

Preparing for Placement:  
developing a cultural toolkit  
to improve the experience of  
both international students and  
placement providers

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University of Sheffield



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

UK Council  
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**Preparing for Placement: developing a cultural toolkit  
to improve the experience of both international  
students and placement providers**  
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## Aims of the project

Recent years have seen significant growth in numbers of international students, particularly from China, attending UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). A greater range of courses are proving attractive, including some which include a work-placement element. Since these require students to engage with 'real-world' situations outside of the mainstream teaching and learning environment, they are likely to present specific challenges to both students and placement providers.

In the summer of 2017 the University's School of Education (referred to occasionally below as 'the department') approached the International Student Support team (ISS) in response to specific challenges arising on the recently-developed undergraduate course in Education Culture and Childhood (ECC). The course requires a placement to be undertaken in Year 2 in one of a selected group of pre-school and primary education providers in the city. Feedback received from both students and placement providers highlighted some significant problems concerning international students, primarily affecting the students from China. These included:

- Limited engagement by students with teaching and support staff
- Students were too 'quiet' and 'reserved'
- Inappropriately 'direct' communication with support staff
- Problems with punctuality
- A reluctance to complete more than the minimum 60 hours on placement, compared to the majority of UK students who were completing the maximum 180 hours

For their part, Chinese students reported feeling overwhelmed by the placement environment and in some cases this had a negative impact on their ability to engage meaningfully and critically with their projects. This was in turn confirmed by the relatively low scores attained by Chinese students compared to their UK peers. Staff in the placement institutions (henceforth 'placement mentors') ascribed the problems primarily to language difficulties, coupled with the 'reserved personalities' of Chinese students.

Discussion between the department and ISS, while acknowledging that language confidence was an issue, explored the possibility that cultural factors lay behind some of the problems that had arisen. In particular it was suggested that outcomes might be improved by:

- Developing increased intercultural confidence among students, placement mentors and academic staff
- Providing placement mentors with a greater understanding of the range of challenges facing international students

- Providing academic staff and placement mentors with a greater awareness of the educational and cultural background of international students, particularly those from China

For a number of years, the ISS team has provided cultural awareness training for staff and, in some cases students, particularly those starting out on research. Since 2012 it has also developed and delivered training on the specific support needs of Chinese students. Feedback from staff who have participated in these sessions suggests that their greater understanding of the cultural challenges faced by Chinese students significantly enhances the quality of their interactions and their ability to support them towards successful completion of courses. The aim of the current project was to seek to improve work-placement and academic outcomes for the international (and especially Chinese) students on this course through the direct application of some of these training elements to this specific context. A pilot project was designed in three phases:

- **Phase One:** development and delivery of a Pre-Placement Workshop. The event would bring together key departmental staff, international students and placement mentors with the aim of improving understanding of the challenges involved in work-placement within a different culture.
- **Phase Two:** creation of video-based resources to be used online by students and placement mentors to augment the workshop materials in the lead-up to placement.
- **Phase Three:** development of a generic online toolkit for use within the sector by institutions seeking to improve the work-placement experience of their international students and the confidence of staff who support them.

## Summary of outcomes

The pilot project suggested that the work-placement experience can be significantly improved for students, departmental staff and placement mentors by the provision of cultural awareness training delivered through a pre-placement workshop, available online for those not able to attend. As well as benefiting from increased cultural awareness, placement mentors in particular valued the insight into the specific challenges faced by international students, some of which are rooted in their educational and cultural backgrounds. Although the specific context of the project was to prepare students for success in educational work placements, it is felt that since these present particularly acute cultural challenges, the conclusions that have been drawn are likely to be applicable to a wide range of placement contexts.



In terms of resources, the project has so far produced the design of a pre-placement workshop, a screen-capture version of the workshop available online and some short videos of the work-placement environment. These will form the basis of a generic 'Preparing for Placement' toolkit currently in construction and which will be available online for use in the sector by the end of 2018.

### **Institutional background**

Sheffield is currently in the top five in the Russell Group for numbers of international students, and the top three for Chinese students where they represent 50% of the total of international students. In 2016-17 there were 10 international students enrolled for the ECC course, including seven from China and in 2017-18 there were 11, including eight from China. In the discussion below, these groups will be referred to as the '2016-17 and 2017-18 cohorts'. Total numbers of students enrolled were 39 and 46 respectively.

### **Project structure and evaluation**

#### **1. Pre-placement workshop**

The pre-placement workshop was designed to address the main project aims and consisted of a presentation followed by a Q&A session between students and placement mentors with contributions by academic staff. Almost all of the 2017-18 cohort of international students attended. The 2016-17 cohort were also invited, though none attended. Invitations were sent out to all nine placement mentors, of whom three were able to attend.

Surveys using Google Forms were sent out to both cohorts of students beforehand and the responses evaluated. Completion rate for the 2016-17 cohort

was 60% and for the 2017-18 cohort 100%. The surveys included questions about the students' educational backgrounds, attitudes to staff and feelings about work placement. (See the links at the end of this report to view the Google Forms). Presentation of the results of these surveys provided staff with insight into how different the students' educational backgrounds were from the UK and thus how challenging the UK school environment was likely to be. A significant component of the project was to compare outcomes for the 2016-17 cohort of international students with those going on placement during the 2017-18 session.

The main components of the workshop presentation were as follows:

- Presentation of key findings from the student surveys
- Cultural background to challenges faced by international students, including the 'culture iceberg' model and a discussion of the causes and effects of culture shock
- An introduction to some of the key 'dimensions of culture' that can affect the quality of intercultural interaction. These were 'time', 'communication', 'social priorities' and 'attitudes to authority'. This part of the presentation included live polling using the 'Turning Point' clicker system, used both as an icebreaker and to stimulate discussion around these key themes

These elements will be incorporated into the cultural toolkit that is being developed for use across the sector. (See the links at the end of this report to view the workshop presentation).



## 2. Key findings from pre-workshop student surveys

**2016-17 cohort.** 57% completed no more than the minimum placement hours. When asked how worthwhile they thought the placement had been, 43% stated it had been worthwhile (selecting '4' on a Likert scale from 1 to 5 where '5' was 'very worthwhile'.) 43% responded '4' and 29% '3'. 86% said the placement was 'somewhat different' from what they expected and a further 14% responded that it was 'very different.'

**2017-18 cohort.** When asked how confident the students felt about their forthcoming placement (where 1 = not confident and 5 = very confident) 64% responded '3', 27% '4' and 9% '5'.

## 3. Effectiveness of the pre-placement workshop: students

### i. The work-placement environment

When the 2017-18 cohort were asked how confident they felt about their placements after attending the workshop, 22% responded '3', 44% '4' and 22% '5'. This is a significant increase in confidence compared to beforehand. They thought the Q&A session with placement mentors was the most useful component (66%). Next was the presentation of the student survey responses (44%) followed by the explanation of culture shock (33%) and the opportunity to meet with departmental staff (22%). Compared to the previous year's cohort, the students were more prepared for the work-placement environment with 33% finding it as they expected, a response registered by none of the students from the previous year.

### ii. Engagement with the work-placement experience

More students completed at the minimum level of 70-90 hours (78% vs 57%) but at the same time 22% completed at the maximum level of 120-150 hours whereas none had completed this many hours the previous year. In terms of perceived value of the work-placement experience, on a scale of 1 to 5 (where 1 = not worthwhile and 5 = very worthwhile), of the 2016-17 cohort, 42% responded '4' and 29% '5'. For the 2017-18 cohort, the scores were 22% '4' and 67% '5'. This suggests that this year's cohort benefited from the work placement experience to a significantly greater degree.

### iii. Confidence in interactions with staff

Of the 2016-17 cohort, in the case of teaching staff 29% felt fairly confident and 57% confident. For 2017-18, the 'confident' figure had gone up to 78%. In the case of support/admin staff, 43% of the 2016-17 cohort had felt fairly confident and the same proportion confident. In 2017-18 the proportion of those who felt confident had risen to 67% and, in addition, 22% felt 'very confident'.

## 4. Effectiveness of the pre-placement workshop: placement mentors

All three of the mentors who attended the workshop found it interesting and useful. The results of the student surveys, introduction to culture theory, explanation of culture shock and the Q&A session were unanimously deemed to be the most valuable components. All of the mentors felt that the workshop would make a significant difference to their understanding of the challenges faced by international students and that it would

improve their confidence in taking placement students from outside the UK.

### 5. Work-placement experience: mentors who attended the workshop

Asked to what extent they thought attendance at the workshop had improved their experience of mentoring an international student, on a scale of 1 to 5 all the mentors responded '4'. 67% of mentors felt the student was confident in their interactions with both teaching and support staff. In addition, 67% felt the student interacted appropriately with support staff, an area that had been highlighted as particularly problematic the previous year.

### 6. Work-placement experience: mentors who did not attend the workshop

Unfortunately, due to an administrative oversight, the link to the online version of the workshop was not sent out to those mentors unable to attend in person. Therefore in these cases, only the student had the benefit of the workshop. Response rate was 50%.

On a scale of 1 to 5 as above, to the question of whether, from the mentor's point of view, the work-placement had been successful, 50% responded '3' and 25% '4' and '5' respectively. Over half responded '3' and above to the questions of whether the students were confident and appropriate in their interactions with teaching and support staff and communicated with them effectively.

### 7. The departmental view

Both the Placement Tutor and the Placement Officer within the department felt that problems were significantly reduced this year. No issues or concerns were raised by students, student enquiries about placements were significantly reduced and some positive feedback had been received from mentors. Unlike the previous year, no concerns had been reported about inappropriate behaviour and all providers had welcomed the opportunity to take students in the coming year.

### 8. WeChat Group for Chinese placement students

To facilitate communication with Chinese students during and after the placement period, a WeChat group was set up by the project lead. WeChat is a communication app similar in format to WhatsApp and is used predominantly by Chinese people. It is easily downloaded onto mobile phones. The group included all the Chinese students on placement plus the project lead and, though it was not used heavily, it is felt that it provided reassurance to students that they were being supported while away from the University. Following experience gained on this project and from the UKCISA-funded

2016-17 'WeChat project' also based at Sheffield, departments around the University are starting to express interest in this medium for communicating with their Chinese students. To read the report go to [www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-schemes](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/grants-schemes).

## Timeframe

|    | Project component  | Method   | Timescale  |
|----|--|--|--|
| 1  | Collection of experiences of Chinese students and feelings about forthcoming placement. Experiences of previous years international placement students | Google Forms questionnaire   | Originally October 2017, rescheduled for December            |
| 2  | Preparation of pre-placement workshop materials  | Interactive PowerPoint presentation using 'Turning Point' audience-response system | Originally early November 2017, rescheduled for January 2018 |
| 3  | Pre-placement workshop   | Invitation to all placement mentors and both 2016-17 and 2017-18 student cohorts   | Originally mid-November, rescheduled for early February      |
| 4  | Post-workshop survey of placement mentors  | Google Forms   | February 2018  |
| 5  | Production of online version of pre-placement workshop   | Kaltura screen capture   | February 2018  |
| 6  | Students on work placement; set-up of WeChat group   |  | Early February - mid May 2018                                |
| 7  | Production of work placement environment (classroom) videos  | Self-planned, shot and edited videos with subtitles                                | April-July 2018  |
| 8  | Post-placement surveys of students and mentors   | Google Forms   | June 2018  |
| 9  | Evaluation and report to UKCISA  |  | July 2018  |
| 10 | Construction of Cultural Toolkit   | Video and online resources on the Kaltura platform                                 | July -December 2018  |

## Challenges

The challenges were mainly those that arose from a complex collaborative project involving student support services, an academic department and external stakeholders. Due to administrative pressures on schools, placement allocations were confirmed later than hoped so that the pre-placement workshop had to be put back from late first-to early-second semester, shortly before students went out on placement. Administrative oversight, compounded by the effects of a sector-wide strike, meant that the online version of the workshop was not sent out in time to mentors who had been unable to attend in person. Again,

pressures on the school timetable meant that only a limited number of survey responses from mentors had been received before the summer break. However, despite these challenges, the evidence suggests the pre-placement workshop made a significant contribution to a reduction in problems compared to the previous year, particularly as the great majority of the students had attended. There are good reasons to believe, therefore, that when fully disseminated in the coming academic year, the workshop materials, plus the cultural toolkit in preparation, will lead to further improvements.

### Sustainability

The pre-placement workshop and work-placement videos will be embedded within the department's student support resources for ongoing use. Not only will this be of direct benefit to students, it is hoped it will also build a pool of placement mentors with intercultural skills that can be passed on to their peers with the aim of improving the confidence with which they take on non-UK placement students. More broadly, other departments and institutions will be able to use the toolkit, adaptable to their specific needs, to prepare students and placement providers for more successful outcomes from work-placement.

In the coming years, the resource requirements of the UK HE sector are likely to mean that, other things being equal, institutions will continue to recruit heavily from overseas student markets. In addition, UKCISA and other bodies have systematically made the case that the presence of international students significantly enhances the experiences of all students and staff. This project hopes to show that with greater cultural awareness and preparation in advance of work-placement, the sector will be able to further demonstrate the significant contribution that international students can make to both the academic and workplace environments.

### Reflections and implementation of learning points

The project highlighted the benefit of exploring ways that we can learn more about the challenges facing international students by engaging in dialogue with students at an early stage, in this case by construction of a questionnaire. This encourages a two-way relationship between staff and students which is likely to have a positive impact across the curriculum.

### Recommendations for other UK institutions

The project outcomes so far suggest that institutions should be wary of ascribing 'problems' that arise with international students to lack of confidence in language alone. The amelioration of

problems on work-placement compared to the previous year strongly supports the assertion that intercultural confidence is an equally significant factor in improving overall confidence, especially outside of the immediate academic environment.

### Links to documents used in the project

Survey for students who went on placement in 2016-17: <https://goo.gl/formsfy7M60zt1RNzKMHS2>

Survey form for students going on placement in 2017-18: <https://goo.gl/forms/0eh9khRtFMTdziWt1>

Pre-placement workshop presentation: <https://tinyurl.com/y85jhms8>

### Further information

The project was led by **Dr Tim Cooper** (International Student Support Officer) in collaboration with **Dr Themasa Neckles** (Placement Tutor) and **Jenny Butcher** (Senior Student Experience Officer, Placements) both of the University's School of Education.

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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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