Improving the experiences of international staff in UK higher education

Summary
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This publication provides a summary of the findings and recommendations from a larger research report. References will be provided throughout to the larger version, should more information be required for any particular section.

[www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/improving-experiences-international-staff](http://www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/improving-experiences-international-staff)

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Further information

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## Improving the experiences of international staff

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Introduction

In an increasingly global society, higher education can create exciting opportunities for international collaboration and shared learning. International staff are a key part of this. Their potential to bring different experiences, skills, knowledge and networks can enrich UK education and aid collaboration.

However with this opportunity comes increased competition. Higher education institutions (HEIs) need to attract and recruit the best staff to offer high-quality research and teaching in a global market. To do this they need to ensure that staff not only feel valued and supported but that their international experiences are respected and utilised to the benefit of the sector.

Roughly 61,175 international staff currently work in UK HEIs and anecdotal evidence suggests that they face different barriers to success to those of their UK colleagues. This report outlines areas where HEIs may want to increase support and consider the inclusivity of their institutional culture.

Improving the experience of international staff:

- helps to promote the reputation of the UK higher education sector internationally
- improves the staff experience
- increases the likelihood of attracting the best and most talented staff
- enables a wider range of research and teaching methods

International staff could particularly benefit their institution through:

- developing teaching materials and curriculum content to make them more up to date and relevant for students
- drawing parallels between different cultures to increase understanding
- using an understanding of cultural differences to obtain international funding and collaborate with overseas academics
- a broader network of international contacts
- knowledge of overseas research priorities and needs
- providing input to better support international students

‘In regard to both teaching and research, my background involves a substantially different system, allowing me to see and suggest possible ways to deal with various concerns that people who have grown up only within the various UK systems often cannot see.’
Introduction

The survey

The recommendations in this report are based on research conducted by Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) in 2011/12. In places it may refer to survey respondents and/or include quotes from the research. The full research report is available at www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/improving-experiences-international-staff.

The full report contains further details of each of the areas covered below, and also lists the resources that the 1400 survey respondents found helpful when they started working in UK higher education.

All quotations in this document are from international staff who responded to the survey.
Providing information, advice and guidance on living in the UK

Good information, advice and guidance (IAG) is imperative to help international staff:

- feel prepared for moving (if they are not already in the UK)
- concentrate on their new job, rather than being distracted by logistics when they start

IAG needs to be well organised and comprehensive, but not overwhelming, and be easily accessible in one place. There is a strong correlation between good IAG and how prepared international staff feel for the move to the UK.

**Proportion of respondents reporting that they felt ‘prepared’ or ‘very prepared’ for the move to the UK, by reported levels of usefulness related to IAG received.**
Suggestions

- Send staff an induction pack, or direct them to suitable information on your website, when they are offered the job. This will help international staff to plan the move as soon as possible, and help them to feel prepared. It may also be useful for staff moving from elsewhere in the UK.

- Make sure the induction pack covers the key areas of information staff require, without bombarding them with information. Basic information can be supplemented with links to further information, for example, online.

- Consider providing staff with a named contact for any questions. This may be most useful if it is a dedicated adviser for international staff.

Our research showed that current IAG focuses on the job and institution. Areas such as UK culture, society, childcare and schooling had less emphasis. In addition to information about the specific role and institution, HEIs should consider providing IAG on:

- visas and immigration
- finances and tax
- healthcare
- personal security and emergency services
- accommodation
- childcare and schooling
- UK culture and society
- the local area
- the higher education sector generally
Providing information, advice and guidance on living in the UK

General IAG is available at:

- [www.internationalstaff.ac.uk](http://www.internationalstaff.ac.uk)
The University of Leeds international staff website offers a wealth of information and is free to access without subscription. HEIs can pay (£1000+VAT per year) to add specific content for their institution to the website. Currently 36 institutions are subscribers.

- The British Council provides many resources for people relocating to the UK, in particular *The guide for international researchers moving to the UK*.

Some HEIs have developed areas of their websites for international staff. For example:

- University of Nottingham
  [www.nottingham.ac.uk/jobs/applyingfromoverseas/index2.aspx](http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/jobs/applyingfromoverseas/index2.aspx)

- University of Bristol
  [www.bristol.ac.uk/international-office/staff-support](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/international-office/staff-support)

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**Visas**

The process for applying for, and criteria for issuing, visas are outside HEIs’ control. This limits the level of support possible. However, providing staff with suitable IAG will be useful, even if this is to direct them to the appropriate documents and local offices, and alert them to the timeframes involved. This should include IAG for visas for partners and families.

Changes to visa requirements also affect staff already in post. HEIs can help by alerting staff to changes and highlight where they can find more information, or who they can speak to. Being proactive in considering the effects of changes will make staff feel valued, even if the process and impact is outside the HEI’s control.
Suggestions

- **Provide a point of contact for international staff, to give assistance for visa applications.** While a specific member of staff will not be able to provide legal advice or formal visa advice, they can at least provide staff with someone who can assist with what the process is or where to start, even if they cannot comment on their particular case.

  International staff and student advisers at the University of Bristol answer queries on welfare and immigration. Staff know who to go to for advice once they are in the country, as well as before they arrive in the UK.

  ‘I had to figure out the process by myself and for my family. I had expected that HR would provide some logistical support but they provided conflicting advice and I ended up having to sort things out myself.’

- **Provide access to materials for the life in the UK test** so that staff can borrow them without having to buy them.

  In addition to providing IAG on visas, other more practical support may also help international staff to settle in the UK.

- **Consider offering financial support for visa applications,** either by covering costs or providing an interest-free loan to save staff fees linked to credit cards or loans. Alongside the initial fee for an application, costs may include:
  - legal advice and fees
  - visas for dependants
  - fees to renew a visa or for indefinite leave to remain
  - costs to resubmit in the case of administrative error (either by the HEI or the individual)

  ‘[The fee] was not reimbursed by my employer in spite of the fact that the visa was a requirement to remain working in my permanent position. Interactions with HR on this front were quite negative… Due to this negative experience with my employer, I am now considering adverts for other positions in the UK.’

- **Consider providing flexible working or leave arrangements for visa appointments.** This will likely only be for a small amount of time and will make the staff member feel supported.

  For more information see pp12–19 of the longer report.
Respondents identified this as a confusing and frustrating area for international staff. Some described a catch-22 situation where they need a pay cheque for a deposit for accommodation, a bank account in order to be paid, and a permanent address to open a bank account.

**Suggestions**

- **Provide IAG on banking options and potential difficulties before arrival.** This has two benefits.
  - Some larger, international banks allow people to open an account before they move, while others have specific UK accounts for people who have recently moved to the UK. For example, HSBC offers the passport account, which allows customers to open an account without a permanent address. [www.hsbc.co.uk/1/2/current-accounts/uk-bank-account](http://www.hsbc.co.uk/1/2/current-accounts/uk-bank-account)
  - International staff can prepare for the financial difficulties before arrival and have a contingency plan in case they are unable to be paid when they initially arrive.

- **Proactively offer staff an employer’s letter of introduction.** This may help staff to open a bank account more quickly and easily where they have no formal proof of address. It should:
  - be on headed paper
  - be addressed to the bank
  - contain the staff member’s name
  - confirm the staff member’s address
  - give details of their employment start date and salary

- **Provide information on national insurance and tax**, for example, how to obtain a national insurance number, how tax codes work and the definition of P45 and P60 forms. HMRC’s website may be useful: [www.hmrc.gov.uk/ni/intro/number.htm](http://www.hmrc.gov.uk/ni/intro/number.htm).

- **Make sure staff are aware of pension schemes and employee benefits such as season ticket loans, annual leave provision and public holiday dates.** These may not be standard in other countries. Pensions may be particularly complicated for staff members who are not planning to retire in the UK. In this situation, it may be useful to suggest that staff seek specialist advice.
'I was quite confused about the pension system, but I didn’t know who to ask about it. I was sent papers from my institution which stated if I didn’t sign them straight away there was no guarantee I could join the pension scheme later. Workplace pensions are extremely rare where I come from so I would have liked to discuss how they work with someone.'

For more information see pp19–23 of the longer report.

**Accommodation**

Accommodation posed significant problems for some respondents. As well as the stress and expense of finding somewhere to stay when they first arrived in the UK, international staff noted the importance of knowing that they would be living within easy reach of their workplace and in a safe area.

The potential issues associated with finding longer-term accommodation include:

- knowing which area to live in, which is particularly important for those also requiring a school for their child
- having money for a deposit and undergoing a credit check
- understanding how letting agents and landlords operate and other UK-specific areas such as council tax

**Suggestion**

- Provide IAG on the types and cost of accommodation in the area, for example, the average cost of deposits, rent, council tax and letting agent fees. This can help international staff to prepare financially before moving. You may also like to provide IAG regarding areas to live, how to view and rent various types of property, and questions to ask letting agents and landlords.

The University of Bristol has an accommodation officer who handles queries from international staff.

- In addition to IAG, consider offering short-term affordable university accommodation, or help staff to find temporary accommodation.
‘I got short-term accommodation from the university. This had two advantages. First, it meant I didn’t have to worry about finding an accommodation before moving. Secondly, it allowed me to know the area better before finding my own accommodation.’

For more information see pp24–26 of the longer report.

**Staff with families**

Respondents identified that support for partners and in finding childcare and school places would be beneficial.

**Suggestions**

- **Provide IAG on childcare and schools in the area.** This may include:
  - any facilities provided by the institution
  - catchment areas for local schools so that staff can make an informed decision about where they choose to live
  - how to contact local authorities and where to research schools

- **Offer IAG on finding employment in the area for partners.** This may include:
  - links to local employment agencies and careers services
  - suggesting websites and mailing lists to look for jobs
  - alerting staff to employment opportunities within the institution

For more information see pp26–27 of the longer report.

**Healthcare**

**Suggestions**

- **Alert staff to how to register with a GP.** If there is a GP surgery on campus, make sure that staff are aware of it.

- **Signpost healthcare information to international staff,** such as the NHS website.

- **Make sure that staff are aware of internal policies on sickness absence and time off for medical appointments.**

  ‘In [country of origin] you are expected to bring a doctor’s certificate after 2 days. I am still not sure of what is required here… Information about how much time I can take out of my day to go to the doctor or dentist, or whether I need to take leave for these.’

For more information see p28 of the longer report.
Local area

There are aspects of moving that are localised and cannot be found through national bodies and organisations. While it would be impossible for an institution to cover everything that a person would need, there are some basics that are valuable to know.

Suggestions

- **Make sure staff are aware of particular areas where it may be less safe to be in the local area.**

- **Provide some information about where to shop,** for example, where the main supermarkets are.

- **Offer information about local transport services and customs,** for example, whether they can pay on board or will need a ticket in advance. Provide some numbers for local taxi firms and offer estimates of how much average journeys will cost.

- **Signpost staff to sports and leisure facilities** on campus and in the local area.

- **Provide a list of places of worship and religious organisations,** including the institutional chaplaincy.

For more information see pp29–30 of the longer report.
Support once staff are in post

Formal induction on arrival

Staff may prefer different levels of support once they start their job. Some respondents said that they would not want to be singled out for a specific induction for international staff, and felt that it might be patronising, while others felt that this would be useful.

Suggestions

= Offer staff a standard formal induction as early as possible when they start, but make them aware of optional further support that they can choose to take up if they wish. This optional support could cover the issues touched upon in the previous section. It may be possible for additional sessions to be arranged on a one-to-one basis for international staff as optional extras in addition to the usual staff induction (eg a session with the payroll team to discuss tax codes, or a session with human resources specifically on pensions and benefits).

The University of Nottingham runs an annual international induction session in October for staff and postgraduate students. They found this works well.

= Consult current staff when deciding how to operate an induction programme. Some elements may work best in groups, whereas others will be more effective on a one-to-one basis.

= Consider adding academic-specific elements to an induction. These might include:
  – teaching, marking and assessment practices, including second marking
  – research processes in the UK, including the research excellence framework (REF) and applying for research funding
  – information on the UK education system and students’ level of knowledge on admission
  – the admissions process
  – workload and role expectations, including appropriate levels of pastoral care for students
  – institutional committee structures and decision-making procedures
Support once staff are in post

‘Coming from a very different HE culture, I was thrown in at the deep end in the UK. It was assumed most of the time that I already understood how assessment and research work in the UK, which was of course not a correct assumption. I had a very steep learning curve in the first two years.’

‘I had to adjust my publishing strategy to the REF system, where journal articles are ranked and book chapters are not valued as highly.’

**Consider offering staff a phased entry to work**, for example by enabling academic staff to settle into the institution and their research before taking up a full teaching load.

‘They have eased me into teaching by giving me no teaching in the first year, and an increasing load over the following four years, allowing me to develop new coursework but also keep my research effort strong.’

For more information see pp31–34 of the longer report.

**Buddies, mentors and talking to other international staff members**

Our research highlighted a need for buddies, mentors and general contact with other members of international staff.

Mentors were described as useful for support and advice in career progression.

‘During my first year, the careers office organised Springboard women’s development programme… It gave me lots of options and confidence. It ran parallel to an informal mentoring scheme, which was also very helpful. A senior female professor was my mentor, someone from a totally different faculty, and I’ve received more guidance from her than any other staff member in my own department/faculty.’

Buddies were seen as useful for having someone to ask ‘stupid’ questions to, for example about stationery, or the local area.

Being able to talk to other international staff was seen as really useful. It is possible that the buddy system could use international staff, but where there are not enough international staff volunteers to act as buddies, other forms of communication are important.
Suggestion

Consider helping new international staff to meet other international staff at the institution. Many respondents felt that being able to talk to someone else who had had a similar experience would be particularly helpful. It may help them to feel able to ask questions that they would not feel comfortable asking a British staff member. This may be someone who could explain cultural aspects, such as customs and elements of ‘Britishness’.

The internationalstaff.ac.uk website has a Facebook account and Twitter feed which institutions could direct their international staff towards. It may also be useful to direct international staff who have been in the UK for a long time to the feeds if they would be willing to provide replies or advice to any questions that are posted.

The University of Leeds set up an informal discussion group to allow international and UK staff to meet and share experiences. The university provides refreshments for a monthly coffee hour, hosted at the chaplaincy. The meetings have had positive feedback from staff, who have found that they enable deep and open discussions about life experiences.

The University of Manchester held free events to launch an international staff network group. These included a film screening, a walking tour of the city, language taster courses and a cultural awareness session. The group was advertised to all staff, and has a confidential email list for group members.

New and current staff at the University of Bristol can ask to be put in touch with a member of staff of the same nationality who has volunteered their email address.

Consider whether there are any welcoming activities you could provide to help international staff when they first arrive.

The University of Nottingham provides an airport collection service for international staff arriving in the UK for a job at the university. This can help to reduce the anxiety of arriving in a new country, and make the individual feel welcomed by the institution.

For more information see pp34–37 of the longer report.
Line managers

Line managers play a pivotal role in staff support and induction. As with any new member of staff, it is important that they know who their manager is, and receive appropriate support and instruction from them.

Suggestions = Consider how well line managers are able to support their staff, and offer further training where necessary. Line managers have a vital role to play in helping staff to settle into their role and develop in their career. Their support is especially important for international staff who may be unsure of what to expect and who to turn to for help.

‘I didn’t receive any local induction… my line manager just left me to get on with things after I arrived and this has continued… I didn’t even have a meeting with him for nearly two weeks after my arrival.’

For more information see pp38–40 of the longer report.
Overcoming cultural issues and barriers

Interactions with colleagues and managers are key to a healthy work life, and having a good social network and social opportunities are important for wellbeing.

Language and language barriers

Most of the (non-native-English speaking) research participants had a good level of English upon arrival in the UK. However, some commented that conversational English is different to academic English, and an advanced English course would have been beneficial. Using academic English can be arduous, not just for verbal communication but in writing long academic papers and books.

Similarly, some commented that while they were fluent in English, delivering lectures and presentations in an additional language can be demanding.

Native-English speakers commented on the difficulties of cultural references and acronyms that they did not understand. Additionally, local dialects and accents could be initially tricky.

The research highlighted a perception that sometimes British people were not as patient as they could be when talking to those with English as an additional language. Examples included finishing people’s sentences, not being patient in waiting for them to make a point and assuming that someone’s English is not fluent if they have an accent. This also extended to a perception of a general lack of empathy for people who had moved to the UK from overseas.

Suggestions

Consider offering language classes to new staff and their families. If an institution has a language department, or a good relationship with an external language school then it may be possible to provide these free of charge, or at a subsidised rate.

The University of Nottingham offers English language classes for partners of international staff. As well as helping them to communicate, this provides an opportunity for partners to meet people and may help them to feel less isolated.
- **Consider offering proofreading support for international staff.** Though international staff need to take responsibility for their English language skills, institutions might want to think about assistance they could provide, at least in the short term to help with academic writing.

  ‘Despite a great degree of fluency, I still find writing in English a struggle… This makes the writing aspect of my work more arduous than it already is. And in the long term, it might make certain career paths inaccessible (for instance I can’t imagine myself being capable of writing an academic book).’

- **Offer presentation training to staff.** This could help build confidence in presenting and leading lectures in an additional language.

- **Consider providing cultural awareness training.** This could alert all staff to differences in communication styles and clarity of language used. This is not just beneficial for international staff, for example hearing-impaired staff and students using British Sign Language interpreters or palentypists often find the speed and propensity for cultural references and acronyms difficult.

- **Consider methods for promoting the importance of international staff in UK higher education.** It is difficult to do this without it seeming tokenistic or patronising, but ensuring international staff are valued and respected as a vital part of the organisation is important.

- **Consider the role of student feedback in formal appraisals.** Some respondents felt that negative judgments of their ability and work were formed unfairly on the basis of their foreign accent, even when they had a high level of fluency and delivered high-quality lectures. If this bias affects student evaluations then international teaching staff may be at a disadvantage in performance appraisals.

  For more information see pp41–47 of the longer report.
**Styles of communication**

In addition to language barriers, communication styles and ways of speaking were highlighted as a potential difficulty to the engagement of international staff. This was the case for both native-English speakers and those with English as an additional language. For example, some respondents cited a ‘British’ style of communication that was indirect and coded. They felt that some British people have a tendency to avoid direct ways of saying things. This was particularly cited as a problem in meetings where decisions were being made, and in communicating feedback.

‘I literally sat in meetings where apparently ‘decisions’ were taken right in front of me but I did not realise it at all since they were stated in a very indirect way.’

‘I speak my mind and do not necessarily think that disagreement or confrontation is something that has to be negative. Too many times problems arise or are not resolved because people tip-toe around pointing the obvious, especially to people in a higher position, or just don’t want to talk to each other. I favour a more direct approach of pin-pointing the problem and getting to the person that can fix it.’

**Suggestions**

- **Equip meeting chairs to consider different communication styles.** Some respondents felt that they were talked over. All attendees should be given the chance to speak and express their opinions. It is good practice to summarise decisions and who is responsible for actions at the end of a meeting. This practice would benefit all staff, not just those for whom English is an additional language.

- **Understand that different people will have different ways of communicating.** Encourage different styles of communication even if they are styles that are unfamiliar.

For more information see pp48–51 of the longer report.
Networking, collaboration and socialising

Establishing a social network includes socialising inside an HEI, as well as interactions outside the HEI. Ensuring that staff interact can assist in creating a friendly, inclusive environment and encourage collaboration.

Suggestions

- **Encourage social interactions within the institution.** One respondent commented on how their department meets on a regular basis as a wider team to have a cup of tea with each other. This gives colleagues a chance to build relationships, which can improve team working.

- **Consider how to involve international staff in other social activities.** Respondents noted that they found it difficult to establish social networks initially. Institutions may consider holding regular social events and networking opportunities. These should be widely promoted so that international staff feel welcome to attend. Where relevant, consider whether partners could be invited too.

‘It is a very difficult place to socialise or network if you are not from this institution. I think a lot more could be done to help newcomers feel welcome that would pay enormous dividends for this institution.’

The University of Bristol ensures that an international adviser sits on their staff club committee to ensure international aspects are considered in all decisions by the committee.

- **Consider how colleagues collaborate and work together.** There was a strong perception from many respondents that UK staff preferred working with other UK colleagues over international staff. Improving networking and socialising may help to overcome this.

For more information see pp58–61 of the longer report.
Overcoming cultural issues and barriers

Tackling racism and promoting good relations

The research highlighted examples ranging from subtle exclusionary acts and behaviours to overt racism in the workplace. Conscious and unconscious discrimination and national stereotypes permeate the way staff are perceived by their colleagues and students. Institutions should seek to develop an institutional strategy to create an inclusive culture, which could be connected to existing equality and diversity objectives and policies.

For UK higher education to operate on a global platform, people of all nationalities need to be valued and respected. The reputation of the sector is reliant not only on good quality research and teaching outputs, but on how it is perceived by staff. This is particularly significant when those staff have large international social networks.

Suggestions

- Consider that international staff may not report incidents of racism or xenophobia. As with all staff disclosure of discrimination, they may worry about victimisation, they may not know how to report the incident, they may feel that there is no point in reporting it, and they may not have confidence in the reporting process.

- Analyse staff survey results by ethnicity and international status to identify any trends and differences in experience.

- When analysing promotions, grievance and disciplinary data, analyse it by ethnicity and international status.

‘International staff have a glass ceiling above us in terms of promotion and taking a leadership/management role… You can be an excellent professional but rarely someone who is managing or leading a team of UK colleagues, especially in a region and university when a large proportion of staff (especially non-academic staff) are local.’
Overcoming cultural issues and barriers

- Ensure workload models and opportunities for career development are distributed fairly.
- Consider unconscious bias training and how accent, nationality and ethnicity may affect behaviours and decision making.
- Ensure international staff feel valued and are not made to feel temporary.

‘I have felt on a number of occasions – it has even been said to me – that responsibilities and other opportunities for progressing my career were not available to me because there was the idea that I would not ‘settle’ here making investment in me useless. This manifests itself in the management level, but also in casual interactions with colleagues (e.g. research grant writing collaboration, curriculum design).’

For more information see pp51–58 and pp62–69 of the longer report.
Conclusions and recommendations

International staff have much to contribute to UK higher education and the sector should be responsive to ensuring they are able to thrive. There are areas that are outside an HEI’s control, but providing good IAG and signposts to appropriate support can improve international staff experiences.

‘I think international staff should be more celebrated. They contribute to the diversity of the student experience and the university as a whole. Just because some international staff speak with a strange accent or dress differently, it doesn’t make them worse at their jobs. They have a lot to contribute and I wish this could be recognised by students.’

Key recommendations

Key areas that institutions may wish to explore are to:

- include support for international staff in corporate strategies and equality and diversity objectives
- monitor internal processes (eg, promotions, grievances and disciplinaries) by international status
- have a named contact to answer international staff queries
- provide accessible IAG to international staff, which should include links to existing resources, government and other relevant websites and information on the institution and local area
- create safe spaces and methods for international staff to communicate with each other
- provide cultural awareness training for managers and team leaders and potentially all staff
- provide language classes for international staff and their families
- facilitate social occasions for international and UK staff to get to know each other
- appreciate the different perspective that international staff can offer and make use of their expertise to improve existing teaching and research methods

‘I have a wonderful team of colleagues of different nationalities, including British, who are highly supportive, intelligent, creative, and it is a joy to work with them.’
Equality Challenge Unit

ECU works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education across all four nations of the UK, and in colleges in Scotland.

ECU works closely with colleges and universities to seek to ensure that staff and students are not unfairly excluded, marginalised or disadvantaged because of age, disability, gender identity, marital or civil partnership status, pregnancy or maternity status, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation or through any combination of these characteristics or other unfair treatment.

Providing a central source of expertise, research, advice and leadership, we support institutions in building a culture that provides equality of both opportunity and outcome, promotes good relations, values the benefits of diversity and provides a model of equality for the wider UK society.

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