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**Transition into Undergraduate and Postgraduate  
Study for International Students**

## **Transition into Undergraduate and Postgraduate study for International Students**

This section should be read in conjunction with the information on transition for new UK undergraduates and postgraduates, as much of the support needs and good practice identified also apply to international students.

### **Support to acclimatise**

The diversity of prior experience of students from outside the UK means they have a wide range of different induction needs and timescales to reach a point where they would consider they had successfully completed their transition. In the early weeks and months, international students are not only dealing with the same challenges associated with moving to a different study level and new University environment experienced by UK students, but are additionally coping with adjusting to unfamiliar social and cultural norms; different academic methods and values; for some, studying and interacting intensively in a second language for the first time; and being too far from family to go back for an occasional weekend of home comforts. As exciting as it is to be starting at Leeds, this combination of factors creates the conditions for many international students to experience more discomfort during transition and to take longer to be operating confidently. It is difficult for them to process and act on large quantities of new academic-related information at the same time as adapting to the wider context of life at Leeds. Many students will be coping with culture shock during their early weeks and months. So it is important to provide multiple opportunities to absorb new information and adjust to unfamiliar aspects of UK study, by offering induction support and study skills development which starts before students arrive and extends well beyond the first week.

### **An inclusive and integrated academic community**

Students from outside the UK are likely to be unfamiliar with a lot of British-specific content and will be used to different varieties of English, so such content and the language used during induction should be adjusted or explained in order to be inclusive. Some small group support is also valuable to provide a recap of key information and an easier space to ask questions.

Creating opportunities during induction for international students to demonstrate the value they bring to the learning community through their prior experience and international background is important, to counterbalance the focus on the need to adapt in order to be successful in Leeds, and to stimulate interest in integration rather than segregation of UK and international students. The International Student Barometer scores indicate that Leeds is performing less well than competitors on international students' satisfaction ratings for feeling safe and secure and making British friends. So it is important to ensure induction engenders a sense of belonging to a welcoming academic community, through providing content and activity that is inclusive, and supports both UK and international students to have positive interactions with peers from different cultural backgrounds and to get to know key staff, at the earliest opportunity.

### **Student View**

*"My Head of Department wrote to me before I came to Leeds. She reached out first and that meant a lot to me."*

*"It would have been nice to have information before about the methods of assessment and methods of working in the classroom."*

*"I had trouble trying to settle socially and academically because the system is really different from what I have in my country."*

*"The first few weeks in class I would maybe just take in about 1% of it – I was feeling sorry for myself each and every day."*

*"I think there should be information made explicit that it's ok to ask for help."*

*"Induction was thorough and well-structured and used innovative methods, but I was aware of the segregation and feeling a bit left out."*

### **Pre-arrival**

Support from staff before arrival was considered very important to give students a clear idea of what to expect and they found it very useful to have a particular faculty member they could contact with questions. Some students did not remember receiving anything from their school before they arrived and had been disappointed only to receive general information about the University. Most felt they needed more information before they came to help them prepare effectively for the new study

experience. For example they would have liked information about contact hours (some had much more and some much less than they were expecting); the grading system; what seminars were and how to prepare for them; methods of assessment; and enough information about the dissertation to enable them to bring any relevant material with them from home. They would have liked to see video examples of different types of teaching session relevant to their discipline to help them understand what to expect. They wanted to be able to do some preparation in advance and to have reading lists before they came.

Briefings in home countries where students met alumni were praised. Many students stressed that it was invaluable to be able to contact current or former students, preferably with experience of their programme, before they left home. A blind student said it would have really helped to be linked with a current visually-impaired student in Leeds before he came. Disabled international students had difficulty finding out what would be different for them in the UK. They could not do much of the preparation that disabled UK students can do in advance through already being in the UK.

For students whose arrival was delayed, especially if the student missed induction week, extra support from school staff whilst still in their home country and then on arrival was vital.

### **Induction and settling in**

Many students were unprepared for how long it took for them to be able to function well in the new academic environment. They described a prolonged period of feeling miserable and overwhelmed because the study experience was so different and for some, language difficulties and culture shock made it particularly hard to take in the new information and keep up. Students felt it was important to raise awareness that it can take at least two to three months to feel comfortable here, so that people do not despair in their first few weeks.

Students suggested there should be more encouragement to ask for help as there can be a stigma around this for students from some backgrounds. They thought current students sharing experiences of asking for and receiving help would allow new students to feel more comfortable to do this.

Information which was delivered via long induction talks that were not interactive was difficult to take in. Some students found it hard to get used to speakers' unfamiliar accents and speed of delivery so having written back up was essential. They also wanted verbal explanation of information which they were being given in written format. For example it was not sufficient just to provide handbooks and expect the information to be taken in. Generally during induction, the use of unfamiliar examples, terminology, acronyms and jargon was a problem. Many asked for better induction in how to use the VLE and the portal - not just those who came from places where technology is not used to the same extent as in Leeds. Some said the IT induction they were given assumed a lot of prior knowledge which they did not have.

Students found their academic induction on plagiarism and the referencing skills VLE tutorial helpful but some continued to be very anxious about writing because plagiarism had been mentioned so many times. They wanted more clarity on assessment and submission earlier to give them longer to prepare, this was especially important to students working in a second language.

Some students were unhappy that there was not an atmosphere of integration between students from different backgrounds on their course and little or no focus on diversity in their induction. Others mentioned valuing induction teambuilding activities where they were put together in mixed nationality groups which helped them get to know others on their course. Group visits to places of interest were also praised as ways of getting to know people as well as experiencing life outside campus.

Students who had been on a pre-session course missed the support of Language Centre social assistants once they started on their main course and would have liked an equivalent to help them settle in to the new situation. Induction social events which took place in noisy places (for example with loud music) were not helpful for students using English as a second language or students with certain disabilities. The disabled international students in the focus group said they needed support to find out about and be able to attend social and co-curricular events during induction and beyond, not just for the academic aspects of their time in Leeds.

In light of student feedback the **following recommendations** are suggested, to enhance the support for international students' induction to undergraduate and taught postgraduate courses:

- Provide information pre-arrival that is detailed enough to help students form accurate expectations of the UK study environment and prepare for their programmes
- Offer opportunities for new students to consult staff and more experienced peers before arrival
- Provide some induction support in small groups, incorporate explanation of jargon, unfamiliar terminology and British-specific examples
- Use multiple communication methods to facilitate retention of critical information and be inclusive of students whose first language is not British English
- Ensure there is a comprehensive and inclusive induction to the VLE, Portal and IT
- Provide holistic induction support to meet the social and academic needs of international disabled students
- Use current students to support new students during induction
- Arrange social and community-building activities that encourage successful intercultural mixing and are inclusive for students whose first language is not English
- Provide extended induction support to take into account the longer time students may need for successful transition.
- Give extra support to international students arriving late

**Case study: Institute for Transport Studies** *Contact: Jo Moran*

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The example below identifies elements of the Institute for Transport Studies PGT induction programme which are helpful for international students and for encouraging integration of UK and international students.

The institute has an adviser who specialises in supporting International students and meets them during induction.

Their induction programme includes the following opportunities to get to know staff and course-mates and the local area.

**International Welcome Week**

- Afternoon tea following the University international postgraduate orientation programme

#### **Week 0 Induction week**

- Field trip to Headingley to look at local transport issues, followed by a social event.
- British Energy Challenge: in groups home and international students with staff discuss how solutions from the countries international students come from might help solve British energy challenges
- International Transport quiz

#### **Week 1**

- Metropoly – a team challenge. Students are put into mixed nationality teams of eight and given metro family day passes. They gain points by visiting specified interesting and unusual destinations across West Yorkshire using rail and bus to get there. Points are scored for each place visited and at the end of the day the team with the highest number of points scored wins a prize.

#### **Week 2**

- Coffee and cakes event

#### **Week 4**

- International night - International and home students are briefed before they come to Leeds to be ready to share an aspect of their country or region at this event (Greek dancing, Devon cream tea and Ghanaian clothes have featured in the past)

### **Resources**

University of Leeds information for international students preparing to come to Leeds

[www.leeds.ac.uk/international](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/international)

University of Leeds Student Education Service (International Student site) with advice and guidance

[students.leeds.ac.uk/internationalstudents](http://students.leeds.ac.uk/internationalstudents)

Global Community connects students to intercultural and international activities across campus

[www.globalcommunity.leeds.ac.uk/](http://www.globalcommunity.leeds.ac.uk/)

UKCISA Culture Shock information for students

<http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/International-Students/Study-work--more/Culture-Shock/>

UKCISA 2009 'Discussing Difference, discovering similarities: a toolkit of learning activities to improve cross-cultural exchange between students of different cultural backgrounds'

[www.ukcisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges--schools/Publications--research/resources/35/Discussing-difference-discovering-similarities](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/Info-for-universities-colleges--schools/Publications--research/resources/35/Discussing-difference-discovering-similarities)

QAA Report 'Supporting and Enhancing the Experience of International Students in the UK: A Guide for UK Higher Education Providers' updated June 2015

[www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Newsroom/Pages/International-Students-in-the-UK-guidance.aspx#.VdXpggNwaHs](http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/Newsroom/Pages/International-Students-in-the-UK-guidance.aspx#.VdXpggNwaHs)

Bamford, J (2008) Enhancing the international learning experience: Strategies for the improvement of international students' academic and cultural experiences of studying in the UK. HEA Report

[www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/enhancing-international-learning-experience-strategies-improvement-international-students](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resource/enhancing-international-learning-experience-strategies-improvement-international-students)

Carroll, J and Ryan, J (2005) Teaching International Students – Improving Learning for All. London: Routledge

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