Lincoln University Students' Union

Are students' unions' activities, events and opportunities accessible and used by international students?

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"For me this is my first year to study abroad and the biggest problem is the culture and language barrier so when I first come here I have no more energy."

1. Background to the research

1.1 Lincoln Students' Union

The University of Lincoln Students' Union (ULSU) is committed to the advancement of education of students at the University for the public benefit by:

- Promoting the interests and welfare of students at the University during their course of study and representing, supporting and advising students.
- Being the recognised representative channel between students and the University, and any other external bodies.
- Providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of its students.

The Students' Union (SU) is a democratic, student-led organisation, and has five elected Student Leaders (Sabbatical Officers) who represent the Union's members and lead activities and campaigns which act in the best interest of students. The SU is a unique organisation in that it is both a charity and a limited company. It offers both commercial services in the form of bars, pubs, club nights, events and a bed and breakfast to students (ie, Tower Bar, Engine Shed, The Swan); and charitable services which are informed by the needs of the members and are intended to improve their experience, ie, student representation, activities (sports clubs and societies), an Advice Centre and employability opportunities including volunteering.

Historically, international students have shown little engagement with services offered by the SU, and the SU is committed to changing this. The information gathered through this research project and detailed in this report will be shared with the University of Lincoln, specifically its International Office, English Language Centre, Student Services and Advice Service to inform and encourage a commitment to best practice, and to support an institution-wide improvement of understanding and engagement with international students. It is hoped that the findings will also help students' unions across the sector to increase their engagement with international students.

1.2 Introduction of VP International

In 2016, the SU successfully applied to the University of Lincoln's Vice Chancellor for funding to introduce a new Student Leader position – Vice-President (VP) International. For the 2016-17 academic year, 10.5% of the student body were international students, demonstrating the importance of having a student leader specifically to support the needs of these students. Unfortunately, due to unforeseen circumstances, the student elected to this role had to withdraw from their position in November 2016, affecting the SU's capacity to place a high focus on the representation of international students. During the time the elected VP International was in post they were able to provide significant insight into the experience of international students, but this was not continued or developed when they withdrew from the role. This research enables us to gain a much deeper insight into the international student experience and, with the appointment of a new VP International, there is now significant opportunity to positively impact the international student experience through delivering the actions outlined within this document.

1.3 Previous research at ULSU

The strategic research carried out by the SU in 2015, both quantitative and qualitative in nature, identified that the support and engagement of international students is a significant development area for the SU and, by extension, the wider University of Lincoln community. This research identified that there are various issues with the engagement of international students in comparison to home students at the University of Lincoln, and that this remains a gap which needs to be bridged. The strategic research found that:

- UK students are more likely to say that the SU enhances their university life, and that they are more satisfied with the SU than international students.
- UK students are more likely to say they know exactly who the SU members are and what they do.
- UK students are more likely to say that they enjoy living in Lincoln and that they are pleased they chose to study at the University of Lincoln.
- UK students were found to be more likely to use the SU for support with issues relating to their course than international students.
- International students feel it is important to get the opportunity to meet and make friends with British students.

"The first problem I have to overcome is the language barrier so I need to try to understand what are my friends saying."

Overall, international students were found to be less engaged with the SU than UK students on almost every measure. They are less satisfied, less likely to be involved, less likely to feel the SU is relevant and less likely to vote in elections. From this, the SU identified that there is significant room for improvement in terms of the Union's engagement with international students. This research aims to identify why this is the case and to aid in creating measurable recommendations and actions for improvement.

1.4 LUSU data

These findings have been further supported by analysis from the SU's membership management system; Students' Union Management System (SUMS). This identified lower engagement from international students across a variety of SU services. Of the international students enrolled for the 2015-16 academic year, only 49.2% engaged with the SU in any way, in comparison to home students where engagement levels were 65.33%. More specifically, course representative positions were held by 2.8% of the international student population, 10.7% attended events, 12% were members of a sport or society and 2% used the Advice Centre. Similarly, only 33% of international students voted in any election.

This further emphasises the necessity for a better understanding of what international students need, as well as continuing to highlight the importance of adapting and developing, both at SU and university level, the support for and engagement with international students. Equally, it is important for all students that international students are engaged and integrated so that as a student body, an awareness of different cultures is gained – an important awareness in an increasingly globalised world.

Key objectives for the SU have been developed as a result of the strategic research. Firstly, the SU will support the integration of home and international students to create a diverse multi-cultural experience for all. Secondly, the SU will support the positive experience and integration of members into the University of Lincoln community. Some aspects of these objectives have already been addressed, but it is hoped that this research will build on this further and more can be put in place in order to achieve these objectives. Through the research, the SU also aims to identify additional areas for the enhancement of the experience of international students.

International student engagement has increasing importance for both the SU and the University. For the SU, it is important that all members are able to interact effectively with all services during their time at university. It is hoped that this research will:

- Inform the understanding of how international students currently engage with the SU and how they view that experience.
- Highlight barriers which prevent international students from accessing activities, events or opportunities and offer suggestions how the SU could further improve engagement and the student experience.
- Gain insight into what students actually want, to ensure future developments are evidence-led rather than based on assumptions.
- Identify strategies for longer term engagement with, and integration of, international students at the University of Lincoln.

The SU will, therefore, gain a more in-depth understanding of international issues and the barriers to engagement so it is able to make positive changes to improve its services and support for international students. Such strategies will directly impact on the student experience and wellbeing of international students in order to support them in reaching their potential, both at university and in their own life.

Lincoln SU is not aware of any research which has been conducted into how international students engage with SU services and opportunities. Consequently, this research has the potential to offer sector-wide insight, which may help to improve the experience of international students while at UK universities.

2.   Research methodology

The research was carried out using questionnaires and focus groups.

2.1 Equipment
A paper consent form and short questionnaire were provided to all participants in the focus groups (noted below) with refreshments provided as an incentive for taking part. A voice recorder was used to record the discussion for the purposes of transcription. The online survey (also below) was emailed and a prize draw for a £25 Amazon voucher was offered as an incentive to complete it.

1. See the online report at www.ukcisa. org.uk/ lincolnappendices for links to the appendices.

2.2 Participants

A total of 21 students took part across five focus groups and a further 26 students completed the online survey. All participants were international (including EU) students currently enrolled at the University of Lincoln. All international students were invited to take part in the focus groups by email (see Appendix 1[1]), and were also given the opportunity to sign up to the volunteering opportunities page of the SU's website. In addition, participation was promoted through the established student network of the International Students Association (ISA) and on social media. Information about the focus group was also disseminated by the University of Lincoln International Office and administration staff in colleges and schools with high numbers of international students.

2.3 Procedure

Focus groups

At the beginning of each focus group participants were given a verbal briefing explaining the purpose of the group and how their responses would be used, as well as being informed that the recording was for the purpose of transcription only. Each participant was required to sign to indicate their informed consent (Appendix 2[1]) before completing a short questionnaire (see Appendix 3[1]) in order to establish base level knowledge about the SU. A semi-structured approach was used to give students an opportunity to ask further questions. Planned questions were asked on five topics: Sports and Societies; Volunteering and Employability; Support and Advice, Commercial and Events; Student Voice and Representation (see Appendix 4[1]).

Survey

Feedback from early focus groups suggested that a language barrier and the possible accompanying anxieties may prevent some international students from wanting to have a face-to-face conversation but also that reading and writing in a second language may be easier for some. As a result, it was decided that an online questionnaire may be appropriate in the interests of gathering more feedback, in a more accessible way. An invitation to take part was sent out to all international students by email (Appendix 5[1]). The questions followed a similar format to those in the focus group (see Appendix 6[1] for questions used) and were both open and closed. The survey was also used in order to gain an increased number of responses,

improving the reliability of the results, as well as providing the opportunity for distance learners to participate.

3.   Results and discussion

3.1 Focus group questionnaire

Prior to each focus group, participants completed a short questionnaire. Responses suggested there was a general understanding of the purpose of a SU and what it stands for; however knowledge about specific services was relatively limited. This is consistent with findings from the ULSU Annual Membership Survey 2017 (AMS 2017) which measured satisfaction and knowledge about the SU across the entire student population at the University. This survey indicated that only 54% of all respondents felt they knew exactly who the SU was and what it does. This suggests there are potential problems with accessibility of services due to lack of awareness across the whole student body. This may particularly be the case for international students and offer some explanation for the lack of engagement with SU services.

3.1.1   Student Leaders

Overall there was a lack of knowledge about who the Student Leaders were and their role. Similarly, the AMS 2017 indicated that only 56% of respondents felt that the Student Leaders were available and easy to contact. This suggests that Student Leaders have not been visible enough and consequently it was unclear what their role was. This is particularly troublesome as the position of VP International was introduced specifically to improve Student Leader (and subsequently the entire SU) engagement with international students. It is possible that perception of the Student Leaders may have been influenced by the early departure of two of the 2016-17 Student Leaders and this could have altered the messages and responsibilities of those remaining.

With a full team of new Student Leaders starting their role in June 2017, a key aim of the next academic year is to have Student Leaders out and about talking to students more in order to increase awareness and gain student feedback. Increased presence on campus should result in Student Leaders being more recognised and their role being clearer. In particular, increasing the new VP International's presence on campus will hopefully improve the engagement of
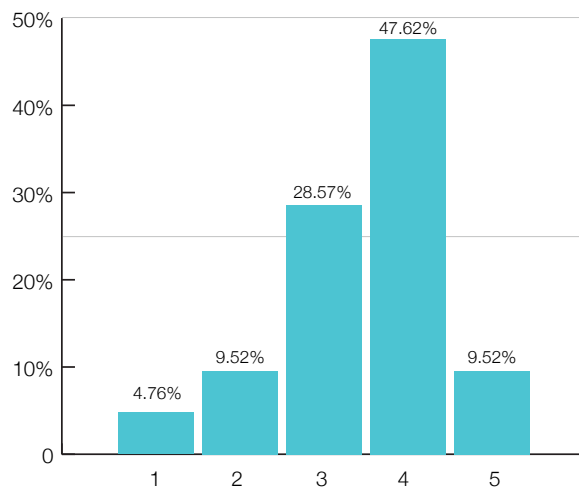
"In China we don't have the habits to go to the bar or the club regularly so that's why maybe some people don't join in with some activities."

international students with the SU, and also provide another point of contact to offer support to students or, at least, be able to signpost to appropriate services. Additionally, the VP International 2017-18 already has an established network of nearly 400 international students on the social media platform WeChat which gives direct access to this population.

3.1.2   Communication
Additionally, the questionnaire asked about communication from the SU with their members. A total of 57.14% of respondents thought communication from the SU was effective. Likewise, 45.2% of respondents to the AMS 2017 felt that communication was effective. However, it is important to note that 42.85% of respondents and 54.8% of AMS 2017 respondents indicated either ambivalence or that communication was ineffective, suggesting changes to methods of communication may be beneficial.

Do you feel that the SU communicates effectively with you?

Figure 1: perception of effectiveness of communication from the SU
1= not effective;
5 = very effective

All students should receive communication where relevant and appropriate. These findings suggest that the success of this varies. Communication with students was an area mentioned in nearly all focus groups and in the online survey as an area which could be improved.

Methods of communication preferred by students vary. However, some have specifically mentioned not seeing or receiving emails which

had been sent to all students. Consequently, it may be necessary to consider other methods of communication that would ensure that all students receive the information they need. Some suggested more emphasis on posting on social media. However, as all key events and information are already posted on the main SU Facebook and Twitter page it may, instead, be the case that more students need to be guided to these pages.

In January 2017, a new Head of Marketing and Communications at the SU was recruited who has been creating a strategy to ensure that the SU's marketing and communications improves. This has included the purchase of Falcon software, a customer experience management platform which ensures that communication and social media presence can be as effective as possible for every group. In addition, the new VP International should result in an increased social media presence specifically for international students which may help to resolve this issue. Furthermore, if students are unable to find information on social media, a feature on the SU allows online chat and then directs them to where this information is. This, again, may be a feature which needs to be highlighted and promoted more.

4.   Sports and societies

4.1 Reasons for joining
Those who had joined either sports teams and/or societies highlighted that the main reasons for doing so were: taking part in an activity they had an interest in; joining in with home students; and making new friends. Many mentioned that joining sports or societies helped them to adapt to the new culture after moving to Lincoln, as well as the UK more generally. Equally, academic societies were considered to be beneficial if they offered support for students' studies as well as the opportunity to make connections within their course. However, across participants, only a small number had at any point been part of an activity, with even fewer continuing participation throughout their time at university.

4.2 Barriers to participation
Participants identified a number of barriers which may prevent international students from becoming involved with activities.

"Most of my foreign friends I met them in my lectures and a few from the English language centre but actually I don't know how to make friends with native people."

4.2.1   Time

Many mentioned they were too focused on their studies and assessments to have the spare time required. Many expressed difficulties with language when completing university work, making it considerably more time-consuming than, perhaps, for home students or those with a greater English language ability. As a result, the time commitment required to be part of a sports team or society can be a disincentive. This was particularly the case for those who were only at the University for one semester and, therefore, were focused on settling in, both to the university and a new country, and completing university work. The possibility of flexible membership or simply highlighting societies which require less of a time commitment may enable students to take part in social activities without detracting from their university commitments. An increased number of one-off or 'give it a go' sessions and opportunities run by the sports clubs or societies may also help to engage international students.

4.2.2   Cultural differences

It is also pertinent to consider the variety of education cultures that international students have come from. For students who have previous experience of university education in countries other than the UK, some experienced culture shock. It was found that some international universities focused entirely on a student's studies but coming to Lincoln and being part of the SU provided an opportunity for students to also have an enriched social life. Those who were part of an activity, or had been previously, were keen to describe not only the benefits of meeting new people but also being introduced to, and welcomed into, a different culture. It would be useful to gather case studies of those who have benefited from being a part of an activity in order to promote their value.

4.2.3   Making friends

However, it must be noted that many international students do not have a positive experience. Responses overwhelmingly indicated that the reason many international students did not join an activity is that they felt they were not welcomed by home students. In addition, those who had wished to join for the purpose of making friends felt that often members already had established friendship groups and were less willing to incorporate new members. This was particularly the case for those international students who are only at the University for one semester, for example, having started in January

rather than September. As a result, there seems to be a suggestion that many international students perceive societies and sports teams as being exclusively aimed at home students.

Students reported they felt they were approached less at Freshers Fayres and some societies did not respond to emails or messages about joining. At events such as the Freshers Fayre, it was viewed by some that UK students were less likely to try and engage with them as international students than perhaps they may have been with fellow home students. It may be that there is a potential language barrier, potentially making it more difficult for students to engage with one another.

Whilst there were few suggestions for how to combat language issues, students emphasised the importance of bridging the gap between cultures in order to alter how home students view international students wishing to join a society, but also to increase the perceived accessibility of activities for international students. A recommendation in order to combat this may be to provide cultural/inclusion training for sports club and society committee members in advance of Freshers Fayres to raise awareness of this barrier and perhaps prevent this from remaining an issue in the future.

4.2.4   Lack of information

Another significant barrier to international student involvement with the SU that was identified was a lack of information. Some participants stated they did not feel they had enough information to be able to make an informed decision about whether to join an activity, or what joining would actually entail for them. Likewise, the information about how to join was not felt to be clear enough and in some cases there was a lack of communication from societies when students had asked questions. As a result, students emphasised increasing advertising and promotion of which sports clubs and societies are available to all students, as well as outlining the benefits of joining. It was suggested that this could include information in poster or leaflet form about all societies and what they offer, but particularly from those who are unable to hold stands at the Freshers Fayre.

It is also important to consider that, with international arrival dates, there is always the possibility that late arriving students may miss Freshers week in September or Refreshers week

> "Students might have language difficulties and also cultural barriers and some international students just don't get involved because of that."

in January, and thus may not have the chance to find out about activities or miss the trial periods in order to be able to find out more or get involved.

The overall impression gained was that information about societies was not obvious enough, and this perceived lack of information simply prevented individuals joining an activity. Giving as much information as possible to international students in their welcome week or a welcome pack was suggested in order to make students aware from the beginning of their time at Lincoln what activities are available to them, the possible benefits of joining, and how they can do this. Additional suggestions included adding positive testimonials from international students who are part of a sports club or society, as well as collaborating with the International Students' Association (ISA) to help organise events and to promote joining an activity. It was also suggested that the ISA may be able to hold joint social events with different activities in order to boost engagement with sports and societies and this could result in increased membership.

4.2.5   Cost and payment arrangements

A further barrier identified was cost and the financial implications of joining an activity. International students have significant financial commitments on moving to a university in a new country which can include paying a large proportion of accommodation costs or university fees upfront. International students have higher university fees to pay and, therefore, may not have the resources required when they arrive in

Lincoln to also pay membership fees upfront. Even if they do, the financial implications may potentially be greater especially if they wish to join more than one activity.

Having to pay joining fees as a lump sum may have significant financial implications, particularly for activities with higher joining fees, and hence prevent individuals from becoming involved when they start university. It was suggested that the option of offering payment of fees in instalments or perhaps paying for shorter periods of time (ie, smaller, more regular payments) would allow more students to join.

In addition, for those international students who are only in Lincoln for a short period of time it would allow them to join an activity without having to commit to a year-long membership. Longer trial periods or even the option to swap activities if they paid for one they were not enjoying was suggested as a way to combat the daunting aspect of committing financially to something they were not entirely certain about. The practicality of such a change would need to be assessed and further research would be required in order to establish if this is viable.

However, it is important to note that with many activities, it is already possible to join at any point within the academic year and pay for only that semester. This needs to be advertised more to ensure all students are aware of this option. Additionally, a membership refund within seven days is offered, allowing students some flexibility in swapping activities. Equally, as suggested

earlier, this problem may also be reduced by introducing more one-off events for non-members to join in activities.

5.   Volunteering and employability

There was an overall sense that international students were aware of the benefits of volunteering. They frequently described it as a valuable experience and an opportunity to gain or develop skills in order to list on their CV. It also allows them to give back to the community and the chance to meet new people. Despite this, engagement has generally remained low with approximately only 5% of all international students enrolled for the 2016-17 year involved in volunteering. Those who had part-time jobs or who volunteered appeared to be more likely to take part in things on campus, so there needs to be some consideration as to whether or not they feel there is a lack of assistance in terms of looking for positions elsewhere.

5.1 Barriers to participation

There are a number of barriers which may prevent participation in volunteering or undertaking employment, and these need to be considered in order to understand why international students may not be engaging with volunteering and employability services.

5.1.1   National Insurance number

Those who were able to work in the UK explained difficulties or confusion surrounding gaining a National Insurance (NI) Number. There was a general impression that few international students were aware that a NI number was required in order to work within the UK and those who had heard about it tended to be unaware of the full process required to get one. The vast majority of participating students agreed it would be helpful to have this information, for example in an international student's welcome pack. Additionally, for some students it would be necessary to travel to another city to gain a NI number which presents issues in terms of both cost and missing lectures and/or seminars in order to attend appointments.

5.1.2   Lack of awareness of the 'Work Ready' scheme

As part of both the focus groups and online survey, every participant was asked whether or not they had heard of the SU's 'Work Ready' initiative. This scheme covers developing employability skills whilst at the University of Lincoln. The findings indicate that very few had knowledge of what it consisted of, with only 21.28% indicating they had heard of it (see Figure 2). There was also little understanding of what the scheme actually entailed from those who had heard of it.

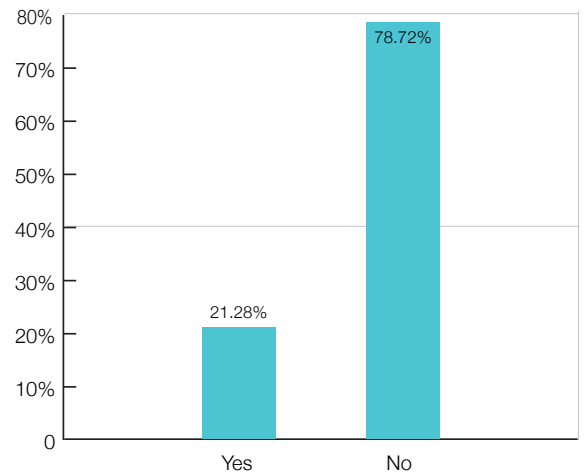**Have you heard of the students' union's 'Work Ready' scheme?**

Figure 2: respondents who have heard of 'Work Ready' scheme

This finding has not been limited to international students. Throughout the student body there appears to be a lack of knowledge about the 'Work Ready' scheme, with only 37.2% of respondents in the AMS 2017 having heard of it. This is not an unexpected finding as the scheme is relatively new.

As a result of this feedback, a number of plans are already in place in order to increase awareness for the 2017-18 academic year:

- The SU website will have a section dedicated to the scheme which will encompass everything related to volunteering and employability. This should make the information easier to access.
- The volunteering and employability department within the SU will be focusing much more on 'Work Ready' and therefore it should become more widely known. For example, when entering the SU building all new signage for the department will detail it as 'Work Ready'. Volunteering will also be included so there will be more activities for students to take part in.
- At present there are workshops held as part of the 'Work Ready' scheme and in line with proposed changes these will cover more topics, for example, finance and the Duke of

Edinburgh Award. This should be helpful to a wider population of students.

▪ Volunteering drop-ins currently held by the SU will be rebranded as 'Work Ready' drop-ins as they will address both volunteering and employability, and there will be an increased number of these across the university campus, not solely in the SU building. This, again, should increase awareness and make ease of access to information significantly better.

▪ The 'Work Ready' scheme has recently improved its social media presence having set up both a Facebook and Twitter page dedicated entirely to the scheme in order to continue promotion of the scheme over the next academic year.

5.1.3 Careers and employability: the SU and university services

In line with these findings, a key message from the feedback received from students was that careers and employability information needs to be better advertised. There appears to be some confusion about what the University and the SU respectively offer in terms of support with employability. The information has been described as difficult to find, most likely contributing to the perceived confusion as to what services are available from which organisation. Some stated not knowing about such services until they had been at the University for some time when it might be too late to fully benefit from them. Better advertising and promotion of services would give students access to the relevant services according to their needs and inform them where to go for the most appropriate assistance.

When asked how individuals would begin to look for employment, most focused on actively seeking employment in the local area or searching online. There was very little mention of using university or SU services in order to find employment or volunteering. This again emphasises that advertising of services may need further development. Similarly, opinions were mixed in terms of whether international students felt that their university life was preparing them for working life post-university.

The AMS 2017 indicated that 38% of respondents felt their SU and university experiences have enabled them to develop employability skills, further supporting that promotion of careers or employability services should be of paramount importance to help

students. This may feed directly into the increased promotion of 'Work Ready', as this should make it clearer what the SU offers. However it remains an area which needs to be developed across the University community more widely.

5.1.4 Brexit

Brexit and the uncertainties surrounding this seem to be a recurring reason for students not to stay to work in the UK after completing their studies. Whilst this remains an ongoing concern for many university communities, and best efforts are being made in order to make students feel more at ease, it is possible that this uncertainty has contributed to international students choosing not to become involved in services which they may perceive as focussed on working in the UK.

5.1.5 The Lincoln Award

In terms of promoting both volunteering and employability, many students were keen to emphasise the benefits of completing the Lincoln Award (this is an employability award designed to engage students in activities that will make them more employable as graduates. See https://lincolnsu.com/lincolnaward).

Many felt that an increased emphasis should be on the benefits to international students of completing the Lincoln Award. Those who completed it gained skills from volunteering as well as having the opportunity to attend employability events that they felt they struggled to access otherwise. It was suggested that key information and contacts related to employability services could be included in information given to international students including information about the Lincoln Award. It may also be useful and beneficial to international students to include information about 'Work Ready' and the benefits of the scheme.

6. Advice and support

The general consensus from students who participated in the research was that most would try and seek guidance and information online or from a fellow student before they would approach a member of staff or an advice service. While discussing the advice and support an international student might need, a number of international students told us they weren't aware that help and support was available to them and

there was some confusion over the services that were offered by the SU and the University. Some examples given were help with essay writing, signposting to the chaplaincy, anti-stress advice, housing & accommodation advice and mental health.

6.1 Barriers to usage

6.1.1 Location of SU Advice Centre

Few international students seemed to know where the SU Advice Centre is located or even that the service existed. In contrast to this, 89.7% of respondents to the AMS 2017 were aware of the services of the Advice Centre. This suggests that international students in particular appear to have a lack of awareness of the Advice Centre. Upon further discussion within the focus groups, there appeared to be significant confusion surrounding the difference between the SU Advice Centre and the University advice service. This indicates that there is a need for increased promotion about what each service offers.

Suggestions included a guide which could be offered to students clarifying where to go for particular issues and the support that is available. Clarity seemed to be key in order to avoid students being directed from place to place as a result of not knowing which service to go to. In line with this, the lack of knowledge of, and limited promotion of services, was identified as a major barrier in terms of students choosing to use services or seek support. Similarly, it was felt that the chaplaincy tended not to be recommended to most students as a source of advice and support and this may be a relevant source of support for international students with a faith.

6.1.2 Cultural differences

Nearly all international students expressed the sense that home students lacked an understanding of international students' experience of university. The concerns of an international student can often be different to those of a home student, so feeling that support is available to them is important. For example, international students who move into new accommodation with mostly English students can find this daunting. Many suggested that home students are less aware of how hard it may be for an international student to be in a new country and not have the family support that students from the UK may have. For this reason, they may not offer the kind of friendly support

that can make this transition easier. This can contribute quite significantly to feelings of loneliness or isolation. In order to try and prevent this, the Advice Centre has planned the re-launch of the international friends and buddy system. This should help to reduce this area of concern for international students, while providing international students with a person who is able to understand the issues that they experience.

6.1.3 Academic context

The NUS report entitled *Student Perspectives on International Students*[2] highlighted the greatest opportunity home and international students have to integrate is on their course, with approximately 80% indicating this is the case. This is compared to only 40% who integrate with international students as part of sports clubs or in halls of residence. It is important, therefore, to address home students' perspective of international students as part of their course.

During this research a specific example given of home students responding negatively to international students was in the context of group work or group assignments. Many felt they were perceived as being lazy or not wanting to join in, when in fact they were simply struggling to keep up with the speed of conversation between UK students. Many felt they were not able to adequately explain that they might need extra support or did not know where to go to ask for help.

The Advice Centre offers support for academic issues and has planned lecture shout outs for the next academic year which could be tailored towards schools with high numbers of international students in order to highlight where the support can be found. Additionally, promotion of these advice services through Academic Representative networks may aid this further, whilst also ensuring reps identify themselves as another source of support for academic issues. This could also be an area where working with the University directly may be of great benefit. Highlighting this issue to programme leaders and encouraging them to educate students about taking international students potential conversation speed into account when working together could help to reduce this as an area of concern.

2. See online link in references on page 51.

"Especially when you are in a group with people at the beginning they might just talk slowly but then they get faster and faster and use more slang then you don't understand anything and are isolated."

6.1.4   Issues particular to international students

Additionally, it was suggested that perhaps some areas within the University could be considered in more depth in terms of the impact on international students. For example, the issue of exams not being scheduled far enough in advance; or last minute timetable changes impacting on booking flights home, and the increased costs associated with late flight booking or having to make changes to flights. Having to pay a significant proportion of fees or accommodation upfront, which home students are not required to do, also causes some distress to those with limited financial resources. Furthermore, it was frequently mentioned that as the majority of student tenancies are set to end shortly after the end of second semester, international students do not have anywhere to live until graduation. Support is therefore necessary in relation to housing issues affecting international students. Further research is required in order to find out what sort of additional support international students would find helpful in relation to this from the University and the SU.

6.1.5   VP International and Student Leaders

Feedback suggested that the introduction of a VP International was beneficial in terms of providing a figurehead that could act both as a source of support but also as someone who is able to signpost to the relevant support services. The VP International provides a figurehead and can inform the Advice Centre on relevant issues of support and how the SU can make positive changes. At the start of the new academic year, the increased presence of Student Leaders on campus should ensure that international students know there is someone specifically dedicated to helping with issues they experience and who can offer guidance as well as being able to appreciate their unique experience as an international student.

6.1.6   Reluctance to seek help

When discussing what may prevent an international student from seeking help, even when they know about the available services, a number of other barriers were identified. The key theme was a fear or anxiety; of being looked down on or feeling stupid for seeking help. There appeared to be a sense that what they wanted to know may be obvious to home students, but there was also a perception that staff do not understand the needs of international students.

6.1.7   English language

A language barrier was an expected obstacle, with difficulties in English contributing to the perceived embarrassment or even potentially to the lack of understanding from staff or other students. Language was also described as a factor which contributed to a lack of confidence in approaching advice services and members of staff. In order to try to reduce this issue it may be helpful to explore the practicality and cost of a contract or using pay-per-minute with services such as LanguageLine® in order to have access to a telephone or video translator. In addition, it may be of great benefit to recruit more Student Advisor volunteers within the SU who are either bilingual or multilingual to help direct international students to access the correct services, or even act as an interpreter if requested by the student.

6.2 Future plans for improvement

Over the next academic year, the SU Advice Centre has planned a number of measures in order to increase the awareness of the service, and a place that international students feel they can approach. Results from the AMS 2017 indicate that of the students who have used the Advice Centre 69.3% would recommend using it to other students. Further work is being considered to develop the Advice Centre to ensure that students have a clear understanding of what the service does. Suggestions include a pop up Advice Café's to ensure the Advice Centre is more visible. As previously mentioned, lecture shout outs, promotion through the course representative network and relaunching of the international friends system are also planned. There will also be bitesize workshops for specific issues open to all students. Through these measures it is hoped that awareness of the SU Advice Centre and the services it offers will improve, and that international students will feel it is somewhere they are comfortable approaching. These measures and the (hopefully) improved engagement with advice services will directly impact upon the student experience and wellbeing of international students, supporting them in reaching their full potential.

7.   Commercial and events

Of those who participated in the research, attendance of SU-organised events was very mixed. The majority of students explained they generally attended events in Freshers week or towards the beginning of the year (the

international welcome party was specifically mentioned as a success), but rarely attended events later in the year, if at all.

7.1 Barriers to attending

Reasons for not attending events were similar to reasons international students gave for not engaging with sports teams and societies. These include commitment to academic work and deadlines, lack of knowledge or awareness of events and on a more general level, a lack of interest in attending.

Students can find events Information on the Lincoln SU website https://lincolnsu.com/events. Information is also posted on the SU Facebook page and related Facebook pages. There are also posters and poster boards outside the venue and around campus. Event information is also e-mailed to all students in a newsletter. Most participants indicated that they were aware they could look for information on the SU website but suggested the information was not necessarily easy to locate.

7.2 Benefits of attending

Largely there appeared to be a feeling that international students were more willing to attend events they felt they would gain something from. For example, many expressed an interest in attending events which would aid with employability rather than evening social events. Similarly, moving to a new university can be very daunting and students suggested an event entirely for the purpose of meeting people and making friends would be of great benefit in helping them get to know people and settle in to university.
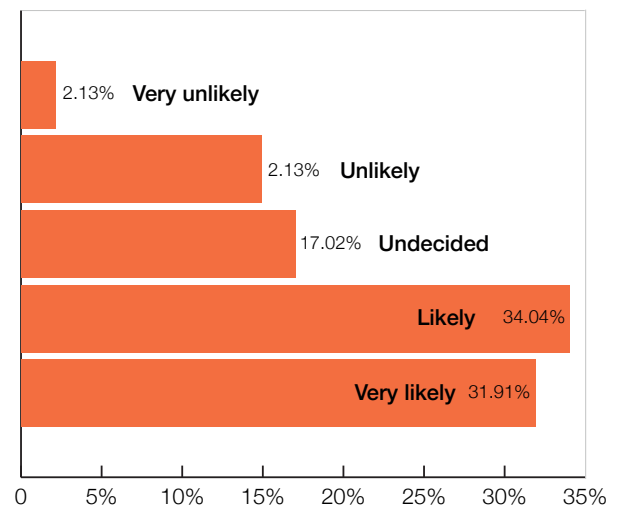
7.3 Cultural events

As previously mentioned, many students explained that international universities do not tend to have any kind of focus or contribution toward students' social life. For some students this can make a pleasant change when they come to a UK university. However, for others it can potentially present a culture clash. Consequently, it may be important to take into consideration cultural implications of events and how they could be perceived. Many students expressed a desire to see more cultural events hosted by the SU, such as the Diwali and Chinese New Year events which are already held. It was suggested that students advise on the organisation of cultural events to ensure they are

sensitive to the culture and are not unintentionally disrespectful or encourage cultural appropriation.

Most international students who participated in the research indicated they would be either likely or very likely (65.95%) to attend a regular event for international students hosted by the SU (Figure 3).

How likely would you be to attend a regular international student event hosted by the SU?

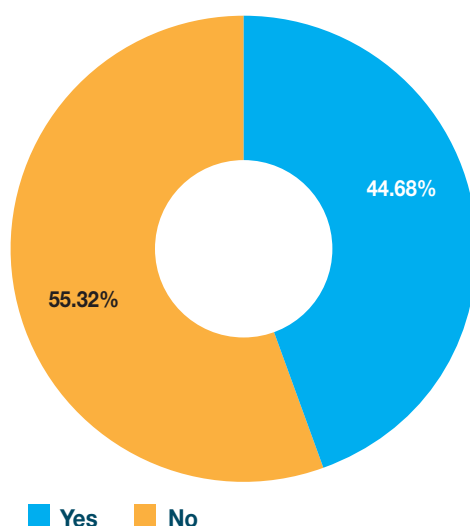Figure 3: respondents who would attend a regular event hosted by SU

Suggestions for potential events included tea parties to allow students to socialise without alcohol being present, or an increased number of cultural events. The main idea suggested by people in every focus group was cross-cultural events in order to provide the opportunity to meet other international students as well as home students. This could involve sharing food, culture and music in order to bring everyone together.

When asked how international students usually socialise with their friends, many mentioned hosting movie nights, cooking food together or just arranging to meet up every week more casually, for example going to a cafe. Taking this into consideration may aid in developing frequent events for international students that are separate from the weekly SU club nights and more in line with interests they already share. Again international students emphasised the time commitment on academic work and students may be less likely to attend frequent events. They suggested spreading events out, for example, no more frequently than once a month.

8. Student voice and representation

Almost 50% of international students knew who their course representative was, as depicted in Figure 4. In contrast, in the AMS 2017 73.2% of undergraduate students and 64.8% of postgraduate students indicated they knew who their course representative was. Similarly, general awareness of the academic representation system was 78.2%. This suggests there is a lesser amount of awareness among international students, and that this is something which may need to be addressed.

Do you know who your course rep is?

Figure 4: respondents who know their course representative

8.1 Barriers to participation

The Academic Representation System is an important mechanism for resolving course problems or discussing difficulties. However, most international students who knew who their representative was suggested they would only communicate with them if they were already friends or if they were also an international student who, they thought, appreciated the problems of international students. This finding reflects the barriers that were identified in preventing international students from seeking advice and support. The perceived lack of understanding from those who are not international students and feeling like someone cannot be approached prevents international students from seeking support for course issues.

Similarly, it was highlighted that international students can often be older than home students,

meaning that if the Rep is significantly younger it can become even harder to approach them with problems. It is possible that the relaunch of the International Friends schemes will aid with this and provide a route for raising issues. In addition, Academic Representative training could raise awareness of issues facing international students and also the difficulties they may face when approaching a Rep. Highlighting the need for the Rep to be proactive and patient in approaching international students could help to bridge the gap between Academic Reps and international students on their course.

8.2 Improving participation

When discussing how the voice of international students is heard by the SU, many felt that this was already good, with incentives to participate in the survey. This encouraged people to take part and share their opinions. Equally, most felt they would feel comfortable approaching academic staff on their course.

To improve how the SU specifically could hear the thoughts of international students one of the ideas proposed was a suggestion box. While theoretically this could work, it may not be the most practical for all enrolled students to access, particularly those who are distance learners. It may be more appropriate to direct students towards the pre-existing system of 'SUggestions'. This online platform allows students to make suggestions and also have their say on suggestions from other students and see the progress of ideas which have been previously raised. 'SUggestions' has been promoted before, however the apparent lack of awareness of how to make suggestions means it may still be necessary to take this more directly to international students. This could be done through increased marketing, through Student Leaders out on campus and through Representative networks.

A further suggestion from students was to host drop-ins they could attend, however, the practicality of doing this would need to be assessed before anything could be formally implemented. It may be possible to trial specific drop-in times with the VP International, but there is a question over whether it is actually of the greatest benefit to students. Similarly, as previously mentioned, Student Leaders will be required to spend more time out on campus talking to students over the next academic year. They will also promote where the VP International

"I just usually feel stupid and don't ask questions"

will be and this will provide the opportunity for international students to discuss issues with them, negating the need for specific drop-in sessions.

8.3 Creating an inclusive environment

It was established that one of the biggest problems for international students is that they often do not feel as included within the university community as home students. Consequently, a key area for discussion was how it may be possible to further promote inclusivity, respect and understanding amongst all students, regardless of their background. The key point is that anything which helps to make home students seem more welcoming towards international students would be of great benefit to the international student community. Whilst many felt that efforts were already being made, or were successfully in place, there were suggestions that may help to develop this further. This included the recurring suggestion of multicultural events in order to let students mix together and network, showcase the variety of international student cultures and also introduce international students to British culture. Many mentioned that a contributing factor for them coming to university in the UK was to meet different people from different countries. Subsequently it was important to them that events were not separated for home students and international students.

It was felt that the main barrier between home and international students was a lack of understanding, and that events encouraging students to join together would help to bridge this gap and aid in promoting inclusivity and respect. Additionally, it was felt it would be of great benefit for these events to provide the opportunity for international students to engage with British students which may help them settle better into life in Britain.

It was also suggested that it may be helpful to create a guide to help international students learn how to live on campus, perhaps including a basic guide about the SU. This is because many students are from countries where SU's do not exist and so they do not understand how they work. Better understanding of this may help international students to discover the measures which are in place to help them have their voice.

9.   General comments

9.1 International student arrivals

Overall, it was suggested that information was not clear enough or easy to find.

The International Arrivals Lounge was proposed as the best way to initially get information out as every international student is required to go there when they start at the University of Lincoln. (The International Arrivals Lounge is an annual event that runs from Freshers week until the first week in October. It's where all international students need to enrol for the academic year and it also acts as their welcome to the university (www. lincoln.ac.uk/home/welcomeweek/international/ arrivalsguide/).

An in depth welcome pack with all the information about services available at both the SU and the University was suggested as a highly beneficial way of setting an international student up in the best way possible and enabling them to access and use services that will support and help them throughout their time at university.

It was felt by some that there was a lack of information about what to do when students first arrive. For example, they don't know where things are, both on campus and in the city more generally and they don't know that they need to enrol on blackboard in order to see timetables and make module selections as soon as possible. It was highlighted that some other universities send out comprehensive guides to international students about where to go to register and details about everything they may need to know about enrolling or services available once they arrive.

The VP International's presence at the arrivals lounge will help to put a face to a name as soon as students arrive, perhaps having the effect of increasing engagement with the SU over the following year. Using the arrivals lounge in this way may give international students information about services that they have available to them so they feel that they are supported from the beginning.

It was also suggested that the possibility of the arrivals lounge opening earlier, even if just by a couple of days, may provide international students with the opportunity to get to know both Lincoln and the University at their own pace

before classes start and campus gets very busy. Likewise, this may mean that international students may have more of an opportunity to explore the different SU and university services and find where each of these are located.

9.2 An app

In addition, many participants discussed the idea of an app being developed in order to help make information more obvious. This would need to be concisely summarised and would need to ensure everything is in one easy-to-access place. The ability to purchase tickets or merchandise via an app was also suggested in order to make attending events easier, with the possibility of a full events calendar linking to phone calendars. This may increase awareness of events and boost attendance. Developing such an app may result in more people engaging with the SU. An app should therefore be developed, working in partnership with the University, to ensure the maximum positive impact on students.

10. Research limitations

Despite using a number of methods in order to promote participation, and a number of incentives being offered, only a very small percentage (3.36%) of international students actually took part in the research. This further demonstrates how engagement with the SU is very limited within the international student community at the University of Lincoln, and that improving on this is of the utmost importance to ensure that international students have a positive experience at Lincoln.

Despite the small sample of students who gave feedback, it can still be used to boost engagement. Arguably, the fact that there was consensus amongst the responses and it was possible to identify recurring themes across the different focus groups suggests that these feelings are held more widely across the international student body, and thus generalisations can appropriately be made.

11. Research application: key action points

– Student Leaders will be significantly more visible to their students, via Facebook Live activity, increase 'Go Out and Talk' activity, and greater use of their social media channels, so that students are aware of them and what they do. In terms of this particular project, this is particularly important to the VP International.

– The SU will develop an in-depth International Welcome Pack to provide students with information as soon as they arrive in Lincoln, including information about SU and University services and more general information about

Lincoln. The Arrivals Lounge will be used as the base for distribution and for introducing the VP International.

– The SU will work in partnership with the University to ensure there is clarity about what support and information services are available to students, and will ensure that students are signposted to the most appropriate staff or service

– The SU will increase advertisement and promotion of all SU services and support available to students; specifically, information about 'Work Ready', the Advice Centre, 'SUggestions', events and activities.

– The SU will strengthen the relationship between the International Students Association and Student Activities (Sports Clubs & Societies), by ensuring they are aware of each other and have opportunities to collaborate, to encourage international students to join sports clubs and societies.

– The SU will provide cultural awareness campaigns for all students, but in an effort to encourage awareness, respect, and inclusivity between all students.

– The SU will incorporate within both Academic Representative and Activity Committee training information about how to be proactive and patient in approaching international students and will include information about difficulties faced by international students.

– The SU will ensure that communication is as clear as possible to prevent misunderstanding or confusion, considering alternative methods of communication, including signposting to various different social media outlets where appropriate. The SU will continue to develop the SU website and how it is navigated to support this.

– An App will be developed, working in partnership with the university, to create a new platform which will increase awareness of our services.

– The SU will deliver an increased number of cultural events, organised by students of the respective culture, to promote cross-cultural understanding.

– The SU will promote the use of the Academic Representative system directly to international students to help resolve academic course issues. This will include working with university staff.

– The SU will relaunch the International Friends scheme in order to provide another source of support for international students and use this as a platform to help to promote other SU services and guide students to appropriate SU and university services.

– The SU will evaluate the cost-effectiveness of a contract with a telephone translation service in order to improve the accessibility of all SU services, but more specifically the Advice Centre.

– The SU will actively train volunteers who are Student Advisors or a part of the International Friends Scheme to be empathetic to the issues of international students and where possible encourage multilingual students to apply for volunteering opportunities.

Research implications

Initially, research findings with minimal impact on resources and pre-established plans can be added to the VP International Operational Plan. Where additional resources or financial commitments are required these will be incorporated into annual budgets and operational plans. These larger requirements are most likely to affect existing departments within the SU, such as the Advice Centre or Student Voice. In order to use the data for the benefit of students, the SU may also need to work with the University to make changes within their services and processes.

Recommendations for action from student feedback will be planned against an appropriate and achievable timescale. Many recommendations are within areas the SU is already aware of and plans for implementing changes have already been considered for the start of the new academic year. Follow up research may be conducted to gather more information using, for example, the New Starters survey, the NSS, or the SU management system, SUMS for insight into data.

12. Recommendations for other SUs

Top Ten Questions your SU needs to ask about supporting international students

1. Do you have a dedicated point of contact for international students?
2. Do you offer welcome events for international students?
3. Do you provide information for international students before they arrive in the UK?

4. Do your student-led sports and societies offer flexible membership options for international students?
5. Do you offer a series of inclusive educational cultural events through the year?
6. Do you offer a regular forum for international students to get together/ share opinions/ socialise/share experiences?
7. Do you offer support and advice on how to get a National Insurance Numbers? (UKCISA has useful advice at https://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Information--Advice/Working/Employers-income-tax-National-Insurance)
8. Can you measure engagement of international students via a membership management system where you can track activity?
9. Do you promote volunteer opportunities specifically to international students (perhaps those that are based on campus)?
10. Do you work with university staff to support cultural differences within the curriculum?

13. Conclusions

The key learning point from the research project is that the SU's Activities, Events and Opportunities (including Academic) may be less accessible to international students than desired, and there are a number of barriers that prevent international students from engaging in these. The main conclusion is that information about services is not as clear as previously perceived by the SU. Implementing recommendations and adapting existing plans in line with the findings of the research should increase international student engagement with the SU. We hope this will result in improved overall student wellbeing and that enhanced support for students will enable them to reach their full potential while studying at the University of Lincoln.

14. References

Student Perspectives on International Students, NUS 2017 https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/Student-perspectives-on-international-students

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