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'Enhancing the international student experience'

Universities could be really effectively run were it not for students. Staff-room banter notwithstanding, references to 'enhancing the international student experience' are now ubiquitous. In the UK alone, there are **conferences**, reports, scholarly books and media coverage around the international student experience. The upshot – and this may reflect the deteriorating financial circumstances of our sector – is that the discourse around the internationalisation of higher education is becoming more explicitly student-centred.

There are different ways of unravelling the mysteries of the international student experience. At the thoughtful end of the spectrum, Catherine Montgomery from Northumbria University has just published a book entitled '**Understanding the International Student Experience**'. This has empirical data and emphasises the impacts of socio-cultural contexts on the international student experience.

At the mercenary and grammatically challenged end, a recent conference in London promoted itself by advising that 'the international student has become a customer of UK higher education demanding a total experience and return on their investment'.

There is also YouTube. A video of a **Columbia Business School** orientation seminar for new arrivals includes an amusing primer on unravelling American idioms. Some of its examples ('I'll have to think about it' means 'I thought about it and the answer is no') apply equally well to the UK.

At the unequivocally 'how to' end, the International Unit yesterday released '**A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Experience**' (see also p3). This guide, freely available online to UK university staff (and in hard copy until we run out), focuses on the satisfaction rates of international students across a range of variables via a wealth of primary data from the **International Student Barometer (ISB)** of the **International Graduate Insight Group** here in the UK.

Such variables in student satisfaction include first impressions of the arrivals and orientation process; opening a bank account; the quality of seminar rooms, accommodation and sports facilities; student societies; welfare provision and more besides. Across these items, the guide records the proportion of international students that judge them to be important and the proportion that are satisfied with the actual delivery. It also juxtaposes these perceptions against those of domestic UK students, against an international benchmarking index, and against data from a few years earlier.

UK universities are generally way out in front of the international index but are the 'best in class' only rarely. American universities do better on quite a few variables, including the quality of infrastructure and facilities. New Zealand ranks top in the ease of opening bank accounts (the UK does very poorly for international students in this regard) and Singapore is unassailable in providing a safe environment.

While most of the variables in the guide can be directly tackled by individual universities, there are of course others that are in the realm of public policy. In the UK, the ISB shows that while 80% of international students express satisfaction with the immigration process on arrival, only 66% are satisfied with the process for acquiring a visa. This further quantifies the survey evidence from Universities UK noted in our **last issue**. It only requires one big thing to go wrong for the overall experience of international students to be tainted.

Events are as important as cultural context to the student experience. The internet throws up an abundance of Australian references but what is striking about them, in the wake of recent events, is their focus on the safety of international students. A **speech by Education Minister Gillard** in May 2009 is a case in point, as are a Universities Australia paper ('**Enhancing the Student Experience & Student Safety**') from June 2009 and an International Student Strategy agreed by the **Council of Australian Governments** in July 2009.

The discourse on the international student experience can therefore contract to a single issue over which the HE sector has little control and individual universities almost none. Although this is worth avoiding, it is, like the visas issue, not comfortably within the sector's sphere of influence.

Markets & Intelligence

Forecasting future recruitment trends: The role of market share

Deciding which international markets on which to concentrate resources is a crucial business for universities, and one which is fraught with difficulty.

This is partly because future patterns of international student recruitment are influenced by so many variables, some macro – at the level of global economic trends – and some micro, at the level of national economies, demographics and localised and difficult to predict events like outbreaks of swine flu and other natural disasters. But it is also difficult because patterns of student recruitment reflect history, and in particular the cumulative effect of actions taken by particular institutions in particular countries over long periods of time.

To some extent at least predictions of future trends can become self-fulfilling prophecies: country X looks like a hot prospect over the next ten years (for a variety of perfectly good reasons), so institutions invest time and resources in recruiting from that country and, lo and behold, the numbers soar.

One potentially fruitful route when deciding where to focus resources for future recruitment, is to consider the question of market share. Market share has two meanings: national market share – how well we do against other countries – and institutional market share – how well a particular institution does in relation to others, either by country or overall.

An analysis of national market share, by country, is highly instructive. In particular, in cases where the overall market for international students is large, but the UK share relatively small, there may well be mileage in focusing resources in such markets, or at least investing effort in understanding why the UK performs relatively poorly in these markets.

The table above lists the top ten countries for outwardly mobile students, and compares the UK's share of this market with the country which has the largest share. In some cases, the low UK share is to be expected: it is entirely predictable, for example, that 67% of mobile Moroccan students choose to study in France, and fewer than 2% in the UK. One finding stands out in particular, however. South Korea sends the third largest number of students abroad after China and India, and yet the UK enjoys only 4% of this share. The dominance of the US in this market is understandable given the history, but we should not ignore either the relatively low priority given to this market by UK recruiters – particularly when compared to the effort invested in China and India.

If the UK's market share of Korean students were increased to the same level as its share of Chinese market, this would result in more than 16,000 students coming to the UK – 12,000 more than at present.

Country	No. of students overseas	% of UK global market share	Largest market share (%)
China	421,148	11.7%	US (23.5%)
India	153,312	15.5%	US (56%)
South Korea	105,327	4.1%	US (60%)
Japan	54,506	10%	US (66%)
US	50,265	32%	UK (32%)
Malaysia	46,473	25%	Aus (39%)
Canada	43,918	11%	US (66%)
Morocco	41,502	<2%	France (67%)
Hong Kong	32,726	29%	Aus (41%)
Uzbekistan	31,889	<2%	Kyrgystan (60%)

**Adapted from UNESCO, Global Education Digest 2009*

Teaching and learning for international students

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) and UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA) have launched a joint, two-year venture, focusing on teaching and learning for international students

'Teaching International Students' project is co-funded by the HEA and the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI2), and focuses on the ways that lecturers and other teaching staff can better meet the diverse learning needs of international students. The project will establish a research and resource database via its website as well as provide guidance for staff development strategies through events and guidance material.

Click **HERE** for further information.

In Focus: International Unit report launch

A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience Breakfast Briefing Launch

House of Commons Terrace Marquee, 09 March 2010

Seventy delegates attended yesterday's launch, in the House of Commons, of the latest report from the UK HE International Unit, *A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience*. The guide, written by i-graduate, is a practical guide for universities that uses data from the International Student Barometer (ISB), the flagship research tool of the International Graduate Insight Group (i-graduate). The data convey what international students think is important and how satisfied they are with services provided. The views of domestic UK students and an international index provide context and benchmarking.

Delegates from government, industry, parliament and higher education attended the event, hosted by Gisela Stuart MP. Charles Kennedy MP, a former Fulbright Scholar and current Rector of Glasgow University, and Professor Colin Riordan, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Essex, gave entertaining accounts of their experiences as international students.

Charles Kennedy emphasised the need for early contact between international students and universities, even before they arrive – an echo of a point made in the guide. Satisfaction ratings were of unlimited importance, he said, particularly in light of rising student expectations. His time at Indiana University in the US as a Fulbright Scholar brought home to him the importance of human contact and the difference this can make to the overall experiences of students.

Professor Riordan spoke about his experiences as an international student in Germany, which at the time (the late 1970s) seemed a long way away. That was no longer the case, he said, with the development of communications technology. He drew attention to the explicitly 'student-centred' nature of the guide and how, overall, the UK does well but that it often falls short of the top grade when measured against traditional and emerging competitors. He praised the guide's focus on what UK universities can change and predicted that they would turn to it again and again (one university requested 100 copies).

The report's findings were presented by Will Archer, Director of i-graduate. He spoke briefly on the history of the ISB which has been running for five years and is used by almost every UK university. He highlighted some of the UK's successes in student satisfaction. But he pointed out that most of the successes have not come as a result of major capital investment, but rather from staff engagement. He noted that the government of Germany has committed €16bn for higher education internationalisation, a figure that dwarfs equivalent spending in the UK, as welcome as the latter is.

If we are generally doing well, he asked whether it was a case of 'job done'. The answer was a clear no: each new cohort of international students represented a fresh start and each individual had his or her own expectations. He rhetorically asked what level of satisfaction should satisfy the UK HE sector – 75%, 80%? Perhaps 90% was a reasonable cut-off. One could ask Akio Toyoda. Car of the Year 2009 was the Toyota Prius and it turns out that nine out of 10 of them work fine. Will concluded that excellence is a pursuit, not an achievement.

The question-and-answer session opened with a call from Christina Yan Zhang, an international PhD student, NUS National Executive officer, and project steering group member, for panel members to help to facilitate the internationalisation of UK students so that they understand, and are more sensitive to, the needs of international students. Professor Riordan responded that all students should be considered as international students but that there was often a struggle to get UK students out of UK universities, let alone abroad.



*Charles Kennedy MP
addresses delegates*



*Delegates discuss the report
over breakfast*



*Will Archer, Director of i-graduate,
shares a joke with Charles Kennedy
and delegates*



Gisela Stuart MP chairs proceedings

In Focus: International Unit report launch



Delegates discuss the report over morning coffee



L-R: Dr William Lawton, UK HE International Unit; Will Archer, Director, i-graduate; Gisela Stuart MP; Charles Kennedy MP



Professor Colin Riordan, Chair of the UK HE International Unit Advisory Board and Vice-Chancellor, University of Essex, addresses delegates



The panel take questions from the floor

A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience Breakfast Briefing Launch

House of Commons Terrace Marquee, 09 March 2010

Jan Bamford from London Metropolitan University raised concerns over funding cuts. She gave the example of international student support in the US which was better than the UK and had good levels of funding. In the UK, she said, there may be a rising tension between aspiration and what is achievable in terms of international student support.

Professor Michael Hoey from the University of Liverpool said the guide was a 'timely publication' and he congratulated the International Unit on its output. He picked up on an earlier comment from Will Archer on how Bahraini students encourage each other to come to the UK which in itself is good, but can lead to large groupings of particular nationalities on campus. The dilemma was that while such groupings might be seen as a type of ghettoisation, it might also be the case that these critical masses were necessary for these students to have a positive experience and hence, for the transmission of these experiences to future students.

Will Archer noted that some universities might encourage this from the start by, for example, asking an existing student from China to contact a new applicant from China in order to increase the likelihood of converting the application. Professor Riordan added that students do inevitably form their own societies and that perhaps this is a bigger issue for smaller universities.

Harry Wang from the University of Bedfordshire broadened the discussion to introduce the issue of off-campus safety and security in relation to the local community. He said that often police were powerless to act in the face of problems between students and the local community.

Gisela Stuart responded that it was different everywhere. In some cases there were radicals on campus. At some universities, Manchester for example, you could not escape the city' while at Birmingham you would never see the city. Charles Kennedy chipped in that Glasgow has the highest proportion of stay-at-home students in the UK which in itself could be constraining.

Nick Butler from SOAS and Colin Monk from the University of Brighton argued that the visas and immigration issue was the elephant in the room and that it went to the heart of the matter on whether the UK was still a 'welcoming destination' for international students. They suggested that despite the best efforts of Universities UK in making representations to the UK Border Agency and Home Office ministers, we were in danger of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.

Charles Kennedy noted the point and said he would investigate visa approval rates and the time required for them over the first year, as we approached the first anniversary of the points-based system. Professor Riordan agreed that Universities UK worked closely with UKBA, that security was a political issue and universities needed to be realistic.

Gisela Stuart, a member of the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee, pointed out that about 80% of visa applications from Pakistan were forgeries, and very good ones, so it was clear to see why visa approvals took time.

The report is available to download from the secure area of the International Unit website **HERE** (UK universities only, login required). Hard copies can be obtained at no cost by emailing elizabeth.farnell@international.ac.uk

In Focus: Quality, Price and Reputation

Quality, Price and Reputation: Conference report

More than 90 delegates attended the joint International Unit/i-graduate conference, 'Quality, Price and Reputation', on 24 February. To set the mood, the keynote address by Professor Steve Smith, President of Universities UK, contrasted the greater investment in higher education by many countries as a response to recession with the cuts recently announced by the UK government. Against this backdrop, the conference got to the heart of student finance matters. The simplistic notion that inflating international student recruitment can offset domestic contraction raises real dilemmas for higher education that range from organisational and financial to ethical and moral.

Elizabeth Tromer of the Technical University of Denmark noted that their sector was not exposed to the same cash problems and discussed how the introduction of fees for international students in 2006 impacted on the HE sector. The number of international students and the dropout rate both dropped sharply, and their popularity among both Danish students and staff rose. A more marketised mindset emerged.

Dr Dean L Hubbard, President Emeritus of Northwest Missouri State University, provided a penetrating analysis of the drivers of international student recruitment. Expectation drivers included experience and reputation; perception drivers included ease of interaction, timeliness and doing the unexpected. He further noted how the perception of value was relatively easy to manipulate by altering the quality/cost ratio, though he characterised lowering cost as an insipid alternative to working on quality.

Carolyn Campbell from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education took a case-study approach to the influence of regulation and accreditation on the reputations of HE systems. She noted the government of Singapore's rapid response to brand damage caused by bogus colleges in 2009.

Future pricing models were presented by Professor Nick Barr of the LSE to meet four criteria: strengthen the quality of teaching and learning, widen participation, protect autonomy, and sustain the fiscal base of higher education institutions. His audience was impressed by the economic analysis, less so by the ways and means of achieving policy change. The status quo is that deferred variable fees are capped at £3209 this year and means-tested grants are available for some students. Whether the lifting of the cap will happen after the approaching election is in less doubt than the impact it will have when fewer places are available to study. The recent achievements in widening participation to lower income groups look set to be reversed.

Wes Streeting, President of the National Union of Students, argued that fees adversely affected participation, but the main thrust of the panel discussion was the 'need versus merit' dichotomy in allocating scholarship money. The NUS position was opposed to awarding such funds on merit but others argued that academic merit was the only easily measurable mechanism actually available.

In the competitive context that is the UK higher education sector, nothing is more sensitive than the matter of setting international student fees. Perhaps this explains its almost total absence from public debate – or does it?

Presentations by Neil Kemp and Will Archer made a refreshing change. They opened up the debate about fee-setting for international students for the first time in a large policy forum but left their audience with a number of challenges. The first is finding out from reliable sources what others are charging, the second is working out full programme costs, and the third is getting closer to understanding of how prices influence student choices.

There are clearly major obstacles in the way: relying on course fees announced on institutional websites tells us only so much, and when potential students are faced with paying these they rightly ask questions about the published ticket price and the availability of discounts. University staff who have fielded questions at international recruitment fairs will testify that the three most common queries are: Where is your university? (for those not in Edinburgh, Manchester and London); do you have an MBA; and what scholarships are there?

Students, their families or sponsors confront a nexus of issues in making their choice of university, knowing that they will part with significant sums for a higher education experience that is promoted largely on the basis of reputation. Fees and maintenance costs might be defrayed by a merit-based scholarship with the benefits this brings to a CV.



The 'Scholarships and Funding' panel at the Quality, Price and Reputation conference, 24 February 2010

In Focus: Quality, Price and Reputation

Quality, Price and Reputation: Conference report, continued...

So how is the HE sector dealing with these aspects of international student recruitment? The starting point is the unavoidable fact that money received from the HE funding councils may not be used to subsidise the international activities of universities. Such funds may only be used for the purpose for which they are given: to meet (part of) the costs of providing higher education for UK domestic and EU students. To do otherwise is judged *ultra vires* and raises the risk of legal challenge.

The HE sector thus has to approach international recruitment might therefore be expected to set their fees in the light of what is judged carefully and the weight given to the cost element.

While many declare that they can at least closely approach their claims prove on closer inspection to be at best partial. They struggle to deliver and support the learning experience. They struggle with the routines for understanding and allocating indirect or overhead costs.

ongoing attempts by many in higher education to benchmark their performance acknowledge the persistent lack of consensus on determining what is best.

All of this leaves those setting international fees and determining what this were not enough, there is a complex set of moral dilemmas. Universities are de facto meeting the needs of new social elites as they do in their own country's provision. Yet, while these same institutions are in the UK, their freedom to act consistently in the international market is described.

For his part at the conference, Shadow Minister for Universities and Skills strengths of UK HE are its autonomy, flexibility and diversity. He argued for the repayment of loans (there is £30bn outstanding, he said) in relation to the dilemmas described above. He argued for a focus on American liberal-arts colleges that focus on teaching without pretense to cutting-edge research.

So, has the conference done us a favour? Would it be easier to leave the questions to one side and just get on with Prime Minister Brown's agenda of 'doubling the value' of our education exports? Or will the international community want us to play a much more even hand, and show that as a country we are willing to give and not just to take?

Professor Philip Garrahan
International HE Consultant



David Willetts MP, Shadow Secretary of State for Universities and Skills addresses delegates

**Research
& Collaboration**
Wolverhampton strengthens links with India

The University of Wolverhampton recently signed a new agreement with **Bishop Heber College in Tiruchirappalli**, South India.



The new Memorandum of Understanding allows the college to offer an International MBA to professionals with at least two years experience. The course will initially open for twenty students with bi-yearly intakes in June and September. The MBA programme will last for fourteen months, and will include visits from Wolverhampton lecturers.

The partnership continues the flourishing student and staff exchange programmes already in place between the two institutions and strengthens the Wolverhampton's relations with Indian colleges. Previously, Wolverhampton signed an agreement with Donba College and opened an office New Delhi (**see IF 20**).

DelPHE-Iraq programme launches partner-finding tool

The British Council Development Partnerships in Higher Education – Iraq (DelPHE-Iraq) has launched a partner finding service to match Iraqi higher education institutions with other countries.



The service lists institutions in Iraq, the UK and other countries that have expressed an interest in finding a partner to work with as part of the programme.

Click **HERE** to view the list. For further information, email delpheiraq@britishcouncil.org

As this newsletter **reported recently**, the application deadline to participate in the DelPHE-Iraq programme is Friday 26 March. Exploratory grants of up to £10,000 are also being offered to cover the cost of visits and communications that support the development of new partnerships and for existing partnerships that intend to submit a full application.

Click **HERE** for more information about the DelPHE-Iraq programme.

SE Asia takes steps towards Bologna style system

Recent reports in the **US** and **Asia** press suggest a move by Japan, China and South Korea to introduce a standardised credit system similar to the 'Bologna Process' in Europe.

Japan's Ministry of Education has drawn up a new framework in conjunction with China and South Korea to allow universities in all three countries to standardise student evaluation methods and certify academic credits. Currently, individual universities in the three countries swap academic credits with each other at their own discretion.

According to the **Daily Yomiuri** newspaper, the three countries have taken the first step towards a pan-Asian student exchange programme, a move that comes days before the launch for of the European Higher Education Area (the culmination of 10 years of the 'Bologna Process') under which European nations agreed to 'harmonize' their higher education systems with common degree times and expectations.

Japan is keen to internationalise its higher education system, **announcing plans back in 2008** to triple the number of foreign students at its universities by the end of this decade and the education ministry hopes this new venture will encourage more students to study abroad. Data from the Institute of International Education **Open Doors report** (2009) showed a drop off in Japanese students studying in the US, down 14% from the 2007/08.

Similar discussions on degree standardisation have been raised in the US. At a **recent conference** of college presidents, questions were asked why there was not more cooperation between universities in the US, Canada and Mexico to create a common agenda in higher education in North America.

Back in Japan, under the planned new framework, the ministry aims to standardise rules to certify foreign institutions' credits when students return to Japanese universities hopes the system will eventually cover universities in member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, as a prelude to a European Erasmus-style exchange programme.

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If you have any feedback or suggestions regarding this newsletter and its contents or would like to bring to our attention news from the international higher education sector, please email info@international.ac.uk

**UK HE Europe
Unit campaign
launch**

UK HE in Europe: Marking 10 years of Bologna

The UK Higher Education Europe Unit will kick off a campaign on Friday to mark the UK's role in the formal launch of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

As Ministers for higher education from 46 European countries gather in Vienna on Friday (12th) to celebrate this landmark event, the Europe Unit will launch a new publication, 'The European Higher Education Area: Celebrating a decade of UK engagement' and a micro-site profiling the UK's role in the development of the EHEA.

The establishment of the European Higher Education Area has been driven by what has become known as the Bologna Process. One of its main aims is to enable students and academics to move more freely between European universities. The UK was one of the original four signatory countries to the Process, which has now expanded to include 46 European nations.

On the agenda at the Anniversary Conference is the finalisation of the Budapest-Vienna Declaration to be issued jointly by the Ministers for higher education. The Declaration will note the unique partnership approach of the Bologna Process, taking stock of all the progress to date by participating countries in realising the EHEA.

Ministers will discuss the next decade of the Bologna Process, particularly areas of activity which still require implementation, such as degree and curriculum reform, recognition and widening participation. They will also reaffirm the principles of academic freedom, autonomy and accountability as cornerstones of the EHEA.

The Europe Unit's micro-site and publication will be launched on Friday (follow the link from the website):

www.europeunit.ac.uk

Copies of the report can be ordered (free of charge) by emailing:

info@europeunit.ac.uk or downloaded directly from the micro-site.



**Launching Friday:
Celebrating a decade of UK
engagement in the EHEA**