



Cultural connections

How to make the most of the
international student experience

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Our culture helps us to make sense of the world around us and gives us security

Tinted glasses – introducing cultural awareness

Culture, prejudice and stereotypes

Working with international students raises issues of culture, social customs, religious traditions and the prejudices we all have. 'Culture' is the significant word here. What do we mean by it?

Our culture is the way we handle the basic issues of living, such as food, shelter, clothing, family organisation, government, law and order, relationships with people, celebrations and religion. Culture is so much a part of everyday life that it is contained in unspoken rules – which is tough on an outsider trying to understand.

Our culture helps us to make sense of the world around us and gives us security. It tells us who we are. Within our own culture we find those with whom we feel most comfortable. In their company we 'get things right,' we know 'how things should be done', a position that is important to most people. When we are challenged, or made to feel unsure by another's culture, we tend to look for reassurance in our own cultural assumptions and values.

But this reaction can be unhelpful . . .

- Feeling secure ourselves, we may shut others out, judging them by our own cultural standards as bad-mannered, failures, outsiders – or just plain bad. This shades easily into prejudice and thinking in stereotypes.
- Stereotypes are fixed or standardised ideas about people or things, leading to unjustified assumptions about a person's culture. For example:

all Britons are cold and reserved

all Germans are efficient

all Japanese are hard-working.

- Stereotypes and prejudice can influence the way we treat students, especially those from another culture. It is surprising how easily one can say something, that could be deemed discriminatory, without meaning to:

We all have prejudice within us, even those of us who believe ourselves to be professionals, said an experienced administrator.

So – how do we cope with our own cultural assumptions and the cultures of others?

Think of your culture as a pair of tinted glasses that colour everything you see. You have worn them for so long that it is hard to imagine the world looking any other colour. Others are wearing differently tinted glasses, so things look different to them – yet we are all looking at the same world.

Realising this is the beginning of cultural awareness. From there you can go on to learn about and appreciate the tints of others' glasses.

But you do not acquire cultural awareness just by learning details about the cultures of others. In fact, a *little* knowledge, a few 'tricks of the trade', can be dangerous. It may encourage you to jump to conclusions and to deal in stereotypes. So, although this booklet will offer a few useful cultural details, it does not pretend to be a 'cultural handbook.' It is designed to give a quick look at the world of cultural awareness, to help us to accept and respect the cultures of the international students whom we should be helping to feel at home here.

Will this booklet apply to me?

Properly to understand and appreciate culture in others, we must first understand our own and 'where we are coming from'. So we hope that this booklet will both help you to become more aware of the tinted glasses you wear, as well as to appreciate the glasses of others.

Not all the sections of this booklet will be of equal interest to you – it depends on your own experience, your cultural background and the contacts that you have with international students. So – *dip and skim. Check the contents page before you read on.*

Through student eyes:

*Our differences are what makes the world endlessly interesting.
Just talking about culture – British people don't do that.*

Through staff eyes:

Culture is central, not marginal, to most situations.

Cultural awareness is an attitude of mind that can be cultivated

Where you come in – and why

What this booklet is about – and who it is for

We are people; we need to feel more at home in this strange place.

This is an African student challenging us on behalf of the half million or more international students to whom the UK plays host every year.

From teenagers learning English in summer schools to civil servants, army officers and professors studying for postgraduate degrees, international students have been a vital feature of education in the UK for many years, enriching the institutions in which they study and the communities within which they live.

- Their tuition fees and the money they spend on daily living contribute approximately £5 billion a year to the UK economy, benefiting both the institutions attended and the UK as a whole.
- They enrich and expand the research work carried out in universities.
- Without their funding, courses would close – and the survival of some institutions could be threatened.
- Commercial and political contacts with other countries can be more easily developed if the decision-makers in that country have had positive experiences of the UK through their education there.
- Training students from developing countries is an essential aspect of international development work.
- International students have always considered study in the UK to be a high-cost but high-reward investment. They expect a good-quality experience. If they feel they are not getting this, they will go elsewhere – to our competitors.

Phases one and two of the Prime Minister's Initiative have eased immigration and work restrictions for international students and provided support for the recruitment work of institutions. More attention is being paid to enhancing the quality of the international students' experience in the UK. 'We want UK education to become genuinely international,' said the Prime Minister in 2006. As a result, numbers of international students are increasing: every year more are encouraged

to come to study here – ‘in this strange place’. But there is more to this encouragement than marketing. To get the best out of their courses, students – all students – need to be made to feel at home.

Feeling at home is vital if a student is to work effectively and succeed. It is part of the customer care that all institutions have to provide if they are to attract paying students, who rightly expect value for money. When students come from other countries and cultures, it is even more important to enable them to feel at home: institutions committed to equal opportunities and valuing diversity have a duty to help the international student to feel just as much at home as the British student. *This is where you come in.*

This booklet is aimed at *you*, the people who meet international students in the course of your daily work. You may be an academic or an administrator, a counsellor or a hall warden. You may be responsible for staff who have daily contact with international students. You may deal with them across a counter in a finance office or a registry, over a hotplate when serving meals, when showing them a room or when cleaning one.

You may be meeting people from other cultures for the first time, or you may already be experienced in working with international students – a seasoned campaigner who knows how to cope. Your international contacts and multicultural experience may already be strong and personal: perhaps you were born, or have worked, outside the UK or grown up with an ethnic or cultural background different from ‘mainstream UK culture’ (whatever that may mean).

Whatever your experience and cultural background, we hope that you will find sections of *Cultural connections* interesting and helpful. For 15 years now, the three editions of this booklet (previously entitled *Feeling at home*) have continued to be in great demand. As international student numbers rise in response to the Prime Minister’s Initiative and grow ever more diverse, now is the right time to produce a revised fourth edition. We hope that it will help you in your vital work of helping international students to feel at home; work that is not always easy.

It is not easy because their understanding and use of English may be limited and their expectations may be different from those you are anticipating. Misunderstandings between international students and tutors, reception staff, administrators, caretakers, wardens, landlords and others can cause irritation on both sides and make life and study in the UK less satisfying.

Misunderstandings and bitterness nearly always arise from differences in background and culture and will often be overcome by your awareness of the students’ expectations and their point of view. This awareness can be developed. Hence this booklet, which has been written as objectively as possible, but – obviously – from a UK standpoint.

In it we explore some of the issues encountered in meeting the needs of students from other cultures and suggest how understanding and meeting these needs can be an enjoyable and rewarding experience. We try to show what ‘culture’ is and give examples of ways in which cultural differences can interfere with day-to-day communication. The quotations from students and staff are designed to show that the points made are drawn from practical experience

rather than from academic theory. This booklet is about cultural awareness, an attitude of mind that can be cultivated.

Recent world events have proved how savagely wide the gap between cultures can become. If the world is to find healing and reconciliation, solutions to underdevelopment, powerlessness and what is seen as economic tyranny have to be found. Cultural awareness and understanding of others' points of view is the vital first step – where better to start than with students, the leaders and negotiators of the next generation?

Through student eyes:

I arrived in winter and on a Sunday when everything was closed and it was really cold. I arrived at the accommodation and I didn't know where to get food or what to do.

It is a two-way thing – the more you give, the more you get.

It is an experience of a lifetime; you come out of here a different man or a different woman.

Through staff eyes:

In any service area, working with people saying 'help me'; 'I want'; 'I have a problem'; 'you must help me'; 'show me'; 'tell me' is very tiring when conducted in English. In 'almost English' it is very tiring indeed.

International students sometimes infuriate me – but the infuriation is my problem, not theirs.

My job is like reading The Very Hungry Caterpillar. I get to see students grow from a little caterpillar, hungry for more UK experiences and cultural knowledge, flourishing into beautiful butterflies upon graduation. I get to know them from a name on an application form to a student to a friend. It's not only students who learn about other cultures and languages and make friends from all over the globe, it's nice for us staff to appreciate that too.

You do not have to visit another country to experience culture shock

Culture shock – yours and theirs

The effects of new surroundings

It is homesickness and more. First encounters with another culture can be a shock. You do not even have to visit another country to experience culture shock. As anyone knows who has kept a diary through important changes in life, such as a new job or going to college, we usually go through changes of mood and attitude before coming to terms with new situations. So home students experience culture shock, but they can usually go home to recover and adjust and the shock is not so dramatic.

For international students, the shock is often more extreme, and can come from the most everyday experiences: 'the traffic was on the wrong side of the road' was the first shock one international student reported on arrival. Of course, plenty of other sources more significant than traffic contribute to culture shock: new surroundings, change of climate and weather, language, unfamiliar food, different study methods, new routines, misunderstandings over what is expected, the lack of friends with whom to share apprehension and new experiences. Exposure to racism can further undermine the international student's processes of self-adjustment.

Racism is almost universal; prejudice against other races, on the grounds of colour, beliefs or culture is found in most countries. International students may be shocked when they experience it in the UK, either because they have not been warned to expect it here, or because they have not been on the receiving end of it at home. Fortunately, institutions are active in opposing any kind of racism (see Further material on page 59) and will support students who experience it.

If you are aware of the effects and stages of culture shock, then you are better placed to make allowances and help the student to cope. Consider your own past experience: you may be able to remember your own changes of mood and attitude when faced by a new situation and appreciate the stages through which a student is likely to be going.

Not everyone experiences culture shock in the same way: cultural differences may 'hit home' through different aspects of life for different students. Individual students may take a longer or shorter time to come to terms with their new environment. Typically, coming to terms goes through stages of 'ups' and 'downs'.

At first there may be a 'honeymoon' period when everything is new and exciting. But over-enthusiasm and excitement may wear thin as homesickness and confusion make themselves felt. There comes a change of mood – downwards. With luck, this stage does not last. As new arrivals start to adjust to their host culture, their confidence grows.

But fresh confidence can easily take a knock; another low patch usually occurs if things go wrong and familiar things seem far away:

I had expected that there would be differences between my home and UK studies, but it was much more different than I had expected and my difficulties made me homesick.

Culture shock can trigger different emotions. It may arouse hostility or self-blame and depression, leading to missed lectures, rebellion and possibly blanket rejection of what the UK has to offer.

It can show itself in exaggerated complaints about the course or accommodation or worries about illness. It can lead to sleeplessness, loss of concentration, loss of appetite and to alcohol or drug abuse:

That winter I got depressed. I couldn't perform in my studies as I wanted to. I thought my supervisor expected me to perform better. I thought 'in Mexico I used to have friends, here my phone never rings'. I slept all day and woke up when it was dark.

Students who find it difficult to adjust may strike you as arrogant, demanding, depressed or unreliable. Unfairly, their words or actions may be misconstrued and they are wrongly labelled as difficult or unable to cope.

It is not unusual for students from cultures fairly similar to the UK – from the USA, Canada, Australia, even from the closer European countries, such as France and Germany – to experience culture shock. This can be all the more upsetting to them because it is unexpected.

Fortunately, most international students work their way through culture shock and achieve a more positive attitude to their problems and their surroundings. With growing self-confidence they come to value what is best in their own and the host culture:

Seven years in Britain has raised my cultural awareness. I'm proud of who I am and my heritage. I'm more interested in other people's cultures and ways of life.

For those who do not recover from culture shock, it is important that they get the right help. International students in difficulty usually turn to academic tutors, fellow nationals or student friends. Help from someone you trust is very valuable, but it has its limitations, so you should have to hand up-to-date information about counsellors and other specialised help and be ready to pass it on.

'International students rated homesickness as the second worst aspect (after lack of funds) at 23 per cent. By comparison, only seven per cent of UK students missed home.' (*UNITE International Student Experience Report*, press release, July 2006)

Through student eyes:

More understanding of homesickness on both sides would reduce it.

For the first couple of months I felt homesick because I knew I had to stay for a year and I didn't know anyone here.

My greatest fear was that I might die alone in my room and no one would know or care.

It's important to bring photos of family, friends and oneself; some favourite music; your phone and address book, to ensure that you don't suffer too much from homesickness or the distance from your own culture.

Through staff eyes:

I didn't realise how moving to another country could knock you off-balance till I did it myself.

Developing cultural awareness helps us to identify and respect each other's differences

When in the United Kingdom . . .

Should international students conform to our customs?

Some might say that students who have come to the UK have a duty to learn about it and to conform to this way of life, and not vice versa. Many international students agree:

It is my responsibility to understand and change to your culture for the period I am entitled to be here.

My country sent me to gain experience. If the UK were similar to Malaysia, there would not be much point in being here.

We should not be trying to make ourselves more at home – rather, we should be enjoying the UK, both its good and bad aspects.

But not everyone feels like this:

I live in halls of residence. It's OK. We get together and talk about home. We do get newspapers from home, but if I was here on my own it would be a lot harder.

Adapting to a new culture is not natural; it's asking someone to challenge most of their life experiences. What we should be aiming for is understanding.

And remember the African student with whom we started in chapter 1:

We need to feel at home in this strange place.

So, put yourself in the international student's place. When we travel to another country, we expect to find differences (e.g. language and customs) and only the most dyed-in-the-wool Briton makes no allowances for this, expecting to be understood so long as he or she speaks loudly and clearly enough. But, even expecting these differences in a new place, we may find that we are infringing social norms that we did not know even existed.

Even for those on their home ground, behaviour is often by instinct, not by clear rules: if asked to make a comprehensive list of 'how things are done in the UK', could you do it? It is unlikely; so surely it is unreasonable to expect international students to get everything 'right', even after several tries.

An example: in the UK, people tend to arrive on time for appointments. But what about a dinner party? Is it polite to arrive five minutes early or half an hour late? And what about meeting a friend for lunch? How exact is the appointment time? Probably only you and the friend really know. Answers to such questions are very subtle – and vary within cultures.

So if we accept that certain practices are difficult to get right, we can make allowances and explain to students when the issues come up. It is important not to make a big deal out of minor misunderstandings. Make light of them if possible, but get the point across. Be prepared to adjust your attitudes as well as expecting the student to adjust

You expect that people will tell you and if nobody tells you, you don't know what to do.

In the end, we may expect students to conform in most respects, but they have a right to our respect for their culture and their values. There will be times when the student's religious upbringing or traditions will be in conflict with UK culture and conforming will demand too high a price: there will be sticking points, such as alcohol for those to whom it is forbidden, certain foods and social customs. Developing cultural awareness helps us to identify, understand and respect these sticking points.

There are similar issues in UK culture and institutions too. Certain rules that we consider basic may not be obvious to someone from another culture or climate, but conforming will make things easier on both sides.

Much, if not everything, can be agreed or accommodated, provided the effort is made to ensure that basic essential rules are understood and clearly explained to begin with. A language school principal gives a good example of his basic rules:

When new students arrive, I tell them two things. First, that my door is always open, and second, that they must conform to school time.

Two examples from the field of accommodation:

Here we expect everyone to make their own beds.

We make no charge for heating, but expect you not to waste it, so close your windows when the heating is on.

Every culture is polite. Only the way we communicate politeness differs

No better, no worse . . .

Just different – customs and good manners

Every culture is polite. Our ways of being polite differ. Polite and acceptable behaviour in one culture may not be polite in another, and it is important to be aware of the differences you may come across. The following are examples of polite behaviour practised in different cultures. There are no 'right' answers – which are yours?

Do you:

- Shake hands with friends when you first meet each day,
- or** shake hands only when meeting after a short interval?
- As a man, shake hands with a woman when you first meet,
- or** do you greet her, but take care not to touch her?
- Come straight to the point when discussing business (a research question, or an accommodation problem, for example)
- or** begin the conversation with polite enquiries about the other person's health and well-being?
- Make requests outright,
- or** use an indirect, hesitant or deferential approach,
- or** get someone else to raise issues on your behalf?
- Treat a price quoted or a room offered as a firm proposal,
- or** treat it as the opening bid in a bargaining session, in order to get a better deal?
- Think it dirtier to spit and blow your nose on the street,
- or** carry it round with you in a little piece of cloth or paper, which you keep in your pocket and reuse?
- Blow your nose in front of others,
- or** leave the room for this purpose?
- Expect a choice when offered a drink,
- or** find that a choice embarrasses you?
- Feel upset if you are offered alcohol to drink,
- or** consider soft drinks to be insufficient hospitality?

- Take a bottle to a party
- or offer food or a present?
- Expect to pay if you have suggested going for a coffee
- or expect each to pay for his or her own?
- Enjoy being asked for your personal opinion,
- or think that opinions should be left to the professor?
- Admire fluent speakers,
- or distrust them?
- Feel it more important to keep an appointment,
- or more important to entertain an unexpected caller?
- Think it knowledgeable to handle goods offered for sale,
- or inconsiderate to touch?
- Eat or drink alone in the presence of others,
- or offer to share?
- Make light of feeling unwell,
- or make sure the doctor knows how unwell you feel?
- Thank someone who has done you a service
- or think it unnecessary, as they are just doing their job?

Through student eyes:

One of my housemates is English. When I first arrived, he tried to be friendly by hugging and kissing me. Of course, according to my custom, we will never do this with strangers.

If I do not want to drink alcohol that is my choice. I am happy to sit with you in a bar and I am happy to explain my beliefs to anyone who wants to listen, but please do not try to make me change my ways.

I was confused by people eating fish and chips out of newspaper. I had always thought that British people used china dishes and napkins and had afternoon tea.

Stopping to think about the issues

Becoming aware . . .

Face to face with international students

Being culturally aware ensures that you can use your common sense and imagination and will stop to think about the issues and pressures that may be affecting the international student with whom you are dealing. After all, most of these issues and pressures will affect home students too, especially those from small villages – and will probably have affected you at some point in your life. It is just tougher for the international student. Here are some examples from common situations:

On arrival, the student may:

- be suffering from jet-lag
- be worried about family or dependants left at home
- have experienced delays or problems at Immigration and Customs
- not have received the pre-arrival literature sent by the institution
- be having financial problems
- have incorrect information about what will be provided.

When I arrived I didn't know you could drink water from the tap and I spent ages looking for bottled water.

A difficult, unhappy student may:

- be homesick
- be at a low point because of culture shock
- be feeling the strain of the Ramadan fast (see page 48) or some other religious observance
- be in need of medical support.

In accommodation, international students may:

- be upset by pets; some cultures consider dogs to be unclean and touching them is therefore dirty – it disgusts many students to find animals in a kitchen
- consider carpets dirty and dusty when compared with stone, marble or wooden floors that they have at home
- be offended by a routine visit to their room; for example, a Muslim student with a prayer mat on the floor in his or her room could be upset by a cleaner or college official entering without removing shoes.

Attitudes to status vary from culture to culture. International students may:

- be shocked by a professor enjoying DIY or gardening as a hobby: manual work should be beneath people of standing
- expect families on modest incomes to employ at least one servant
- regard a porter, cleaner, landlord or landlady as a servant, to be given orders
- be shocked by being asked to help with the washing up
- be hurt because their status at home (as a lecturer, for example) is ignored and they are treated like all other students in their group or class
- find it hard to accept the authority of a female adviser or tutor, since they come from a culture where women have different status from men, especially outside the home.

Problems may also arise if the person in authority is younger than the student, since age plays a vital (but varied) part in issues of authority and status in most cultures. Authority figures who are young and female may not be easily accepted by some international students.

Note: the issue of female authority is dealt with on page 28.

Facing differences in climate and infrastructure, students coming to the UK may:

- be more used to finding their way round using landmarks rather than maps
- be from a hot country and have no conception of the need for heating, how to budget for it or how to operate heating systems and conserve warmth
- be unfamiliar with the architecture and layout of UK accommodation; they may, for example, be uneasy living in a tower block, if this is not familiar, and may also be uneasy at relative communality (e.g. shared kitchens or showers) or – the opposite extreme – individuality (en suite rooms; only meeting at meal times)
- not be familiar with using cashpoint machines or paying for goods by cheque, debit or credit card
- shy away from underground trains or double-decker buses:
We are frightened by these strange green buses at two levels, so we walk.
(French students in Liverpool)

As well as cultural differences, international students have personal differences and preferences. Some will:

- want to share accommodation with fellow-nationals or co-religionists
- want to share with UK students (to improve their English and learn more about the UK) or
- prefer to share with other international students ('all strangers together'; similar motivation).

Attitudes vary widely and cannot always be predicted.

As someone working with international students, you may:

- tend to think of Africa as one country, not as a vast continent of many different countries, cultures and climates
- imagine that Islamic culture is the same in all Muslim countries: there are cultural differences, for example, between Muslims from Pakistan, from the United Arab Emirates and from Northern Nigeria
- not realise that Europeans often look the same to Chinese, Japanese and Africans
- forget that the political views of a student from a former British colony may be coloured by a very different view of history from yours
- believe that your culture is superior to another person's; they could feel the same about theirs
- say 'my door is always open' without really meaning it
- just possibly be more prejudiced than you realise.

Through student eyes:

At home, the maid makes my bed. We have five servants, plus the boys who look after the horses.

Through staff eyes:

I had never thought that our Western ways might be seen as bad influences.

I didn't think I was prejudiced until encounters with some nationalities made me question that assumption. However, to go home at the end of day knowing that I did my best for that student and made them feel better, makes silly questions irrelevant.

A little learning is a dangerous thing

Different cultures

Helpful facts

So far, to avoid suggesting stereotypes, we have given few actual facts about cultural differences. But some facts are basic and can be helpful. So brief notes follow on communication, social relationships, study methods, finance, hygiene, cooking, food and diets, and on religions and festivals.

These notes must be approached with caution. 'A little learning is a dangerous thing' and this quotation (by Alexander Pope) is never more true than when we are dealing with detailed information about cultures that are not our own.

- Culture changes and evolves. Within the UK itself, we can see how culture and customs changed, for example, between the 'swinging sixties' and the Thatcher era – and how they are changing now: communication was very different before texting and e-mails, and the internet has revolutionised the exchange of information.
- Culture varies between individuals. Within the UK, for example, many families speak two or more languages at home – English and Welsh, Gaelic, Urdu, Punjabi or Arabic. Each language has a cultural content and will affect the culture of the family concerned. Regional cultures vary, as do the cultures of town and country, agriculture and industry, commerce and the academic world.
- More of us are international now, but it does not make us intercultural. We travel much more than we used to, both for work and leisure. We may think of ourselves as having experience of other cultures, but this experience is generally superficial.
- Society is multicultural. In a multicultural society – and today most countries reflect a wide range of cultures – there are other influences at work that affect our cultural attitudes. For example, I may believe strongly that I belong to a particular culture and community, but it does not follow that I will be totally loyal to it in every detail. My own experiences and the contacts that I have with friends and fellow students from other cultures will modify and probably dilute the way that I feel about the culture of my parents and family.

So 'basic facts' and information can be risky. They can encourage readers to jump to conclusions and make assumptions based on their own prejudices and the stereotypes that they accept. But the object of this booklet is to encourage cultural awareness, and to develop understanding, so as to build bridges, and that involves our acceptance of the validity of cultures other than our own. To accept them, we must know something about them. To know something about them means that some information is essential and must be given, in spite of the dangers involved in offering it. But use it for guidance only. It will not apply in every case.

Through student eyes:

Adjusting to the weather, the culture and the new life is part of the whole 'deal' of seeing the world.

Through staff eyes:

*We judge ourselves by our ideal; we judge others by their practices.
It can be a learning curve for us all.*

Knowing the right English words
is not enough

Basics on communication

Alphabets, names, language and body language

Alphabets

Students used to reading and writing their own scripts (e.g. Arabic, Chinese, Greek, Hebrew, Russian Cyrillic) may find Roman print difficult and British handwriting impossible. It helps if notes and notices are printed.

Roman and some other scripts are read from left to right, but Arabic and Hebrew are read from right to left, and traditional Chinese (which includes Japanese) is read in columns, from top to bottom. Arabic and Hebrew print consists mainly of consonants, with vowel sounds sometimes marked in, or left to the reader's intuition. These differences can make it difficult to write names in another script, and spelling in English may vary.

Names

Not all names fit tidily into UK filing systems. If the student is not familiar with Roman script, spelling names may be a problem. Family names (UK surnames) may come first, last or as middle names. Nor may it be easy to identify first or personal names. To complicate matters, students sometimes try to co-operate with the system by altering the order of their names after arrival – as a result they may get lost in the records or acquire more than one file.

Many international students give themselves a European name to relieve UK difficulties in pronouncing their given name. Some like this European name to be used. Others would really prefer you to use their given name. It is worth checking. Establish and explain your own code for names – most academics now prefer to be on first name terms with research students, while remaining more formal at undergraduate and teaching levels. Other staff will have their own preferences.

It is best to ask students to give a family name for filing purposes and then to check the names by which they like to be known. If the name is difficult for you to say, make a note of the exact pronunciation, to help you get it right next time. It can be humiliating and infuriating to have your name casually dismissed with: 'I can't pronounce that, I'll call you Mr Jan.'

Language

As hosts, we must take care not to fall into the trap of thinking international students are stupid because they do not speak English well.

Knowing the right English words is not enough. We use different tones of voice to get our meaning across: the subtle difference between a heartfelt and a sarcastic comment may be difficult for a non-native speaker to detect. Every language contains hidden assumptions that take longer to learn than vocabulary or grammar.

Students whose first language is not English can get very tired when having to concentrate hard for long periods in lectures.

Sometimes, especially when brainstorming or group working, I can't catch up with others whose English is native.

Chinese and Japanese students can find it difficult to decide when to use 'yes' and when to use 'no' in reply to questions such as: 'This is difficult, isn't it?' Also, they may want to agree with the questioner's point of view and so reply 'yes' politely, while really wanting to reply 'no'.

Americans – and others who have been taught American English – may be confused by some UK English usage. For example:

- Pants (underpants or knickers in the UK and trousers in the USA)
- Pavement (path for pedestrians in the UK and roadway in the USA)
- Fancy dress (costume in the UK and formal attire in the USA)
- Rubber (eraser in the UK and condom in the USA)
- Braces (suspenders in the UK and dental devices in the USA)
- Vest (undershirt in the UK and waistcoat in the USA)
- Jelly (a dessert in the UK and jam in the USA)
- Nervy (nervous in the UK and bold in the USA)
- Trunk (large box in the UK and boot of car in the USA).

In some languages 'an ordinary conversation can sound like an international incident'.

It helps to speak slowly and possibly repeat what you have said using different words.

Regional accents may be difficult to understand – and the speaker may not realise this:

I was pretty amazed to hear the Yorkshire accent of English, which was very different for me. I am sure they had problems with my English, especially at the beginning, so I think that made it more difficult.

Through student eyes:

English people are always laughing and joking but you can't always understand them. Their sarcasm and dry humour sometimes throws you and you need to have British jokes explained to you.

Through staff eyes:

A foreigner who speaks my language, however badly, deserves my respect. He speaks at least one other language. Many students are studying in their third or fourth language, let alone their second.

Body language

Many people nod to mean 'no' and shake their heads to mean 'yes'. These gestures are reversed in the UK and many other countries.

Holding eye contact is considered rude in a number of cultures, so some international students will keep looking away, or avoid looking at you at all while talking. This is not insincerity, but shows respect.

Giggling or laughter is often caused by surprise or embarrassment. It is by no means always a positive, happy response.

In some cultures, you stand close to someone when talking to them and touch them for emphasis. In the UK it is expected that you keep a space between you. Attitudes to touching and body space vary widely and are often subconscious.

Through student eyes:

There is a gap that you have to maintain when you are talking to a British person, which says that if you get closer than a foot or two then the person starts to get really uncomfortable.

Through staff eyes:

Some Asian people don't really say 'please' or 'thank you', but their smile means 'please' or 'thank you'. People don't really understand.

That student would not look me in the eye, so I knew he was lying.

Requests in English can sound exaggerated and full of unnecessary politeness

Basics on being polite

Gestures

It can be rude to show the soles of the feet, because the sole of the foot is in contact with dirt. For someone to put feet up on a chair may be considered shocking.

Pointing (especially with the left hand) is a rude gesture in some countries. So, for example, counting heads in this way before setting off on a coach trip may not be a good idea.

The 'thumbs up' sign is considered obscene by some Bangladeshis.

When passing each other, Japanese feel it important to do it right shoulder to right shoulder – one reason for their adherence to driving on the left.

Traditionally, many nationalities and cultural groups have used the left hand for cleansing after using the lavatory. The right hand is used for all other purposes, for example, greeting, eating, and offering food.

Shaking hands is accepted as a polite gesture in most but not all cultures.

Saying 'please', 'thank you' and 'sorry'

Thanks are expressed for different things in different cultures. Some people do not express thanks for a small service (picking something up, for example).

The use of 'please' and 'thank you' varies between languages and cultures. For example, a polite order for a coffee in Italian is 'Mi fa un caffè'; this sounds abrupt if translated word for word as 'Make me a coffee'. On the other hand, requests in English can sound exaggerated to speakers of other languages and full of unnecessary politeness.

As well as 'please', international students may find the British habit of saying 'sorry' all the time confusing: it is said to mean 'excuse me, I didn't hear' or 'I don't understand'. We say it if someone else bumps into us and we use it sarcastically to mean 'I am not really sorry at all'.

Hospitality

A British invitation to go for a cup of coffee is as much about getting to know someone better as it is about needing something to drink. International students may miss this nuance and refuse if they don't like tea or coffee.

When visiting someone's house in the UK, it is polite, once the door has been opened, to wait until you are invited in. However, in some cultures (certain parts of Nigeria, for example), you are expected to walk straight in as soon as the door is opened. Not to do so implies that the house is too poor for you to cross the threshold.

In many cultures even a casual caller will be offered something to eat, and it may cause offence to refuse it. This sometimes means that international students develop better relations with their landlords than home students. The international tenant treats the landlord's visit as an occasion for coffee and a chat; the home student probably regards it as an intrusion:

Yes, I have unexpected visits from my landlord, but it is no problem. It is his house. We drink coffee together.

In my country we feel very obliged when someone comes to the house and should offer the best hospitality.

In some cultures it is accepted practice to use the right hand to eat with instead of a fork or spoon (scooping up rice, for example).

Some students are more at ease eating seated on the floor. It would not be polite to expect to be given a chair when eating with them.

In the UK, guests generally show appreciation of a meal by eating everything on their plates. Leaving food can embarrass the host, who may think it is not liked. Elsewhere it may be polite to leave some food to show that you have had enough to eat.

In some cultures (the UK, for example) it is good manners to eat quietly. But in some other cultures, open and even noisy enjoyment of food is expected as a compliment to the host.

An Australian girl found that she gave unwitting offence when first entertained in the UK: Disgust when I drank my beer straight from the can at a party – it's cooler that way; we rarely use glasses in rural Australia. Disapproval when I asked for a beer at a cocktail party.

And an Albanian: The shock and slight disgust of the English hostess when I was invited for Sunday dinner and did not want any gravy on my food, but asked for some lemon and olive oil on the vegetables.

Respecting each other

Relations with staff can be a matter of uncertainty for international students. Some feel uncomfortable if expected to use first names and be informal; some may pick the 'wrong' name for use with a title: 'Mr Bob', 'Mrs Pauline' – see the section on Names on page 21.

The Japanese language has carefully graded forms of address for use between people of different status or ages. There are no equivalents in English and this can cause embarrassment; Japanese students may be unsure whether they are being too polite or too informal.

Japanese students are also likely to be hesitant or ambiguous in their approaches to avoid the embarrassment of a direct refusal. You should be ready to help with an explanation.

To cause someone to lose face or to be humiliated may not be intended, but it can happen just the same. It hurts more in some cultures than in others. A direct telling-off can be much more painful than is realised. It may be better if you make the point indirectly:

People who break this rule cause extra work and annoyance to the staff.

Bad news

This point may seem obvious, but very bad news (for example, a death back home) is best broken carefully by a senior official or someone well known to the student, and not by letter or impersonally from behind a desk or counter.

Refusals

Saying 'no' to a request and being effective without appearing brutal can be hard. Depending on what the student is used to at home, just saying 'no' can suggest to the student that they have not asked the right person, not asked in the right way, or not asked often enough. They may not understand the British way of replying indirectly and politely – 'That would be against our usual policy'; 'I really don't think that could be done'.

'No' can be made both effective and positive by offering an alternative – 'I cannot do what you ask, but I can . . . '.

Some cultures regard the giving and taking of bribes as a natural adjunct to doing business. In others the exchange of gifts is regarded as natural and friendly. Most UK institutions are very strict about staff accepting any gifts that might compromise their impartiality.

A gift from a student may be a bribe – or it may be a friendly gesture whose refusal would cause offence. How do you say 'no' if you feel that you cannot accept? Explaining the situation may be the best way:

I very much appreciate your kindness, but it is my job and my pleasure to try to help. I am not allowed to accept gifts for doing my job.

International students are likely to be under pressure to succeed, but may find it difficult to adapt to a new education system

Basics on study methods

For UK students, the move from school to further or higher education has surprises in store. They do not always adapt easily to changes in style: some miss the stimulus of competition and others find it hard to be responsible for organising their own time. It follows that international students from countries with very different education systems often find it even more difficult to adapt, and feel even greater pressure.

This pressure can be due to changed study methods, financial considerations, or a simple matter of prestige. Much more than most UK students, their sole purpose in being students is to study, and to succeed at their studies. Their family may have borrowed heavily in order to send them, or the international student may be the first from his or her community to study in another country, and so be under special pressure to bring credit on family and home by success.

Some international students may also have to come to terms with having much more prestige at home than in the UK: PhD students here may be professors, high-ranking army officers or civil servants in their home country:

In my country I communicate with ministry officials and other important people in my own language. Here I have to use English and talk to different types of people.

International students may be used to having to learn many detailed 'facts' in order to pass exams. They may find it difficult to adapt to the different academic style found in the UK, which stresses self-expression and development of the individual, and encourages students to question and put forward their own ideas. They may feel that they are not getting the instruction that they expected.

Why am I paying all this money to educate myself?

International students may be uneasy about challenging the opinions of acknowledged experts such as tutors and authors of textbooks and it may be hard for them to adapt to an easy-going relationship with staff. In many countries, academic staff command great respect and are recognised as social and moral leaders, wiser and more highly qualified than others:

Sometimes people from industry come in to talk and they use four-letter words. I can accept it in a situation where I have the choice to walk away, but not in a lecture.

For students from some cultures, it may be distressing for a female student to be left alone with a male member of staff, or for a male student to be taught by a female member of staff.

When issues of questioning female authority do occur, the consensus among women members of staff is to be good humoured but firm:

Let's focus on the solution, not who is providing it.

Tough, it's me you've got.

I am the head of this department.

Practical laboratory work can be a problem as it may involve contact with animals considered by some cultures to be 'unclean' – for example, pigs or dogs. Also, any manual work (such as building research equipment) can be felt to be demeaning and its purpose will have to be clearly explained.

Relations between research students and technicians may need sensitive handling and careful definition by academic supervisors: the technician may not be a graduate, but when it comes to setting up apparatus, he or she will probably be far more experienced and skilled than the student and will expect to be valued as a colleague, not treated as an underling.

Plagiarism – copying the work of others (most often from textbooks, but also from fellow students and the internet) is an issue affecting both home and international students. Quite apart from the moral issue ('stealing' someone else's work), international students may need to be shown that the textbook answer is not necessarily the final word. Institutions take a very serious view of plagiarism and it is important that students should learn to appreciate that sometimes very fine distinctions between an offence and the respectful use of authoritative sources; students in doubt should be encouraged to consult their tutors or study support services before showing completed work.

Try to understand the difficulties international students face. Be clear and specific when setting tasks and discussing the student's progress, and be sensitive to possible problems. Some guidance on study skills may be appreciated, for example, has the student learned to 'skim read' or does the student need more training in the specialised English the subject requires?

It would be better if staff can explain face to face what the important things are. In China if something is important you expect to be told you must do it.

And remember all the time the strains imposed by studying in a foreign language:

Sometimes international lecturers don't have good English but we understand they are experts in their field and our English isn't that great either.

Through student eyes:

When we do group work there are cultural clashes about the way we do things.

We are shy and reserved in our country. We are not trained to speak our mind – it is rude to do so, especially with older people.

There is much more communication between teacher and students and among students in the classroom, which is a positive feature. At home the teacher is the focus of the learning process but in the UK students are expected to work independently.

Working together with people from many cultures can motivate me and improve my skills by knowing new ways of thinking.

The teacher's/examiner's expectations are not always clearly expressed. In the UK people often say important things in a non-directive way.

The small classes here make me feel comfortable – you have more opportunities to talk to the teacher and other students.

Through staff eyes:

International students often find it difficult to deal with British academic staff, because they don't expect to use the first name, or this rather easy familiarity, which is very much a part of the British system. It is very important for staff to take this into account in their first dealings with international students.

Listen to students and try not to stereotype – be in an asking or inviting mode. It is more enjoyable if there is mutual learning. I have got a lot out of some of my research students.

Money matters – it matters more when you are away from home

Basics on finance

This is an area where you can put yourself into the international student's shoes. Finance rules so much of all our lives, both as students and later on, when we have careers with responsibilities and ambitions. Money matters – and it matters more when you are away from home.

Imagine being on holiday in a strange country and losing your cash and credit/debit cards. Imagine the stranded feeling, the fading smile on the waiter's face, the insincere regrets from behind the counter in the bank. A holiday crisis would be bad enough, but now imagine how much more devastating it would be to have such a crisis far from home, if you were in the middle of a course on which your whole future depends.

A great deal of money is invested in an international student's course: tuition fees on a much higher scale than those for which home students may be responsible, and living costs, which have to cover terms and vacations (or travel costs to get home). Most students are very well aware of what their courses are costing – and who is having to pay. For some this is a source of pride; for others it can be a source of pressure and anxiety.

Who is having to pay?

International students are financed in the UK by an array of means, including government scholarships (their own government or one of the many schemes operated by the UK government), sponsorship by institutions and firms, support by relatives, personal savings, loans, or a combination of sources.

Before being admitted to study in the UK, most international students have to satisfy UK visas and/or the university or college that they have sufficient funds, but that evidence is rarely the whole story:

- many students on adequate scholarships feel obliged to send money home to help relatives and dependants
- conditions may be attached to scholarships, putting students under pressure
- most scholarships have strict time limits – PhD students routinely overrun their deadlines
- changes of government at home, or civil war, can wipe out some scholarships, leaving students stranded

- currency fluctuations can reduce the value of an award
- exchange permission for the transfer of funds can be delayed
- private funding is vulnerable to business failure, over-optimistic forecasts and unforeseen family problems.

Budgeting

Again, home students have headaches making ends meet, and we can all feel sympathy with them. International students' headaches tend to be greater:

- they are operating their budget in an unfamiliar currency
- many of them will not have had to budget for heating before
- food costs, and the prices of different kinds of food, vary enormously between countries
- after arrival, some will try to extend a single person's budget to cover the arrival of a family (this problem has been reduced by stricter controls)
- as with many home students, lifestyle compromises will probably have to be made; for international students, these may be major, for example, shopping and cooking at home because it is too expensive to eat out (which it may not have been in the home country)
- many will have relied on getting work to supplement their budgets – only to find that it is not available, or less well paid than they had expected
- some will have recourse to sharing or sub-letting rooms, possibly at the cost of adequate study space
- the prospectus on which a student budgets may be a year out of date
- field trips and study visits may have to be missed because of shortage of funds.

Other issues

- As we noted on page 17, cheques, cash points and debit and credit cards, which are essential features of life in the UK, are not as common in all parts of the world.
- This can lead to international students carrying large sums in cash with them.
- Opening a bank account in this country is a major hurdle, with different conditions being imposed and different demands made by different banks. For example, a student's passport may be held by the police just when the bank insists on its production.
- This can lead to penalties for being late in making payments and other frustrating situations.
- Different cultures have different attitudes towards debt and paying bills.
- Students from a bargaining culture can cause unnecessary offence by querying a figure that an administrator knows is absolute and set in stone.

Making life easier

First of all, appreciate the pressures that international students may be under. Think what it must be like to know that ten members of your family are living in poverty in order to help you – and that it is up to you to be in a position to repay them in your turn. Remember that admitting to financial problems involves painful loss of face. Depending on your particular responsibilities, it helps to:

- have good local information about which banks are most helpful
- know where to go for Sharia investment services (investments provided for Muslims)
- know what hardship funds are available in your institution – and who administers them
- encourage flexibility wherever possible when dealing with international students' finances – and practise it yourself
- remember that many institutional financial and registration matters are dealt with online – are you in a position to help those who are baffled by the procedures?

Through student eyes:

Some of the administrators are too fixed with rules: I needed an urgent letter for the bank to release my funds so I could pay my fees. They said all letters have to be ordered five days in advance, but I wasn't even in the country then. So now I can't enrol and use the facilities.

If I had known how much bureaucracy there was here, I would have brought someone with me to do it for me.

Hosts should not be offended by departures from ‘usual behaviour’

Basics on personal hygiene

Washing and lavatory use

To be culturally aware in the area of washing and lavatory use, hosts should not be offended by departures from what they consider to be ‘usual behaviour’, and should be confident enough to explain tactfully the most efficient use of the toilet facilities provided.

Many international students much prefer showers to baths. Not using clean water to rinse soap from the body or detergent from dishes is regarded as unhygienic by many:

Sitting in a bath is not really acceptable. You need to wash the dirt off.

In addition to hygiene, running water may be needed for ritual purification (for example, practising Muslims wash before prayer). Depending on how the facilities are arranged, water may get splashed on floors. Understanding the reasons for this should help in sorting out any disputes that might follow.

It is probably more natural – and healthy – to defecate squatting than sitting upright on a pedestal lavatory. The pedestal-type lavatory is not familiar to everyone worldwide. In some countries, toilet paper is disposed of in a bin provided, not flushed away; doing this in the UK is likely to be misunderstood. Lavatory paper is not universally used. Some students will prefer to wash themselves:

It would be nice if there were a sink in the toilets because we wash after . . . and we do not use toilet paper.

Attitudes to sanitary protection among female international students vary: it is a topic not easily discussed, but guidance as to the use and disposal of tampons is sometimes helpful.

North Europeans are often sensitive to the smells of people who eat differently from them or use different toiletries, but should be aware that they, too, can smell different – and possibly unpleasant – to people from elsewhere.

Through staff eyes:

It is important to understand and not assume that our standards are the best or the absolute and that for international students the way we live our lives can seem in some ways quite off-putting, or not as clean as we would like to imagine.

Both home and international students can benefit

Basics on socialising

A positive social life for international students

The average UK student union caters for the majority interests of UK students: beer, sport, music and meeting the opposite sex. Although most make generous provision for international events and for programmes run by national societies, the fact has to be faced that many international students either slip into, or are encouraged into, social ghettos where they pursue their own activities and meet only a small and unrepresentative selection of UK students. The reasons for this are partly cultural and partly practical – on both sides.

- Although some young international students are now coming to the UK, many are older and more mature than the majority of UK students. The average UK undergraduate has more maturing to do – many international students have already matured within their culture by the time they arrive.
- A higher proportion of international students are postgraduates.
- They are more likely than their UK opposite numbers to be strongly motivated and to spend more time in study.
- Many of them come from cultures where alcohol is forbidden and find its prevalence in bars intimidating. Even students from countries where alcohol is consumed freely may be shocked by UK students – ‘binge drinking’ does not appeal to them:

Pub crawls nightly: they come back at two a.m., talk till 4 a.m., crash out somewhere. They wake up not remembering what they did and moan about it. What do they want to forget?

British students have expensive social lives which we can't afford.

‘In a typical week, 52 per cent of international students don't spend any money on alcohol, compared with a quarter (24 per cent) of UK students.’
(UNITE International Student Experience Report, press release, July 2006)

The disadvantage is that in some halls you could get very rowdy students who you may not get along with well.

- Added to all of the above points is the fact, pointed out in the Introduction, that we all get on better with people from within our own cultures, and it requires an effort to step out of our culture and still make proper contacts. So it is not surprising that the UNITE report found that 36 per cent of international students and 43 per cent of UK students found it was 'hard to get to know' students from the other group. In fact, it is encouraging that these percentages were not higher.

Clearly it is important that as many students as possible, of all races and cultures, should lead full and satisfying social lives during their time of study. That way loneliness can be overcome and culture shock lessened. If there is cross-cultural contact in these social lives, so much the better. Both home and international students can benefit: there is a lot to be learned from coming to appreciate cultures other than one's own.

As our cultural awareness develops, we become better able to assist international students to enjoy social events and to join in.

International students encouraged to join in social events may:

- be happier 'slipping in' unobtrusively as individuals or
- prefer the security of joining in as a group
- feel it is enough not to join in actively, but simply to be around, and be friendly and polite
- feel unable to join in because they do not drink alcohol and do not realise that it is perfectly acceptable to ask for a soft drink
- still not feel welcome; as one student put it: 'English politeness: to invite you when they do not really want to'
- find that their English deserts them in a large, noisy group
- take offence at people who are rude in a joking way
- be scared of going out:

When I first came, safety was a big issue for me. I heard things from other students about safety that made me concerned. I didn't know if it was true or just what people were saying.

Suggested ways forward:

- encouraging small mixed (UK and international) groups to meet in their own homes
- encouraging the work of HOST in your area (see Useful organisations on page 58)
- encouraging international students to join in sports that they enjoy at home, or to try new ones
- explaining the purpose of student union societies and encouraging them to join

- encouraging cheap evening transport arrangements through the student union
- reassuring and informing international students about safety issues (see *Safety first* booklet in Further material on page 59)
- organising walking tours of the local area
- arranging shopping trips (it may be welcome to offer women-only trips)
- providing special programmes for dependants who may feel isolated and cut off
- setting up international food evenings, where different groups are encouraged to provide favourite dishes
- if budget allows, taking small groups of international students to places of interest, local amenities, beauty spots, historic buildings; invite other staff or home students to join in
- encouraging students to become involved in local, off-campus activities.

Through student eyes:

I have become a member of two local folk clubs. It is a very interesting and unique experience for me, when I play my music to English people. They have a genuine interest in our culture.

UK students should understand the importance of being prepared to work multinationally in their future careers and thus of mixing with international students.

Newly arrived Chinese students are not sure how they should approach and get to know foreigners because they don't know what they're interested in. In this respect, living with a host family has been very useful.

I find it easy to talk to British people, but hard to become close friends.

British people are so cold and look like they don't want to chat with other people.

People in the UK are quite friendly and I find no problem socialising with them.

I have more in common with international students than with home students.

I found my time to be very fulfilling, not only academically but in helping me to become more open to new people and personalities and cultures.

Avoiding pitfalls

You can help international students to avoid social pitfalls. For example, the guide circulated to their own international students by the University of Nottingham gives practical advice on, for example:

- Queuing discipline
- Not asking personal questions
- Only kissing close friends and relatives
- Using the weather as an opening gambit in conversation
- Not talking with your mouth full
- Covering your mouth when coughing or yawning.

The same guide also gives useful information about alcohol and smoking: international students need to be reassured that it is fine to ask for non-alcoholic drinks, but some may also need to know that there are strict limits on drinking alcohol before driving, and that the legal age for buying and drinking alcohol is 18.

Recent legislation on smoking in public places needs to be explained. In private homes, international students should know that it is polite to ask permission before smoking.

See also *Can I help?* on page 53.

Cultural and practical points to bear in mind

Basics on sex, relationships and gender

Intimate issues of which we have to be aware

This is an area where generalisations and stereotypes can do much damage. It concerns intimate and private aspects of students' lives and you may wish that it could safely be ignored. Unfortunately, real damage can be done to individuals if basic cultural and practical points are not borne in mind.

Many international students find public displays of affection between couples in the UK confusing and offensive.

It is shocking to some international students to see condoms freely available.

The open existence of lesbian and gay groups in student unions is very shocking to students from certain cultures.

The degree of openness in the UK about sexual orientation, the equal status of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender relationships and visible challenges to discrimination on grounds of sexuality may all be new to international students and may challenge existing perceptions and views.

Although legislation is more open here than in some other countries, international students will find that social attitudes are not as open.

Civil partners are eligible for visas to enter the UK.

In some cultures, cohabiting is acceptable. In others, it is definitely not accepted.

The attitudes of men to women and of women to men will be influenced by their home culture. For a man from a culture where women cover their bodies and where a male witness equals two female witnesses, meeting lightly dressed women who expect to be treated as equals can be very confusing.

In some cultures, arranged marriages are practised and expected.

Some female international students find the casual friendliness of an English housemate's hug or kiss unacceptable.

Before coming to the UK, women students may have been protected and closely chaperoned. Their new-found freedom can be threatening – or over-intoxicating; they may be unaware of dangers in certain situations. On the other

hand, women need to be encouraged not to be offended or frightened if a British man invites them out.

The use of abortion as a means of contraception is acceptable in some cultures; it is important to convey the message that contraceptive devices make better sense from every point of view.

The area of sex and relationships is especially open to stereotyped assumptions by UK students and staff. For example, that some female international students will prove to be naïve or ill-informed about sex and contraception, or that men from certain countries are, as a rule, demanding in relationships and less respectful of women's feelings.

It is important to treat issues of sex, sexual orientation and contraception sensitively. There are obvious dangers, but there are worse risks if the topic is avoided altogether. It is vital that existing public information on sexual health, HIV, chlamydia and other sexually transmitted diseases is equally accessible to international students. Bear in mind that, to some, these issues might be frightening, embarrassing or are being encountered for the very first time. The issue of HIV/AIDS cannot be ignored: the British Council leaflet *HIV and AIDS: the facts you need to know* is designed to help international students and can be downloaded from their website address: www.educationuk.org/downloads/hiv.pdf.

Through student eyes:

In the UK girls dress more unrestrained than in my country – but they do not behave so unrestrained.

Holding hands is acceptable, but I find some kissing unacceptable.

Eating the right food helps you to feel at home

Basics on cooking and diets

Culture and food

When asked, international students often say that being able to eat the right food was the single most important factor in helping them to feel at home. But not all students can cook. Ethnic restaurants, offering familiar food, can be an answer – but regular eating out is far beyond most students' pockets.

Largely because of pressure from minority ethnic UK students, catering departments of institutions are moving towards making their menus fully inclusive.

Cooking is a social event for some students. Food preparation and eating are group activities. A particular group of international students may monopolise all available kitchen space for long periods in pursuit of social relations, and because of the amount of oil and heat used, kitchens may need to be cleaned more often (or redecorated).

Most Chinese students like to cook together because there are too many steps in our cooking for one person to do on their own.

Lack of familiarity with Western kitchens is one reason for dirty cookers and burned pans. Some international students, like their UK counterparts, may need to be shown how to use microwave ovens and electric or gas cookers. Electric kettles are uncommon in many parts of the world, including other European countries and the USA.

Outside major cities, buying the right ingredients for self-catering can be a problem.

Food

One way we remember God is being careful of our food.

Many Muslims will eat only *halal* meat (meat slaughtered according to prescribed Islamic rules), but some are prepared to eat meat slaughtered by Western methods if *halal* meat is not available. Orthodox Muslims and Jews will not eat pork products of any kind (pork, bacon, ham, sausage with some pork in it, and anything cooked in pork fat). Most Hindus will not eat beef. Sikhs will not eat *halal*-slaughtered meat. Jews will not eat shellfish.

Kosher meat (meat slaughtered according to prescribed Jewish rules) is acceptable to some Muslims.

Muslims, Hindus and Jews avoid permitted food that may have been contaminated by other, forbidden, food. For example, strips of bacon used to baste a roast chicken render the chicken inedible to Muslims and Jews. Ham sandwiches and sausage rolls should not be placed close to food that is acceptable to them.

Where there is doubt about possible contamination, some students may prefer to stick to vegetarian dishes. For some observant Jews, pots, pans and fridges may be considered contaminated by previous use. In most student flats, fridges are shared, and this can raise issues.

UK eating times are not universal and some international students will find that they are at variance with the pattern of meal times to which they are accustomed:

The time between lectures is so short it assumes you will only have sandwiches. Sometimes we only get 30 minutes. At home we would have a cooked meal.

At home the whole university has a fixed lunch break at the same time. Here sometimes there isn't time for lunch. At the beginning I felt very uncomfortable because I couldn't have time to eat lunch and felt hungry and tired out all the time. I got to understand that it's the culture here.

You have to condition your stomach not to require food outside the certain hours.

In student cafeterias there is a social dilemma for some: do you order a range of dishes and then share, or do you order a complete meal for yourself only, but probably join others to eat it?

Vegetarians

The number of vegetarian home students is increasing and so is sensitivity about the issues involved. Many Hindus and Sikhs are vegetarian. In their country of origin, the majority are probably lacto-vegetarians: they eat no meat, but will eat dairy products, although not always eggs. This last is an important point, since the traditional vegetarian alternative in UK educational institutions is often an egg-based dish with salad and grated cheese. Some cheese may not be acceptable because animal rennet has been used. Dishes made with animal fat (traditional Christmas puddings, for example), or gelatine, as used in mousse-style puddings, may not be acceptable to vegetarians.

Through student eyes:

Having friends means feeding them.

Food was prepared from a very Euro-centric, or very, if it is possible to say it, Christian-centric point of view.

There is no possibility of getting food in the evenings if one likes to work late.

I've learned about British kitchens – everything is done standing up and the utensils are different. My wife finds this an improvement from her culture – it is easier to cook standing than sitting.

In my flat, we always have dinner together at the weekend; we cook one dish each – that makes 14 dishes from five countries (China, Japan, UK, France and Spain).

Even the values and culture of non-religious people are influenced by religion

Basics on religions and festivals

As is obvious in UK society, even the values and cultures of non-religious people are influenced by religion. Thumbnail sketches of religion are always risky but some basic facts about the principal religions of international students are useful in the process of helping students feel at home.

Remember that not all members of a religion will be equally devout and strict in practising it.

There are wide variations of belief and practice in most religions. For some students, being away from home frees them from obligations. For others, the practice of their religion provides security in the face of culture shock:

The Church has become a very important part of my life. It has given me strength and hope and a sense of belonging, joining others in worship and social activities.

Most religions are divided and sub-divided into different denominations. In Christianity, for example, we encounter Roman Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Pentecostals, Greek and Russian Orthodox, and others. Relations between these different divisions may be cordial, indifferent or hostile.

Not all students are happy to state their religion. If asked to do so on a form, the question should clearly be described as optional. Chinese students, for example, may reply 'none', which can either mean that they really have no religion or that they would prefer to say nothing about it:

Our attitude to religion is ambivalent, to say the least. We adopt whatever is appropriate. We are as flexible as the English in this respect. But many Chinese Christians are very committed and it is probably the same for Chinese Muslims.

Many international students are practising Christians of one denomination or another. Some will find that Christianity is practised differently in the UK than in their home countries.

This can be very confusing. Others find support and friendship through the church. Some will be surprised by the many Christian denominations to be found in the UK, since in their home countries, denominations have been determined historically by areas of missionary activity.

Observing their own religious festivals in the UK can be a means of maintaining contact with the home culture, but for some international students, festival time can mean increased homesickness – this has been observed among American students at the quasi-religious family festival of Thanksgiving.

Some counsellors have expressed the fear that students who are cut off from the security of home religion can become more vulnerable to the approaches of proselytising religious, or quasi-religious, movements.

The principal religions practised by international students already have thriving communities of adherents in the UK. Although many students will want to practise their religion within their institutions, a start can often be made by contacting local community groups – though this is likely to be a problem where institutions situated in the country or in small towns are concerned.

The Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Faith is global in scope. Its membership represents a cross section of humanity. Bahá'ís come from virtually every nation, ethnic group, culture, profession, and social or economic class.

The Faith's founder was Bahá'u'lláh, a Persian nobleman from Tehran who, in the mid-19th century, claimed to be a new and independent Messenger from God. Bahá'ís view Bahá'u'lláh as the most recent in this succession of divine Messengers.

Bahá'u'lláh's essential teaching is that of unity. He taught that there is only one God, that there is only one human race, and that all the world's religions represent stages in the revelation of God's will and purpose for humanity – 'the earth is but one country, and mankind its citizens'.

Another fundamental principle is that women and men have equal rights and responsibilities in the community.

The Bahá'í community has no priests, ministers or prayer leaders. Its affairs are governed by elected councils at local, national and international levels. Bahá'ís meet regularly for worship, to consult together and to socialise, but there is little in the way of public ritual.

Individual Bahá'ís have a range of personal responsibilities, including reciting one of three obligatory prayers each day, and observing a period of fasting during daylight hours from 2 to 20 March inclusive.

There are nine holy days throughout the year on which Bahá'ís will wish to refrain from working. Bahá'ís have no particular requirements of dress or diet, but they do refrain from taking alcohol and other habit-forming drugs.

Bahá'í students will doubtless wish to participate in the life of the local Bahá'í community.

Further information can be found at <http://bahai.org>.

Buddhism

Buddhism as a way of life came into existence in about 500 BC following the enlightenment of Siddhattha Gotama, thereafter known to the world as the *Buddha* (the Enlightened One). The purpose of his teaching was (and is) to show how the unsatisfactory condition of our lives can be overcome and how *Nirvana* (a state of bliss) can be achieved. The earliest writings recording the life, teachings and systematic philosophy of the Buddha are to be found in the *Tripitaka*, an extensive collection of writings divided into three parts.

Buddhists are guided in their daily lives by the voluntary acceptance of the Five Precepts, one of which involves abstaining from substances that alter the mind and adversely affect behaviour. Individual interpretation is important. Buddhism is practised worldwide, but most international students who are Buddhists come from Sri Lanka, South-East Asia, especially Thailand, and also from China and Japan.

There are many festivals. Perhaps the one most widely known is *Wesak*, usually celebrated on (or near) the full moon in May (or December), when the birth, enlightenment and final passing away of the Buddha are commemorated.

Christianity

Christians believe in one God, known in three persons: the Father (Creator), the Son (Jesus Christ, God become man) and the Holy Spirit (the spirit of God now active in the world). The Christian scriptures are contained in the Bible. Sunday is the holy day of the week and is normally a holiday in all countries where Christianity is the majority religion.

Festivals include *Christmas* (the birth of Jesus Christ), which is now a major holiday throughout much of the world, and *Easter Day* (the rising of Jesus from the dead), which is, for most Christians, the more important festival. It is preceded by six weeks of self-discipline – abstinence, fasting, or other form of self-denial, usually according to personal choice (*Lent*), culminating in *Good Friday* (the crucifixion of Jesus).

Alcohol is rejected by some Christians, but most feel free to drink it. Wine plays a central part in the *Eucharist* (or Communion) service.

Confucianism and Daoism

These two religions, together with Buddhism, are important and intertwined strands in much Chinese religion and culture. Many Chinese combine elements of different religions and philosophies, together with Chinese Communism, into a flexible personal belief system.

Confucianism was founded by K'ung Fu Tzu (born 551 BC). His name was Latinised to Confucius by 16th-century Jesuit missionaries who admired his teachings and sought to incorporate them into their teaching of the Christian Gospel. These teachings developed as a criticism of the moral laxity of the Chou dynasty, the period into which he was born, and are primarily ethical, advocating benevolence toward fellow human beings, honesty, trustworthiness, moral

behaviour and sound family relationships as the basis of society as it should be. Confucianism omits many of the elements found in other world religions. There are no services of worship as such, but ancestor worship is practised and there are rituals associated with birth, reaching adulthood, marriage and death. There are no clergy: Buddhist, Daoist or even Christian priests officiate at a Confucian funeral. Confucian scriptures are contained in the *Shi Shu* or *Four Books* and the *Wu Jing* or *Five Classics*.

There are six schools of Confucianism: Han Confucianism, Neo-Confucianism, Contemporary Neo-Confucianism, Korean Confucianism, Japanese Confucianism and Singapore Confucianism.

Daoism is more otherworldly than Confucianism. Central to it is the concept of *Dao*, usually translated as *the Way*, but which refers to the underlying reality in the world of nature. Daoist ideas defy simple categorisation. Its scriptures are the *Daodejing* (ascribed to the earliest Daoist sage Laozi, an older contemporary of Confucius) and *Zhuangzi*, named after its author who lived in the 4th century BC. They protest against the brutality of local rulers with a defence of the individual, and they advocate the importance of spontaneous action, the relativity of value judgements and the benefits of obscurity, powerlessness and 'doing nothing'. It has a priesthood that mediates between lay believers and the supernatural, performing exorcisms and other rituals.

Hinduism

The Hindu tradition has ancient roots. It has no 'founder' and is very diverse as regards belief and practice. Many gods are worshipped, but it is believed that they, like human beings, emanate from one eternal creative force. The cow is sacred and Hindus will normally avoid the eating of beef. Many Hindus are vegetarian, since they believe that the soul is present within every living being. Many Hindus do not drink alcohol. Hindu scriptures include the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and the two holy epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (which contains the *Bhagavad Gita*).

Social divisions traditionally exist within Hindu society, which may make social mixing, including eating together with those of different groups, problematic; however, these customs are breaking down and are unlikely to be strongly adhered to among Hindus studying abroad. A practising Hindu is likely to have images or pictures of divinities in his or her room and to offer flowers or incense to these at prayer time. A Hindu would normally wash from head to toe every morning.

Of Hindu festivals, the most important is *Diwali*, the *Festival of Lights*. The following day is the Hindu New Year's Day, associated with ceremonial lights and present-giving. Other festivals (such as *Holi* and the *Birth of Lord Krishna*) are celebrated, but may vary according to the regions of origin.

Islam

The followers of this religion are called Muslims.

Muslims believe in one God, Allah, and in His Prophet, Muhammad. The revelations of Allah through Muhammad are contained in the Qur'an. Copies of the Qur'an are treated with respect. Like many other Asian, African and Middle Eastern people, Muslims will not usually wear outdoor shoes when in their homes.

Friday is the holy day of the week. Prayer is very important to many Muslims. They are expected to pray five times a day and there is communal prayer on Fridays, when many Muslims, particularly men, will try to attend a mosque where they can pray communally and listen to a sermon. If there is no mosque near a college campus, a special prayer room may be needed for Muslim students. A Muslim must wash before praying, so availability of running water (from a tap or jug) is important.

Alcohol is forbidden, as are all pork products. Muslims must dress modestly, and the stipulations as to what this involves are different for men and women. Although dress differs widely between countries, many women choose, or feel that they are required, to be veiled in the presence of men. Problems of privacy can arise if veiled women are allocated ground-floor rooms, where they may be seen unveiled through the windows. Meetings exclusively for women, and the encouragement of activities for women (cooking, shopping and swimming) are valuable.

Dates of festivals depend on sightings of the moon. The month of *Ramadan* (29 or 30 days), is a holy month when Muslims will spend extra time in prayer and study of the Qur'an. They will also abstain from all food, drink and tobacco from dawn to dusk. Towards the end of *Ramadan*, devout Muslims may spend whole nights in prayer. Arrangements for meals or cooking after dusk may be needed. Muslim students may be tired or irritable in the afternoons at this time – and examination performance can be affected. *Eid-ul-Fitr* is the festival ending Ramadan. *Eid-ul-Adha* commemorates Abraham's obedience and Muhammad's pilgrimage to Mecca.

Jainism

Jainism is an ancient faith of India. Along with Buddhism, Jainism is one of the two surviving non-Brahmanic religions. Jainism believes in 24 omniscient teachers called *Tirthankaras*.

The 24th, and last, *Tirthankara* of this era was *Mahavira* (599–527 BCE). Jainism does not believe in a creator god, but defines the universe as a permanent existence of *Jivas* – sentient souls, and *Ajivas* – insentient substances. The soul is tarnished by karmic matter as a result of one's deeds, which is the cause of rebirth. The aim is to purify the soul through austerity and equanimity and to attain liberation, which is called *Moksha*.

There are two major sects of Jainism: *Digambaras* or the 'sky-clad' whose monks roam naked and the *Shvetambaras*, whose monks are 'white clad'. Both groups have their own canon consisting of several texts. *Tattvartha Sutra*, an

exegetical text, is accepted by all Jains as the philosophical expression of Jainism.

Jain society has a fourfold structure of male and female monastics and laity. Five main vows are practised at an absolute level by the ascetics and at a conditional level by the laity:

- Ahimsa* (non-violence)
- Satya* (truthfulness)
- Asteya* (not stealing)
- Brahmacharya* (celibacy)
- Aparigraha* (non-acquisition).

Jains are pure vegetarians and teetotal. Some Jains even exclude root vegetables, such as onion and garlic, from their diet.

Jain festivals are based on the lunar calendar and fall on different dates each year. Some important festivals: *Mahavira Janma Kalyanaka* (Birthday of Mahavira), *Paryushana* (eight- or ten-day period of atonement), *Mahavira Moksha Kalyanak* (Day of Emancipation) and the enlightenment day of *Gautama*, the chief disciple of *Mahavira*. Other festivals of lesser importance are also celebrated.

There are many places of Jain pilgrimage in India of which Sammet-Shikhar, Palitana, Junagadh, Abu-Diwara, Ranakpur and Shravana Begola are the most popular.

Jains can worship in temples called *Jinalaya* or at home. In the absence of a Jinalaya in the vicinity they would have a small home shrine and can perform worship at home. If they can find other Jain students, they would certainly be happy to form a group and meet for worship as mutually convenient. Some UK universities (Cambridge and Warwick, for example) have enough Jain students to form a Jain Society.

There are approximately 30,000 Jains living in Britain, the majority within Greater London.

Judaism

Jews believe in one God. Their religion is strongly family oriented. The Sabbath, the holy day of the week, runs from sunset on Friday to sunset on Saturday. Worship takes place in the synagogue but also in the home. Many Jews observe restrictions on travel and other activities on the Sabbath.

As well as other sub-divisions, there are two distinct groupings within Judaism: Orthodox and Progressive. They normally use separate synagogues and are members of separate congregations.

Food rules are very important to Orthodox Jews. When food conforms to Jewish law, it is called *kosher*. Although *kosher* mainly applies to foods, it can describe other things made according to Jewish religious law. Orthodox Jews must keep food with meat in it separate from food made with milk or dairy products. Strictly orthodox students are unlikely to agree to live in a non-Jewish household or hostel.

Alcohol may be drunk and wine plays a part in religious ceremonies in the home. Alcohol is also consumed at synagogue at two festivals.

Jewish festivals include *Pesach* (Passover), which celebrates the Jews' escape from Egypt. *Rosh Hashanah* (New Year) is followed by ten days' repentance for sins, ending with a 25-hour fast, *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). Jews who observe this fast will not be able to join in college activities or change their accommodation at this time.

Parsi Zoroastrians

Parsis are India's smallest racial minority, living mainly in Mumbai. As they have a high literacy rate (98 per cent) they pursue higher education – and in disproportionate numbers in the West. Their religion is Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster is dated roughly 1400 BCE, making his religion probably the oldest prophetic religion.

After the Islamic conquest they migrated to a land of religious freedom, India, where they were known as the Persians, or Parsis. They were the first Asian community to be formally constituted in Britain (1861), have had three MPs, the first in 1892. Recently a Parsi was elevated to the House of Lords, Karan Billimoria. Zubin Mehta is and Freddy Mercury was a Parsi.

They are monotheistic, and venerate fire as the symbol of the living formless God. Once initiated (around the age of seven to nine) a Parsi should wear a cotton 'vest' (*sudre*) next to the skin at all times, tied at the waist with the sacred woollen cord (*kusti*), as the 'armour of their religion' and should offer short prayers five times a day. They believe that earth and fire are sacred so burial and cremation pollute the divine creations (death, like suffering, is the work of evil) so, in India, they expose their dead to vultures in *dokhmas* or Towers of Silence.

In Britain Parsis are centered mainly in London with their headquarters in Harrow and their own cemetery (not a *dokhma*) in Surrey. They are known for their honesty and charitable work, as well as being pioneers in education, politics, social work, industry and commerce.

Shintoism

Unlike most religions, Shinto has no real founder, no written scriptures, no body of religious law, and only a very loosely organised priesthood. Essentially all followers of Shinto are Japanese. It is difficult for a foreigner to embrace Shintoism. It has deities, rites, shrines and priests, but no human founder or concept of a divine creator. The central concern of Shinto is with this world and its most visible form is the ritual visiting of shrines – the vast majority of Japanese may be classed as Shinto in that they visit shrines at some time in their lives to venerate the *kami* (deities held to inhabit the shrines), but only a small proportion actually claim to believe in these deities.

Shinto is more concerned with the community than the individual, with performing rituals than with doctrines and believing. Most Japanese seem to combine Buddhism with Shinto in their religious practices. It does not have its own moral code: Shintoists generally follow the code of Confucianism. It is

common for a believer to pay respect to other religions, their practices and objects of worship.

Sikhism

Sikhs are almost all from families with strong connections to Punjab (North India). They respect Guru Nanak (1469–1539 CE) as their first guru (religious teacher). Guru Nanak and successive gurus emphasised the oneness of God, the irrelevance of social divisions and the need for spiritual integrity rather than outward religiosity. The initiation of committed Sikhs is traced back to the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh (d.1708). Sikh students' responses to the pressures of popular Punjabi culture, global trends and Sikh religious teaching will vary, with the minority of *amritdhari* (initiated) or *Khalsa* (pure) Sikhs adhering most closely to a code of discipline that rules out smoking, drugs and alcohol, as well as the removal, shaving or cutting of hair.

Many *amritdhari* Sikhs are strictly vegetarian – they will certainly avoid *halal/kosher* meat, whereas the Hindu-influenced Punjabi norm is simply to avoid beef. The *Khalsa* discipline is not gender-specific. So the five outward signs, of which the *kara* (circular iron or steel bracelet) is particularly visible, are maintained at all times by both men and women. The turban (covering the wearer's uncut hair) has come to symbolise Sikh identity, and is worn not only by male *amritdhari* Sikhs but also by many uninitiated men and by some *amritdhari* women.

Although Sikhs have no weekly holy day, congregations in UK *gurdwaras* (public places of worship) are bigger on Saturdays and Sundays, and many marriages take place then. The *gurdwara* is the hub of local Sikh community life and the *seva* (voluntary service) carried out there includes the daily provision of free vegetarian meals (*langar*). Most importantly, in the *gurdwara*, the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib, is venerated and read. Sikhs emphasise the fact that the volume includes compositions by Muslims and Hindus as well as by six of the Gurus.

Sikh festivals have historical significance. For instance, *Vaisakhi* (14 April) marks the 'birthday of the *Khalsa*' when followers of Guru Gobind Singh were initiated as *Khalsa* Sikhs and two festivals celebrate the birthdays of Guru Nanak and Guru Gobind Singh respectively. *Diwali* day for Sikhs has the special importance of commemorating the sixth Guru's release from prison and its alternative name *Bandi Chhor* (liberation of prisoners) recalls his success in having fellow prisoners set free at the same time.

Information about religious festivals

It can be very helpful to know the dates of religious festivals, which may be important to particular groups of international students. But not all festivals are held on the same dates each year and knowing when certain festivals fall requires specialised knowledge.

I always ask my students to tell me about their special festivals and when they occur.

A calendar of the principal festivals of the major world religions is produced (as a booklet that comes with a wall chart and a laminated A5 insert for a Filofax or similar diary) by:

The Shap Working Party

PO Box 38580

London SW1P 3XF

Telephone 020 7898 1494

Fax 020 7898 1493

Nobody has all the answers

Can I help?

Meeting the needs of international students

Meeting the needs of international students and solving some of their problems will not only contribute to the success of their studies and influence their attitude to the UK, it will also bring you job satisfaction and widen your own understanding of life. It can make you friends in many corners of the world.

When in doubt . . .

You do not have to be an expert in cultural awareness to make and enjoy these friendships. Anyone who claims to be an expert is likely to block real friendship.

Nobody has all the answers.

A comment by a real expert in the field of cultural awareness:

Uncertainty is your friend. (P. Pedersen, *A Handbook for Developing Multicultural Awareness*, 2000)

When in doubt, the best policy is to ask. Almost without exception, international students enjoy talking about their homes and their culture. The exceptions will be those who distrust the motives of the questioner. Friendly curiosity, respect for other people's ways of life and respect for people as individuals are the only ways to overcome suspicion:

I think students are always very pleased and delighted if you ask them something about their homes and their customs.

They start talking about your country and that is very nice.

In this way you give international students the confidence to explain what matters most to them.

Listen to international students, and take the trouble to find out what they are really saying, and why. Read novels and watch films from different cultures. Spend time with international students. It will be repaid by their friendly co-operation.

Ways to help

Use your imagination to identify where there are gaps in your institution's provision for international students:

- Is the right information given to international students?
- What happens to them over Christmas?

- Is there a room or rooms set aside for students who want to pray?
- Is there a room available for Muslims equipped with washing facilities?
- Are postgraduates' dependants isolated and lonely?
- Are your policies and procedures appropriate and sensitive?

And so on . . .

These gaps may be outside your own area of responsibility, but you may be able to pass on suggestions or tell students where to go and who might be able to help. And you will nearly always be able to find opportunities to join in (and often help) with the social life of international students.

I thought they would arrange a programme for us at Christmas but there was nothing.

However, be realistic. Getting involved outside working hours with hospitality and social events can be very rewarding, but you need to be sure that you are not taking on more than you can cope with.

In working hours, too, it is important to be realistic about the amount of time that working with international students can take. An accommodation officer has found that interviews with international students take on average twice as long as interviews with home students; it is important that your institution is aware of this and makes the necessary provision in terms of staff time and numbers.

You will not be an expert in every area. Discuss issues with your colleagues. Locate your 'allies' (those who are either already culturally aware or willing to become so). Networking with other departments and with student societies gets the best results as you will meet those with the appropriate expertise.

Do not be afraid to refer students who seem to need it for educational assistance, pastoral counselling or medical or psychiatric support. Remember that some students may feel that they are losing face by asking for help: you can help them to keep their dignity. Others may have no idea that help is there to be asked for:

In my country we don't have support services so we're not used to asking them for help. Here you have to ask for help. No one's going to help if you don't ask for it.

Try not to say 'no' automatically to a request that may seem unusual or outside the way things are normally done. At least think about it. Try to understand why the request is being made and if it is reasonable and within your power (and budget) do it – even if you know it will cause you extra work (it usually will).

My scholarship was delayed so I went to ask if I could pay my fees two weeks later. They said 'yes you can, but you have to pay a fine'. They did not give me any other advice. I think they should be flexible in such situations.

In closing

Whatever your circumstances, you will be more at home in 'this strange place' than most of the international students. From your position of comparative security you can help them to feel at home and reap rewards in doing so: a wider experience of life, the warmth that comes from having your help appreciated, and growing

tolerance and personal understanding as your own cultural awareness expands. Working with international students gives you opportunities denied to many other staff. Seize them.

Through staff eyes:

We are all people at the end of the day and, sure, there are differences in assumptions or expectations, but those can be worked out between you, and if you are working in an institution you are never on your own. There are a whole range of other people who are available.

Cultural awareness is an attitude of mind that can be cultivated – but it's about your heart too.

Through student eyes:

The UK is one of the best places to go. A mixture of people from every side of the world are melted together.

The time I spent in the UK is one of my most memorable experiences. The skills and friendships built here are something that I will treasure for ever.

The conclusions they have reached

The last word

What international students have to say

International students and others have been quoted to illustrate points made throughout this booklet. Here we give some students the last word. They tell us what they like about UK culture, what they find unpleasant or hard to accept and list some conclusions they have reached.

What I like about living in the United Kingdom . . .

Good relations between professor and student (closer than in our country).

Kindness, politeness and helpfulness: the British are very quick and efficient in an emergency.

Frankly, I admire greatly that here drivers give way to pedestrians, which is not the case in my country.

Colourful pubs and fancy people.

I think the multicultural nature of the UK – you meet with such great diversity. It is one of the strengths of the UK . . . it is an eye-opening experience.

What I don't like about living in the United Kingdom . . .

We have beggars in my country. I didn't expect to find them here.

I don't understand why elderly people are separated from their own sons and daughters to live in nursing homes. Yet people claim to be Christians.

People don't understand my need for privacy, due to the greater conservatism of my culture.

Thinking back on my time in the United Kingdom . . .

There is a brilliant international society in my university and a very efficient accommodation office. I hope the same excellent service is available in other institutions.

Living here has given me my independence, something I'd never have had back home, where girls move from their father's to their husband's house.

Race was never discussed back home. I suppose our equivalent would be tribalism and nepotism.

I've lost touch with my friends at home – we don't seem to have much in common – and yet I haven't made many friends here.

It's a new concept, to find the system actually works.

If you're genuinely interested in culture, look for shared accommodation, not halls.

If I was telling a friend about the UK, I would definitely warn them about the weather.

They told me about the weather; they gave me a fair warning about the weather. They also told me a little bit about the civilisation and the way people relate to each other, about the way relationships are built, which is very different from other countries.

My host mother even says I am now more English than she is.

I have learned that no matter what the colour of the people, which country they grew up in, what language they speak, they all have one thing in common – that is they want the world to be a peaceful, happy and equal place for everyone.

The people I have met and the knowledge I have gained will remain with me long into the future and will benefit me.

The UK has made me into a person of confidence and rigour. I want to succeed, and it is the UK which has given me my ladder to success. My life is now beautiful.

Further information

Useful organisations

British Council

Bridgewater House
58 Whitworth Street
Manchester M1 6BB
Telephone 0161 957 7000
www.britishcouncil.org

UKCOSA

The Council for International Education
9–17 St Albans Place
London N1 0NX
Telephone 020 7226 3762
www.ukcosa.org.uk

The Shap Working Party

(for religious festivals information)
PO Box 38580
London SW1P 3XF
Telephone 020 7898 1494
Fax 020 7898 1493

HOST

1 Ardleigh Road
London N1 4HS
Telephone 020 7254 3039
Fax 020 7923 1606
www.hostuk.org.uk

Further material

British Council

First steps: pre-departure pack for self-funded international students coming to study in the UK.

First steps: British Council guidance note on preparing for a visa.

HIV and AIDS: The facts you need to know: a leaflet to help students understand what HIV and AIDS are and how they and those around them can protect themselves.

Safety first: a personal safety guide for international students.

UKCOSA

See www.ukcosa.org.uk for current publications.

Making the Adjustment: orientation programmes for international students.

Homeward Bound: planning and running workshops for students returning home.

Working with international students: a cross-cultural training manual.

Forthcoming: a cross-cultural training DVD (Colin Lago and Alison Barty, expected autumn 2007).

Other reading

A Guide to Teaching International Students: Janette Ryan, Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (2000).

Higher Education: the International Student Experience: Allen and Higgins, HEIST in association with UCAS (1994).

Race, Culture and Counselling: Lago and Thompson, Buckingham: Open University Press (1996).

Promoting good campus relations: dealing with hate crimes and intolerance: Universities UK Equality Challenge Unit SCOP, available at <http://bookshop.universitiesuk.ac.uk/downloads/promotinggoodrelations.pdf>.

The International Student Experience Report 2006: UNITE, in partnership with UKCOSA, conducted by Ipsos MORI, from UNITE Group plc, The Core, 40 St Thomas Street, Bristol BS1 6JZ or www.unite-students.com.

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What readers thought of the previous edition:

'I am a big fan of your booklet.'

'A great idea and very useful to staff and students.'

'Does an excellent job of raising awareness of cultural differences.'

'It raised questions for me about my interaction with international students – and I've been working with them for a long time.'

'Quite frankly, a very useful resource.'

'I was impressed.'

'Very useful in getting staff to look at their own preconceived assumptions – it certainly made me do this, which was a little embarrassing.'

'An invaluable tool for “put yourself in their shoes” moments.'

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