



International
Students House

Enhancing International Student Belonging & Inclusion

A Practical Guide for International Students,
University Staff, and Student Mentors

UK Council
for International
Student Affairs

UKCISA



#WeAre
International

Project Team & Authors

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How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is intended for flexible use, with strategies and activities that can be adapted by:

- University staff – to enhance student support initiatives.
- Student unions & societies – to create inclusive engagement opportunities.
- Peer mentors & ambassadors – to support new international students.
- International students – to navigate social, academic, and cultural challenges.

We hope this toolkit serves as a practical and impactful resource in fostering inclusive and welcoming university environments for all international students.



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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Purpose of the Toolkit

International students contribute significantly to the diversity, innovation, and global outlook of UK universities. Their presence enriches academic discussions, broadens cultural perspectives, and enhances the overall student experience. However, despite their contributions, international students often face unique challenges that can impact their sense of belonging, well-being, and academic success.

These challenges include:

- **Cultural adjustment** – Differences in social norms, academic expectations, and daily interactions can be overwhelming.
- **Social belonging difficulties** – Many students struggle to build friendships with domestic students or find communities where they feel included.
- **Academic barriers** – Different teaching styles, limited personalised support, and uncertainty about academic expectations can make it difficult to adjust.
- **Financial constraints** – High living costs and limited access to part-time work can affect students' ability to participate in social and extracurricular activities.

Research highlights that a strong sense of belonging is a key predictor of student success—students who feel connected to their university community are more likely to thrive academically, socially, and emotionally.

This toolkit has been developed to provide practical, adaptable strategies to address these challenges. It is designed to help universities, student mentors, and international students navigate the complexities of transitioning to life in the UK, fostering a more inclusive and welcoming higher education environment. By using this resource, institutions and individuals can create spaces where all students feel valued, supported, and empowered to succeed.

1.2 Who Is This Toolkit For?

This toolkit has been designed as a practical resource for a range of users, from international students themselves to the university staff who support them. Each group can use the toolkit in a way that meets their specific needs.

International Students 🟡 Self-guided resource for navigating social, cultural, and academic challenges.

University Staff 🟡 Practical strategies and training tools for improving student support services.

Student Unions & Societies 🟡 Ideas for running inclusive events and fostering student engagement.

Peer Mentors & Ambassadors 🟡 Structured guidance for supporting new international students.

1.3 How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is modular and adaptable, meaning users can either read it in full or focus on the sections most relevant to them. It is structured in a way that makes it easy to navigate, with clear practical guidance, case studies, and customisable templates that can be applied in different university settings.

Key Features of the Toolkit:

- Practical guidance – Clear, actionable strategies for students, staff, and mentors.
- Real-life case studies – Examples of successful international student support initiatives.
- Interactive activities – Exercises to help students reflect on and navigate their experiences.
- Customisable templates – Editable resources that universities and student unions can adapt.

How Different Users Can Use This Toolkit:

- For Universities & Staff – Use this toolkit to enhance student support services, integrate peer mentoring programs, and create inclusive learning environments.
- For International Students – Apply the guidance to build confidence, make social connections, and succeed academically in a UK university setting.
- For Peer Mentors & Student Ambassadors – Use this toolkit to support new international students effectively, facilitate discussions, and run inclusive social events.

This resource is designed to be useful throughout the academic year—not just during induction. Universities are encouraged to embed it into ongoing student support programs to create lasting impact.

1.4 Implementing the Resources

Universities, student unions, and student support teams are encouraged to integrate it into their existing support structures.

- Pre-Arrival Support: Include this toolkit in pre-arrival materials so international students can familiarise themselves with key challenges and solutions before they arrive.
- Staff Training & Induction Programs: Embed sections of this toolkit into staff training workshops to ensure all student-facing staff are equipped to support international students.
- Peer Mentoring & Student Societies: Encourage student unions, societies, and mentoring programs to use the templates and activities to foster more inclusive engagement.

By making this resource widely available and easy to use, universities can take a proactive approach to international student support, rather than relying solely on reactive interventions when challenges arise.



2. UNDERSTANDING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT BELONGING

2.1. What Does ‘Belonging’ Mean for International Students?

Belonging, for international students, is not simply about feeling welcomed—it is the deeply embedded sense of being valued, included, and connected to a wider community. It is relational and shaped through interactions with peers, faculty, and institutional structures that either facilitate or hinder integration. More than just academic success, belonging extends into social spaces, influencing students’ emotional well-being, engagement, and overall satisfaction with their university experience (WeAreInternational Grants Scheme Report, 2024).

International students navigate a complex landscape, where the ability to develop a sense of belonging is contingent on both formal (academic support, university services) and informal (friendships, community engagement, and cultural familiarity) experiences. Research has consistently shown that social belonging is linked to positive academic outcomes, increased retention rates, and overall student satisfaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hausmann et al., 2007). However, significant barriers persist. Language challenges, cultural differences, social isolation, and institutional disconnects often contribute to feelings of exclusion and alienation (Goastellec, 2022; Ahn & Davis, 2020).

For instance, consider Maria, a student from Chile who is studying in the UK. Initially, she found it challenging to adjust to the pace of academic life and struggled to find common ground with peers. She felt excluded from social circles where humour, accents, and cultural references were unfamiliar. However, through engagement with a student society, participation in a peer mentorship programme, and informal interactions in shared accommodation, she began to develop a support network. Over time, these experiences helped her cultivate a sense of belonging, which positively influenced her confidence and participation in class.

Conversely, a lack of belonging can lead to disengagement, loneliness, and poor academic performance. The WeAreInternational study found that students who felt disconnected were more likely to withdraw from campus life, experience stress, and struggle with their overall well-being. Universities, therefore, have a responsibility to create inclusive environments that support students beyond academic integration—acknowledging the role of community, peer support, and institutional commitment in fostering a meaningful sense of belonging.

2.2. Why Does Belonging Matter?

Research consistently highlights the link between social belonging and student success. When international students feel a sense of belonging, they are more likely to engage in learning, develop meaningful relationships, and navigate academic challenges with resilience (WeAreInternational Grants Scheme Report, 2024). Conversely, a lack of belonging can exacerbate feelings of stress, anxiety, and loneliness, which negatively impact student well-being and academic persistence (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Hausmann et al., 2007).

Belonging is particularly crucial for international students, who often face additional challenges such as cultural adaptation, language barriers, and social isolation. The WeAreInternational study found that students who struggled to integrate socially reported higher levels of stress and were less likely to seek academic or pastoral support, ultimately affecting their overall performance. Students who felt disconnected were more likely to withdraw from campus life, leading to lower retention rates and reduced engagement in academic and extracurricular activities.

Social belonging also enhances participation in leadership roles, networking opportunities, and career readiness. Students with a strong sense of belonging are more likely to take on leadership roles in student organisations, form professional networks, and engage with employability initiatives, ultimately shaping their long-term career prospects (Tavares, 2022). Moreover, alumni who maintain a sense of belonging to their institution remain engaged with their university community, contributing to mentorship and support networks for future international students.

As one participant in the WeAreInternational study expressed,

“I only really felt like I belonged once I had a community. It changed how I engaged with my studies and how I saw my place here.”



2.3 Barriers to Belonging

International students face multiple challenges in developing a sense of belonging, often navigating cultural, social, and academic barriers that can impact their integration and overall well-being. The WeAreInternational Grants Scheme Report (2024) highlights several key obstacles that shape students' experiences in UK higher education.

Cultural Differences & Social Norms:

- Adapting to a new cultural and social landscape can be disorienting. Many international students struggle with understanding British humour, informal communication styles, and lifestyle expectations.
- Feeling 'othered' due to differences in language, religion, or customs is common. Students who do not drink alcohol, for example, often feel excluded from social activities centred around pub culture.
- Social norms in classroom participation, such as debating ideas or challenging lecturers, may contrast with expectations in students' home countries, making engagement feel daunting.

Language Barriers & Confidence:

- Many students hesitate to participate in class discussions or ask questions due to fears of miscommunication or being judged for their language proficiency (Pervez et al., 2024).
- The pressure to articulate thoughts fluently can discourage students from engaging in both academic and social settings, limiting their ability to build connections.
- Some students struggle with understanding local accents or fast-paced speech, making everyday interactions overwhelming.

Limited Social Networks

- While co-national friendships provide comfort, they can also limit opportunities for cultural integration. Students often report difficulties in forming meaningful friendships with local peers.
- The lack of organic opportunities to engage with home students—especially in accommodation, student societies, or group work—contributes to feelings of exclusion.

Academic Expectations & Support

- The UK's emphasis on independent learning, critical thinking, and self-directed study differs from more structured education systems in many students' home countries (Tavares, 2022).
- Some students find the feedback process unfamiliar or overly critical, leading to anxiety and disengagement.
- Referencing and academic integrity expectations, particularly around plagiarism, can be difficult to navigate for those unfamiliar with Western academic conventions.

2.4 How Universities Can Support Belonging

Universities play a crucial role in shaping the student experience. By fostering inclusive spaces and meaningful connections, institutions can create environments where all students feel seen, supported, and valued. The WeAreInternational Grants Scheme Report (2024) highlights that intentional policies and initiatives are essential in addressing the structural and social barriers to belonging faced by international students.

Pre-arrival & Induction Support

- Tailored welcome programmes can ease the transition for international students, offering pre-arrival resources on cultural norms, academic expectations, and essential services.
- Peer mentoring schemes—where new international students are paired with more experienced students—help foster immediate social connections and provide guidance during the initial adjustment period.
- Extended orientation programmes, rather than a one-off induction, allow students time to settle, reducing feelings of overwhelm and culture shock.

Culturally Inclusive Campus Initiatives

- Universities should celebrate cultural diversity by organising heritage events, religious festivals, and international student showcases. This promotes cross-cultural understanding and encourages engagement beyond co-national groups.
- Staff training on intercultural competence is essential to fostering inclusive teaching and learning practices. This includes recognising diverse communication styles, classroom participation norms, and cultural sensitivities in feedback and assessment.

Academic & Pastoral Support Services

- Easily accessible mental health and well-being services that recognise the specific stressors international students face—such as isolation, academic pressure, and financial concerns—can enhance their well-being.
- Academic skills workshops tailored for international students (e.g., critical thinking, referencing, and academic writing) help ease the transition into UK higher education.

Encouraging Peer-to-Peer Learning & Friendships

- Structured social programmes, such as buddy systems and intercultural dialogue groups, facilitate interaction between international and home students.
- Universities can support student-led initiatives, including volunteering opportunities and international student societies, to create welcoming spaces where students can build friendships and networks.

By embedding these strategies into institutional policies, universities can foster a culture of belonging that enhances student well-being, academic success, and long-term engagement.



3. STRATEGIES FOR UNIVERSITIES & SUPPORT STAFF

Overview

International students enrich UK universities with diverse perspectives, global insights, and cross-cultural connections. However, their success and well-being depend on how proactively institutions support their integration—academically, socially, and culturally.

Universities must move beyond passive inclusion efforts and implement intentional, evidence-based strategies that foster a genuine sense of belonging and academic success. This means ensuring that international students don't just exist within university spaces—but truly feel valued, supported, and integrated.

This section outlines four core strategies that institutions can adopt to enhance international student engagement, backed by real-world case studies demonstrating best practices and measurable impact.

- **Pre-Arrival & Induction Support** – Ensuring students feel prepared before and upon arrival.
- **Social & Cultural Inclusion Initiatives** – Creating meaningful opportunities for connection and engagement.
- **Academic Integration & Learning Support** – Addressing academic barriers through structured interventions.
- **Cultural Awareness & Training for University Staff** – Equipping staff with the tools to effectively support international students.

Each strategy is adaptable, scalable, and rooted in student experiences—ensuring that efforts are both practical and impactful.



3.1 Pre-Arrival & Induction Support

First impressions set the tone for an international student's university experience. The way international students are welcomed—before they arrive and during their first weeks—determines how quickly they settle in, engage with their peers, and succeed academically.

"I arrived in the UK feeling completely lost. The induction sessions helped, but it wasn't until I met my peer mentor that I started feeling at home." – Ali, a postgraduate student from Pakistan

Key Strategies for Universities

Pre-Arrival Engagement

- ◆ Virtual Welcome Spaces
 - Create online communities (WhatsApp, Discord, MS Teams) where international students can connect before arrival.
 - Host interactive webinars covering:
 - Visa and accommodation processes.
 - UK academic expectations and assessment norms.
 - Student well-being and support services.
- ◆ Peer Mentorship Before Arrival
 - Pair incoming students with trained peer mentors for practical, real-life guidance.
 - Ensure mentors cover both academic and social aspects, from settling in to making friends.

Case Study: University of Manchester – Pre-Arrival & Induction Success

Manchester launched a virtual pre-arrival hub and mentoring scheme, resulting in a 35% increase in international student satisfaction and a 28% improvement in early student engagement. Their phased induction model—combining online resources, peer support, and small-group discussions—ensured students felt supported before they even arrived on campus.

Induction & Early Support

- ◆ Phased Induction Model
 - Spread out essential sessions over six weeks to prevent information overload.
 - Cover critical areas such as:
 - Making friends and social belonging.
 - Navigating UK academic expectations.
 - Practical skills (banking, transport, NHS, part-time work).
- ◆ Welcome Week with Cultural Inclusivity
 - Move beyond generic "Welcome Week" activities by offering:
 - Cultural storytelling circles where students share experiences.
 - Guided city tours in multiple languages.
 - Social ice-breaker sessions that mix home and international students.

3.2 Social & Cultural Inclusion Initiatives

International students often struggle to build friendships outside their own cultural communities. Universities must actively facilitate social integration through structured and informal opportunities.

“I wanted to make friends outside my nationality group, but I didn’t know how to approach British students. University-led programs made the first step easier.” – Hiroshi, exchange student from Japan

Key Strategies for Universities

Intentional Social Mixing Initiatives

- ◆ Cross-Cultural Student Mentoring
 - Pair international and home students in mentorship programs to encourage integration.
- ◆ Social Labs & Structured Friendship-Building
 - Organise social labs that help students practice:
 - Intercultural communication.
 - Understanding UK social norms.
 - Confidence-building in social spaces.
- ◆ Culturally Inclusive Social Events
 - Ensure at least 50% of university-run social events are free or heavily subsidised.
 - Offer cultural exchange nights, themed networking events, and volunteer-led community activities.

Case Study: University of Edinburgh – Social & Cultural Inclusion through Structured Events
The University of Edinburgh implemented a Cultural Conversations Café and a Cross-Cultural Buddy Scheme, which led to a 42% increase in international students feeling socially integrated. These structured social activities created sustained friendships and improved domestic-international student engagement.

3.3 Academic Integration & Learning Support

International students may not be familiar with UK academic norms, leading to anxiety around essays, referencing, and classroom participation. Universities need to provide ongoing academic transition support.

“I was confident in my subject but struggled with academic writing. The university’s writing workshops helped me understand how to structure arguments in the UK system.” – Sara, postgraduate student from Indonesia

Key Strategies for Universities

Early Academic Support

- ◆ Pre-Semester Academic Bootcamps
 - Offer intensive academic readiness programs covering:
 - UK essay-writing styles.
 - How to engage in seminars and critical discussions.
 - How to avoid plagiarism and use referencing correctly.



Case Study: University of Nottingham – Academic Integration through Peer-Led Learning
The University of Nottingham introduced a ‘Student Academic Success’ program, embedding peer writing mentors, structured study groups, and academic transition workshops. Students who participated saw a 30% improvement in essay grades and a 50% increase in seminar participation.

3.4 Cultural Awareness & Training for University Staff

University staff play a central role in shaping student experiences. Without cultural awareness training, unconscious biases and unintentional exclusion can occur.

“My professor assumed I understood the UK grading system, but I didn’t know what a 2:1 meant. Small explanations make a big difference.” – Carlos, undergraduate student from Mexico

Key Strategies for Universities

Early Academic Support

- ◆ Inclusive Classroom Practices
 - Encourage lecturers to:
 - Set clear academic expectations early on.
 - Use diverse examples in teaching materials.
 - Facilitate culturally inclusive discussions in seminars.
- ◆ Normalising International Student Support
 - Train academic advisors and personal tutors to proactively check in with international students.

Case Study: University of Birmingham – Staff Training & Cultural Competency

The University of Birmingham implemented an ‘Inclusive Teaching Pledge’, requiring all academic staff to undergo intercultural competency training and update curricula to reflect diverse perspectives. This led to a 20% increase in international student satisfaction with teaching quality.

Key Takeaways

- Pre-Arrival Engagement & Peer Mentorship Matter: Universities with structured pre-arrival support report higher retention rates.
- Social Integration Requires Intentional Design: Facilitated buddy programs and structured group events work better than unstructured networking.
- Academic Success is Built on Embedded Support: Students benefit from peer-led mentoring and faculty-driven learning interventions.
- Cultural Awareness in Staff is Critical: Universities that invest in mandatory intercultural training see measurable improvements in student well-being and performance.



4. STRATEGIES FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

Overview

Moving to a new country for higher education is a significant transition, and international students often face academic, cultural, and social challenges that impact their confidence and sense of belonging. However, proactive strategies can help navigate these challenges effectively and build a successful and fulfilling university experience.

This section provides practical guidance and actionable strategies to empower international students to:

- Build meaningful social connections and combat isolation.
- Adapt to UK academic expectations and improve learning strategies.
- Manage culture shock and homesickness effectively.
- Access mental health and well-being resources.

Each strategy is practical, research-backed, and adaptable, ensuring students feel equipped and confident throughout their university journey.



4.1 Building Social Connections & Overcoming Isolation

Many international students report feeling disconnected from their peers, particularly during the first few months of university. Establishing friendships and a support network early on is crucial for mental well-being and academic success.

"I struggled to make friends outside my cultural group at first. But joining student societies and structured meet-ups really helped me feel like part of the university community." – Hassan, postgraduate student from Jordan

Practical Strategies for Students

- ✦ Get Involved in Student Societies & Clubs
 - Join student-run societies related to your interests, hobbies, or cultural background.
 - Don't limit yourself—engage in diverse groups to meet a mix of international and local students.
 - Many universities offer Global Buddies or International Student Societies—take advantage of these networks.

Case Study: University of Leeds – Social Inclusion through Student Societies

The University of Leeds reported that over 75% of international students who joined student societies during their first term felt a stronger sense of belonging and were more likely to engage in academic and social life.

- ✦ Attend Structured Social Events
 - Many students feel uncomfortable approaching new people. Look for structured events such as:
 - Speed Friending – A fun way to meet new people quickly.
 - International Student Welcome Mixers – Events designed to connect students from different backgrounds.
 - Volunteering Opportunities – Engaging in community service helps build friendships while making a difference.
- ✦ Connect with Local & Home Students
 - Many international students stay within their cultural circles, but integrating with local students enhances language skills and cultural understanding.
 - Join activities that mix local and international students, such as sports teams, debate clubs, or academic workshops.

Case Study: University of Glasgow – Cross-Cultural Buddy Scheme

Glasgow introduced a cross-cultural buddy system that paired international students with domestic students. Over 80% of students who participated reported making long-term friendships outside their cultural group

4.2 Adapting to UK Academic Expectations

Many international students experience academic culture shock, struggling with independent learning, critical thinking, and different grading systems. Adapting to UK academic norms is essential for confidence and academic success.

"My first essay was overwhelming because I wasn't used to critical analysis. The university's writing workshops helped me improve my approach to assignments." – Mei, undergraduate student from China

Practical Strategies for Students

- ✦ Understand UK Academic Culture
 - In the UK, students are expected to engage in independent study and participate in critical discussions.
 - Critical thinking is highly valued—focus on evaluating different viewpoints and providing evidence-based arguments in essays.
- ✦ Use Academic Support Services
 - Most universities offer study skills workshops, writing centres, and one-on-one tutoring—use them!
 - If unsure about referencing or plagiarism rules, attend library workshops on academic integrity.

Case Study: University of Warwick – Academic Writing Mentorship

Warwick launched a peer-led writing mentorship program that significantly improved academic confidence among international students, with 90% reporting better understanding of academic writing norms.

- ✦ Learn Effective Time Management
 - Academic schedules in UK universities can be flexible—this means students must manage their own workload.
 - Use a planner or apps like Notion or Google Calendar to track deadlines and readings.
- ✦ Participate in Class & Ask for Help
 - Unlike some education systems, UK lecturers expect students to ask questions and engage in discussions.
 - If struggling, book office hours with lecturers or tutors—they are there to help!

Case Study: University of Sussex – Encouraging Seminar Participation

Sussex introduced interactive seminar structures, making it easier for international students to engage confidently in discussions. Student engagement rates increased by 35% in subjects that implemented these changes.

4.3 Managing Culture Shock & Homesickness

Adjusting to a new culture can be emotionally overwhelming, and many international students experience culture shock or homesickness. Recognising and managing these feelings is essential for mental well-being.

"The first few months were really hard—I missed my family and struggled to adjust. But once I built a routine and connected with others, things got easier." – Fatima, master's student from Malaysia

Practical Strategies for Students

◆ Recognise the Phases of Culture Shock

- Most students go through four stages:
 - a. Excitement & Honeymoon Phase – Everything feels new and exciting.
 - b. Culture Shock Phase – Feelings of frustration, homesickness, or confusion.
 - c. Adjustment Phase – Understanding and adapting to the new culture.
 - d. Acceptance Phase – Feeling comfortable and confident in the new environment.
- Knowing this helps students normalise their experiences and take proactive steps.

◆ Stay Connected to Home While Engaging Locally

- Keep in touch with family and friends back home but balance this with exploring your new environment.
- Participate in cultural events that celebrate diversity, so you don't feel disconnected from your identity.

◆ Seek Mental Health & Well-being Support

- Universities offer free counselling services—do not hesitate to use them.
- Engage in mindfulness and well-being workshops to manage stress.
- Find peer support groups through international student societies.

Case Study: University of Sheffield – Mental Health Support for International Students
Sheffield introduced culturally sensitive mental health workshops designed for international students, resulting in higher well-being scores and reduced dropout rates.

Key Takeaways for International Students

- Engage in student societies and buddy programs to build a strong social network.
- Be proactive in using university support services—they are designed to help!
- Develop independent learning skills and seek academic guidance when needed.
- Embrace cultural differences while staying connected to your home identity.
- Prioritise mental health—seek support when needed and don't hesitate to ask for help.



5. INTERACTIVE ACTIVITIES & EXERCISES

Overview

International students often face challenges in adapting to a new academic, cultural, and social environment. These interactive activities provide structured engagement opportunities to help students:

- Reflect on their identity and strengths to boost confidence.
- Develop social integration skills and form cross-cultural friendships.
- Enhance their academic readiness for success in the UK education system.
- Improve well-being and resilience in response to cultural adjustment challenges.
- Develop strong communication and practical life skills to navigate university life effectively.

These activities can be used:

- Individually by students as self-reflection exercises.
- By peer mentors and university staff in orientation workshops and support programs.
- By student societies to foster inclusive and engaging community spaces.

List of Activities

- Activity 1: Identity Reflection – Understanding Yourself in a New Environment
- Activity 2: Social Belonging Challenge – Overcoming Isolation & Building Connections
- Activity 3: Academic Preparedness Checklist – Mastering the UK Education System
- Activity 4: Cultural Adjustment & Well-being – Navigating Culture Shock
- Activity 5: Communication & Confidence Building – Speaking with Impact
- Activity 6: Navigating Campus Life – Practical Skills for Independence

5.1 Activity 1: Identity Reflection – Understanding Yourself in a New Environment

Many international students feel torn between maintaining their cultural identity and adapting to new norms. Self-awareness helps students feel more confident and grounded in a new environment.

Purpose

- To help students gain self-awareness, feel confident expressing their identity, and explore how their background shapes their experiences at university.

Instructions

Step 1: Self-Reflection Questions (10 min, Individual Task)

Students write responses to:

- Describe yourself in three words.
- What aspects of your identity are most important to you? (e.g., nationality, values, religion, personality, aspirations)
- When have you felt most connected to your culture?
- How can you integrate your cultural identity into your university experience?

Step 2: Identity Mapping (15 min, Visual Activity)

- Students create a mind map with their name in the centre, branching into:
- Cultural background & traditions.
- Personal strengths & values.
- Key influences (family, mentors, experiences).
- Academic & career aspirations.

Step 3: Pair & Share (15 min, Group Discussion)

Students share one key takeaway from their reflections.

Small groups discuss:

- What commonalities exist across different cultures?
- What aspects of identity have changed or evolved?
- How can students celebrate their cultural identity while adapting?

Best Practice: University of Bristol – Identity Mapping Workshops

Bristol successfully integrated identity reflection into induction, helping students build confidence and connections early.

5.2 Activity 2: Social Belonging Challenge – Overcoming Isolation & Building Connections

Many students struggle to initiate friendships outside their cultural group. Structured interaction reduces social anxiety and helps students form lasting friendships.

Purpose

To encourage proactive social engagement, helping students connect across cultures and overcome initial isolation.

Instructions

Step 1: Set Personal Social Goals (5 min, Individual Task)

Each student sets three social goals for the next month, e.g.:

- Introduce myself to three new people from different backgrounds.
- Attend one student society event or social gathering.
- Participate in a group project or discussion in class.

Step 2: Social Bingo Challenge (15 min, Group Activity)

Students receive a Bingo-style challenge sheet with prompts such as:

- Find someone who speaks more than two languages.
- Meet someone from a different continent.
- Learn one phrase in a new language.

Step 3: Group Reflection (10 min, Discussion)

- What was easy or difficult about approaching new people?
- How can these lessons be applied to future interactions?

Best Practice: University of Edinburgh – ‘Global Mixer Events’

Edinburgh’s structured social events increased international student friendships by 50% in the first term.

5.3 Activity 3: Academic Preparedness Checklist – Mastering the UK Education System

Many international students struggle with UK academic norms, critical thinking, and independent learning. Early support improves student confidence and academic performance.

Purpose

- To help students assess their academic readiness and take proactive steps for success.

Instructions

Step 1: Academic Self-Assessment (10 min, Individual Task)

Students rate themselves (1 = not confident, 5 = very confident) on:

- Understanding independent learning expectations.
- Knowing how to write critical essays and structure arguments.
- Confidence in class discussions and seminar participation.

Step 2: University Resources Exploration (15 min, Research Task)

Students research and present on:

- Where to find academic writing support and workshops.
- How to access one-on-one tutoring or peer mentoring.

Step 3: Personal Academic Plan (15 min, Action Planning)

Each student develops a three-step academic improvement plan, e.g.:

- Attend a library session on referencing.
- Join an academic peer study group.

Best Practice: University of Warwick – Academic Readiness Program

Warwick's pre-semester academic bootcamp reduced student stress by 40% and increased engagement.

5.4 Activity 4: Cultural Adjustment & Well-being – Navigating Culture Shock

Many students experience emotional highs and lows due to cultural differences. Recognising common adjustment phases helps students feel more in control.

Purpose

- To help students understand, normalise, and manage culture shock in a new country.

Instructions

Step 1: Identifying Culture Shock Phases (10 min, Group Discussion)

Students learn about the four culture shock phases:

1. Honeymoon Phase – Excitement, fascination.
2. Frustration Phase – Challenges, homesickness.
3. Adjustment Phase – Learning to adapt.
4. Acceptance Phase – Feeling at home.

Step 2: Managing Challenges (15 min, Reflection Task)

- How have I experienced culture shock before?
- What strategies help me cope?

Step 3: Coping Strategy Brainstorm (15 min, Group Activity)

- Students create a list of well-being strategies, e.g., exercise, social activities, mental health support.

Best Practice: University of Sheffield – Well-being Support for International Students
Sheffield's cultural adjustment workshops helped students develop resilience and social connections.

5.5 Activity 5: Communication & Confidence Building – Speaking with Impact

Many students struggle with public speaking, seminar participation, and everyday conversations. Confidence in communication boosts academic success and social belonging.

Purpose

- To help international students develop confidence in spoken communication, both in academic settings (seminars, presentations) and social interactions (networking, making friends).

Instructions

Step 1: Self-Assessment (10 min, Individual Task)

Students rate their confidence level (1 = not confident, 5 = very confident) in the following areas:

- Participating in class discussions.
- Asking questions in lectures.
- Giving presentations.
- Initiating conversations with new people.
- Speaking in a second language (if applicable).

Step 2: The ‘One-Minute Talk’ Challenge (15 min, Group Activity)

- Each student picks a random topic from a prepared set of cards (e.g., "Your favourite book," "A place you'd love to visit," "A person who inspires you").
- Students speak about their topic for one minute while the group actively listens.
- The group provides positive feedback on what was effective.

Step 3: Strategies for Effective Communication (15 min, Group Discussion & Practice)

Students discuss:

- What makes a speaker engaging? (tone, body language, clarity).
- How can they improve confidence when speaking? (preparation, breathing techniques).
- How can they apply these strategies in university settings?

Step 4: Pair & Practice (15 min, Peer Exercise)

- Students pair up and practice delivering a short response to a common classroom situation (e.g., responding to a lecturer's question, or introducing themselves in a seminar).
- Peers provide constructive feedback on confidence, clarity, and engagement.

5.6 Activity 6: Navigating Campus Life – Practical Skills for Independence

Many students struggle with adjusting to everyday life tasks. Practical knowledge reduces stress and increases independence.

Purpose

- To equip international students with practical knowledge and skills for managing daily life in the UK, including banking, healthcare, transport, and budgeting.

Instructions

I Step 1: Campus & City Navigation (15 min, Group Task)

Break students into teams and assign them a set of practical tasks:

- Locate the university's student support services and describe what help is available.
- Find the nearest supermarket, pharmacy, and student bank branch.
- Research public transport options and the cheapest way to travel.
- Teams present their findings to the group.

Step 2: Budgeting for Student Life (15 min, Individual Task & Discussion)

Students create a mock budget for their first month in the UK, factoring in:

- Rent & utilities.
- Groceries & transport.
- Social activities & leisure.
- Unexpected expenses.

Step 3: Practical Scenario Challenge (15 min, Group Activity)

Students role-play real-life challenges and discuss solutions, such as:

- What do you do if you feel unwell? (NHS registration, GP appointments, pharmacy services).
- What should you do if you lose your bank card? (Contacting the bank, security measures).
- How do you handle an emergency situation? (University emergency contacts, local police & emergency numbers).

Key Takeaways

- Helps students feel more prepared for independent living in the UK.
- Provides practical, real-world knowledge to manage challenges.
- Builds confidence in navigating daily life effectively.

Activity	Purpose	Key Outcome
Identity Reflection	Build self-awareness & confidence	Helps students articulate their identity & values
Social Belonging Challenge	Overcome social barriers & make connections	Encourages proactive social engagement
Academic Preparedness Checklist	Strengthen study skills & academic confidence	Helps students take ownership of learning
Cultural Adjustment & Well-being	Help students navigate culture shock	Provides resilience strategies
Communication & Confidence Building	Improve speaking & interaction skills	Increases participation & social confidence
Navigating Campus Life	Teach practical life skills for independence	Reduces stress & improves daily life management



6. ENSURING LONG-TERM SUPPORT & SUSTAINABLE CHANGE

Overview

Creating a welcoming, inclusive, and supportive environment for international students is an ongoing process, not a one-time initiative. This toolkit has provided practical, evidence-based strategies to support international students socially, academically, and culturally, ensuring they feel a strong sense of belonging in UK universities.

This final section outlines:

- Key Takeaways – A summary of the most critical insights.
- Final Reflections – Why long-term engagement is necessary.
-

The impact of these efforts extends beyond individual students—it enriches the entire university community, fostering global connections, cultural exchange, and a truly inclusive academic environment.



6.1 Key **Takeaways**: What Have We Learned?

Area	Key Insight	Actionable Steps
Pre-Arrival & Induction Support	Early engagement prevents isolation and enhances student success.	Implement virtual pre-arrival hubs, peer mentorship, and phased induction programs.
Social & Cultural Inclusion	Social integration does not happen organically—structured interventions work best.	Facilitate buddy programs, cross-cultural events, and intentional social mixing initiatives.
Academic Support	International students benefit from early intervention and peer-led learning.	Provide academic writing bootcamps, mentoring programs, and culturally sensitive teaching practices.
Staff Training & Institutional Change	University staff play a crucial role in shaping student experiences.	Introduce mandatory cultural competency training and inclusive curriculum design.
Student-Led Initiatives	International students thrive when they are actively involved in shaping support programs.	Empower students through co-creation of programs, student-led events, and advisory boards.

6.2 Final Reflections: The Need for Long-Term Commitment

Supporting international students is not a one-time intervention—it requires continuous reflection, adaptation, and improvement.

✓ Universities are global institutions—ensuring international students feel included strengthens academic excellence and global reputation.

✓ Retention & Success Matter – Research shows that students with a strong sense of belonging perform better academically and socially.

✓ Diversity is a strength—cultivating an inclusive culture benefits all students, not just international students.

The Role of Universities, Staff, and Students

Universities must embed international student support into policies and everyday practices. This means:

- Institutional Commitment – Leadership must prioritise long-term investment in international student well-being.
- Staff Responsibility – Academic and professional staff should receive ongoing training on cultural competency and inclusive teaching.
- Student Involvement – Student voices must shape international student policies and initiatives through student-led programs and advisory groups.



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