Preparation for success: key themes in the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (UK)

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Abstract

In 2006, Tony Blair launched the second phase of his Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education., aiming to increase and diversify inward mobility to the UK, to build partnerships at institutional and national level with key target countries and to improve the quality of the international student experience. This paper will look at how a range of UK partners are working to deliver on this latter strand. "Preparation for success" has been identified as fundamental to raising international student satisfaction levels by ensuring students are helped through the initial transition period as quickly and smoothly as possible. Some resources have been focused directly on students, but much of the work is based around developing and sharing best practice in institutions, and improving professional development opportunities and resources for staff working with international students. This paper reports on key developments to date, and directions for the future.

Keywords

International student experience; integration; employment; finance; preparation; professional development

Introduction

The launch of the first phase of the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI) in 1999 marked something of a watershed in the UK's international education policy. For the first time, there was recognition at the highest political level of the importance of the international education industry to the UK. Competitor countries around the world looked on with interest and used the PMI as a lever to persuade their own governments of the need to develop international education strategies – and to provide (or increase) budgets to go with them.

The second phase of the PMI (PMI 2), launched in 2006, marked a further step forward, by recognising that it was not enough to focus on marketing campaigns to increase the numbers of international students coming to the UK. It acknowledged that partnerships – at national and institutional level – would be crucial to maintaining the UK's role as a global player. It also sought to diversify the range of international students coming to the UK, both to lessen dependence on any one market, and to achieve a better balance within the classroom. Finally, it set as a goal to improve satisfaction with the quality of the international student experience.

This fourth goal will be the focus of this paper. We will review the topics identified as priorities under this strand, the activities set in place to address them, and the progress achieved to date.

PMI governance arrangements

The PMI is a government initiative led by the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS, formerly part of the Department for Education and Skills), but also with input (financial and otherwise) from other government departments (UK Trade and Investment, UKvisas and the Home Office) and the devolved administrations (for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland). Other partners include sector representative and funding bodies for public further education (FE) and higher education (HE) and for the accredited English Language (ELT) sector, and, as the lead professional bodies in this area, the British Council and the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA).

All of these stakeholders are represented on the Steering Group for the PMI, and on its four advisory sub-groups, two of which are sectoral (HE and FE/VET/ELT), one of which is topic based (the Student Experience) and the fourth of which takes an overview of research across all the activities. The advisory groups also include practitioner representation, providing core expertise on the issues covered. This complex and multilayered approach to governance was designed to ensure that all the funding partners were content with the way in which the initiative was taken forward, that sector-specific issues would be properly addressed, while allowing for cross-cutting themes to be identified and co-ordinated.

In terms of delivering PMI objectives, the British Council continue to lead on the marketing and recruitment activities they led under the first phase of the PMI, including the diversification of markets, and much of the partnership activity, although the latter is developed in partnership with sector bodies. UKCISA has taken the key role in co-ordinating and delivering the majority of the student experience strand.

Aims of the student experience strand

As may have become clear from the above, the responsibility for identifying and proposing activity under the Student Experience strand, has therefore been the responsibility of the Student Experience Advisory Group and UKCISA. Although the budget for the student experience strand is only a very small proportion of the total PMI budget (about 5%), it represents the first time significant sums of money have been centrally available for work on this area. The key questions have therefore been how to use the funds most effectively to achieve the objective of improving satisfaction ratings with the international student experience.

In practice, it is clear that with considerably less than GBP 1 per international student being invested each year, the scheme will not achieve the rather overambitious target of "a measurable improvement in satisfaction ratings" Even if satisfaction levels do rise over the period, there will be no way of demonstrating the effect that PMI activity had, as opposed to other variations. Priorities have therefore been more realistically set with a view to identifying the areas which students say are of most importance to them and where scope for improvement has been identified, and producing resources which enable institutions more effectively to meet those needs students have identified.

Priorities have been identified using a range of research data (UKCISA's surveys of higher and further education, *Broadening our Horizons* and *New Horizons (UKCOSA 2004 and 2006)*, the i-Graduate International Student Barometer) and consultations with the sector (events were held for further education, higher education and students' union representatives to canvass views). The Advisory Group then identified the following priority areas.

Employability

One very clear finding from the student feedback was the importance of work experience opportunities in the UK, whether during or after their studies, and the expectation of help from their institution in finding good jobs after their studies, whether in the UK or overseas. These were also areas where satisfaction ratings showed room for improvement.

Preparation for success

Although students' levels of satisfaction with their course experience and support services is generally very high, institutional feedback prioritised identifying ways of easing international students' transition to UK study and life. This perhaps indicates that both teaching and support staff see international students as needing considerable assistance with the transitionary period, and recognition that as numbers of international students on one-year courses grow, the need for quick and effective adaptation becomes ever more critical.

Integration/diversity

Both students and staff agreed on the importance of creating more effective mixing between home and international students. International students complain that they do not get sufficient opportunities to meet British people – a particular problem for ELT students who want to practice their English, but also a significant issue on academic and vocational courses. Staff are concerned that both home and international students lose out on opportunities to learn about one another. There is a clear recognition that a laissez-faire approach does not work, and institutions must actively help students to overcome the barriers to meaningful encounters.

Finance

It is undoubtedly a problem for the UK that it is a high cost destination in terms of living costs and exchange rates – even if one-year Masters and three year Bachelor's degrees to some extent offset this. International student feedback frequently raises financial issues as a significant concern, and helping them to budget realistically was therefore included on the list of priorities.

Capacity building and professional development

To deliver better on all the other topics identified, and to raise the quality of the international student experience in general, capacity building within the sector was identified as a priority. The aim is to ensure that those working with international students have the skills and resources they need to do their jobs effectively. Part of this involves developing greater understanding of the issues at senior levels within institutions, to ensure that

appropriate policies and resourcing levels are in place to deliver the services needed. This is helped by building the credibility and visibility of those professionals delivering the services. Part involves building up the skills and knowledge of frontline staff and managers, and giving them easier access to information on good practice and off-the-peg resources which they can use. The aim is to raise standards in all institutions, but also to have clearer national guidelines on what minimum standards of support international students can expect.

Progress to date

So far, one year of activity has been completed, and a second has just begun. This section will summarise key outcomes from the first stages.

Employability

The sector bodies for careers advisers, who have been leading on this topic, have set aims of improving advice and support for students; extending professional development opportunities and resource material for advisers and raising awareness among employers.

The latter is particularly crucial, as there are real concerns that the newly introduced International Graduate Scheme (IGS) and Fresh Talent: Working in Scotland Scheme (FT:WISS), which allow graduates to work for one and two years' after study respectively, are raising expectations, which may be disappointed if employers are unaware of the terms of the schemes, or are unwilling to employ international students because of their limited period of leave, or based on assumptions about their skills or language competence. The ability to deliver meaningful work experience for students during study is also dependent on persuading employers of the benefits of taking on international students for such placements. Work on increasing employer awareness will need input from government, sector careers bodies and careers services in institutions, and will be a key ongoing theme for the next few years.

Initial work has included

- producing labour market information on India and Hong Kong for students and their advisers;

- a dedicated web interface for international students with careers information, including an international vacancies database;

- web based e-guidance for international students, including a CV surgery, message forum, enquiry service and FAQs;

- a survey of best practice from careers advice services;

- a survey of employers' views on international students;

- an extended programme of training for careers advisers working with international students;

- a number of pilot projects in institutions e.g. building contacts with local networks of employers, and developing students' employability and job seeking skills.

Finance

While recognising that financial issues are of much concern to international students, there are limited areas where the we have identified effective means of intervention. Outside the PMI, UKCISA plans to undertake research into international students' expectations and beliefs about how they will fund their studies, and look at how they budget, and actually spend, while studying. We hope this may identify ways to help them manage their finances more effectively, and ensure that they are fully informed and supported in making financial decisions about studying in the UK.

As part of the PMI, activity to date has focused on piloting more targeted and interactive sources of information, such as a website focusing on the cost of living in London (the most popular destination for international students in the UK, but also the most expensive); and a tool being developed to help them think through their budgeting choices and the impact of their decisions on their finances and lifestyle.

Integration/diversity

Under the "integration" theme, one key activity for the coming year is the preparation of a guide to involving international students with volunteering schemes. International students often report volunteering as a truly transformative experience, often bringing them into contact with parts of British society they would not otherwise encounter (schoolchildren, older people, refugees, etc), giving them a sense of having a contribution to make and giving them skills and confidence for the future. The guide will look at good practice from across

the UK in involving international students with mainstream volunteering schemes on and off campus, and also look at the pros and cons of setting up schemes specifically for international students.

One piece of research undertaken in the first year of the project underlines the benefits of such a project. An organisation called "HOST UK", which organises weekend visits for international students to British family homes, looked at the impact of international students on local communities (Hart et al, 2007). The study set out to look at how the presence of international students affects the communities in which they are based, and how activities designed to increase mutual understanding impact on communities. Previous research had shown that such schemes had clear benefits for international students. The HOST study found that overall perceptions of international students (and students in general) improved when local people were involved with schemes with international students. The study found evidence that such schemes increased local people's knowledge about other cultures, and their belief in the importance of intercultural friendships.

Another key piece of research last year (Harrison & Peacock, 2007) focused on home students' perceptions of and attitudes to international students. It confirmed previous findings (e.g. Ward et al) that interactions between home and international students do not occur simply as a result of proximity, and that interactions can be limited, problematic or non-existent due in particular to discomfort with difference, obstacles around language ability, work orientation and alcohol use. Although UK students reported some benefits of working in an "international classroom", these were generally very limited. A prevailing interest in other cultures does not tie in more widely with learning or skills acquisition. Although most cross-cultural interaction occurs in the classroom, not enough is done to manage this process. Interestingly, the process of research with the UK students caused them to report having thought about these issues for the first time, and one next stage of the research will be to design training interventions which can be used to encourage reflection and interaction among student groups. It is hoped that further development of key questions raised by the research will also be addressed.

Capacity building and professional development

A key element of the capacity building strand has been to share good practice between UK institutions, and this has been done by a mixture of commissioned reports and invitations to institutions to pilot new ideas and approaches. Twelve pilot projects were funded in the first year of PMI, on topics ranging from UK/international student integration to employability, and a second round of funding has just been awarded. In year two an Overseas Study Visit programme has been introduced to fund a small number of professionals to visit counterparts overseas and gain a broader perspective on best practice in supporting international students in other countries. All of the completed projects are written up for dissemination, and can be found at http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi.

Small amounts of PMI funding have gone towards developing resources for particular needs which had been identified. All sectors were, for different reasons, expressing a desire for clearer guidance on how best to provide for international students under 18, and a guide was therefore commissioned covering both the legal guidance (for FE, HE, schools and language colleges, and covering the different legal jurisdictions within the UK), and assembling as much good practice guidance as possible relevant to each sector. It is hoped this will help introduce greater consistency in the care and provision for younger international students, and will ensure institutions fully understand their obligations towards them. It was also clear that there was a need for an updated cross-cultural training resource for use with all staff working with international students, and a DVD has therefore been produced.

Engagement with the sector remains a key priority, both (and especially in the first year) to consult on future priorities for PMI work, and to disseminate project outcomes and other best practice in the sector. There has therefore been support for an ongoing programme of events for sector organisations, including dedicated events for international student officers and sabbaticals in students' unions. In the current year a review is planned of continuing professional development opportunities for staff working with international students.

One of the most significant outcomes of the first year's Student Experience activities, was a benchmarking survey of provision of international student support services in higher education (a parallel for further education is planned for year two). Over half of the HE sector responded, giving us a really broad picture of the range and reach of provision. It established that most of the services one would expect to see are in place as standard – for example, pre-departure information, immigration advice, meet and greet services, orientation programmes, social programmes, advice and support services, language and study skills support, and social programmes. The challenges for institutions are to improve the impact and reach of these services, in particular finding new ways to address integration issues and to prevent or mitigate cases of financial hardship. The survey is intended as a measure against which institutions can benchmark their own services, and as an aid to setting future priorities for the PMI. It did leave some unanswered questions, for example, no correlation could be found between the number of advisers in an institution and the number of international students. Further work would be needed to

establish the advantages of different organisational models of service provision, and the resource levels needed to offer effective services to different numbers of international students.

As a next stage in the benchmarking process, we have commissioned a senior sector figure to review what policy measures might best guarantee minimum standards of international student support, and which might help raise standards across the sector. The UK has no equivalent of the Australian ESOS Act or the New Zealand Code of Practice. We therefore wish to consider whether voluntary schemes such as kitemarking or self-assessment regimes would have a real impact on standards, and what level of enthusiasm there might be within the sector for adopting any such schemes.

Preparation for success

In addition to the capacity building measures referred to above, several specific steps are planned with a view to better preparation of students for studying in the UK.

A new toolkit for practitioners is planned on the topic of orientation, going beyond the basics to look at how to extend the scope and reach of orientation programmes and provide the necessary flexibility to target students at all levels of study, arriving at all times of year, whether singly or en masse, and making better use of new technologies for an interactive and personalised orientation experience. It will also look at how orientation can be made more effective by being offered over an extended period rather than all being concentrated in the first few days of a student's stay.

Mentoring of international students – either by home students or by other international students – is something that has been shown to have many beneficial effects (for both mentor and mentee), but institutions often struggle to implement mentoring programme. A "how to" guide is planned to gather examples of good practice, provide off the peg models for institutions to tailor to their own circumstances, with the benefit of accumulated guidance from the sector about what works, pitfalls to avoid, resources needed, and other "top tips".

Finally, and most ambitiously, we are seeking to commission an online interactive learning tool with which international students can engage before arrival, which will start to introduce them to some of the language, study skills and cultural issues they will face when adjusting to studying in the UK. An initial scoping study last year established that only a small number of institutions have as yet started developing materials of this kind for their own students, and that there is significant interest in a centrally produced resources which institutions could either use off the shelf or tailor to their own needs. However, many questions remain about the extent to which students will engage with such a product, the impact it will have on their levels of preparedness, the cost of developing the resource centrally, and the costs for institutions of tailoring it, and if appropriate providing online tutoring as part of the experience.

Where next?

Key questions for the next three years of PMI activity will be how to evaluate the first two years' work and identify which interventions have been most useful to the sector and effective in improving the student experience. They will also be to identify further areas for development. One likely candidate at present is the academic experience – to attempt to work not only with support staff, but to have a real impact on the working of those involved in teaching international students. Fortunately there is a growing level of interest among academic staff in internationalisation issues at present, and the growing opportunities for collaborating with disciplinary associations and groups bode well for reaching this audience.

Another key question for the future, of course, is whether the new Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, will take ownership of his predecessor's initiative. The signs are good in that the most significant developments for international students over recent years – such as the International Graduate Scheme – emerged from Gordon Brown's Treasury, and not (directly) from Tony Blair's PMI. We wait with interest to see how Gordon Brown's Initiative will develop.

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