

Press release - Tuesday 09 March 2010

New guide tells UK universities what international students really want

A guide published today by the UK Higher Education International Unit provides an invaluable tool for UK universities in their efforts to 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.

A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience, written by the International Graduate Insight Group Ltd. (i-graduate), is a practical manual for universities using data from i-graduate's International Student Barometer (ISB). It combines this data with opinions from international students and practitioners in the field and offers recommendations to inform those at the heart of international education.

The guide covers all aspects of the international student experience. It records what international students think is important, how satisfied they are with services provided, and juxtaposes these views against those of domestic UK students and an international index of students studying worldwide. Many universities already go beyond basic services and the guide affirms existing good practices.

Some of the main findings of the report include:

- Application and arrival: Customer-relationship management and the use of automated technology is crucial as prospective students have ever-higher expectations of online services.
- Cultural and social integration: Begin early, ideally before arrival; involve existing students, Students' Unions, clubs and societies, including those designed for international students; continue social integration opportunities throughout the year; promote them better.
- 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.
- Teaching quality and learning support: Better promotion of existing support 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.
- Finance: International students value those universities which have a broader view of internationalisation and see students not only in economic terms. Scholarship schemes reinforce that view and are effective promotional tools. Advance communication on banking difficulties may help to offset frustrations on arrival in the UK.

Professor Steve Smith, President of Universities UK, said, "This new guide is 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.

"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, 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.”

Will Archer, Director of i-graduate, said, “UK universities lead the world in listening and responding to their international students. Since 2006, the first year of the ISB, we have seen satisfaction levels increase by 8 to 10 percentage points. That’s an astonishing achievement for the sector. Students are no less critical today, but universities are a lot better at listening and responding.

This achievement doesn’t reflect massive capital investment. Much of the change so far has been attitudinal – recognising the part that each member of staff plays in the student experience, and the small things people do that make a big difference to how students feel.”

Across most of the UK’s best universities – from the oldest to the newest – there is now a substantial body of evidence showing significant positive change, year on year. The new guide shows how they are achieving this.”

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Notes

1. The report will be launched at a Breakfast Briefing event at the House of Commons on 09 March 2010.
2. *A UK Guide to Enhancing the International Student Experience* is available to download from the UK HE International Unit website: www.international.ac.uk. Login and password details are required (UK users only).
3. Since the conception of the ISB in 2005, i-graduate has gathered feedback from more than 600,000 students in 16 countries through a standardised questionnaire that captures key information and allows for national and international benchmarks. To date, over 270 higher education institutions worldwide have engaged the ISB, which runs in the USA, Australia, New Zealand and continental Europe, among other countries. 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.
4. For further information contact Elizabeth Farnell, Communications Officer, UK HE International Unit: 020 7419 5609 / elizabeth.farnell@international.ac.uk or at i-graduate contact Jess Davison on 020 7222 7890 / jess.davison@i-graduate.org

The UK Higher Education International Unit coordinates, promotes and undertakes activities designed 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. www.international.ac.uk

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