CS 14: The Teaching International Students (TIS) Project

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Research background

This project is collaborative and international in several ways. It was created as a joint initiative of two bodies which already had a long history of supplying guidance in international education albeit with different remits: the United Kingdom Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA)[1], and the Higher Education Academy (HEA)[2], using funding supplied by the Prime Minister's Initiative 2 (PMI2)[3]. UKCISA is primarily an advisory and lobbying body, working both for students and for university staff by publishing information and running advice lines. They are also the most productive body engaged in training of those university support staff who work with international students, and are also the predominant networking body for such staff by issuing regular publications and running conferences. The HEA is primarily concerned with learning and teaching activities, hence works mainly with academic staff: 'to identify and share effective teaching practices in order to provide the best possible learning experience for all students'. (This project concerning the implications of international collaborations was also funded by the HEA[4]). PMI2 ran from 2006 to 2011 as 'a five year strategy to strengthen the UK's position in international education'. Both UKCISA and HEA are umbrella organisations bringing together institutions from across the sector, and both concentrate on the identification and sharing of best practice. By bringing together these bodies representing distinct institutional stakeholders who work with students in different contexts, the TIS project set out to address the issues of quality in international student experience in a holistic manner. The initial focus was on issues relating to teaching and learning, but then this broadened out to include other aspects of the students' lifecycle such as pre-arrival information, careers guidance, and life outside the classroom. Although the main focus of the TIS project was on the experience of international students coming to study on UK campuses, the

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[1] http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/
[2] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/
[3] http://www.britishcouncil.org/eumd-pmi2-about.htm
[4] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ntfs

issues addressed cover a range of topics, including internationalisation at home, internationalising the curriculum, transnational education, and staff development.

Key learning up front

The student experience should be the main focus of all staff involved in any aspect of international or transnational education.

- **CS 14.1.** It is essential for all staff working with international students to consult the TIS website and to explore the International Student Lifecycle Resource Bank[5].

- **CS 14.2.** It is essential for university academic staff to explore in particular the learning and teaching resources section on the International Student Lifecycle Resource Bank[6].

- **CS 14.3** It is recommended that university support staff who work with international students investigate the training opportunities supplied by UKCISA[7].

- **CS 14.4.** It is recommended that university support staff who work with international students use the conferences and other networking opportunities supplied by UKCISA in order to participate in a community of good practice.

- **CS 14.5.** It is essential for institutions to bring together all institutional stakeholders who work with students in different contexts, in order to address the issues of quality in international student experience in a holistic manner.

- **CS 14.6.** It is essential to consider all aspects of experience of both international students (who travel abroad for their courses) and also students who study transnational programmes (in their own countries).

- **CS 14.7.** It is important to recognise that what is good practice for one group of students would also be good practice for all students, including home students.

- **CS 14.8.** It is recommended that staff build upon the evidence-base of good practice on the TIS resource bank to develop their own praxis concerning their own areas of activity.

- **CS 14.9.** It is recommended to begin the process of induction of students as early as possible, for example by directing prospective students to the 'Prepare for Success'[8] site in order to begin the process of adapting to what may be a new culture of learning.

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[5] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/international-student-lifecycle
[6] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/international-student-lifecycle
[7] http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/training/index.php
[8] www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk

- **CS 14.10.** It is recommended that academics should participate in the process of induction as early as possible, even before students arrive, by arranging for online resources with reading materials and online lectures.
- **CS 14.11.** It is recommended that institutions should include current students in the preparation of induction materials, for example with videos recounting their own experiences.
- **CS 14.12.** It is essential to supplement induction programmes run by staff with mentoring and buddying schemes to supply peer support.
- **CS 14.13.** It is recommended that induction is not seen as something which is achievable in a one-off period shortly after arrival, and so to continue the process longitudinally.
- **CS 14.15.** It is essential not to think of students only in relation to their studies, but to recognise that their sojourn includes experiencing wider aspects of social life.
- **CS 14.16.** It is essential to match the help which is given to students to assist them in making adjustments with measures taken within the institutions which ensure that social environments, on and off campus, are welcoming.
- **CS 14.17.** It is essential for students' unions to endeavour to make a positive impact both on the experience of international students in the UK, and the internationalisation of students in general.

The case study

The project was established in 2009 with funding for two years. The HEA hosted the project, and gave some support to the two prime movers (the Director Janette Ryan, and the Associate Director Jude Carroll) as well as ensuring support from the HEA subject centres[9]. From the beginning it was recognised that what is good practice for one group of students would also be good practice for all students, so both the outputs and the outcomes serve to improve the experiences of all:

> *The project therefore focuses on the ways that lecturers and other teaching staff can maintain and improve the quality of teaching and learning for international students thorough providing guidance and information about how to meet the diverse learning needs of international students, and, importantly, in ways that will benefit all students[10].*

During the project life-time a series of events and workshops around the UK were organised, but the primary activity became focussed on producing a

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[9] For details of the team see:
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/internationalisation/TIS_About_Us
[10]
http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/internationalisation/Introduction_to_project.pdf

comprehensive collection of resources which are structured around the international student lifecycle. These resources have been supplied by practitioners around the world (hence illustrate another dimension of international collaboration) and can be seen as examples of praxis, combining research with practical applications. Indeed, to link this initiative to the wider 'National Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education[11]', a cascading outcome of the TIS project may well be that the examples supplied of evidence-based good practice could spur more staff to develop their own praxis concerning their own areas of activity. Several of the examples supplied as further readings in the International Student Life Cycle Resources Bank [12] are actually outcomes of the staff development programme described in CS 10, hence these demonstrate how a structured approach to staff development can influence not only individual practice, but can influence the sector more widely. This outcome is intended to enhance the creation of a community of practice dedicated to best practice in this area:

> *Where available, a 'Top Resource' or 'Top Tip' is provided for those with less time. By 'Tip' we mean 'Theory into Practice' and hope that teachers consider these in relation to their own contexts, needs and ideas[13].*

The International Student Lifecycle

The resources are divided into five major sections: 'pre-arrival and pre-sessional support'; 'induction'; 'teaching & learning in the classroom'; life outside the classroom'; and 'employability and next steps'. The third of these, 'teaching & learning in the classroom', is the largest, but the contents of each of the sections will be glossed below. It is essential, however, for those working with international students to consult the full resource bank.

Pre-arrival and pre-sessional support

Significantly the topics covered here are of use not just for those international students who will travel abroad for their courses, but are also aimed at students who will be entering transnational programmes as described in chapters two and three, and also in CS 9: 'All of these students will be studying the same programmes as local British students and most will also need some kind of pre-arrival or pre-sessional support [14]'. The first aspect relates to the university documents and websites which students can access before arrival, and stresses

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[11] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/rewardandrecog/ProfessionalStandardsFramework.pdf
[12] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/international-student-lifecycle
[13] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/internationalisation/Introduction_to_project.pdf
[14] http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources/detail/internationalisation/ISL_pre_arrival

the importance of these both being welcoming and being authentic. There are also links to advice supplied by the British Council and UKCISA which help students to choose their courses and find details related to immigration and living in the UK. An extremely useful site which prospective students can be directed to in order to begin the process of adapting to what may be a new culture of learning is 'Prepare for Success[15]'. This includes online activities about features of studying in UK higher education, and this was also developed with funding from PMI2 and UKCISA. There are also suggestions for pre-sessional support programmes, along with guidance concerning what academics can do to help students before they arrive, including arranging for online resources on:

- Early reading materials such as key texts and annotated reading lists
- Glossaries of key terms and concepts
- Sample lectures online (audio or video)
- Examples of assignments and learning tasks
- Stories and suggestions from previous students

Induction

The major focus of this section of the resource bank concerns the organisation and content of induction and orientation programmes, stressing the crucial need for this to be done efficiently and sensitively. Aspects include English language preparation and also introductions to the culture of learning, and it is pointed out that as well as structured programmes of induction run by staff there is currently a welcome growth of mentoring and buddying schemes to supply peer support[16]. Another area of change involves a recognition that induction is not something which is achievable in a one-off period shortly after arrival hence:

> *Some universities have longer-term transition programmes that recognise that international students' support needs may last much longer than the initial first few weeks and may involve not just 'culture shock' (different physical environment, customs and practices), and 'language shock' (realising that their mastery of formal English doesn't prepare them for fast-paced, colloquial or disciplinary language and vocabulary) but also 'academic shock' (different teaching and learning approaches such as relationships between teacher and students, forms of assessment and even what counts as 'knowledge').*

Areas which need to be covered include functional, academic, and social aspects, and probably require an interfacing of different university departments. Once again the specific induction needs of transnational students are addressed, recognising that they are moving from one culture of learning to the new culture

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[15] www.prepareforsuccess.org.uk
[16] http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/pdf/about/material_media/mentoring.pdf

of education of the transnational programme, giving suggestions how features of this specific epistemology might be included. There is also a rich collection of practitioner produced materials and case studies.

Teaching & Learning in the classroom.

This, as was stated above, is the largest section and the main focus of the resource bank. It is itself divided into five subsections, and for each of these there are several pages, with each page linking to resources which clarify the issues and give examples of what can be done. Essential features are the recurrent use of students' own experiences via case studies and downloadable video clips, and the constant encouragement by example for staff to engage in their own action research in order to improve practice. The complete menu of items included in this section is:

Teaching context

- Lectures
- Seminars and tutorials
- Professional placements
- Supervision
- Online teaching
- Transnational and multimodal teaching

Teaching approaches

- Pedagogic theory
- Group work
- Assessment and feedback
- Language

Learning

- Critical thinking
- Academic writing
- Addressing plagiarism
- Independent learning
- Language
- Reading and note-making

Curriculum

- Internationalising the curriculum
- Disciplinary approaches

Intercultural Competencies

- Mixing, learning and working together
- Intercultural competencies

Life outside the classroom

This section provides sobering reading as, inevitably, the focus is mainly on things which can go wrong and the factors which limit international students' sense of belonging. There is a needed reminder – that is a reminder perhaps needed by some who may only think of the students in relation to their courses – that their sojourn is not solely related to getting a qualification but includes experiencing wider aspects of social life. For a variety of reasons this ambition can be frustrated, and can result in ghettoisation or individual isolation. Students can be helped to make adjustments, but the institutions also need to ensure that the social environments of their students, on and off campus, are welcoming. Once again the message which has been repeated in several chapters and case studies produced by this research should be recalled: there is need for engagement with internationalisation from all stakeholders in an institution, and all departments need to be included at all stages of planning any collaboration. This may require new competences and staff development, and issues concerning this are covered in CS 10. The frequent mentions in this section of the resource bank of involvement of Students' Unions echo much of what was said in CS 5: 'It is essential for students' unions to endeavour to make a positive impact both on the experience of international students in the UK, and the internationalisation of students in general.' The other main agency referred to in this section of the resource bank is UKCISA, and many of the resources referred to are produced by UKCISA, and it should be recalled that UKCISA is the main body involved in providing training for university support staff[17].

Employability and next steps

The topics covered in this section of the resource bank match some of the findings reported in CS 1 concerning careers services, hence again emphasises the need for 'across the institution' engagement with internationalisation. In that case study the various issues of international students working in the UK (both during their courses, as internships or placements, as well as the various post-study opportunities) were mentioned, as was the difficulty of keeping up-to-date with frequent changes in legislation in this area. Employability – viewed both as the development of competences and of knowledge related to subject specialisms – is increasingly seen as a necessary component of academic

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[17] http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/training/index.php

programmes, and one of the reasons for seeking to attract international students is to enable the development of global employability competences amongst home students. CS 7 gives an example of how such competences can be built up by using an online course with participants remaining in their home countries. Within this section many of the linked resources have been produced by AGCAS (Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services), which has created an Internationalisation Community:

> *This community is for careers professionals working with international students and graduates. It is intended as a forum for sharing and discussing issues, resources and good practice relating to international students and graduates, both within an HE careers setting and in the wider context[18].*

As with other sections of the resource bank there are suggestions for improving practice and links to information, again much of it produced by UKCISA.

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[18] http://www.agcas.org.uk/communities/13-International-students