

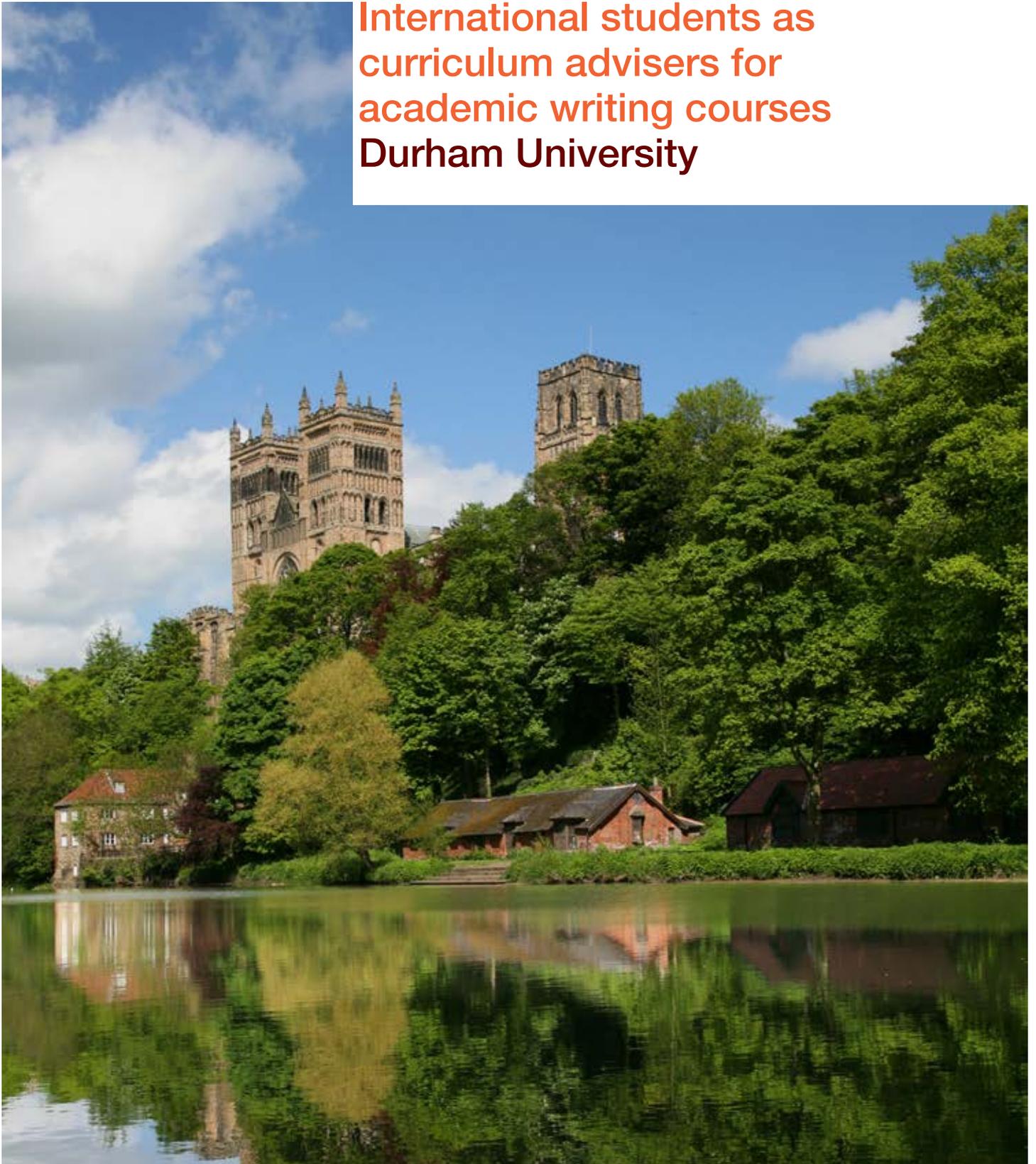
**UK Council  
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**UKCISA GRANTS SCHEME  
FOR INTERNATIONAL  
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2016-17 Pilot project  
supporting the international  
student experience in the UK

**International students as  
curriculum advisers for  
academic writing courses  
Durham University**



# International students as Curriculum Advisers for academic writing courses: developing and implementing staff-student partnerships

## Durham University

### Aims and genesis of the project

This project aimed to develop a method of creating effective staff-student partnerships so that international students could actively contribute to improving academic writing course provision. Over the years, international students had contributed texts, self-study materials and cultural and/or disciplinary insights to the academic writing courses at the Durham University English Language Centre (ELC) on an ad hoc basis. However, these contributions were not being acknowledged in any systematic or formal way. How could the international students contribute more directly to curriculum planning, and how could their contributions be more formally recognised?

The concept of staff-student partnerships in curriculum planning seemed to offer a potential method of giving international students greater voice and agency. A small exploratory study was first conducted to see if international students would be interested in helping with curriculum and materials redesign for a year-long in-session writing course, the Academic Writing Workshop. The pilot project was then designed, aiming to set up a more formal process for establishing and implementing staff-student partnerships. The project was envisaged to benefit both staff and international students by breaking down and equalising, as far as possible, the power distance between

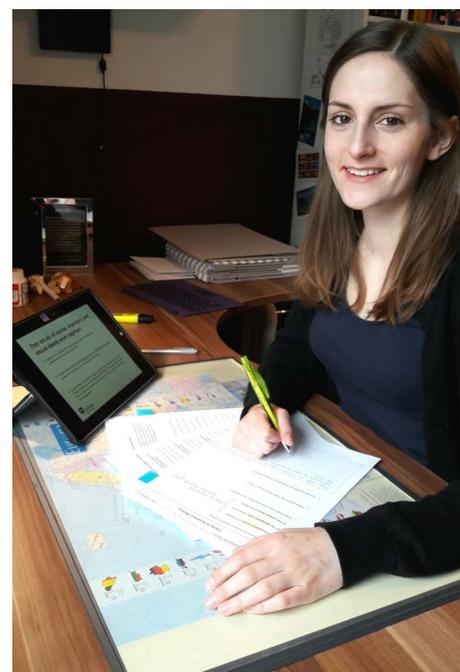
them. It was also hoped that the international students would feel increased engagement with the host university through their participation in the project.

### Summary of outcomes

- **Revised materials** were produced for the Academic Writing Workshop, to be piloted in 2017-18.
- **Qualitative interview data** was gathered from semi-structured interviews and a focus group, and the findings clearly demonstrate the benefits of involving international students directly in HE curriculum planning.
- **Conference presentations** were made by two staff members and four international students (at UK Lingua, Durham; BALEAP Bristol; STORIES, Oxford; Kaleidoscope\*, Cambridge; CERA, London; RAISE, Manchester; Learning and Teaching Conference, Durham).  
\*you can download the Kaleidoscope presentation from the UKCISA website
- **Three conference proceedings papers** are in progress: STORIES has been accepted and is in its final draft. Two more papers in which three students are co-authoring (BALEAP 2017 and Kaleidoscope) are currently under review.

### Background to the project

The ELC at Durham University is a busy one, with a summer pre-



*Critiquing course materials: Natalie Schandri*

sessional programme of more than 600 international students, one-to-one consultations assisting approximately 1,000 students a year (both domestic and international), and an In-session programme with more than 50 courses. The ELC also runs discipline-specific courses, but on the in-session programme, most courses such as the Academic Writing Workshop are open to all, regardless of discipline or level. Although feedback for the workshop is always positive, the course supervisor felt that the materials are not always appropriate for everybody in such a multi-disciplinary, mixed-level, multicultural class. It was felt that if international students could act as Curriculum Advisers, working in



*Critiquing course materials: Ting Yang (above) and her notes (top)*

partnership with staff on a lesson-by-lesson, exercise-by-exercise basis, the course materials could be enhanced.

### How the project was set up

A staff project team was set up, consisting of the Project Supervisor, a Project Adviser to take care of ethical issues such as data protection and release of rights, and a Project Assistant to conduct internet research and data analysis. A total of six Curriculum Advisers were then recruited for the project through purposive sampling. Five of the six Curriculum Advisers had attended the Academic Writing Workshop; the sixth had attended an ELC Pre-session course. One of the Curriculum Advisers is a PhD student; the others are all taught Master's students. A key element of the project was the use of social media tools to promote teamwork and a sense of trust. Firstly, a Dropbox was set up containing project documents and selected journal articles about staff-student partnerships: everybody was given full access and editing rights. Secondly, a closed Facebook group for the project

group was set up by one of the Curriculum Advisers so that photos could be shared and meetings could be scheduled. In addition, all relevant e-mails were forwarded to the Curriculum Advisers to keep them fully informed of all developments in the project. The only documents not made available to the Curriculum Advisers were confidential student data such as personal details and interview transcripts.

### Timescale: project activities and findings

The project ran from October 2016 until August 2017 and was divided into four main phases:

#### Phase 1: Baseline study (October-December 2016)

In Phase 1, a baseline study was conducted by the Project Assistant to establish whether there were any other staff-student partnership projects in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in the Russell Group or at universities in the North of England. A series of keyword searches were run on the university websites and on Google. Although international students are increasingly being consulted in the design and delivery of discipline-specific academic writing courses (for example at Bristol University), no specific references to staff-student partnerships in EAP were found.

#### Phase 2: Data collection (January-April 2017)

The Curriculum Advisers evaluated materials from the first lesson of the Academic Writing Workshop. This allowed the staff to see how students of different nationalities and cultural backgrounds reacted to the same exercises and activities; also, on a voluntary In-session course the first lesson is crucial for ensuring ongoing student attendance. The staff-student discussions of the materials were audio-recorded and ethnographic field-notes were taken. After checking the field-notes for accuracy against

the audio-recordings, the field-notes were transcribed. All the Curriculum Advisers' comments were then collated on a session evaluation sheet. In a second round of materials evaluation, the Curriculum Advisers could choose any (and as many) of the 25 total sessions that they wished to critique. In both evaluation rounds, the Curriculum Advisers set their own deadlines and chose their preferred work locations.

#### Phase 3: Materials redesign and piloting (April-June 2017)

Redesigning the materials sometimes took place on the spot, with staff and students working side by side. In other cases, comments collected on the session evaluation sheets were used to adjust the materials at a later date. Broader-scope suggestions made by the Curriculum Advisers were noted, such as using a wider variety of text-type exemplars on the handouts, increasing the range of optional homework tasks, and improving the online support materials. These changes will be incorporated during the next roll-out of the Academic Writing Workshop in 2017-18.

#### Phase 4: Feedback, evaluation and dissemination (April-August 2017)

Semi-structured interviews and a focus group were conducted to ask participants to reflect on their participation and on the value of the project itself. How much of their time had been taken up with project work and was this appropriate for them? Had they truly felt that they were in partnership with the staff? Had their attitudes towards their writing, their studies and the host institution changed as a result of their participation in the pilot project?

The Curriculum Advisers' responses to the project were overwhelmingly positive. The project had not been too time-consuming, and the Curriculum Advisers felt that they were treated as equals within the partnership. Most

importantly, their attitudes towards their writing, their courses and to Durham University had become much more positive as a result of their participation. At the focus group the Curriculum Advisers were unanimous in their views of the value of the project to themselves as members of the university as well as to the ELC. They highlighted presenting at conferences as being seminal experiences for them. They also had several suggestions for taking the project forward, such as making videoed extracts of international students explaining academic English conventions in their own languages. A test video has been made in Korean, and we will add more videos in the coming year and assess international students' reactions to these recordings.

Dissemination of the project took place at a number of conferences at which Curriculum Advisers co-presented with the staff and with each other. Further dissemination and evaluation of the project will be made via the Conference Proceedings papers which the partners had been invited to publish.

### Challenges to project delivery and budget

The actual phasing of the project was somewhat less orderly than the above outline would suggest, resulting in a certain amount of "phase bleeding". For example:

- Heavy teaching loads for staff in Term 1 of 2016-17 meant that the baseline study scheduled for Phase 1 could not be fully completed until Phase 3.
- Data collection during Phase 2 could not be completed until Phase 3 as Curriculum Advisers on taught courses had extremely heavy workloads.
- Phase 3 (trailing the materials) could not be completed as originally planned, because the Academic



Writing Workshop is not scheduled to run again until 2017-18.

- The project dissemination planned for Phase 4 actually went through all four phases, owing to conference schedules and abstract submission deadlines.
- The unpredictability of successful conference submissions made it difficult to estimate expenses in advance. One or two more conferences could have been attended and still kept the project within budget. Two conferences fell outside the budgetary period, so not all expenses have yet been claimed.
- A member of the project team became ill, which slowed down the collection and processing of interview and focus group data. Although this can be done at a future date, the hours allocated for this work could not be fully claimed within the budgetary period.

### Project findings and long-term sustainability

Participant responses to the project were very positive. At the focus group, Curriculum Advisers reported that they felt they had been treated as equals while working with staff, and that they found this empowering. All felt that it was rewarding to have more contact

time with university staff and with each other. One participant also mentioned that the altruistic nature of the project (helping future international students to improve their writing) was particularly valuable.

During the semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions, the Curriculum Advisers had many ideas for taking the project forward next year and beyond. One idea was to make a series of video recordings explaining English academic writing conventions in their first languages. The Curriculum Advisers agreed that this would allow them to give more nuanced explanations of cultural differences, which would be helpful to future students. The Curriculum Advisers also thought that putting such video content into the public domain would attract international students to the Academic Writing Workshop, to other ELC courses, to the University of Durham, as well as to the project itself. A video camera has been purchased for the project so that the current cohort of Curriculum Advisers can make high-quality recordings for next year's Academic Writing Workshop students to view on the university's Blackboard system. It was also suggested that a website could be set up during the next phase of the project to assist sustainability.

The Pilot Project has also demonstrated that this is a sustainable project from a research perspective, with the focus shifting from the process of setting up and implementing specific staff-student partnerships to the broader issues of international student empowerment within higher education institutions in the UK.

### Recommendations for other UK institutions

Staff-student partnerships can be set up and implemented within any discipline and can be used to develop a more inclusive culture of teaching and learning in higher education. Even if funding is not available, there are many incentives for international students to participate in a curriculum enhancement project. The title of Curriculum Adviser is a valuable addition to students' CVs, boosting employability. For some international students, it is sufficient incentive to take an active role in a research

project, particularly if there are opportunities to present and publish. The social aspect of the project was clearly valued by the Durham participants: as early as possible in the lifetime of a staff-student partnership project, it is a good idea for all participants to meet up. This will encourage team-work and help international students to build cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary friendships.

The workflow process developed in the Durham project can be greatly simplified if the purpose of the staff-student partnership is curriculum renewal rather than research. Simply noting and collating Curriculum Advisers' comments would be sufficient to allow changes to be made to curriculum and/or materials: audio-recording, transcription and coding would not be necessary.

### Further information

**Conference presentation slides:**  
[www.ukcisa.org.uk/durham-slides](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/durham-slides)

**The project was run by Terri Edwards,** Durham University English Language Centre  
**Contact:** [terri.edwards@durham.ac.uk](mailto:terri.edwards@durham.ac.uk)



*Terri Edwards (second from right), project leader with Curriculum Advisers Tamara Barakat, Lily Bossin, and Bohan Chen (left to right)*