

Student Transition to the UK Projects

International student transfer and transition project Heriot-Watt University

Background to Heriot-Watt

Heriot-Watt University is often referred to as Scotland's international university, with a third of on-campus students in Edinburgh coming from beyond the UK. It has campuses in both Dubai and Malaysia, and the University's international strategy is an integral part of its overall strategy and vision. 2016 saw the expansion of the Go Global project, aimed at encouraging enrolled students to take advantage of its international hubs to gain cultural exchange experiences, broaden their horizons and enhance their career prospects. The transfer programme is directed at students going into their second or third year of study who wish to spend an academic year in another Heriot-Watt campus (students are then expected to complete, as usual, after four years). The International Student Transfer and Transition Project has focused on the support elements which underpin the successful student experience.

Why this project?

There is a recognition that students participating in the inter-campus transfer programme are familiar with the institution of Heriot-Watt University. Unlike new students, they are already studying in an HWU academic programme and are established in a HWU campus. However, the transfer

opportunity brings a different social and cultural setting and, despite the common programme outcomes, a different academic environment. Transfer students therefore face issues of transition to, and integration with, a new institutional setup, with similarities with, but often significant differences from, students who are completely new to Heriot-Watt. There is a need, therefore, to provide preparatory and introductory resources to those students transferring between campuses, to provide them with essential information about aspects of academic and cultural life, and the avenues of student support available to them in order to facilitate their successful transfer and transition.

Why now?

The Senior Counsellor in the Student Support team was prompted to apply for the UKCISA grant in response to a concern raised by a number of transfer students attending the counselling service.

Aims of the project

- To identify the main barriers to successful integration
- To generate a suite of resources to underpin the transition and transfer process between the global Heriot-Watt campuses



- To enhance the transfer experience and provide examples of good practice in this growing area of the sector

Summary of outcomes

Questionnaires, surveys and focus groups were used to gather information regarding the needs of transfer students, and to learn more about the resources that they would find beneficial. Using this information, a variety of resources have been created:

- A centralised list of transfer students, allowing more efficient email communication
- A variety of resources with information specific to transfer students, including:
 - Posters



Heriot-Watt University Malaysia Campus

- Leaflets
- A specific web page on the university site with links to appropriate information
- Workshop programmes for pre-departure and post-arrival

The above resources are currently for students arriving in Edinburgh, but are being developed for those travelling to Dubai and Malaysia campuses.

Who were involved in the project?

The project worker was appointed from within the Student Support team to manage the running of the project. Contact was established with relevant staff members, from Student Support, the Chaplaincy, and the Student Union. This helped to generate initial ideas, and a list of students to contact. Over the course of the next few weeks, students were invited to focus groups to discuss their experiences. Those who could not attend were asked to complete a qualitative questionnaire detailing their experiences as transfer students. In all, three focus groups were held and over fifty questionnaires sent out to students. There was also an opportunity to liaise with staff members in Malaysia and Dubai.

The data generated through this research was collated and analysed. Through this period, there was regular contact between the project worker

and the Senior Counsellor to discuss progress. There was also ongoing communication with colleagues within the Student Support Services to support the planning for workshop delivery and the creation of web links and resources.

Timescale

Work was begun on the project at the start of the academic year in September 2015. The first semester was focused on accumulating data on student experiences, existing information and staff knowledge. The second semester was focused on collating this data to produce new informational material including workshops and internet and paper-based resources.

Challenges

There are six schools at Heriot-Watt: Energy, Geoscience, Infrastructure and Society, Engineering and Physical Sciences, Management and Languages, Mathematical and Computer Sciences, Textiles and Design, and Life Sciences. Initial communication with students proved difficult as there was no centralised list of students who had transferred to the Edinburgh campus. This meant that each school had to be contacted directly to collect student details. Once contacted, there was a slow response from students, as by then it

was nearing the second half of the semester and students were focusing on preparing for exams. This meant that repeated efforts were made to arrange different meeting times for students to attend, and an additional electronic questionnaire was sent out to enable students unable to attend a focus group to participate.

Evaluation

A questionnaire was sent to students who engaged with the transfer programme, but the project is currently still being evaluated, a process that will not be complete until the beginning of the next academic year when students will have access to the new resources. However, the Go Global team valued the workshop resources as well as the student support advisors in our Dubai and Malaysia campuses who will be using the resources in September. Later in the academic year feedback will be gathered and any further modifications or additions can be made.

A sustainable project

The project grant has supported the project worker's fee and allowed for the creation of paper-based resources, currently in development. This process has been shared with colleagues in the other global campuses, to facilitate the creation of resources specific to Dubai and Malaysia. Discussion is

underway with the Go Global team to ensure that the learning from this project is incorporated into the information available to prospective transfer students.

Reflections on the project – students have different identities and different needs

It has been clear through the course of this project that students have reacted very positively to the experience of transferring. They have commented on their expectations of the benefits of the scheme being fulfilled, in terms of cultural exchange, broadening their experience of different academic environments and creating a sense of adventure which has been very welcome as part of their student experience.

Perhaps of central importance in this project has been the renewed awareness of the complexities around how students identify themselves. Students talked of their desire to integrate into the wider student body, and not remain within their groups of fellow students from their home campus. The success of their integration appeared to depend on a number of factors, including personal resources, language ability and access to information.

While the information given to new and international students in Welcome Week is clearly of relevance to the majority of transfer students who are arriving in this campus and country for the first time, they may not identify it as such and therefore will miss out on beneficial workshops. This was evident in the greater levels of campus knowledge that students who had attended induction workshops had, and the confidence that this generated.

On the other hand, some students arriving from campuses abroad originate from the UK as ex-patriates, or come from other European

countries where the cultural difference is not as great. These students felt less need for an induction workshop as they were confident in their own pre-existing knowledge and ability to ask their peers for practical guidance. It is logical then to suppose that transfer students will require different levels of practical and social or emotional support, depending on their background.

However, it feels highly appropriate to create a workshop in Welcome Week which speaks directly to transfer students (particularly those with little prior knowledge of the country and culture) and which will incorporate some of the issues covered in other inductions. It also feels important to start this preparation before students leave their home campus, in order for their arrival to be better supported in those early days.

The new list of transfer students will ensure that all students receive the same level of information, regardless of the campus they arrive from or the school they are in. Therefore there is a greater homogeneity of the dissemination of information and students are free to use the resources as they please.

Learning points for other UK institutions

There is evidence of a real demand amongst students to participate in a more international academic experience. Students described wanting to integrate into the main student body, mix with people from other countries and cultures, and participate in a different academic environment. Where this happened, students felt their student experience was greatly enhanced and were very eager to recommend the scheme to others.

There should also be recognition then, that this integration requires both thought and consideration on the part

of the institution, and a level of personal responsibility on the part of the student to be successful, given that students are joining an already established peer group. There is a balance to be struck, therefore, between identifying this group of students as a separate entity in order to provide them with relevant and appropriate information to ease their transition, whilst encouraging them to become part of the wider student body.

Further information

Heriot-Watt Go Global Project:

<https://www.hw.ac.uk/students/studies/go-global.htm>

Go Global Transfer Students:

<https://www.hw.ac.uk/students/studies/goglobal/inter-campus-transfer.htm>

Heriot-Watt Student Support pages:

<https://www.hw.ac.uk/student-life/campus-life/student-support.htm>

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