

The international student food project

University of Reading



Pilot project into the international student experience in the UK
2017-18

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Project aims

Food plays a significant, but sometimes unacknowledged, role in the wellbeing of international students. The overall aim of this project was to engage international students and staff in the creation of a food induction toolkit: an online resource to provide materials supporting students' adjustment to shopping, cooking, and eating at university in the UK. The key steps were to elicit students' views, raise awareness of key challenges, and provide a resource of practical resources and advice.

"International students can get through all the cultural shock if they get great or familiar food in another country."

(Questionnaire respondent)

Outcomes

A food-focused survey on students' food perceptions and experiences was distributed and has informed the implementation of the project. In collaboration with students at the University of Reading, a series of online informational materials for student self-access and induction has been designed and trialled with international students. Activities to bring students together around food, including competitions and chat sessions, were also organised. Preliminary feedback from students and university stakeholders has been positive. Materials are now available on the project blog (links at the end of this report) and will be used for international student pre-arrival and induction from autumn 2018. The winning recipes from the competition will be distributed in halls and the campus shop.

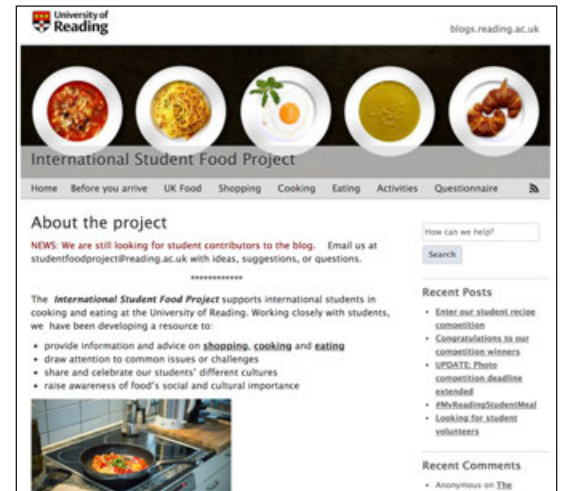
Background

The project arose from the understanding that food is an issue of central importance to the life and adjustment journey of many international students, but has remained relatively unexplored in the higher education sector (Brown, 2009). At the same time, such food acculturation is a complex and multifaceted process that can be affected by individual, cultural and external factors (Hartwell et al 2011). Each student may have very different interests or needs in their food transition, meaning that one size cannot fit all. A certain amount of food-related material directed at international students already exists but it is often dispersed across different media, difficult to find, and/or limited in its scope. It was therefore felt that more could be done to support those students who wished for more, and provide more easily discoverable, information or assistance with preparing and consuming food at university.

How was the project set up, run and evaluated?

The project was initiated and implemented by Dr Liz Wilding (International Study and Language Institute).

The project blog: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/international-student-food-project/>



It was supported by the project assistant HuiQi Yeo, (PhD student in the Department of Food and Nutritional Sciences), who was extremely active in engaging students and producing materials for the blog.

Following recruitment of the project assistant, individual students and representatives of student societies were invited to participate in and contribute to the project in a variety of ways. They were encouraged to:

- Respond to an online food questionnaire distributed via the Bristol Online Survey tool
- Take part in planning and organisational meetings
- Join a focus group
- Participate in scheduled but informal 'Food Chat' sessions in the language resource centre
- Enter a food competition
- Contribute ideas and materials

The questionnaire responses helped identify key themes and informed the direction of the project. Face-to-face sessions with students formed the heart of the project, with the most successful being targeted sessions, for example for student groups from particular programmes. Foundation students were invited to 'snack and chat' with the team, with home-made food provided as an additional incentive. A series of 'Food Chat' sessions directed at Pre-session students attracted students interested in the opportunity for English discussion as well as in the topic of food. Areas covered during the sessions included: restaurant recommendations, favourite foods, advice for new students, ideas for the website, and suggestions for activities/events. The overall structure and main topics covered in the blog derived from these qualitative and quantitative information-gathering methods. We also took the opportunity to gather feedback at other meetings, such as the celebratory gathering for competition winners. Two competitions were conducted:

Left: Bogdan Andrei, photo competition winner in the 'most delicious' category for his shot of a home-made pizza.

Photo credit: Dr Liz Wilding

- A photo competition was organised around the hashtag #MyRdgStudentMeal, in order to raise awareness of the rich cultural diversity of cooking and eating taking place.
- A recipe competition (#MyRdgStudentRecipe) was less successful, most likely due to the fact that the timing ran up against the exam period.

The original plan was for student volunteers to co-produce materials, but in the face of limited time the project team produced them based on the student comments and input we had received. Students were then given the chance to comment and provide feedback. Therefore, this blog strongly reflects students' interests and concerns as elicited during face-to-face discussions and chat sessions. The inclusion of practical information, such as a local supermarket map, a guide to online shopping, and a list of Halal restaurants were in direct response to this feedback. Listening to students, hearing their concerns, challenges, experiences and recommendations – has been the most powerful aspect of the project. The strength of the project and of the materials produced lies in the fact that it reflects our students' interests and voice.

Support and engagement were also elicited from key university stakeholders from the accommodation, international support, catering, and recruitment units, as well as campus retailers. The benefits of shared practice were noticeable and allowed for a widening of the scope of the project. For example, we discovered an overlap in aims and motivations of the project and the University's residential life programme, Your Halls Life (YHL). Not only were we able to exchange information and ideas, but the project could direct students back to YHL's food events and experiences. We have shared information and material with a number of such units, and some of the project's output will be embedded in relevant university web pages and/or distributed in hard copy.

Evaluation of the project has thus far come from informal discussions as well as the use of a focus group. Looking ahead, use of the blog will be monitored via Google Analytics and feedback on materials will continue to be elicited as it is used for new student induction programmes.

"I always believe that food draws people together. By being able to appreciate food, we can easily create a community."

"Having familiar foods helps settle you in and combat homesickness, while trying local foods is part of the experience of being here."

(Questionnaire respondents)

Timescale

The project ran from September 2017 to the end of June 2018. The initial stages (desk-based research,

questionnaire design/distribution and assistant recruitment) were completed on time in the autumn term. Recruiting student volunteers was more challenging than anticipated. It therefore took longer than planned to engage students, as it was necessary to design a series of additional activities in order to generate interest and involvement. These included targeted leafleting at food-focused events such as the weekly campus produce market and outdoor lunch stalls, and engagement with campus retail outlets to provide publicity and prizes for the competitions. Greater success came with the more targeted student sessions (as listed above) in the spring and summer terms, after which food induction materials were completed, shared, and tested. The web pages are now live, with material still being added. Recipe cards are being edited and prepared for distribution in the autumn term 2018.

Challenges

The major challenge of the project was garnering enough rich input from students. We received 170 responses to the questionnaire, which was a lower number than anticipated, even though we extended the closing date several times. Positive support was forthcoming in principle from university stakeholders, the Students' Union, and individual staff and students. However, they were often unable to commit the time and resource initially hoped for, slowing down progress significantly, especially in the beginning stages.

Students consistently expressed an interest in receiving support with food-related matters, but we struggled to engage them in co-designing materials. It was also a disappointment that student groups and cultural societies were not more involved and in the future we need to find new ways to engage them more successfully. We undertook significant project publicity through mainstream channels (eg email, posters and flyers) and social media (Twitter and Facebook) in order to counter this trend, but progress was slow at times. The result was that some student-generated ideas, such as a recipe book and live cooking demonstration, were not achievable within the timescale of the project.

Furthermore, certain issues were felt to be beyond the scope of the project. In some of these cases, however, we were able to pass on useful feedback to the relevant university unit. Student questions about food labelling (in relation to Halal food labelling at Reading), for example, were raised at university level.

Sustainability

The blog should be a sustainable resource that can be accessed by students at the University of Reading and other institutions. Our own students will be actively directed to the site through our

communication channels and information about it has been incorporated in the University welcome pages for new international students. Some materials (for example, practical information guides and recipe cards) will be distributed in hard copy. Dissemination of the project is continuing via conference presentations and by being shared through partner networks, such as the University Pathways Alliance. Institutions are welcome to contact the project lead for sample materials or for access to the questionnaire. In addition, the structure of the online resource could serve as a template upon which other institutions could build their own materials.

Reflections

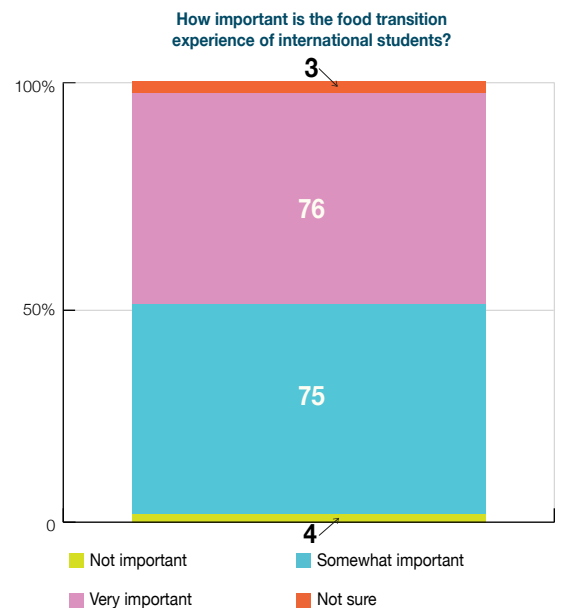
“I feel a lot of students eat very unhealthy food so a compulsory workshop or similar might be helpful to remind students of the importance of eating healthily to do well at uni.”

The project has been successful in a number of ways, not only in producing the finished blog. A key outcome has been how it brought different groups together around food and has provided an opportunity for potential collaborations in the future. On a practical level, it has highlighted sector-wide interests as well as more local concerns, including practical everyday information that could be easily put onto our website. A common theme emerging from online feedback and face-to-face discussion has been the need for students to learn to cook, suggesting the importance of offering more practical guidance in this area. The project has further underlined how varied student perspectives on food can be. These views can undergo change depending on where students are in their journey. For example, it may be that food becomes more important after arrival in the UK and perhaps we should not rush to introduce too much information too early in the year. In our questionnaire:

- 66% of respondents reported that they did not have concerns about food prior to arrival. However;
- 95% of respondents (students already in the UK) feel that food is important to the transition experience of international students.

There is room for the project to continue to grow and develop. Ideally, we will garner additional input from a wider range of students, both home and international, and enhance the ways in which we celebrate cultural and culinary diversity. Overall, it is intended that additions be made to the online materials, that more practical activities be introduced, and that the institution-wide approach to supporting international and home students be consolidated.

Survey results regarding the importance of food



“Thank you for doing this project.”

(Questionnaire respondent)

Recommendations for other UK institutions

- Start as early in the academic year as possible in order to gain support from student groups or societies as they begin to plan their events and activities.
- Get buy-in from the Students' Union (we benefitted greatly from the support of the Diversity Officer).
- Do not underestimate the time needed to work with multiple stakeholders and groups.
- Provide good food at any meetings.

References

Brown, L. 2009. The role of food in the adjustment journey of international students. In A. Lindgreen and M. Hingley (eds) *The New Cultures of Food: Marketing Opportunities from Ethnic, Religious and Cultural Diversity*. London: Gower.

O'Sullivan, N. and Amirabdollahian, F. 2016. Loyal Tongue, Liberal Mind: International Students' Experiences on Dietary Acculturation in England. *Journal of International Students*, 6 (1), pp. 107-127.

Links and further information

The blog is available here: <http://blogs.reading.ac.uk/international-student-food-project/>

Please contact the project leader for further information:

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The UK Council for International Student Affairs is the UK's national advisory body serving the interests of international students and those who work with them.

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