. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages but, irrespective of the method, it is essential that students know how to access such a service. Universities should examine their practices from a student perspective.
Out of hours support applies not only to the pickup, but to accommodation.

*We were told that there would be student ambassadors to help us when we arrived. But there was no one in sight. With loads of luggage and severely jetlagged, it was a depressing experience.*

**Taught postgraduate from India**

Solutions to improving the welcome can be bold. Some airports positively encourage university representatives at welcome desks. A good strategy might also include clearly recognisable student volunteers (domestic and international) in this. In some cases payments are made for this service but experience suggests that international students in particular are pleased to participate without payment. Involving international students in this way can also give a sense that they are making a contribution to the university.

*It would have been nice if the welcome team at the airport was actually waiting for us instead of wandering around. When I went to the terminal there was nobody there! After some time a girl with a yellow t-shirt showed up but she was just standing there and looking around. It would have been better if she had a sign.*

**Undergraduate from Bulgaria**

The cost of airport or other transfers can cause dissatisfaction among international students and so it is important to ensure that where charges apply they are made clear in advance.

2.5 First night

International students are largely satisfied (81%) with being able to get to their accommodation on their first night. The UK scores above the international index (75%) for this and is outperformed by only one other country (New Zealand, 84%). However, domestic students are more often satisfied (94%) and often very satisfied (36%). Satisfaction is comparable across key student groups, although there is a slight tendency for Chinese students to be less positive about this element of the arrivals process.

*Maybe tell students prior to arrival that basic necessities like duvets, pillows, etc will not be provided by the college. This is not helpful to those arriving after 9pm.*

**Research postgraduate from China**

2.6 Academic registration

International students are generally satisfied (86%) with the academic registration process in the UK. This is comparable to the domestic level (88%), which suggests the two groups have similar expectations. Satisfaction is high among most student groups. However, only three-quarters of US students are satisfied, which may reflect their previous experiences of an efficient, online system in the USA. Finally, 78% of international students on short courses are satisfied with the registration process.
2.7 Formal welcome at the university

The formal welcome offered to international students by universities gets a positive rating (86% satisfied). The international index is 84%. Some nationalities may have higher expectations and rate the welcome slightly lower, including Pakistan (82%) and the USA (81%). While 81% of Malaysians are satisfied, only 14% are very satisfied, compared to an average of 25%. Variables beyond nationality do not appear to impact on satisfaction with the formal welcome, so ratings may be driven by cultural expectations and different understandings of what constitutes a formal welcome. One of the big areas of concern for universities to consider is the role of senior staff in the formal welcome. Many international students expect to be welcomed and have the opportunity to meet the Principal or the Vice-Chancellor, in addition to senior academic and other administrative staff.

2.8 University orientation

A healthy majority (86%) of both international and domestic students are satisfied with the university orientation they receive. Indian and Nigerian students appear particularly pleased: in each case 35% are very satisfied. As with other aspects of the arrival process, there are indications that international students on short courses are less well served, since 82% are satisfied compared with 86% of those on longer courses.

Even so, new students can be easily confused, particularly if they are not familiar with large universities and are unclear as to what is expected of them. This is certainly exacerbated if there are several university locations or campuses. The provision of understandable maps and clear signage can be critical. If staff have been at a university for a long time it can be easy to forget how difficult it can be to find one’s way around. Consulting recently arrived students may help locate navigation black spots and allow better information for subsequent cohorts.

Orientation also offers a great opportunity to foster integration from the outset, by combining programmes for both domestic and international students and ensuring that all students start at the same time. Conversely, providing customised orientation processes for different groups of international students may promote segregation inadvertently.

2.9 Local orientation

Satisfaction with local orientation is also high (84%) among international and domestic students in the UK. But where appropriate, a city-wide welcome in conjunction with other universities could improve the experience further. At the very least, universities could consider a joint civic event, ideally involving a mayor and other personalities. Raising perceptions of the university in this manner can help reassure international students at an early stage that they have made the right decision.

Here too one can consider making use of alumni by asking if they would be interested in showing new international students around the city (or university) and acting as informal ambassadors for the university. This has the additional benefit of bringing alumni into contact with the university more generally.
You should have more excursions for international students or students new to the university in the first few weeks of them arriving.

Taught postgraduate from Cyprus

Just as maps and signage are important on campus, so they are in the wider community. All major routes should signpost the university. Maps and signage re-affirm the brand and show that there is pride in the university, which thereby helps to reinforce the decision (and financial investment) a student has made. Where a university is a major local employer, it is natural that it should have a highly visible presence. An increasing number of universities work together with their local council to ensure they are prominently featured as integral to the life of the local community.

Application and arrival: actions to consider

- Publish and maintain transparent and consistent entry requirements for all students and ensure that application procedures and deadlines are communicated clearly.

- Establish appropriate guidelines for processing enquiries and applications and utilise customer relationship management software or techniques to ensure deadlines are met.

- Pre-screen applications through a central admissions process or an international office so that only those with appropriate qualifications are referred to academic selectors.

- Utilise new technology so that incoming international students are offered online pre-departure opportunities, such as access to Facebook groups, YouTube or podcasting.

- Ensure that airport and other arrival point pick-ups are sufficiently resourced such that students who arrive out of hours are supported.

- Recruit domestic and international students as volunteers for orientation activities and encourage them to continue as mentors throughout the year. Engaging UK students with international experience can be particularly effective.

- Combine orientation programmes for domestic and international students; ensure that international and domestic students start at the same time in order to maximise opportunities for integration.

- Consider sharing orientation activities with other universities or the wider local community. Civic receptions reinforce a university’s value and facilitate the integration of international students into UK life.

- Ask alumni to show new international students around the university and the local area.

- Ensure that all signs and maps relating to the university and the local area are accessible and clear so that students are able to navigate and become familiar with their surroundings quickly.
International student arrivals: Teesside University

Teesside University provides a personal service and offers to collect new international students from either Durham Tees Valley or Newcastle airports. This service runs 24 hours a day all year round. New international students are encouraged to arrive in time to attend an orientation event the weekend before enrolment which provides them with information on Teesside and studying and living in the UK.

Students book the free Meet and Greet service in advance. The university confirms the arrangements and reassures them that a representative of Teesside will meet them on arrival. At the airport students are met and taken to their transport. If students have to wait until another flight comes in, soft drinks and snacks are provided.

Students are brought to the campus using a combination of a coach shuttle service and cars, depending on the date, time and location of their arrival. University staff accompany the students and are briefed to answer questions they may have on what will happen in the first few days.

In addition to making this service as individual and as personal as possible, a key element to the success of the Meet and Greet service is liaison with the university’s accommodation service. This ensures that staff know exactly where students need to go on arrival. If students have booked their own accommodation the university will accompany them into their accommodation to ensure that everything is fine.

About two weeks after they arrive and have settled in, students at Teesside are formally welcomed to the university by the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Graham Henderson, and to Middlesbrough by the town’s Mayor, Ray Mallon. This is at an international student reception which includes a quiz, raffle, live music and, most importantly, free food.
This chapter addresses the integration of international students on campuses. The issue that universities face is how best to offer ways of integrating their international student populations with domestic student bodies and, more broadly, with local communities. Most international students want to experience UK cultures, and in many instances this forms part of the decision process when choosing where to study. A degree of integration with the host population can facilitate this immensely and is a way of developing language and other skills.

There is also the issue of integration between different nationalities within the international cohort. The recent trend is for increasing recruitment from a few countries. Such concentrations of students can hamper integration and make the process of internationalisation in the UK more difficult. Of course, integration is as much about the disposition of UK students and work needs to be done to ensure that integration remains a two-way process.

Although the arrival process is one of the key points at which to address the issue of integration, it must be considered an ongoing process. The differing needs of undergraduates, taught postgraduates and research postgraduates adds further complexity, as they can give rise to segregation as easily as integration. In addition, funding assigned to integration activities tends to be modest in comparison to marketing and recruitment initiatives. Although some methods to facilitate cultural integration do demand substantial capital outlay (for example, investment in sports or social facilities), much can be achieved through well-planned, simple and less costly solutions.

### 3.1 Making friends: on arrival and during the programme

Nine in ten international students in the UK say that meeting UK students is an important part of university life. A good indicator of, and aid to, integration is how easily new international students are able to meet and mingle with students from the UK and elsewhere. Three-quarters of international students in the UK express satisfaction with the experience of meeting UK students on arrival. Unsurprisingly, students in a strange environment also seek others from their own countries. Although this is rated important by only 59% overall, students from countries that are further away from the UK, both geographically and culturally, are much more likely to rate meeting friends from home as important (80% of students from China, India, Pakistan, Nigeria and Malaysia do so).

There is also evidence that meeting compatriots is less important when studying at universities with a large proportion of international students. This may indicate that such universities are, through necessity, better equipped and organised for the integration of international students, or that the greater number of international students creates a less intimidating environment.
A holistic approach to integration will also consider the role of language courses and study skills training. Such courses can offer an effective way of developing the confidence and skills for international students to make friends with a wide range of students. In addition, the organisation of social programmes around these courses can greatly enhance opportunities for international students to socialise beyond their national groups.

While contact with compatriots is certainly of benefit to students unsure of their new environments, universities are aware that this can also give rise to large cohorts based on nationality, which when reinforced by accommodation allocation and choice of course, can inhibit integration. Placing international cohorts, even if inadvertently, in accommodation silos can create a vicious circle whereby the lack of opportunity to use English makes it more difficult to socialise with domestic students outside of this context. With increasing numbers of students from a small number of countries, the need to intervene in the allocation of accommodation places to ensure diversity in halls and other accommodations may be more important in the coming years.

We five Chinese students were arranged to live in the same flat. It’s now a perfect ‘China Town’ which does no good for improving our English or socialising with international students.

Research postgraduate from China

Only two-thirds of Chinese students are satisfied with the level of integration with UK students on arrival. But anecdotal evidence suggests that Chinese students are very likely to form large cohorts that inhibit integration. There is also some evidence that taught postgraduate students and those on shorter programmes are less satisfied with the extent to which they mix. In both cases this may be because each more commonly arrives outside normal arrival times, as discussed in Chapter 2.
British students are too few in the business school, so I have few chances to communicate and understand the local culture and lifestyle!
Taught postgraduate from China

Although three-quarters of international students are satisfied with how they meet UK students on arrival, ISB data confirm that in this critical phase the expectations of international students are most likely not to be met. For international students to settle into new surroundings most effectively, arrival-phase activities should be well-organised.

Strategies to facilitate integration on arrival can be various and enhanced via mentoring schemes, ideally initiated before arrival. A number of universities utilise tools such as Facebook, MSN Messenger, MySpace or their regional equivalents to put prospective students in contact with current UK and other international students. This creates an open and welcoming environment for new international students.

While integration with UK students is most critical in the initial stages, it remains an issue throughout programmes of study and therefore requires ongoing university intervention. The difference between successful and unsuccessful integration on arrival is easily illustrated:

Prior to arrival, I had high anxiety about the transition to university life in another country. The airport Meet and Greet session really helped me to calm down. I immediately started feeling at home when I talked to students in the airport welcome team. They were nice and friendly.
Taught postgraduate from Nigeria

Some of the people here were friendly and they approached the international students but sad to say that the British students were quite unfriendly.
Undergraduate from Malaysia

Many universities successfully integrate international students into the wider university community through the activities of international offices, international student advisors, student unions, chaplaincies, community associations such as Rotary, and local faith or cultural groups. A varied social programme can bring students from all backgrounds, faiths and interests together throughout the academic year.

Satisfaction with meeting UK students remains at a similar level (73%) throughout the year and remains lower with Chinese students (62%). Despite the performance of UK universities having improved from an overall 69% satisfaction rate in 2007, this is likely to remain an issue for universities in the years to come.

In regard to meeting host friends on arrival, the UK is ahead of the international index (75% versus 65% satisfied) but lower than the best (USA, 78%). Similar numbers pertain throughout the duration of the study period.

Although international students say that meeting students from other countries is as important as meeting students from the UK, they are more satisfied with the former, during both the arrivals process (87%) and later (85%). This serves to emphasise that UK universities are less able to meet expectations for integrating with domestic students. Chinese students are again the least satisfied with the extent to which they integrate with any other nationality.
Student advisory services

Student advisory services are organised differently in different universities and it is not surprising that reported usage levels vary. Average usage levels are low among international students, at only 27%. But satisfaction with such services is high (90%). This is higher than the international index (86%) and it also represents a significant improvement over the 2007 level of 79%.

Thirty five per cent of international students know where their student advisory service is but have not used it. A further third, however, do not know where to find it. Perhaps the location and scope of student advisory services may need to be better communicated.

Counselling service

Only about one in ten international students access counselling services but those that do are almost universally positive about the experience. Nine in ten are satisfied with the counselling they receive, which compares well with the views of domestic students (86% satisfied). It also compares favourably with the international index (83%) and represents a significant improvement since 2007 (78%).

For a variety of reasons, some students do not declare problems and seek support from peers rather than professionals. Academic and other staff can help signpost to services like counselling to ensure that students know how to access them.

Sports and social activities

Sports and social activities, and the facilities that underpin them, are important for many international students. They can also serve to facilitate integration. While all students will seek ways to socialise, not all will necessarily want to participate in sport and for international students this is particularly true. Evidence exists to suggest that many international undergraduate students are more eager to use university sports and social facilities than, for example, international Research Postgraduate students. However, overall, international students tend to attach more importance to sports facilities (73%) than their domestic peers (59%).
Satisfaction with sports facilities is higher among students from the European Union (83%) and lower among US and Pakistani students (73%). There is some evidence that students at smaller universities are less satisfied – perhaps due to a more limited range of facilities. Satisfaction is slightly higher among domestic students (86%), even though they attach less importance to them. The provision of UK sports facilities at universities stacks up well against the international index (76%) but does not quite match the best in class (USA, 84%).

Common criticisms focus on the quality and breadth of provision, although the most frequent complaint is cost. Indeed, it is not uncommon for international students to expect to use university sports facilities for free – an expectation perhaps consistent with the higher fees they pay. Although providing free sports facilities may be impossible, it may be possible to manage this more successfully by either making the costs explicit in marketing material or by adding a modest additional amount onto the tuition fee so that provision for all students can be offered free at point of use.

It is essential that students see that sports facilities are open to all and a good place to mix with other students. Sports more popular elsewhere, such as basketball and table tennis, can provide excellent opportunities for students to mix casually with a range of their peers.

Social facilities are generally important to more (82%) international students than sports facilities, and the same proportion express satisfaction with them. All undergraduates attach more importance to social facilities than those studying at a higher level.

Overall satisfaction is the highest in the international index, which averages 77%. Students from the European Union are marginally more satisfied and students from Pakistan are the least.

Organised events are slightly less important to both international (78%) and domestic (71%) students than social facilities. Like facilities, social activities are more valued by Asians and of least importance to Americans. Organised events are notably more important to both undergraduate and taught postgraduate international students (79% of each) than research postgraduates (67%). Interestingly, among domestic students, only undergraduates place significant value on organised events. Their greater importance for international taught postgraduates may indicate the role of such activities in integration.

The training offered by UKCISA for university and student union staff is an excellent way of developing new approaches for social programmes and events.
Satisfaction with social activities is generally high (80%) among both international and domestic students. This matches the best in class internationally and is ahead of the international index (74%). Students from Pakistan are again least satisfied (74%), which reflects an unsuitability of many events for Muslims. The need to be more open and creative in developing social activities that cater for all faiths and cultures continues to be critical to improving the overall student experience. Despite different expectations, undergraduates and postgraduates are generally equally satisfied with organised events. Universities should consider the extent to which events and activities are geared towards undergraduates. Postgraduates are more likely to be in the UK with partners or families and are likely to seek different activities.

Organised activities often revolve around university clubs and societies. Fewer than half (44%) of international students in the UK use them, although usage is not much higher among domestic students (51%). Of the other international students, most are aware of clubs and societies on campus but tend not to use them. It is apparent that many Asian and Muslim students do not wish to participate in activities that involve alcohol. Hence, they participate less in clubs and societies.

As a Muslim, the drinking culture and the lack of prayer facilities prevent me from participating in many of the social activities as well as some academic activities.

Research postgraduate from Malaysia

Universities could review the provision and purpose of clubs and societies on a regular basis and could involve international students in the process.

Just over half of both international and domestic undergraduates are members of university clubs or societies. Taught postgraduates are least likely to use them, which likely reflects the shorter and intense study programme of most masters programmes. This, however, reinforces the importance of engaging with this cohort so that they feel their UK study experience is as rounded and fulfilling as possible.
Universities that have a larger proportion of international students have a greater proportion joining university clubs and societies (55% at universities with 25% or more international students; 37% at those with 10% or fewer). Absolute student numbers, however, do not have this effect. Presumably, this simply indicates a wider range of societies at the more diverse universities. Among international students who do belong to university clubs and societies, there is almost uniform satisfaction (93%) with them. This should only serve to encourage UK universities to promote clubs and societies more effectively among the international cohort. Those that do so successfully have a good chance of standing out from the crowd.

3.5 Student unions

Active and inclusive student unions are focal points of university life. ISB data show that student unions have a greater impact on domestic students but the difference in usage between international and domestic students is not as significant as anticipated (50% versus 57%). However, such data do not reflect the frequency of usage, which may be higher among domestic students. Students from the European Union are slightly more likely to use student unions than those from outside the EU (53% versus 48%). Significant differences in use, however, exist by study level: not surprisingly, undergraduates are the most likely users (56%, compared to 39% of postgraduate research students, for example). This pattern is mirrored among domestic students.

Further consideration is required on how to involve international postgraduate students with student unions and the social life of universities more generally. When postgraduates are less likely to engage with the union, a greater need to review events and activities for different age groups is important.

3.6 Opportunity to experience UK culture

The opportunity to experience the cultures of the host country can be a powerful driver of choice among many international students. The UK is no exception: nine in ten include this in their reasons. While this view is even more prevalent among those from outside the EU, it is nonetheless important for nearly all students, irrespective of cultural or national background.

*It would be nice if my college organised more activities that are less focused on alcohol and more on other aspects of living in [this city] and in England. For example, occasional trips to nearby places of interest, activities that cater to older students, etc.*

Research postgraduate from Israel

Four-fifths of international students are satisfied with the opportunities they have to experience and explore the UK, which is comparable with the international index, and only a little behind the best in class (Singapore, 83%). This is a significant asset to universities that actively recruit international students and reflects the mix of strategies they employ.
Cultural and social integration: actions to consider

- Provide activities for cultural and social integration throughout the full period of study.
- Start mentoring or buddy schemes prior to arrival, particularly through online social networking sites, to facilitate early integration.
- Reassess the allocation of accommodation places with a view to encouraging a greater mix of nationalities and awareness of the requirements of different groups of students.
- Consider international student integration in the context of the wider community such that a range of organisations and groups are involved.
- Assess the cost of using sports facilities and consider adding a one-off annual membership fee to the international tuition fee.
- Ensure that sports provision covers all activities of interest to international students and encourages participation in mixed and culturally-specific groups.
- Offer incentives for participating in social events (e.g., issue certificates and emphasise the value of involvement to CVs).
- Ensure a variety of formal and informal social activities in order to encourage international student participation. Balance alcohol and non-alcohol events.
- Promote clubs and societies widely, with taster events to encourage participation from a wide range of international students.
- Involve student unions in the integration process.
- Work with student unions to promote the benefits of volunteering to international students, such as enhancing employability and integration with the student body and local community.
Integrated orientation – a sense of belonging: University of St Andrews

Like many other universities, the University of St Andrews decided a decade ago that international students required distinct attention. An international welcome programme emerged. The distinct needs of other groups, such as mature and disabled students, were also recognised. The norm became the integration of home and overseas – and all students – right from the outset of orientation.

The orientation programme grew from 30 events in six days to 270 events in nine days. These included daytime academic induction programmes and ceilidhs at night. Planning was shared between the university and Students’ Association.

Events are attended by both international and home students, and older students guide newcomers. Two hundred student volunteers are focused on the target of encouraging belonging by the end of the week. Volunteers meet newcomers at the airport, help them with their luggage at the halls, walk them around the town, take them for a drink. Corridor meetings expand to hall BBQs and parties at night. Identities based on nationality are gradually augmented by identities based on residence, student society and academic subject.

Much of this may have happened in any case but the deliberate integration programme accelerates the belonging process which extends to an ‘academic family’ system in which third- and fourth-year students adopt first-years as ‘academic children’ and prolong induction over six weeks.
Integration: Loughborough University

An outstanding student experience that helps to equip Loughborough’s graduates for every aspect of their lives and careers lies at the heart of the university. In 2008 Loughborough received the Times Higher Award for the UK’s Best Student Experience for the third consecutive year.

Its success in this area is due in no small part to the students’ union, which works with staff across the university to ensure the experience of all students is continually enhanced.

In 2007, the union established an International Development Officer post. While the initial remit was to enhance the experience of international students in the UK, it quickly expanded to help UK students capitalise on the opportunities available to them overseas and to integrate Loughborough’s UK and international students.

‘Lufbra’s Going Global’ campaign was developed to promote global awareness among the university’s students. Several initiatives were developed, including a newsletter that reports on international activities.

A series of awards was established to recognise student efforts to promote global awareness. A ‘language buddy’ scheme was set up to help both UK and overseas students develop language skills, and a multicultural parade, with hall students dressed in national costume, was held on campus.

‘Universal Thursday’, a social event to help integrate Loughborough’s UK and international populations, was reinvigorated with a proactive promotion campaign. Held weekly at the union, the event now attracts in excess of 800 students from both the UK and overseas.

International study opportunities were also promoted. One of the union’s newest societies, the Erasmus Student Network, provides a platform to help incoming exchange students achieve the best possible experience in the UK and to encourage UK students to participate in exchange programmes.

All these international initiatives were instrumental in the students’ union having achieved two NUS awards in 2009 – Best International Students’ Union and Event of the Year for International Students (for Universal Thursday).
Volunteering as part of a holistic approach to integration at the University of Warwick

The University of Warwick attempts to take a holistic approach to the interaction between international students and the host culture through multiple interventions at appropriate points along the student journey. The process begins before arrival in the message that is sent to new students as they prepare to join the university: at Warwick all students are considered to be international students. On arrival, the orientation programme provides further opportunities to promote interaction with UK students and the local community, including a one-day session run by ‘Warwick Volunteers’. This early intervention encourages a high take up rate: international students account for 45% of members of Warwick Volunteers.

Local schools value the input of student volunteers and there are a number of projects in which international students bring particular value. A language register programme matches speakers of languages to pupils who are new to the UK and need language support. As well as sharing their language skills, international students experience the UK school system first hand. The benefits are summed up by a Chinese postgraduate student who volunteered for a school-based project: ‘I didn’t expect to learn so much. It helped me to put the puzzle together and learn about the whole western society and culture. It is a great experience and it is free!’ Warwick Volunteers also facilitates school and community group events led by international students to celebrate and educate about a range of cultures. The Chinese Society has organised a number of cultural workshops in local schools as well as a ‘China Day’ for the University of the Third Age to promote lifelong learning among older people.

Volunteering opportunities for Warwick’s international students are not limited to the promotion of a particular language or culture. International and UK students work side by side in a Technology Volunteers project in which volunteers teach software programming and hardware control in schools, while environmental and sports projects bring together a range of nationalities and cultures.

As part of this holistic approach, Warwick Advantage was created to enable students to reflect on and present the skills and experiences gained from volunteering in ways that are attractive to graduate employers. The Warwick Advantage Award provides university recognition for the time and effort put into volunteering, societies, sports clubs, campaigns, committees, events and everything else that isn’t degree-related but gives students a competitive edge.
This chapter looks at the provision of university-managed and private accommodation, access to catering services, university-managed transport services and the crucial issue of safety for international students. Individually, all of these elements are significant for students, but collectively they are among the most critical parts of the student experience. Where there may be problems, the impact of such elements can certainly affect the overall living experience of students in the UK but more importantly, they can also alter the ways in which students focus on their programmes of study.

4.1 Accommodation

The provision of accommodation is significant hugely important service for international students, whether in the UK for the first time or seasoned travellers. They all tend to have different expectations as to preferred type and style of accommodation, the services they require, the amount they are willing to pay, and the facilities offered. Similarly, university policy is enormously varied on accommodation: some guarantee housing only for first-year undergraduates, while others prioritise visiting and exchange students and offer only a limited number of places to non-EU postgraduates. For all UK universities, it is crucial to be aware of what international students demand and how such demands impact on the type and range of accommodation that they are able to offer. This is an area in which established university policies are likely to meet the needs of most students, but with the range of demands of individual students being so varied, some students will always fall outside of what most accommodation services can support.

Figure 10
Satisfaction with accommodation elements (ISB)

- Very dissatisfied
- Dissatisfied
- Satisfied
- Very satisfied

Accommodation quality
Accommodation cost
Accommodation office
Accommodation office (arrival)
Contact with accommodation office staff is a critical element of the arrivals process for most students, international or domestic, and an area in which universities would wish to perform well. Three-quarters (77%) of international students are satisfied with their dealings with the accommodation office on arrival, which compares well with the international index (72%) but falls short of the best international competitor (USA, 82%). Domestic students also show more satisfaction (84%). North American and EU students are less satisfied than others. International postgraduates are less satisfied (74%) than undergraduates (82%), and a similar pattern is observable among domestic students. Satisfaction with the accommodation office for those who use it beyond the arrival period changes very little from that observed at the start of the year.

The fact that postgraduate students are more likely to arrive outside the normal arrival time, usually take a lower priority than undergraduates in regard to accommodation, and are more likely to have non-standard needs (for example, families) no doubt contribute to the lower levels of satisfaction.

*I think the university should pay much more attention to family accommodation around the university.*

Research postgraduate from Iran

The main problems are arriving late, arriving early and arriving without having been allocated university accommodation. Private accommodation can be hard to find at short notice. Extending opening hours for accommodation services may be the optimum way to support such students, but it may not be practical to ask administrative and service staff to work late or unsocial hours. An alternative arrangement is to link the initial contact with accommodation services with other arrival procedures, such as airport or train station pick-up and offer students somewhere to wait before the accommodation office opens.

Universities should aim to develop dependable relationships with local rental providers and help international students navigate the accommodation market. This could include an approved supplier list of private rental agencies and landlords, details of how the local rental market works: likely costs, reference to legal requirements, and an outline of how to secure private accommodation.

Where universities were uncomfortable with endorsing private landlords or rental companies, reference could be made to student resources such as Studentpad (www.studentpad.co.uk).

Early university intervention on accommodation in the recruitment and marketing phase of the relationship with prospective international students is important in managing expectations. Issues such as the size of utility bills, Council Tax level, the availability of kitchen utensils, internet access and the location of accommodation can be managed successfully through transparent and early communication.
Some flexibility would also be useful for international students who arrive without accommodation. Temporary university accommodation might be provided, even for a few days.

The only problem I faced was with the accommodation office. I received my offer letter pretty late compared to other international students. I sent the accommodation office a mail … and they never replied. It is worrying when you travel to the UK for the first time and you don’t even know where you are going to stay. If someone can improve this system, it would be really helpful.

Taught postgraduate from India

Beyond the arrivals process, twice as many international students as domestic students make use of accommodation offices. Chinese and Malaysian students are the most likely users of the services; Polish and American students the least likely.

The use of residential welfare support services (individual universities may refer to these services differently) differs significantly from university to university. Just over one in ten international students use these services, and just under one in ten domestic students. Nine in ten international students are satisfied with the provision of such services, which compares very favourably with the international index (79%) and places the UK top in this respect. Domestic students in the UK are equally satisfied. There is some evidence that postgraduate students are less satisfied with residential welfare support, but the experience of such services is nonetheless positive (83% for research postgraduates).

For those not living in halls of residence or other university accommodation, such services are not relevant. A substantial minority of international students (28%) think welfare support services at halls of residence may be of use but don’t know where to find them. This suggests that such services are not always well promoted and lack visibility.

Noise is a problem that is frequently raised by international students in connection with accommodation. Unfortunately, this often originates with UK domestic students, who are not always as focused on pure academic achievement as their international counterparts. They are also more likely to participate in late-night, alcohol-related activities which can cause friction.

Living with some students in … halls of residence has been a nightmare. They scream and yell from 9pm to 1am on a daily basis for reasons I am yet to understand. I have made several protestations to the local hall office, but nothing significant seems to happen to contain the menace. It is mental torture – you can’t sleep in peace, you can’t study well at night. I am amazed where these young students get all the energy to disturb their neighbours without a care on their part and without them getting tired.

Taught postgraduate from Kenya
There is no easy way to enforce reasonable behaviour but one simple approach is to ensure that first-year undergraduates are not co-located with international postgraduates or even final-year undergraduates and when tensions arise, they are dealt with in a timely and appropriate manner.

Three-fifths of international students rate accommodation quality as very important. It is therefore imperative that universities deliver on the expectations of their students, which indeed they largely do. 83% of international students in the UK are satisfied with the quality of accommodation; this is in line with the international index but slightly worse than the best competitor country (USA, 88%) and perceptions among domestic students (86%). While quality is high across the UK, universities should continue to ensure that the type of accommodation and the range of facilities they provide match the needs of all international students.

Common complaints with accommodation relate to the provision of cooking and washing facilities. Cleanliness is also an issue, as is inconsistent internet access in halls of residence. The lack of common social areas is also particularly disappointing to many international students. Not only does this fall short of expectations, but it also inhibits socialising and integration, which is an important element of international student life and experience.

The cost of accommodation is also of almost unanimous importance to students in the UK, international and domestic alike (this is also discussed in detail in Chapter 4). Two-thirds of international students rate accommodation cost as very important but only three-fifths are content with the cost. Although this is slightly above the international index (58%), it is below the best in class and below the views of domestic students (both 71%). Students from the EU are less satisfied (56%). International research postgraduates are also less satisfied with the cost of accommodation (54%).

I was very disappointed about student accommodation. It is not as nice-looking as shown in the prospectus. After some local research and talking with students who don’t live in student accommodation, we found out that the price of student accommodation was a third higher than having your own flat.
Taught postgraduate from Germany

While complaints about the cost of accommodation are sometimes in absolute terms, they are just as often about value for money. Addressing some of the common problems described above would help improve perceptions.

I am satisfied with my course but this bad experience of living at such an expensive, uncomfortable flat makes me disillusioned. I am aware that my flat is much better than most other students’ flats because I am spending more money than other students, but I have never lived at such a bad flat in my life, even when I was living in developing countries.
Research postgraduate from Japan
Faith-based provision

The provision of facilities for worship is important to twice as many international students (49%) as domestic students (24%). Among Muslims, however, 86% of both international and domestic students rate worship facilities as important or very important. Around two-thirds of Sikh and Hindu international students rate such facilities as important, while UK Sikh and Hindu students are much less likely to do so.

Following the introduction of differential fees in 1989, many UK universities determined quickly that providing appropriate worship facilities was an important service as part of a successful international recruitment strategy.

It’s very important to have a prayer room at my university. I asked for that, but no response yet! The facilities for religious worship is an essential living matter.

Taught postgraduate from Libya

Although there are still campuses where more could be done, on the whole there is a high level of satisfaction with worship facilities provided by UK universities. Approximately eight out of ten international students are satisfied, including those for whom it is most important. There is also a very high level of satisfaction (90%) among international students with a chaplaincy or multi-faith provision, though only 10% of international students actually use them. About 20% believe that such services may be useful but do not know where to find them.

There should be a true place of worship where Christian students can worship. Not the praying room that you have. I am disappointed that there is no provision for interdenominational Christian fellowship.

Taught postgraduate from Nigeria
4.3 Health centres

A third of international students indicate that they have used a university health centre or university-based health services. Around 20% do not know where to find it. This pattern broadly matches that of UK students. It is important to note that some international students access healthcare services outside the university.

Of those students who use a university health service, satisfaction for both international and domestic students is at the 90% level. Where levels of satisfaction are lower, it usually relates to access – for example, the time to get an appointment or out-of-hours emergency access. Perceptions may often be driven by expectations students bring from their own countries, where aspects of healthcare may be very different. Again, expectations can be managed to some degree during the recruitment and orientation processes.

4.4 Disability support

There are proportionally fewer international students with disabilities than UK students. Only 3% of international students say that they have used disability support services at universities, compared to 8% of UK students. However, of those students who have used disability services, satisfaction is at the 90% mark for international and UK users alike. When international students have disabilities that require special provision, it is important to identify these issues during the recruitment process so that plans can be made for the right provision to be in place.

In some cases, international students do not declare health issues (particularly mental health issues) during the admissions process, perhaps for fear that disclosure would lead to rejection. And in some cases, the stresses of attending university study and living away from home can cause health problems and disabilities to worsen. International students may instead seek support from peer groups. It is important that there is a range of information available about the support on offer, widely and regularly communicated to the student community, so that students can locate this support for themselves or for others about whom they have concerns. In many universities, the central coordinating role for ensuring that students can access services lies with a central Student Support or Student Welfare office, which liaises with academic and other departments.
4.5 Transport links between university locations

Transport links between university locations are linked to accommodation issues. Highly rated halls of residence can fail to impress if they are not well-connected to the rest of the university, no matter how idyllic the setting or highly specified the accommodation. The social aspect of university life is an important one; poor transport links can inhibit it and contribute to a sense of isolation. International students may be particularly sensitive to this, especially if they have been segregated into mono-national accommodation.

Eight out of ten international students rate transport links between university locations as important, and the same proportion express satisfaction with them. Nine in ten students from China, India, Malaysia, Pakistan and Nigeria rate the provision of such transport as important. Students from the UK, Europe, North America and Australasia are less concerned. Satisfaction is fairly consistent across nationalities, including the UK, despite significantly different expectations. This places the UK broadly in line with the international index. The key issues surrounding inter-site transport links that can lead to dissatisfaction relate to cost and the frequency and extent of the service.

The university should ensure that students have significantly reduced, if not free, public transport – it certainly has the money to secure this.

Undergraduate from Ireland

4.6 Campus eating places

Two-thirds of international students use campus eating places. There is very little variation by nationality, and domestic students are only slightly more likely to use university catering facilities. This suggests that the two categories are equally catered for.

Campus food is often criticised and this is reflected in an overall satisfaction score among international students of 76%. While this is ahead of the international index (72%), and broadly in line with the best in class, domestic students in the UK are more favourably disposed towards on-campus catering (82%). This is not a great revelation given the wider range of tastes and expectations among international students.

Meeting these expectations will always be a challenge, even beyond dietary requirements based on faith. While circumstances vary by university, at a UK level there are no indications from the ISB that the dietary requirements of one faith is being addressed any better or worse than another.

The common areas of complaint are cost, quality and choice. Cost is a difficult issue but it is not an issue in all universities. University catering services should aim to benchmark themselves against food outlets in the local community. Of course, in parts of the country where the cost of living is generally high, it will be difficult to satisfy all students.
The quality and choice of food available go hand in hand. Universities can assess that the range of food available matches the profile of their students, in terms of national preferences and dietary requirements dictated by faith. A common complaint is the prevalence of a fast-food diet while many international students come from cultures where food preparation is more valued than in the UK.

*Perhaps the campus eating places can include dishes of Chinese, Arabic, Iranian styles? I love Scottish and English breakfasts, shepherd’s pie, beef lasagne. Just nice to have some variety – it is not too difficult to be included.*

Research postgraduate from Malaysia

### 4.7 Safety

Universities are acutely aware that safety is important to students and their parents, and they can use a reputation for safety as part of their recruitment campaigns. This can help to counterbalance the disadvantage of not being in a big cultural hub.

International students almost unanimously rate ‘feeling safe and secure’ as important, and two-thirds rate it as very important. Students from the EU are relatively less concerned (55% rate safety very important compared with 71% for non-EU students). Students from North America and other industrialised countries also show lower concern. The greater the cultural difference between the UK and the home country, the greater the concerns over safety. International students expect there to be an effective safety regime on campus at all times and that risks off campus are explained as well.

Overall, the UK has a relatively good reputation for safety, with nine in ten international students (89%) reporting they are satisfied in terms of feeling safe and secure. This matches the international index, but does not match the best (Singapore, 94%). Importantly, the views of international students in the UK do match those of domestic students; all nationalities are highly satisfied, including those from outside the EU, despite the greater importance attached to safety among this group. The overall situation also represents an improvement since 2007.
Accommodation and living: actions to consider

- Ensure that students are provided with a point of contact should they arrive when the accommodation office is closed. A contact point or place to wait can make all the difference to first impressions.

- Couples and families require different accommodation and support solutions; universities should factor in the additional information required.

- Develop good working relationships with the local private rental sector and provide students with information on how to secure such accommodation. Universities that are reluctant to recommend private providers can advise students to use generic resources such as Studentpad and student associations.

- Accommodation and related expenses should be as explicit as possible, and should compare university and private accommodations.

- Allocate accommodation such that suitable groups of students are placed together; try to avoid placing first years with final years and postgraduates.

- Where possible, bundle utilities and other services into the overall accommodation cost of university-owned or managed properties.

- Where students require access to a range of disability services, good planning and a coordinated approach is essential, involving ongoing assessment and communication between the student and those involved in support provision.

- Benchmark catering costs and opening times against local providers to ensure that services match the expectations of international students.

- Ensure that a good variety of foods is served in at least one catering outlet on campus, taking into account specific faith or cultural requirements.

- Offer information to prospective international students and parents on how safe the university, accommodation and environment is.
Accommodation and living: Sheffield Hallam University

The Accommodation Service at Sheffield Hallam works with a range of internal and external stakeholders to provide outstanding customer service to international students. The office has a culture of continuous improvement that has led to a range of new initiatives.

The team provides cheap, flexible accommodation in catered halls when students arrive, which gives them time to find the right accommodation. It provides a range of information on accommodation in the city which is specifically designed for international students.

One of the most popular services for international students is the house-hunting service, for which students can register when their places are confirmed. Groups of 15 students are taken on a mini bus to a range of private properties, which helps international students to familiarise themselves with the area and to find the right accommodation. This service also facilitates the development of new friendships so that students can sign up for houses together with people they are getting to know.

As well as working with students when they arrive in the UK, there are also a range of measures undertaken before they arrive.

International students who have registered for house hunting are invited to join a Facebook site when their places are confirmed, which enables them to build online friendships before they come to the UK. The team also works with overseas staff and agents in order to facilitate the processes and forms involved in arranging accommodation. This allows students to talk to somebody face-to-face about any concerns. International students are given a dedicated email address for queries. These are answered on a case-by-case basis and individual students are given contact details for named members of staff.
This chapter looks at three areas of the international student experience: technological support, library facilities and the learning environment, with a particular focus on lecture theatres, classrooms and laboratories. It is perhaps for such learning infrastructure that the level of expectations of students is at its highest.

5.1 Libraries and learning spaces

ISB data confirm that libraries are one of the most important aspects of the learning experience for all students. They are of almost universal importance and are rated as very important by three-fifths (61%) of international students. When compared against the views of domestic students, for whom libraries are ‘very important’ to 53%, one can see the important role libraries play in attracting international students to the UK. It is therefore important that libraries continue to satisfy international students at the level they do (86% satisfied, 33% very satisfied). This is slightly ahead of the international index (83%) but behind the figures for the USA. US students in the UK give the lowest score (72% satisfied, 21% very satisfied) while students from India and Nigeria are almost universally satisfied with library facilities in the UK, and half of each cohort is very satisfied.

There is some evidence to suggest that postgraduate research students, with their greater requirements and expectations, are slightly less satisfied with UK library facilities. International students at smaller universities, which may be less well-resourced, are also less satisfied (74% satisfied, 23% very satisfied), although domestic students at such universities have similar perceptions.

While some concerns in regard to libraries require large capital expenditure to address, some common complaints can be tackled easily and relatively cheaply. International students make frequent demands for quiet spaces in libraries and quieter libraries in general. They are often used to more conservative learning environments. Quiet policies often need to be more rigorously enforced in the UK. Some innovative libraries have traditional quiet zones, group zones where students can interact, and areas where students can work, eat and drink.
Capital investment and the impact of strategic developments in teaching and learning have had an enormously positive effect on the quality of university libraries in the UK in recent years. As measured by the ISB, the overall satisfaction with UK university libraries has increased by 9% since 2006, with individual universities outpacing the sector by as much as a further 11%.

Concerns that exist are often not related to the range and quality of material holdings. Indeed, complaints frequently revolve around access, opening hours and the availability of specific library services. It is common for students to complain about evening, weekend and vacation opening times. Some universities have addressed this by providing separate, dedicated study premises that are continuously open (for example, the Learning Grid at the University of Warwick is always open except for Christmas Day). As a minimum, universities have altered opening times to meet the needs of students more closely.

_**Library opening hours are exceptional; a 24-hour operating study area is ideal for students who either have other commitments during the day, or prefer to work late at night. Simply an excellent resource.**_  
_Undergraduate from Greece_

Library holdings does emerge as a relatively common issue – mainly range and how up-to-date stocks are. Regular audits can tie stocks to the changing demands of individual faculties and in particular to ‘hot’ texts recommended by lecturers. Although this problem can be exacerbated by students leaving essays to the last moment, thought needs to be given as to how to manage this peak. Early release of reading lists will assist those who are willing and able to buy their own copies to do so. Another might be to give access to electronic versions of texts.
I have been disappointed by the fact that the library has very limited access to scientific journals. The online catalogue and browsing system is also not very user-friendly.

Undergraduate from Mauritius

Loan periods also need to be reviewed regularly, and in particular reserve and short loan status reassessed on a flexible basis according to the size and workload of specific programmes.

Key books should be available in sufficient numbers or as e-books and for longer than short loans.

Undergraduate from France

Universities have the capacity to increase satisfaction by reviewing inter-library loan procedures. The speed of such loans is often criticised, as is the number of loans allowed, particularly by those on programmes that require access to less common texts.

Dedicated library support for international students may also have a valuable impact, through either the appointment of a dedicated member of staff or the provision of dedicated printed and online support. Where resources allow, such a post can focus on managing expectations before arrival, supporting new students on arrival, and training colleagues. This might include library practices and jargon and bibliographic referencing.

The quality of the learning spaces – lecture theatres, classrooms, and laboratories – is also paramount. Important to most international students (87%) and very important to a third, these facilities have higher priority among those from beyond the EU and other Western countries. Nearly all Indian, Malaysian and Nigerian students judge learning spaces as important, while around half of each give a very important rating to the category. Postgraduate research students, both international and domestic, unsurprisingly place less importance on learning spaces.

International students are largely satisfied with learning spaces (84%), in line with both domestic students and the international index, although this is a little behind the top-performing market (USA, 90%). Students from Western countries are less positive than those from elsewhere.

For this part of the learning experience, different academic disciplines will require different approaches. For drama, having sufficient studio space is important. If the amount of space cannot be increased, then perhaps increasing the hours of access can. It should also not be underestimated how much the cosmetic appearance of learning spaces provides tangible evidence of a university’s investment and attitude to learning and students.

A major part of learning and focusing in a learning environment is the surroundings you are in and the lecturer you have. I have found it very difficult to be motivated and focused in class due to the horrible facilities we are using. I get a lot more out of my class in the new PG-101 room than in my seminar in the attic above the changing rooms. The quality of the surroundings truly affects my learning.

Undergraduate from the USA
5.2 Internet access and technology

The desire to be connected and in touch with academic and personal networks is paramount for almost all international students. As a consequence, access to the internet is consistently rated as one of the most important factors in the academic lives of international students. Nearly four out of five say it is very important and next to none say it is unimportant. Before arriving in the UK, students, particularly at the postgraduate level, are familiar with remote methods of working, such as online learning platforms, e-journals and electronic libraries. The onus is therefore on UK universities to meet and exceed the expectations of international students in this.

Although 85% of international students express satisfaction with their internet provision, universities should not underestimate the importance of getting access right from the very beginning of the student experience. This is more critical for international students on short courses, particularly visiting and exchange students. They tend to be more demanding than others.

The ability to make immediate contact with personal or professional networks makes it easier for international students to settle and counteract any sense of isolation or loneliness in the first few days. When such a facility is not available, the level of dissatisfaction and frustration can run high.

*I had problems with registering my computer to the internet. I was not the only one, a lot of people had problems. They solved it after four days. My parents were a bit concerned about when we could call each other.*

Undergraduate from Slovakia

Numerous examples exist of good practice in the UK of universities providing access to online and other technology services before arrival, either when an offer of admission and/or accommodation is accepted, or when a deposit is made. Universities once may have provided international telephone cards for calling home but this has been superseded by email, Skype and social networks. If university regulations preclude pre-arrival arrangements for access to computing facilities, universities should at a minimum provide sufficient open access terminals in the first weeks of term. Such facilities could be located in halls of residence, student unions, other service areas and international offices.

The USA stands out in terms of internet provision. Students from the USA are notably less satisfied with UK provision and only 17% of them are ‘very satisfied’, a perception that reflects the high standard of provision in the USA. International students in the USA have a 91% satisfaction level, well beyond the international index of 82%.
Having to wait a week to get internet access made the first week of adjusting to living here much harder than it should’ve been. The internet is the way to communicate with people back home, to find your way around (on Google maps and the like), and to get information about the uni.

Exchange student from the USA

Students from Australia and New Zealand are also more demanding of good internet service, although four out of five are satisfied with its quality in the UK.

The internet connection is too too slow. I was using a faster connection back home. As postgraduate students we expect a reliable internet and we are not provided with that … disappointing.

Taught postgraduate from Turkey

At a minimum, internet access and online infrastructure need to be resourced sufficiently in terms of hardware and support to ensure that connectivity and speed are of a high standard, particularly during peak periods. The need to ensure good internet service is one of the most critical aspects of service infrastructure for all universities. Larger universities will be able to achieve better economies of scale in this regard.

International students also increasingly expect wireless access to the university network from everywhere on campus, notably halls of residence.

There is very limited wireless internet connection. I would expect that everywhere in the uni should be covered with wi-fi tech.

Taught postgraduate from Turkey

As for paying for internet access, universities could consider bundling the cost with accommodation. Bundled services are common in other contexts and undoubtedly inform student expectations. Bundling would also tend to leave universities less open to unfavourable comparisons with the costs of other internet providers.

IT support in the UK matches the performance of US universities (91% satisfaction) and exceeds the international index (85%). US students in the UK are less positive but largely satisfied (81%), while Indian and Nigerian students are almost unanimously satisfied, half of each group being very satisfied with IT Support. These results reinforce the message that internet dissatisfaction relates to hardware and access rather than the support provided. Nonetheless, universities should consider whether they deliver uniformly high levels of IT support. Mac users, for example, feel less supported (and US students, and those on creative arts and design programmes, tend to favour Macs). Attempts might be made to provide physical IT support for postgraduates (not just a recorded message) outside of office hours, particularly weekends.
There are some specific concerns among postgraduate students that, if addressed, would have a positive impact on all students. In some cases there are simply not enough workstations or the work area is overcrowded. Because of the intensity and brevity of their programmes, taught postgraduates are particularly concerned with this. Even where postgraduate research students are entitled to individual workstations or carrels, it does not always happen. At a minimum, when workstation or workspace commitments are made to international students, they ought to be delivered.

Where possible, universities should establish suitably sized areas for postgraduate students for both study and other purposes. Forward-thinking universities in the UK have created unique, technology-rich spaces that enable both collaborative and quiet individual study (for example, the Research Exchange at the University of Warwick, where research students and staff can come to work and meet). Such facilities, which students often help design, are extremely popular and reflect a university’s strategic intent and attitude to encouraging postgraduate students to meet their full potentials.

**Learning infrastructure and environment: actions to consider**

- Provide new students with email addresses and login details before they arrive so that they can access online resources on arrival.
- Provide wireless access to the internet across all university buildings and bundle related costs with accommodation fees.
- Streamline network access with a single master password for all online resources.
- Ensure that the IT department offers support for Mac and PC users and provides out-of-hours support.
- Consider evening and weekend library access wherever possible and consider 24-hour access during crucial times in the academic year.
- Conduct regular audits of library stock to ensure there are enough recommended texts available via a range of lending methods, including inter-library loans.
- Ensure that electronic access to key texts and journals matches the needs of students.
- Consider dedicated library support for international students through a member of staff or the publication of specific guides.
- Ensure that rules for quiet areas in libraries are rigorously enforced but also communicate exceptions where they exist.
- Wherever possible, allocate individual workstations to postgraduate students and aim to locate them in separate study areas.
This chapter looks at how international students are supported during their studies, how their learning styles are catered for and how a multicultural learning environment is offered. The overall performance of UK universities in these aspects of the student experience is excellent, from academic induction, through the provision of support for English-language and study skills, to academic feedback and assessment.

6.1 The English language

International students are eager to improve their English and this is often a reason for choosing to study in the UK. It is therefore important to provide language training at a sufficient and appropriate level. Such a programme should include language testing prior to study and language support throughout a programme. The linguistic skills of UK and international staff are also most important. When neither student nor staff member is speaking his or her first language, a student’s ability to learn can be adversely affected.

International students may experience feelings of isolation in the early stages of UK academic life because of the language issue. This is an area that more universities should proactively manage from the recruitment and admissions phase to ensure that a good diversity of international students are selected, so that integration is facilitated more positively.

From the beginning of the term I found it quite hard to understand my classmates especially when we have seminar and discussion. I’m the only international student in my class and I didn’t feel confident to participate in debate because I couldn’t get the questions and the subjects that they were talking about. I found this situation hard to overcome. I felt that tutors don’t try to make British students understand how much it could be hard for internationals to catch the discussions.

Taught postgraduate from Iran

Figure 14
Importance of language support to international students in the UK
University support for English-language skills offered during the programme of study is largely well regarded by international students. Eighty-four per cent of them are satisfied with the help they receive to improve such skills, which compares favourably with the international index (82%) and matches the top-performing nations. This is an area that has seen significant improvement in recent years, satisfaction having increased from 77% in 2006. Satisfaction does not vary greatly by nationality, although Chinese students are less positive than others (77% satisfied) and also place most importance on language support. French students likewise place great emphasis on this area of the learning experience (more than half rate it as ‘very important’) and are likewise less satisfied than average (82%).

Sometimes it is rather difficult to understand what the lecturers say, because they tend to move very quickly in their speech. I suppose the fact that English is not my first language occasionally makes it more difficult for me to follow their arguments.

Undergraduate from Finland

Students who find it difficult to learn a subject and a language at the same time may also appreciate summer classes. Involvement in the TANDEM Language Exchange Programme4, a popular student-led initiative, is another means of support. There is, however, evidence that English for Academic Purpose (EAP) programmes are often poorly attended if they are not credit-bearing or if they lack relevance to a student’s discipline.

In rapidly internationalising UK classrooms, the role of academic staff in ensuring that international students are supported appropriately and effectively is pivotal. With a varied student population comes a varied range of learning experiences and styles for which the reliance on habitual learning methodologies may not be the best way of supporting and integrating international students. Assignments, performance review and feedback need to be considered more carefully for international students. Small adaptations to existing practices may be sufficient, for example, providing written instructions for assignments developed in association with Teaching and Learning Units. In addition, feedback should be written rather than verbal and offered on a regular basis.

Please make a list of the assessment requirements and which things we need to hand in. I hope assessment requirements are clear and easy to understand.

Undergraduate from China
Universities should give particular attention to those programmes for which very high proficiency in written and spoken English is important – for example, law, history, the humanities and social sciences. High scores in IELTS, TOEFL and other language tests may not be a sufficiently robust measure of ability in these areas, and raising the required scores for these subjects may not guarantee that students are at the appropriate levels. There is a body of recent research on the usefulness of IELTS and other language tests for predicting later academic success.5

International students often refer to the difficulty of following strong accents, including British ones. However, this does not appear to be a major problem; satisfaction with the English of academics stands at 90% – comparable to the international index (88%) and the views of domestic students. Chinese students, while largely satisfied (83%), are less positive than other nationalities, and certainly less likely to be very satisfied with the standard of English spoken by staff. They are also the group that places most importance on this aspect of the learning experience (93% important and 51% very important).

**6.2 Academic induction**

During the arrivals phase, the necessity of providing students with large amounts of logistical information runs the risk of overloading them and increases the likelihood that information on academic induction misses its target. This is also a possibility for international students who arrive late.

Good practice in this area is widespread and varied in the UK. One approach to academic induction is to separate it from general orientation by allocating specific days for academic briefing or arranging specialised academic induction after general orientation. And in order to capture international students who arrive later than usual, a series of smaller, half-day academic and general orientations can be offered on a rolling basis over the first four weeks of term.

There is a high level of satisfaction for academic induction among international students in the UK. Nine in ten are satisfied – appreciably better than the international index and comparable to leading nations and the perceptions of UK domestic students. Suggestions from students on how this strong performance may be improved include simple ideas like having a meal with academic and administrative staff:

*I was very pleased with the academic staff of the Physics department, they were very helpful during my application. They organised a breakfast in the first week, which was a good opportunity to get to know each other. I think it was a very good idea!*

Undergraduate from Hungary

---


6.2
Satisfaction with the information actually conveyed during inductions is a bit lower, at 83%, which compares favourably with the international index (77%). Perceptions are also comparable with UK students. US students are again notably less satisfied (71%). The main message would appear to be that programme information should be supplied well in advance of arrival. As study skills and methods often form an integral part of academic induction programmes, international students should also be referred to the Prepare for Success website (www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk), an interactive pre-arrival learning tool for UK-bound international students.

Where induction programmes include formal presentation or other support material, universities could consider posting such resources online.

*The presentations explaining how the course works were extremely poorly done. Someone needs to take on the responsibility of monitoring the quality and consistency of the information given!*

Taught postgraduate from the USA

### 6.3 Academic feedback and assessment

Fair and transparent assessment is a cornerstone of a quality university education. Almost all (95%) international students in the UK rate it important and nearly three-fifths rate it very important. Nearly nine in ten (87%) are satisfied with the fairness and transparency of the assessment they receive. This compares well with the international index (82%), but falls short of the best-performing competitor country (92%).

Dissatisfaction with academic feedback and assessment appears to be almost entirely subjective and dependent on the experience of individual students. In general, they appear to want more assessment but the responses to this issue are extremely varied. Some international students want earlier assessment, others want it after they have had some experience of the academic system and the learning environment, some want more assessments, and others would prefer it to take place just once a year. Perhaps only one conclusion can be drawn: universities should assess their own student bodies and set policy and practice accordingly. In many instances, the formulation of such policy takes place at both university and departmental (or faculty) levels so that assessment meets the expectations of the majority of students.
Universities of course need to ensure that their policies meet the requirements of all students and external bodies such as the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. When international students demand more assessments, it may be possible to conduct smaller, more regular assessments as a solution. Where this is not possible, interim feedback on first drafts or preparatory work may help some students to develop ideas and the quality of their final work. Another option is to give feedback on non-assessed work. Often students simply want to know that they fully understand what is expected of them. There are concerns among international undergraduate students about the standard of marking when classes are taught by postgraduate students, so this should be regularly assessed for quality and consistency.

As for ‘fairness and transparency of assessment’, the assessment is not unfair in the sense that the grading is too bad (rather, it’s surprisingly lenient), but a detailed explanation for the grades would be very helpful.

Undergraduate from Germany

Feedback on coursework is of importance to the same proportion (94%) of international and domestic students. It is of greatest importance to taught postgraduates and undergraduates. Feedback on coursework is rated as satisfactory by 84% of international students. This matches the international index and UK domestic students (83%) but not the best international performer (USA, 88%). Undergraduates place the most value on feedback and are the least satisfied (81%). There is also evidence that students from the USA and Germany, particularly those on exchange programmes, are less satisfied than their peers.
The most common criticisms of feedback are that it is insufficiently detailed and provided too late. Students can be unaware that verbal feedback or the discussion of their work can be regarded as formal feedback. Universities can improve their performances in this area by introducing more written feedback at regular intervals, or short ‘report card’ comments after meetings with students.

The feedback on coursework consists of one phrase.

Undergraduate from Austria

6.4 Learning styles

International students coming from a range of pedagogic backgrounds can provide a challenge to the learning style of UK universities. Initiatives like the Improving Teaching and Learning for International Students (ITALIS), a project of UKCISA and the Higher Education Academy, will address some of these issues with a view to improving the experience of learning for international students through support and guidance offered by an expert-led centre.

The flexibility to decide how to study, is another important variable for international students. This means different things to different students: it can mean the ability to choose the modules that make up their programmes; being able to balance academic studies and a part-time job; different modes of assessment; the option of a work placement; or the facility for evening study.

Third year is especially difficult but most of the lecturers do not seem to acknowledge it. More flexibility in terms of assignments and studying patterns and a more supportive environment would certainly help.

Undergraduate from Poland

Nine in ten (92%) rate such flexibility as important and almost half (44%) as very important. International students value this more highly than their domestic counterparts but this is because of the higher proportion of postgraduate research students among the international cohort.

These preferences appear to be largely recognised by UK universities because the postgraduate research group is most satisfied with the flexibility they are offered. More generally, satisfaction among all international students is 85%, which compares favourably with the international index (81%) and is broadly comparable with domestic students (87%).

International students in the UK are not that different from domestic students in their study preferences, although there is a greater tendency for them to believe that academic staff ‘know best’.
There are also some cultural differences. A preference to study independently is less pronounced among Chinese students. Conversely, they indicate the greatest preference for working within strict guidelines and are notably less tolerant of interruptions in lectures.

French students show most deference to authority. Seventy per cent agree that academic staff tend to know best. Indian students hold similar views and, along with their Pakistani counterparts, are the most likely to believe that students should not disagree with lecturers. Students from Germany are far less deferential (only 34% agree that academic staff know best) and almost no German students think that students should not disagree with lecturers. American students hold similar views to German students.

Thus there is a range of attitudes that academic staff can reflect upon. While almost all students desire some autonomy, some prefer more detailed guidance on how to conduct their studies. This is as likely to be a cultural distinction as a sign of a weak student. If they are to be encouraged to challenge, some students may require more explicit permission to do so. While most programme structures do not allow for such variations in attitude, international students clearly need the means to adapt to what is often an unfamiliar style of learning.

*My courses have too much flexibility ... I want more structure. Reading lists can be long, but they should be prioritised. I'd love a schedule of what to read for which weeks of class.*

Exchange student from the USA

6.5 Multicultural academic experience

Three-quarters of international students say that a multicultural learning environment is important to them. Interacting with students from all over the world is a significant part of the attraction of the UK classroom. Eighty six per cent of international students are satisfied with the multicultural element of their learning experience, an increase of 5% since 2006 and now better than the international index of 84%. Domestic students are even more satisfied (91%) but a multicultural learning experience is much less important to them. Chinese students tend to be the least satisfied (77%) and they tend to be less integrated inside and outside the classroom.
Teaching quality and learning support: actions to consider

- Make access to support available throughout the academic year.
- Offer introductions to academic support as a part of orientation or induction programmes but dedicate separate days or times for these activities.
- Make greater use of UK initiatives to prepare international students for UK study, e.g., www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk
- Provide full programme structure, syllabus and reading lists prior to arrival so that students are informed and able to ask questions straight away.
- Ensure that sufficient English-language course places are available and that access is possible for those with other commitments such as a job or family. Summer courses could also alleviate time pressures.
- Set up social networking initiatives to encourage dialogue around learning and language support among students.
- Make the terminology for key services more relevant for international students, for example, ‘additional learning needs/skills’ or ‘transferable skills development’.
- Provide written instructions and feedback for academic work.
- Develop a university-wide strategy for performance feedback and assessment. Where examples of good practice already exist in faculties, adopt these at the university level. Consider the following:
  - provide more opportunities for feedback
  - more short assessments
  - interim assessments
  - timeliness
  - feedback on non-assessed work
- Review language and academic support in the context of the overall student population, rather than just international full-fee-paying students.
- Provide cultural awareness and intercultural communication training as part of an induction programme for new academic staff.
This chapter examines how international students fund themselves, including the kinds of financial support they receive from universities and elsewhere. Access to a variety of funding sources is increasingly important; the chapter looks at the role of universities in coordinating and promoting such opportunities.

### Funding

Half of all international students in the UK rely in some part on their families to fund their studies. A further quarter are self-funding, and one in ten obtain scholarships from either their home countries or their UK universities. Just under one-fifth take out loans to help pay for studies. Loans are of course the primary source of funding for two-thirds of domestic students (beyond the funding provided for undergraduates by the UK government). Self-funding is more prevalent among domestic students than international students. One in five domestic students obtain a university scholarship or means-tested bursary – this is twice the level seen among international students. Such awards, where they are on offer, are of course a means of competing for the best students.

Four-fifths of Chinese students in the UK rely on their families to fund their studies. This probably places additional pressure to get the best value out of one’s studies and may consequently lead to higher expectations of universities. Self-funding, and to a lesser extent university scholarships, make up the difference. Polish students, by contrast, are the least likely of international students to rely on families (28%) and are the most similar to domestic students in this respect. Polish and UK students are also most likely to obtain funding from employers (10%). Their primary sources of funding are loans or their own funds.
As is the case when they study in their home countries, French and German students rely primarily on families and their own funds, and one in five take out a loan.

Although half of Malaysian students rely on families for funding, a third obtain awards from their government. This plays a critical role in enabling Malaysian students to study abroad. No such awards are available for Indian students, who are therefore largely funded through families and loans. Students from Nigeria and Pakistan rely heavily on families or they fund themselves.

For international undergraduate and taught postgraduates, the funding profile is similar: mainly families, topped up with own funds and loans. But for postgraduate research students, university scholarships are instrumental in attracting them to the UK. One-third of them receive such awards and a further one in ten get a scholarship from the UK government.

Finance on arrival

Opening a UK bank account is not by any means always a smooth process for international students – hence the low level of satisfaction (63%). This looks very poor against the international index (82%) and the best in class (New Zealand, 93%). The experience of UK students is entirely different: close to 85% of them are satisfied, and most have accounts before starting university.

Students from countries where they expect opening a bank account to be a straightforward procedure are most dissatisfied. Barely half of students from the USA, Australia, New Zealand and France are satisfied, and indeed fewer than half of German students.

Setting up a student bank account has been by far the worst experience, but that is not the fault of the university. It does not accept applications from students who are not living in uni accommodation and only lets you know after you have stood in line for two hours. It is disgusting that it charges so much a month plus a hefty rate for international transactions and then it takes them almost two months to send me info about my account, let alone my debit card.

Taught postgraduate from Germany

Opening a UK bank account is now more complex than ever before because of new legislation and regulations. Most complaints relate to slowness and bureaucracy. Dissatisfaction is highest at universities that process a large number of international students. Universities may try to help facilitate the processes and contacts with local banks. Developing effective relationships with banks is not necessarily an easy task and the decline in campus banking has inhibited this further. But international offices and other university colleagues can manage expectations by ensuring that new international students understand the regulations and procedures. They could provide students with information about the services provided and with examples of letters from banks in welcome packs.
University staff could also ask for a clarification of policy from banks in advance, so that potential pitfalls for students can be identified. Universities provide significant numbers of new customers to banks and should be able to use this leverage in negotiations. Where possible, universities should consider inviting banking staff to orientation events. Student helpers at banks could alleviate some problems faced by international students.

Dealings with Finance Offices are satisfactory to four in five international students. This compares favourably with the international index (77%) but does not match the best in class (USA, 89%). Again, expectations among Western students (eg from the USA, France, Germany, Australia and New Zealand) drive down satisfaction.

*We probably made six trips to the registration/finance offices just to sort out simple things. The inflexibility and bureaucracy was incredible. Just getting our external private scholarship payments invoiced and balance refunded required all sorts of further phone calls, visits, etc. I cannot believe how inefficient the ‘system’ is, nor how much extra work they create for themselves.*

Research postgraduate from Australia

The need to offer financial advice or manage the expectations of international students before arrival is likely to be of greater importance in years to come. While international offices may well not be positioned to advise students in detail, the UNIAID International Student Calculator can be enormously valuable in providing budgeting tips and preparing international students for the cost of living in the UK.

### 7.3 Cost of living and financial support during study

The cost of living (including food, drink, transport and social activities) is important to everyone but only three-fifths of international students are satisfied with the cost of living while studying in the UK. This figure has not changed significantly since 2006. It matches the international index, but even in the most highly rated market, satisfaction is far from universal (75%).

*Very expensive. I am really not satisfied that we are paying expensive fees but still pay if we want to use sport facilities and transport.*

Research postgraduate from Malaysia

It might be counter-intuitive at first glance, but students from the richest countries are least satisfied with the cost of living in the UK. Fewer than half from France and Germany are satisfied, despite a weaker pound.

The key message in regard to cost of living is clear communication and provision of concrete examples of what things really cost locally. It is thought good policy to advise students to bring approximately four weeks’ worth of money. Staff should aim to supplement tools such as the UNIAID International Student Calculator with local knowledge. Filtering such information through Facebook groups or international student blogs from the same country can sometimes have more impact.
The university should state overtly that the living cost now is expensive so that international students don’t get a shock.

Research postgraduate from Indonesia

The availability of financial support in the form of bursaries is important. Unsurprisingly, half claim such support is ‘very important’ and more than four-fifths say it is important. Financial support is of almost universal importance to Indian students and generally more important to students from the East. Germans are least concerned, even less so than Americans.

Financial support is of particular importance to international research postgraduates, who are also the least satisfied with the cost of living in the UK. Only two-thirds of all international students are satisfied with the financial support they receive. But this compares favourably with the international index and so confirms that this is an issue for other countries as well. Domestic students are, of course, better catered for (73% satisfied) but financial support nonetheless remains a concern for them also. Just over half of students from Nigeria, Pakistan and Poland are satisfied, although Chinese and Malaysian students are the most satisfied.

Hardship funds constitute another way that UK universities can offer support to international students and demonstrate a willingness to give something back to those who need it. Some universities have innovative and well-established schemes that were set up during the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s. A new UK Border Agency requirement for holding funds in sponsors’ bank accounts for 28 days should eliminate the problem of students arriving with insufficient funds. But the reality is that, despite formal financial regulations, some will require emergency funds at some point. Hardship funds can be top-sliced from international tuition fee income and be jointly administered by student unions.

International students who arrive in the UK on normal Tier 4 (General) student visas are permitted to work 20 hours per week during term time. This presents an opportunity to earn money to augment funds. Four-fifths of international students in the UK rate this opportunity as important. This increases to nine in ten or more of Indian, Pakistani, Nigerian and Polish students. Earning money is of least importance to German students (70%). Taught postgraduates who are on an intensive one-year programme may find it too difficult to manage paid employment even when the need is there.

Employers may discriminate against international students. Nigerian and Pakistani students may have particular problems, since only just over half of each group is satisfied with the opportunities to earn money, despite it being of great importance to them. Indian and Polish students appear to fare better, as their satisfaction rates are consistent with international students as a whole. Universities may be able to help to educate employers about the entitlement of international students to work and how to deal with logistics such as obtaining National Insurance numbers. They can also work with local careers offices to promote the benefits of taking on international students on a part-time basis.
There may be an expectation from international students that universities will intervene on their behalf to secure part-time employment. UK universities are not prepared to offer such a service but they should perhaps more actively communicate the general opportunities that exist. Further support in the form of help with writing CVs and the etiquette of job-hunting could assist international students in taking better advantage of opportunities. Universities can also set an example by taking on as many international students as feasible in university positions in the library, cafeterias, telephone switchboards and retail outlets.

Half of international students in the UK claim to have used the Finance or Accounts department at their university. Only one-third of UK students do so. Satisfaction with these services is high (85%) among international students and consistent across nationalities and study levels.

**Fees, finance and funding: actions to consider**

- Provide detailed information on the range of potential sources of funding, university or otherwise, that prospective international students can access.
- Focus scholarship schemes on specific countries, academic levels or subject areas to align with international recruitment efforts more closely and ensure that students from different backgrounds are able to access these opportunities.
- Ensure that international students are provided with explicit information on the costs of being at your university. Work with student associations on campus to provide accurate cost-of-living information, including advice on how current students budget. Encourage students to use the UNIAID International Student Calculator before they arrive so that expectations on budgeting and costs are better managed.
- Communicate clearly to international students the procedures for opening a UK bank account.
- Invite local banks to participate in orientation programmes and give them the opportunity to explain their services and procedures to new international students.
- Invite local banks to participate in arrival or orientation programmes so that they can explain their services and procedures to new international students.
- Review the provision of financial aid so that sufficient funds exist for international students to access hardship or emergency funds.
- Provide practical information to international students on part-time and vacation work opportunities, including potential employers, locations and rates of pay. Communicate this through a ‘job shop’ or employment agency on campus, perhaps supported by the student union or international student associations.
The University of Wales Institute, Cardiff (UWIC) has more than 1,000 international students from over 70 countries outside of the European Union. UWIC has a longstanding policy of integrating into the International Office all essential functions and services for international students: marketing, recruitment, applications, admission, pre-arrival, accommodation, visas, induction, finance, study skills support, social programme, medical and welfare.

UWIC encourages regular contact between students and International Office staff. Personal finance and support is very important and the International Office has a Finance Officer who assists in all activities.

Services offered include:

- information and advice on academic fees and living costs
- convenient arrangements for payment of fees (bankers draft, bank transfer) including advance fee payments and payments by instalments
- tracking of financial information
- government/ministry sponsored students do not deal personally with fees
- supply of official letters and advice, to enable students to open UK bank accounts
- free airport welcome service including escorted bus transfer and personal taxis
- arranging university and private accommodation
- promoting online the International Student Calculator for management of personal finances
- subsidising international social events (eg parties and receptions) and trips. International Student societies are also given sponsorship to host national cultural and religious events
- immediate assistance when students encounter financial problems, including financial support during difficulties.

These policies of the International Office have the support of the Vice-Chancellor. UWIC consistently scores highly in the International Student Barometer™ satisfaction survey, has a low student dropout rate, a high success rate and a good ‘word of mouth’ reputation internationally. This encourages a consistently high and increasing international student enrolment.
The vast majority of international students will want to move on to a good and rewarding career at some point after graduation. The support that universities can offer to them can not only help make the difference in realising desirable outcomes, but will also ensure that international students continue to study at UK universities. While the route from higher education into employment is not always a straight path, UK universities have performed well compared to universities elsewhere in helping to prepare students for careers. This chapter unwraps these issues.

8.1 The importance of careers support

Although almost all students eventually seek employment, the urgency with which this is sought, and therefore the degree to which help is required, varies. Only a third of international students in the UK say that they intend to move into employment immediately after studies (of these, about half intend to work in the UK for up to the legal limit of two years). A further third intend to continue studying and the remainder are mostly undecided. International students on taught postgraduate programmes are more likely to seek short-term employment in the UK after graduation than other students.
8.2 Work experience

The opportunity for work experience as part of a study programme is so important for many students that it is the deciding factor in the choice of university. Depending on the academic discipline, work experience helps to make an effective CV. Work experience in the form of teaching assistant positions is particularly sought after by some postgraduate research students who need these skills for academic careers. It is therefore important that students have clarity about access to work experience.

About 80% of international students rate the availability of work experience as important or very important. This rises to 90% for students from China, India, Malaysia, Nigeria and Pakistan. Students from the EU, North America and other developed nations often seek a more ‘rounded’ university experience and are less focused on job opportunities. This puts them in line with UK domestic students, three-quarters of whom state work experience is important to them.

Levels of satisfaction with work experience opportunities among international students are middling, at 66%. There is clearly scope for universities to better meet student expectations, though it should be noted that the UK compares well with the international index (61%) and is only slightly behind the best in class (USA, 69%). The rating of 66% also represents a significant improvement from 58% in 2007.

Malaysian students are the most satisfied (76%), but most nationalities cluster around the average figure. International undergraduate and taught postgraduates are not significantly less satisfied with work experience opportunities, despite higher expectations than among international research postgraduates.

Work placements are important for increasing a student’s future employment opportunities, so they should be integrated as a part of our course, which we now don’t get.

Taught postgraduate from China

For my course, I expected more practicals and on-field practices than all theory. That’s what employers want to see when they interview you.

Taught postgraduate from Nigeria

International students often express interest in securing relevant work experience as part of their programmes and it is for universities to consider how this may impact on the development of curricula for these students. Communication throughout the recruitment process may be helpful, for example. Many careers offices use various methods to communicate with international students, including databases and international careers blogs, though more could be done to bring together employers with students.
8.3 Employability

For some nationalities employability is the *raison d’être* for study itself (around 75% of Indian and Nigerian students, for example).

Interestingly, international postgraduate research students place less emphasis on employability than other postgraduates or undergraduates, which suggests that their choices of study are more predicated on programme content as an end in itself.

In spite of universities having no control over economic externalities, there has been an increase in satisfaction among international students in the UK, from 71% in 2006 to 79% in 2008. This places the UK well ahead of the international index (73%) and equal to the best in class.

International students, and notably Indians and Nigerians, believe that employability is greatly enhanced by making good contacts. Three-quarters of international students are satisfied with the opportunities they receive to make contacts useful for their future careers. This compares well with the international index (71%) and matches the best. While satisfaction is broadly uniform across students groups, the two most demanding groups, Indians and Nigerians, are most likely to be very satisfied with the contacts they make.

8.4 Careers advisory services

An interesting observation from the ISB data is that only around 20% of international students report using the careers advisory services offered by their universities (and 29% of final-year students). It is possible that some students attend events or use services without recognising that they are offered by the careers advisory service, but the low figure is surprising nonetheless and warrants investigation.

It first of all indicates that better promotion of careers advisory services to international students is required. This could be achieved through links with academic staff, links with student clubs and societies, and through student unions. Equally important is ‘badging’ existing events so that students are aware that the careers service is involved.

Those students who have the most interest in future career opportunities report using the careers advisory services most: that is, students from India, Nigeria and China, and students on taught postgraduate programmes.

Among those who use careers advisory services, satisfaction is high (87%). This is the best on the international stage and significantly ahead of the international index (74%). It also represents a considerable improvement since 2007, from 76%. It also broadly matches the perceptions of domestic UK students. Satisfaction with careers advisory services is high among all international students, at all study levels, and in all university types. More than 90% of Nigerian, Chinese and Malaysian students are satisfied or very satisfied with the careers services on offer.
At the least, it is important to gain higher visibility and increase usage for careers services by creating stronger links with student support services generally, to build more of a ‘one-stop shop’. While it may not be possible or appropriate to accommodate all services together (since careers services tend to have a different relationship with students), co-location and joint promotion of some services will be useful. Personable and accessible services with a customer focus are important.

Effective links with a range of international employers is an important part of the international offer. The British Council and other organisations have supported a range of careers programmes that could be promoted to current students. The PMI2 programme has some resources for careers advisors in developing services for international students, and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and the British Council share good practice from this initiative.

Stronger engagement with alumni and collaborative working with alumni offices will be an essential component of improving relationships with international employers. International alumni can act as ambassadors for universities and can promote employment opportunities in their fields. Some alumni are in a position to recruit graduates from their former universities, and some will be able to advise current students on career prospects, through online alumni services or even perhaps through in-person advice at university-organised events.

Careers advisory services do much to improve relationships with employers, and organisations such as AGCAS and the Association of Graduate Recruiters share good practice in services and on improving the understanding among employers of the visa and other regulations around employing international students.

### 8.5 Other careers advice

Advice and support from individual academics is also valued by the vast majority of international and domestic students. Continuing to ensure that career-relevant information on specific sectors is available to all international students is likely to be increasingly important in the future, as is the development of successful cooperation with professional associations and skills networks.

Seventy one per cent of international students are satisfied with the careers advice they receive from academic staff. This is comparable with the best internationally and with satisfaction among domestic UK students. It also represents a substantial improvement over the 56% in 2006.

Two-thirds of Indian and Nigerian students say that this advice is very important; 90% of those from China, Malaysia and Pakistan say that careers advice from academic staff is important. International students on taught postgraduate courses place more importance on such advice than their counterparts on undergraduate or postgraduate research programmes.
Careers and employability: actions to consider

- Include international careers services in a university-wide approach to internationalisation.

- Coordinate services to international students with other student services areas and ensure that appropriate expectations for work experience during study and employment after study are conveyed during the recruitment process.

- Understand the characteristics of key international student constituencies at the university; tailor services and promotion to the different needs of these groups.

- Consider developing partnerships with international employers to develop a greater capacity to access the international labour market on behalf of domestic and international students.

- Consider the appointment of an international careers advisor to provide a focus for international careers work throughout the university and develop dedicated material to support the role.

- Where employability is an explicit part of the curriculum, provide clarity to students on what to expect and how they can build their experience portfolios.

- Encourage programmes for international students that support universal skills development for global careers: communication, presentation and language skills, team-work, problem-solving and time management.

- Work with a range of organisations to offer opportunities for employers to meet and engage with graduates.

- Develop effective engagement with alumni and alumni services to ensure that graduates have better access to local and international employment opportunities.

- Consider a greater sharing of best practice for international careers advisory units between services such as AGCAS, UKCISA, and the National Association of Student Employment Services; develop links for career-related information with sector skills councils and professional associations.
Careers: Robert Gordon University

The Career Centre at Robert Gordon University (RGU) connects with international students prior to arrival by supplying service information and notification of careers events such as our Part-Time Job Fair. On arrival this information is reinforced through a university-wide international student orientation programme and through the Careers Centre and induction sessions where service delivery and student expectations are discussed. The university believes that managing the expectations of international students is key to building a positive and productive working relationship. This relationship is developed through our work with students and targeted careers inputs to courses and with our stand-alone Essential Skills suite of employability workshops.

Another key feature of this policy is active collaboration between the Careers Centre and the International Student Advice, Visa and Immigration Service to provide separate but inter-connected services to support international students throughout their career planning. Both services are housed and managed in a central Student Services department.

RGU prides itself in accessibility in relation to the Careers Centre and an online presence that includes a booking system and JOBSHOP, an interactive opportunities database and searchable employer directory. The university encourages and provides opportunities for international students to network with employers through on-campus presentations and vocational careers fairs. Coupled with an active promotion of international graduate potential to employer partners, this completes the triangle of the approach.
Useful links

Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS)
www.agcas.org.uk
Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR)
www.agr.org.uk
Education UK
www.educationuk.org
The Higher Education Academy ITALIS project
www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/teachingandlearning/internationalisation/italis
International UNIAID Student Calculator
www.studentcalculator.org.uk/international
National Association of Student Employment Services (NASES)
www.nases.org.uk
National Union of Students (NUS)
www.nus.org.uk
Prepare for Success
www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk
Prime Minister’s Initiative for International Education (PMI2)
www.britishcouncil.org/learning-pmi2-connect
Studentpad
www.studentpad.co.uk
UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA)
www.ukcisa.org.uk
UCAS
www.ucas.ac.uk
The International Unit would like to thank the following members of the project steering group for their expert advice:

**Jo Doyle**  
Head of the International Office  
University of Southampton

**Dr Heather Forland**  
Head of International Development  
Kingston University London

**Professor Philip Garrahan**  
International HE Consultant

**Richard Kington**  
Director of  
Accommodation Services  
University of Edinburgh

**Maggie McNorton**  
Head of International Partnerships  
University of Glamorgan

**Frances Meegan**  
Careers Adviser  
Cambridge University  
Careers Service

**Beatrice Merrick**  
Director  
Services and Research  
UKCISA

**Dr David Pilsbury**  
Pro Vice-Chancellor (International)  
University of Coventry

**Geoff Pringle**  
Director  
Campus Services  
University of Exeter

**Jo Purves**  
Head of the International Office  
Northumbria University

**Tracey Wells**  
Assistant Director  
Oxford University Careers Service

**Stephen Williams**  
Assistant Director  
International Office  
University of Warwick

**Zena Wooldridge**  
Director of Sport  
University of Birmingham

**Christina Yan Zhang**  
NUS National Executive

We would also like to thank:

**Elspeth Jones**  
International Dean  
Leeds Metropolitan University

**Ian Wright**  
Consultant  
i-graduate

**Pamela Barrett**  
Consultant  
i-graduate

**Tim Rogers**  
Consultant  
i-graduate

---

Alternative formats  
This publication can be downloaded in pdf format from the UK HE International Unit website  
[www.international.ac.uk](http://www.international.ac.uk)
About the UK HE International Unit

The UK HE International Unit coordinates, promotes and undertakes activities to support UK universities in a globally competitive world.

The UK HE International Unit is funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Department for Employment and Learning (Northern Ireland), GuildHE and Universities UK.

A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience

William Archer
Elspeth Jones
Jessica Davison

UK Higher Education International Unit
Research Series/6
March 2010