

An aerial photograph of a vast desert landscape featuring rolling sand dunes. The dunes are characterized by fine, rhythmic ripples that create a textured, undulating surface. The lighting is soft, casting gentle shadows that emphasize the contours of the sand. In the bottom right corner, a single starfish is visible, partially buried in the sand, adding a point of interest to the otherwise uniform terrain.

The STAR Project

(Student Transition and Retention)

University of Sunderland Retention Initiatives for International Students

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SUMMARY

The initiatives described in this study form a series of support mechanisms that have attempted to enhance the experience of the international students studying in the University of Sunderland's School of Computing and Technology, which contains around a third of the university's total number of on campus international students. Some were able to be implemented due to the author's part time secondment over two years to study the international student experience, in the form of a University Teaching Fellowship. The initiatives are discussed in turn, with reference to their resourcing implications.

Keywords: Student retention, international students, induction.

INTRODUCTION

The University of Sunderland, like HE institutions across the UK, has experienced a significant increase in the number of international students registering on its programmes of study in recent years. Since the Prime Minister's Initiative in 1999 which gave UK universities the target of attracting an extra 50,000 international students by 2005 and the subsequent EducationUK branding campaign of the British Council, the numbers of full fee paying international students studying on campus at Sunderland have increased more than threefold to almost 1500.

Continued recruitment of international students cannot however be seen as a consequence of our teaching practices and support mechanisms. On the contrary, there are likely to be many reasons why overseas students choose to study in the UK (Waller, 1993). Our challenge is to ensure they continue to want to come here which means our programmes must be appropriate, in terms of content, delivery and evaluation, and so too must our support services. With appropriate support, students may successfully make the transition to the different learning and living environment, and progress through the system to achieve their potential. The personal experience of staff at our institution, however, has until now been that :

- many international students have not been achieving a smooth transition;
- the difference between the level of achievement of some of these students at home and in the UK can be quite marked, notwithstanding the different grading conventions used; and
- students often struggle to flourish in the new environment both academically and socially.

In a study carried out by the author in 2003, as part of her Teaching Fellowship, a questionnaire was distributed to staff in the School of Computing and Technology, concerning their perceptions of the Chinese student experience. Analysis of the responses revealed that 94% of staff believed that Chinese students *experienced* problems over and above those of UK students and 58% felt that these same students *presented* problems, largely because it was difficult to get meaningful feedback from them. Fifty-five per cent of staff admitted knowing nothing about the Chinese educational system. When asked whether Chinese students should be given additional help in making the adjustment to the UK system, 10% emphatically stated that the differences between the two systems did not justify such help. This case study seeks to present some of the measures taken in the last two years in order to facilitate this academic adjustment process and a wider social integration.

OUTLINE OF PRACTICE

The initiatives outlined are aimed at international students studying in the School of Computing and Technology, which contains around a third of the university's total number of on-campus international students. Within the School, out of a total on-campus population of almost 1700, there are currently over 500 international students, compared with 1150 home or EU students. In 2003 the author began a two year University Teaching Fellowship investigating the experience of and provision for Chinese students studying within the School (the study was widened to encompass all international students after the first year). The background to the fellowship was the author's concern that as higher education institutions become increasingly committed to opening their doors to students whom they have not traditionally taught, there is a need both to recognise that while all students have the right to a high quality learning environment this concept means different things to different students, and to consider what values are placed by these students on the approaches to teaching and learning that we adopt. The Fellowship inspired the setting up of a regular meeting that became known as the International Student Forum, and also provided the resources required to run it. (The Fellowship scheme pays for a member of academic staff to be seconded from their academic duties two days per week, for a period of two years, in order to undertake research into an aspect of teaching and learning relevant to the university's learning and teaching strategy.) Although the Fellowship came to an end in the spring of 2005, the forum continued to be staffed on a voluntary basis until the decision to formally incorporate it into the School's retention strategy for the coming academic year.

The mechanisms described here are: the International Student Forum – both real and virtual; the Sunderland Language and News Group (SLANG); the Community Fellowship project International Students into Schools; and Happy Families. The driving force behind all four is the desire to adopt a wider, culturally informed and more holistic view of students' ability to engage in the learning process. The following sections first of all indicate the relation to the STAR guidelines of each initiative, and then present each one in turn with a discussion of the level of success achieved so far and the implications in terms of resources.

RELEVANCE TO THE STAR GUIDELINES

Implementation of the four initiatives has contributed to the achievement of guidelines 2.1-2.6 of the STAR project (Cook *et al.*, 2005), which address 'Induction and Beyond'. It is important to view induction as a process that should continue throughout higher education because the students are in frequent transition between modules, learning experiences, and changing expectations both academically and socially. Furthermore, in timetabling the International Student Forum so that it is a formal part of students' studies, their course is assisting their 'transition from their previous educational experience' (guideline 3.2). The following table illustrates where and how the relevant guidelines are addressed.

Star Guideline 2.1 *Induction activities should familiarise students with the local area, the campus and its support services.*

- International Student Forum (ISF) features guest speakers on campus and support services
- International Students into Schools (ISIS): Local school visits engender familiarity with local people and places
- The local daily paper is used in the SLANG meetings, so local stories are discussed widely
- Happy Families: Level 2 and 3 students (parents and grandparents) show their 'children' around the campus during induction week, having been primed with key areas to visit, e.g. the help desk, the learning resource centre, the library, etc.

Star Guideline 2.2 *Induction activities should highlight students' academic obligations and the obligations of the staff to the students.*

- Academic obligations and expectations are covered in ISF
- Happy Families parents and grandparents help new students understand processes, obligations and expectations of staff.

Star Guideline 2.3 *Induction activities should support the development of those independent student habits suitable for higher education.*

- ISF allows PDP related reflection and development, and practice of skills
- ISIS has been shown to aid development of time management, communication skills etc.
- SLANG promotes critical thinking and discussion
- The 'family' network allows students to understand through others' experiences and advice the difference in the study and learning requirements between the levels, e.g. discovering what a TCT is and how difficult it is likely to be in the computer programming module.

Star Guideline 2.4 *Induction events should provide the foundations for social interactions between students and the development of communities of practice.*

- ISF fosters social bonding between students
- ISIS encourages students to work together and also provides social interaction between the students and the outside community
- SLANG is very much a social, non-academic, event with a strong identity
- Happy Families is an excellent way of promoting social activity which the students organise themselves.

Star Guideline 2.5 *Induction activities should promote the development of good communication between staff and students.*

- Students view ISF as a 'safe' place to voice their opinions as they feel very comfortable speaking to staff they clearly see as interested in their welfare
- ISIS students have commented that the staff involvement in the activity allowed them to see course staff as friends rather than teachers
- Happy Families social events have taken place on campus during the year involving both students and staff.

Star Guideline 3.2 *The course and its delivery should assist students' transition from their previous educational experience...*

- By embedding the ISF into the students' timetables, the assistance given to the students becomes part of the course rather than an addition to it.

INITIATIVES

The International Student Forum

In the beginning, weekly meetings were set up for Chinese students only, as it was the experiences of that group of students that the study was initially addressing since they were the largest international group in the institution and their educational background was so markedly different from that of the UK students. An initial publicity flier was produced in both English and Chinese. However, during the first year, students from other countries asked if they could attend and when, at the end of the first year, the Fellowship was renewed with the premise that the study would be widened beyond Chinese students the forum became international. It is held specifically for students from the School of Computing and Technology, but on occasion students from other schools have been brought along by friends. It meets weekly and its format can vary, depending on the time of year – for example, students who are nearing the end of the dissertation stage of their studies will be keen to gain advice on presenting their work and the viva process – and whether the students have particular issues they wish to discuss. In general, the formal meetings were set up with the following structure:

- Invited talk
- Study skills
- Surgery.

Often, however, students may want to spend the session chatting about anything that is bothering them at the time, academic or social.

Invited speakers typically speak on:

- The Students Union and international student issues
- Information Services
- Opportunities, both voluntary and paid
- Welfare issues
- Counselling

- Health care
- The HOST System – through which international students can visit the homes of British families for short stays.

Study skills encompasses matters such as understanding assessment, writing reports, group work, presentation skills and understanding the university regulations.

The forum meets for a total of two hours per week so there is a need for a member of staff to be available to cover that period. Some preparation time is required, but not a great deal after the first run through. The forum was initially staffed voluntarily by the author, who is an academic, and the school administrator who was especially valuable in helping the students understand university regulations, etc. Occasionally the staff were present together, sometimes one or other of them. From this academic year, the author has the two hours recognised on her timetable, which means the same allocation is allowed for preparation. Attendance by the students has varied according to the time of year, whether or not an assignment deadline is looming, whether or not the topic of a particular week is held to be relevant by particular students, timetable clashes and other commitments such as paid employment. We have come to expect around 30 students when there is a 'hot topic' and less at other times. Of the attendees, the majority are Masters students as they represent the largest proportion of international students and their needs are more acute as they need to understand the obligations towards and expectations of the institution very quickly due to the brevity of their course. Often, undergraduates will attend during their first year and then not subsequently.

WebCT Forum

The WebCT International Student Forum was created in parallel with the actual forum but has never been as effective a method of interacting with the students as the latter. This may be due to: cultural reasons (see for example Marcus and Gould (2000), Tylee (2001), Miah (2004)), and the author is currently investigating this phenomenon; or to the students' unwillingness to engage in something that is not compulsory or that they do not see as directly affecting their progress through university. The virtual forum has in more recent months, however, grown as a mechanism for publicising events and disseminating useful information/materials for the students. As higher education institutions across the country expand their provision of virtual learning environment delivered materials it is important to investigate the use of these systems and the potential barriers they may or may not create to students of different cultures.

SLANG

One of the planned tasks of the Teaching Fellowship study was to look into setting up a mechanism for improving the social inclusion of the students and facilitating their development of English language skills. What emerged was the Sunderland Language and News Group (SLANG). This is another weekly meeting although it meets at the weekend to further enforce the idea that it is not an academic event. Whereas the student forum is an international students only event, SLANG is open to all students, home as well as international, and this is deliberately so because the university is a regional institution, with many local students having had very limited

contact with people of different cultures until they come to university. Thereafter, unless specific attempts at getting the students to mix are made (and 61% of staff in the 2003 study said they did not integrate students in group work but rather let them pick their own groups) the students are likely to remain in groups of their own cultural background.

In the initial weeks the meeting was kept as just an international event while numbers increased and students began to find out about it and feel at ease to participate. Based around the idea of a 'book group', the meeting is a social event and is very informal (refreshments are provided). As the students already have an abundance of reading to do on their degree programmes, and this task is magnified by the fact that the students have English as an additional language, the author did not wish to burden them with the task of reading even more books. Spending a relatively short period of time skimming newspapers for interesting stories, however, seemed to be a manageable task and one that would allow the students to find out more about local and national culture. In practice the students tend to bring along the free Metro newspaper which they pick up as they travel on the Metro train system, or in the library, or else they bring printouts from online news web sites. In addition, the students bring along stories from newspapers in their own countries, and thus everyone present gets to learn more about cultures, political events, etc. right across the world. The processes of reading English newspapers and discussing the stories in English should, the author believes, lead to an improvement in English language ability and confidence in using the language. Of the regular attendees, some are family members of students at the university, so membership of the group is not restricted to students alone. The core weekly attendees number around twenty, with other students attending regularly but on a less frequent basis.

The desire for another mechanism for the development and practicing of English language aside from the existing assessed English for Academic Purposes (EAP) provision arose from both feedback from the students and the author's judgement that the students could perhaps benefit from 'classes' taking place in the physical and subject context of their degree studies. In her experience, students were not attending EAP classes for a variety of reasons: physical location was far removed from their subject content classes; their subject content timetables/programmes did not allow for them to take the English classes as part of their programmes and required a lot of additional work – often in the evenings which required the students to be far from their homes late in the evening (which may have safety implications); they were mixing with other international students and so not interacting with native English speakers; and topics they were covering were not relevant to their studies. SLANG addresses some of these issues but not all and there are still tentative plans to develop 'English in Context' instruction, in the first instance English for Computer Studies.

Community Outreach to Enhance the International Student Experience

Our wish to expand the experience of international students and to attempt to forge links with the local community, that might in some way help to promote a more tolerant attitude in the city, resulted in the development of International Students Into Schools – a community outreach initiative that began with a link with a single school where a small number of Chinese students initially began visiting to spend time with

the children and to help prepare some staff members for a visit to a partner school in Beijing. The students continued to visit regularly and also completed the university's certification programme for their work in the local community. The author submitted an application to the HEFCE Active Community Fund National Awards in 2004 to showcase the students' work and they were successful in reaching the finals of the awards, each of them receiving runners up certificates from the ceremony. The national panel of judges said the entry showed:

“how a simple idea (but one that was also novel) which was well executed, has brought huge benefits to all parties. The evidence ... of the students' commitment, achievement and personal benefit was very strong”.

There are now students from China, Africa, Spain, Hong Kong, India and Pakistan visiting five schools, with several more schools in the city waiting for students to become available for visiting. By registering with the University's additional certification programme, which is open to any student who is volunteering in the community, the students are able to chart their personal professional development and improve employability and communication skills. This is in addition to Personal Development Planning that the students may also engage with as a means of developing these skills.

Happy Families

Buddy schemes are being implemented in many higher education establishments at present. In the School of Computing and Technology, the Happy Families initiative has been instigated on two undergraduate programmes. The scheme aims to provide a network of support among a whole programme of students that can clearly be of benefit to international students in their unfamiliarity with western higher education and also their social acclimatisation. Happy Families groups students together with level 3 'grandparents', level 2 'parents' and level 1 'children'. The interaction is both 'virtual' through WebCT, MSN Messenger, etc, and 'actual' through social events that, to begin with, the programme team organises but, thereafter, the student 'families' can do themselves.

In contrast to more formal schemes such as the University of Bournemouth's Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) scheme, the higher level students are not selected and trained for their role. Happy Families seeks to involve all students and aims at a holistic approach to support rather than a purely academic approach. The families are mixed, so we do not limit international students to 'parenting' international 'children'. In the photograph below, an English grandmother and her Egyptian son dress their Chinese grandson/son in our Happy Families Halloween 'Dress the Mummy' competition.



The Egyptian expertise paid off and this family won!



OUTCOMES OF INITIATIVES TO DATE

The initiatives, particularly the forum and the outreach activity, have been disseminated across the institution through seminars and the university's annual Academic Conference and its Equality and Diversity website (http://my.sunderland.ac.uk/web/support/equality/a_home), as well as at two international conferences. Staff from other schools have been encouraged and advised on how to set up similar initiatives, and international student fora have been set up recently in a further two schools in the university. By necessity, some things need to be school based: for example a Computing assignment will usually take a

very different form to a Tourism Studies assignment. However, there have been discussions among staff about setting up a cross-university forum, meeting much less frequently than one based in a single school, to cover generic issues – such as politics, local issues, etc.

Probably the most important point to address is how successful these initiatives have actually been. One way to measure this would be to simply look at the retention figures. However, the initiatives have been in place for varying periods of time from two years to six months and it may not be possible to pinpoint the ‘active ingredient’. Far better is to judge by the feedback of the students who are taking advantage of the initiatives, and the response of the School and the wider institution to the work that has been done. This section therefore focuses on the opinions of the students and also offers some ideas as to how the level of engagement might be improved. The institution’s response is evidenced below and is further discussed in the final section of this case study.

Outcomes of the International Student Forum

Feedback from the forum has always been positive since the meetings began. Common themes that have emerged about what the students want are:

- The chance to integrate in the academic and larger society
- The chance to practice speaking English
- Help in adjusting to new styles of teaching, learning and assessment
- Help in organising their time/studies
- Where to go for help
- That lecturers need to be aware of them – in course preparation *and* delivery
- A safe and welcoming society
- More chance to take English classes and English classes that are more finely tuned to their needs
- Better information on accommodation

Specific comments on problems the students experience are presented below. They are wide ranging, from specific academic points to personal and social issues, and are fully representative of the feedback received.

“As a new student from China I don’t know where I can get help.”

“Yes [I get enough help], but sometimes I don’t know how to ask the questions because of my bad English.”

“I do [like the way classes are taught] but I am not used to it as in China we have at least 8 hours’ class each day.”

“In the class, I only understand 40% of what the lecturer has said. I haven’t made any friends with my classmates.”

“The UK teens are not friendly.”

Specific areas of help the students have pinpointed:

“Teach me how to prepare and go over my studying.”

“Please tell me more education and life rules of UK, thanks. It’ll [be] good for me to understand UK.”

“Offer some extra skills (such like more living skill).”

“More placement chances for postgraduate students from outside UK.”

“Please tell our teachers: do not speak too quickly in class. I do not like too many assignments run together, and they run with the final project.”

“Provide security.”

“Keep, run the Chinese student forum.”

“Open more English classes to help me improve my English, especially speaking.”

“Put more concentration on international students especially during the tutorial and lab sessions.”

Comments on the helpfulness of the forum have included:

“I am really very glad that you are really doing very much for international students....”

“It’s really good idea for help student improve them writing skills.”

“It’s useful because this subject [university regulations] was what I worrying.”

“I’m glad to see a lot of Chinese can get much help from now on.”

“The student will know more things... better and faster than they found themselves.”

Attendance at the forum, as previously indicated, can be sporadic. However, when the author has emailed students to ask whether they would prefer the forum to be redesigned, they have always responded with an emphatic wish to keep it going in its present format, citing other pressing concerns such as timetable clashes and assignment deadlines as their reasons for non attendance. For example:

“I like to attend the international forum meeting but sometime very busy with my assignment and working. I hope student forum still can continue to help student.”

The staff involved with the forum strongly believe that the students feel more at ease and air their problems more than has been the case in the past using the personal tutoring system. Indeed, the 2003 staff survey found that 73% of personal tutors found Chinese students to be less willing than UK students to approach them with a

social or personal problem, and 41% felt that they were less willing to present academic problems. Since the inception of the forum, students have a recognised facility that they feel able to use to share their problems, and staff will readily refer students to the forum for help if they feel this is appropriate.

In an effort to encourage more students to attend, the forum has been formally timetabled from September 2005 so that not only will the staff facilitating it have it formally acknowledged in their workload (for both preparation and delivery), but also it will be printed on every students' timetable. Thus student awareness of the forum is not left to chance. Moreover, this serves to demonstrate the School's commitment to the initiative as they clearly consider it to be of benefit to the students. In addition, the new academic year will see the students on the institution's International Foundation Programme timetabled to attend the meetings. This is an attempt to ensure that this group of students progress onto undergraduate programmes following a successful foundation year improving English language skills, gaining a firm grounding in the subject area and practices adopted by the institution and, importantly, feeling a part of the university community.

Outcomes of SLANG

SLANG seeks to improve social inclusion, cultural awareness and English language development. Of course, it does not happen in a vacuum and it would be difficult to prove that the language practice that occurs as a result of SLANG leads directly to an improvement in linguistic competence. However, qualitative feedback from the students so far suggests that they see it as beneficial. Some comments appear below.

"The Saturday session help me to know more about the British culture. I can understand the newspaper deeply. For example, I can realize the royal family in England, something about Dr. Who, etc... It is a good place for the international student to grasp the live in England. I appreciate of it."

"Every Saturday morning there is a group meeting for both international students and local students. We shall pick some our interested topics from the newspaper such as from Royals wedding to the Pope's funeral, from top chef Jamie Oliver's TV program to North East children top junk food eating league. We could expose our own opinion or experience and/or what's the difference between UK and our own countries. When I stay in UK, I get used to drinking tea, travelling on English buses and handling English money. In the meeting, I get used to speaking English and before long I could understand almost everything that people said to me."

"Advantages of attending this meeting: 1.) The bring in articles have no limitation, which makes the discussion unexpected and active. 2.) Because of the unknown discussions stimulate students' brains thinking in English instantly. This way of training brain to adapt into daily communication on spoken English is better than using of prepared presentation. 3.) The discussion often reveals different culture background, and help students understand more about things outside their own countries. 4.) This meeting is

often in a chatting atmosphere without any pressure, which is a joyful way of learning.”

“As an overseas student you don’t dare to speak up in class in case your English might not be right. You need confidence – SLANG does this.”

“I did some project vivas yesterday. What I learnt was that I was confident in asking students questions, which I wasn’t before. I think that last year’s SLANG meetings was really helpful. Thank you very much.”

Outcomes of Community Outreach

The International Students into Schools initiative was funded by two consecutive University Community Fellowships. In point of fact this scheme is the only one to have been funded twice by the university’s Higher Education Active Community Fund Steering Committee, which is a strong indication of the institution’s belief in the measures undertaken. Like the Teaching Fellowship, the Community Fellowships afforded the staff time to spend on activities beyond their normal remit. Unlike the Teaching Fellowships they are short term (single semester) and much less generously funded (around £3000). To establish and run the outreach activity necessitated time spent: contacting schools, publicising the initiative to students, organising visits, providing liaison between schools and students, and organising presentation events at the end of the volunteering period. The activity has had a hugely rewarding outcome for both students and schools. This is just some of the feedback from students (gathered for the purpose of feeding back to the Community Fellowship funding group and for inclusion in the successful volunteering award application):

“We really enjoyed the visits to the school during the past days. We are very happy that we can help the pupils learn something and develop our communication skills. We’d like to express our sincere gratitude to you for your kindness and all the effort made for us.”

“The aim of this project was not only to live outside the campus but also we knew that it was a good chance to show our country’s culture and build strong, friendly relationships with English and Chinese people.”

“The project has given us a lot of benefits. All of the skills are now really useful in our study, in life and in the future job market. We are not afraid anymore to do presentations in front of people, and we know how to manage our time. As an overseas student who has been in England for 2 years already I travelled to a lot of cities to find out what is the real England and English people. However, until now I think I had just touched the surface of realising the culture and people here.”

“Cooperation is the key, and we needed to keep in touch with teachers in the primary school. Simple and clear language skills were required for children studying in primary school. We were forced to speak in English to communicate with each other so our English improved impressively. We enjoyed every conversation both with the teachers and children.”

Feedback from the schools included:

“The project has added much value to our pupils’ experiences, and to our efforts to enrich our curriculum, and we feel the students deserve recognition for their valuable efforts. The pupils gained first-hand experience of another culture which is immensely valuable in eradicating prejudice. We value this link and look forward to it continuing.”

“The students are really good with the children. Year 3 really enjoy their visits. They are teaching cricket and have arranged to come in to take another class. They are really nice boys and we hope they continue to visit.”

In the first, pilot, year of the project four students were awarded certificates for their commitment to it – and they reached the finals of the Higher Education Active Community Fund Awards (student category) – and in the second, ten students recently attended a certification ceremony with a number of others being eligible but having already returned to their home countries for the summer break.

Outcomes of Happy Families

Compared with the International Student Forum and International Students into Schools, Happy Families is in its early stages and so evidence of its effect is perhaps more anecdotal. However, students have given good verbal feedback on the system: *“the family idea – met some good friends”*, and there has been evidence of them using the virtual forum to ask questions about programme and module issues such as the format that certain assessments would take, etc. (The programme leader can monitor the WebCT online discussion, and this information also comes out in conversations with the students.) It is felt that the true benefits may only be reaped after the system has been in a place for a few generations, i.e. once the ‘children’ become ‘grandparents’ and fully understand the value of peer support.

It can be said, though, that the School management is very supportive of this initiative: as the University’s current retention strategy calls for all schools to implement a PAL-type scheme, the School of Computing and Technology is continuing with Happy Families which it sees as a more holistic approach to student support, addressing peer assisted social welfare as well as academic issues.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESOURCING OF INITIATIVES

As previously indicated, the belief of the School management in the initiatives has already led to a commitment to resource the activities now that the author’s Teaching Fellowship and Community Fellowship have come to an end. The International Student Forum is being formally timetabled this year for the first time which will have a threefold benefit: students will not have timetable clashes with the meetings; they will see the forum marked clearly on their timetables; and the staff involved will have the teaching and preparation time acknowledged in their work load statements.

International Students into Schools is set to continue although it is not the intention to apply for further funding unless the focus of the activity is expanded, for example to

set up links with secondary schools or community organisations. The fact that the foundations have now been laid and friendships established with the schools means that less time will be needed for organising and overseeing the project, and in fact the University's International Office have recently approached the author with the offer to take on the administrative side of the project and to help expand it across the University. Thus the resourcing implication of the project will all but disappear from the school if it is taken up centrally by the University. Moreover, like the International Student Forum, SLANG and International Students into Schools now feature in the School's retention strategy for the upcoming year and thus there is a commitment made to recognising the time involved of the relevant personnel.

Happy Families is also a strand in the 2005-6 retention strategy. In the last year it showed that social events were needed to help build families and build better relationships between staff and students, and this is planned to be addressed both in the induction week events and across the academic year. The resource requirements of this initiative are access to a VLE, regular meetings with the students, and the time needed to establish the families in the VLE and physically through induction activities. These are activities that naturally fall in the remit of the students' course leader/personal tutor who, in the School of Computing and Technology, is allocated one hour of personal tutor contact time and a corresponding hour of preparation for each tutor group.

The International Student Forum is being investigated as a mechanism through which Personal Development Planning (PDP) may be facilitated for Masters students in particular – recent figures indicated that 61% of full time taught postgraduate students are international (HESA, 2003) – and international students in general where specialised knowledge may be required. For example the focus of careers information will be different and the kinds of skills development that international students may seek to develop as part of their personal plan may also differ from home students (time management, for instance, is often signalled as a difficulty faced by students from China). However, any increased input by careers staff into the forum would not be an additional resource caused by the forum itself but rather would reflect the university's commitment to PDP and the forum is a conveniently timetabled opportunity for them to gain access to the students.

CONCLUSION

In the introduction, Waller was quoted as saying that there are many reasons why students choose to come to study in the UK. Waller (1993) also states that "it is unfair for tertiary institutions to reap the benefits of enrolling overseas students without acknowledging the language, cultural, and personal difficulties these students face". As higher education professionals it is our duty to acknowledge the existence of the potential barriers international students face to having equity of experience with our home students, and from there to implement measures to either eradicate the inequity or to support the students in getting to the 'level playing field'. The initiatives presented in this case study have been in place for varying periods of time from three months to two years and so the amount of evidence of their effect varies. The data are largely qualitative at present and clearly illustrate that students are appreciative of our efforts and have taken the opportunities to gain an improved understanding of

university procedures and a richer experience of life in the university and in the city at large.

Furthermore it is clear that both the School and the Institution are convinced of the benefit of the initiatives. Staff awareness of the issues relating to international student academic performance, and academic and social integration has been raised – the School last year hosted an ICS subject centre event ‘Supporting English as a Second Language Students’ and this year’s School conference featured an afternoon of workshops on cultural awareness – and there has been acknowledgement that initiatives such as the four that are the subject of this study are positive and worthy of support. In terms of social integration in the wider context of the city, a number of international students have made a significant impact on a large number of school children across the city, and the posters that the children have drawn to represent their friendships with the students are about to be displayed across the city, in public buildings and on local transport. (We successfully applied to the Local Strategic Partnership’s Community Cohesion Group for £5000 to fund this.) Addressing the problems highlighted at the start of the paper is however a long process. By implementing academic and social support initiatives, in addition to the curriculum based changes we have made as part of our wider review of both undergraduate and postgraduate programmes, it is hoped that, in time, many more of our international students can be as successful as this student from China:

Laura, a Chinese student who provided several of the feedback comments in this case study, is graduating this year with a 2:1. Following a very poor first year, she was keen to turn things around. She became involved in International Students into Schools and was one of those short listed at the HEACF Award Ceremony in 2004. Since doing this she has sought every chance to improve her skills and to promote her university, her country and her fellow students, including presenting with the author at the University’s academic conference in front of senior university staff and the deputy-vice chancellor. In her own words: “*We are not afraid anymore to do presentations in front of people*”. We will be awarding Laura the International Student Excellence Award that we have set up this year for outstanding contribution to the cause of international students in the community and/or academic achievement.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

See STAR Case Study: Support for International Students in Higher Education in the UK