

IEC International Student Experience Working Group

Interim Report to the IEC

May 2014

At the meeting of the International Education Council (IEC) on February 26th, 2014 IEC agreed to establish a working group to make recommendations to improve the International Student Experience in the UK. The IEC established Toni Pearce, President of the National Union of Students (NUS) as the Chair. BIS, as secretariat to the IEC, circulated a questionnaire on behalf of the working group in March/April which invited education institutions, sector bodies and students representatives to contribute. The IEC International Student Experience Working Group met on April 28th, 2014 to discuss the results of the consultation exercise into the international student experience as well as the key areas of work the group would like to explore.

The working group has identified the following areas of work which are outlined further in this paper:

Immediate:

- Following consultation with the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and International Student Advisors as members of the UK Council for International Student Affairs, the working group recommends a **Resource for Employers on the Employment Regulations for International Students** be re-established by the Home Office, in partnership with the British Council, UKCISA and NUS.
- The working group asks the Government to draft a proposal to the IEC on how to ensure banks are complying with Home Office requirements for banking documents and on the ease of opening bank accounts for international students.

Medium-Term:

- The Working Group has agreed that **pre-arrival information and civic welcomes** are two areas they will explore further in future meetings.
- The working group has agreed to explore those institutions providing a **private rental sector guarantor scheme** with the aim of achieving a short-term solution to this aspect of the international student experience.
- The working group has identified **employment/employability** as an area to explore further and will seek assistance from specialists in this area within the sector at the next meeting of the working group.
- The working group will bring together the various **codes of practice** and the different education-sector bodies towards the goal of identifying a clear code with central principles.

Long-term Strategic:

- The working group identified that **accommodation** is a considerable part of the international student experience and a clear area for further research.
- The working group proposes IEC members undertake a **single programme of research** into international student satisfaction in the

academic experience as well as accommodation, information, support and employability. This research should be strategic in both its method and proceeding action; identifying areas for improvement and areas which the UK clearly excels at.

Consultation Summary

The working group undertook a consultation exercise in April to explore the areas of the international student experience those in the sector felt should be addressed within the context of the group and the IEC. The consultation response identified five key areas where there was considerable consensus from the sector:

- Pre-arrival
- Accommodation and Community
- Academic Experience
- Employability
- Regulation

Using the summary consultation response, the working group discussed these areas in the context of establishing short-term goals and long-term strategies.

Pre-Arrival

The consultation outlined the desire from the sector for a more consistent, comprehensive and centralised approach to pre-arrival information. While the sector acknowledged that there is a good standard from individual institutions, a central source of information for confirmed students, along with a welcome from the UK government and/or regional areas would provide students with the a considerable amount of support they required, pre-arrival. It would also allow the sector on a national level to be more strategic about pre-arrival information and support and institutions to focus on more specific pre-arrival information.

This area within the consultation also provided consensus that civic welcomes should be an area of consideration for the working group and asked for recommendations on how to facilitate this area of work.

The working group also notes that these are both areas identified in the IEC report from the Deputy Mayor of London, which emphasized the challenge for students before they arrive and the negative experience they could have, especially at the port of arrival (eg. Airport, train, bus).

The Working Group has agreed that these are two areas they will explore further in future meetings.

Accommodation

The consultation identified two key areas within the experience area of "accommodation" which were a clear consensus on where to move forward:

- *International Students and guarantors in the private rental sector*

International students are often asked to provide guarantors to rent in the private rental sector and guarantors from outside the UK are not permitted by many landlords. As accommodation across the sector could be not suitable or available for groups of students, private rental is the only option.

- *Rental fraud*

International students often have to secure accommodation prior to arrival and without the opportunity to view the property or take the precautions recommended to protect against rental fraud. In addition, finding private rental accommodation in the UK is a unique experience when compared to their home environments, and this makes it more difficult to identify rental fraud.

The working group has agreed to explore those institutions providing a guarantor scheme with the aim of achieving a short-term solution to this aspect of the international student experience.

The working group identified that accommodation is a considerable part of the international student experience and a clear area for further research.

Academic experience

The consultation identified areas where international students may not be satisfied with their academic experience but more importantly, the lack of a strategic approach to addressing student satisfaction which encourages cross-sector learning. The group noted the work being undertaken by both QAA and HEA and felt strongly that moving this work forward, and evaluating the effectiveness of projects had to be done in a strategic way.

The working group also noted with concern the Ofqual review into qualifications undertaken by Tier 4 students which highlighted that “two-thirds of the awarding organisations looked at were not up to the required standards”.¹ The working group identified this as an area to explore further with awarding bodies and regulators from across the education sector.

The working group proposes IEC members undertake a single programme of research into international student satisfaction in the academic experience as well as accommodation, information, employability and support. This research should be strategic in both its method and proceeding action; identifying areas for improvement and areas which the UK clearly excels at. The working group will propose how to move forward at the next meeting of the IEC.

Employment

The consultation identified several key areas for the working group to explore. These included:

- advice on employment internationally available to both international and home students;
- a lack of information on the take up of the various post study work schemes and a pressing need to explain more clearly to employers the ways in which well qualified international students could legally be employed in the UK;
- the impact working rights within and post-study have for students on vocational courses and courses with accreditation and;
- the impact of unclear guidance and working rights on the ability of international students to participate in representative activities and integrate into the community.

¹ <http://ofqual.gov.uk/news/ofqual-publishes-review-into-qualifications-taken-by-tier-4-students/>

Consultation with the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) identified the need to update a leaflet for employers, jointly produced by the Home Office, AGCAS, the British Council and UKCISA, which was last provided prior to the major changes of 2010-2012. AGCAS members have expressed to the working group chair an urgent need for such a resource which explains T1 (Graduate Entrepreneur), Doctoral Extension Scheme, T2, T4 ("Holiday-working", 4 months after study and in-course internships;) and in particular the various opportunities under Tier 5, many which were updated in October 2013.

Following consultation with the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) and International Student Advisors as members of the UK Council for International Student Affairs, the working group recommends a Resource for Employers on the Employment Regulations for International Students be re-established by the Home Office, in partnership with the British Council, UKCISA and NUS.

The working group has identified employment/employability as an area to explore further and will seek assistance from specialists in this area within the sector at the next meeting of the working group.

Regulation

Regulation within the sector was identified as the strongest area of concern within the consultation. There was also a concern from respondents that dealing with unclear regulation often prohibited them from focusing on the international student experience. Regulation concerns identified a clear desire for:

- A code of practice for recruiting, teaching and supporting international students.
- A tuition fee protection scheme which should be adopted.

Both the consultation and the working group identified initiatives from across the sector from various bodies but a lack of both consistency in approach and clarity for students was identified as a concern. The group noted that a clear code, with central principles was required to ensure an impact on both the international student experience and the perception of the UK as an education destination. The group also noted that the QAA Guidance *International Students Studying in the UK* is a thorough and well produced document that could form the basis of a new regulatory initiative.

The working group will bring together the various codes of practice and the different education-sector bodies towards the goal of identifying a clear code with central principles.

Further Action

The working group identified a concern in the consultation over the issue of banking within the UK. Respondents identified issues with the ability of international students to open bank accounts and separately the way banks were complying with Home Office requirements for documents

The working group asks The Government to draft a proposal to the IEC on how to ensure banks are complying with Home Office requirements for banking documents and on the ease of opening bank accounts for international students.

Additional members

The working group would like to formally invite the Independent Schools Inspectorate and a representative from the International Education Council Working Group: attracting legitimate international students to the UK led by Kit Malthouse, Deputy Mayor of London for Business and Enterprise, to join the working group.

The working group would ask that the IEC accept this report as an interim report and look forward to reporting further at the next IEC meeting.

National Union of Students (NUS), May 19th, 2014