

Unit six

Researching the experience of international students

Accompanying online resource:

[Researching the experience of international students](#)

Facilitator's notes



Introduction

It seems clear that HE in the UK provides a different experience for international students than for their UK counterparts. In order to provide appropriate levels of support and understanding, research and evaluation are necessary.

This topic area aims to prepare workshop participants to research for themselves the experience of the international students who they are involved with, so that they may explore methods of continuing their professional development related to supporting this group of students. Trainers should emphasise that these activities link to the *UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education*; in particular the fifth and sixth areas of activity: integration of scholarship, research and professional activities with teaching and supporting learning; and evaluation of practice and continuing professional development.

The potential final outcomes of the unit will be two substantial texts: a research proposal and a research report. (For each of these it will be necessary for each institution to determine the exact requirements in terms of length, structure, timing etc.) The activities within this section unify the separate threads of each topic area so far as they demand demonstration of reflective practice, action research, and application of general concepts to specific subjects, specific levels, and specific institutions. Depending on each participant's specific job, the research could cover any of the aspects covered by any of the topics, including any aspect of teaching and learning, student support, or institutional strategic policies.

These activities will look at two ways of carrying out research with students in order to be able to use the findings to inform reflective practice. It will also look at the resources available in the different Subject Centre websites of the Higher Education Academy.

Learning objectives

- To look at the use of 'critical incidents' as a method of researching the experience of international students.
- To look at the use of focus groups as a method of researching the experience of international students.
- To explore methods of using the resources of the Higher Education Academy to continue professional development in this area.

Reading materials

- The Higher Education Academy website www.heacademy.ac.uk
- J. Jackson (2001). '[Critical incidents across cultures](#)'
- A. Gibbs (1997). '[Focus groups](#)', in *Social Research Update*.



Further reading:

- [*UK Professional Standards Framework for Teaching and Supporting Learning in Higher Education*](#). Note in particular the fifth and sixth areas of activity.
- P. Sander (2004). '[How we should research our students – part two](#)'. Note in particular the ITDEM model of action research.

Workshop Activity 1: Higher Education Academy and internationalisation

Introduction

The Higher Education Academy works with institutions, discipline groups and individual staff to enhance teaching, learning and the overall student experience in UK Higher Education. Its website provides a range of information and resources to this end, including reports, case studies, descriptions of projects, and event announcements. As one of the Academy's key areas of concern, issues relating to internationalisation receive significant attention on this website. This activity encourages participants to explore the information available online from the Academy and use it as a springboard for developing action research proposals. Another intention is to demonstrate the diversity of materials available.

Pre-workshop reading

Explore the Higher Education Academy website www.heacademy.ac.uk. There are a variety of documents linked to the internationalisation pages of the Higher Education Academy which include:

- Case studies
- Research
- Subject Centres
- Bologna
- Policy
- Student support
- Academic and support staff
- Events

Several of these links themselves link to other choices, for example 'Case studies' include 'Institutional policies and strategies', 'Curriculum' and 'Support for international students'.

Several of the 24 specific Subject Centres in the Higher Education Academy network contain information concerning curriculum, case studies, and staff development related to internationalisation.

Browse around the internationalisation pages of the Higher Education Academy website (www.heacademy.ac.uk/International.htm) and the pages of the subject network most related to your own subject speciality (www.heacademy.ac.uk/SubjectNetwork.htm).

Find some examples of current developments related to teaching and learning concerning international students in an area you are concerned with. This could relate to any aspect of the student experience (teaching methods, assessment and feedback, pastoral care, induction).

Be prepared to describe briefly what you have found to the rest of the group during the workshop.

Method

1. Ask participants to describe briefly the resources they had found useful on the Higher Education Academy website.
2. Run a brainstorming session on areas which would be suitable for research based on the explorations of the situation of international students within the specific institution. The features of action research should be referred to, such as: close involvement of the researcher as participant; the focus on bringing about change; the possibility of conflict hence the need to consider other stakeholders. Special attention should be given to ethical considerations, and if there is an institutional code of ethics concerning research this should be presented at this stage.

Notes on the Portfolio Activity

The requirements of this activity are that participants produce a research proposal. The specific format of the proposal needs to be made clear, and it would be useful to select a research proposal format which is already in use within your institution, preferably at M level, to benchmark the specific requirements of the proposal guidelines you set.

Unit six: Portfolio Activity I

Researching the experience of international students

Higher Education Academy and internationalisation

(This activity may be printed out and added to your Portfolio)

Write a proposal for doing research in one area related to your own work with international students, and which will then enable you to bring about change in some way. Include in the proposal:

- An introduction to explain why this topic needs researching and why you are a suitable person to investigate it
- A clear explanation of the research aims/questions that you wish to investigate
- A description of the research approach and methods you will adopt
- A preliminary discussion of how you wish to make use of your findings in connection with your professional practice
- A review of the ethical considerations which this research will need to recognise and take account of.

Title/Context	
Introduction	
Aims and questions	
Methodology	
Application of findings	
Ethical considerations	

Workshop Activity 2: Critical incidents

Introduction

This activity and the following one on focus groups, serve to introduce two of the many possible methods of research which could be suitable for the research the participants are to carry out. It is also likely that they will themselves have made use of other research methods, so a useful idea for another workshop would be for each participant to present one method of research which they are familiar with and which would be suitable for researching student experience.

Advice to participants: In order to research the experiences of international students in your institution you could use the 'critical incidents' approach to discover what their experiences are. A definition of 'critical incidents' is:

'Originally, a means of gathering data but can also stand as a research method. More recently, it has been applied to teaching and the development of reflective teachers as a trigger for learning. Teachers are asked to recall a specific incident or moment from their recent teaching experience, to write it down and to critique it, with the focus on the critique, rather than the incident (which could be a negative one).' (Higher Education Academy website: www.heacademy.ac.uk)

Pre-workshop reading

In preparation for the workshop, participants should read:

- J. Jackson (2001). ['Critical incidents across cultures'](#). This paper describes using critical incidents in researching cross-cultural encounters. Jackson mentions 'the ways in which differing expectations, values, and behaviour can affect communication across cultures'
- Critical incident text (below)

Reading text about a critical incident

This incident relates to an international student studying in his first year of a degree course in a school of Environmental Science, but who had already spent one year in the same university attending an International Foundation Programme. During that year he had started to become familiar with the expectations of UK universities but had always only worked in groups consisting of other international students. A lot of time in the Foundation year had been spent developing group work skills (managing groups, discussions, researching, making presentations). This student had valued his experiences during this Foundation course and had passed comfortably.

The information given here was collected in a series of meetings during his first term of degree study. In his new course the other students were mostly British, many of them were older, in employment, and some of them were married with children. Some had practical work-related experience whereas he had come to the university directly from high school in China.

During his first few weeks he found that to some extent he was an outsider. Concerning his classmates he reported:

'They're quite friendly, but you know they, they don't talk too much to you, because you're not British I think.'

However, he was not completely isolated:

'I've got a good friend, who's from, who's British and he's quite ... he's quite friendly to me and also invite me to his home, to have dinner, um, well he's quite good, but the others, well they also, you know they treat me very well, as well, but don't talk to me very much, too much.'

Concerning tutors he stated that:

'Tutor is quite good because they treat you like, like they treat the British student, um but sometimes they speak to the British student but, not too much to, to me.'

It seemed that academic support was very dependent on communication and posting of information via the course virtual learning environment (VLE), and this seemed not to be what he had been expecting:

'Well, after the lecture I feel very confused, and er, but you know, the tutor just go away, and just disappear ... I just go home and get on the [VLE] and see the, see all the notes the teacher put on the [VLE].'

A month later he felt that he was much more of an insider, both within the group of students and in seminar discussions. He reported that he was speaking more:

'more, much more, than, than the beginning, because, you know I feel that my English is better now, and er, I start to answer the teachers questions, and start to chat with my, er chat and discuss with my classmates ... at the beginning the teachers, um just speak more, an... and they, they ask questions but always the British students answered, and now I can answer properly, because I am not bad at that subject, at chemical, or geography, and biology, I think I'm not bad, so because my English good, I could understand them well, so I can answer these questions well.'

It was not a constantly improving path of adjustment though. Towards the end of the first term the student described the low point which he had experienced in the previous month:

Q: *Do you sometimes feel down?*

A: Yes.

Q: *What do you do then?*

A: Um, I was in my dark November.

Q: *Dark November?*

A: Yes.

Q: *Tell me about your dark November.*

A: Um, maybe it, it's because of the weather, it's very cold.

Q: Yes.

A: That's why, and do, I had to do the ... um assignments and two exams, [...]

Q: *And you labelled it dark November?*

A: Yeah, I had to work till very late, and it made me feel very tired.

Method

1. Get participants to read the critical incident concerning an international student at a UK university. Get them to work in pairs to discuss the questions covered in the Portfolio Activity.
2. Put pairs together to share ideas and open to the group.

Notes on the Portfolio Activity

Participants should create a Portfolio entry by writing up the ideas discussed in their groups.

Unit six: Portfolio Activity 2

Researching the experience of international students

Critical incidents

(This activity may be printed out and added to your Portfolio)

Can you draft four possible explanations to account for this student's initial process of adaptation?

- one related to language learning
- one related to university support systems
- one related to contrasting cultures of learning
- one related to reluctance to interact with people who are in any way 'other'.

(You may substitute any of these explanations for others which you feel are more appropriate)

Language	
Support	
Cultures of learning	
Othering	

Workshop Activity 3: Focus group research

Introduction

In order to research your chosen aspect of the environment for international students in your institution you might organise a focus group to find out more about the students' experiences. While focus groups are not structured interviews following a set of fixed questions, the moderator does need to have topics that they want the participants to discuss. In this case you could look through the survey questions which were used in the UKCOSA survey [Broadening Our Horizons](#) (see appendix B) not in order to repeat those questions but to gather ideas of topics you might want the participants to discuss.

Pre-workshop reading

In order to prepare for this activity, read the following article:

- A. Gibbs (1997). '[Focus groups](#)' in *Social Research Update*. This is a concise guide to the theories and practical aspects of focus groups as a research approach.

Method

Get participants to plan a focus group session. Provide the following advice: you need to set up your meeting; you will need to make decisions concerning which students to invite, where to hold the meeting, how you will record the discussion. You will need to follow the ethical considerations of this form of research, for example concerning getting the informed consent of the participants, ensuring their anonymity in your report, and you may need to supply a research proposal to an institutional ethics committee.

Notes on the Portfolio Activity

Participants should plan and conduct a focus group on their chosen area of research into support for international students. The Portfolio entry consists of a report of their findings. It is likely that whilst the participants are carrying out their research and producing their reports that they will require both individual and group support.

For the individual support participants should be allocated a supervisor or mentor to check that the research is appropriate (and ethical) and that the finished report will satisfy the course requirements (if any).

For group support it would be useful for the participants to meet occasionally to share experiences, findings and advice. It may also be useful if each participant could make a presentation of their research. Indeed this could then become a symposium open to others in the institution as a way of raising the profile of this topic more widely.

Unit six: Portfolio Activity 3

Higher Education Academy and internationalisation

Focus group research

(This activity may be printed out and added to your Portfolio)

Plan and conduct a focus group on your chosen area of research into support for international students. Write a report of your findings ensuring that you include the focus group questions in an appendix.