

Student Experience Project

Freshers of '15': student perspectives – tracking the international student journey University of Sussex

Why this project?

Sussex currently has students from over 120 different countries, and we recognise that the cultures which students leave in order to come here vary enormously, and that there is no 'one size fits all' as to how best to support these students. We wanted to offer our students a platform to express their thoughts, feelings and experiences about their life and studying in the UK as they progress through their degree at Sussex. We wanted to track their journey in a methodical and meaningful way, and to use the findings to directly shape the services we offer. The aim was to ensure that University services are responding at appropriate times to the challenges being faced.

Outcomes of the project

The project has provided detailed insight about the international student experience at Sussex. Some findings have not been surprising, but instead reconfirm their continued position as key concerns being faced. What was gained, however, was an increased awareness of the extent to which certain issues were fundamental to these students' experiences, as well as a better understanding of the cultures students had left behind. A bank of feedback, focus group discussions, and social media content has been produced to be used in future service planning and as a resource for other new international students preparing for life at Sussex.



What did we do?

The project was set up and run by two International Student Support Officers at Sussex. An initial timeline for the year was identified, with key milestones scheduled for appropriate moments in the academic calendar. In order to chart a student's journey, a pre-arrival task was first required and a focus group to meet the students soon after they arrived was also key. So as not to be too intrusive about the student's academic and social commitments, we decided to have just one other in-person focus group in the spring term, but that all other tasks were to be completed online to provide flexibility to the participants.

At various intervals throughout the year, participants were asked to respond to four statements by telling us how strongly they agreed or disagreed with them on a scale of 1-10. They were then asked three

more times throughout the year to do the same thing with the same four statements, in order to measure variation and changes in attitude over time. The statements were:

1. How homesick do you feel?
2. How do you feel about your study workload?
3. How do you feel about your home life outside of your studies?
4. Overall, how are you feeling about your life at Sussex?

Focus group questions were related to the time of year that the groups took place but many of the same questions appeared in both so that we could chart changes over time.

For other tasks, we would request short answers to various questions which gave us an insight into daily experiences. Where possible, participants provided accompanying images to be used for social media posts.

In January, we hired a Social Media Intern to set up designated online platforms and to post the content provided by our participants so that experiences and feedback was shared publicly with the university community.

In order to keep participants engaged and involved in the project for the duration, we identified a number of incentives including two social events, free hoodies, the opportunity to contribute to the University's high profile One World Week through involvement in a mini-project, and the opportunity to undertake paid work as a One World Week Ambassador.

Timescale

The project was scheduled to take place between August 2015 and June 2016 in order to capture results from a full academic year.

Challenges

- We were not able to provide branded 'University of Sussex' and 'Freshers of '15' hoodies to the group at the beginning of the year as planned, as the University was undertaking its own rebranding process which prevented us from using the existing university logo. We were able to use the previously authorised One World Week logo to print alternative hoodies for participants, but these were provided later into the project.
- We were late in hiring our Social Media Intern due to autumn term welcome activities being busier than ever before, so it wasn't until the spring term that we finally got the content of the autumn term activities posted, by which point in the year it was a challenge to build 'likes' and therefore have much engagement with the material. Our intern was then taken ill for an extended period, we were not in a position to re-advertise the role and the responsibility was incorporated



Joanna Tsui

Hong Kong

"I was very worried and excited before coming here. I think there has been a few things about culture shock after arriving at Sussex. The first is when getting off the bus people will say 'thank you' to the bus driver but in Hong Kong we never say 'thank you' to the bus driver. I think the second is most local students like clubbing after school. That's when I really felt very shocked because I don't really drink alcohol and I don't know how to react and interact and communicate with the local students. Although the students in Hong Kong will go clubbing not many of them go every night and they also have another activity such as going to karaoke and they will sing together and sometimes they will drink alcohol. The third is any time they would say 'how are you' to you. I think this is very curious because I don't know why British always say 'How are you?' I checked this online and know that in this culture that greeting is showing you are very polite so I've started getting used to it."

"I think here it is too relaxed because my life tempo becomes very slow here. It is very different to Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a very busy city people on the streets are walking very fast and sometimes you will feel very pressured but I am here, I am very relaxed, and I am so happy that I am here because I have met a lot of people from different countries. In Hong Kong I don't have the opportunities to talk to many different people from other countries."

"When you meet really good people and good friends you will feel you are settled here. I made friends and we celebrate festivals such as the Chinese Lunar New Year together. It don't feel homesick and so I think that I am getting used to being here."

"Here I am very relaxed and I am so happy that I am here because I have met a lot of people from different countries."

into the day-to-day workload of an officer who was leading on the project, but who did not have the capacity to develop this side of the project to its full potential.

- We had planned a second social gathering for the end of the year, but many students left Sussex and the UK as soon as their assessments were finished, so we didn't have enough participants to make a second social event viable.

Sustainability

Many of the participants were studying at Sussex for one year or less, and have left and regrettably, the number of continuing students is too small to continue with the project into a second year.

However, since beginning the 'Freshers of '15' project we have been approached by academic colleagues in the School of Psychology at Sussex who wish to undertake research into a similar area by conducting a

longitudinal study to gain insight into international students' experiences over a period of time. They are specifically interested to explore potential links between the cultural integration of international students over time and their final degree results. The project overlaps with many areas of 'Freshers of '15'. As such, we will be collaborating with these academic colleagues – and be able to draw upon their vast knowledge and experience of data collection and analysis – in this project for the academic year 2016-17.

Key learning points

A range of feedback came out of the project but below we have identified some recurring issues which have in turn provided us with a number of learning points:

- A key factor in ensuring the wellbeing and general sense of integration and belonging for our students seems to be flatmate allocation. Those who reported having strong friendships with those they lived with at the beginning of the year seemed to have a more positive experience overall, as close relationships from the offset provided the confidence to actively engage with everything Sussex had to offer. Those who reported these

strong friendships with flatmates had been allocated rooms in diverse groups which included a mix of home and international students. This feedback has been passed on to our Housing Services team.

- The main ongoing concern for most participants was their studies. Most were concerned about study expectations and a lack of clarity around assessment criteria, but these worries reduced during the second term focus groups, implying that an academic induction early in the year would be useful. This is currently under discussion at Sussex.
- Despite largely positive feedback about arrival experiences, participants reported receiving too much pre-arrival information from across the University. A communications review is underway to identify all of the information which new students receive. The plan is to then streamline it.
- The small number of postgraduate participants who took part helped us to identify a need for providing postgraduate-only events, particularly during the welcome and induction period.

Recommendations for other institutions

The number of participants

It is imperative to recruit as large a number of participants as possible at the beginning of the year, as this number will inevitably dwindle. Once students had arrived other priorities (particularly the increasing demands on their time from studies) inevitably got in the way, and many dropped out. In order to be conclusive about patterns in emotional peaks and troughs, a large group of students is needed. Having certain incentives for sticking with the scheme throughout the year certainly helped us (socials, opportunities for paid work, free gifts etc.).

The type of participants

Whilst any feedback is useful, students who are visiting or on exchange for just one term are less likely to fully demonstrate such varying attitudes and experiences over time, so it is worth restricting the opportunity to only those students who will be at your institution long enough to provide more in-depth results. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students are needed as the experiences and challenges facing both groups varied quite significantly.

The most important point is having a strategy for recruiting those traditionally hard-to-reach students who, for various reasons, tend not to engage with UK and university life beyond simply attending classes. These reasons might be English language difficulties, problems with making friends, particularly outside of their own cultural groups, or adjusting to UK academic challenges. We soon realised that those who had readily volunteered their time and their experiences to get involved in a project of this nature were usually those students who were naturally more outgoing, confident, had strong English language skills, and were generally more committed to engaging with everything which the University and UK life had to offer. The insight that we got into these students' experiences was therefore overwhelmingly positive. This knowledge is helpful but only to a certain extent, as the main aim of the project was to identify the issues and problems.

Further information

Freshers at Sussex University:
<http://bit.ly/2dDNJ2O>

freshersof15 on Facebook:
<http://bit.ly/2df5wwu>

This project was run by International Student Support Officers, Helen Quin and Sarah Cook. Contact:
issofficers@sussex.ac.uk

