Manchester Metropolitan University

Between expectations and lived experiences: recruitment strategies and their impact on international students' academic and social experiences in UK HE

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Paul Webley Award for Innovation in International Education 2017

This award was created in 2016 in memory of the late Director of SOAS and Chair of our Board, Paul Webley. It was presented to Manchester Metropolitan University at the UKCISA Annual Conference at the University of Exeter in June 2017.

MMU's research looked into the recruitment strategies and their impact on students' academic and social experiences in UK HE. The research used in-depth student focus groups at three Manchester-based universities. The researchers encouraged reflection and dialogue between the students giving the students themselves a learning experience as part of the research. We were told they enjoyed it so much, they were sad for the research to end!

The judges noted the lack of research on how international student marketing materials are perceived by the students themselves, and so this research will provide evidence for a 'sobering reality check' and could have significant impact on recruitment practices across the UK. UKCISA also wanted to mark this research as the ultimate beneficiaries will be international students themselves who, we hope, will receive more realistic and better quality guidance and information as they start on their student journey.

The Paul Webley Award presented to Dr. Khawla Badwan, Manchester Metropolitan University, by Professor Sir Steve Smith, Vice-Chancellor of Exeter University (left) and Professor Koen Lamberts, Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of York and Chair of UKCISA's Board of Trustees (right)

1. Introduction

This research project investigated how international students are affected by UK higher education online marketing strategies and the extent to which such strategies shape students' expectations of life in the UK. The study first analysed the marketing discourses used by three UK higher education (HE) institutions in one of the main UK super-diverse cities. Next, it featured student voice through individual and group interviews to explore whether or not students' expectations of life in the UK match their lived experiences and the implications of any mismatches on their overall student experience.

This research aimed to provide useful information about transparent student recruitment which has the potential to affect marketing and recruitment strategies in the sector.

2. Rationale for research

Internationalisation has become a key strategic goal for many universities in different parts of the world (Taylor, 2010). In fact, it is rare to find a university website that does not include words such as international or global integration (Rhoads and Szelenyi, 2011). In the UK, internationalisation is firmly placed on the education agenda (De Vita and Case, 2003) and international student recruitment is one of its major manifestations.

Unfortunately, with increasing economic pressures on universities in the UK, tensions arise between 'promoting themselves attractively and giving honest information to prospective students' (Harris, 1997, p.38). This has resulted in constructing a contemporary 'market abuse' discourse surrounding international student recruitment. Some of the characteristics of this discourse are: using international students as a revenue source in climates of budgetary strains (De Vita and Case, 2003), focusing on disembodied student narratives for the sake of imposing 'one-size-fits-all educational prescriptions' (Sidhu and Dall'Alba, 2012, p. 415), and suggesting that international students are exposed to market abuse and exploitation which favours Western universities (Chowdhury and Phan, 2014).

The study responds to this discourse by taking a step towards building 'intercultural dialogue' defined by the Council of Europe (2008) as 'a process that comprises an open and respectful exchange of views between individuals and groups with different ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds and heritage, on the basis of mutual understanding and respect'. To this end, the project was based on the premise that international student voices had to be represented in order to understand the trajectories of these students, starting from reporting on their decisions before joining UK HE until the end of the academic year 2016-2017.

The investigators believe that the findings of this research project need to be communicated to higher education practitioners and policy makers because students' perspectives are also part of the 'intercultural dialogue' this project aimed to achieve.

3. Aims and questions

This exploratory research aimed to:
a. analyse the online marketing discourses of three universities based in the same city in the UK;
b. understand how these particular discourses influence decisions pertinent to student mobility, and the impacts of these discourses on students' expectations of imagined life in the UK;
c. raise students' voices by asking them about the differences between their imagined and lived Britain and the factors that might contribute to creating a gap between these two visions;
d. suggest ways of enhancing universities' professional practices when they market their courses to an international audience, if they are to reflect a more 'real' lived experience.

Specifically, the study asked the following questions:
1. What do we (in UK HE) say to international students to attract them to study in the UK?
2. What is the impact of what we say on student mobility?
3. What 'promises' do students infer from our online marketing strategies?
4. What do students say about the promises made to them during the recruitment stage?
5. Are there any mismatches between students' expectations and lived experiences? If so, what cause these gaps?

6. Are students mainly attracted to UK HE because of their exposure to UK HE marketing discourses? Or are there other reasons underpinning student mobility?
7. How can universities in the UK recruit international students on more 'transparent' grounds?

4. Methodology: plans and challenges

The project was conducted in one of the UK's super-diverse cities (see Vertovec, 2007 on super-diversity). The city has three universities: a Russell Group HE institution (henceforth U1), a 1990s university status institution (U2), and a 1960s university status institution (U3). The names of these three universities have been anonymised due to the competitive nature of the higher education sector.

The project had four main stages:
Stage 1:
A multimodal analysis of the marketing strategies featured on the three universities' websites. This stage involved looking at verbal, visual and video data on the universities' websites focusing on the following sections: Homepage, Why study at x university?, Information for international students, Student life, and other sections that stand out about university ranking and plans for expansion. This stage also aimed at investigating how different or similar are the marketing tools used by these three universities.

Stage 2:
Conducting recorded group interviews with international students during the first term of the 2016-2017 academic year. This stage involved interviewing 34 participants studying in the three chosen universities. Table 1 lists the details of the participants and their university affiliation.

The recruitment of the research participants took different paths. Some participants were recruited via convenience sampling (where the researchers recruited newly arrived students whom they already knew), others through snow-ball sampling (where the recruited participants were asked to recruit others from among their acquaintances). Participants were recruited also by contacting gate-keepers to allow the interviewer to either speak directly to students or to leave an announcement with them. The participant recruitment stage was rather

Table 1   Participants' interviews in Stage 2

Interview no.	University affiliation	Number of interviewees	Length of interview (mins)
1	U2	2	21.55
2	U2	3	31.42
3	U2	5	28.16
4	U2	5	26.01
5	U3	1	10.53
6	U1	3	30.53
7	U1	1	15.51
8	U1	1	15.33
9	U1	1	16.20
10	U1	4	26.59
11	U1	2	14.36
12	U1	1	16.19
13	U1	2	13.43
14	U3	3	21.55

challenging as it meant frequent inter-city travels, addressing different gate-keepers and dealing with their delayed or no responses, and completing necessary protocols that vary from university to university and from one department to another within the same university. Another challenge was having potential participants who verbally agreed to take part in the study after being given an information sheet but they never responded to emails inviting them for interviews. Having taken multiple participant recruitment routes while factoring in possible drop outs, this stage resulted in the participation of 34 students who were interviewed towards the end of the first term October-December 2016. As seen in Table 1, it was sometimes difficult to arrange group interviews because of students' differing timetables. Some interviews therefore were in pairs and a few volunteers were interviewed individually.

Students tended to respond better in group interviews. They appeared to feel more confident supported by their peers and were not under pressure to respond to every question. They were also able to draw on others' responses which fuelled the discussion. A few students commented that they had enjoyed the discussion as the questions had made them think more closely about the reasons for their university choices. Some students welcomed the opportunity to practise speaking English with a native speaker. Some postgraduate students were appreciative of the opportunity to observe how interviews were conducted as they would have to do this for their own research. Thus, it can be argued that the design of the study not only helped nurture 'intercultural dialogue'

between students and higher education researchers but it also encouraged intercultural dialogue within the recruited student population.

Stage 3:
Conducting recorded semi-structured individual interviews with a sample of the recruited participants at the beginning of the second term of the 2016-2017 academic year. While factoring in possible dropouts, the plan for this stage was to email all 34 participants to invite them for interviews in February-March 2017. 19 students accepted the invitation to be individually interviewed. Table 2 shows the participants' affiliation.

Table 2   Participants' interviews in Stage 3

Interview no.	University affiliation	Length of interview (mins)
1	U2	15.00
2	U2	19.34
3	U2	23.22
4	U2	10.28
5	U2	22.43
6	U2	13.53
7	U2	18.03
8	U2	14.24
9	U2	26.58
10	U2	15.25
11	U1	22.45
12	U1	16.22
13	U1	19.22
14	U1	15.58
15	U1	12.30
16	U1	14.01
17	U1	10.16
18	U1	09.56
19	U3	10.54

Stage 4:
Conducting recorded focus group interviews at the end of the academic year 2016-2017. This summative stage involved inviting all 19 participants to take part in one last round of group interviews. 18 students from U1 and U2 took part in this stage. The only student from U3 dropped out due to study commitments. Table 3 below lists the details of the last stage interviews:

In addition to the traditional question and answer format, the interview structure for this stage included some different approaches from those in the previous stages. This was primarily to inject some variety into the process and to employ a range of strategies which could enable

Table 3   Participants' interviews in Stage 4

Interview no.	University affiliation	Number of interviewees	Length of interview (mins)
1	U1	1	19.12
2	U1	4	30.41
3	U2	3	28.14
4	U2	3	29.37
5	U2	1	10.50
6	U1	1	19.29
7	U2	1	12.11
8	U1	2	15.35
9	U2	1	13.24
10	U2	1	07.22

1. The information presented here has been updated based on the online content of the three universities during June 2017.

students to reflect analytically on their experiences. Here is a list of the different approaches:

1. The participants were sent links to their university webpages for international students, and asked to look at these before attending the interview. This was to refresh their memories as it was unlikely that they had looked at these webpages since applying for their course. When interviewed, the participants were asked to reflect on the webpages' content.
2. Participants were asked to grade some of their responses on a Likert Scale to provide some quantitative data.
3. Participants completed a short survey asking them to identify the influencing factors in selecting their university, and requiring them to write a few sentences summarising their academic and social life in the UK.

Those interviewed in a group were asked to brainstorm a list of advice for future students from their home countries who were considering applying to their university. The participants developed a list which they then handed to the interviewer who read the list, engaged with it and started another dialogue asking the participants to expand or explain their views. Those interviewed individually completed this list in dialogue with the interviewer.

It was wise to ask students to peruse the relevant webpages before coming to the interview. For some students, it refreshed their memories. For others, it was the first time that they had viewed these pages.

The survey and short statement provided a welcome break from the question and answer format. The group debate and follow-up

discussion with the interviewer led to some lively and truthful responses.

Overall, most participants said that they had enjoyed sharing their views with the interviewer and several asked to see the final report. A few of them had used the process as a model for their own research projects. Our relationship was now well established and it was difficult to tell them that the project had come to an end.

5.   Key research findings

Stage 1 Key findings[1]:
This stage entailed developing a multimodal analysis of the online marketing strategies outlined on the websites of the three universities. This included analysing verbal, audio and visual data to see how universities market themselves to their local and international audience. It is also worth mentioning that some of the photographs were used as prompts during the two group interview stages (stage 2 and 4) to see the impact of these visual representations on students' expectations of life in the UK.

This stage highlighted some of the striking similarities between the online marketing discourses adopted by these universities. Overall, it appeared that there are at least six similar strategies:

1. **An attractive city:** all three universities use the geographical location of the vibrant, super-diverse city as a key attraction tool, featuring some of the landmarks of the city and tapping into its demographic diversity as a resource. This is also closely linked to promises of an exciting 'student life'.
2. **Facilities on campus:** another common strategy is to upload photographs and virtual tours (videos) of university campuses. However, as a Russell Group university, U1 presents its campus in a different way by emphasising two key points: a) both old and modern style buildings and b) the large-scale investments in improving and expanding the existing campus. Both U2 and U3 present their modern-style, high-tech facilities while showing some photographs of older buildings in an attempt to appeal to students seeking both exciting modernity and rich heritage.
3. **Diversity on campus**: this appears to be a common strategy, very relevant to all three

universities given the diverse population of the city as well as its international recognition which also makes it a key tourist attraction. Diversity on campus is displayed by showing photographs and videos of students from different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. Across the three universities, numbers of international students are shown with no further details about major sending countries.

4. **Testimonials from former students:** another common strategy is to show videos of former students talking about their time at their chosen university as well as talking about their experiences in their chosen city. Most of these videos emphasise how this super-diverse city allows them to find a wide range of things including different cuisines and shops. In addition to videos, there are also written testimonials and students' blogs talking about students' courses and how their degrees helped them move on with their career paths after graduation.

5. **Promises, opportunities, investment:** although this is also a common marketing strategy, the three chosen universities present it in different ways. To start with, U1 uses two elaborate tools to persuade their prospective students. The first tool features a positive and personalised marketing discourse. The second lists details of future opportunities such as internships, volunteering activities, and opportunities to contribute to research centres.

   U2 uses a different approach to this strategy by presenting statistics of graduates in employment. It also lists details of job fairs, and 'meet employers' events.

   U3 employs this strategy in a more general way commenting on the contribution of its graduates to different domains of public life.

6. **University recognition:** this strategy highlights the extent to which a university is recognised for its ranking, impact, teaching and support reputation. Even though the three universities have very different research profiles, they seem to emphasise a similar discourse which can be due to pressures from evaluative systems such as the Research Excellence Framework (REF) and the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). These messages are reflected both verbally and visually, showing photographs of laboratories, high-impact projects, and modern facilities. In addition to that, high teaching quality and student support are indicated.

Overall, it is evident that the three universities used similar techniques to promote themselves online. These, we argue, are means of creating attractive brands. Branding, (Moore, 2004), is about promises of customer experiences and the strategies outlined above can be easily interpreted as promises of positive student experience.

Stage 2 Key findings:
This stage involved 34 recorded interviews across three universities. Where possible, interviews were in groups or pairs. Some participants were interviewed individually owing to timetable constraints. The key findings are:

1. The website does not appear to play a critical role in determining students' choice of university. A few reported that they perused the website in detail, but many claimed to have ignored the pages for international students. They tended to focus on the web pages relating to their course, to entry requirements and to finding accommodation.

2. The main driver for selecting U1 tended to be the university's world ranking. Many students chose U2 and U3 on recommendation from alumni or from an agent. Some believed they would receive more support at U2. Others wanted to pursue a specific practical course. Notably, the reputation of the School of Art at U2 was a significant draw. Students' IELTS score was also a key determinant bearing in mind that different universities and different courses require different entry IELTS cut-off scores.

3. The city's reputation as an international city was a key factor in student choice. Students cited also the city's lower cost of living compared with London. The majority of students prioritised the university and the course over the location. For several however, the universities' location was of equal consideration.

4. Students at U3 were surprised at the number of students from one particular sending country on their respective courses. For a few, this was a comfort; for the majority, it was a disappointment because they wanted to mix with students from differing nationalities.

5. Students from all participating institutions reported some difficulty in adapting to the independent, interactive, multimodal teaching

and learning styles prevalent in UK HE, compared with the traditional didactic style employed in their home countries.

Stage 3 Key findings:
This stage consisted of 19 individual interviews mostly from U1 and U2 with only one participant from U3.

1. Participants generally reported feeling more settled in this second semester because they were more familiar with life in the UK and with university systems and study routines.
2. With regard to assessments, most students said that they had received good, clear and thorough feedback so that they understand how to improve.
3. Students appeared to be adapting to UK teaching styles saying that they preferred the UK approach to study as they felt it had improved their critical thinking skills and had enabled them to become independent learners. Several students liked the tutorial system, whereby they were able to discuss and ask questions in small groups. One student was critical of the 'inefficiency' of discussion groups and one student suggested that UK teachers were not strict enough by allowing students to talk over the teacher.
4. In the main, students reported good academic support in the form of workshops and tutorials and commented that teachers were more approachable than in their home countries. Some however, would have appreciated more individual tutorial support and more support in securing work placements.
5. Some students were surprised at the theoretical bias inherent in their courses and had assumed, because of the course title, that there would be a practical element.
6. A few students took part in activities organised by the students' union in their respective universities but most were unaware of what the students' union had to offer. Students were complimentary about the activities organised by the International Society. Several students from a particular nationality commented that it was not within their culture to go out and meet strangers.
7. Students commented that it was difficult to socialise with British people because they did not understand the cultural references and could not participate in the conversation. Many students, in particular, tended to socialise with co-nationals with whom they

'felt more comfortable'. One student would have liked a 'buddy system', whereby international students were paired with UK students to practise speaking English and to become more au fait with UK culture.
8. Unsurprisingly, those who spoke English most of the time reported an improvement in their fluency, whereas those who conversed mostly in their native language reported little or no progress in spoken English.

Stage 4 Key findings:
This stage involved 18 students from U1 and U2. The U3 participant dropped out due to study commitments. Where possible, interviews were in groups or pairs. Some participants were interviewed individually.

This stage was designed to be a summative round in which students commented on their overall experience throughout the past academic year. Prior to the interviews, they were also asked to revisit university websites to comment on how useful the presented information was. They were then asked to rank the usefulness of the websites of their respective universities on a scale from one to ten. During the same interviews, they were also asked to rank the level of support they receive on a similar scale. Figures 1 and 2 summarise the results for both U1 and U2:

Figure 1: responses from U1 students

University website: 1= not very useful;
10 = very useful
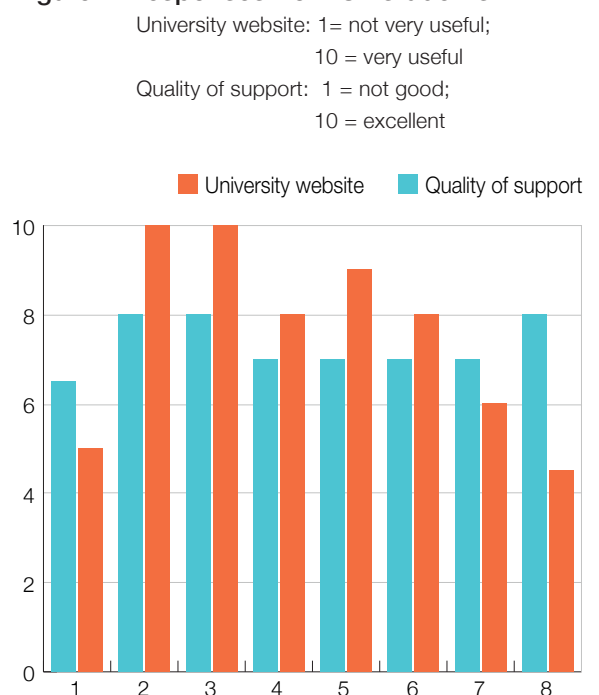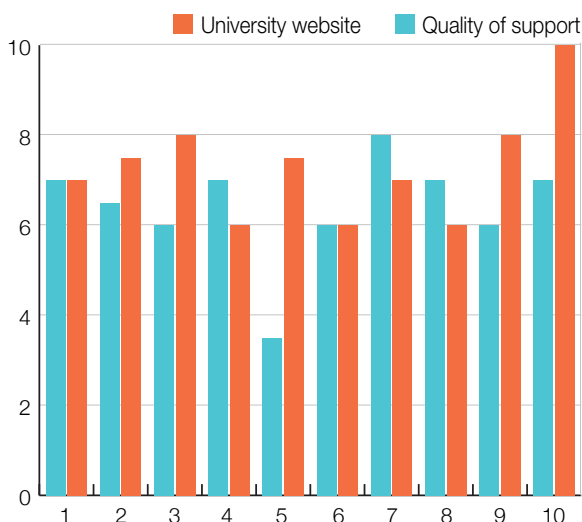Quality of support: 1 = not good;
10 = excellent

Figure 2: responses from U2 students

University website: 1= not very useful;

10 = very useful

Quality of support: 1 = not good;

10 = excellent

Overall, many participants stressed that university websites can be difficult to navigate. The following response seems to be representative of students' views, 'we can find everything on it but we just don't know how'. In addition, the majority of students indicated that they visited the websites to find out about accommodation, student life, and details about their courses. Some felt that the university website for their respective university did not include sufficient information about the units/ modules on their course. They wanted more details, in advance, about how they would be assessed as they thought these details would allow them to have a clearer idea about how they would spend their time in the UK, particularly because their length of stay was subject to visa restrictions.

In addition, some participants reported some mismatches between their expectations based on website details and their lived experiences in the following areas:

a. There are more optional units on the website than the students are actually offered;
b. Photographs of university accommodation are not always accurate;
c. There is some outdated information about old courses with irrelevant reading lists.

With regard to student support, the participants, overall, seemed more settled as they were approaching the end of their third academic term. Many reported that they expected more

contact time during classes and more one-to-one tutorials with their tutors. Although they seemed aware of the different sources of support available, many felt that they had to wait a long time before being able to seek advice on academic writing, assignment-related queries and counselling advice. As expected, responses varied within institutions.

The students were also asked to tick the factors that influenced their decision to choose their university. More than one answer was allowed. Table 4 refers to responses from U1 students and Table 5 refers to responses from U2 students:

Table 4   factors influencing U1 students' decision to choose their university

What or who influenced you to choose this university?	Response
U1 University website	✓✓✓
Course content	✓✓✓✓
Students	✓
Your IELTS score	✓✓✓
University ranking	✓✓✓✓✓✓
University reputation	✓✓✓✓✓✓
Fees	✓
Parents	✓✓
City's reputation	✓✓

Table 5   factors influencing U2 students' decision to choose their university

What or who influenced you to choose this university?	Response
U2 University website	✓
Course content	✓✓✓✓
Students	✓
Your IELTS score	✓✓✓✓
University ranking	✓✓✓✓✓
University reputation	✓✓✓✓✓
Fees	✓✓✓
Parents	✓
City's reputation	✓✓✓✓✓

Other factors were mentioned by three participants:

- Recommendations from recruitment agencies
- Interview with tutor who was very likeable
- A teacher who is a former student
- Offer came through quickly
- Scholarships

Whereas the research started with the assumption that international students are guided/affected by the online marketing

strategies of HE institutions in the UK, the data presented here indicates that this is just a partial understanding of the bigger picture. The geographic and demographic advantages of the city were key pulling factors. However, the distribution of students across the three universities was significantly linked to other factors. This stage has highlighted that student recruitment is not a one-way process where universities advertise themselves in the educational marketplace in order to attract students. Rather, it is a dynamic process whereby the students are affected by multiple factors which do not necessarily include universities' marketing strategies.

Here are other key findings:
1. Students generally appreciated the depth of their UK HE experience. Many compared their UK university facilities and resources with those in their home countries to emphasise how developed and established their UK universities are.
2. Some students continued to believe that class discussions 'wasted' their contact time and demanded shorter group discussions with brief summaries/commentaries outlining major points.
3. Many students suggested that, while the university ranking tables can be useful, it is best to look at how the university is ranked for their own subject. Some even advised future students not to be too rank-driven.
4. Many students advised future students to actively engage in classroom activities and to familiarise themselves with activities on campus in order to meet new friends and know more about life in the UK.

6.   Conclusion

These findings suggest that international student recruitment is a dynamic process affected by multiple factors. University websites tend to be populated with information that creates a 'brand' with a lesser focus on the detail of what to expect regarding academic life in the UK (styles of delivery, modes of assessment, support mechanisms, relationship with tutors, etc.). Our findings suggest also that the majority of the participants who visited the university websites were not interested in reading about what universities say about themselves. Instead, they were concerned with the practical elements of their applications, such as the course content,

accommodation options and student life. University ranking and reputation continue to be major factors, but it seems that students refer to sources other than university websites for this information. Some of these sources include word of mouth (recommendations from former students, parents and friends) and/or published ranking tables.

7.   Recommendations for practice

This project puts forward the following recommendations, some of which are best practice employed by some universities and/or their departments:
1. Summarise key information on university websites in different languages including short video testimonials from alumni. Multi-lingual websites can reflect the multilingual, multicultural spaces on UK campuses.
2. Emphasise the practical applications of courses, career paths and future job prospects.
3. Provide a handbook for international students with information such as:
   - an explanation of the teaching and learning styles which they will encounter
   - whom to contact for support with academic work and how early to make contact
   - contact details for other areas such as counselling, pastoral support, accommodation and finance
   - an explanation of workshops and courses available to students, eg language courses, research skills, etc.
   - details about how assessment works in UK HE
   - a description of the students' union, what it is, what it does and how to access its facilities and activities
   - a list of contact details of international societies
   - description of the types of accommodation available; an explanation of the geography of the city and how to apply for accommodation
   - information about the diverse profiles of the students who have typically studied at this institution in order to prepare students for the diversity they will experience on campus.
4. Ensure that course details state clearly if courses are entirely theoretical or if they have a practical element.

5. Present a clear timeline with an overview of what students will study and the activities and tasks they are required to complete. This may help to minimise anxiety by removing the fear of the unknown, and also to enable students to make the most efficient use of their possible visa–restricted time in the UK.
6. In the case of practical subjects, ensure that international students understand how to obtain workshop induction training and how to access workshop space.
7. Ensure international students have sufficient support for finding compulsory work placements.
8. Provide a departmental support tutor for international students; preferably someone who has been an international student.
9. Raise intercultural awareness among university staff to ensure that they are sensitive to the needs and expectations of their international students.

8. Areas for future research

It is believed that there is a need for further research to investigate how international students can be better equipped to make the most of their sojourn in the UK. This project could be developed by interviewing not only students, but also teachers and support staff, to ascertain their perception of the reasons for and barriers to international students' academic success and social integration. The investigators suggest also a research project which trials and evaluates one or more of the recommendations in Section 7 to provide some tangible evidence of strategies which may enhance the experience of international students in UK universities.

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City of Manchester attractions (clockwise from top left): former industrial canal with Beetham Tower in background, the Castlefield inner city conservation area, Library Walk, a Metrolink tram, City Council Town Hall.