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UKCISA GRANTS SCHEME  
FOR INTERNATIONAL  
EDUCATION

2016-17 Pilot project  
supporting the international  
student experience in the UK

Language Café  
University of Glasgow



# Student experience

## Language Café University of Glasgow

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### Motivation for the project

The language café programme was piloted throughout the 2016-2017 terms at the Queen Margaret Union (QMU), at the University of Glasgow. The Students' Union had identified a significant lack of support for both international and language students across the student body and wider university services. In analysing the target student groups, we determined that there was a demand for an open and easily accessible language conversation group. Both language, and international students felt that they were lacking in opportunities to practice their chosen languages outside of an academic environment. By creating so-called Language Cafés, we hoped to bring together both native and non-native speakers and facilitate conversation and cultural exchange.

### Project Overview

The funding from UKCISA was primarily designated to provide a location and services for the Language Cafés. We had no paid members of staff working on the project, and any time spent planning, organizing and leading the Cafés was done voluntarily. This allowed for significant cost savings; however, it could lead to issues with continuing the project depending on volunteer commitment. We planned to run the cafés

fortnightly, beginning with a large “kick-off” during Freshers' Week and culminating in a larger end of term event. For each fortnightly language café, we selected a different language, thus maximising the number of languages available. The languages we selected, based on the initial feedback we received from the Freshers' Week event, were:

- Spanish
- French
- German
- Italian
- Japanese
- Mandarin
- Portuguese
- Nordic Languages
- Dutch
- Hindi

These ten languages were then split evenly between first and second semester.

### The beginning of the project

The first café event, held during Freshers' Week yielded incredible turnout, with attendance numbers peaking at nearly 200 during the two hours it ran for. This not only reaffirmed our notion that the wider student body wanted an event of this type, but also allowed us to gather feedback and suggestions from the attendees and to put together an event mailing list for the Language Cafés throughout the year. There was

a great response to the idea of the mailing list with over 90% of attendees stating that they would like to be included and that they were interested in potentially attending similar events in the future.

The Freshers' Week event was structured differently to the fortnightly cafés. In order to draw the maximum number of attendees we opened the event to all languages and divided speakers between tables based on their language of choice. Event volunteers ensured that the tables were divided as evenly as possible between native and non-native speakers to better facilitate conversation and language exchange.

### Linking outside the University

To further increase the reach of the event we partnered with Glasgow International College, a subsidiary of Glasgow University. The International College helps to facilitate the integration of international students into the wider university student body. We felt that an event like the Language Cafés could help first year international students improve their English skills, and interact more with the rest of the Glasgow University student body. We received excellent engagement from the International College administration and students.



*"And finally, early Tuesday evening... In the fourth instalment of our Language Cafés, QMU learns German! FREE tea, coffee and biscuits will be provided, along with a variety of games and themed conversation. All levels, from novice to native, are encouraged to attend!" (November 2017)*

## Event design

The individual café events were designed with an open format in mind. The idea was to present an alternative to a traditional classroom-based approach. We wanted the event to be social and distinctly non-academic and present a different, more cultural and fun approach to learning a language. We discovered, however, that a completely unstructured approach does not fully engage some people. Through feedback from attendees we found that some structure is beneficial to help break the ice and get people conversing. We found that splitting the room into smaller groups and giving each a topic helped to start things off and once participants started getting to know each other the conversation began to flow more naturally.

## Challenges

While the Language Cafés proved popular they were not without several challenges. Primarily these were:

- **Lack of Staffing.** Having the event run entirely by volunteers created staffing issues especially during high-workload term weeks. To remedy this in future we would recommend that the program take on a paid position, dedicate an organisational committee to run each individual café, or establish a closer working relationship with the University's own language courses. The latter option presents potential issues due to relying on University staff assistance. Establishing a committee, or group to oversee the Language Cafés specifically would remove significant pressure on any one volunteer.
- **Lack of Language Proficiency.** Due to the number of languages we planned on running, the knowledge requirements for each event was high. It became difficult to find proficient speakers for each additional language. We attempted a closer partnership with university language societies, however their level of involvement varied widely and the societies themselves lacked a significant connection the Language Café programme. This may have meant that they were less interested or committed to the project. To remedy this, we would suggest establishing an early relationship with any university language societies. By the time we made contact the year had already begun and it was difficult to coordinate our events with those of the society.

## Recommendations for other UK institutions

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- **Establish a mailing list** as early as possible. In this project, the mailing list allowed information to be sent out to students who were already potentially interested and it significantly increased attendance, especially at the early stages.
- **Divide and conquer!** Planning each event individually does help to create an individual feel, and engages the participants, but can be a daunting task especially for a single person, or a small team. If it is at all possible, divide your volunteers into groups and assign each group a language to focus on. This will not only greatly improve the events themselves but drastically reduce the overall workload on any one volunteer.

## The future

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As outlined in this report, the challenges at Glasgow QMU were mostly due to volunteers' time conflicts and busy schedules. Budgeting the project proved simple, and we were easily able to provide a location for the event, refreshments and language learning materials (dictionaries, phrase and activity books) for each of the languages. As Student Union terms of office are short term, a new social convenor is now in place at QMU but the aim is to build on the success of the initial pilot. There have been similar style events being trialled across campus which confirms there is continued demand for casual language exchange programmes.

## Further information

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**This project was run by Noah Cloak**, Social Convenor, QMU, with massive help from the Social Committee, and the QMU board and executive.

Questions about the project can now be addressed to Glasgow University Queen Margaret Union at: [social.con@qmunion.org.uk](mailto:social.con@qmunion.org.uk)

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