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# Accommodation toolkit for international students

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Liverpool John Moores University

**Aim:** The project aimed to alleviate the challenges international students face in finding private accommodation, by creating a toolkit of information and guidance on factors such as accommodation websites, budgets and contracts. The focus was on supporting those attending LJMU, and – initially – those accompanied by dependants.

**Key activities:** Two student ‘ambassadors’, representative of the target students, were hired in February 2023. A survey of international students at LJMU took place in April 2023. One hundred and two students participated, providing valuable insights. Changes in government policy, in May 2023, restricting postgraduate students from bringing dependants, shifted our focus to all international students seeking private accommodation. An updated survey in November generated 45 responses. The toolkit was put together based on the results from both data sets.

**Outcomes of the work:** The survey found that private accommodation was the most popular option. Most international students, mainly from India, Nigeria, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, used online platforms to find accommodation, the process taking a month on average. However, the survey confirmed that students faced many

challenges: most commonly landlords’ requirements for a UK guarantor.

The toolkit was available for students joining LJMU in September 2023, and was improved for those entering in January 2024. Feedback showed that this additional accommodation communication ahead of arrival helped new students prepare better.

**Key next steps:** Annual updates to the toolkit are important to ensure that the information remains relevant. Our commitment to this regular review process will enable the toolkit to serve as an ongoing reliable resource for incoming international students.

**Recommendations:** It is crucial for UK universities to consistently offer helpful information for international students about accommodation options both on and off campus. We recommend that universities wishing to engage their international students in similar research start the survey process in September, also conduct focus groups, offer incentives for participation and engage student societies for further insights. They should regularly review and update easily accessible online information provided from their research.

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# International talent symposium: a regional approach to employer and student engagement

University of Stirling



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**Aim:** The symposium was created to support international students in navigating the Scottish graduate labour market and to address the lack of awareness amongst local businesses about the benefits of hiring international graduates.

**Key activities:** An international paid student intern was employed to work with the University's Careers and Work-based Learning teams to plan, promote and organise pre-event workshops and the symposium, and to ensure that international students were represented throughout the process. Three pre-symposium workshops and one online event were held in January to support students in preparing to work in the UK, and a roadshow event was held for local employers. The main symposium event featured a keynote by Universities Scotland, a panel discussion with international alumni and employers, and a networking drinks reception. The local business community contributed expertise and provided networks to spread the message further. The programme was enriched with case study films.

**Outcomes of the work:** Twenty-nine students and three local small businesses attended the pre-symposium events. Workshops were

recorded and video content created for use after the pilot for students and employers.

The main symposium event was attended by 86 students, 17 guests from large companies and local business networks and 15 university staff from different services and faculties.

Qualitative and quantitative feedback was collected, highlighting that the project has been very effective in raising awareness of the skills and cultural diversity of our students, the Scottish labour market and international graduate visa routes.

**Key next steps:** The project prioritised sustainability, ensuring that its resources could benefit other career services by documenting its best practices and creating a blueprint for future international initiatives to be delivered by other universities.

**Recommendations:** Main recommendations for other universities, are to partner with local business support services, to incorporate the student perspective by recruiting an international student intern to support the project, and to engage with university partners to leverage their influence and resources.

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# Exploring opportunities and challenges to international students' sense of belonging and inclusion in the UK

University of Nottingham and International Students House

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**Aim:** The project aimed to examine the barriers that inhibit experiences of social belonging and exacerbate isolation faced by international students during their studies in the UK.

**Key activities:** One-to-one semi-structured interviews with 26 international students were conducted, and survey data were collected from 52 respondents. The results were analysed using qualitative and quantitative methods and presented at a stakeholder conference to gather feedback and recommendations. An online toolkit was drafted, based on these recommendations.

**Outcomes of the work:** The results of the research project highlighted factors that facilitate or hinder international students' sense of social belonging while in the UK.

**Initial challenges and adaptation:** Students experience culture shock, language barriers and unfamiliarity with local norms, leading to feelings of isolation. Such challenges are exacerbated by the influx of events and information that students receive at the start of the term/course. Overcoming these challenges requires significant personal adaptation.

**Support and development:** Students rely on peer-to-peer learning, induction support and

alumni networks. Gaps were identified in resources relating to independent living skills, cultural integration and understanding social norms. Students reported seeking comfort in activities that remind them of their country/culture.

**Academic integration:** Academic challenges faced by students include expectations that differ from the reality of academic life and lack of individualised support from university staff, fostering feelings of neglect and hesitation to engage. Students reported that lecturers provide limited support to help them adjust and adapt.

**Key next steps:** We are writing up peer-reviewed research and hope to use the results from this study to facilitate new student-support initiatives.

**Recommendations:** Further research could focus on different 'home' countries' or cultures' correlation with social belonging and isolation and on the best mechanism to provide students with the support and information they need without overwhelming them. We encourage all university staff to deal with international students with kindness and to have 'real' conversations with them to find out what they need to fully express themselves and to succeed academically.

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# Democratising assessment rubrics: enhancing accessibility for international students at King's College London

King's College London



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**Aim:** Rubrics serve as a key method of communicating assessment expectations. This project aimed to demystify assessment rubrics for international students at King's College London. The focus was to enhance first-year undergraduate international students' comprehension of and engagement with assessment rubrics, addressing dissatisfaction reported in institutional evaluations and the National Student Survey (NSS).

**Key activities:** Focus groups with international students were conducted to gather insights. Guidance posters for both students and academics were developed and information shared through the university learning management system. Findings were disseminated via academic networks and conferences.

### **Outcomes of the work:**

**Assessment language and rubrics:** There was an enhanced understanding of assessment language and rubrics among international students. Academics' ability to design inclusive assessment rubrics improved.

**Assessment practices:** Practical guidance posters were developed and distributed, benefiting both international and domestic students by improving overall comprehension of assessment criteria and practices. Complementary posters,

targeted at academics, enhanced their understanding of the challenges faced by international students in such comprehension.

**Key next steps:** We will continue to integrate project resources into institutional frameworks and promote digital access to materials across the university, to facilitate sharing of academic and guidance materials, assessment documents and discussions. We will further develop our engagement with other institutions to share findings and practices.

**Recommendations:** Following this work, we recommend that universities aiming to carry out similar research engage directly with international students to identify and address the challenges they have in understanding assessment methods and rubrics, and they should continuously evaluate and adapt assessment methods based on students' feedback. We recommend that they introduce rubrics early in the course, align them with course objectives, design straightforward rubrics and provide supplementary materials to aid understanding. Further recommendations include creating supportive classroom environments with accessible resources and equipping educators with skills in culturally responsive and inclusive teaching.

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# Supporting international students fleeing humanitarian crises: untangling the experiences of students from Ukraine and Syria

Keele University

**Dr Filippo Nereo**, Curriculum Design, Global Banking School

**Dr Alison Long**, Senior Lecturer in Languages, Keele University

**Tetiana Tsapenko**, Keele University (Student Intern) and Loughborough University (PhD student)

**Aim:** The aim of this project was to learn from students who have fled humanitarian crises. We wanted to know whether the support they have received from UK higher education (HE) institutions has been adequate, and to discover areas in which they have not been considered as needing additional support.

**Key activities:** We undertook semi-structured interviews with students in the UK who had fled their home countries: Ukraine, Syria and Afghanistan.

**Outcomes of the work:** Our research shows that students who have fled their home countries and are now studying, or have recently completed their studies, in the UK, are a heterogeneous group, each with diverse needs and aspirations. We have learned that some widespread terminology in HE, such as the label 'international student', is problematic in the context of forced migration.

**Key next steps:** We continue to build capacity and engage with colleagues across the sector. Dr Long is working with colleagues at Keele to create guidelines for the specific curriculum needs of these students. We are planning an

exhibition of photographs taken by forced migrant students, to amplify their voices and showcase their positive contributions to university life.

**Recommendations:** Since forced migrants are not treated equally (legally, politically, perceptually), comparative studies in this area are important. In institutions, these students need a point of contact to whom they can speak and go to for advice. This person must understand the issues these students face with regard to visas, funding, accommodation and the emotional implications of their situation. Students in this situation often do not have the necessary networks to allow them to find scholarships and funding; therefore we recommend a centrally organised database providing such information.

**Outputs:** We presented our findings at the *Inclusive Education* conference at Keele (10 May). We presented, as invited speakers, at *Inclusive Higher Education for People Forced from their Homes: An International Webinar*, and IMISCOE (2–5 July 2024).

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# Beyond cultural differences: Critical intercultural orientation workshops for newly arrived students

Newcastle University



**Project lead: Dr Alina Schartner**,  
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**Sara Kozáková**,  
#WeAreInternational Student Ambassador Alumna



**Chang Liu**,  
Workshop facilitator

**Aim:** In response to prevailing uncritical and simplistic approaches to cultural orientation provision, this project aimed to facilitate meaningful intercultural dialogue, by (1) enabling reciprocal dialogue and intercultural learning among international students and with 'home' students, and (2) empowering critical self-reflection rather than solely acquisition of factual knowledge about the host environment.

**Key activities:** Aligned with a 'researching with international students' approach, a programme of five orientation workshops for newly arrived students was co-created, trialed and implemented with international students, using the UNESCO 'story circles' method to facilitate intercultural learning.

**Outcomes of the work:** The project team created a workshop toolkit for a programme of five intercultural workshops on the themes (1) Identity, (2) Cultural values and beliefs, (3) Diversity, (4) Personal values, and (5) Self-awareness.

The toolkit includes a facilitator guide and materials for five 90-minute workshops. Each workshop follows the same structure:

(1) ice-breaker activity, (2) intercultural story circle, (3) plenary debrief. It can be delivered either as a stand-alone or as part of a consecutive series. The toolkit offers a flexible and adaptable model for higher education (HE) practitioners supporting induction and orientation activities.

**Key next steps:** The workshops are integrated into Newcastle University's International Welcome programme for future years. They are also being incorporated into the NCL+ scheme, which allows students to gain recognition for extra-curricular activities. Workshop facilitator training is being offered to colleagues and students across faculties.

**Recommendations:** The workshop toolkit can be adapted by any HE practitioner to suit their specific context. It can be delivered in person or in an online format, and the intercultural story circles can be flexibly adapted to suit the needs of the participant group. The workshops are best delivered by students, to support a safe space for intercultural dialogue. Institutions could consider training student workshop facilitators using the workshop toolkit from this project.

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# Amplifying voices of international doctoral scholars on intercultural perspective

University of Glasgow and  
The University of Edinburgh



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**Aim:** This research aimed to investigate the voices of UK-based international doctoral scholars (IDS), to understand how their intercultural interactions influence their academic, social, psychological and environmental development, and what we can learn from examining these interactions.

**Key activities:** There were two phases to the study: (1) a systematic review of doctoral theses, using E-Theses Online Services (EThOS, see [ethos.bl.uk](https://ethos.bl.uk)), and (2) creative interviews with a group of doctoral graduates, using 'River of Excellence' drawings as metaphors for their doctoral journeys to encourage deeper reflection and exploration of their experiences.

**Outcomes of the work:** Through our empirical research on IDS's intercultural interactions in the UK, we enhanced our understanding that these interactions flourish, play a major part in their socialization and acculturation process, and become reciprocally beneficial through their active membership in communities, offering them channels of academic, social and psychological support. Further, we deepened our insight of the crucial role of these interactions

in shaping and broadening IDS's interests, visions and acquisition of practical skills.

**Key next steps:** This project has raised many invaluable ideas that are worth pursuing further. We are building on this research to expand our understanding of IDS's experiences and how to harness further the unique set of knowledge, insights and cultural wisdom that combine and emerge as they interact with others.

**Recommendations:** Future research needs to focus on investigating more comprehensively how these qualities above can be harnessed. We recommend that graduate schools actively foster or facilitate three channels of intercultural interactions for IDS: (1) doctoral communities, (2) communities for co-nationals and (3) opportunities for active interactions between IDS and interested individuals from the local community. Active membership in communities will maximise the benefits of intercultural interactions. Finally, IDS need to be encouraged to see intercultural interactions as a form of 'doctoral socialisation'.

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# Enhancing the career prospects of international students through targeted pre- and post-enrolment opportunities

Swansea University

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**Aim:** The project aimed to address the specific challenges faced by international students in navigating the UK job market, by providing tailored support packages. The goal was to empower international students with the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary for success in their careers.

**Key activities:** An International Career Development Course (ISCDC) was created, supported by a UKCISA grant-funded student intern, to equip international students with essential skills and knowledge before they commenced their courses. Job fairs were run and guides for international students and employers were created in print and online, to facilitate understanding and collaboration between them. The Business Hub hosted a networking event to educate local employers on the advantages of hiring international students. An international alumni panel was held to provide insights and guidance on career development to current students.

**Outcomes of the work:** Students have reported increased preparedness and confidence following the ISCDC, indicated by positive feedback and high course completion rates

(94-96%). Enhanced understanding and collaboration between international students and local employers is developing, evidenced by the successful networking events. The job fairs have provided greater accessibility to employment opportunities for international students.

**Key next steps:** Long-term sustainability of the project's initiatives will establish ongoing support for international students' career development, and the ISCDC and student guides are now in place for future international students. Further, the project initiatives will be integrated into SEA's annual plan to ensure continuation and development. The immediate focus is on developing a system for measuring and reporting on the uptake of project initiatives, and an annual content review will ensure the relevance of materials.

**Recommendations:** Following overwhelmingly positive feedback, we recommend continued collaboration with external stakeholders, such as local businesses and alumni, and exploration of opportunities to expand initiatives, such as incorporating the ISCDC into new top-up courses.

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