University of Glasgow

A report on a survey of international summer schools: student expectations

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1. Motivations for the research

There is very little discussion or formal sharing of information amongst the institutions that host international summer schools (ISS). The research for this UKCISA-funded project focused on trying to better understand the needs and expectations of incoming summer school students, and identifying common patterns. It is hoped that this research will help to determine the challenges and opportunities associated with supporting international students, within the context of short-term study.

2. Methodology

The initial method of gathering information was through an online survey that was designed and disseminated through SurveyMonkey.com. There were 80 recipients: key study abroad and exchange partners of the University of Glasgow, of which 22 replied positively. The 22 university representatives spanned 12 different countries, notably France, Germany, Holland, Belgium, Poland, United Kingdom, Canada, China, Hong Kong, Malaysia, India and Mexico. Almost all participants were from institutions which were established post 1990: from 1996-2015, except one institution founded in 1969.

This report will be shared with all participants.

See Appendix 1 for the full breakdown of survey questions sent to the participating institutions.

3. Key survey findings

From the results, it became clear that the combination of nationalities within a summer school varies according to the host country. British universities mostly host students from Asian countries (notably Japan and China), USA, Europe and Saudi Arabia. In China, participating ISS students originate from Australia and USA. European universities host predominantly local students. North American institutions largely welcome students from Asia and Europe.

3.1 Why attend an ISS?
In order of importance, the main reason why students applied to attend a summer school were to:

- gain academic credit and/or work experience*
- experience a new country and culture
- make new friends
- gain a taster of the host university/pursue PGT/PGR study
- combine studies with recreational activities and travelling
- learn another language

*Some schools offering short-term internships and the opportunity to gain work experience as part of the summer programme prove to be the most attractive to prospective students. However, this is not an option in the UK for non-EU nationals whose visa will usually prohibit them from working.

3.2. ISS Preferences by student nationality and age
One of the survey participants from the UK explained that according to their experience, participating students from North American institutions tended to pay more attention to the opportunity to gain extra credits during the summer school, more so than students from any other nationality.

Another important reason for students wishing to attend a summer school was to gain an initial taster of the host institution. It was found that a number of students attending summer schools already hold an offer from the institution, but wished to experience the university and evaluate the services and campus life.

Two universities from UK and Belgium wrote that there was a connection between age and preferences. It was clear from the findings that younger students attending a summer school wanted to experience a comprehensive social programme, learning in class in the morning and doing activities or visits in the afternoon. Older students tended to focus on studying language classes in the afternoon.

3.3 ISS Student Support by Nationality
From the findings it was clear that nationality also played an important role in the expectations for on-campus student support:
- Prospective students from Asia and North America expected guidance and student support through the entire end to end process and applicant journey.
- Students of Islamic faith indicated that the option to skip Friday classes for prayers would be welcome.

- Chinese students were interested in a package deal arrangement, with all costs (including travel and meal plan) included in the overall price.
- Parents of North American students want to know what their child is doing or want to make sure that the child is performing well.
- Mixed student accommodation is not always popular.
- Food preferences and restrictions. As ISSs fall outside term time, providing a meal plan/catering was an issue (no pork and Halal food for Muslim students, for example).

3.4 Common issues hosting an ISS (and the associated solutions)

Across the institutions participating in this survey, a pattern of common problems emerged:

- Most universities are not fully prepared to host disabled students over the quieter summer period. A common occurrence was that the institution's **Disability Services** were not fully equipped to provide accommodation and support outside term-time.
- **Sport facilities** and access to the campus gym – some universities do not provide access to the gym over the summer period.
- **Accommodation** – lack of space for incoming summer students, especially on city campuses. As a result, some universities engage with host families to accommodate students during the summer (this is very popular with Japanese students).
- Almost all universities faced problems in **processing visas**. The common solution is in the provision of ongoing support, guidance and providing sufficient information throughout the applicant journey, and not just at the point of registration.
- One of the participating UK institutions noticed that if there are **too many students of one nationality**, there is a tendency to interact only with each other in the home language. This can have a detrimental impact on student integration and student experience.
- **Differences in methods of learning and teaching** – academic approaches can vary and expectations vary across nationality and age. Some students (for example, from North America or East Asia), are not as familiar with the flipped classroom approach as, say, students form Europe and the UK.
- **Medical insurance** – students require detailed information regarding healthcare and health insurance, as provision varies tremendously between countries. Failure to do so has at times proven to be extremely disruptive and costly.

Participants shared their solutions to combat the above issues:

- Provide detailed information on what level of disability support the institution can provide over the vacation period. Engage with students at the application stage to provide contact details for Disability Services.
- Run thorough cultural awareness sessions in both pre-departure events and during the first days of an ISS. Make these engaging by incorporating activities.
- Aid student integration by encouraging more joint activities and excursions for students across all summer school programmes
- Hire a team of student advisers to support with logistics (including airport arrival), integration (informal ice breaking sessions) and as a touch point for ISS students requiring assistance and support.
- Keep participating students busy; students should study "actively" (less lectures, more student activities). Offering different formats such as hybrid courses (both online pre- and post-lectures and one week on campus for example), can occupy students who have more of a thirst to learn than others.
- Try to best meet learning and teaching expectations by publishing course information in advance, and updating web content and promotional materials to reflect this. Some institutions provide applicants with the opportunity to engage in web chats or online information sessions prior to arrival. Visa information can also be disseminated through these channels, via online pre-departure events, which have proven successful. The majority of participating universities cited social media as the most useful channel to distribute useful information both prior to arrival and during the period of study.
- The option to mention dietary restrictions could be included in the application form (for university canteen).
- To combat problems with language barriers, hiring a native speaker (perhaps a current student) for the first week to mitigate issues and provide support.

It is hoped that the findings from this survey will help to inform institutions of the commons issues and recommended solutions when providing short-term study opportunities. The demand for short-term study continues to grow rapidly, and

is expected to continue to increase as institutions develop their internationalisation strategies.

4. Conclusions, ideas for further research and lessons learned

Conducting the research for this project was both reassuring and rewarding. As a summer school manager myself, I felt reassured that I was not alone in facing a multitude of issues and problems on an almost daily basis. I found comfort in knowing that I was not the only one having to find solutions and think on my feet, and that every day was, essentially, a school day when managing short-term study for international students.

Whilst conducting this research, a number of lessons were learned:

- More time is required to research this subject in more depth. My colleague and I were on a relatively tight turnaround, and requesting institutions to participate in an online survey counted on someone from that institution having the time to open my email, respond, and then finding further time to fill in a relatively lengthy survey.
- Face-to-face interviews and focus groups with the participating institutions would have proven more valuable – however, time and budget did not allow them. It became apparent for my counterparts, as was the case for myself, that managing their institution's summer school was not their only

responsibility, and participants simply did not have enough time to complete or fully contribute to the online survey.

- It was hoped that individual case studies would be obtained to provide more specific information for this report. However, for the reasons detailed above – that participants were already stretched to complete the survey – it is recommended that for future research, face to face interviews are conducted.

Going forward, as the demand for short-term study options is predicted to continue to grow globally, it would be beneficial that there was continued support to conduct further research on this growing trend within higher education.

See Appendix 2 for a checklist of key considerations when running an international summer school.

5. Contact details

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Note
Lexy Docwra led on this research while working as Senior International Officer and ISS Manager at the University of Glasgow. She moved to the University of Strathclyde in October 2017 and can be contacted there.

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Appendix 1
Survey questionnaire

The survey consisted of eight open-ended questions:

1. Number of students participating in your summer schools for the last two years (approximate amount)

2. Year that your summer school was established

3. Approximate percentage of nationalities distribution among your students.

4. Approximate percentage of gender distribution among your students.

5. According to your observations what are the main expectations of the international students on short-term summer programmes? If you have any examples of different requirements of students from various groups (geographical areas, gender, age, etc.) please add these in the comments section.

6. In your experience, what problems in the delivery of core services for international summer school students do you face?

If possible, please provide examples that apply to certain student groups (geographical areas, gender, age):

- Enrolment and registration process
- Pre-arrival engagement
- Orientation programmes
- Delivery of disability services
- Provision of sport facilities
- Learning processes
- Accommodation
- Entertainment, socialization
- International student support
- Medical services
- Other

7. Besides the core services (listed above) provided by summer school staff, what further needs do international students have according to your records? Please include examples concerning various groups of students if you had any.

8. What solutions and approaches have you identified to address these particular needs of international summer school students?

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Appendix 2
International Student Support: a checklist

From the information submitted by the 22 survey participants, a pattern emerged which detailed the most important provisions as requested by international summer school students:

- Detailed course information (including teaching methods, required reading, method of examination and credits obtained)
- An acknowledgment that the credits obtained would be recognized by the home institution
- Clear and detailed information on the applicant journey, including language requirements and accommodation provision
- Information on visas (if required)
- An opportunity to submit dietary information and contact disability and chaplaincy services (if required)
- Prior information on campus life, the local area and useful services.
- An opportunity to contact current students or summer school alumni to better understand the student experience and campus life
- Course timetables in advance
- Information on medical care and provision
- Airport arrival information
- Information on 'things to do' and recommended trips for those on short term study programmes
- For those whose English is not a first language, provide language support from day one to combat issues of settling in and class enjoyment
- Information in advance regarding the social and cultural programme
- Detailed and user-friendly information on academic and financial registration, as well as applying for housing/accommodation

Providing information in advance: an important note

Summer schools are by nature short-term – therefore, those institutions that participated in the survey made it clear that students required the majority of information in advance in order to avoid facing problems and finding solutions on arrival. If a typical summer school programme lasts three weeks, and a student had an issue with registration or accommodation, the issue could take the full three weeks to solve, which can prove highly disruptive to the student's academic experience and overall enjoyment. It was widely acknowledged, however, that providing information prior to arrival was recommended and of high importance, but that students very rarely read or acted on this information. This could be combated by further use of social media channels to disseminate important information – a closed Facebook or WeChat group, for example – and by encouraging applicants to participate in online web chats and/or pre-departure events.